

Only 9 years old, youngster captures the soccer world

By Rob Hughes International Herald Tribune

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Rhain Davis has journeyed from Brisbane, Australia, to enroll in the Manchester United academy in England. He is 9.

The flow of embryonic soccer talents across oceans is quickening, and Davis may be part of a new trend - boyhood precocity spotted via the Internet.

During the past week, Freddy Adu has left the United States to join Benfica of Portugal, Alexandre Pato has arrived at AC Milan from Brazil and Pier Larraurio of Peru has started to take lessons with Bayern Munich.

They are old compared with Davis: Adu is 18 and eligible for the qualifying games this month in the European Champions League. Pato is 17, and under international rules cannot play competitive matches until January. Larraurio is 13, and under German law cannot be transferred from abroad.

Davis, however, avoids restrictions on long-distance signings of minors because he and his family used to live near Manchester and the whole family is hurrying back there to give the boy his chance. Officially, the Davises say they are returning to England for "family and business" reasons. The business of grooming potential young soccer stars is compelling.

The Rhain Davis story hit Britain's newspapers this week, but it was done and dusted a month ago. His grandfather, left behind in the Manchester district when the family sought a new life in Australia, sent a DVD of Rhain to United. The video was already making hits on YouTube - 800,000 hits of the "Brisbane Whiz Kid" skipping tackle after tackle on the playing fields of Queensland.

The Courier-Mail in Brisbane broke the news July 19 that the boy, whom it described as a budding midfield general, was back in Manchester. His mother, Leah Davis, said he would not be returning to Australia. His father, Mark, was with him, and his two siblings, Emerson and Reeve, were packing their toys, bound for England.

Manchester United will not talk about a child of 9 under its wing, except to repeat that he has residential qualification to join their school and is one of the 30 boys 8 and older whom the club recruits each summer. If by 12 they still look good, they are taken on under full-time scholarships.

One thing that is striking about Rhain Davis is the way he moves his feet in a quick step of feints and flicks over the ball. Very Cristiano Ronaldo. Another is the way he holds himself, the control reminiscent of ballet, from fingertips to toe.

But that's enough on one wunderkind. As United says, its policy is not to comment on individual members of its academy. There is, though, fierce competition out there. Davis might be one of the first You Tube discoveries, just as Adu at 8 was already a name around Tema, Ghana, before his mother won the Green Card lottery entitling her to take her two sons to the United States as new citizens.

No one could have predicted then that Freddy, at 14, would become the youngest Major League Soccer professional, and the Nike face of America's baby soccer boom - could they?

Believe that, and you qualify for almost a preschool star rating in naïveté. Soccer's scouts, and the agents and the shoemakers, are simply everywhere that the ball moves.

Way back when Alexandre Rodrigues da Silva first kicked a ball down in Pato Branco, Brazil, his reputation started spreading as he played futsal, a form of indoor soccer. He was all of 3 years old.

By the time he was 11, he had moved to live in Porto Alegre, along with 83 other youngsters all of whom hoped to become players for Sport Club Internacional. When Pato, as he is now known, turned 17 last September, Internacional put him on its first team and sealed him on contract with a \$35 million release fee until 2009.

Arsenal, Benfica, Chelsea, Juventus, Inter Milan and Liverpool were just some of the clubs sniffing around. When Pato made his choice, apparently stating that he thought Italy a better schooling ground than England, AC Milan paid that minimum sum to Internacional. He signed Friday; he can play friendly matches starting in September. What is so special? His goals, his grace, his eye for opportunity and his ability to deliver.

All of this, the global tracking of young stars, the movement of families to where the sun shines on talent, is far from unique. Bayern Munich this week began a year long trial in its Under 14 setup of Pier Larrauri, a Peruvian prodigy being likened to Lionel Messi who moved with his family to Barcelona at 13. Signing adolescents is forbidden in Germany, but Bayern had to move quickly against reports that Italy's Fiorentina had designs on Larrauri. Youngsters from Latin America or Africa become "scholars" at European clubs in their early teens, often via the gateway of Belgian clubs that are less fussy about age restrictions than those in other nations.

But, you want innocence? You want a view of boys, and these days girls, playing free and unfettered? Scandinavia is the place. For three decades now, the Nordics have been holding their midsummer youth festivals, some of which have multiplied until they are the biggest thing in youth movements outside the Boy Scout centenary.

The Gothia Cup last month in Sweden boasted 1,585 teams from 68 nations. Boys and girls from 11 to 19 years of age, and of every color, creed or nationality, played in those long, long sunlight hours. The Gothia Cup is part soccer festival, part tourist wheeze, part charitable organization to give underprivileged youths a meeting ground.

Tahuichi, the remarkable club from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, established a phenomenal record, winning the Gothia Cup year after year. Tahuichi, taking children off the streets and out of the drug-infested youth culture, started with the desire of one man, Roly Aguilera, to teach his own sons the Beautiful Game.

The Gothia Cup this year, and indeed the Dana Cup, a smaller but similar youth soccer festival in Denmark, have ended. But the ball is flowing close by, because the Norway Cup, in its 33rd year, is in full swing. It ends Monday, by which time about 4,000 matches will have been played among teams from 42 lands. Among them are three teams representing the Mathare Youth Sports Association in Kenya.

Its aims and principles are to use soccer to wean children from the slums of Nairobi away from hopelessness and, particularly, to educate them on the dangers of AIDS and away from the exploitation of child labor.

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/08/03/sports/soccer.php>