

Football – The Beautiful Game for Kids

Okay, I admit I'm a little biased, well maybe a little more than a little, I love football (let's call it soccer for this article just to keep it easy), and even worse for some I'm also a Manchester United fan! When I first joined Harbord Diggers SC on the Northern Beaches of Sydney as a 6 year old you were either Liverpool or Manchester United on the training paddock and well...I was Manchester United. It stuck.

On reflecting on over 30 years of following soccer, there is something quite instructive about our love of those 2 particular teams, and how the game in this country evolved to replicate the English game in so many ways. In Australia we were so influenced by the English game we sort of became a colonial soccer outpost. There are commentators such as chief football analyst Craig Foster on SBS, who'd suggest that this tactically hindered Australia, and on some levels he is right.

Yet there is another argument, and that is though we on a 'tactical' level embraced the more basic approach to the game, the English style of quick movement, long passing, super fit players, but with questionable skills, we've still produced some amazing players for a country of our population.

Harry Kewell, Mark Schwarzer, Tim Cahill, Lucas Neill et al. The majority of our 'superstar' players have made their reputations in the English leagues, but slowly we're seeing the emergence of players like Mark Bresciano, Carl Valeri, Jason Culina and Bruce Djite who have all excelled in continental leagues – hey even Harry Kewell is playing his best ever football in Turkey.

Things are evolving and there are some soon to be major changes at the grassroots level which are going to have a huge impact on the most popular team sport in the land. These changes are going to have greatest impact on the biggest growth area in particular, and that is amongst the junior kids who play the game.



Before I go any further, let me give you a bit of an idea of how soccer sits in our sporting landscape. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) soccer is the most popular team sport globally and in Australia it's no different. In 2005-06 Australia participation levels for people over the age of 15 (it's even higher in junior sports) had soccer at 419,600 and its closest competitor was AFL at 268,700.

In terms of kids aged between the ages of 15-17 the gap was huge. Over 127,000 players as opposed to the next closest of AFL, again at just over 62,000. In terms of junior participation the gap between soccer and the other codes is even larger.

There is no denying that soccer is on the way up in this country, whereas some codes are falling in participation rates – why?

As a parent who is looking at organised sport for my 6 year old there are lots of reasons why soccer is particularly appealing.

Soccer is inherently a non-violent game. Yes, it is a body contact sport but the chances of serious injury in soccer are far less than in heavy body contact sports like AFL, Rugby League and Rugby Union.

There is also the 'culture' aspect of the game, and an example of when sports culture goes bad is Rugby League, where over the last few years there has been scandal after scandal. I really enjoy Rugby League, played it at school and watch it on the weekends, but as a Dad I despair at some of the somewhat caveman attitudes of the players, administrators and commentators.

The big issue for all rival codes at the junior level is that a lot of mum's in particular would much rather see their boys emulating a Harry Kewell or a Mark Schwarzer than say the Cronulla Shark's Paul Gallen.

Beyond the image of the game is the fact that soccer is an incredible game for developing coordination, skills, and overall athleticism. It's a game that also allows for many body shapes and precludes none.

Barcelona's Lionel Messi who just carved up my beloved Manchester United in the 09 Champions League final is only 169cms (5ft 7in). It's a game where skill, speed and ability triumphs over physical size.

There is also now a legitimate pathway to the elite levels of participation through the A-League, and most importantly there is a new uniformed approach to skills training that has been endorsed and rolled out by Football Federation of Australia over the next few years.

This involves the unveiling of a new skills based, National Football Curriculum (NFC). As Football Federation Australia CEO Ben Buckley stated:

"It sets the blueprint for the quality and style of Australian football for the future and aims to significantly improve our skill levels."

"It is the first time we have had a national curriculum which sets the basis for the development of all young players and coaches, whether at community or elite level."

"The key objective is to create a talented player development program that emphasises skill and sustains international success for generations to come, as well as a coach development system that produces quality

coaches who are able to implement the curriculum and realise similar goals.”

So what does this mean for a parent looking at getting their child involved in soccer?

Mostly, the days of watching a bunch of kids chasing after a ball with dust flying all around them is coming to a close.

Moving forward junior coaches will be expected to implement higher levels of skills based training and will be encouraged to produce a proactive style of playing that corresponds with the Australian competitive nature. In essence the NFC looks to combine our inherent combative nature with equal levels of skill.

Training in my day was running around the oval 4 times, a few shots at goal, and then shirts on vs shirts off scratch game. From now on we will see the “integration and mutual dependency of physical conditioning with football training so that they are not separated”. Coach Education Programs will be reviewed in each state to reflect the goals of the NFC.

So in summary what we will see in the future is a much more centralised, professional approach to the game where all kids will be taught from the same book. Australian kids will be encouraged to hold onto our gritty way of playing but also develop silky skills.

If you have an elite child they will be identified quickly and their pathway to higher levels of representation will be coordinated at a much better level. It’s a wonderful outcome for soccer playing kids in this country, and if you’re very lucky your child could lead a fantastic life as a professional footballer in any of the major leagues in the world.

If you want to find out more about the NFC and how to get your child involved in more skills based training go to www.footballaustralia.com.au and look for your local state federation. There are lots of fantastic coaching programs available, so get active.

Enjoy!

Adrian Buckley – Dad.

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