

# Houllier takes France forward

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Cannes has been an entirely appropriate setting for this week's ninth UEFA Elite Youth Football Conference given the reputation of both France and the local academy, where the likes of Zinédine Zidane and Patrick Vieira – among many others – first learnt the skills that made them famous. One man who is perfectly placed to give a valuable insight into the French model of youth development is Gérard Houllier, who has enjoyed considerable success at home and abroad.



## Glittering career

The 60-year-old started his coaching career with Le Touquet Athletic Club and US Noeux-les-Mines before taking charge of RC Lens in 1982, moving on to Paris Saint-Germain FC three years later. Houllier guided the club to the Ligue 1 title in his first season in charge, becoming the technical director of the French Football Federation (FFF) in 1988 and holding the post for the next decade. Under his watchful eye the likes of Thierry Henry, David Trezeguet, Nicolas Anelka and more were allowed to mature and show early signs of their talents, France winning the UEFA European Under-18 Championship in 1996 and 1997. More success followed at Liverpool FC, most notably in 2000/01 with victories in the UEFA Cup, English FA Cup and League Cup. After five major trophies in six seasons Houllier left Anfield in 2004, returning to his native France to guide Olympique Lyonnais to league titles in each of his seasons in charge to set a new French record of six successive Ligue 1 titles. Having stepped down at the end of 2006/07, he returned to the FFF to pick up where he had left off almost ten years previously, once again assuming the role of technical director.

**uefa.com: How would you describe your approach to coaching?**

**Gérard Houllier:** My philosophy is based on skills and movement. Everything starts from the back. In football we always want to go forward quickly but it all starts from the back. You can't play the long ball, the passing and movement starts from deep. Some people like wingers, some like a big centre-forward. I very much like creativity and skill and use of players on the flanks.

**uefa.com: Your career as a coach has lasted more than 35 years and covers a broad range of experiences and challenges. What advice would you give to any young coaches today?**

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**Houllier:** Be prepared to have difficult periods. When it's a crisis it's also an opportunity to

bounce back. A crisis forces people to work together more, and better. It's an opportunity. Failure is part of the road to success.

**uefa.com: This is a very broad question but why has France produced so many top-class young players?**

**Houllier:** Because we have a culture of development and training. We coach coaches, and we make a point of developing the best in the best conditions. We have a long tradition in education and training the coaches; this stretches back around 30 years and was set up in response to a series of poor results at senior level. We set up training centres to improve the players aged between 13 and 19. Then we wanted to work better with players aged between 12 and 15 so we set up training pre-centres.

**uefa.com: Was there lots of opposition to that initial proposal at the start?**

**Houllier:** When you come up with something new, obviously you have people who are against it. As soon as you have a new idea only a small percentage of people will support you. You have to convince the rest with good results and with the quality of the work you do.

**uefa.com: When people discuss France's record in youth development, much of the attention focuses on the national technical centre at Clairefontaine?**

**Houllier:** People think Clairefontaine produces the players, but in fact it's there we produce the coaches. It's the academies all over the country that produce the players. Our idea at the FFF is not to replace the work done by the clubs but to work alongside the clubs, to supplement their work.

**uefa.com: You've returned to the FFF as technical director. Is it a different challenge this time?**

**Houllier:** Yes, it's bigger. It's a bigger challenge now because the expectation is there and bigger. You must keep humility and work, because as soon as you stand still you are overtaken by the others. You can become complacent, this is a cancer for football. We can't rest on our laurels – we need to keep moving forward.

**uefa.com: So what will you do next?**

**Houllier:** We have other projects. We think other teams and other countries work better than us at grassroots level. That's one of the things we'll focus on in the future.

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