

# Inside Senegal's Premier League incubator

French coach Olivier Perrin speaks to players during a training session at the Generation Foot Academie

## Dèni Biram Ndaw, Senegal

Long before Sadio Mane and Diafra Sakho battled for Premier League supremacy, the two footballers made their mark at a Senegalese club increasingly recognised as a west African pipeline to the top of the game.

Generation Foot began life as an academy in 2000 and the side became national champions for the first time on June 11, seeing off every adult club in Senegal after being promoted to the elite national league this year.

Its players are all 18 or under, and all obsessed with following their heroes to Europe to play among the world's best. Thirty so far have made it as professionals.

Ibrahima Niane, 18, is just about to leave for Europe after a stunning season at home, scoring 15 goals in his last 15 matches, the best score of any player in the championship.

Bidding goodbye to his mates, he will swap Senegal's blistering summer heat for eastern France and French Ligue 1 side FC Metz, which has a relationship with Generation Foot going back to 2003.

"My objectives are to play over there at the top level and to help my family as well," he said on the gleaming pitch at Generation Foot's combined school and training ground in Deni Biram Ndaw, a village around an hour's drive from the capital.

Gambian forward Ablie Jallow, also 18, will join Niane at Metz, where they could soon be training alongside another former Generation Foot player, midfielder Ismaila Sarr.

Sarr has made a huge splash since arriving at the French side

in July 2016, and could even be snapped up by one of several English, French and German clubs who have shown an interest in his footwork before his compatriots arrive.

## Academic backup

Generation Foot's manager Olivier Perrin, who arrived in Senegal in 2013, explained that two players on average were sent to FC Metz each year, leaving the vast majority behind.

"We aren't going to make 110 professionals out of 110 kids, but we also have a social role to play in Senegal, to improve their conditions," Perrin conceded.

"Everything is 100 percent covered, they don't spend a penny and they receive a free education," he emphasised, in a country where around a third of children are able to complete secondary school, often due to family financial pressures.

"There are no transfer fees and in return FC Metz pays for the monthly costs of the academy," Perrin added.

Although Generation Foot has not disclosed the particulars of the FC Metz deal, it has allowed the academy to move into facilities that are luxurious by Senegalese standards, with well-kept pitches and boarding houses for the boys.

"We want Generation Foot players to be ready for anything, as sportsmen and as people," said Perrin.

## Lessons of footballers past

Founder Mady Toure, who played in France in the 1990s until a career-ending knee injury struck, had the idea for

Generation Foot after counselling African footballers struggling to get by once he quit the game.

A chance meeting with former FC Metz coach Joel Muller established the partnership that still exists today, which has also proved lucrative for the French side.

Sadio Mane, now the most expensive African player in history, was sold to Salzburg in 2012 in FC Metz's third-largest ever transfer deal.

The local community, said Toure's

communications manager Talla Fall, has been involved in the Generation Foot from the beginning, and workers on the site are all drawn from the village.

The project also finances Deni Biram Ndaw's village school and clinic.

After such successes, other French clubs are becoming more interested and travelling to Senegal to scout out players.

Olympique de Marseille officials are expected to visit Diambars, an academy in the Senegalese beach town of Saly, next week.



Senegalese player Ibrahima Niane (L) attends a training session