

PASTIMES

Summer Soccer Camp, Europe-Style

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Finally, we were in Provence, and the drive from Gordes to Carpentras had it all: roadside vineyards, cone-shaped Bories (ancient stone dwellings), the Abbey Sénanque and, at the foot of the mountain, an artisanal boulangerie proffering baguettes and croissants.

We were there for a soccer camp. Our three sons were all suited up.

When our twins were 7, and our youngest 5, they learned geography by identifying countries with their flags during the 2010 World Cup; now at 13 and 11, they play for the Downtown United Soccer Club in New York.

Planning a summer trip from Paris to Rome, my husband and I figured we should combine our passion for historic sites with their passion for soccer. But because soccer season in France and Italy ends in May, we were at a loss — until a teammate mentioned a camp in Italy sponsored by Juventus, the Turinese powerhouse. Intrigued, we found our way to the website of Soccer Camps International. Youth soccer camp, the site made clear, is a big deal: It involves professional coaching, stadium visits, language immersion and the like.

We arranged to visit three camps in France and Italy where our sons could take part and test them out while we spoke with coaches and participating families. Are European soccer camps welcoming and challenging for young American players? Or are they pricey forms of branded tourism? Those were our central questions, and with the 2016 UEFA European Championship taking place this summer in France from June 10 to July 10, many soccer-mad families are asking them, too.

Stages Bosquier

Carpentras, France

Stages Bosquier feels like a soccer school, with lectures and video demonstrations in the hours between morning drills and afternoon matches. Run by Bernard Bosquier, a star of France's World Cup squad in 1966, Stages Bosquier immerses players ages 7 to 17 in high-level soccer and in the French language. Most players we met were from France, but others came from England, Canada, Italy and the United States.

For 35 years, Stages Bosquier has been held in the south of France, most recently at a sports complex in Carpentras, with a dormitory, snack bar, and lobby kitted out with foosball tables, and walls papered with clippings about former campers like Samir Nasri (who now plays with Manchester City). This summer the camp will move to a modern complex in Cavaillon.

After breakfast, campers meet outside for Ping-Pong and pétanque (a game like horseshoes, but with balls) before breaking into groups (grands, moyens, petits) on fields nearby. As the boys changed into matching jerseys, they hung their European club replica jerseys on hangers on the wire fence (they'd been instructed to care for their uniforms as well as themselves). Our boys swapped their favorite team jerseys for camp colors and were gone.

Training begins amid the clicking of cicadas: dribbling, long passing, passing with the outside of the foot, and shooting, and one called l'étoile — keep-away along points of an imagined star. Coaches are Mr. Bosquier's friends and former teammates: 60-ish men with the taut legs of teenagers. Training is conducted in French, but the language of soccer prevails. "Football is the same as life," said Mr. Bosquier, "You need to work out, you need to work together, you need to respect one another."

Following an hour of games with seven players on a side, campers walked to a park for football de plage: beach soccer. After showers, lunch and rest, they attended the midday lecture — "Le Football Est Fait de Mouvement" the day we visited — and then went to late-afternoon matches.

Mr. Bosquier's daughter, Valerie, an interior designer during the year, is the camp's mother figure, making sure the campers have water and sunblock, taking photos for their parents. During the midday pause, she sent us into town for lunch and a swim, and we returned refreshed to watch the matches — stages in a tournament, which concludes on the last day of camp, with parents present.

In the evening our sons rejoined us, and we pointed our rented Citroën through the limestone passageways of Gordes, one of the loveliest villages in France. At L'Artégal, a small restaurant with tables beneath the floodlights of the Château de Gordes, we ate salmon, duck, fresh vegetables and sorbet. For a moment, we all forgot there was soccer the next morning.

Information: bosquier.com. Options include 460 euros (about \$520) for one week with room and board. One week is reserved for girls ages 14 to 17.

AC Milan Junior Camp

Lignano Sabbiadoro, Italy

Fifty-six miles from Venice, Lignano Sabbiadoro is a resort town in Friuli, poking out into the warm bath of the Adriatic Sea. There, the spartan Getur Sports Village amid pine trees is the site of the AC Milan Junior Camp. The song playing in the lobby, oddly, was “Let It Snow.”

As our sons joined the arriving campers, they received a club kit and soon blended into the red, white and black of AC Milan.

The camp directors, Pietro and Michele Marchioni (father and son), have turned their lifelong passion for AC Milan into a soccer League of Nations. The Marchionis run camps under license to their company, Sportaventi, on the Asiago mountain plateau; at Cortina d’Ampezzo in the Dolomites; in Jesolo Lido, a ferry ride from Venice; at Lignano Sabbiadore, where we visited, and one near Naples for American military families — “so that they can interact with Italians off the Navy base there,” Michele Marchioni said.

“Soccer is the national disease,” he told us, and explained how he came to spread it. Studying economics at Oxford, “I realized I could bring the world here, and create a multicultural society like the one I knew at Oxford.” At the Lignano camp, half of the 92 campers were Italian; the coaches speak mainly in Italian, but English and Russian are spoken, too. There were players from Zimbabwe, Venezuela and Lebanon. A dozen players came from Japan with a chaperone while their parents visited Venice.

At a buffet-style breakfast our sons got to know two players from Taiwan, as well as another player from New York. Then all the campers strode in two lines to the soccer fields, all singing the AC Milan anthem with kids and coaches waving flags on long poles front and rear.

Morning training moved players through various activities, including dribbling, passing and five-passes. The drills (our sons said) were a notch less intense than at Bosquier, but the coaching was lively and precise with one coach for every 12 players. Goalkeepers are trained separately. One coach showed a keeper how to position his body by making a cross — torso up and down, arms outstretched.

As at Bosquier, afternoons are devoted to matches, but at Lignano, midday is time for fun. One group goes to the waterslides, another to the beach.

The night we were there, campers went to an amusement park, and the Marchionis took us to the restaurant Brigantino for supper with Pierino Prati. Mr. Prati (“Pierino the Pest”) starred for Italy in the 1970 World Cup. He ensured the camp is training players the AC Milan way — playing with the ball as a team, stressing style rather than physicality. “We look at the quality of their feet, but also their minds,” Mr. Prati said. “Are they looking at their teammates? Do they have a global vision of the game?”

Mr. Marchioni added: “Soccer is like life, soccer is life. So we take a holistic approach: physical, mental and emotional, to help bring the talent out from the inside.” As we left the restaurant, the kitchen staff came out in their aprons to have their pictures taken with Pierino Prati — young men and women afflicted with the national disease.

Information: soccercampsinternational.com/italy-soccer-camps for boys age 7 to 16. Options include \$1,295 for one week with room and board.

Paris Saint-Germain Academy

Châtenay Malabry, France

The logo of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) features the Eiffel Tower, so it was strange to arrive at Châtenay-Malabry, a suburb blanketed in silence during France’s August holidays. At a landscaped estate, campers were coming over the crest of a hill, PSG duffel bags slung over their arms. The turf fields were refreshingly free of sports-gear signage. Here the brands were PSG’s players. A camp “day” named for the striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic was devoted to shooting; Lucas Moura’s day was focused on developing players’ dribbling and creativity with the ball.

Paris Saint-Germain has opened camps in New York, Brazil, Montreal, Qatar and India, as well as outside Paris. The club’s Academy head coach, Ben Hourri, strolling the sidelines, explained the PSG philosophy. “It’s easier to create an athlete than a footballer, and it’s easier to teach passing than dribbling, but dribbling is where creativity happens, and good footballers are naturally relaxed with the ball.” Players at the camp learn this through quickness exercises (races) and agility exercises (right foot in the red hoop, left in the yellow one).

“For one week they live like PSG youth players,” said Julien Bacinello, the project manager. The camp is run by Urban Football, which promotes soccer for adults in French cities, and the family feeling we had seen at Bosquier and Lignano was less obvious. The midday pause was more or less unstructured, with players working foosball tables and PlayStations under the light supervision of young counselors.

A Wednesday outing to Paris, then, was well-timed. Urban Football is converting tennis clubs to 5 on 5 soccer pitches, and the branch in La Défense offered a glimpse of soccer’s future: office workers meeting during the lunch hour for a match and some “team building.”

After two hours of training the campers went by bus across Paris for a tour of the Stade de France, which they were reminded was the site of Paris’s home victory in the 1998 World Cup final. It turned out to be a history lesson in advance: Three months later, explosions were heard there during the terrorist attacks on Paris.

Information: soccercampsinternational.com/france-soccer-camps. For boys ages 8 to 17. Options include \$1,395 for one week with room and board.

In New York the next week, our sons were back with their own club, Downtown United. From the sidelines, my husband and I assessed the European camps. Are they welcoming to Americans? Yes, if your children are willing to stretch a bit culturally and trust the language of soccer. Are they challenging? Yes, but it’s important to choose a camp with a skill level that suits the player in your family. Are they an authentic experience, or just pricey branded tourism? They’re both. European clubs have deep roots, so joining the culture of a renowned club is a form of immersion in its home country.

For our boys, the answer to all soccer-camp questions is simple: They want to go back.