



## **Football coaching in the current youth game ages 5+**

Football coaching in the UK has seen dramatic changes over the last decade; the introduction of the level 1 course and the failing programme (in some places) of the junior team managers course has only led to more adults becoming involved in a kids game, which had led to an increase in many factors decreasing the quality of performance and experience of many young people.

### **Factors affecting young players**

- Adults telling players how to play constantly from the touchline
- More than just the coaches voice from the touchline – parents screaming instructions, confusing players and increasing pressure – many times if left the player will surprise you with their decision making.
- Coaches getting goalkeepers to kick out of their hands and not playing out from the back
- Coaches shouting things such as, “don’t pass it back,” “don’t play across the back,” “clear it,” “get rid of it,” etc etc etc etc all detrimental to learning. If a player makes a mistake they process that information themselves and will rectify the decision next time – they don’t need adults telling them not to do it as it causes doubt and decreases confidence and the learning aspect. Self empowerment is sadly overlooked in football coaching courses.
- “Don’t be greedy” is another – why not? When asked how he became so good Ronaldo stated, “put it this way I didn’t give the ball to anyone else.” Let kids make their own choices, encourage exciting play and passing will happen naturally anyway.
- “Don’t lose the ball” – another classic – immediately by saying “don’t,” and “lose” the negative words increase the tension on the players forcing mistakes.
- A player runs through 1v1 with the goalkeeper – don’t tell them what to do or when to shoot – he may dribble round the keeper, or square the ball to a team mate – let them decide and learn.
- Remembering they are young people – use language appropriate to their game and their age – “stop chasing lost causes” is a good one – not sure a 5 year old would understand that. There are many more statements from adults that simply confuse young people.
- Who taught you to walk? Who taught you how to talk? How did you learn to drive? YOU DID IT – NO ONE ELSE.
- As a parent, do you go into your child’s classroom at school and shout at them for getting a maths question wrong – didn’t think so – so why shout at a kid who gives possession away?
- Do you want your child to be a nice person? Thought so! So why encourage them to cheat at football? I have seen coaches recently saying, “stand over the ball on the free kick,” “just try get away with not going back ten yards until the ref tells you to,” what a wonderful society we have! And great role models! If your child stole from you or lied you would be distraught (hopefully) so why teach them to push boundaries playing sport?

- Referees – the poor guys! Why have them? If you have honest kids (which 99% are naturally) let the kids' referee – ask them to be honest – if they give a free kick or handball – get them to give the ball to the other team. Keep the adult influence out of the game as much as you can.
- A tournament recently at a professional club that invited junior teams to play had mostly the above. Adults shouting, screaming, kids crying, etc (CHILD PROTECTION!). The best team that were unbeaten had one coach, who sat and watched, didn't say a word. At half time was positive in his comments – focused on the kids and his team was a joy to watch. The parents also kept quiet but said the best thing that you can after a game – “well done son, did you enjoy that? You looked like you did, we're really proud of you, we all love you.” That was it, kids playing how they wanted, trying things and making mistakes but having fun with their friends with nice comments, no tears and lots of confidence as they were under no pressure.

At the same tournament, a team in the same group had a coach, whose son was playing in defence. He went on a run though but his team mate lost possession and the other team scored. The coach blamed his son, brought him off the pitch told him off for going forward and taking risks and he son duly sobbed his eyes out on the bench. What a great experience for the kid! Does it really have to get to this? Does it mean that much?

Most kids don't know the score when they finish games – they want to win, but they never know if they have. That's the difference – most kids are naturally competitive anyway.

### **Current games format in England**

Mini soccer (7v7/8v8) may have seemed ground breaking when introduced. It opened organised football up to younger kids. It made football more accessible to more kids because of fewer players being needed and less space.

Many problems have arisen however:

- Transfer of 8v8 into 11v1 is unrealistic – formations are very different and bad habits are merely picked up earlier
- When things open up and become popular then more attempt to join clubs – this has led to a decrease in places to play due to the sheer numbers attending clubs. I often hear, “my son has been training but can't get into the team as they pick 11 kids every week and he doesn't get a chance.” This is ridiculous – stopping kids playing at all will only lead to a reduction in kids playing longer. Why not just play 4v4 split the pitch in half and have 16 kids playing every morning.
- The top academies focus on 3v3, 4v4, 5v5 but no one else does? Why? More touches, better and quicker development. Oh i know, there is no end result and trophy for the adult!!!
- We can't play 4v4 as we have 9 players training! Coaches adapt – wake up, think! Play 4v4 with a floater; play 5v4; play one with a GK and one without; let the kids make up a game, etc etc.

**“ITS NO POINT IN ME TELLING MY KIDS TO PLAY THE BALL OUT FROM THE GOALKEEPER INTO THE DEFENDERS BECAUSE THEY CAN’T HANDLE IT”**

The above is heard everywhere – even in some professional academies. Great – coaches are there to coach – not to un-coach! How many chances do you give to players to make mistakes, learn playing the game correctly to develop their technique for when they are older? Not many I can assure you, let them concede goals – it’s the only way young players will develop – teach them to split wide from the keeper, don’t let your own ego and own pride take over – it’s not about you – it’s about the kids getting better.

**“STOP DOING THOSE FANCY TRICKS WITH THE BALL”**

**“STOP DRIBBLING ALL THE TIME AND PASS”**

The above comments are the worst – why stop players having time on the ball? Why stop kids becoming exciting players and enjoying themselves? On the streets years ago, no one stopped Wayne Rooney, George Best, Steven Gerrard, etc, running with the ball – children are clever – they will work out when to pass and dribble – but don’t stop them! Ryan gigs, Chris Waddle Paul Gascoigne etc – point proven.

You may argue that defenders such as John Terry don’t dribble – they aren’t kids though – they did when they played with friends at a young age – that’s because they didn’t have coaches telling them and criticising them constantly.

It’s time to change how you coach – and how you behave – and be a real role model to young kids who want to learn, be challenged and develop – everyone starts with one dream – to become a footballer – not concerned with the value of what they might achieve – it’s the adults that quickly turn this dream into false hope and a winning mentality regardless of the quality of the play.

On a personal note, I went through professional centres of excellence from 9 - 18, did half an apprenticeship and had England trials etc. I got to international level at 14 through not having a coach. Playing with friends at school 4 hours a day, at home after school for hours on end, and playing in a 5 a side league every Saturday from which over 60 players moved into pro clubs. I started being ‘restricted’ as a player at the age of 15. A player that is pigeon holed (on opinion – which football is apparently all about), can easily lose the qualities they have, or want to have in their own mind – no one ever finds out the players point of view or studies players feelings – not even parents.

Many young players in the current climate are stopping playing earlier. Kids are put in professional club development centres – many go to different ones every night of the week – being told different things through different club philosophies – is it pass and move, or is it game understanding from a young age, or is it fitness/ speed based, or skills based? Mixed messages and lots of pressure on young shoulders from the age of 6, travelling after school to different centres, doing school work on the way and having a sandwich and a drink in the car.

Many people will say “well I know he’s young but at least he’s getting the coaching.” That’s just it though, in most clubs they aren’t. Philosophies of many professional academies are so far off the mark it’s untrue.

It’s not the fault of the clubs to take younger kids, if they didn’t and the nearest rival would do so and they’d lose the talent. It’s not the fault of the parents either, would you not let your son have the opportunity and most parents don’t see the long term picture just as many coaches don’t.

How many kids will come through from 6 into a professional first team? Not many! The England under 18’s team was made up of mainly players that had only signed at a professional club at the age of 14 – what has happened to the kids signed at 8-9 or even being invited into programmes at 6? They go back to their junior clubs in most cases – in some cases they stop playing.

So whose responsibility is it?

Who runs football? Many people blame the FA. Maybe they do need to re-organise the coach education programme – level 1 coaches think they can work anywhere with kids, etc – this should be stopped – level 1 coaches working in schools with mass participation and with junior clubs needs a re-think. More kids playing but with less quality environments = decreased performance.

Many coaches go on the level one course then have little or no support – the level 2 for most is too much of a jump. The level two courses are still ‘old school’ in the sense that stopping sessions to coach dribbling in a 1v1 situation is a waste of time. Players need confidence to try things and experiment and make mistakes. Stopping and coaching someone who loses possession just relays negative input into the players mind – players at professional level will tell you which session they prefer and it’s not the shadow play stopping and starting ones.

Age related courses are not really going to produce better coaching – Steven Gerrard and Wayne Rooney both state in their books as do most players that they improved due to playing on the streets or playground with older kids, having to be more physical and quicker etc and learning from better players with more experience – Wayne Rooney made his debut at 16 against players twice his age.

Professional clubs I have visited have a pass and move philosophy, teaching positional play at a very young age – it looks ok, but there isn’t much learning going on. Players being told not to do too much and to pass all the time will stifle the natural player – the player that has always produced himself by having coaches as Tony Whelan has described as “men in wellington boots letting kids play” – this type of coach, maybe with little knowledge used to let kids play – have natural competition and ask the right questions or even get the kids to organise practices and games themselves.

The last visit to a professional academy saw the head coach telling players not to run with the ball too much, to pass, pass, pass, etc. The tempo when he was there went through the roof; he went after 20 minutes and the kids were lost – 11 year olds not being able to solve their own problems – they could only respond to shouting – surely a bad habit to get into. When you play in front of 76,000 people you can’t hear the coach, you have to solve your own problem.

Who is policing the game? We now have the FA skills coaches programme – I have seen some of these sessions too – too many kids stood in queues waiting for a touch, coaching instructions taken a long time, with complicated instruction. It doesn't need all this input – an environment where kids can learn for themselves, is better with small amounts of input, maybe before, at breaks and after the game/ session.

How many coaches allow the kids to run their coaching sessions? Not many.

Did your school teachers tell you the answers to all questions? No, they give you the tools needed – think of your favourite teacher at school – the one that was pressure free, helped when needed and recognised your talent and helped facilitate your needs.

The teacher you disliked was the one shouting, complaining, being negative, being old fashioned and un-approachable – most coaches are just like this.

There is no excuse, I have seen hundreds!

### **“If Im not seen to be ‘coaching’ then it doesn’t look like I’m doing my job”**

The best coaches don't constantly step in and instruct – they actually do very little.

If your players were technically competent and were part of a technical programme and you allowed them to experiment and advised occasionally then you wouldn't need to over coach and be seen to be working hard.

If your players know why you are not stepping in all the time and shouting instructions because it's about their development, then they would enjoy it more – debrief the players in front of the parents at the start and end of sessions so you don't get conflicting views. This approach is alien to many adults – they only see the result and the performance through adult eyes.

Creating the right environment for kids is more important, as is saying the right thing at the right time, rather than giving John Motson a run for this money commentating on the game.

### **IN CONCLUSION....**

Football coaching has been placed on a high priority list by so many. Level 1 coaches are not qualified to a high standard. Parents, schools, clubs should be educated on this. Just because someone has played Sunday football and passed their level 1 does not mean they are right to look after young players and develop them to be as good as they can when they are older (14+).

There are a few campaigns such as give us back our game that have done good work and research on this area and academies such as Manchester United that have embraced this to great effect.

Something further now has to be done – thousands of kids being criticised, told what to do, stopping playing at younger ages, having no freedom, not learning, living the life of an adult at 6-9 years old,

travelling the length of the country to try make the grade, playing 30 minutes and not playing with friends outside their homes.

#### RADICAL THINKING..

Why doesn't to FA have a technical director that emails every junior club in the country with one or two session plans each week – each coach then has to follow the programme at say under 7. It doesn't matter who wins, give them games to play in training sessions and give the reasons why. No need for courses, unless regional refreshers are needed. Each club should have a head coach who is responsible for the programme being done correctly.

Could the FA send a list of adapted games that teams must play in place of normal match structures for say half the match time every Sunday – for example a game designed to encourage playing out from the goalkeeper with no go areas for the opposition until the gk plays the ball out.

Getting kids to just pass the ball all the time has to stop – this may seem extreme (team game and all that) but a 6 year old probably won't play with the same group of friends at 6 that he will at 12 for example, I know I didn't; dribbling, skills, taking players on (even out of defence) is the only way to benefit the England team in years to come and increase the technical skill levels of young kids – passing will come as a result of players learning through mistakes and understanding themselves when to play a short pass or switch play – designing games to teach certain aspects is all that is required. Work on a scissors move for example and play a game where each time a player does a scissors move the other team sit down for 3 seconds – you will soon see confidence rise.

In Holland, games such as giving each player a number, calling out random numbers, giving points for tricks, good creative play, good defending, saves, goals, and placing teams in random orders, giving everyone game time and playing with different players increase the individual influence as well as forging a team ethic. No one can claim unfair teams, there is no coaching, players are responsible for themselves and their decision making and encouraged without coaching to try things on the ball and be creative; good defending is also given points, encouraging all variations of player.

These are just three ideas, there are many more things we can do to develop players in this country. Why not get out of the comfort zone and prove to be modern, free thinking people to benefit future talent – through this spread of education, all coaches will benefit and parents will have a better understanding.

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