

Knowing Your Players: Playing Up And Down Age Groups

Written by The Coaching Manual



Interview with Manchester United Academy U14 coach Hasney Aljofree about his thoughts of players playing up and down age groups

TCM: What are the reasons for playing a year down?

HASNEY ALJOFREE (HA):

1. If players cannot cope with playing in their own age group
2. If a player is a late developer
3. To protect players
4. To nurture talent
5. For psychological reasons, for example, confidence
6. Find it difficult to adapt to a change of pitch sizes

TCM: Can you give us a few examples?

HA: There are plenty of reasons why a player would play down but mainly so their talent could be nurtured and developed. For example, a player could be a late developer who would find it hard to compete physically when playing with his own age group, however, they could be a very hard-working player who has a lot of technical ability. These types of players could work off a bespoke programme to help guide them in the correct way. With the amazing work ethic and great support from their parents and coaches, These types of players have the opportunity to progress.

TCM: You mentioned a bespoke programme, can you explain to our audience what a bespoke programme includes?

HA: A bespoke programme is a training programme that is created for an individual to aid their development. You could offer players a full-time programme or a part-time programme. A full-time programme is where the players go to school and also train in the daytime and evenings. This programme is exposing the players to more training hours and hopefully preparing them to become professional footballers. The part-time programme is where the players stay and study in their local high schools and train in the evenings and come in on the occasional daytime session. If you are the best player does not mean you will automatically go into the full-time programme. This is a big decision that is made between coaches and the player's parents.

TCM: What are the reasons for playing a year up?

HA:

1. If a player is excelling in their own age group
2. If a player is excelling in their own age group
3. If a player has a vast tactical understanding of the game
4. If a player can handle the physical demands
5. For psychological reasons, for example, confidence

TCM: Can you give us any examples?

HA: There are plenty of examples where a very talented player plays up from their respective age group. Players should demonstrate good technical ability, tactical awareness and it is vital that they are able to compete physically against bigger and stronger players. Another key factor is the pitch sizes. It is important that a coach encourages a player to play up an age group when they can compete in these areas, this will continually challenge players learning and development.

TCM: Do you see any benefit in players training with their own age group but playing games with a different age group?

HA: Yes, I think this is very important. The most important thing is to give the individual some variation in their training. If a player is finding it hard to cope physically with their own age group, they can train with their own age group and play games with the age group below. This will give the player different challenges. In training, they might find it difficult, they will have to cope with that and work out strategies to help them. By playing games with the younger age group will allow them to be a leader, become more creative and hopefully be one of the best players.

TCM: How important is it for the parents to be on board?

HA: Very important, the parents are vital to their child's development. I think that it is vital for the parents to trust their club and the coaches to make the correct decision and decide on the best strategy that will enhance the development of their child. As coaches, it's important to have experienced people to guide them and make better decisions.

TCM: How would you give parents an understanding?

HA: It is very important that coaches have a long-term plan for each player and explain to the parents what the strategies are to help them on their football journey. I believe it is important to hold an induction session at the start of every season that introduces the parents to the programme and the expectations that await them. This will help the parents buy into our methods and hopefully gain an understanding of why there would be certain decisions made. Also, it's important to have players parents meetings throughout the season where you may discuss a players progress and their development. One tip I would give all coaches is to always be truthful to players and parents.