

Top football programs discover European recruits

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Jairo Faverus, a defensive back from Amsterdam, was hanging out in Alabama's football facility for about 20 minutes before a Crimson Tide staffer let him know who, exactly, he was waiting to meet.

"He was like, 'Nick Saban wants to see you.' Oh. Oh," Faverus recalled his reaction, with a little laugh.

The 20-year-old Faverus is part of a group of 29 football players from Europe who have been caravanning to college campus around the country since May 30. The players are getting the opportunity to compete against American prospects at recruiting camps in front of dozens of Division I coaches. The tour has made stops at Alabama, Clemson and Ohio State, with Michigan, Notre Dame and Penn State still to come.

Brandon Collier, a former college football player from Ohio now living in Germany, is trying to open a pipeline to the United States for European recruits. Players he has worked with have already landed at Michigan, Cincinnati, Temple and Georgia Tech, among others. This is the third year Collier has organized and led a spring camp road trip, but this one represents a breakthrough. Now the programs currently ruling college football - Alabama and Clemson - are taking notice.

"My end goal I said two years ago was one day I'll be in Nick Saban's office and it kind of happened," Collier said in a phone interview Wednesday. "So it's kind of a surreal moment. I mean I had goose bumps."

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Collier grew up in Cleveland and played at the University of Massachusetts from 2005-09. He got looks from the Carolina Panthers and Philadelphia Eagles, knocked around the CFL for a couple years and played professionally in Europe. He decided to stay in Germany after injuries ended his playing career and found untapped potential in European players. There were plenty of top athletes on club and semi-professional teams, but not much structure to develop them or provide the exposure necessary to be recruited by American colleges. In 2017, Collier started Premier Players International, hoping to fill the void.

His first spring camp tour had 15 players and focused mostly on the Midwest. Collier had played for Michigan defensive coordinator Don Brown while at UMass, and with Tim Day, the brother of Ohio State coach Ryan Day.

The latest PPI tour has also stopped at Cincinnati, the home of an alumnus. Lorenz Metz, a 6-foot-7, 277-pound offensive lineman from Germany, signed with the Bearcats in 2018.

Cincinnati coach Luke Fickell said European players tend to be a little older than the typical American high schoolers, which can be a bonus when it comes to maturity. But, as expected, they're not quite as refined.

"You got to be willing to say hey, `There's going to be a learning curve here,'" Fickell said. He added the PPI prospects seemed prepared for what would be expected of them at camp.

This year's prospects include players from Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and France. Collier said players paid a \$300 fee to be part of the trip and had to pay for their own airfare and lodging.

They gathered in Newark, New Jersey, on May 30 and - using three 15-seat vans - drove 16 hours to Macon, Georgia, for a camp at Mercer University. The camp drew coaches from more than two dozen Division I programs, including LSU, Nebraska and Mississippi State.

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"Then I felt good after the camp so I took a handful of guys that I thought was pretty elite and drove to Alabama the next day on June 2 and did a camp there," Collier said.

Faverus, a 6-foot, 190 pound cornerback who started playing flag football when he was 11, made the greatest impression.

"I went because I really wanted to get the experience of having that competition and learning from those types of coaches and that type of team," Faverus said. "Kind of see what that's all about. See if I could compete with those guys."

After the drills, an Alabama coach pulled Faverus aside. He didn't realize it immediately, but Saban wanted to meet him.

"He said they wanted more information to see who I am. They didn't really know who I was until I was at their camp," Faverus said.

Collier's relationship with Alabama offensive line coach Kyle Flood, who was head coach at Rutgers from 2012-15, opened the door to the Crimson Tide. At the invite of Clemson defensive coordinator Brent Venables, Collier's crew also got to visit the national champions.

"(Clemson) rolled out the red carpet for us," Collier said.

Collier said 13 players had already received a total of about 40 scholarship offers during the trip. Getting Saban's attention was especially satisfying.

Just a few months ago, Collier was in Tuscaloosa and told the coach with six national championships he was planning to bring Europeans to Alabama's camp.

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"He said, "Whatcha' got, soccer players?" And laughed and walked away," Collier said. "I was kind of motivated to get back to him on it. I went in his office and said, `Do you remember you asking me if I only got soccer players?'"