



**"4v4 ... where soccer players play."**



Manchester United have implemented 4v4 soccer into their Academy program (4v4 pilot scheme), they believe that this format and philosophy will take youth development at grass roots to a higher level. In this article we look at the Manchester United 4v4 project and the influence it can have lower down the ladder.

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 soccer for their vision of grass roots development; they realize 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 soccer is no more and that 'the children's game' must be continued in some form if we are really serious about development.

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 soccer environments where the young player was free to learn, practice and develop their soccer 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 alleyways, 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 soccer sense. Remember childhood today is very different from way back when, 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?

Fear is everywhere in soccer 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.

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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%*

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 soccer players.

The benefits of 4v4

- 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 soccer player and have a much better all round understanding of the game

MAYBE, IF THE 4V4 MESSAGE CAN SPREAD, WE CAN REAR A GENERATION OF SOCCER PLAYERS WHO PLAY WITH CREATIVITY AND WITHOUT FEAR, WHO SOLVE THEIR OWN PROBLEMS ON THE PITCH, AND WHO ENJOY THE GAME. SOCCER PLAYERS WHO PLAY TO WIN, INSTEAD OF LOSING THROUGH FEAR.