

The Future is Small

By [Craig Foster](#)

As excited as we all are about the trajectory of the [Socceroos' campaign for 2010](#) and the positive result recently against Qatar, it is important to keep in mind that another generation of future Australian internationals, as well as tens of thousands of youngsters whose only desire is to enjoy the world's greatest game, are about to embark on their own adventure in the new 2008 junior football season.

Registrations have begun around the country with tens of thousands of volunteers doing their bit to get things moving and all of us parents rushing off to fill out forms and pay the fees.

While some kids are dusting off the boots for another go, the lucky few may even get a fresh pair of the latest design going around. Regardless, anticipation levels among the kids will be high.

So it's a great time to revisit some of the areas affecting the grass roots and which will play critical roles in whether the kids both enjoy their football to the absolute maximum, and are allowed to develop fully in to the players they idolise, such as their Socceroos heroes.

One of the most topical issues right now is the introduction of small sided games, which seems to be causing some consternation at junior level, not surprisingly considering this is the largest and most fundamentally important structural and cultural change for the game in decades.

This is the first critical step forward towards positively influencing the experience our young kids have of the beautiful game and of altering the way they play. To build better footballers capable of excelling at the truly top level -being the top five football clubs in the world and ultimately a World Cup winning Australian team.

Having launched a national football plan the time is now, when every football parent is naturally concerned that their child is given the optimal environment to play in, for the FFA to be selling the wonderful and vital benefits of small-sided games.

The fun and involvement that brings a smile to every kid's face, not just the talented ones who usually dominate games on larger pitches, the tenfold increase in development of every player when placed time and again in football situations and encouraged to express themselves and solve problems and the general rise in standard of kids across Australia - giving this country the greatest platform to then apply better coaching standards to a more competent playing population, increasing our international competitiveness.

But the education process from the FFA thus far is too little too late, principally because they still have no-one in their football department who has either played the game, or even more incredibly has actually worked in a junior club or association in this country and thus understands the issues facing junior clubs in this transitional period.

It has largely been left to the states and, ultimately, to the volunteers to sell the move, to explain it in detail, and to educate themselves enough to be able to overcome the understandable concerns many parents have about any change affecting their child.

Now is the perfect time for Rob Baan, the FFA Technical Director - who since working with the Olyroos hasn't been sighted and in my view lacks either the technical know-how, the personality, or the passion and willingness to lead this country at a critical time for the game, and possibly all of the above - to prove his worth by taking the lead in driving this revolutionary step forward.

Baan has proven he can coach at senior level but as yet I see no evidence of a technician with in-depth knowledge of youth football, the very area we most need assistance on, and it is high time a panel of Australian football experts took a long hard look at the outcomes of his work.

At least Pim Verbeek has been both vocal and honest, sparking much needed technical debate, in fact he may well be making Baan superfluous.

Nevertheless, we are moving in the right direction, and *for those clubs and regions making the move to small-sided games, well done, you are working in the best interests of the kids and the game.*

I know this first hand because I have spent countless volunteer hours over the last three years selling the move, showing the research behind the small pitches and small playing numbers, watching it being implemented, speaking with parents to assess feedback and reaction, answering the questions of those who

can't see the reasoning, and I have seen the process which over the course of a season has the vast majority of stakeholders evangelising the format and what it has done for their children, both the talented and less so.

But in the absence of any meaningful public education process, many will arrive at the wrong conclusions, and just in the last week there has been some press regarding having no goalkeepers at very young ages, a move which, until the sound rationale is explained, can seem confronting to many.

The fact is firstly that *specialisation at too young an age is disadvantageous*, in contrast to every child learning how to play, including those who will later become keepers.

In modern football keepers must be able to play with their feet, particularly after the back pass was ruled out by FIFA in 1992, making it fundamental for every child to learn to play football.

Many top class keepers did in fact not specialise until their teens at any rate, and the best with their feet like Edwin van der Sar and Fabien Barthez learnt the game on the outfield, making them doubly valuable as an added player sweeping behind the defence.

Any keeper who is incompetent on the deck in controlling and passing the ball like an outfield player are not only forced to kick long every time and therefore risk the loss of possession for their team, but in fact become only a last resort as an option to keep possession as defenders are reluctant to pass the ball back, *in this way the ability of the side to keep the ball under pressure is severely compromised*.

This is not how Australia will play football in future, we want to keep the ball and 11 men are better than 10, so future international keepers will need to be extremely competent to play.

If any parent is concerned that 'little Johnny' wants to emulate Mark Schwarzer, and nothing wrong with that, then time can still be spent in training during the week in goals, should they wish, but on the weekend they will learn to play football.

And of course many young keepers can hardly kick the ball any distance at all, and thus the opponents tend to gather like vultures near the goal to capitalise on a weak kick.

Lastly, having a keeper at young ages tends to completely change the football, back to what we are and not what we want to be, *because every time a young keeper gets the ball they will rush to boot the ball from their hands as far as they can*, when we want them to roll it out for their team to keep it and play, not boot it.

Later, when they are hitting double figures in age, they can better understand how to complement their team with the ball in their hands, for now, just learn to play.

Small-sided games is the single most positive story for our kids to experience the game in decades, and is only bringing us in line - twenty years too late in reality - with the world's best football countries and their age-specific development models, such as Spain, the Netherlands, Japan, Portugal, France, Italy, Brazil, Argentina... you get the picture.

If you want further reassurance, the world's best clubs - Barcelona, Real Madrid, Juventus, Manchester United and Arsenal - play their kids in this format:

:: [Small Sides Games Manual](#)

:: [Youngster's learning curve](#)

:: [The Manchester United 4x4 Pilot Scheme](#)

The documents I have indexed have much of the leading research into the format of play, but essentially the key is that football for young players should be precisely suited to their requirements and abilities, including cognitive, to enable them to learn most effectively.

In short, *11 a side football is for adults, small sided games are for youngsters*, it is that simple, and that effective.

So, for all the club secretaries and registrars, the coaches and parents who want to feel comfortable you are doing the right thing, be assured you are.

This move to small fields and small teams will give your son or daughter the greatest opportunity to enjoy the game as well as to develop better skills and awareness, leading to either a lifetime of enjoyment because they can actually play and therefore don't have to rely on running and tackling as an adult, or to excel and become a superstar, if that's the path chosen and ordained.

I know it is difficult and laborious to change in any respect. I know this is added work for the volunteers and stress they could do without. I know those of you who deal with the parents will find that, regardless of the sound rationale behind, some will just never accept change no matter how beneficial to their own child because I have seen it happen in the last three years.

But hold firm to what's best for the game and the kids, and you will all be rewarded with players who when older will thank you for your vision.

At this time, with new coaches looking to plan their first sessions with the kids and get the season underway, here are a few additional, important principles which you might find of assistance to enable our kids to learn the game in the correct manner, to learn 'jogo bonito', not kick and run.

Youth Football is for Development - kids playing under the age of at least 18 are there entirely for one thing, to learn the game of football. To learn it to become a professional player, or to enjoy playing properly and with technique for a lifetime, not to be left as an adult with no skill or technique and thus resigned to a lifetime experience of the game as a kick and rush merchant.

Now, the only way to develop completely at anything is to be criticised, to be told you are doing the wrong thing, to see adults screaming at each other and you, and to be told what *not* to do far more often than what *to* do, right?

Wrong of course, but *take a moment to consider how close to the reality of your child's football experience the above will be*, because it doesn't have to be if you give the issue some thought now.

Development and fun, enjoyment, remember that thing you had as a kid, mostly when the adults weren't around and you could make your own rules and be free of negative input, which is the heart of why kids play football.

You may not have considered so, but *research says kids would rather play and be involved in a game and lose, then have little involvement, no enjoyment, and win.*

It is a game, and the main principal should be how the player and team plays, not the ultimate result, because not only can results in football be somewhat beholden to lady fortune, but the football itself is the best determinant of both whether you are likely to win the next game, and whether the players will actually learn.

Australia must be the most competitive nation on earth and this assists with the development of our kids in many sports but here's the key you have to comprehend, *an emphasis on winning above the football played at youth level actually does the opposite, and this is the great paradox of football.*

Here is the technically brilliant future World Player of the Year, Lionel Messi of Argentina and Barcelona, in the Guardian recently (UK): "The Barcelona youth programme is one of the best in the world,' said Messi (an irrefutable point given that, in recent years alone, it has produced players of the quality of Andrés Iniesta, Xavi Hernandez and - of course - Cesc Fabregas).

What was the secret?

"As a kid they teach you not to play to win, so much as to grow in ability as a player. That's why, in contrast to the experience I'd had in Argentina, where it was all much more physical, at Barça we trained every day with the ball. I hardly ever ran without a ball at my feet. It was a form of training aimed very clearly at developing your skills."

Let's be clear - if you are a youth coach, in charge of an impressionable group of kids between the ages of 4 and 18, your job is to teach them how to play football the right way, the passing game not one of running, and every decision you make should have this aim in mind.

The best youth coach develops the best players and the best football, that's the true guide, not whether you can compile trophy after trophy, especially if your players aren't capable of playing at a higher level.

Football is different to any other sport your child plays - and thus the same rules can't be applied to the education of a young footballer.

Playing for results only at youth level encourages everything wrong from a coach and team, you have seen it, the big kids up front, best kids always play, lesser kids get little time particularly against fierce 'rival clubs' (as if the kids care whether you dislike the other coach or club or not), rigid positional allocation of youngsters too early compromising the learning environment, all expedient decisions designed to support the club and coaches' desire for 'success' as measured by trophies, when the only success should be the development of every single player, the type of football being taught and thus played by the kids, and their experience of the game in total.

The hurdle we have to overcome in Australia is to understand that the finest football produces the finest players, and the finest results. "*Winning with style*" I call it, which produces teams and players who can play football beautifully with technique and skill, and overcome an opponent through football expertise not effort and hard tackling, which in the modern game is never enough anymore.

Not just winning, for there is no honour in playing ugly football just for the result, it is an affront to good players, nor just stylish football, because the ultimate aim is to better your opponent, and anyway we are Australian and thus serial winners, *but to combine the two*.

Get rid of the Parents - the scourge of the game and kids' enjoyment of it, and before you get upset, remember I am one!

The fact is that the experience of a vast majority of young players in this country is far too restricted by all the elements surrounding football, one of the key ones being the parents.

The coaches restrict what the players are allowed to do or try, the clubs allow coaches to play defensive or ugly football which is anti-development because they haven't thought through the issues surrounding styles of play, believing incorrectly it is a matter only for the coaches themselves, and many parents are a disgrace to the game and of basic sporting principles.

And one of the critical factors in us moving forward as a football culture is to understand that aside from encouragement and support, *a parents' involvement in actual training and games is better kept to a minimum*, the optimal amount being only to encourage.

I have lost count of the number of times I have seen a game between juniors, notice it is called a game not a fight or World Cup Final, and the parents are screaming at the players, predominantly telling them what not to do and particularly chastising mistakes, screaming at the coach and opponents, the ref (who often is just a kid), and anyone within earshot.

Make no mistake, this is not only against the principles of fair play and the basic ethics kids should be learning whilst they develop their game, but it is against the interest of every player there.

At most top class professional clubs overseas, parents are not allowed anywhere near youth training sessions, and have no part to play in games, and that's the way it should be.

I'll give you a personal example to illustrate.

My son was playing for his school in midfield, and being well in front the coach shuffled the line-up and put an attacker in goal and my son in central defence. This is excellent coaching at age 10, as long as everyone understands this is in the interests of development of the players, and inevitably leads to mistakes as the kids learn.

Great, that's what they are there for, but not surprisingly an opponent came forward, was not closed down by my son, and scored. No problem there, great learning opportunity for the kid.

Until, that is, the father of the (stand-in) goalkeeper walked over and started to chastise my son for poor defending!

Having not played there, and being unsuited to the role, *a mistake was inevitable and an opportunity to then work on in training during the week - that is called development.*

What is anti development is to berate *any child* for making a mistake, particularly if it is not your own child!

I couldn't believe my eyes, and asked the gent if he had a coaching license? No. Had he played internationally then? No. Had he been a celebrated defender, since he was in the midst of trying to make a point on this principal? No. Then what exactly was he doing speaking to someone else's child?

I stressed that he was not *the* coach, even if he was a coach, and thus had no role to play in the game except to encourage. If he had an issue with the coach for any reason, the time to make this clear was during the week before or after training according to the coach or club's policy, and to stay out of the way during games.

After the match my discussion to my child was well done, you played great, did your best which is all that's ever asked of you, and you tried to adapt to being a defender and played a few beautiful passes forward, controlled the ball always, and never kicked it away, as I have taught you to.

In short I encouraged him, because he had done everything right, and his mistake was a chance to develop, but the actions of one parent can go a long way towards ruining the positive experience a child has of the game.

Now, this is about as close to absolutely disgraceful parent behaviour as one can see in junior football, and I would encourage every junior club to have policies on parent behaviour which clearly explain at season's start that there are times to discuss issues with their child during the week or over the phone; that during training and games the coach has control and parents are not to interfere; that any negative comments against any referees or opponents are not acceptable; and that the entire club environment is designed with the child's welfare in mind, not the parent.

Here is some reading material on this critical issue holding Australian football youngsters back:

[Referees, Coaches and Parents: Role Models for Life](#)

[For Coaches and parents: Cheshire \(Connecticut\) Soccer Club's Dos and Don'ts](#)

[Keys to Peak Parental Performance](#)

Coaches - be sure to take all your parents aside for a coffee and explain the above right at the outset, and explain very clearly in particular, that mistakes from youth players are not just a fact of life, but actually a necessary step on the road to improvement and enjoyment, since trying new things and extending themselves is a vital ingredient of play and requires constant experimentation, therefore no parent at any time, ever, is to yell at any child to 'kick the ball' out of defence, or berate them for a missed pass.

"Good try" is the only call allowed after a mistake, not only because (you will inform them) that *you are teaching the kids to play football properly* and therefore they will be challenged technically, but that in fact to play good football requires the kids to do things which are against the natural instincts of the parents.

IMPORTANT POINT: Playing or bringing the ball out of defence, and teaching the kids to always control and protect the ball before passing instead of taking the scattergun option to get it away from the defensive zone, runs contrary to the thoughts of every *non-football parent*, particularly those who have played the kick and rush sports. It makes much more sense to most onlookers the to get the ball out of defence as quickly as possible, and "play down the other end".

It won't escape many that this is the common catchphrase of English football and creates the kick and run, anti jogo bonito football which has held Australia back for decades, but *coaches must recognise that in youth football the principals of controlling the play, keeping possession and playing out from defence actually run contrary to the natural instincts of most of the parents, and must be dealt with systematically.*

Explain that if a child brings the ball down and has no option to pass, it is a great opportunity to learn how to protect and shield the ball, how to dribble it into space away from opposing legs to wait for (and hopefully for the better players to create) a pass to a team-mate, and these are the basic principles upon which possession football is based. Here the kids' team-mates also have an opportunity to learn how to get themselves open for a pass, the principles of support and combination play, and staying involved in the game.

Remember that when a kid in defence kicks the ball down the other end, all that is learnt is how to give the ball away, something our youngsters are far too familiar with at all levels.

Style of Play - Clubs should have a style of play which dictates how your club plays the game, to guide all the new and old coaches as to what to teach, how to grade, and which allows the kids to come through a club knowing everything they need for the next level above.

Explain in full that your club or team plays football based on possession, uses short passing which is high percentage rather than long which is low, focuses on the technical competency of players not their physical qualities and grades the best players at the top not the best athletes, and that your team(s) always play the ball out from defence and use patience in the build-up phase, because this is not only much more enjoyable to play and to watch, but produces better football and thus better footballers who are comfortable on the ball.

Explain also that you discourage overly physical and aggressive play, and that in fact players who like to lump others in the air are frowned upon as not possessing a cultured view of the game, and that those who try to injure other players disrespect the beauty of the game and are most often making up for a lack of technical ability, understanding as you do that *the less technique a player has, the more he must compensate through physicality ie. running, tackling, straining.*

In this way everyone at your club should be completely aware of what constitutes 'good football'. Systems of play will differ between each club, which gives us diversity, but within a club every coach must be on the same wavelength, and the basic principles of possession football, of patience, not always wanting to send the ball forward too early or at the first chance without any thought or strategy as to what will happen to the ball, of support for a team-mate with the ball, of spacing off over the field to keep width and depth to make your team harder to defend against, all apply whatever tactical system you prefer.

Ban the High Ball and Make Goalkeepers Throw the Ball Not Kick - I would prefer if every youth coach or club banned passes over shoulder height under the age of at least twelve, to teach our kids to play properly, and at any rate every single coach can easily make this a principle of their coaching philosophy, to make the kids learn how to play themselves out of any situation – this is what they'll need to know as adults.

No pass should ever be made without a clear option and solution in mind – no more hopeful lumps forward – rather the kids lose the ball and learn, then give it away. *The ball is precious, protect it jealously when you play football!*

Another step forward would be for points to be awarded, or prizes, on the basis of which youth team plays the best football, not whether they win or lose, and in any event, I am constantly urging clubs/schools/coaches to aim for their entity to become known as the best footballing one in the area/district/State/country.

This is a worthy aim.

Referees - Australia is seeking to develop a new generation of referees and given the abuse they cop at many levels, has an issue retaining them, and youth football is precisely where these young refs should learn their trade.

Every association, club and coach must ensure that these kids are able to ref a game without any negative input from any of the participants or onlookers. Often the A-League is a poor example here, as are most professional leagues around the world because of the added pressure on results, *but that doesn't stop us creating and enforcing our own culture of what constitutes good sportsmanship at youth level, and abuse of refs is out.*

If you witness an example of a referee being abused this season, be sure to report it immediately to your club or association.

Refs are a vital ingredient in our game, are fallible like all of us, and deserve to be able to expect an environment free of abuse and criticism, particularly when it comes to youth football, when our kids are supposed to be learning about respect for opponents and participants, win or lose.

That's all for now, if you took the time to read all of this, thank you for your patience.

Good luck to everyone for the coming season, for those lucky enough to be at a club playing small sided games, well done, you will realise the benefits in time and to all, as always, *enjoy your football.*

Remember, that's the ultimate outcome.