



## WOLLONGONG WOLVES JUNIORS VISIT HOLLAND

During February 2020 five of our selected junior players spent two weeks training and playing with Dutch Eerste Divisie team S.B.V Excelsior Rotterdam.

Wolves juniors Zach De Jesus and Max Cunial (u/14's), Kalani Vella (u/15's), Anton Radice-Jones and Josh Galevski (u/16's) were selected at the end of the 2019 to spend time with the Dutch club to experience life and football at a professional European club.

The Wollongong Wolves have a supportive link to the Dutch club via Wolves Juniors Technical Director Neil Mann and his colleague Marco Van Lochem (S.B.V Excelsior Rotterdam).

Prior to journeying to Holland, the players were inducted into the program and set themselves targets and goals to achieve during the trip with the assistance of the club's head of Mindset & Culture - Mr Ezio Mormile, Head of Medical Provision – Matt Whalan, Junior Technical Director-Neill Mann and Marco van Lochem (via Skype from Rotterdam).

The players and accompanying parents reaction to the opportunity has been incredibly positive. To be able to experience the facilities and the European intensity of training was certainly an eye opener for the players. We are certain that the players now have a greater appreciation of what is required of them should as they continue their path towards wishing to become professional footballers.

Upon their return, the players and parents were de-briefed and had the following feedback:-

Player responses:-

### 1. What was the most enjoyable part of your experience in Holland with Excelsior?

*"The facilities and the environment that I trained and played in. All the staff and players were very professional and included me as a part of their club and team from the beginning. The facilities had 3 neatly cut and well-kept artificial fields which made my play improve and it felt amazing to play on."* **Kalani Vella**

*"Seeing how they play and learning new things, meeting new people who are inspired by football. I also enjoyed training and playing in the cold weather and the different training ideas."* **Zach De Jesus**

*"I was really welcomed into a great team. I always felt like it was very professional, but the team and coaches have such a great relationship, the coaching was fun and this always increased the intensity and excitement to train hard. You could see the morale of the team was really high and this was demonstrated in their will to do really well for their*

coaches. There was a lot of mutual respect between players and coaches. This environment was a safe place to try things.” **Max Cunial**

“Everything was about football.” **Anton Radice-Jones**

**2. What was the biggest surprise to you from a football perspective?**

“The intensity that they trained at and how every single person was focusing on the coach the whole time. Although we train very intently here at the Wolves, it was just that one step up which stood out to me.” **Kalani Vella**

“As a goalkeeper I was really surprised that every player from the goalkeeper to the striker could finish accurately.” **Max Cunial**

“How professional the whole club is.” **Anton Radice-Jones**

“I knew the players would be of a higher skill level, but I was surprised by their size – they were generally smaller. They definitely made up for it in skill. The training grounds and facilities were awesome and better than what I thought we’d get to see and train on.” **Zach De Jesus.**

**3. Has the experience motivated you (or increased your motivation) to become a professional footballer? If it has, explain how and why.**

“Yes, it has definitely increased my motivation because I’ve seen how good the players are at my age and ages above, and the opportunities available to them. This pushes me to get better at my skills because then, those opportunities will become available to me. I want to bring that motivation to my current team and hopefully inspire them to become better too.” **Zach De Jesus.**

“Yes. When I watched the ability of the players in the team, I was able to see that with their commitment and their extensive training program that they were achieving what they were because of the hard work they put into training.” **Max Cunial.**

“Yes, because now I know what I need to do to play overseas and with a professional club. The way that they train over there has influenced me to train with the exact same intensity at home.” **Kalani Vella**

**4. What do you think you need to do from now on to achieve your football goals?**

“To keep my concentration at the highest level and focus on my training and games which will improve me as I progress from level to level. I also need to keep my football and school as first priorities as the players were seen to do on my trip.” **Kalani Vella**

“Push myself to extend beyond my capabilities. This involves consistently training and working hard. My coach at Excelsior gave me some feedback on my strengths and weaknesses. I need to keep working on both to improve my game.” **Max Cunial**

*“Keep practicing, dedicate more time outside of structured training to get better, faster, stronger and more skilled. Learn to communicate more and be heard. I also need to focus on not wasting so much time.”* **Zach De Jesus**

*“Work hard and keep believing.”* **Anton Radice-Jones**

5. **What was the biggest difference you noticed in terms of how we live in Australia on a day to day bases, compared to how people live in Holland? That is, the differences in our culture.**

*“In Holland they are always riding bikes. They also use public transport a lot like catching trams from school to training. Another difference is the weather for their training sessions, most days were freezing, while we train in the hot sun. Although they speak Dutch as their main language, they all attempted to speak English and I could understand them well (except my coach).”* **Kalani Vella**

*“The way that we live and go to school in Australia is very different to Holland. In Holland their training program is integrated with schooling. This meant that training starts much earlier in the days and they can diversify their training program. One of the greatest aspects of the culture in the Excelsior club was that the team ate together at the club prior to their game.”* **Max Cunial**

*“Transport is predominantly by bicycle and trams .”* **Anton Radice-Jones**

*“I know that when the team starts training in Holland, there’s no complaining, no discussion about X-Box, girlfriends or anything else. They simply got stuck into it, even if the coach wasn’t there. They also had access to equipment straight away and facilities, so this might be why. We were in the city, so everyone catches the trams or trains or rides bikes, there’s not so much car traffic. The kids catch public transport from school to training (schools let the kids out early to go to training). Our weather is way different – it’s a lot colder. School hours are shorter. It’s very multicultural but friendly.”* **Zach De Jesus**

**Accompanying parent responses:-**

1. **What do you believe your son learnt from the experience?**

*“Zac gained a greater appreciation for football in general, but in particular, the level of dedication required to play football at a professional level. He learned different training techniques, different drills and greater ball handling skills. He was exposed to a different football culture, which was all encompassing.”* **Tracey Payne**

*“I believe that after 2 weeks at the club Max learnt how to train and play at their intensity level. I can already see evidence of this in his last 2 trial matches. Also, with the language barrier, this meant that he had to apply greater focus when learning and understanding drills and what was expected from the coach. I think this will help in his ability to read play.”* **Daniel Cunial**

*“He is now able to benchmark himself against quality Dutch players.”* **Dr Mark Jones**

**2. What was the most eye-opening aspect of the football experience for you?**

*"The culture was far different and quite advanced compared to football in Australia. The Club itself was inclusive, particularly in relation to mentoring their younger players. I was quite surprised to see the extensive facilities available to the players and how they operate the Club from a business perspective. It was very clever. The training was very structured and disciplined, but they could afford to be that way because they had the facilities to back it up."*

**Tracey Payne**

*"It would have to be that youth football is acknowledged as part of their schooling. In Max's U 14 's team, approximately two thirds of the team went to the same school. The club had a deal with the school that the students that played at this level of football did not have to attend, let's say "less critical" studies, for example, music, art, other sports and peripheral subjects. This enabled the players to get to training by 2 pm which in turn would get them home by about 4:30 pm to get there home work completed on the more critical subjects." XXX Cunial*

*"There is a real emphasis on attacking drills at training. A large component of training is small sided drills." Dr Mark Jones*

**3. How did the club help you prepare for the trip?**

*"Neil was fantastic in terms of communication and provided us with plenty of information. They skype session with Marco Van Lochem was extremely helpful in easing concerns and at least providing some level of familiarity before we arrived. It was an all-round excellent opportunity for both Zac and myself and taught us a lot in terms of actual football for Zac, and for me, being a supportive parent." Tracey Payne*

*"With a pre-departure presentation and lectures." Dr Mark Jones*

*"We were able to have a communication session with Marco via face time and discussions with Ezio and Matt Whalan on preparation, execution and reflection of the trip." Daniel Cunial*

*"The funds available to the Junior clubs in Holland as a whole, and the financial support of the local governments/councils to ensure each club has sufficient facilities." Matt Vella*

*"A very informative consultation evening with Neil, Matt & Ezio." Matt Vella*

**4. From a football perspective, what do you feel the major differences are between what you have experienced in Holland to what you see in Australia (not necessarily at Wollongong Wolves)**

*"The football culture in Europe is quite different to the Australian Football Culture and I expect that comes down to money. There is insufficient money in Australian football to support the necessary infrastructure including facilities, staffing and training. There is insufficient government support (from all levels) and inadequate Corporate support. Given football is a major sport in Australia, the facilities in Australia leave a lot to be desired. Particularly in Wollongong, facilities are less than adequate, especially wet weather venues. A quick google search shows 1.7 million plus players registered to play soccer in Australia." Tracey Payne.*

*“While there were still many similarities in regards to drills and merging these into a training game at the end of each session, the main differences I found was the diversity of the training and preparation. With the luxury of 3 to 4 coaches per team, the team was often split up into 3 or 4 parties to hone in on positional requirements. The head coach of the team was not only coaching the players, he was interacting with and coaching his assistant coaches. Often he would simply stand in the middle of several different drills on one pitch or several drills over 2 pitches and basically oversee the other coaches ability to control and motivate each drill, while giving constant feedback to both players and coaches with a high level of discipline, intensity and encouragement. The players reacted very positively to this and very quickly acknowledged any downfall. It would show in their immediate response on the field that their feedback was absorbed constructively.*

*An outdoor gym was set up (for minimal expense) under the stadium concourse. Once per week the junior grades would have a boxing session. This wasn't just boxing. While they did not lift weights at U 14 level, they would simply lift the bars to get there posture right for future gym activities. Most gym work incorporated bodyweight, eg. push ups , dips , chin ups with bands, burpees etc.*

*One activity in the gym was to run through several boxing bags with people supporting them and barging them away from themselves. This style of training was noticeable during actual game time where there style of play was very aggressive, yet clean at the same time. Fouls conceded in game time were minimal.*

*There was also a lady employed at the club as a “mental coach“. I only spoke briefly with her and wished I had further and greater discussion. From what I understood of her role, she was there to ensure they players were psychologically fit. Her main focus was to ensure each player had full concentration at training and that their concentration was on themselves, not on others. She also helped them with their ability to deal with coaching feedback and how to take criticism constructively.*

*And as much as I don't need or want to say it, funding in such clubs is something that is extremely difficult to compete with here in Australia. From the top tier clubs, this ranged from €300,000 to €11 million per annum to run their youth division sectors. Spent on A grade facilities and amenities, numerous and specialised quality coaches, coaching courses, transportation, entry fees etc. The young players turn up and train in a professional facility , in a professional coaching environment and train as professional players striving to make it to the top.” **Daniel Cunial***

*“Football is a way of life. The facilities are first class. Multiple synthetic fields at the one venue. Having back nets also an advantage especially in shooting drills to recover balls quickly. The physicality/more aggressive play and the overall Individual higher skill level. The high intensity of drills/play - there were winners/losers in training activities, consequences for the losers such as burpees or laps. The Monday session would start with laps for the whole team if they performed poorly at the weekend league match.*

*They had 4 sessions per week and no drink breaks – they went straight from one drill into the next.*

*The mental training coach conducted on field sessions, group based activities but can also provide individual advice for players as required such as dealing with constructive criticism for example.*

*Strength training as a team (boxing & circuits) was conducted once a week after one of the field sessions. Friendly matches were incorporated into an afternoon starting with training for 1.5 to 2 hours, followed by team dinner then the match. Play 40mins each half instead of 35mins at home.*

*Team travels together for away matches and teams are relegated/advanced, not the club as a whole.*

*Cooperation with a Rotterdam school for players to be on a special schedule where school hours are reduced to attend training 4 days a week, dropping unnecessary subjects and creating a longer day off. These boys also travel to training together via public transport.*

*Overall, Kalani thoroughly enjoyed the time he spent at Excelsior and we were all extremely well looked after by Marco and his staff and we would highly recommend the trip.” **Matt Vella.***

*“Much better facilities, an abundance of artificial pitches and an abundance of highly qualified coaches. There is an emphasis on playing and training better players in higher age groups, a big emphasis on attack/ shooting/ small sided possession and attacking drills, regular and increased number of practice matches. Training is 4 times per week and is supported by school programs in the morning.” **Dr Mark Jones***

Attendance at S.B.V Excelsior Rotterdam was facilitated by Marco van Lochem, Head of Youth Development. Following our players stay at the club, Mr van Lochem said:-

*“We were delighted to give the Wollongong Wolves players this opportunity, we have a great relationship with the club and look forward to strengthening that in the future. The players all showed a tremendous appetite for the game and integrated themselves well into what is a different culture both football wise and day to day life.*

*The boys trained with our youth squads and were exposed to the higher expectations that are put on players at a professional club. Initially they found it challenging but gained confidence as they went on and gradually started to play at the level of intensity that we demand. Hopefully they have learnt from this experience and will continue to develop their game at Wollongong Wolves”.*

We take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in facilitating this opportunity for the players, particularly Wolves Junior Technical Director - Neil Mann, Marco van Lochem, Ezio Mormile, Matthew Whalan and of course, the players and their parents.

We look forward to sending more players to S.B.V Excelsior Rotterdam during early 2021.