

Arsene Wenger

Arsene Wenger is the most successful coach in the history of Arsenal. He won the double in 1998 and 2002, and in 2004 he won the premiership without losing a single match. SoccerCoachingInternational went to visit the successful French coach and spoke to him about his ideas on coaching football.

By Paul van Veen

Why are you so successful?

Why do you think I am so successful? That is a difficult question. I think, first of all, because I am passionate about soccer. I like the players and I like to do what I do well. So for me it is quite an obsession to always try and improve. Just like players, you need to improve every day, and you have to be humble enough to always question yourself. So I think it is a mixture of wanting to be better, always trying to improve and humble enough to ask yourself what you can do to improve yourself. Also, it is very important to love the players. As a coach you need to help them. Help them to improve; to do that you need to have a philosophy of the game you want to play. Then, at this level, you try to find the players who can adjust to that philosophy.

And what is that philosophy?

My philosophy is always to get as close as possible to the pleasure of the game. I try to talk to the part of the player that makes him come to love the game, the child in the player. I try not to make the game only a job. That is the part that interests me the least. But I try to make him enjoy what he does. That is the part I like to work with.

What do you look for in a player you want to sign?

I make all the contracts myself and, of course, I always try to let the players earn as much money as they can. But that is not the part that has my interest. When I talk to a player, my interest is the passion that is inside a player—his passion for the game and how much he wants to gain and try to develop that. To develop the dream that is inside every individual. I look for the passion that was initially in every player when he was still a boy. That is the part of the player I am interested in and what to talk about. Then it does not interest me if a player makes 2, 5, or 10

million. If the club can afford it and the player is good enough to earn it, then I am okay with that.

Do you have any tips to motivate a player?

I am looking for intrinsic motivation. I believe this is related to the character of that player. The attitude a player shows inside the game is the real attitude of the player; there he shows who he really is. When you come out of a game, you can disguise your personality. But you really are who you are when you play. We want players at Arsenal who have a good attitude. I have worked for 20 years with motivational people about the attitude; we study our players, we give them tests,

that could have gone either way, and in our case it went the right way.

He could have become a player that is not worth wasting your time on, but sometimes geniuses are like that. He has developed very well. He now has a good girlfriend as well. His environment is good, and the club was always there for him. The club showed enough patience. He had come to a club with big players, and we have the time. Furthermore, I am used to working with young players. I know you have to be patient, and we gave him a little time, but the biggest part came from him.

Do you ever get it wrong with a new player?

Van Persie turned out well, but of course, I have been wrong in the past,

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and I have a good analysis of the players. In our youth development, we think that also is very important. Our youth teams have tests on their motivational level, their mental attitude, their competitiveness and their team attitude. We try to keep these tests as objective as possible.

You signed the Dutch player van Persie when he was out of favor in Holland. Why?

I know we signed van Persie when he had big problems in Holland. First of all, I think he was not respected in Holland. He did not get the respect he expected. He was still very young, and he was not really mature at that time and he was a bit fragile mentally. He was damaged by it, but not destroyed. When I talked to him I felt he would be fine. Van Persie had a deep love for the game, and the human aspect was very positive. He was somewhat unlucky in the way things went but on the other hand the way he behaved was a mixture between strength, a bit of arrogance (which you need as a big player) and sensitivity as well. He is a very sensitive person, but with strength that makes him a top-class player. When we signed him, we knew he was a player

too. In such a situation, you make a calculation, you look at it, and you take a gamble. And when it turns out wrong, you can always try to learn from your mistake. I think a good coach is always capable of saying: I was wrong in this situation. A good coach (or player) is capable of saying: today we won five nil, but I made two big mistakes. This job teaches you humility, because you face human beings, and human beings can always surprise you and prove you wrong, and you have to accept that.

Coaching is decision-making...

That's right. You as the coach have the authority to make decisions...big decisions. But you are only a human being, and you have to accept that you make mistakes. I also made mistakes when I was really convinced of my decision. But I am not sorry about the players whom I believed in and didn't make it – I believed in them and gave them the chance. I am more worried about the players who deserved a chance and I didn't give them that chance. I must say: we are very successful in our choices. The percentage of success we now have in our team is

unbelievable. That means that the way we scout players is the right way to go, the way we work with players is right, but of course we also have a few who don't make it, and maybe I missed a few because I didn't give them the right chance and therefore they didn't make it. That is what worries you as a coach.

You seem to emphasize "The Team" in your coaching philosophy. Is that true?

Soccer is a team sport. When a player begins to play he is more worried about his individual pleasure and individual performance. When you convince your players that they can get a team pleasure out of the game that is 10 times stronger than they can get for an individual performance or movement, then you have a chance to be successful. When everybody accepts that, I can get to the point where the team understands what a team sport is all about. That is a big part of my job. If you have achieved this, you can say you have done your job as a coach. Everybody wants to win the game, but it is how we get there. You need to come to a way where they are capable of expressing themselves as a team. Therefore you need to have a connection within the team and that connection is – for me – the communication. The ball communicates from one player to the next and if the communication is at a very high speed, you have a great chance to win the game.

So what is your definition of good soccer?

What is good in soccer? Every way you play is good. You can play a long ball, and you can play a short ball. Both ways can be very efficient. The most important thing is that you translate it well into your practice session and you play it with the right players. If you have the players who can play the long ball, you can do that. I am not for that, because most players at our club want to express their talent.

How long does it take a new player to understand how you want to play as a team?

It takes six months for players to get used to the way we want to play. We give players that amount of time, because we have stability on the technical (coaching) side (the staff) and secondly we have stability on the player's side. Instead of a player leaving after two or three years, we have players play for our team for eight years. So, the stability is there. We do not sell our players, and we take time

to integrate new players. We don't judge them too quickly.

What is the most important adjustment for the individual players who come to the team?

For some people it is physical, because the intensity of the game in England is very high. Sometimes it is tactical because of the changes in the system, because we play zonal. Sometimes we play a different tactical organization. For example, when Overmars came to us, he was more used to a winger system and we played 4-4-2, so he needed to adjust to a new tactical approach. So it depends on the player, but most of the time it takes six months to work on the things they are missing.

Is it true that you had a difficult transi-

results. The second level is the individual influence on the career of every individual player. You have some coaches that can't win trophies because they work in smaller or average clubs, but they still develop players. They deserve a lot of respect because they have a great impact on the individual career of a player. And then you have the third level, which in my opinion many coaches do not participate enough in. That is the influence you have on the structure of the club (college/team). How much bigger do you want to make the club? What kind of influence do you have to develop the level of the youth teams? How much influence do you have on the stadium, the training grounds, the facilities, the quality of the training facilities? Because it is not all just about me, my results and my ego, it is

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tion when you arrived at Arsenal?

When I just started at Arsenal, I was questioned a lot. I was questioned about everything I did, but you have to accept that as a coach. Do not transform radically what you want to do, but you have to do it step by step. The charisma and convincing power of the coach comes in as well, because you need to convince the players to do it like that. It's a mixture of adaptation, being faithful to your ideas and having a bit of luck as well. Because if you lose every game, everybody will say, "We like your ideas very much, you work very well, but thank you very much and bye-bye."

You have been at Arsenal quite a long time...

I am not a coach for the short term, but a coach for the long term. I always felt that a coach has the responsibility on three different levels. The first level is the way you think in terms of soccer and the

about what you leave behind when you go. What kind of potential does the guy that comes after you have? I agree that not many have the chance to do that, but it must be your ambition.

As you look at your career, what stands out?

When I talk to other coaches I say I was lucky, because I had 17 years at two clubs in my career. If I had not come to Arsenal, I probably would still be working in Japan, because they wanted to give me a very long contract. I was lucky because I went to clubs that gave me a chance to develop my ideas. I am conscious of that, and I am conscious of many people trying to have an influence and did not receive a chance to do it.

Rafael Benitez says that a good staff is a key to success. Do you agree?

I try to find staff that knows how I want to work. I support them very well,

I delegate a lot, but if they don't do what they are asked, I don't keep them. I always try to get one local guy who knows the club and has been a long time inside the club – for example, a player or former captain of the club. When I am looking for someone to add to the staff I always look to see if people are intelligent, passionate and want to develop. We all need somebody who gives us a chance. Just as when I was young, you need someone who gives you the chance. Arsenal gave me that chance, and I will never forget that.

Transition seems to be more important than ever in soccer today. Do you agree?

The transition in soccer is vital. But it is always linked with the technical qualities of the players, the vision and the physical qualities of the players. The physical qualities especially have become more important nowadays. They have improved, so the transition has become shorter. Especially when your opponent lets you play the game, it is very short. Furthermore, when you are at a big club like Arsenal, the teams don't really get out against you. They try to cancel this transition because they don't come out of their position. So the transition period is important only when a team comes out and tries to play against you. When you are a big club, you first have to put your opponent in a position where they have to be in a transition period when you win the ball. For example, that they have to be 1-0 down to start to get out and try to equalize.

But in a Champions League game, the transition is very, very important. Because

both teams usually play, both teams are used to taking the game, so then it becomes very important. But to take that advantage, you need to be physically very strong. It is a very interesting and important period, but because it is so important you see that most teams neglect it a bit – and I am personally sorry for that – how to create space when they have the ball and the other team is in position. They refuse to take their responsibility.

What is the key to coaching successfully?

It is always the same; you have to love people. A coach like Louis van Gaal is a bit different. He is more rigid, but that is his personality and that is the only secret rule; you can be successful only if you are who you are. Van Gaal is who he is and he will never change. He will be successful because he is faithful to who he is and doesn't cheat.

Any advice for younger coaches?

Always try to have a philosophy and be faithful to it. Don't give it up, but as a coach you need to be open to new ideas, because soccer is constantly in evolution. You have to be mentally very strong, be ready for a fight in life, because it is a very hard job. It is an obsession, and you have to be ready to suffer. You have to be conscious that your environment suffers a lot as well. I always say it is a job for single people, because also your family suffers. That is really something you have to take into account when you are

going to do this job. Most of the time that is something you don't consider when you are passionate. You have to be able to cope with disappointments. You see many people with very nice ideas when they start their career. Then they are under pressure and exposed to disappointments, and they drop out. You have to walk like a soldier and therefore you need exceptional strengths or you know you will have no chance to be successful. If you fail, fail with your own philosophy.

How important is "style" in soccer? Arsenal has been described as having a "very good style" in their play.

You know what I like about Brazil? They say, we respect you for your success, but we love you for your style. I think that is the complete picture. But first, you have to be respected for your success and then on top of that you can be loved for your style. They had for a long time a history of results and success, so at the start they were just happy with winning, but after that the demands always become higher. People want to be entertained, that is the responsibility of a big club. People come to the stadium with an expectation. You can't charge 100 Euros per game and say to a guy; sorry we have not more to show you, our only ambition is to win a corner kick in the 87th minute, and you should be happy to spend 100 Euros on that. It just doesn't work that way. ⚽

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