



EQUAL PLAYING TIME IN GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

Are your Players receiving equal opportunities to play?

The match result should never be the most important thing in grassroots football at the development stage, but unfortunately, this is still the case in many clubs across the country. Equal playing time can be an issue for many players and parents.

Most notably, some coaches are known for only starting their 'favoured players' and giving the 'lesser ability' players minimal playing time. This approach can be very frustrating as a parent, and often, questions are asked about the ethos of a club before considering moving to another club.

However, just because they are not starting every game doesn't necessarily mean they are not getting equal playing time – in England, Youth/Grassroots football has a roll-on/roll-off substitute system. In effect, this should make it a lot easier for coaches to equally share playing time throughout the season. Most Leagues have at least both home & away fixtures, so coaches should utilise this effectively.

Creating a fun and safe environment is also important to building a child's success and development while playing football. Building relationships in a grassroots football team can be difficult, especially for new players coming into an already established group. But the culture within a team (which comes from the coach, the philosophy and the team's players) is a key factor in terms of enjoyment and development for every player.

So, when considering 'Equal Playing Time', there are **two important things** to remember:

1. Why Children Play

They play because it is **FUN**, but the fun is in the playing. It is most fun for those who play the most and not so much fun if the child is denied an opportunity to play in matches, whether that's in a formal league or a friendly.

2. The Coach's Purpose/Philosophy

Does the coach use methods that are player-centred? Do all players have the same opportunity to play in matches?

The role of a coach is fundamentally to provide an opportunity for children to have a positive experience whilst learning life skills through our Beautiful Game. Many of the challenges involved in ensuring 'equal playing time' debate can be lessened by the development of a club or coach ethos/philosophy which clearly defines the club/coach position and intentions. These can be further underpinned by using codes of conduct which communicate club/coach philosophy in terms of allocation of playing time and can manage expectations for how players get game time.

Here are **ten reasons why** many clubs/leagues and local FA's consider that equal playing time is the **best strategy** for player development.

1) Maximises long-term player development

Without access to playing time, quality coaching or experiencing critical game situations (such as playing against special teams or cup semis/finals), players who started playing late or are temporarily behind their peers in terms of physical or mental development are less likely to improve. These same players may actually have more long-term potential if provided with the same opportunities to develop.

2) Development v Winning

Why do some coaches persist in playing their "best" players all the time and ignoring the needs of their new or not-so-skilled players? There is only one answer: they want to win matches so much that they dare not take a risk with a player who might make a mistake and cost the team a goal. If a coach is focused on providing equal playing time, they can't be equally focused on the score and winning. The coach can have this in his/her peripheral vision, but instead should be more focused on game/skill development. The Scotton Scorchers JFC ethos is about player development, not 'win at all costs'.

3) Fun increases motivation

The number one reason children play sports is to have fun. Enjoying playing football is the main reason children work hard in practice and spend their free time playing and practising on his/her own. Not playing isn't fun and can result in children who are less motivated to not improve, have less fun and who may choose to quit. Knowing that they can play alongside their friends in their team will increase the motivation of every player, irrespective of age or ability.

4) Social/Psychological well-being of the players

What is the effect on the self-esteem of a player who starts as a substitute and only plays a couple of minutes every week? Are they adversely affected by being openly acknowledged as less able in terms of their social standing amongst their friends and peers? As coaches, we have a duty to consider the effect that our actions have on the child's development in a wider sense and to be accountable for the part we play in it. Not every player will follow a team or watch football on TV, but will often look forward to their Saturday/Sunday football, as this can have a positive impact on the child's self-esteem.

5) Builds confidence and resilience

From a small child to the world's greatest athlete, those who are confident are confident because they have attempted a skill or taken thousands of shots, tried and failed many times in a supported environment, then tried again and got it right. This is a valuable life lesson, and only by exposure to opportunity can the child benefit. Emphasis on player development can and often does build self-confidence even for the quietest of children.

6) Enhances Teamwork

When players feel that everyone is an important part of the team and is treated fairly, they are more likely to focus on working together. When teamwork improves, players are more likely to make friends, have fun during training and matches, and the team will have a better chance of experiencing success. Teamwork is a valuable life skill, and it's through football that we can encourage children to understand what being a team player is. The FA Respect Policy is an important tool in helping players (as well as parents) to understand the importance of how we behave around others and what is appropriate behaviour and what is not. Another important life skill!

7) Players develop at different ages

How do we know which players aged 7, 10, or 12 will be the best players aged 18? The reality is, we have no idea who has the potential to be the 'special player'. Children who excel now won't necessarily still be shining stars four years from now. All players develop at their own pace. Coaches should allow them to make mistakes and learn the game, without a dependence on the final score. It also may make sense to *rotate positions* so that the players have varied game positional experience, which adds to their ever-growing game understanding. It also stops us from stereotyping player attributes to positions, e.g., a player is tall, so they might be a centre back, or someone who is quick, so let's play him/her in a wide position. This fails to account for the fact that an early developer might be tall for their age, but eventually, at age 18 are not tall comparatively and are stuck with their formative football experience in a position which does not eventually suit them. Again, rotating positions can often help a child's understanding of the whole game – for example, what is a Goalkeeper? A defender who can use their hands, etc

It's a well-known statistic that only 0.1% of boys who play football from a young age will go on to make an Elite team.

8) Improve relationships between coaches and parents

Do you have that 'Team around your Team'?

One of the most common causes of disagreements between coaches and parents is the subject of playing time. By providing players with equal opportunities to play, coaches set the stage for more positive relationships with parents. Parents want to see their child in the game, and when they don't, it hurts. Lack of playing time can cause frustration directed at coaches, and children on the car ride home. This generally leads to players dropping out of the team and parents looking for other activities for their child to try.

9) Minimise Player Drop-Out

Sadly, a high percentage of children who play football stop playing the game before they get to the age of 15. A recent study found the top five reasons for the high dropout rate were:

- Lack of playing time
- Overemphasis on winning
- Other activities are more interesting
- Lack of fun
- Coaching/adult behaviours

10) Minimise fatigue

When teams fail to rotate players, the top players potentially could be fatigued by the end of the game, and the lesser-skilled players could be cold, stiff and have less game experience. Interestingly in the professional game, academies are governed by rules and regulations of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), in which clubs are obliged to evidence that all squad members must play at least 50% of games. This is a clear recognition of the need to allow the development of players holistically in their own time. The job of the clubs and the coaches is to provide the developmental platform. In the grassroots game, some clubs have adopted the following policy: Coaches and Managers of Under 6 to Under 11 teams must ensure that all players receive equal playing time for each and every game. The only exception is where a player is injured or does not want to play for whatever reason. Coaches and Managers of Under 12 to Under 16 teams must ensure that all players receive equal playing time over the entire season. These age groups differ from the younger players because, in some games, due to the superiority of the opposition, one or two players may struggle to compete, which could lead to a loss of confidence or, worse still, a risk of injury. This may cause the coach to give greater playing time to some players for these games, with the time being made up for the others against weaker opposition. What is most important is that whatever policy or philosophy a coach or a club adopts, it is clear, transparent and consistent so that all involved understand their roles and responsibilities.

Summary

Every child who wants to play football does so because it's about having fun, learning life skills, building friendships and developing as both footballers and as people. Yes, some ultimately want to play at the highest level – and will often work hard to achieve that. But for 99.9% of children, winning is not the most important!

Remember, football is For All – irrespective of ability, age, gender or culture.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, it's even more important that children have the opportunity to play, and even though the 'new normal' looks slightly different, it should not deter coaches from giving every child the positive experience that football can bring!

The FA is changing the pathway to the more talented players to achieve dreams, but for most, their dream is simply just to play and feel like Kane or Haaland, Bronze or Daly!

Thank you for being an important part of a child's life – often you do not always see or realise the impact you have on them throughout their football pathway. But you will see in time what great players and people they become.

Just give them their chance to play!

Remember – at Scotton Scorchers JFC, every player matters because it's more than just football!