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Soccer expert - Younger players

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What makes the great players stand out? John Alpress, National Player Development Coach of the English FA, says: "Being able to recognise the constantly changing nature of a game of football, being able to see the situation as it is developing, making the right decisions for the circumstances and execute the required skill or technique with precision."

Alpress, writing in the FA coaches magazine *Insight*, explored the best ways of developing 7-10 year olds: "It was not too long ago that Under 10's in England were playing 11-v-11 on full size pitches in some places. This all changed with the forced introduction of smaller-sided games (8-v-8 for 7-11 year olds) in the mid 90s. Now the debate has moved on to discuss a possible move to 4-v-4 at younger age groups. This debate is also raging in the USA where 4-v-4 is being introduced in some regions."

"The supporters of this format are right. It creates a match-like situation, which allows young players a multitude of touches. It also encourages width, depth and movement so encompassing the vital ingredients to match play, albeit on a smaller scale." Alpress goes on to say: "4-v-4 generates many match situations involving all the players, with small numbers guaranteeing repetition of opportunity to problem solve and learn (i.e., see it, make a decision, execute a skill)."

The youth development (Academy) staff at Manchester United can also be seen to support a move to 4-v-4 at the young age groups with the introduction of their Under-9's pilot scheme. The aim of their scheme is to create a fun learning environment. They argue their scheme allows the following:

1. Plenty of individual possession, ball control and touches
2. Trying new skills without fear of ridicule or recrimination
3. Taking players on and challenging defenders
4. Little or no pressure from significant others (parents, coaches)
5. A vibrant, creative and fun atmosphere

It will be interesting to see how this scheme develops. We will keep you informed.

Soccer-expert.com strongly believes in developing not just matches but practices that support a multitude of touches and allows players to develop in realistic situations. You can replace any drill-like practice with a game-style practice in the soccer-expert.com philosophy, thus allowing greater realism and decision-making to develop amongst the players. And it's great for those players less gifted technically.

Handball!

Believe it or not, another way of helping players learn techniques and tactics - both complex and simple – is through handball. Derek Broadley for soccer-expert.com explains more:

"When it comes to teaching the "game" soccer-expert.com would suggest and will demonstrate use of what they call "Handball Activities."

The strategies for playing soccer are complicated enough due to the environment continually changing. Add in the skills needed to actually play the game - kicking, heading, running, jumping, tackling, etc. How do we develop? Well the "game" and the strategies that are employed can be introduced gradually by eliminating the "technical flaws" that are apparent during the developmental years.

Too often, coaches feel the need to correct every fault they see during the early stages of development, they always correct it by recognizing the fault as being a "technical fault." However, the mistake could well be a problem with the decision that the player has made and quite simply, the player has tried to use a technique that cannot handle that particular skill. So the coaching point is not a technical one but a decision-making issue.

A way of eliminating the technical issues is to take them away. By using "handball activities," which younger children find easier to perform, it allows them to keep their head up rather than looking at their feet. The hands maintain the decision making process and allow for a similar game to take place but the soccer technical skills are taken away. The coach and the players can now focus on the decision-making issues of the game in terms of tactical awareness, and strategies/methods of playing.

The use of hands is vital for varying the service to players during technical work. Players can give a different serve to different areas of the body far more easily with their hands than with their feet, which enables players to develop much quicker using all parts of the body more frequently. The use of variations in serves from hands can be done over long and short distances.

Key points:

- Increased awareness
- Better decision-making
- Improved skill selection

Removes technical errors

The sessions on soccer-expert will demonstrate and explain these issues in much greater details. So tune in to soccer-expert.com and get the full story.