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Dave Collins, Andrew Cruickshank, Geir Jordet

The coach nomad

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Guus Hiddink, Geir Jordet
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Introduction

Often when I was working, me and my partner went to Africa around Christmas time. In Africa, we met nomads. Coming from the west, you are thinking: “how do they survive?” They manage to survive under very difficult circumstances, in the desert and so forth. Of course they are concerned about their daily existence, or maybe also about tomorrow, but not so concerned about what will happen in a year or two ahead. For me, I love to travel and to look around. And I love to work elsewhere because I never had a big fear of how it will be tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or the week or the month after. I have never had a fear of this unknown. Not really. When the circumstances are okay, then I dive in.

It is not in the world of the nomad to go back, but sometimes you deliberate a bit before you go in. One example is when I was asked, after I had been in Spain, to work for the South-Koreans, on the other side of the world. At that time, they wanted me to come and give some advice leading up to them hosting (together with Japan) the World Cup in 2002. I said, “ok, I can give some advice”, but I still kept my distance. Of course, the World Cup is very challenging and very attractive, but I was thinking, “what would I do in such a different world, the Asian world?” They then offered some conditions. I demanded, based on that, something I thought they would never give in to. It was some kind of self-protection. I said, if you want to achieve what you are aiming for, which was to be one of the best 16 teams in the world cup, naturally an unrealistic target because you’re now 60–80 in the FIFA ranking, you must do a few things: hire a coach, and give him a full licence to work with the players at the club level. This means that the national team must be a club. Then, let the coach take the players for one and a half years around the world to give them experience. This was important because they were so closed in their own football society. And you have to have a budget to enable the team to travel to South America, Europe and meet very strong teams. South Korea at the time had a fully professional league. Not a big league, but still a real league, covered by Hyundai, Samsung, and all the big companies. I was thinking, they will never manage to get the players free from club obligations for 18 months. However, within ten days the guy came back – he later became my friend, and he said, “ok, on the conditions of having all the players whenever you want, we agree. Secondly, we have a budget from someone. And third, here’s
your contract”. So I said “no, no, take it easy!” At the same time though, they did manage
to put this together in ten days. This felt challenging, and it triggered me. So I accepted, and
bombed my way in to this unknown world. I can do this only when the conditions are ok.
If I would have gone there and not got the conditions where I could have my approach with
the team, I would not have done it. It is not in the world of a nomad to go back. But I am
not having that fear.

This chapter is about how it is to work as a professional football coach in different countries
and different cultures. How do you adapt? How do you navigate and work with people in elite
and professional sport, under very different cultural, linguistic, and societal circumstances?

My beginnings

Before I started coaching, I was playing professional football for 16 years. At the same time, I
took a degree in physical education as a teacher. I did some training with a younger team on
the side, which I loved. And in the mornings, I worked as a physical teacher with young boys
and girls who could not adapt to normal school. They had to go to special school for different
reasons. I did this for many years with a lot of joy.

However, once I got an offer to become a full professional assistant coach at PSV Eindhoven
in my country, the Netherlands. This was after my professional player career. People around
me then said: “Be careful, football is a jungle, don’t jump in!” Yes, it is a jungle. But when
you are in the jungle you have to grab the lianas, and then you can move around. I could
have stayed in this rather comfortable zone, teaching in the morning and having a team in
the afternoon, and I would have had a normal existence. But at that moment I said to myself
“come on! If you want to challenge yourself, go for the unknown!” For me, personally, this
was a decisive moment. Making a decision where I will have no security for tomorrow, or
for the year after.

Since this, I have coached in Turkey, Spain, South Korea, Australia, Russia, England, and
recently, China.

My staff

When I go to a new team, and a new country, I do not like to bring in my own big staff. I could
demand this if I wanted to, I could say: “I want an assistant, and another assistant. And I want
a physical therapist, a masseur, a team manager, a video analyst, everything”. I could easily ask
for a five- or six-man staff. However, I do not like that because once you go for a staff like that,
and probably it would have been a Dutch staff, you go into an isolated island. You enter into a
new culture and with such an island you can be a little offensive or it can be very awkward with
respect to the local culture.

I always have one main assistant who comes from the local culture. This person is more of
a colleague, but officially is an assistant. Most of the time, this is a retired professional footballer
who has come into coaching. Before I talk more definitely about the contracts and so forth I go
searching for this assistant from the local federation or a club. And then I have several encoun-
ters with that man, so I can talk with him, more or less “feel and smell him”, until I know how
he is thinking and what he is doing. Then I have information about whether I can rely on this
man, because he can give me a lot of information within a half a day about their culture, such
as: what are the good things, what are the tricky things or bad things, and so on, in a club or
federation. This is based on me trusting him after several conversations, of course. If I were to
come with an island of my own staff, you need three, four, or five months to get adapted into that new environment. That is why I prefer to always hire a local.

From the outside, I can bring one or two assistants that are working together. Maximum. Other staff are local. I always talk very openly with them. Until I see that they cannot live up to the standards we like to have, whether it is a physiotherapist, physical trainer or what so ever, I always say beforehand, that after two months, I might have to bring in someone new. An expert, someone I have confidence in, that can come in and cooperate with them. Whether I do that or not I decide after I know if the experience with the local people is ok.

About my style and way of doing things, the president and the board hire me to reach some targets. The targets can be for example to get into the last 16, become champions or qualify for the Champions league. So, these targets are rather focused, and I can use my methods of working towards that.

My bosses

The cultural influence is what you have to try to distinguish. What is the culture in this club or this society? On top of that, I think for the targets there are political influences. I try to avoid always, in the bad sense of the word, the political things. That is why briefly, when I started in Korea, it was political. Of course everyone says, “Korea was wonderful”. Yes, in the end it was. Because I was working for one and a half years before that. Or fighting. I do not know if it was to my advantage not knowing the language. I could not read, I could not understand the TV, or the radio, or the newspaper. They are so polite, and they did not tell me what was written in this, let us say, rough preparation time. I am not talking about the last two or three months, at the World Cup and the successful preparation for that, but before that. I was not told at the time, but I was given a nickname: “Zero-five”. Because I had said something about the Korean team in the past, the team that was present for five World Cups, but never with a win. They always prepared with games against Malaysia, Singapore, and won, three, four, five–nil, and the country was always thinking, we are ready for the World Cup. And then they met the real teams in the real world, and they got smashed. So, when I came in, I wanted to go the hard way. I said: “We will have a rough time, and there we will be killed, but we will learn a lot from that experience”.

This is also why I always want one person I make myself responsible to. And in Korea, he was also the president of Hyundai. I told him: we are going into a rough period now and we will lose. He replied: “You don’t even have to report to me because the team had five world cups already, and nothing”. He was a very intelligent, western-educated man. He told me he would cover me until the end. But if I had not made this contractual approach, it would have been a technical committee to report to. The technical committee made with other coaches, previous coaches, their selection. They were all representatives from north, east, south, west, from the whole country. Ten football regions. And they bring all their players from their region, shouting: “Hey, my player must be selected, my player this, my player that. . .”. It was not on quality, it was political. So, that is why I killed the technical committee of ten men, powerful men. I said no. Those are the struggles you must go for.

Always, there needs to be just one person you report to. One, so I have this one channel. I tell this person I can come to talk to you and say what I am doing, and you can decide whether you like it or if you kill me, fire me, or whatever. I do not do this with a committee.

In Russia, there is also the influence of the football culture, which is dominating in the clubs by powerful presidents, and even sometimes, in some clubs, by for instance the army or the old
KBG, such as in CSKA Moscow and Dynamo Moscow. Lokomotiv is the state railway. Spartak Moscow is the only people’s club. And this is important to know. Players behave differently when they are in Dynamo, the army club. The coaches are put in there by the generals. And the players are not stupid, they know. If you do not perform, you get punished. As a leader to be safe, you have to punish the worker. Even if it is illogical. So, those things you must know when you operate in Russian football. Spartak is more of a free club, that is why it is very popular.

During the games, what I was taught, is that they could yell at everyone, politically. They were allowed to yell, swear, and whatever. During the game, not outside. In Spartak they could say that this politician or this person is so and so. Because, people are very creative in this. And all these influences you have to deal with. With me, they said: “First, we have to qualify, and then we have to perform well on the European stage”. But then you get all these influences. I was put there by another authority, by the Russian federation. In Russia they accept authorities, but they do not trust them. They cooperate, because if they do not cooperate, they go to Siberia or you look for another club.

My bosses and I have the same targets. I had the target to qualify, they must have the target to qualify, so we have in principle the same target. Of course, I make decisions on who to play, how to play, and so forth, but first of all I have to win people’s confidence – particularly your players. So, what do you have to do? Not say that you are different with long speeches and verbally asking them to trust me, because they know those stories. But you get offered situations where you can go in and show them. For instance, when authorities of the federation come and say they would like to talk with the players.

This happened once in Russia, before a game. It was a friendly game, and I said okay. You know how it is with the big guys, the presidents, holding speeches for 30 seconds or so. But this guy kept on talking for ten to 15 minutes. And the players got very tired. Afterwards, the next day, my boss at the federation said “next time, let’s do it in a different way. We can come in and say ‘Let’s go! For the country and for the flag’, you know, for 30 seconds. Next game”. I do not remember if the fixture was against England or Germany, they came in one or two hours before the game in the locker room and started talking, so I would say: “Guys, listen! Our boss would like to say some words”. And then he said a few things, and after around 30 seconds, he ended it with: “Fight!” Okay, good, so then we went out with him, out of the locker room. And all of a sudden, I saw him in the corner of my eye, coming back into the locker room. I waited for ten seconds and then he started talking again. So, I went back in, and this was a crucial point, I think. I said “Vitaly! (In Russia one always calls one by his first name. It is an honorful approach). Vitaly! Come”. I grabbed his arm. And the players, they were looking. They knew our relationship, that he was my boss. So, I grabbed him, and I said, “Vitaly! Come on! What did we say the last time?” I took him and pushed him, and we walked out. And later, I would hear from my local coach that this was the moment where things changed. Afterwards I was thinking they could have killed me, because I was taking away, a little bit, my boss’s authority. The players at this point were looking at each other and saying “shit!” This was a breaking point. Because he could have said, “I’m your boss! Get out!” That would have been a normal reaction. But, not being totally stupid, he was maybe thinking of the reaction of the others. So, those are key moments. You get offers, but you have to smell those moments. If I would have given in, he would have gone in and held a speech again for five or ten minutes. And I would had stood there. Then I would totally have, in my opinion, lost the authority with the players. Because they would have thought “hey, this is another coward coming here to guide us!” Those moments you get offered. Take them! With the risk that you might get killed. But
I would rather be killed than work under those circumstances. Authorities are sometimes a little bit scared. You think they are big, but they are sometimes scared because of prestige. And you can play with that.

The players

Coaching in different countries can be a very different experience. You come in to a different world, a different society. And also, a different football society and a different football culture. In my country, in the Netherlands, we raise youngsters so that they ask “why?” “Why should I, why should this, why should that?” That is totally different from many other cultures where they never ask this question. In Korea, they never ask “why”. In Russia, they think “why”, but they do not ask “why”. In Australia, they say “ok, we’ll do it”. And in Spain, they also do not ask because of your authority and your position. Here in Holland, you have to win your authority by knowledge, experience, and quality, but it can be different in other places.

When I went to Australia, they said: “We have not qualified to the World Cup since 1974 in Germany, and we have to qualify for the World Cup in Germany in 2006”. I looked at the players, and they were all playing in Europe. And I said, okay, I will take the challenge. But, we do not travel to Australia, because they had suggested to have the training camp in Australia. I said, 90% of the players are playing in Europe and there are two players playing in their league in Sydney. We had our practice here, in Holland. I said they could come here, and that is what I wanted.

When I started there, practising with them, the players were so committed in the first training session. I like to play eight versus eight, or ten versus ten, and so forth. They were so eager to play, and they kicked each other. Usually I like it when it the game is getting a little tough but they were literally kicking each other on the side of the pitch, having a fight. Later on, the players who were fighting came in and said “boss, we fixed the problem ourselves”. And then you would think that these players would avoid each other, but no. Soon after there was another clash. So, there was a very open-minded approach to the game. But, the downside of that was that they said: “We are so committed! Australians are so committed, we fight, and we fight!” And I said: “Yes, but we haven’t qualified for 37 years. Ever thought of why that is?” Commitment is not enough. You have to look at other parts in which you have to improve. Tactical and strategical elements of the game. Try to use your brain a bit more.

I always try to construct my teams in a spine, tactically or strategically. And I like to have players in the spine, who know the game and who also have the ability to transfer the ideas we are talking about in our practice sessions into our game. My opinion is that football is not really a coaching sport, if you compare it with basketball, handball, or other sports. Like in volleyball, you can draw the patterns, and you can practise those patterns in training sessions because there is a reduced number of players, and there is not always a physical opposition, so you can manage more as a coach in terms of patterns of play. But in football it is more complex I think. So, I need players in my spine who know how to play offensively, defensively, and in transitions. If I know there are one, two, three players in central defensive, midfield and maybe an attacking player, midfielder or striker, who can play: well, then the unit is more safe as a team. I can yell on the side. But I know, that if a coach is yelling at the side, as a player you don’t understand because of all of the noise. And if the coach does that all the time, he will always be two seconds behind the situation. When I started coaching as a young coach, I saw myself sometimes on TV afterwards. I could see myself yelling after the situation and no one reacted. I was like a supporter on the stands yelling “you should do this and that!”, but it...
had happened already. The situation is already history. So, I tried to think in advance of the situation that was about to come up. This is not easy, but you try to. And if you have some influence, you can have some contact with your key players, for example by saying “hey! We have to draw back” and so on. So, I always try to build my team with that spine. A spine of “coaching players”.

In big clubs, you have always a culture. And in those clubs, although of course in lesser clubs as well, they have culture often guarded by big players. For example, when I worked at Real Madrid, and Real Madrid is for me the biggest club there is with respect to the culture, the pressure, everything. I got to my desk on a Monday, and this player had had a big game on Saturday. On Sunday night, he was going into a night club at 1am, left at 3.50am, and went to another club until 6am. And I got this information on my desk because they are followed by club people, spies, and they are followed by the press. So, I said to my captain: “I’m going to kill this guy. He has irresponsible behavior”. My captain said “Boss! We did already, we did it already”. The main culture guardians were at the time Hierro and Sanchis. And my captain said, “we know already, so we kill him!” This is the culture in this club. If you’re at this club you know what to do within the borders of what is accepted. This is the culture outside the pitch, you know, and I find it very interesting.

Language

Language is an issue when coaching abroad. But I think sports, especially football, and music or maybe art, are without frontiers, without real borders. Everyone plays football, and basically, we already have this language together. If you put some international people, players, who know how to play football together, they will still play together even if they do not speak the same language. They have communication without language. But of course, you do need a lot of language. I need an interpreter. Most of the time I try to use my assistant coach. If I have a different language like Russian or Korean, then I use my assistant. Also, I pick my assistant, for instance when I was in Russia there was a player, a top player who had played in the Bundesliga and spoke perfectly German. So, I could speak German with him with no problem whatsoever.

Plus, always when I go someplace, like to Russia, Spain, or Turkey, I try to learn the language, also because I like languages. For example, I learned Spanish in two months because I studied it for 16–17 hours a day. I listened to audiotapes in the car. Spanish is a very easy language to learn. Russian is more difficult. My partner is very interested in society generally, so in Russia we hired a teacher and tried to learn some basic Russian language. In addition to the normal language, I always prepare a list of football expressions, offside and so on. Sometimes this is like in the early days when one sent telegrams with the principle notes. Of course, now you can write anything you want, but I would talk like a telegram in the early days, in principles.

When it comes to interpreters, I have learned it is best to have an expert – that is, a coach or a football player who knows football, instead of an official interpreter. I had once an interpreter at the beginning in Turkey. Of course I did not speak the Turkish language, and I had an official interpreter sent by the club. I talked in German, and he translated. I said something to the players on the pitch and my speech was more or less done in 30 seconds. And I said to the interpreter: “Translate!” When I talked 30 seconds, he talked for three minutes. I mean, with German, maybe it will take 30 seconds and when you say it in Turkish it will take 40 seconds, maximum 50 seconds. The first time this happened, I let it slide, but the second time, I was thinking, this is impossible. I then put one of my confidants in the back of the group the next
time, and he told me the interpreter was telling a totally different story. This was a lesson for me to, beforehand, have very good talks with people you have in your staff, about trust and confidence. Also, football experts will know the principles you are trying to communicate. Even though language is a barrier, I can then say I want this principle explained, and he can use his words on what we are going to do, and what our targets are.

**Personal factors**

Coaching across the world has affected me personally in a few ways. My fixed ideas of other worlds, my prejudices, are disappearing. I am now less judgemental from a distance. People around the world are of course different, but they are not that different. We always have this idea that the Koreans are like that, the Australians, Norwegians, or the Dutch are like this. Get rid of this idea. I have met a lot of people all over the world who I still have contact with, which has broadened my concept of life. So this is not just about football.

I always defend when people are attacking Australians or Koreans or Russians. When someone says, “the Koreans, they look alike”, I’m thinking “come on. Open your eyes and look. They are totally different”. Of course they have their society and so forth, but people are different. I have gotten rid of some of my prejudices.

This is about curiosity. And it is about tolerance, in general, not just in the exact profession that we are in. Because it is not always healthy in this profession because we have these targets. You may have your limits for the players and for yourselves, and sometimes tolerance is not good, you have to focus on the outcome targets you are set to reach with your team. And that is why it is good to have people around yourself. Like my partner. My lady is always travelling with me. I can make things very narrow. I focus on my targets. I am hired to reach these targets. So, I close my blinkers like the horses and go there, not knowing or not being interested in what is happening around these targets. But she is going into normal life. She is very open. Within no time she knows people, whether it is in Russia, Korea, London, or wherever. In Korea, for instance, I set up this foundation. But that was not my idea, it was hers. In Korea, it looks like a perfect society, because they keep their face and prestige, which is very important. But behind the scenes, she discovered and learned about the society by talking, I mean real talking, not just superficial. In no time, she gets to know people and she goes: “I’ve heard stories about how women who are divorced here are degraded to second level citizens”, for instance. The foundation is based on handicapped and sight-impaired children. Also, in Korea when the success began to come in the last three months, she said, “You’re so popular in this country. You have to do something to pay back a bit”. So, she was the initiator of this. It means that you are so focused, stupidly, on what you are asked to do, that you find an excuse to not open your blinkers. You need people around you to open them, and that is why we came to this foundation. So, you need people around you who are in touch with society in general. In the early days, you would think this one thing is important and the other things not so important. Which is true in a way, but sometimes you have to get a knock and wake up, “wake up my friend”.

**Conclusions**

I think when coaches go abroad from their own country, they must in principle already have that adventurous characteristic to go abroad. On the other hand, you see coaches who are going abroad and come back in no time. Three or six months. I do not know exactly, but they might not have the ability to go into depth in society. Whether it is in the club or in a federation or
in the broader society. And they are sticking to this, maybe a little bit too rigid, approach. I am not sure, but you see several returning coaches after very short experiences abroad.

Doing well coaching abroad can be about flexibility, respect, and tolerance. And it is important to go out with an interest for the culture you are going into. Of course, the target is in your club or federation culture, but there are many influences you cannot separate. And these influences are coming from within the club and in the surroundings of the club or from the national culture itself. I find this interesting.

You need the professional skills. But you also need the human skills, taught or from nature, when you go abroad. Of course, you are asked to reach targets. I am not hired because I am a nice guy. But you can use the influences from the outside as well.

This is my approach. It might not be the best approach, but it is my approach.

Note

1 Guus was formerly with Fenerbache (Turkey), Valencia (Spain), Netherlands (twice), Real Madrid (Spain), Real Betis (Spain), South Korea, PSV Eindhoven (Netherlands), Australia, Russia, Chelsea (England, twice), Turkey, and Anzhi Makhachkala (Dagestan/Russia).