

Kids, football & failure

GIVE US BACK OUR GAME



"If we want to breed winning footballers again, we need to give the game back to the children"

Paul Cooper, from the 'Give us back our game' campaign, writes for Voiceoffootball about how children are experiencing the beautiful game.

In 2006, when the Three Lions failed at the World Cup again and England was once more gripped by the inevitable heart-searching, analysis and post mortems, did anyone remember the words Sir Bobby Charlton spoke after the 1966 triumph: *"The World Cup wasn't won on the playing fields of England. It was won on the streets."* It was street football that created those World Cup icons – kids with their backsides hanging out of their shorts, kicking a bald tennis ball about with their mates for hours on end, learning how to play and how to love it.

Speaking as a youth football coach for twelve years, unless we can revive street football, or something very like it, I believe we can kiss goodbye to world supremacy in the beautiful game, because football's not beautiful for our kids any more: it's ugly. In a world where children can no longer play outside without supervision, parents and coaches have taken over, and the competitive drive adults bring to the game means that youngsters no longer have time to fall in love with football, to play for fun and thus to truly develop their skills.

The late, great Alex Stock, manager of QPR, Luton and Fulham got it spot on when he said about the modern youth game: *"Everywhere I go there are coaches. Schoolmasters telling young boys not to do this and that and generally scaring the life out of the poor little devils. Junior clubs playing with sweepers and one and half men up front, no wingers, four across the middle. They are frightened to death of losing, even at their tender age, and it makes me cry."*

Those street-bred footballers Bobby Charlton spoke about had fewer distractions than modern children. They weren't kept holed up indoors by parents terrified by traffic and the possibility of predatory 'strangers'. Kids in those days not only played football but climbed trees, rode their bikes, built dens and explored their neighbourhood. The self-confidence, social competence and risk-taking skills these experiences bred made them better able to enjoy their play.

In street football, every child in the neighbourhood was involved. You might have the embarrassment of being the last to be picked but at least you played, and if the game was too one-sided and lost its fun, 'Billy the dribbling wizard' swapped with 'two left feet Larry' to make it even. Children also learnt to play in different positions. You might be in goal one day and playing as a striker the next. One thing for certain was that you got a complete football education.

You also played against older kids, and if you couldn't match them physically, you had to use new technical skills and insight in order to compete. Children learnt from each other.

Today's children learn from the grown-ups. Without the freedom of the streets, their early experiences of football are organised, supervised and coached. They have no real say in what happens, and they don't have time to develop and learn. Just as there isn't time any more for families to make a proper meal and sit around the dining table together, there's no time for coaches to waste developing children at football.

Development is long term and takes years of patience, but in today's 'win at all costs' society coaches need success now, so

they pick the biggest kids and get a giant to whack the ball up field as hard as possible to an even bigger giant who wallops the ball in the back of the net. 10-0, we are the business and the other team is c**p!

Watching the youngest age groups play today is like watching a Premier League for tots. Seven-year-olds with David Beckham haircuts and the latest Adidas boots pull on their 'Dudley Tyre Care' sponsored shirts and raintops sponsored by 'Boothroyd, Cripps and Pottinger, Family Solicitors'. They totter up and down the pitch in front of a full house of mums, dads, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, second cousins and all.

This enthusiastic gathering can become very rowdy and explodes into sheer ecstasy when their team scores, but rarely applauds either goals or skilful football from the opposition. What do the children learn from all this? Not that football's a beautiful game, that's for sure. They learn you're a hero if you win and go home with the Man of the Match trophy and a Mars bar, your dad telling you how one day you'll play for England. But if you lose you're a villain – and it's a frosty car ride home with your dad analysing every mistake.

I once watched an under 9s game where one team had the coach and assistant coach standing by each goalpost continually barking orders to the keeper. Meanwhile, a parent on each touchline ran up and down shouting other instructions. When they won a corner at the other end their coach hollered "Wait" and trundled the entire length of the field for a minute's discussion, cupped hand in the ear of the poor flustered corner-taker who knocked his corner kick straight out.

The next game I saw was an under 8s. The team came out for a 30 minute warm-up which would have exhausted a crack team of US Navy Seals, involving running around the pitch, shuttle runs, sit ups and press ups with not a ball in sight. The substitutes weren't used as, according to the coach, the game was too close, and the kids were all kept in the changing room for 30 minutes after the game for a debrief. (The coaches had their initials sewn onto the front of their tracksuits. One was WR and the other ST. Use your imagination as to the missing letters.)

There's also a growing problem with violence among parental supporters. Last season I attended a league meeting where an official from the Wiltshire FA warned clubs about the disintegration of standards. The previous season 15 youth games across the county had to be abandoned because of problems on the touchline. In one summer tournament we attended, a referee got his arm broken in the scrum. The FA have been doing their best by issuing codes of conducts and courses for clubs, but it's very difficult to change a culture with bits of paper.

If we want to breed winning footballers again, we need to give the game back to the children. In 21st century, traffic-infested Britain, street football may be a thing of the past, but at least we could try to provide something equivalent in a safe, fun environment at children's clubs.

It's all a matter of backing off as coaches and letting the children play. In small-sided games, such as 4v4, the game can be the teacher and different types of goals and features can put emphasis on different skills and insight. To the children it is still just a game and most importantly fun. They need to learn to solve their own football problems on the pitch, to work it out for themselves before we give them the solution.

Parents, coaches and kids need to work together. Grassroots clubs should have pre-season meetings with the parents and children to discuss rules and agreements so that everyone understands what their contribution is. In the club I coach at we've had fantastic results using this philosophy.

We've found that by putting the children first and making it their game, they've not only had great fun and developed better as people, but they've also developed a passion for football. What surprised us most was we also saw almost instant results on the pitch. The kids expressed themselves, had no fear of failure (no one shouts at them) and they played with imagination and skill.

We've also seen improvement in the less naturally gifted children who would have been thrown on the scrap heap years ago

by many ruthless coaches. It's as if the kids are back on the street again, everyone playing with smiles on their faces, watched by beaming parents and coaches.

Maybe, if this message can spread, we could 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.

Give the children back their game

- Football for all. (We can't all be professional footballers but if every child who plays develops a love of the game we create the coaches, administrators and football parents of the future.)
- Give the children the opportunity to play in different positions (abilities change as children develop and today's fullback may be tomorrow's striker).
- Give young children the chance to play lots of small-sided games especially.
- Always use the ball even in warm ups: every touch of that ball is important.
- Don't be too quick to give children solutions: let them work it out for themselves.
- Development should come before winning at youth level.