

# CREATIVE TEENS

THE EPPP and the YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PHASE 12-16



**Dan Micciche**, FA National Technical Lead U12-16s and National Coach (U16s Assistant) takes a look at the reasons why creativity declines during a player's early teenage years, outlining some key strategies that ensure individuality and expression continue throughout a young player's development.

For some time now, young English players have been criticised for their apparent technical inferiority when compared to players hailing from other nations, particularly those from South America and Southern Europe.

In response, some coaches in this country have focused almost solely on attempting to develop young players' technique. The intention of this approach may appear sound, but in many cases the attempts at developing 'pure' technique have been prioritised at the expense of other crucial aspects of player development.

Much of the problem arises from the practice type selected. Often coaches deliver repetitive drill-like activities which place the coach at the centre of all the decision-making with the content of the session lacking in game relevance or problem solving.

The concern associated with this approach is that the precise nature of technique - the how - is the centre of all focus with little regards for the why, when and where. Without this applied understanding and connection to the real game the techniques are almost redundant.

One of the age categories where this technique-first approach has been most prominent is in the 5-11 age groups. Resultantly, over the last few years The FA have made significant investment into coach development in this age category to ensure that young players introduction to the game isn't rigid and formulaic.

At this age, children by nature are enthusiastic, imaginative and creative and The FA Youth Award has made significant strides in helping develop coaches' understanding of how to harness and develop these characteristics in the context of the game.

However, as players move into the 12-16 phase a worrying decline in creativity is observed. Players natural response to a greater level of command style and results-oriented



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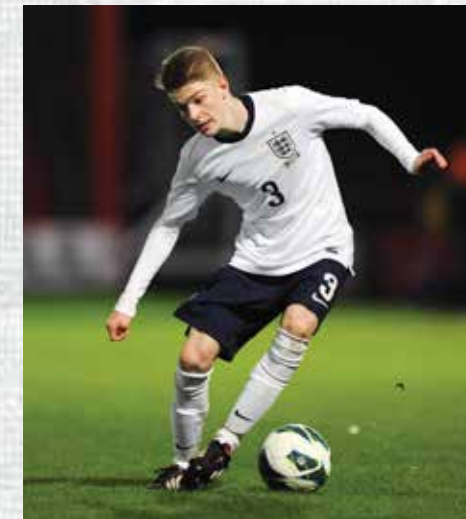
coaching can be to withdraw creatively. With coaches showing a reduced tolerance to making mistakes and experimenting, especially when it comes to the 'real live game', players simply follow suit.

Some of the changes in coach behaviour in the U12-U16 age groups can be traced to a desire to manage in the style of a senior first- team as the format of the game moves to 11v 11. Additionally, there can be significant pressure on some coaches to produce players capable of playing professional football younger than ever before leading to the prioritisation of the match result above anything else.

Players in these age groups also begin to display an awareness of their long term football future. With assessment and reviews unrelenting it is natural to do whatever is needed to please those making decisions of retain or release. In this context, if the message from the coach is that 'mistakes' are to be avoided, the players are less likely to risk making them which in turn halts any form of experimentation.

Add the peer pressure and conformity issues associated with adolescence to this picture, and you have some very strong motives towards playing it safe. Players can also seek to avoid risks through fear of failure or letting the group down.

It is crucial that coaches don't slip into the trap of thinking that creativity is only something that really young players do. If we want our players to develop their creativity as they get older we should do everything we can to keep the players experimenting and trying new things out for as long as possible. This is not easy given the pressures on today's youth development programmes which are now improving with clubs adopting the newly instigated professional Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).





Below are a number of key strategies which can help enable creativity and encourage players to link the how, when, why and where in a more expressive and personal way.

For these strategies to be effective the players must be supported by a positive learning environment. Trust, ownership and responsibility are essential components of this environment and coaches need to strive to create it and/or maintain it.

## Minimum interference, maximum impact

It is difficult for players to come up with creative responses to the problems posed by the game if they are over-coached and bombarded with information and instruction. Likewise, imposing too many rules or locking players rigidly into zones or positions stifles individuality and expression.

Coaches should aim for minimum interference during games and training. In this way the coach is free to watch the players with much more of an observant eye ensuring any input or intervention will have much greater impact and relevance.

Research in team sports shows that more tactical instructions can lead to a narrower breadth of attention, meaning players miss creative options in the field of vision, whereas fewer tactical instructions widen the breadth of attention.

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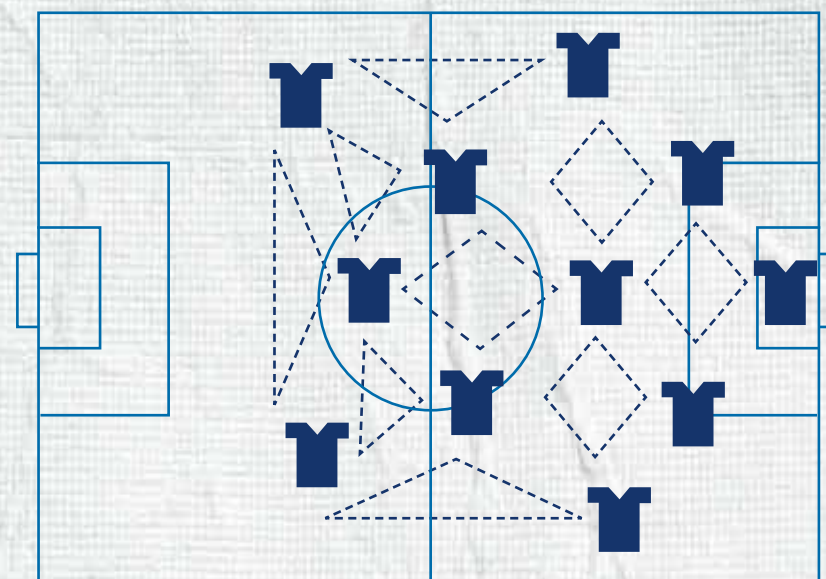
## Hold your nerve

Human beings, by nature, are creative creatures. In unfamiliar circumstances we draw on a natural creative ability to select our next action. Using our library of past experience and knowledge, we observe the current context and create a 'best guess list' of appropriate options for what to do next. Fascinatingly, all this can happen in the blink of an eye.

It's the same for young players when they are playing the game. For this creative decision-making process to work effectively they must be provided with the freedom to express themselves and to think in more imaginative ways. If, during practice and games, things appear to be deviating from the 'plan' coaches must hold their nerve and refrain from restricting or limiting the boundaries of what the players may achieve.

Setting relevant challenges which encourage players to be creative can help uncover hidden talents and empowers players to discover possibilities not just probabilities. For example, encouraging central midfield players to take on players in central areas in order to break the lines and disrupt the opposition's organisation, rather than simply passing the ball.

Coaches can support this process by recognising and praising intent when players are trying new things even if they do not always work.



## Encourage expressive fluid football

Developing a formation which fits the individual needs and characteristics of your players can help them develop their natural abilities and in turn allow greater opportunities for creativity.

Within any system, it is important to develop an expressive style of 'fluid' football with relevant interchange of positions and movement into spaces between defences and lines of defenders.

Above are a number of patterns that will maximise the chances of players forming good triangles and diamonds and in turn may help develop appropriate creativity skills to varying degrees.



## Don't expect instant results

If we are going to challenge the players to leave their comfort zones to learn and grasp new things then we must accept that there will be mistakes along the way.

Trial and error discovery coaching is a powerful way of learning new skills but it also means we shouldn't expect instant results.

Once the coach has come to terms with this it is crucial to educate the parents, players and any other adults of the importance of remaining patient, understanding that short term 'pain' may be followed by long term gain.

## Be brave, play outnumbered

Playing with less players than the opposition in training and matches poses the players with essential tactical challenges when both attacking and defending.

Outnumbered possession practices like 4 vs 6 for instance can help prepare players for dealing with the ball under pressure and playing off their 'instincts'. The coach must understand that success using this method is rare initially, but more often than not this type of challenge will stretch and test the players and will help them in the long term.

Likewise, it is often beneficial for younger age groups to play against older age groups, for example U13 v U15. The challenge is for the younger players to outwit older and earlier maturing players (technically, physically, psychologically and socially). In the same context, older players can be challenged through clever practice design (e.g. 7 v 11).

It is important to stress that this approach requires careful management and a clear awareness of each individual player's maturity in each of the four corners of The FA's Long Term Player Development Model.

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## Big pitch, small pitch

Practising and repeating the same thing in many different ways is essential for long term learning of football. Coaches who consider giving young players up to U16's and beyond the opportunity to play on a variety of different sized pitches help them learn and practise varied skills associated with different time and spaces and therefore speeds of the game.

Young players who only ever get exposed to small pitches will rarely have the opportunity to slow the game down and be more measured in their tactics. Likewise, those who only play on big pitches may not get to practice the more instinctive and quick skills linked to tight, restricted areas.

Try to design your programmes, wherever possible, in a way that enables young players to be exposed to many different learning environments, varying the challenges, the problems and so the levels of creativity.

## Multi-dimensional players

Challenging players to play in any unit and on both sides of the pitch helps develop a 360 degree perspective, feel and vision of the game and helps with physical, psychological, social and technical dexterity on both left and right sides.

Commonly coaches are more willing to rotate player positions in the younger age-groups but this is an approach that can still be encouraged up to a player's U16 year and beyond. Only by enduring with this approach will we develop truly multi-dimensional players, which is becoming a greater demand of the modern game.

"Young players should be exposed to many different learning environments each with different challenges and problems to solve"

## Be true to yourself

The coach's personality and character is one of the most important things to players and parents.

Coaches who try to be someone else when working with young players often revert to their true self when pressure begins to mount, which in turn may affect how willing players are to make mistakes and experiment.

Consistency in behaviour between practice and match day is also required. A coach that is relaxed and jovial in practice but tough in a match is difficult for players to deal with. Coaches should strive to be the same person demonstrating consistent values and beliefs regardless of the event.

Creativity is linked with technical ball-mastery as well as self-discipline and responsibility – it doesn't simply happen. This can apply across many disciplines, such as musicians, who, because of their solid technical base, are able to improvise in the moment.

To nurture creativity it is therefore vital that the coach focuses on individual development over results, encourages taking risks, doesn't punish mistakes, and praises creativity and divergent skills because many other pressures in the environment will work towards conformity and playing it safe.

*This article applies equally to gender – disability – futsal*

**To discuss this article further contact  
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## Be consistent

For some young players the 'test' of the match can prove a stressful and emotional arena to experiment and make mistakes in. Effective management of the match day experience is essential to ensure the players still feel relaxed and free to be creative when required.

This means providing consistent and strategic information as well as taking time-out before making any sweeping statements about individual or team performance, unless of course it is to praise them.

