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LET THE COACH AND THE REAL GAME BE THE TEACHER

Can we really 'let the game be the teacher'? In this article, Roger Wilkinson argues that it is not sufficient to simply let children play.

In the 50s and 60s at grass roots level coaching wasn't particularly great but it didn't really matter because the learning environment simply known as "street football" was, for young kids, uniquely successful in developing their skills to a high level especially in working class Britain.

Kids played in the



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streets and just as importantly in the playgrounds and in the UK we look back with nostalgia at those days that produced great individual players like Mathews, Finney, Baxter, Best, Charlton, Johnstone, Osgood, Law, Marsh, Currie and even more recently Gazza ,and wish that it could be the same now. We know that in those days **the game really was the teacher.**

As modern day coaches we have to look past the nostalgia and really try to identify and learn from the simple yet sophisticated street development system that was such a “conveyor belt” of exciting talent. (Oh yes, I forgot Milburn, Bell, Broadbent, Mannion, Allchurch, Gray, Huddle and a few more).

It’s not enough to say “Let the game be the teacher” without asking **how** and **why** was the game the teacher. More specifically;

Why was this learning process so successful and what were the key teaching elements that produced so many great individuals.

The key teaching elements were;

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1. In the street the young players were playing in tight areas so they either learnt to be comfortable on the ball, despite having little time or space, or they wouldn't be able to "get in to the game" they would often end up as the goalkeeper!!

The incentive to make themselves skillful was immense, skill equaled quality time on the ball. Lack of skill meant next to no time on the ball. So skill was everything!

2. In the playground the playing area was bigger **but** there were usually 3 or 4 other games going on involving kids from other classes. This in itself was a great learning system because the players "eyes" had to be up and alert in case they ran in to somebody. There weren't many collisions. The young players were forced to develop terrific awareness.

3. In both situations street or playground none of the players wore "bibs" **yet** all the players knew who **was on their team**. The environment that demanded this recognition of team mates and opponents in such a random way developed great speed in the vision to

decision making skills
of the players .

4. The young player in
the "street football
"era often **trained 3
times a day.**

a. **Before
school** , sometimes
for almost an hour,
before school
assembly. (No waiting
to be dropped off at
school by car in those
days, most kids ran to
school or if "very rich"
biked!).

b. **At lunch
time** if they ate their
school lunch quickly it
allowed the players
30/40 minutes game
time before afternoon
lessons .Often these
games had the same
sides and were a follow
on from the mornings
game.

c. **After school**
the players went home
and played in the
streets, or if by
themselves ,practiced
against a wall till their
mates joined them.
They played before
mum and dad got
home from work and
before mum had
cooked tea. If they
were lucky they were
allowed out after tea
to play until bed time!!
There was nothing
much else to do.

This informal system
resulted in young
players having
hundreds of touches
on the ball on a daily
basis.

5. The games were played on hard concrete, asphalt or cobble stone pitches, if you fell down it really hurt ,so nobody wanted to fall down!! To be able to play successfully in this unforgiving environment the young players **had** to develop extended balancing abilities on and off the ball.

6. In the street / playground game the young player was **always involved in the game** either **on the ball** ,where they could show what they could do, or, **off the ball** ,where they were indirectly learning the **signals** of the game according to the actions of their team mates. (You cannot learn those signals standing in lines or playing un-related fun games)

7. The “street players” were always **practicing** a version of **the real game** either in a small sided version or sometimes (such was the popularity) an over sized version BUT they always practiced playing the same real game. This allowed the skill transfer system to move through the memory system from short to medium to long term memory in a continuous way. The skills became permanent.

8. The games were really **competitive**, it was important to win , the players played hard and in the main fair. Arguments stopped playing time so they were few and far between. The competitiveness was developed by the kids themselves NOT super imposed by parents and/or coaches!!

However like most things in life "street football" wasn't perfect and but we can still learn from its imperfections.

What we can learn as coaches from what street football did NOT develop in the young players.

The missing elements were

1. The players often, if they acquired basic skills or techniques that worked for them in the early stages of their development, tended to rely on those habits rather than introducing new skills in to their game. This mainly showed itself in many of players only being able to kick, control and dribble the ball with one foot.

2. The tactical and positional aspects of the street game was usually deficient and disorganized and only if they were lucky enough to go on to play at pro or good

semi-pro level would they be introduced to, and instructed in these aspects of the game. There was no coach over viewing and assessing the performance and imparting tactical assistance.

So what are the key points we take out of the street football analysis to add to our own coaching methodology?

In my view "street football" shows coaches the following fundamental coaching methods that would make the work of the modern day development coach far more effective;

1. We can learn from street football that the size of our practice areas is vitally important in helping young players to develop realistic skills based on making the right decisions according to the time and space at their disposal. We can manipulate the size of our playing areas and the number of players to increase or decrease the difficulty in our practices in order to improve the skill development of our players.

The better the players become the tighter you make the areas to practice in. Remember **great players can play in the tight!!**

2. In group situations, even when learning new skills, always involve other players moving in the same area at the same time, so that the **young player starts to learn vision and awareness from day 1** of their soccer education.

For 5 and 6 yr you may start with just 2 players in a 20m x 20m grid in their foundation skill development work.

Increasing the numbers and/ or decreasing the area size as their skill levels develop.

3. Copy playground chaos learning and occasionally mix in to, practices and warm ups, situations where there **are no bibs**, as identification, this will increase the players visual awareness abilities as a form of over training .Then introduce bibs or team shirts to see if there is an improvement in the quickness of decision making.

4. Street Football showed that **time on the ball** is vital for young players. You as the coach are limited to the improvement you can effect in players in 1 or 2 practices a week. The coach has to enthuse and encourage the young players to play

and practice in their "free time". If they are by themselves they can practice using a rebound wall, or alternatively by getting their parent to help them.

When their mates are around they should be encouraged to set up for themselves informal but competitive games. In this respect, **as part of the club coaching programme, homework is vital.**

5. The difference from the street In today's game is that, relatively speaking, the practice areas are much improved from the "cobblestones" of the past. They are usually grass or a form of artificial turf, which is rightfully, more forgiving of the players for loss of balance!!

So the playing surface does not demand that extra quality in foot work and balance. This means the **coach has the responsibility to continually emphasise the importance of these qualities in their practices.** All really great players have great balance and great footwork before, when and after receiving the ball.

6/7. It should be self evident **that all practices should mirror as closely as**

possible the real game so that the skills learned in the practices are transferable to the real game .

Young players cannot pick up the awareness, the understanding, or the signals of the game if they are standing in line waiting for a for their turn. In fact, in a competitive game, if they stood and watched and only played when it was their turn on the ball the coach would go ballistic and yet that is what the drill system is sub consciously teaching them to do!!!

The game CANNOT be the teacher if each practice is a different fun game , that has little similarity to the real game, and has no transference from one practice to the next.

That is the opposite of what street football created.

Street football teaches us that each session should be a follow on from a previous session and a preparation for the next session.

So it is apparent that the coach must develop a coaching programme rather than just delivering random sessions. To develop the programme **the coach must have a picture in their mind of how**

the game should be played. Like the one the street kid had in his mind!!

It is suggested that the coaching programme could develop in this order;

- a. Playing vision.
- b. Vision into tactics and skills
- c. Tactics and skills adapted to age and ability of players
- d. Sessions developed to coach the relevant tactics and skills in 3/4/5 week blocks
- e. Player and team assessment
- f. Next block of sessions

8. Like the playground version the coach should encourage the natural competitive ingredients of the game as part of the young players development but that competitiveness should then be regulated as a positive part of the game, within the rules and spirit of the game, by the players themselves not by over zealous coaches and parents. Play hard, play to win, play fair.

Good coaches will know that it's just as important to produce good people as well as good players.

9. The coach must motivate the players to practice to improve their weaknesses as well as their strengths. If a player can play equally well off both feet their effect on the game will be greater because it gives them, and their team, a wider skill and tactical range when playing in the match.

10. In fact "street football" shows us how important the GOOD COACH is in developing young players. The coach can use the 'street' skill develop system and enhance it with the tactical understanding that enables the players to use their skills to help the team. It is obvious then, that coaches working at grass roots level have terrific responsibility if we are to kick start the "great player conveyor belt". At that foundation game stage we need coaches who are trained to make sessions realistic, challenging and enjoyable.

A simple motto might be "Under coach and over play" especially with younger players.

LET THE GAME BE THE TEACHER!!!

As the natural learning system of street/ playground football started to disappear national

associations put even more emphasis on developing coach education programmes to fill the gap and produce players for the game. Unfortunately, no matter how well intentioned the authors of those programmes were, the coaching became very prescriptive, over organized and probably over coached. It is interesting that most of the coaching programme developers were ex teachers! So organization and drill learning became more attractive than "chaos learning " situations.

Add to the mix the fact that junior soccer was being run, in the main, by keen, but relatively inexperienced parents, who, to a great extent, mirrored their role models, those hard nosed professional managers they saw every week on television, the game at grassroots level became all about competing and winning rather than development.

However recently, especially in the UK, there has been a recognition of the inadequacy of that system if only from the fact that Britain is producing very few world class individualistic players and haven't won a major tournament

since 1966!!

There is a call for change .“Let the game be the teacher” is a convenient slogan but the answer is certainly not that simple. “Street football” has disappeared and the replacement games presented as the “new” learning game are often just simplified “fun” relay type activities that bear no relationship to the real game.

One National Association has as part of their, “let the Game be a teacher” practices, a game where the children stand on a line, run forward and kick a football in to a square and then jog back to their line-then another group of kids run forward from their line and kick the ball back and run back to their line-then the first group repeat the feat and so on!!

I would question the relevance of that “fun” practice. What is that game teaching the players that is transferable to the real game? To stand still , run forward and kick the ball to an opponent, and then run back to where you came from!!

It has been recognized that the game at grassroots level was developing in to an over coached, direct

play, win at all costs, the ends justify the means culture fuelled by over-zealous parents and coaches. I would suggest that our version of "let the game be the teacher" however well intentioned is not the answer.

More than ever the game needs a coordinated coaching programme allied to an exciting playing style with a recognition that its at the grassroots development stage you need the best coaching and the best coaches.

If we maybe considered the slogan "Let good coaching be the teacher" based on the street football "chaos " learning system.

If we developed a playing philosophy based on individualism, player mobility, and clever tactical understanding.

If the coaches adopted a coaching methodology that **maximised the lessons of "street football"** and delivered sessions that **encouraged individualism and decision making in realistic playing situations** where the young players were always **in sessions where they "practiced playing "the real game** and

the coach imparted key points that were relevant, positive and motivating.

Then we would have the best of all worlds and we could say **“Let the Game and the Coach be the Teacher”**

Roger Wilkinson is co director with John Cartwright and currently Coaching Co-Ordinator for Premier Skills a company based in the UK .

Premier Skills is a coach education company which has recently launched the “Practice Playing” methodology based on “street football” They conduct work shops in the UK, USA, Norway, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand . They have also recently launched www.thesoccerplanner.com an online coaching diary/ planning resource for coaches at all levels.

Roger is the author of the successful “One on One Coaching for Parent and Child” , “Advanced One on One Coaching for Parent and Child” and “Coaching the Youth Team “ DVD’s

The company is soon to release the book “Football for the Brave” by John Cartwright which a superb insight and analysis of football

and coaching.