



Highcliffe Hawks Youth Football Club – Child Centred Competition

It's NOT Non-Competitive: It's Child-Centred Competition - by Nick Levett FA Talent Identification Manager.

I think it's time to clarify, clear up, eradicate and move on from some of the nonsense I keep reading about some of The FA's plans for youth football.

Let's get this very clear from the outset: The FA is not making youth football non-competitive. The game is a competition; the battle between two teams to see who wins over the period of time the game goes on for, whether you are 7 or 57, the game is still about seeing if my team can beat your team. End of story. Hope that's now clear.

Non-competitive implies everything is a friendly, like the game doesn't matter. That's simply not the case. All games matter to the kids, for some adults it matters too much and therein lies a lot of the problems.

What the plans are looking at are about making flexible competition, where children can still experience the importance of winning and losing, still feel the highs, the lows, the exhilaration and depression that all get associated with the game we know and love. However, this is about making sure that they experience a children's approach to competition, not an adult's approach. We have taken the adult model, league tables, three points and goal difference, and imposed this on young people. What we have found from listening to young people is that it has increased pressure and is a reason they leave the game. I can't find any academic research that says pushing children down an over-competitive route is good for enjoyment or development. None. All I can find is the opposite, such as the writings of Lynn Kidman.

I have heard from managers about children being sick before the game because they are so nervous about losing a game in a relegation battle and children not turning up or wanting to go on because they were so scared at doing something silly and making a mistake and they didn't want the repercussions. The repercussions from adults after a kid makes a mistake?! I heard one manager about Christmas time last year say to his U11 team that today was a "must-win game"! Nothing is must-win when you are 11. Please, give it a rest!

However, children have also told us they like seeing their progress and they like to see themselves get better, something they like from leagues. We simply have to find the balance between the two that enables development and enjoyment from a young person's perspective.

So, the plan is this; Give leagues the flexibility to organise football for the children in the primary school age group which involves periods of development matches, time to learn the game, interspersed with periods of competitions, where they might play for a trophy or two...And this flexibility is open to the league. For example, one of the issues we have found from looking at youth football around the country is in most leagues there are only two maybe three teams that

might win the league and they invariably know this before the season even starts! The teams that aren't great know they are never going to win anything either, therefore might monitor development and progress in a different way - losing by less goals, sneaking a draw here and there, social and player outcomes etc.

What we are saying to the leagues is this - can you find a better way that encourages and promotes more opportunity for more teams to be competitive? So, in a division of 12 teams, have 6-8 weeks playing development matches, putting into practice what you have been learning and then some form of competition, but be clever and smart with this. Organise a little competition for the top six teams to play for a trophy and the same for the bottom six, where the teams in the bottom six now have a realistic chance of winning something, of feeling good for this, or feeling down because you lost in the final. Something the kids might otherwise never have felt. Use the scores from the blocks of development matches to get teams in the right groups. No team wants to have games that are too easy or be beaten by loads every week so there is a crucial role still in the administrators making sure teams get pitted evenly against others.

One guy from a league said he had 32 teams at the U10 age group, could he organise a World Cup format with 8 groups of four, little round robins and then go through to a knockout and a final? Absolutely! Do things that are going to capture the attention of the kids. Just don't stick them in one league for 8 months a year!

When this has been discussed and understood by people on my travels they have started to get it, to understand why. Not listening to hearsay, fourth-hand information or making up their own spin on something because it suits them. I met the KNVB (Dutch FA) Technical Director, a UEFA Grassroots Panel member, a month ago and discussed these with him - he was hugely impressed with this modern approach and asked if I would meet with his team to discuss further what we are planning. England leading something in football and the Dutch liking the ideas of!? There's a first!

This isn't saying what we have doing has been wrong for years, we are saying this might be a great way of engaging more kids in the game we love, for longer, in a more modern way. We have to move away from the win-at-all-costs culture in this country, we quite simply have to. It is ruining the game for everyone, stifling development and hindering enjoyment. Winning is important, but somewhere down the list behind a number of other more important factors.

Striving to win? Absolutely important. The score? Not as important.

The game is evolving rapidly; new types of player and no longer just giant athletes, new types of football and no longer just 4-4-2, new formats of the game and no longer just 11v11.

"The difficulty lies not in new ideas but in escaping the old ones" (John Maynard Keynes). And he was a smart man.