

Little Wars

“As a coach, I like five – a –side because it’s easy to organise and it develops all the qualities that are important to the modern game. It’s fast, so it improves your vision, agility and movement and because you touch the ball so often, your technique improves too. Today, every player should be able to defend and attack so this game is essential for player’s development.”

Arsene Wenger

Child centred approach

Since Give Us Back Our Game began some two and a half years ago, many coaches have taken up the philosophy of a more child and player centred approach through a games based training programme using small sided games.

Many of the coaches had little experience of playing and coaching football and the games approach absorbed the children and let them develop in a fun way with the emphasis on play.

Many of these coaches were parents of a child in the team and had volunteered so that they and their friends could play.

There was no real selection policy and whoever was first through the door was selected. They soon came up against well drilled teams who proceeded to batter them on a weekly basis with double figure score lines.

Some coaches turned to the games approach purely in desperation. They felt guilty they didn’t have the so called knowledge of the ‘winners’ in the league and felt even more guilty because of the children losing every week and the mutterings on the sideline from parents. They were looking for something that was different than what was currently on offer and that was more child specific.

The games approach is long term, but they still saw early improvements in terms of fun for the children, improved decision making and technique.

I have visited some of these teams and the children play with an intensity and depth with fluid movement off the ball. They are totally immersed and their love for the game shines through.

Manuel Pellegrini

Chilean, Pellegrini is the coach for Spanish club Villarreal and finished 2nd last season in the top division in Spain.

In an article in the Champions magazine he explains his philosophy and why they never play 11v11 in training, but how all his tactics are worked out in small sided games of 5v5.

“In an eleven- a-side practice game, a full back will intervene against a winger an average of seven times. In ‘reduced- space’ football, they intervene 14 times and in

a shorter time span. A striker in a practice game will have, on average, seven clear scoring chances; in 'reduced' football it is 30."

Meanwhile in England at grassroots football, six years olds predominantly play 7v7 and 10 year olds play 11v11 on match day's, based usually on just one training session a week.

When the FA launched mini soccer in the mid 90's they stated that games be up to 7v7 with a recommendation that U7s and U8s play 4v4 or 5v5. That was largely ignored by leagues who introduced 7v7 at all ages from U7s to U10s.

A golden opportunity was missed by giving the leagues a loop hole in terms of formats. Leagues argued that more children would play by using the 7v7 format on marked out pitches, but it is just as easy to organise two games of 4v4 in the same space using marker cones.

Small sided games

Rinus Michels in Holland, the legendary Ajax and Dutch national coach of the 'Total Football' era in the seventies, realised that the decline in street football was having a major impact on the standard of players coming through.

Working with the KNVB he introduced a games based system using 4v4 in a number of conditioned games that emphasised different aspects of the game.

Children learned by playing.

Michels reasoned, "In simplified, modified games, players learn to be aware and to improvise, to concentrate, and to recognize the situation. Skills are important, of course, but the value of skills is to be able to use them efficiently in a fraction of a second. Our practices should be one quarter skill training and three quarters applying those skills in endless situations."

Michels chose 4v4 as it had all the elements of the 11v11 game in that you had options forward, to the sides and back, but in the simplest form.

4v4 was meant to be played without a keeper so that children could learn the game first before specialising.

Some countries added a goal keeper and play 5v5.

Research

Manchester United Academy adopted the 4v4 approach for their U9s Academy match day programme in favour of the standard 8v8 being played at other Academies. Rick Fenoglio, co founder of GUBOG and a senior lecturer in exercise and sport science at Manchester Metropolitan University was asked to conduct a study of the pilot scheme which highlighted the benefits of the 4v4 approach.

The extensive research found the following when compared to the 8v8

- 135% - more passes
- 260% - more attempts on goal

- 225% - more 1 on 1 encounters
- 280% - more 'tricks' attempted

Some other work done by development coach Martin Diggle, while at Bolton Wanderers Academy, based on decision making while on the ball showed that in a ten minute game of line soccer there was an average of 23.5 decisions in a 4v4 game, compared with just 13.4 in a game of 6v6.

Benefits of and games approach with SSGs

- Just as street football was for a previous generation, small sided games are **fun** and foster a lifelong passion for the beautiful game
- Because it is so much fun, kids practise with a ball much more away from coaching and club sessions
- Play football to learn football
- Learn by doing
- Technique, football insight and communication are most effectively developed in game related situations
- Children naturally learn match situations by constant repetition and frequent ball contact.
- A small sided game maximises involvement in real football situations
- Freedom to fail
- Creativity & spontaneity
- More touches
- More involvement in the game
- Easy for the coach to set up
- The coach can easily observe where the players are in terms of their development
- A format that is age appropriate

“Liverpool practiced small-sided games every day and it was high-intensity stuff. We used to do a very light warm-up, jog around the field a couple of times to loosen the limbs, do a few stretches, put the cones down for goals and then go into five-a-side or eight-a-side.

It was the same every single day. There was no tactical work, none whatsoever. All the strategic stuff was done within the small sided games. Liverpool believed that everything we faced in five-a-sides would be encountered again on match day. That was why the five-a-sides were so competitive. Liverpool’s training characterised Liverpool’s play – uncomplicated but devastatingly effective.”

“Practising on smaller pitches, Liverpool were always going to play a short-passing game. We only trained with small goals so there was little long-range shooting. We passed the ball until we got close enough to score. The philosophy centred on passing, making angles and one-touch football.”

John Barnes