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SOCCER

At Italy's Coaching Academy, a Pipeline of Champions

By RORY SMITH MAY 11, 2017

FLORENCE, Italy — Every June, Italy's latest batch of aspiring coaches convenes on Coverciano, a secluded, well-heeled suburb of Florence, to complete the final stage of their education.

There are normally a couple of dozen of them, largely drawn from the ranks of recently retired players. Over the course of the previous year, they have spent two days a week studying toward the qualification that enables them to work at the very highest level of soccer in Europe. It is, officially, called the UEFA Pro License. At Coverciano, they call it Il Master.

They are following in illustrious footsteps. Antonio Conte, who can win the Premier League title on Friday, did this course. Many years ago, so did Claudio Ranieri, who won that title last year. This year, graduates of Coverciano will win the championships of Germany, Russia and Italy.

But before these hopefuls can join their ranks, they must spend a month sequestered here, among the pale yellow walls, terra cotta roofs and sculpted cypress trees of Casa Italia, the headquarters of Italian soccer's governing body. It is not a bad place to spend time, but for four days a week, for four weeks, they work, and work hard.

Then, the last hurdle: a daunting set of oral exams. Renzo Ulivieri, the director of the Scuola Allenatori — the managers' school — and his technical committee grill the prospective managers on subjects ranging from tactics to communications. Each candidate also must defend the thesis he has spent the last year writing.

Through it all, each student must remember Coverciano's twin heresies, the two phrases they are strictly prohibited from using. The first is "ai miei tempi": in my day. The second, even more taboo, is "il mio calcio": my soccer.

"If someone says that," Ulivieri said, "they cannot pass."

Ulivieri, by his own admission, "does not like rules." During his own long coaching career, he inculcated a sort of grass-roots, collectivist democracy among his players; he was famous in Italy for placing a bust of Lenin on his desks.

On this point, though, he is quite serious. Either one of those two sentences brings an automatic fail, and for what he says is very good reason. Those two phrases run against everything Ulivieri, 76, and his colleagues teach at Coverciano, everything they believe, everything that has made this place, for almost 60 years, the most fertile, most formidable proving ground for coaches in the world.

On Friday in West Bromwich, England, only nine months after he took charge of Chelsea, Conte is expected to become the seventh non-British manager to win the Premier League. Of the previous six, half — Carlo Ancelotti, Roberto Mancini and Ranieri — are Italian.

It is not just in England that Italians are thriving. Massimiliano Allegri, Conte's successor at Juventus, will secure yet another Serie A championship this weekend in Italy, where only four of the 20 top-division managers are imported. Ancelotti, now at Bayern Munich, has added the German title to the English, French and Italian crowns he has already gathered. And Massimo Carrera, once one of Conte's assistants, last month guided Spartak Moscow to its first Russian championship since 2001.

All of them are alumni of Coverciano, just as the great names of Italian coaching — Arrigo Sacchi, Marcello Lippi, Giovanni Trapattoni and the rest — were before

them, though there is no other common thread that bonds their teams.

Where the graduates of soccer's other great coaching schools — those of Johan Cruyff and Marcelo Bielsa — all carry the telltale signs of their formative influences, Coverciano leaves no such imprint. To Ulivieri, that is its calling card — the absence of a calling card — and a source of immense pride. He is not seeking to create disciples, but to forge individuals.

"We do not want to create identikit coaches," he said. "There is no 'Italian style' of coach: I believe in this a lot. This is not a factory. There is no such thing as 'my football.' There is only the football that you can play with the 20 players you have."

There is a host of courses at Coverciano — programs designed for scouts, video analysts, technical directors and referees — but Il Master is its most prestigious qualification. It is not taught, though, at least not in the traditional sense.

There is a library, where all the theses that past students have written are stored, for reference, but Ulivieri does not assign set texts. "Football moves too fast," he said. "By the time a book on tactics is published, it is already old."

Instead, he encourages his pupils to think. In "The Italian Job," the memoir of the former Chelsea manager Gianluca Vialli, Lippi, the coach who led Italy to the 2006 World Cup title, remarked that "Coverciano does not offer truths, but possibilities."

There are lectures, on the finer points of tactics, but they are hardly formal. "They can interrupt me whenever they like," Ulivieri said. The sessions, he said, are more like discussion groups. The students have notebooks, but they are encouraged at the end of each day to record their own observations, "the things they liked and did not like." Ulivieri wants his students to learn from one another; Lippi has said he considered that "exchange of ideas" the most important part of his time here.

Much of the teaching has a practical edge: not just the days on the training field and the visits to elite clubs — this year's group spent time at Juventus, Inter Milan and Borussia Dortmund, and also the nearby Serie B team Perugia — but in video sessions.

"We watch a lot of games together," Ulivieri said. "I will tell one student he is in charge of the home team and another to manage the away team. I will pause it after 15 minutes and ask what they should do. They will say, 'We're doing O.K., I'll leave it.' Then we watch another 15 minutes. We pause it. 'O.K., what do you do now? And you?'"

This is the message Ulivieri wants his students to comprehend: Every game is dynamic, fluid, in a perpetual state of flux. Things change, and so must the coaches. He likes to see managers "who take the game in hand," who adjust and alter and tweak as the situation demands.

He draws out his own notebook to illustrate the point. "If our opponents have two really good central defenders," he said, sketching out a formation, "and we have two good strikers, then they can cancel us out."

He flips to a new page. "But if our strikers drop here, and here, then they are playing two against zero, and we cancel their strength."

Another page: "Or say we are losing, and a team is pressing us, we have two choices. We can dig a tunnel — and I think that is hard — or we can go over them. You have to become different."

This is why expressing loyalty to a single style is banned. There is no "perfect football," Ulivieri said. There is only the right football for the right moment. It is one of the things he admires about Conte, the way he has adapted his approach for his players, and for his circumstances.

"You cannot teach English players like you teach Italians," he said. "They would look at you like you were crazy."

Ulivieri does not except himself from that process. He still coaches a girls' team, often trying out tactical schemes with them to see what his ideas on paper look like in practice.

He is currently experimenting with "three forwards, playing deep, but very close, within 20 meters of each other." It is a slight amendment to Barcelona's approach, one the current set of Coverciano students has been researching. The early

signs are good. "The movements are very beautiful," he said. "There are a lot of solutions."

It is an approach, he says, that can be deployed for only a few minutes at a time, though he wonders if it may become more common in years to come.

"We do a lot of work on what the future of football will be," he said. "And we are convinced it is tactical flexibility: teams who can change system week to week, and even in games, who defend one way and attack in another. The future is teams who can change clothes."

This, then, is why students are forbidden to hark back to what they knew as players. In one corner of Coverciano's sprawling complex sits Italy's national soccer museum, full of memorabilia from the country's four World Cup triumphs. It is overseen by Fino Fini. He has worked for the national federation — initially as a doctor — since 1958.

This is a place conscious of history, but not hidebound by it. Its eyes are not on what worked before, but on what will work next. It has no use for nostalgia, or for fundamentalism. Like the sport it studies, it is constantly evolving. That is its calling card, the mark it leaves on all those who pass through its doors. Conte is the latest to prove its success. He will not be the last.

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Renzo Ulivieri coaching on the field at Coverciano. There is no “perfect football,” he said, only the right football for the right moment. CreditClara Vannucci for The New York Times

Coverciano alumni are coaching successfully all over the world, including, clockwise from top left, Antonio Conte of Chelsea; Massimo Carrera with Spartak Moscow; Massimiliano Allegri of Juventus; and Claudio Ranieri with Leicester City.CreditCarl Recine/Reuters; Epsilon/Getty Images; Miguel Medina/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images; Adrian Dennis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Ulivieri instructing prospective coaches at Scuola Allenatori in Coverciano, Italy. “We do not want to create identikit coaches,” he said.
CreditClara Vannucci for The New York Times