

SMALLER IS BETTER

The 4 v. 4 format facilitates more game play for young players

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By Paul Cooper

After Newport County coach Dave Murphy visited Manchester United to see their Academy's 4 v. 4 project, he witnessed a format and philosophy that he knew would take youth development at grass roots to a higher level.

Playing 4 v. 4 is not a new concept; the Dutch have been playing it since the mid 1980s. The godfather of soccer in Holland, the great, late Rinus Michels said: "Good coaches use the basic criteria of street soccer for their vision of grass roots development; they realize that these elements produce a natural process which gives the most efficient training for young kids."

And there we have it, logical thinking from a coach who understands that because of modern society, street soccer is no more and that "the children's game" must be continued in some form if we are really serious about development. Some 20 years later in the U.K. we are still wrestling with the dilemma -- is it a proper game?

The 4 v. 4 pilot scheme for the U-9s at Manchester United's Academy was studied in depth by Rick Fenoglio from the Department of Exercise and Sport Science, Manchester Metropolitan University. Rick published his results of his research in both the FA's *Insight* magazine and in a major report he compiled. In the report Fenoglio highlights the underlying philosophy of the pilot study:

"The scheme was to recreate, as much as possible, a match day environment that was more child- and player-centered. This guiding concept led the developers of the scheme to reflect upon soccer environments where the young players were free to learn, practice

and develop their soccer skills without being shackled by the imposed structures, expectations, attentions and scrutiny of significant others. The environments which were considered to provide these qualities the most were the playgrounds, parks, streets, back alleys, beaches and barrios around the world -- areas where the world's greatest players first learned their skills. At this time, Manchester United FC officials were reconsidering their approach to the development of young players and were concerned that the overall gap in skill levels between English players and European players (and, increasingly, the rest of the world) was widening.

"If true, this is an interesting situation given that one of the primary aims of the initiation of Football Academies in England was the development and enhancement of technical skills. The 4 v. 4 games and format of the pilot scheme were selected because it was felt that they would give players more opportunities to practice and develop their game-related skills in a less pressurized, but nonetheless challenging game format. The environment of the pilot scheme was developed from a desire to produce a more child-centered and ethical learning environment. A 4 v. 4 Pilot Scheme for U-9 Academy Football Players."

There is something deeper here, and

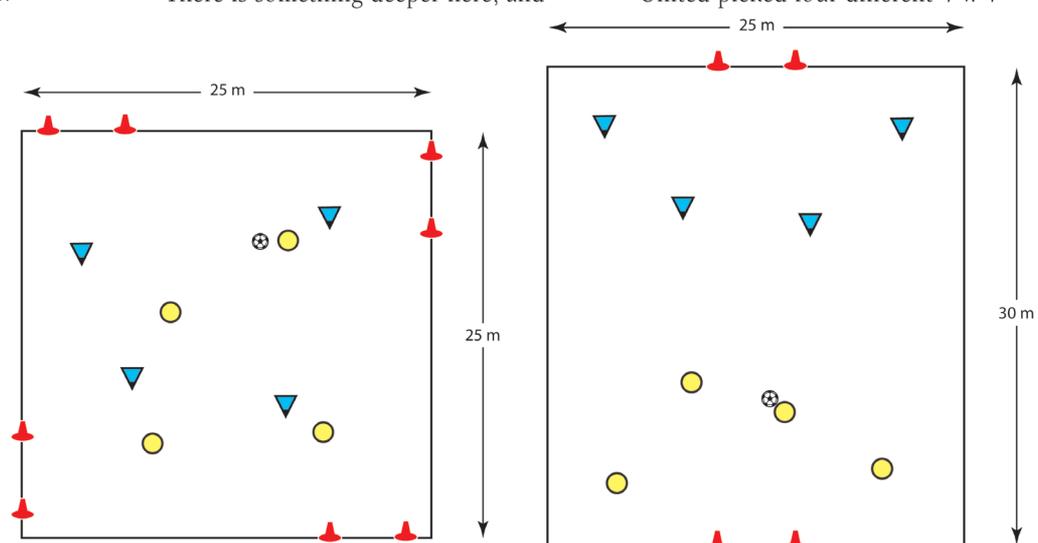
not just in a soccer sense. Remember childhood today is very different from when I was growing up in the 1960s. Kids are hardly allowed out to play now. They don't climb trees, ride bikes and build dens like they used to.

Sue Palmer, child expert and writer, puts it a little more succinctly:

"Play -- unstructured, free range, loosely supervised play -- is the birthright of every child. For the next generation to grow up healthy, balanced and able to benefit from their education, we must ensure that children once again go out to play."

If we are always going to tell children what to do and treat them like mini adult professionals at 8 and 9, when are they ever going to think for themselves? In terms of technique and problem-solving skills, I feel there is a definite link between the England team's inability to cope in last summer's World Cup and what is happening on the fields of England at the youngest age levels in both the grass roots and professional game. Fear is everywhere in soccer in this country, fear of losing, fear of change, fear that the next coach knows more than you and the fear of giving control on the field to the kids.

United picked four different 4 v. 4



FOUR-GOAL GAME -- Pitch size 25 x 25, two goals at each end (four goals total) by the corners, using traffic cones. Dribble or pass the ball on.

TWO-GOAL GAME -- Pitch size 30 x 25, one goal at each end using traffic cones. No keepers; dribble or pass the ball on.

games (eight minutes each) and the players rotate so that they play all the games. On average each child played about six games.

Each game is eight minutes long and very importantly the children referee their own games. This allows them to take responsibility, communicate with the opposition and sort out any problems. This helps with their social development skills. The coaches also take a back seat and just encourage. This allows children to express themselves more, solve problems and think for themselves.

The study looked at game data as well as interviews with players, coaches and parents. The results were nothing short of staggering. Compared to the 8 v. 8 game the data were as follows for the 4 v. 4 games:

- Number of passes – increased 135 percent
- Scoring attempts – increased 260 percent
- Number of goals scored – increased 500 percent
- Number of 1 v. 1 encounters – increased 225 percent
- Number of dribbling skills (tricks) – increased 280 percent

From the interviews conducted, 80 percent were positive regarding the 4 v. 4 pilot scheme and 20 percent were negative. The consensus was that the children became a lot more skillful playing the 4 v. 4 games. The games were varied which also brought out different skills. It was also not so obvious who was a defender and who was an attacker as the children became more complete soccer players.

Despite the overwhelming statistical evidence and the positive feedback, the Academy clubs decided to stick with the traditional 8 v. 8 format. Manchester United continues to play 4 v. 4 at U-9s. I personally believe this is an opportunity missed, but I do understand that the 8 v. 8 game is a good format on the road to playing 11 v. 11, but at what age do you bring it in?

Our soccer culture is one of passion and commitment, two very important factors in both successful players and teams, and if those attributes were the only important ones, as a nation we would probably win a few trophies, however skill and decision-making are also involved and if you take away the chance to develop that further at 8 and 9 years old, you are always going to be playing catch up.

You meet many coaches in youth soccer, some make no impact, but every now and then you meet someone who

rekindles your enthusiasm in the struggle to put development first in youth football. Just over the bridge in South Wales is such a coach. Dave Murphy started by taking his son for a kick-about down at the local park and before long he had 20 kids playing, reflecting his infectious enthusiasm to involve everyone.

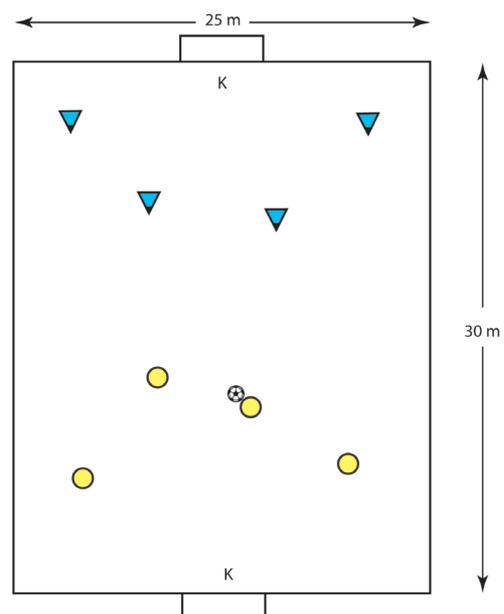
The Dutch 4 v. 4 format is a central part of Murphy's coaching philosophy at Newport County and after a trip to see the 4 v. 4 scheme in action at Manchester United; I met him at a coaching course. Although I converted myself to 4 v. 4, I had only used the games in training sessions and had not thought of playing a number of different games as a match day substitute.

It makes so much sense. The mini soccer leagues play 7 v. 7 and very often at clubs it is impossible to play all the kids. A number of different 4 v. 4 games are the answer. The benefits at the grassroots level are obvious:

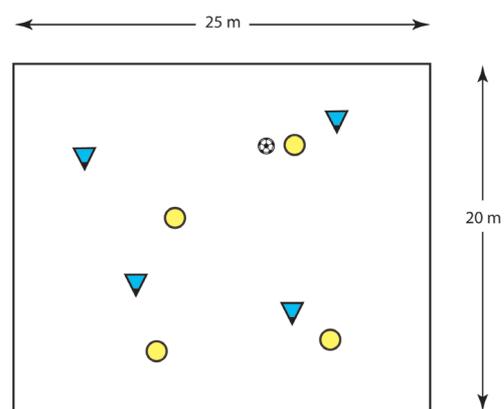
- It is a very flexible format; fields can be marked out with cones and you can have as many different 4 v. 4 games as you have kids.
- Everyone plays
- Many touches of the ball
- The different games bring out different skills
- Many opportunities for everyone to score goals
- Lots of problem solving opportunities without coaches talking you through the game
- Kids are not just a defender or an attacker but a complete soccer player and have a much better all-around understanding of the game
- You don't even need to play another club, you can make it in-house if you have enough kids.

The list is endless!

Murphy and 20 of Newport County's U-9s and U-10s as well as coaches and parents traveled to Cirencester Town one Saturday afternoon in September for a 4 v. 4 fun day. The U-9s and U-10s were mixed up and four pitches were laid out, the same as at Manchester United. I knew it would be a good afternoon, but I had not anticipated just how many touches each child had and when left to their own devices how quickly they adapted to the games and



GOALKEEPER GAME – Pitch size 35 x 25, junior size goal (18x6 ft.). Normal throw-ins and corners.



LINE BALL – Pitch size 25 x 20, the length of each line at each end is the goal (to score, go over the line and put your foot on the ball). Dribble or pass the ball on.

how advanced the children's problem solving skills were.

As mentioned earlier, the Dutch addressed the decline in street soccer, "the children's game," more than 20 years ago but I believe we have never properly done that in the U.K. In a world where children can no longer play outside without supervision, parents and coaches have taken over. And the competitive drive adults bring to the game means youngsters no longer have time to fall in love with soccer, to play for fun and thus truly to develop their skills.

Maybe if the 4 v. 4 message can spread we can rear a generation of footballers who play with creativity and without fear, who solve their own problems on the field and who enjoy the game. ⚽