

Barcelona, Paris and Beyond, the Ekkono Method is Helping Clubs and Associations Worldwide Build Their Identities

By Emile Avanesian

In the years since David Beckham's arrival in Los Angeles, Major League Soccer has attracted some of Europe's top players, who've arrived with plenty left in their legs. Zlatan Ibrahimović has been good for nearly a goal a game with the L.A. Galaxy. Thierry Henry joined the New York Red Bulls from Pep Guardiola's Barcelona, and netted 50 goals in four healthy seasons. David Villa is not only New York City FC's first-ever player, but also its best-ever, scoring 82 goals in four seasons.

Since 2012, the league has welcomed seven new clubs, including second teams in Los Angeles and New York. **Atlanta United**, the most successful newcomer, played before home crowds of more than 48,000 in its 2017 debut season, drew a crowd of more than 67,000 for its first playoff game, won the MLS cup in its second season, and is already the league's most valuable team (<https://www.mlssoccer.com/post/2018/11/14/atlanta-united-leads-way-forbes-annual-mls-team-valuations>).

Gone are the days of anonymous teams, playing on a green rug stretched over a slab of concrete, in a cavernous stadium on loan from a Major League Baseball or NFL team. Twenty-four clubs kicked off the 2019 MLS season – 19 did so in soccer-specific stadiums. The aforementioned trio, plus additional clubs in the not-distant future (<https://www.mlssoccer.com/post/2019/04/18/mls-announces-plans-expand-30-teams>), will enjoy dedicated, purpose-built homes. The average MLS club is now worth nearly a quarter of a billion dollars. League-wide revenue is approaching \$800 million. The stakes in have emphatically been raised.

Against this backdrop, a team's ability to establish itself as a major-league operation, both in hearts of hardcore fans and the attention span of the casual fan, is paramount. The most effective method for capturing the imagination is on-field success. Beyond this, however, an engaging style of play, executed by players with whom fans identify, a squad that is *theirs*, is every bit as vital. There's no one-size-fits-all solution for a club looking succeed while also bonding with its community. This requires a foundational approach – an institutional methodology – to not only assembling today's team, but to building a sustainable long-term infrastructure.



In the summer of 2002, a pair of educators and longtime students of the game conceived of a holistic approach to building a club or football association. They theorized that commitment to a core philosophy, an *identity*, across all levels, from coaching style, to player development, to the establishment of shared values and a core philosophy, is the key to both sustainable success and an enduring cultural import that extends beyond the field of play.

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Carles Romagosa had been a coach at **F.C. Barcelona's** fabled *La Masia* youth academy. David Hernández, meanwhile, had coached at the Football High Performance Centre, CIDARF, in Barcelona. In 2002 both joined the professional staff of CF Mataró, a club in Catalonia's second division. At this time, they also began teaching in the Collective Sports Department at the University of Catalonia. It was at this time that the two men joined forces and further developed their ideas. As a result of their collaboration, Ekkono was born.

Their methodology, **Ekkono**, is a customized approach to helping a professional club or association achieve its own, unique identity. The **Ekkono Method** is based upon four pillars:

1. Talkmade: We build the model. We believe in the model. We **are** the model.
2. Field.rec: 5 vital steps to developing professional players
3. Co-learning: An enhanced approach to learning
4. Commissions: Living the values.

Ekkono's foundational philosophy is born of the idea that a unified approach, across all levels, provides an immense advantage to decision makers tasked with creating that identity, and identifying the individuals best suited to achieving it.

Established in 2004, **Soccer Services Barcelona** is a consultancy with 15+ years of experience working with top clubs and football associations to deliver the **Ekkono Method** through its signature solution, the **Methodology Department**. **Soccer Services Barcelona** has worked with (to date) 32 clubs and 7 federations across 16 countries, and assists clubs and federations in identifying the principles to which they aspire. Beyond this, through the **Methodology Department**, the company takes an active role in developing and implementing a customized plan by which to achieve those principles.

Speak with Mr. Hernández, however, and you're immediately struck by the impression that the principles of **Ekkono**, though the foundation of a successful company, extend far beyond the mission statement of some business plan. The company has extensive experience successfully developing and executing projects worldwide, and thus, **Soccer Services Barcelona** has developed its own principles that guide the company through each customized project:

*"There are different ways to guide a football organization, to develop an identity. During the first period, we always focus on methodology, and we start with the coaches, deciding with them – this is very important, that we decide **with** the coaches where we want to go. Different clubs have different idiosyncrasies, cultures, histories and resources, so we have to be able to adapt... In terms of one shared idea it's important to start with the coaches because we must create an understanding with them."*



David Hernández and Carles Romagosa, while on the project at PSG

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A **Methodology Department** is the structure that **Soccer Services Barcelona** uses to implement a project. The concept itself is not new – many organizations in Europe boast such a department. This transversal department, however, promotes coordination and consistency across the entirety of an organization, with the aim of establishing and promoting a unique identity. Thus, all efforts and resources are deployed in the pursuit of a common goal. The **Methodology Department** establishes player-specific training plans, a shared curriculum and educational philosophy, and a unified game plan.

However, for those organizations with strong vision of the transformative impact that comes with a true identity, the department also focuses on training values, social transformation and community engagement. There is an opportunity to use soccer to mix people, and to get people from different origins together, in terms of sports, yes, but also for social development, and that's one of the main objectives of the **Ekkono Method**.

A **Methodology Department** provides individuals from all levels of a club with active roles in the establishment of an identity based on technical, tactical, educational and cultural elements. To provide a clearer idea of the process, some examples of the methods used by **Soccer Services Barcelona**, at a variety of organizations with whom the company has worked:

"We try to create processes with complex interactions between people from different parts of a club. We create "commissions of collaboration", consisting of people from all different areas. You could have a group that included a groundskeeper, a physical fitness coach, two players and one coach, that would be one commission, and they would focus on the development of one value over a period of time. If we want to strengthen teamwork, for example, they, together, create a plan, with exercises to be integrated into daily life in order to live this value. The idea was to take a holistic approach to the matter.

*Also, a concept that is used regularly is that of "co-" – co-teaching, co-learning – between players, as well as coaches. We create situations where players are analyzing other players during matches and training, or analyzing the coaches, which changes the normal dynamic. **For us, the structure of one coach with his or her team is not the only way to work together.** We need to mix coaches and players. Obviously, we do standard training as well, but we try to create spaces to share, not only on the field, but also in analytical and technical discussions."*

With more at stake for MLS teams than at any point in the league's history – and much more to gain – sustainable success and a true connection with the community has never held greater significance. This is achieved not through slick marketing, short-term success or superstar signings, but through commitment to an *identity* that reflects the values of the environment in which a club resides. A club that is dedicated to a philosophy, and instills that philosophy across all levels is laying the foundation for not only sustainable success, but sincere cultural resonance.

*"For a club like Miami, for instance, it's important to make an effort to understand the idiosyncrasies and unique culture of the region, to figure out how to win the attention of the people, and to offer something in terms of identity. **Soccer Services Barcelona** have experience developing **Methodology Departments** at clubs with less infrastructure or history, and it's a great opportunity because you can really build something. In these cases, in Miami, or in the MLS in general, because soccer is young yet, there is a good opportunity to instill an identity.*

The numbers are growing and growing, and it's clear that the talent is there, but they need to make more of an effort in terms of football culture, because, sometimes in the U.S., the business model is far ahead of the development model, which is sometimes treated like it is 'Copy/Paste'."

What is 100% true is the belief that "the clearer the identity of a federation or club, the higher its likelihood of success". However, that this identity must take into consideration the specific environment in which it resides:

"Although the world of soccer is constantly evolving, there are historic, socio-economic and cultural factors that also come into play. In Japan, for example, players usually follow the agreed upon collective guidelines. In Spain, there is a preference for players who can play a passing game. In France and the United States, there is a preference for strong players who are able to individually destabilize opposing teams."

This has been borne out the world over, of course – nowhere more prominently than in **Soccer Services Barcelona's** hometown. Beyond consistently being one of the world's top clubs, F.C. Barcelona's defining characteristic is its sense of self.

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The club is firmly committed to both to an aesthetic in its style of play (imported by the iconic Johan Cruyff, from Ajax in Amsterdam), as well as to its societal responsibility as a Catalan institution – “Més que un club”. However, F.C. Barcelona is hardly the lone such example, as numerous other organizations, such as Liverpool FC, Athletic Club Bilbao and the Belgium Football Association are also committed to clear identities of their own.



An excellent example can be drawn from perhaps the most significant implementation of the **Ekkono Method**, at **Paris Saint Germain (PSG)**. Despite boasting – and frequently deploying – massive financial resources, PSG has committed to developing an elite youth academy. Blessed with the world’s top pool of young talent, Paris, at its fingertips, PSG seized an opportunity to leverage this advantage. In 2015, the club began implementing its **Methodology Department**. In the years since, PSG’s academy has yielded remarkable results, and holds incredible promise for the future. Over those three years, the club won multiple national youth championships and reached the UEFA Youth League Final. More importantly, PSG is producing talents – like Timothy Weah, the son of A.C. Milan great, George Weah, and a rising U.S. Men National Team star, and new addition to French club Lille – that are thriving not only at youth levels, but are making an impact on the first team.

Since establishing its **Methodology Department**, 80% of PSG players selected for individual player performance programs debuted with the first team and, in 2018, the club had more players than any other club on the list of 80 candidates for *Tuttosport*’s Golden Boy, a prestigious award handed out annually to Europe’s best player under the age of 21 in a calendar year. As Mr. Hernández stresses, however, the results were only possible once the foundation had been laid:

“Winning is a consequence. If you work well, and you are the best one working... probably, because, fortunately soccer is not a science, if you are working well, often you will win. But, either way, a win or a loss is a consequence.

When we were working at PSG the point was to focus everyone in the academy on the process of the development of the players. We tried a multi-dimensional approach. We still worked to develop players physically, tactically and technically, of course, but we also tried to include, in a very real way, other elements, like the players’ families, people that were working at the school, the people working the players’ residence, the tutors, the people attending to the kids during weekends, because they are living in one residence.”

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Beyond simply producing excellent players, a top-tier academy produces generations of players who have grown together, and learned from the same curriculum. This is a vital component of a consistently dominant first team, and also creates an environment in which more players are prepared to enjoy professional careers.

*“The real work is creating structures, relationships and processes to attend to players in a holistic way. It’s sometimes difficult for people to understand what it means to help a young player to achieve a professional career. Everybody knows the stories of the most successful cases, but there are a lot of other kids in the same group. For **Soccer Services Barcelona** it is very important to propose something for all of the players. This includes the players that might be in the first team, but also for other players trying to achieve a professional career.”*

The cities that are (and are soon to be) home to professional soccer in North America are no different from their counterparts abroad. The game itself does not have the same history, but the communities in which it is played are vibrant, with histories and unique cultures and characteristics of their own. It’s here that **Soccer Services Barcelona’s Methodology Department** makes its greatest impact. More than any game plan, the ability to understand and embrace these qualities, and a clear, coherent plan with which to do it, is the key to an enduring connection that outlives the exploits of any individual player or coach.