

Turning kids into world beaters

Contributed by AWFA Admin
Thursday, 24 May 2007
Last Updated Saturday, 14 July 2007

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by Craig Foster

IT'S that time again for football parents, with the junior season on us with grading trials, the first pre-season games, and the season start imminent.

And for all the parents concerned with giving their child the best grounding in the game, now is the time to take a look at the environment your youngster will be placed in, the philosophy of play they will be taught, and the expectations you place on your budding superstar.

Much of the discourse in the game over the last few years has centred on improving the training and coaching of our next generation.

As yet, however, little information has filtered down to the junior clubs, most of which are carrying on in the same fashion as 20 years ago. So here are a few things to keep in mind.

Firstly, up to the age of at least 15 the entire focus of a club, and certainly a coach, should be on the development of the player above results, because ages five to 15 are the years when players learn their awareness of the game, and settle on a technical base which must sustain them throughout a career.

Technique, or the technical ability of a player, is slowly becoming the primary barometer of whether a youngster can play the game, which is a huge step forward for this country.

For example, so fundamental is the technique of young players that at Clairefontaine in France, one of the world's most renowned development centres, new recruits at age 13 are made to start all over again on their most basic techniques.

The program runs for three years - the first-year focus is entirely on the player and his ball, and thereafter on small groups, and only in the third year, at age 15, on team tactics.

The French have long recognised that technique is the most important thing in football, and believe that in the early and teen years every moment spent on refining technique pays dividends.

Competition for points under the age of 12 has been proven to inhibit the technical development of children, principally because it drives coaches to make expedient decisions to win games rather than those which may cost points, but ultimately benefit the education of the players.

So for this season let your child's coach know that results aren't the focus, and that in youth football his role is to teach the kids how to play with the ball, not just to kick it long in an effort to win games.

Secondly, every youth team should be encouraged to keep the ball and play out from defence.

In modern football it is imperative that all players are able to keep the ball, and to restrict young players from doing so on the basis that they may make a mistake is counter productive.

So, if a coach instructs young players to kick the ball out of defence so as not to risk losing the ball, find another coach.

Mind you, many parents don't help the situation by pressuring young players and coaches to play direct football and not to take risks.

The entire focus for young players should be on having fun playing the game, which is also the optimal developmental environment.

And we all have to take responsibility here, so if you see a parent screaming obscenities at a child, coach or referee this season, please, report them to club and association.

Thirdly, your club should be playing only small-sided games with four, six and eight players per side on small pitches until 13 years of age, as this provides the best environment for youngsters to develop their technique and understanding.

In this country we are yet to produce world-class technical players because we are still too focused on running, rather than on learning to play football.

One way we perpetuate this is to play with too many kids on fields that are too large, producing a style of player and game that relies on strong and fast kids who can run and chase, not players who can play with the ball.

And lastly, under at least the age of 15 every training drill must involve the ball - every child should touch the ball between 500 and 1000 times per training session, so there is no time for needless running.

Source: The Sun-Herald