

# What next?

## NEXTGEN SERIES

"We're bitterly disappointed by this," said Aston Villa academy director Bryan Jones upon the news that the NextGen Series for under-19 players was to be suspended due to a lack of definite funding. Jones continued: "The competition is one of the greatest development tools for young professional players in this country, providing an elite competition against some of the best clubs around Europe, and it will be lost to us this season. It's shameful."

The NextGen Series had been a success since its 2011 introduction. Last season, 24 teams from 13 different countries contested the group stages of the tournament before knockout rounds established the winner. In essence, this was a Champions League for youth teams. For players, coaches and scouts alike, it felt a million miles away from the alternative of stodgy reserve-team football. There were even breakout stars such as Tony Watt, the teenager who went on to score for Celtic in their sensational win over Barcelona in the Champions League itself. The consensus was that such a tournament for young players was long overdue. But now the brainchild of Justin Andrews and Mark Warburton, the latter the sporting director of Brentford, is gone with no guarantee it will ever return. It appears that the competition has been fatally undermined by the introduction of the UEFA Youth League this season.

It's not difficult to appreciate why those at Villa would feel aggrieved. The winners of last season's tournament possess what is self-evidently one of the best academy set-ups in Europe but their talented youngsters are highly unlikely to get the chance to compete against the continent's best for some time. The UEFA Youth League is only accessible for those teams whose senior teams reach the group stages of the Champions League. For clubs such as Villa and those with similarly strong youth structures such as Athletic Bilbao and Sporting Lisbon, there is anger at an opportunity denied. Jamie MacLaurin,

head of press at NextGen, certainly cut a frustrated figure on Twitter. "UEFA have created an elitist version of it for next season," he wrote. "No progress has been made other than UEFA gaining control... They spotted a market and have bullied their way into it. Pathetic."

Of course, before one gets too dewy-eyed at this tale of big business squashing the little man, it is worth noting that for every disenfranchised Villa, Athletic or Sporting there is a beneficiary of this change. NextGen was an invite-only tournament in its two-season run. The youngsters at Real Sociedad, for example, weren't invited to take part in NextGen but will now get an opportunity to test themselves due to the club's qualification for the Champions League. In this sense, a flawed oligarchy has been replaced with a flawed democracy.

However, most seem to agree that the principal aim of the NextGen Series was to provide a solution to the stockpiling of young talent denied first-team opportunities at top clubs. The concern is that, for UEFA, the driving force is something quite different. The public perception is that this is a corporate decision made in a Swiss office and motivated chiefly by protectionism.

That it has come to this is hardly surprising. An article in *WSC 300* noted the potential dangers for UEFA should NextGen prove a success. For even if the motives of Cycad Sports Management, the parent company behind the NextGen Series, remain entirely altruistic, then what of the clubs involved? If a youth version of the Champions League could work outside of the auspices of UEFA, with no need for qualification, then this could have set the precedent for something similar at senior level. From the outset, the word was that UEFA were monitoring the progress of NextGen, meaning the fledgling start-up was given the opportunity to test the water before Michel Platini and his executives introduced the brand version instead. "We hope to be back next season with an even better tournament," say NextGen's co-founders. That looks optimistic. For while theirs was a good idea, perhaps the real problem was that it was too good. After all, UEFA have now stolen it.

*Adam Bate*

# SCREEN TEST

## Football videos revisited No 64



### Dennis Wise Moments

A 90 minute documentary about Dennis Wise? Of all the 1990s players to warrant a curiously titled feature-length career retrospective, the ex-Chelsea midfielder is not the first that springs to mind. But perhaps similar tributes

such as "David Batty By Nature" or "Kieron Dyer Straits" are out there.

Wise is an interesting figure, though. Outside Chelsea and Wimbledon circles he was regarded by the time this video was produced in 2000 with a sort of begrudging respect – the little one from the Crazy Gang got to play in the Champions League and become a kind-of England regular. Still, not the first person you'd invite round for tea. Alex Ferguson's comment about him being the sort of player who would "start a fight in an empty house" perhaps best sums up this viewpoint.

But this video wasn't aimed at those people – it's a piece of official Chelsea club merchandise released to coincide with Wise's testimonial season. So there's nothing about Millwall's FA Cup final and the Wimbledon years are dispensed with in a mere minute. Instead this is an account of "Wisey's" progress at the Bridge. Signed in the summer of 1990 and initially played on the left under Bobby Campbell, he is moved into central midfield, called up by Graham Taylor and scores on his England debut but is soon dropped. And then there's the taxi driver incident in 1995 when he narrowly avoids being sent down for assault.

Dennis tells us the story, talking very carefully (and thoughtfully) against a backdrop of Stamford Bridge, his green eyes bulging whenever he wants to make an important point. Colleagues past and present provide extra comment and context. Dave Beasant, Kerry Dixon, Graeme Le Saux, Glenn Hoddle, Terry Venables and Gianluca Vialli all make appearances, though there are a few curious omissions – Ruud Gullit and Kevin Keegan are nowhere to be seen.

The managers grumble about that disciplinary record, while team-mates say the usual stuff about passion, commitment and a penchant for practical jokes. Ex-room-mate Dixon remembers how he slept "with one eye open" and we learn that Wise used to pull out the bristles from Kevin Wilson's toothbrush and hid Tony Cascarino's false teeth ("they had a strange relationship," muses Dixon).

This isn't just Wise's story but a document of Chelsea's transformation from a mid-table team with "uncharismatic managers and a clapped out ground" as Ken Bates charmingly puts it here to a "continental club" (Bates's words again) that by the end of the decade are cup specialists and European regulars. The Abramovich years lie ahead. But during this decade of intense upheaval Wise (along with Bates) is the one constant. That he swiped both Cascarino's dentures and the crucial pages out of the novels Gianfranco Zola read to learn English, tells you exactly how this slightly menacing little bloke ended up bridging two eras of English football.

*Will Simpson*



GETTY IMAGES

Aston Villa win the 2013 NextGen but won't be defending the title