

First Academy offers chance to develop - on and off the pitch

Youth football

by Sarah Bassett

Founded in 2006, First Academy FC's commitment to youth development through football is just as evident on the sidelines as it is on the pitch.

The club is run by ex-professional footballer Oscar Odoch - a former member of Arsenal and Fulham's academy - and former First Academy player Adam Avnon.

At 18 years old, Avnon - from West End Lane in West Hampstead - is unsurprisingly one of the youngest coaches in the Regents Park League.

First Academy train at UCL Academy in Swiss Cottage, and the majority of the players live in and around Swiss Cottage, with some players attending Quintin Kynaston, Hampstead School and North Bridge House Senior School in Hampstead.

The aim is to develop top-class footballers who will eventually go on to be signed by professional academies, who are also equipped with the principles to flourish as individuals away from the sports field.

But the players are not the only ones who are learning and developing - having made the step up from player to coach at the age of 16, Avnon has been growing in his own role.

Balance

"I had always been interested in coaching and two years ago I initially took on the First Academy Under-14s team, which my younger brother was playing in at the time," he told *Ham&High Sport*.

"The first two years that I was coaching involved me getting used to it and making sure the footballing side of things were going well."

"It took a while for me to find the right balance, especially when



First Academy coach Adam Avnon (left) talks tactics with his players

I first started, because I was extremely aware of the very small age gap between myself and the players.

"I think as part of this insecurity I may have initially approached the situation as too authoritarian, but as the time has gone by I have had the opportunity to step back and analyse my coaching skills, asking myself how I can improve.

"I realised I just needed to relax and it definitely reflected positively in the way that the players were interacting with me - it has all been about finding a balance in my coaching style."

For Avnon, it is at least as important to mould good characters at First Academy as it is to pro-

duce talented young sportsmen.

"I realised how challenging it is to attempt to build a good life as a teenager, with the various other temptations, so our main goal is to give less privileged players the opportunity to make a career out of football," he said.

Develop

"We go about that in a variety of ways - Oscar, who runs First Academy with me, is an ex-pro who can utilise his numerous links to enable our players to go on trial with professional clubs.

"First Academy take players from any social and cultural background and our aim is to not only help them improve and develop as

footballers, but also to give them the right ethics to succeed in life.

"Despite not having great financial resources, our competitively cheap fees mean we pride ourselves on offering kids from all upbringings the chance to join the club.

"The players mainly originate from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds and we endeavour to give the children a chance to develop both as people and as footballers, aiming ultimately to get them into professional academies."

First Academy's Under-11s train and play friendly matches because of the club's belief that player development should focus more on the players' technical growth than match results.

"Our pre-season training takes place at Cricklewood's Clitterhouse Park but the poor facilities there means that we are looking to relocate closer to West Hampstead."

The club has already achieved a significant milestone this summer, with football website Goal.com recently becoming official sponsors in a long-term partnership.

Avnon added: "This coming season could prove to be a big tipping point in our history, with myself and the rest of the management attempting to take the club into an area it has never been to."

The Under-13s and Under-16s participate in the Regents Park League, with the Under-17s playing friendlies against development, semi-professional and amateur teams in an effort to get their players signed onto either professional or semi-professional contracts.

Avnon went on: "Oscar and I are now focusing on developing First Academy as a brand - one that is recognised in the footballing community, producing players who represent us and hopefully going on trial to play for professional clubs.