



From the desk of the Technical Director – Number 2 – 2 October 2009

This week a look at how young players in Brazil perfect their techniques on the street and through small sided games.

Much has been said about Football Federation Australia's new curriculum and the major emphasis on small sided games.

The following is taken from an article I wrote for a national newspaper in England as part of a series of pieces by various authors on how the English game could be improved.

My contribution was based on research and observations I had made during different spells in Brazil, including several at Cruzeiro, one of Brazil's most famous clubs. (article begins below)

Only when Brazilian kids reach around 14 years of age does anyone start talking to them about team shape and tactics. Until then it's all about technique, tricks, shooting, dribbling and spontaneity. What's the use of making blind-side runs if they cannot effortlessly control the ball, pass or shoot?

Amid the poor areas, Brazilian youngsters play football on the streets, on waste ground, concrete; any available surface. On the coast, the beaches are a further football haven, with fields and goals for as far as the eye can see. Most of the kids have no boots, so they play barefoot, further promoting an ability to strike the ball properly.

Players are brought up from a very early age playing Futsal, five-a-side on small basketball-sized courts, indoors and outdoors, in a range of conditions, with a smaller, heavier ball that does not bounce. It tends to stick to the foot, enhancing confidence. You name any Brazilian international star and he will have played Futsal.

The ability of Futsal players to control the ball in tight areas and to shoot from all angles is incredible. Even more enlightening is the fact that parents and coaches urge kids to show their magic, without fear of retribution for making mistakes. There are no nonsensical shouts of "Get stuck in, get it up there" or "Get rid of it".

One Brazilian coach told me that the art of coaching youngsters was to try to reproduce street football on the field. At my coaching sessions, I set up small-sided games and, as much as possible, let the young players do what they like doing most - playing. In essence, I orchestrate an environment to resemble street football. I point out strongly that I have no problem with them making mistakes and I insist that they be confident and try things.

Football is a dance, I tell them, and the partner is the ball. In an effort to emulate the Brazilian kids, I often have games in which the players are told to produce all the

tricks and magic they can. In some cases I insist that they take on a player without fail.

It works. The kids love it and their confidence level soars. It's amazing how often I hear kids tell me that their club coaches don't want them to dribble or "do anything fancy".

I have worked with and alongside Brazilian coaches, some former national players, who run sessions at Cruzeiro in which they say hardly a word.

They have technique practices in which players serve the ball to their partners with underarm throws so that a control technique can be constantly repeated, more often than not without opposition.

They set up small-sided games and opposed practices that mimic what happens in a match and let the players get on with it. Occasionally they step in and make a point, then step out. I've seen 90-minute sessions in which coaches have hardly said a word. I remember particularly, a first-team squad game, 14 v 14, half a field, two-touch, in which the ability of players to retain possession was mind-boggling.

As the Brazilian coaches point out, in street football, Futsal and other unsupervised games, players have to make their own decisions, learn from their mistakes and find solutions to problems. Street football, with children of all ages and sizes, requires decision-making; Futsal requires a different set of decisions, as does beach football. Players have to adjust constantly.

By carrying this maxim to club academies, the Brazilians set up sessions that, while organised and well-disciplined, are conditioned in such a way that players still have to make their own decisions, an ability that is carried right up to games at the highest levels. That, combined with outstanding technique and the ability to produce the unexpected, is difficult to stop.

I remember a trip on a bus to a tournament with a small-town club that is affiliated to Cruzeiro. There were three teams on the bus, under-14s, 16s and 18s. It took 14 hours to get there and our accommodation turned out to be a run-down school in an even more run-down neighbourhood.

There were no beds. We had to clean up the classrooms and sleep on mattresses, if you can call them that. It was never less than 90 degrees, day or night. The choice at bedtime was simple: open the windows and welcome in every bug on the planet or close them and bake.

We walked two miles past stray dogs, goats, chickens and cats for a communal breakfast. Back at the school, they changed and then, carrying water and balls walked another mile to play. Those youngsters, and the hundreds of others taking part in the event, might have been living in dirty rooms, but the smiles on their faces when they took to the field were as wide as a palace.

They played every game with unbridled joy, knocking the ball around, dribbling, taking pride in the way they showed off their repertoire. Win or lose, they walked back to the school, took turns in the cold showers, bedded down in the sauna-like conditions and then got up and started all over the next day.