



Tony Whelan,

Manchester United Assistant Academy Manager:



Creating environm

It is never dull when interviewing Tony Whelan, Manchester United's Assistant Academy Manager U9s -U16s. For much of the interview he is out of his chair, either to show me a fun heading game they play with the kids or demonstrating a Cruyff turn. I thought at one stage he would take me out into the car park for a quick game of three and in, such is his burning passion for the beautiful game. When it comes to charisma it is abundantly clear that somewhere in his past he fell into a swimming pool, filled with the stuff. Tony's football philosophy is linked with his past and you can easily picture him kicking a ball around and laughing with his friends at school and in the streets around Manchester where he lived as a boy.

By: Paul Cooper





the right ent for children

Tony developed his love for the game through playing in the streets and schools football. Most days he played out in the streets with his mates but on a Sunday they would head down to the local park where they played from dawn till dusk and were joined by their dads for an hour or two before pub opening time. The only thing that interrupted these marathon sessions was tea-time or if a sibling came looking for you with a message to run an errand for your mum. That was the time to hide until the danger had passed and it was back to the footie.

There was also football in the school yard. You could not bring a ball into school but you could hire one, so all the kids would pool their threepenny bits, knock on the teacher's door, pay for the ball and a game would begin. A typical day at school would be a session before the bell rang more football at lunch and break-time, followed by an hour after school before the school gates were shut. Then there was the school team. This was by and large run by the kids with the 'better players' often picking the teams and organising the positions. The teachers did not interfere and certainly

did not shout and bark orders from the sideline. Tony calls them "Good men in Wellingtons" who cared about the kids and had a love for the game.

Tony recalls that the teachers would occasionally give them little nuggets of advice. "I played inside forward and one of the teachers said, you don't need to worry about coming all the way back into defence when we lose the ball, the half way line will do." It was the equivalent of telling the Count of Monte Cristo, a speed boat was waiting to take him off the island. It meant freedom for Tony who was an attack minded player wanting to show off his skills. These little pearls of wisdom stuck in Tony's mind and when he took up coaching years later he wanted to be able to give the children the same sense of freedom that he had enjoyed playing as boy.

"How much fun can I give the kids'?"

Tony Whelan

Creating the right environment

Tony took his inspiration from those experiences in the street and schools football. He argues that children need their own space where they can play and make their own choices. They must be able to make mistakes as this is a huge part of the learning process. Most successful people in life have made mistakes and it is learning from those mistakes that have made them the success they are. The important issue is creating the right environment where children can be creative, have fun and learn. Tony says they have a motto at the club. Before each session the coaches ask themselves: "How much fun can I give the kids?"

If that simple phrase was adopted by all coaches the game would change for ever and I can imagine how many little sets of ears would prick up on hearing those words. From Falmouth to Felixstowe and from Hereford to Hull, tens of thousands of children have left the game because the F word (fun) was sadly missing from their football experience.

Since Tony's childhood the cult of The Coach, 'the fountain of all knowledge', has dominated the children's game. Who would ever think to ask a child what they thought? No, all those hours on courses and writing out session plans must mean something? But the over regimentation and lack of fun is gradually squeezing the life out of the game for our children and spontaneous play is something that happened in another life time.

Empower the kids

Tony reflects on a trip they once made with the under 10s to Andorra which echoed his experience at school when it was the children that made the decisions. "When we arrived we gave kids the responsibility of sorting out their own sleeping arrangements, we let them pick the team, the system and the captain." Talking to the kids they found that there were some decisions the young players still wanted the coaches to make, such as awarding the 'man of the match'. The children were also encouraged to take ownership of the game so, for example, if they were 2-1 up at half time, what would be their plan for the second half, how would they play? Tony explained that they are often astonished at what children can do if they are given the freedom to think for themselves. It is creating this kind of environment that is essential for long term development.

The stool philosophy

On a recent trip to watch a Manchester United Academy U9s and U10s games day programme I was amazed to see so many smiling children. Whenever you were approached by a child he would fix you with a huge grin, look you in the eye and shake your hand. I thought I had walked in on the set of a remake of 'Goodbye Mr.Chips' with so many happy, polite kids.

The football is wonderful. It is played with a smile and a swagger, kids being creative and having fun. One of the United coaches, Tom Statham is sitting on his treasured African stool. Apparently it went in for repair recently and he used a low slung fishing chair as a short term replacement which made him look as if was waiting for a prize winning Carp rather than watching some of the country's finest young footballing talents.

He gets some funny looks from the opposition coaches and parents but Tony explains that it sends a strong message to the kids

that the coach is only an observer when they play. This is their game and a chance to play with freedom and make their own decisions. The coaches are like the teachers back in Tony's school, "Good men in Wellingtons", only the Wellingtons have been replaced by Nike boots.



"Play is often talked about as if it v

But for children play is serious learning

Fred R

The adult game v the children's game

I watched the Manchester United Academy U10s play a game where the opposition were generally bigger than the United boys. The opposition played well but they played more of an adult game and passed it quickly, one and two touch. They did not dribble nearly as much as the United Academy lads.



were a relief from serious learning.

g. Play is really the work of childhood."

Rogers

So when do you get the chance to be creative and run with the ball and take player's on? As United Academy coach Tom Statham says, "How are you going to create the next Cristiano Ronaldo or the next Messi if you don't give them the freedom to run at people, take risks and be creative. If you can't do it at nine and ten when can you?" Tom adds, "They are going through the player and the ball stage, the other stuff comes later. At the end of the day we are trying to develop players for the Champions League."

The other notable difference was that the opposition team had a number of subs where as Manchester United had a game on the next pitch for the substitutes and players not involve in the main game. They seemed to be having so much fun that it was difficult to tell which game they enjoyed being in the most. Tom Statham explained that they want all their kids to play and not have subs.

Recently an opposition team travelled several hours to play United and had their eight starting players and five subs. Tom suggested they play two 7v7 games instead of one 8v8 game. United lent them one of their keepers, which meant that all of the opposition and all of the United kids played every minute. It is this common sense approach and putting the children first that is helping United lead the way in developing young footballers in this country.

The club have also pioneered playing 4v4 at U9s with the players refereeing their own games. They have done this for five years now with excellent results and have encouraged some other clubs such as Watford to take up the same format.

Parental involvement

Tony feels that adults need to re-think what being a sports parent means. He doesn't think that parents are enjoying the experience on the touch line. "If a young keeper lets in a soft goal and he is lying in the mud, laugh with him." He adds, "Football, like life is about making loads of mistakes, but that is how you learn. We also learnt by experimenting, watching each other and our football idols.

Parents should learn to enjoy the journey with their children by being a support to them and taking them to training and matches, but never interfering with their game." There is a growing problem in today's society with parents trying to live their lives through their children. But childhood is all too brief and something you can never bring back. Tony has backed the grass-roots campaign Give Us Back Our Game and his warning for football in general should be heeded by all adults involved in the game.

"For a young boy, playing football should be one of the most wonderful experiences of his life, but sadly many young players don't find it an enjoyable or pleasurable activity because too many adults (parents/coaches) are getting in the way by over coaching, shouting, screaming and raving, and having a 'win at all costs' philosophy. Unless we adults (who have the power) get our act together on behalf of our young players, we will not have any football at all because young boys simply won't want to play - and who could blame them!"

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