



CREW JUNIORS HOST MANCHESTER UNITED'S RENE MEULENSTEEN IN SUMMER CLINIC

A Day with Rene-by Ken Tamke, USSF "B" License Coach

Not too many other soccer clubs could have pulled it off, and I'm talking nationally. In cooperation with SportpartnersUSA, the licensee for the Rene Meulenstein Academy (RMA), The Grand Rapids Crew Juniors were able to bring in to the MVP Fieldhouse this summer, not only the RMA "Moves, Spins & Turns" program, but Rene Meulenstein himself to direct it. It was certainly a coup as Coach Meulenstein only has a small window of availability each year in which he can personally appear.

I've been fortunate as a soccer coach. I saw early on what was possible, growing up in the game amongst many foreign players who possessed great skill. Throughout my coaching education, sharp minds and keen eyes for the game have shaped my development and outlook. Along the way, I've even been able to cross a few things off my "soccer bucket list," seeing Pele, Beckenbauer, and Chinaglia compete as part of the Cosmos in the now defunct NASL, playing on a championship high school team, attending the 1994 World Cup, and coaching in a State Cup final. Now, I've got another one for that list.

It was a privilege to be asked to help out at the clinic. I'd received the E-flyer emblazoned with the Manchester United crest, but to be honest was not familiar with Coach Meulenstein and his involvement with ManU. Sir Alex, Ryan Giggs, Scholes, Rooney, them I know, but Rene Meulenstein? I did what anyone else these days would do when they need information, I Googled him.

Rene Meulenstein, of Dutch extraction, first and foremost cites the influence of, and admiration for, his mentor Wiel Coerver. As a student of Coerver methods, it came as no surprise that Meulenstein embraced the philosophy of skills development and small-sided games as a means to train young players. After stints of coaching national youth players in Qatar with Coerver, and managerial roles with a couple of Middle Eastern professional teams, Meulenstein joined ManU as "Skills Development Coach" for youngsters ages 9-21. A brief foray as a coach in the Danish Superliga took him away from Manchester United, but he returned being named First Team Coach by Sir Alex Ferguson in 2007. Rene Meulenstein now adds to his responsibilities with ManU, planning and execution of all training sessions for Sir Alex's English Premier League team.

I wondered if he would turn up in a stretch limo, piling out with Rooney, Ferdinand, Evra, and Chicharito. I wondered if he was approachable, a nice guy, or cool and aloof like many professional players and coaches. The day of the clinic was marked by brilliant sunshine and perfect temperatures. The schedule had been arranged with the youngest players attending for the first block of time and then graduating

throughout day to the older age groups in order. Rene Meulenstein would be tested right away. I've attended many clinics and watched many an experienced coach bomb with younger players who can't execute the activity or perform the bit of skill as asked. Likewise, it takes a particular personality to interact effectively with young kids. One's serious side as a coach needs to be left at home, the ability to have fun and be engaging trotted out. I could tell right away Rene had a sense of humor. One of the nine year olds had showed up sporting a pair of eye-blinding neon soccer shoes. Rene winced, and hid behind me to escape the reflection. I offered my sunglasses. We roared with laughter and so did the kids.

Each activity in every session during the day was laid out meticulously by Rene. Interestingly, many of these activities were common to each session regardless of the age of the player. What changed was the focus Rene requested from his charges. Younger players almost always had a ball at their feet and were given more time, more touches, more space, and little or no pressure in which to practice moves and make passes to partners. Older players worked individually and in small groups. They were encouraged to play quickly, with touch, space, and pressure restrictions added as proficiency increased. Every player at every age was given free rein to be creative without repercussion. While older players did participate in some small-sided games, seldom were Goalkeepers used, or more than four players a side. Not a single "scrimmage" as we know it occurred. The players were engaged, excited and active throughout, a true testimony to Rene's energy and organization.

Every group was given the opportunity to ask Rene questions at the end of their session followed by autographs and pictures. Most amusing was the lad who asked how Coach Meulenstein had discovered Lionel Messi, which of course, he didn't. This brought more laughter and Rene in jest claiming a hand in developing all the modern players. There's no disputing that fact, at least for a few. Rene Meulenstein is largely credited with the meteoric rise of Cristiano Ronaldo (on the pitch, not in the hearts of teenage girls). Certainly, Wayne Rooney has benefitted from the association and check out Danny Welbeck the next time you watch ManU in an EPL game that he plays in. He came up through the Manchester United Youth Academy and has been under the tutelage of Rene Meulenstein since he was ten years old.

As the day wound down I found myself sitting on a bench alone next to Rene much like he sits next to Sir Alex. Half a world away from Old Trafford in Cascade Township we talked about the progression and organization of his activities and the ages and stages to apply them. He related stories about the ManU lads. He has them doing many of the same things I had seen on the day, albeit with a bit more speed and quality. His real passion though is giving the game of soccer back to the kids. It is through encouragement, fun, and development of skills he proposes to do this. He asserts that taking away structure and formality, the coach as narrator and puppeteer, and replacing it with free play, the ability to experiment and the coach as passive facilitator not prescriptive dictator simply makes soccer more fun for youngsters. Skills form the foundation for what comes next.

We've come to the end of the clinic for players and now retire inside the MVP Fieldhouse where a handful of local coaches have gathered for an abbreviated lecture. I'm pleased to see not just Crew coaches, but some cross town rivals invited by the Crew to share the good fortune and reap the reward of such a clinician as Rene Meulenstein. There is much method to the Meulenstein madness and that method owes its origins to Wiel Coerver. Coerver conducted an exhaustive study about what attributes make a particular player and a particular team great. There are four cornerstones in the building block of greatness: Tactical Awareness, Physical Makeup, Mental Preparedness, and Technical Ability. There are

also different stages during the maturation process where different ages receive information more effectively. Through his analysis, Coerver discovered the sequence. First develop technical ability. If you arm that player with a toolbox full of tricks, turns, spins, and moves, as that player ages those skills and the comfort with which they are performed will form a building block. Tactics in the game come easier to young players when they have an arsenal of weapons to draw from and can do so unconsciously, but they must first have a solid foundation of technique.

The coaches collectively throw out names, a who's who of the greatest players and teams in the world, past and present, defenders, attackers. We talk about the incredible skills and signature moves they possess, their vision, strength, speed, and the force of will each demonstrates when they are applied under pressure. We discuss the attributes that make up each building block and assign them to one of the four cornerstones. As I replay the day in my head it all makes sense, the activities, the focus based on age, the stages. As we talk about tactical awareness there doesn't seem to be one word or phrase that accurately describes what it embodies. Is it anticipation? Is it decision making or a combination of the two? We all agree the best in the world have it. They just seem to know what to do next.

As I sit in front of the TV a month later watching ManU dismantle another foe the camera pans to the bench after Welbeck scores. Sir Alex puts his arm around Rene as he celebrates and smiles ear to ear. I realize my time with Rene Meulenstein was definitely something bucket list worthy and beyond. The word pops into my head-prescience. That's what tactical awareness is. So Rene, if you read this you have my permission to use it. It means knowing beforehand, knowing what to do and when to do it. Without knowing how, you can't know what, much less when, and certainly not before. What a great day with Rene!



(l to r, Rene Meulenstein, the Author, Mark Maxie)

