



Photographs for this article courtesy of Michael Boyton

Let the kids play

JOHN ALLPRESS, National Player Development Coach, The FA

Back in the '60s when I took my first tentative steps into the world of sport, particularly football and cricket, we never had any coaching or adult supervision. We were luckier than most living in Hackney in the East End of London, it was one of the few inner city areas I know with plenty of grass – Victoria Park, Hackney Marshes, Hackney Downs, Clissold Park and Well Street Common – which is where I played, that is when we weren't playing 'knock down ginger', or 'run outs' over the roofs and on the bomb sites or fishing in the canal.

Games were interesting then. There were no team colours, nobody asked how old you were (as long as you could play), you could play in as many matches as you liked and there might be any number of people in a team. The most important player was the one who owned the ball. You dropped into the game when you wanted and you went home when you wanted and you played as often as you liked. It was a kids' game run by the kids for the kids.

So what was so good about these games – what was it that made them so special that kids went back again and again? Is the answer to this scientific? Were they good and productive learning environments – could it be that players actually learn better from the confusion and chaos of playing and being 'taught' through the active nature of a 'game situation'? Or is it because kids like to have fun, improve their skills by copying their mates, do something they are good at, be part of a team, group or gang, enjoy the challenge of playing with the bigger kids? Or

is it just that there were no adults around to tell them what to do? Probably the answer is – a combination of all those things.

Of course kids very rarely 'play out' now. The streets and parks are regarded by parents as too dangerous for such activities. So should the loss of these 'games' matter to football development? After all they were a very crude affair – a 'kick about' played on concrete, or in a yard or my case very luckily on grass. The ball was usually plastic, or a tennis ball in the playground at school, with four coats or trees or markings on a wall for goals. Its' replacement – organised youth football – is a far grander thing and should be much better.

Why then in May 2001 did Directors of Youth from top European Clubs including Manchester United, Ajax, Barcelona and Bayern Munich issue a statement which said that 'the loss of street soccer was hurting youth development'.

I have visited a fair number of Academies in England now and have been impressed by

the superb facilities both indoor and outdoor with perfect 'bowling green' surfaces. On some visits, when I am feeling in a more mischievous mood, I ask them where their bad pitch is – you know the bumpy un-cut one with the thistles – I always get a slightly odd 'is he out of his tree' look back. Then someone makes a joke and the moment passes. Shame really – most young kids could do with playing on a bad pitch once a week. I'll leave it to you to figure out why.

This contradiction actually goes to the heart of the matter. Is it possible that for our very youngest players (eg those in the under 11 age range) the increasingly organised adult dominated structures of 'player development' are squeezing out all the fun, spontaneity and creativity that evolved in the old street, playground and park games.

For me the key could be in 'adult dominated'. In the games I played as a kid adults were hardly significant at all. On Well Street Common adults weren't



involved at all until the park keeper came to chuck us off. When I went to secondary school we did have a teacher to take us to matches – he did not know or pretend to know much about football – his job was to give out the shirts. When I played for our school First XI the teacher knew more about the game but never imposed himself on us, he created a great atmosphere for us to play, and I can remember few formal 'coaching' sessions led by him.

So am I making out a case for total anarchy – of course not. We need Academies and Centres of Excellence because the old days are not coming back. However I am trying to make the case for greater understanding of the needs of our very youngest players especially in the under eleven age range and the importance of creating the right environment for them to learn about the game.

That is why the recent FA Coaches' Courses (U11/12-16 Module) coaches were asked to consider:

- How can we encourage those people who deal with our very youngest players to be more imaginative and inventive and less prescriptive, directive and intrusive?
- How do we create environments for our youngest players that are less predictable, where adult influence and

involvement is kept to the bare minimum and mistakes are allowed?

- How do we create environments for our youngest players that are less judgemental and less threatening, free of adult expectation and authority, where children can be children and play with emotional freedom, learning about the game without the burden of 'potential'.

It is clear that we have made an excellent start with our Academies and Centres of Excellence in England. But it is only the start. The Academies especially are at the beginning of their journey of discovery towards developing better English players and must be given our support and encouragement to endure and improve. Millions of pounds have been invested – so now 'Youth Football' has to be taken seriously. Academy Managers, Directors of Youth and their staff are held accountable and rightly so. But do our very youngest players in the programme need to learn to play the 'pro-game' with its 'no risk mentality. Professional football played by little boys. Sometimes as young as eight they are expected to 'mark up'; don't let him get behind you'; 'pass it, pass it ' 'don't dribble there', etc. etc.

'Investment in People' is a glib catchphrase, but also a very powerful concept. Investment in people and their training is what we need to develop our coaches' understanding of

their role so that they can work effectively in the superb facilities we are building. It is this lack of understanding of the needs of the youngest players in our care that must be addressed if the 'player development' is really to evolve and help our most talented youngsters to become the internationals and professionals of tomorrow.

So how important is all this? After all we are only talking about the little ones, the babies, the tots – well seven to twelve is the 'Golden Age' of Learning and those coaches working with the youngest could be setting up habits for a lifetime – that is how important it is.

So while we have made an excellent start with our Academies and we do have some first class players at International Youth Level we dare not become complacent especially with the very youngest players. Their spontaneity, flair and sense of fun must not be crushed beneath the boot of tactics and teamwork.

So how can we re-create what we have lost in 'street, playground or park' football? Well the art of 'under coaching' is often under valued. So could we 'let the kids play' more, or maybe Liechtenstein and their like will become credible opponents for mighty England for longer than 45 minutes.

If you have any observations regarding this article, please e-mail John Allpress at john.allpress@TheFA.com