

No Youth, No Future

response to my last column [Possess the ball - a new philosophy](#) about maintaining possession of the football attracted an incredible response, with the article being reproduced on coaching sites in the UK, Canada and Germany as well as here in Australia.

The reaction to the video on Brazilian and American football philosophy was extremely well received, and touched a nerve for people who needed a visual explanation of what they see every weekend in Australia, with parents and coaches screaming at kids who just want to enjoy the game.

Of course as adults in charge of the junior and youth football environment it is our responsibility to allow them to do so, and our agenda to ensure that as they do they also learn the game in the most effective way possible, developing and refining their technique and understanding in an environment free of derision or the adult-generated results phobia, so that they may become the finest senior players their mental and physical capabilities will allow.

As discussed in [Possess the ball - a new philosophy](#), one of the critical areas that determines how a team will learn and play is the club and coaches' philosophy of football, that is, how they wish to see it played.

It is not difficult to develop the proper philosophy, merely sit down and watch the world's best teams play football and you will notice that the Argentines and Brazilians, Barcelona and AC Milan, Mexico and Italy, all have players who are perfectly comfortable on and with the ball, play a game predominantly on the ground that is based entirely on keeping the ball to make the opponent compete defensively, and that the world's finest and most valuable players rely on technique, skill and a football insight developed over decades by exploring their capabilities in games of every kind.

Exploring, that is, without a coach telling them it can't be so.

For how could the imperious Diego Maradona beat four and five defenders at World Cup level if he had not attempted the feat tens of thousands of times growing up, without being told it can't be so?

How could Zinedine Zidane or Johan Cruyff, Pele or Garrincha, Francesco Totti, Kaka or Ronaldinho play passes that no-one else sees, drift into positions that others don't sense, or score wondrous goals from distance or chips from impossible angles if they have not attempted the same thousands of times without the pressure of a coach, or a parent, saying that was the wrong option?

And the more people who develop the right football philosophy, the closer a country moves towards a positive football culture based on a love of the ball and an appreciation of technique and skill, and of beautiful football.

It will take decades to change a national understanding, but for each parent and coach who sees the light, we move forward.

One of my arguments a few years ago in [Revolution not Evolution](#) was that our British heritage has culturally translated across to football, which saw almost all of our major coaching roles go to Brits, particularly English coaches, including key roles such as the National coaching Director, AIS coaching roles and the overwhelming majority of the National Training Centers in the States.

The natural result of this is that we developed a British understanding of the game and this continues today with many of the State academies and almost the entire developmental systems and junior representative coaches in states like WA and Victoria, still being of British background.

I argued that this reliance on an outdated coaching culture and playing philosophy holds us back from moving to a more technical view of the game, and that in fact England is not producing world class coaches because their methodology and understanding lags behind the more successful countries such as France, the Netherlands, Italy and the South American greats.

And while the message is slow to sink in here, the English Premier League (EPL) clubs haven't missed the point which is why they are importing coaches from Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and France as head coaches of their biggest clubs, and as youth directors and skills trainers at the developmental level.

The parallels with Australia are very real and very important, such as how the Socceroos are comfortable playing at a high intensity such as in the EPL but when forced to slow down, keep the ball and construct an attack we struggle for understanding and cohesion. Play stops dead, runs aren't made, and passes miss their mark.

This is one area where Asia will teach us the most and will, hopefully, enforce cultural change at youth level, for it is one thing to carry on in a column about the value of possession, quite a more powerful demonstration when your national team so obviously struggles at times to do so.

The first Asian Cup match against Oman was an excellent example, and this is one of the reasons we needed (and need) a quality coach like Hiddink, to overcome our technical deficiencies with organization and tactical discipline.

Australian football is changing, though not fast enough at the junior club level where most clubs are still intent on playing on pitches that are too big with too many players, resulting in a lack of relationship with the ball and too few opportunities for youngsters to experience every football problem, too much pressure from parents and coaches to not make mistakes, and a results focus at young ages (below 15), which inhibits the learning process of children.

All of this will change in time but the message must be continuously pushed, and recently there have been a few articles of interest to reinforce the arguments discussed in this column over the last few years.

In [Five years to save English football](#), former England international Sir Trevor Brooking discusses the problems with English football and their lack of a technical emphasis.

Another from Brooking, [FA enlist experts to raise skill levels](#), in which he points out that, though England made their first Under 21 semi final for twenty years, they in fact had only 30% of possession against a technically superior Dutch side who won the title (and 11 of the Italian squad who won last year's World Cup had also won a European Under 21 title, proving the correlation to senior success).

[England pay the price for failing to invest in youth development](#) is a particularly excellent insight in to the importance of technique, quoting the dual European under 21 title winning Dutch coach Foppe De Haan, and Hiddink.

[Dutch reform pays dividends](#) discusses the rating system for youth clubs implemented in Dutch football in 2002 by Louis Van Gaal, which assesses the standard of players being produced, not trophies won by the club's junior teams.

This is the future in Australia, and the FFA have had discussions with a group in the Netherlands recommended by the Dutch Football Association (KNVB) to advise on such a system, so that in time every junior club and every youth coach will be ranked on what they produce, not how much they win.

At present, though, Australia are in a situation where the warnings being shouted for decades by Johnny Warren and others, which were never heeded have now come home to roost, and we are trying to qualify for junior World Cups through Asia against players with greater technical ability, who are in most instances better coached than our teams.

So we must turn our focus right down to the earliest levels of the game, to the next generation of junior players and their clubs to build a new and better culture, and to this end we aired a video clip on [The World Game](#) on Sunday 8 July of the Ajax Under 10's.

It includes one of Australia's most promising youngsters, nine-year-old Panos Armenakis wearing the number 14, and though only a couple of minutes long, it nevertheless shows the style of football played, the constant passing on angles on the ground, very few balls in the air, early signs of good positional play and in particular, the keeper rolling the ball out immediately having received it to the nearest defender to start the play from defense.

As you watch you may ask yourself how it is that the style of football being taught impacts on the players' technical development, what they are being asked to do and how this translates to the techniques they must learn to use, and compare what you see against any Under 10 team in this country.

In addition, if anyone has footage of youth football in different countries such as Argentina, Brazil, France, Portugal or Spain, I would love to see them and post them on **The World Game** in the future for all to assess and compare.

This can of course include footage of Aussie youngsters playing great football.

I read in the UEFA Grass Roots Newsletter this month that the Dutch have a saying: No Youth. No Future.

Australia needs desperately to implement a national plan to start developing both.