



Small is Best:

‘Why the 4v4 format is the answer for youth football’

After Newport County coach Dave Murphy visited Manchester United to see their Academy’s 4v4 project, he witnessed a format and philosophy that he knew would take youth development at grass roots to a higher level. In this article we look at both the Manchester United 4v4 project and the influence it is having lower down the ladder.

By: Paul Cooper

4v4 is not a new concept; the Dutch have been playing it since the mid 1980s. The godfather of football in Holland, the great, late Rinus Michels said: “Good coaches use the basic criteria of street football for their vision of grass roots development; they realise that these elements produce a natural process which gives the most efficient training for young kids.” And there we have it, logical thinking from a coach who understands that because of modern society, street football is no more and that ‘the children’s game’ must be continued in some form if we are really serious about development. Some twenty years later in the UK we are still wrestling with the dilemma, “Is it the proper game?”

The 4v4 pilot scheme for the U9s at Manchester United’s Academy was studied in depth by Rick Fenoglio from the Department of Exercise and Sport Science, Manchester

Metropolitan University. Rick published his results of his research in both the FA’s Insight magazine and in a major report he compiled. In the report Rick highlights the underlying philosophy of the pilot study.

‘The scheme was to re-create, as much as possible, a match day environment that was more child and player-centered. This guiding concept led the developers of the scheme to reflect upon football environments where the young player was free to learn, practice and develop their football skills without being shackled by the imposed structures, expectations, attentions and scrutiny of significant others. The environments, which were considered to provide these qualities the most, were the playgrounds, parks, streets, back alleys, beaches and barrios around the world - areas where the world’s greatest players first learned their skills. At this time, Manchester United FC were re-considering their approach to the development of young players and were concerned that the overall gap in skill levels between English players and European players (and, increasingly, the rest of the world) was widening. If true, this is an interesting situation given that one of the primary aims of the initiation of Football Academies in England was the development and enhancement of technical skills. The 4 v 4 games and format of the pilot scheme were selected because it was felt that they would give players more opportunities to practice and develop their game-related skills in a less pressurized, but

nonetheless challenging game format. The environment of the pilot scheme was developed from a desire to produce a more child-centered and ethical learning environment.’ A 4v4 Pilot Scheme for U9 Academy Football Players – Rick Fenoglio

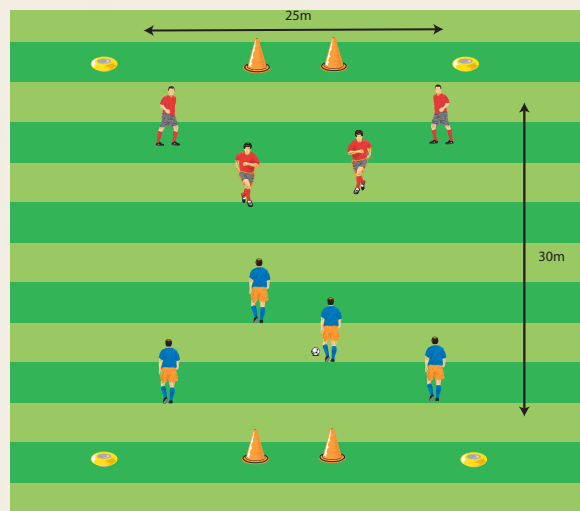
There is something deeper here, and not just in a football sense. Remember childhood today is very different from when I was growing up in the 1960s, kids are hardly allowed out to play now. They don’t climb trees, ride bikes and build dens like they used to.

Sue Palmer, child expert and writer puts it a little more succinctly; “Play-unstructured, free range, loosely supervised play – is the birthright of every child. For the next generation to grow up healthy, balanced and able to benefit from their education, we must ensure that children once again go out to play.” If we are always going to tell children what to do and treat them like mini adult professionals at eight and nine, when are they ever going to think for themselves? In terms of technique and problem solving skills, I feel there is a definite link between the England team’s inability to cope in last summers World Cup and what is happening on the fields of England at the youngest age levels in both the grass roots and professional game. Fear is everywhere in football in this country, fear of losing, fear of change, fear that the next coach knows more than you and the fear of giving control on the pitch to the kids.

The games

United picked four different 4v4 games (8 minutes each) and the players rotate so that they play all the games. On average each child played about six games.

Two Goal Game



4v4

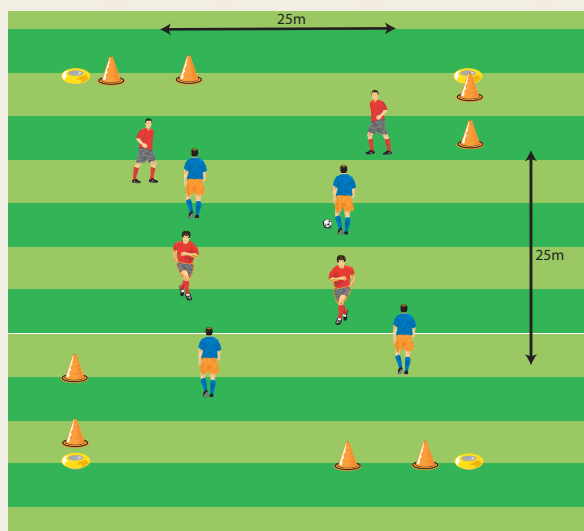
Pitch size: 30x25m

Goals: 2 large traffic cones at each end

No keepers, dribble or pass the ball on

“Play – unstructured, free range, loosely supervised play – is the birthright of every child.”

Four Goal Game



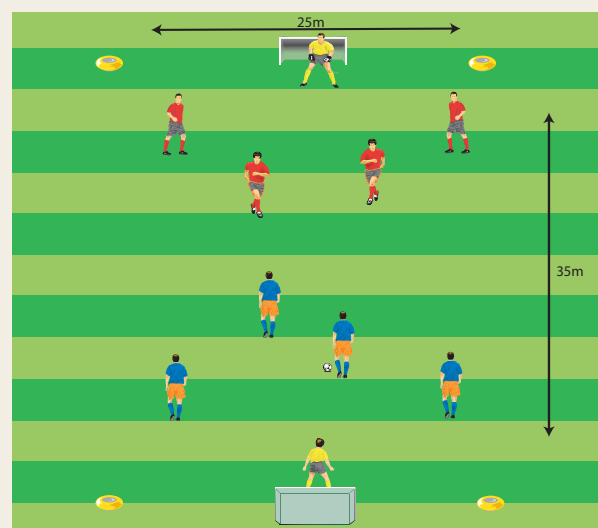
4v4

Pitch size: 25x25

Goals: 2 goals at each end (4 goals in total) by the corners, using traffic cones

Dribble or pass the ball on

Goalkeeper Game



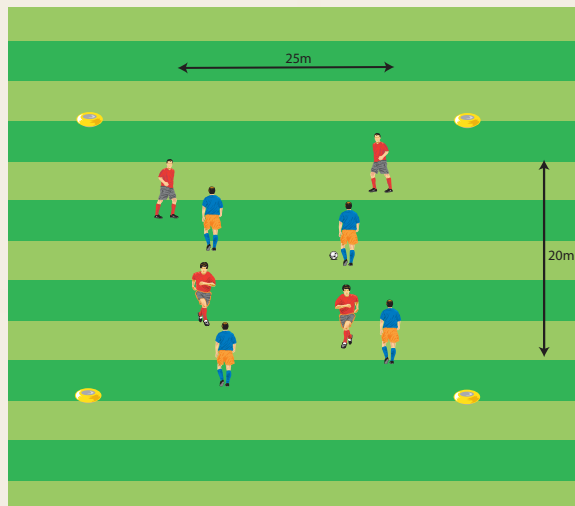
4v4 + keepers

Pitch size: 35 x 25m

Goals: Junior size goals 18x6 feet

Normal throw ins and corners

Line Ball



4v4

Pitch Size: 25x20

Goals: The length of the line at each end
(to score go over the line and put your foot on the ball)

Dribble or pass the ball on.

Each game is 8 minutes long and very importantly the children referee their own games. This allows them to take responsibility, communicate with the opposition and sort out any problems. This helps with their social development skills. The coaches also take a back seat and just encourage. This allows children to express themselves more and problem solve and think for themselves.

The study looked at game data as well as interviews with players, coaches and parents.

The results were nothing short of staggering. Compared to the 8v8 game the data was as follows for the 4v4 games:

Number of passes – increase of 135%

Scoring attempts – increase of 260%

Number of goals scored – increase of 500%

Number of 1v1 encounters – increase of 225%

Number of dribbling skills (tricks) – increase of 280%

From the interviews conducted, 80% were positive regarding the 4v4 pilot scheme and 20% were negative.

The consensus was that the children became a lot more skillful playing the 4v4 games. The games were varied which also brought out different skills. It was also not so obvious who was a defender and who was an attacker as the children became more complete footballers.

The Future

Despite the overwhelming statistical evidence and the positive

feedback, the Academy clubs decided to stick with the traditional 8v8 format. Manchester United continue to play 4v4 at under 9s. I personally feel this is an opportunity missed, but I do understand that the 8v8 game is a good format on the road to playing 11v11, but at what age do you bring it in?

Our football culture is one of passion and commitment, two very important factors in both successful players and teams, and if those attributes were the only important ones, as a nation we would probably win a few trophies, however skill and decision-making are also involved and if you take away the chance to develop that further at eight and nine years old, you are always going to be playing catch up.

Dave Murphy

You meet many coaches in youth football, some make no impact, but every now and then you meet someone who re-kindles your enthusiasm in the struggle to put development first in youth football. Just over the bridge in South Wales is such a coach. He started by taking his son for a kick about down the local park and before long he had 20 kids playing, such is his infectious enthusiasm to involve everyone.

The Dutch 4v4 format is a central part of Dave's coaching philosophy at Newport County and after a trip to see the 4v4 scheme in action at Manchester United; I met Dave on a coaching course. Although I convert myself to 4v4s I had only ever used the games in training sessions and had not thought of playing a number of different games as a 'match day' substitute.

It makes so much sense. The mini soccer leagues play 7v7 and very often at clubs it is impossible to play all the kids. A number of different 4v4 games are the answer. The benefits at grass roots level are obvious:

- It is a very flexible format, pitches can be marked out with cones and you can have as many different 4v4 games as you have kids.
- Everyone plays
- Many touches of the ball
- The different games bring out different skills
- Many opportunities for everyone to score goals
- Lots of problem solving opportunities without coaches talking you through the game
- Kids are not just a defender or an attacker but a footballer and have a much better all round understanding of the game
- You don't even need to play another club, you can make it in-house if you have enough kids

Actually the list is endless.





I knew it would be a good afternoon but I had not anticipated just how many touches each child had and when left to their own devices how quickly they adapted to the games and how advanced the children's problem solving skills were.

Street football

As I mentioned earlier, the Dutch addressed the decline in street football, 'the children's game' over twenty years ago but I feel we have never properly done that in the UK. In a world where children can no longer play outside wit-

"I must admit that football in the streets gave us a great sense of freedom and liberty."

Newport County come to town

Dave and twenty of Newport County's U9s and 10s as well as coaches and parents traveled to Cirencester Town one Saturday afternoon in September for a 4v4 fun day. The U9s and U10s were mixed up and four pitches were laid out, the same as at Manchester United, (all except the goalkeeper game which was changed to a most interesting game Dave got from some Real Madrid coaches, which involves two goals back to back in the middle of the pitch. More of that in the next issue)

hout supervision, parents and coaches have taken over. And the competitive drive adults bring to the game means youngsters no longer have time to fall in love with football, to play for fun and thus truly to develop their skills.

Maybe, if the 4v4 message can spread, we can rear a generation of footballers who play with creativity and without fear, who solve their own problems on the pitch, and who enjoy the game. Footballers who play to win, instead of losing through fear.



If you have any comment to make about this article or you are interested in the 4v4 format please email Paul Cooper: gill_cooper@tiscali.co.uk