

4-v-4: The best by far

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Some people in football would like to see youngsters learning the game as it is played in 'real life'. Eleven-a-side with 3-foot tall goalkeepers standing in front of full-size nets.

Funnily enough, it wasn't the players who wanted this, but their coaches and parents.

About a decade ago the FA in Britain moved from 11 v 11 to 8 v 8 with smaller goals for younger age groups. No longer would the more physically mature players have dominate in a game whilst others could count on one hand how many times they would touch the ball.

So soccer used to be an endurance exercise for young children.

More enlightened individuals realised that

young players needed to be constantly involved in an area size that related to their age and physical development. The more players were involved and the more touches they had the quicker they would learn and develop. Obvious really, except to the Neanderthals who believed the opposite.

Now progress taking us towards 4 v 4 as a stepping stone to 8-a-side, and the reasoning is very much the same as it was a decade ago.

John Alpress (National Player Development Coach at the Football Association) states:

'4 v 4 generates many match situations, involves 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). Above all 4 v 4 is a game and kids love a game.

Writing in *Insight* (Autumn 2002), he goes on: 'It also has a simple framework where the players can concentrate on their own game and learn how to cope and deal with the problems at their own pace without being pressurised.'

- Problem solving and decision-making are VITAL ingredients to a player's development, which we have touched on before. Too often coaches MAKE decisions for players - shouting instructions and so forth. However,



sometimes it's best for the coach/parent/friend to say nothing and let the player try to make the decision. In essence 4 v 4 helps recreate the 'street football' that we have heard many commentators, players and coaches refer too. The notion of 'street football' relates to players kicking a ball about on the local road/street using coats or walls as goals. This, it's argued with some justification, helped young players develop their skills and helped develop great players in the past. As if any further proof of 4-v-4's benefits were needed, Manchester United piloted a scheme for its Under 9's. Rick Fenoglio of Manchester Metropolitan University writes: 'A fundamental concept guiding the primary developers of the scheme was the replication, as much as possible, of the playing environments in which the world's greatest players first learned and then developed the skills they needed for top-level performance. 'To accomplish this, the scheme has incorporated some of the competitive values and best features of youth football as it used to be played in the parks, playgrounds, streets, and back alleys around the world, into the more formalised structure of modern academy football.' Players need to be involved and smaller numbers allow them to do this. Being constantly involved will mean they learn quicker. This of course is common sense and can be applied to all aspects of life and learning. We all like to be involved in an activity and the more we are involved the more we enjoy it and learn. Learning is influenced by a variety of factors, e.g. the environment, information available, individuals' learning capacity, the support of peers and family. However, in this instance 4 v 4 establishes a good learning environment, which is vitally important to player development.