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‘We have a way of educating players, it’s not about winning’

In the second part of our series on the future of football, The Times examines the Dutch blueprint, where caring for kids comes first



Streets ahead: traditionally, Brazilian youngsters learnt to play football in the favelas but today each youth player is given a specific technical programme to follow. The absence of a league system for youngsters makes fun and development the key goals for players used to training for four hours a day (Andre Camara)

Rick Broadbent

Bloody kids. Having planted Steve McClaren in the vegetable plot and beaten his preening players with their Burberry manbags, the finger of blame is being pointed at the youth of today. But if the vista is a mishmash of pushy parents and glum-faced children, there is a blueprint for a happier future across the North Sea. The future’s bright, the future’s Oranje.

The Dutch have long been seen as world leaders when it comes to youth development. “We have special eyes,” Peter Jeltema, the head of youth coaching at FC Groningen, said. They have to. “There are far better players in England and Spain, so we have to be creative and invest in our children.”

This is no empty platitude. In the mid-1980s, the father of total football, Rinus Michels, penned his thoughts on youth football. One key belief was that kids’ football should not replicate the adult game. Another was that it should be enjoyable, with everyone involved and lots of chances to score. Now, across the Netherlands, his ideas are used. At the age of 5, games are four-a-side. At 9 they progress to seven-a-side on half-sized pitches. Finally, at 13, they play 11-a-side on regulation pitches. “If you have kids playing football then give them a ball,” Rob de Leede, of the KNVB, the Dutch FA, said. “We don’t want people doing drills and waiting for 15 minutes for their turn.”

The concept is to nurture rather than neuter on the back of sad dads living out managerial fantasies. Every game ends with a penalty shoot-out. Good idea, that.

The Michels model was revised by Louis van Gaal, now reportedly coveting the job of England head coach, in 2001. He spoke of the pyramid structure and getting the amateur and professional games working together. Academies were rated on a four-star basis, a youth coaching diploma was introduced, clubs were licensed depending on the number of development teams they had. “Fewer children now play football in the streets,” the Masterplan For Youth Football stated. “It has therefore become a major priority of the KNVB and the clubs to take a greater responsibility for youth development.”

That it has done this is reflected at the top end by successive victories in the European Under-21 Championship and at the bottom by a man with a clipboard in North Brabant. He is watching a game at OJC Rosmalen, an amateur club with 71 teams, and is noting down the length of time each child plays. There are no substitutes because they are seen as pointless at this age. It is about enthusing the kids, rather than leaving the worst players on the sidelines. If it sounds a little right-on for the touchline tyrants, it is worth noting the dropout rate in England is huge by comparison. “We have the biggest dropout rate in mid-teens in Europe,” Paul Cooper, of the England-based dutchUK football school, said. “That’s because the kids’ game here is for adults.” Cooper set up the dutchUK school with Bert-Jan Heijmans, who had moved to the North East after playing and coaching in the Netherlands. He cites the structure of Dutch football as the key to its success. He says there are 2,200 independent leagues in England, whereas the KNVB coordinates everything. “Here we have the FA, the Premiership, the Football League, county FAs, kids’ leagues, it’s all over the place,” he said.

The land is flat but the people are rounded in the Netherlands. Clubs do not throw kids on the scrapheap if they do not make the grade. If Groningen decide a youth player is not good enough, the club are duty-bound by their agreement with the KNVB to find him an amateur one. The whole ethos is on caring for the children. “We have a way of educating players,” Jeltema said. “It’s not all about winning.” The land is flat and so are the pitches. “In Groningen we have 18 artificial pitches,” Jeltema said. “It means we can play football all year.”

One of the key differences between England and the Netherlands is historic. In the Netherlands, there is very little schools sport and, as a result, their clubs are well developed. It means each age group has several teams selected according to ability. “I went to a club and saw a boy playing in the under-6 team,” Cooper said. “His dad was in the seconds and his grandad was in the tenth team. They have true community clubs.”

They also have an age group and technical co-ordinator and more qualified coaches, with parents having little influence. Then there is a much finer line between the professional and amateur games, something welcomed in the Van Gaal Masterplan. “A player can go from non-league and become a professional,” Arnold Muhren, a former Holland international and later an Ajax youth coach, said.

Perhaps the key strand of the Masterplan is enjoyment. Gordon Strachan is one who believes they have got that right. “People say kids are getting too much football but that’s not right,” the Celtic manager said. “They’re getting too much pressurised football.”

The KNVB document on the Michels-inspired 4 v 4, now practised at Manchester United, is illuminating. One of the roles of the youth coach is “constructing basic game forms to compensate the negative influences of modern society”. It defines skills under the acronym TIC — Technical (motorical, physical) characteristic, Insight (awareness), Communication. The emphasis is on small games to improve all the above by giving players lots of touches and

repetition. TIC is a variation on Ajax's famed TIPS system, standing for Technique, Insight, Personality and Speed.

It is not rocket science, but the idea that winning is not everything is anathema to the English. Holland's under-21 titles came under the stewardship of Foppe de Haan, who revealed that the English strengths of passion and desire remain much envied. "We cannot teach them to be killers," he once said of Dutch fledgelings. Maybe not, but neither do they kill them off.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/football/article2951184.ece>

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