

## **Grassroots Soccer**

### **UEFA Grassroots Program** **UEFA Grassroots Football Newsletter** [www.uefa.com](http://www.uefa.com)

UEFA, the governing body of European soccer, has taken the initiative to support and encourage grassroots soccer in each of its member associations. Specifically, it is UEFA's role to stimulate interest through promotional activities and materials, to provide expert assistance, facilities and equipment, to organize educational courses and conferences, to create guidelines for grassroots' programs based on best practice; and to generate new ideas which will motivate those working with the players – the instructors and the coordinators.

When dealing with those who play for fun at the grassroots level, the philosophy is clear: The game must be open, safe, everywhere, lively, fair, simple, personal, creative and enjoyable. And, significantly, the game must be viewed as a vehicle for social inclusion and educational development.

Without mass participation and public interest in the game, soccer's popularity will wane. The production of elite players is not the main purpose of grassroots programs. Participation and a love of the game are the core values which underpin a dynamic all-inclusive grassroots soccer environment.

UEFA recognizes the value of grassroots programs as a vehicle for educational, social and sporting development and commit to invest in player development schemes and community projects, in particular those that have a social value.

UEFA's vision of grassroots soccer is that everyone has the opportunity to play, there is no discrimination, safety is a priority, and human relations are more important than results. Other key principles in their philosophy are: action must be simple, dynamic, exciting and rewarding – players come first – relationships, teamwork and skill development are key components.

#### **The Soccer Pyramid:**

at the top level -- Pro Soccer / National Team  
the middle level – Elite Youth Soccer – Pro Academies / National Selection  
at the base, the bottom level – Grassroots Soccer – Children's, Amateur, Leisure, School

The simplicity of the game certainly plays a part in its mass appeal. When street soccer prevailed, children's laughter replaced today's traffic noises, spontaneous small-sided games offered a wonderful learning environment for young players. Fully engrossed in the 'here and now', youngsters would experience games full of imagination and trickery, unbridled joy, friendly competition with no mismatching, self-regulating order and a constant repetition of football skills and moves.

Soccer is not a sport for the elite. It is available for everyone, irrespective of size, shape, color or faith. It is a real sporting democracy, which offers educational values, health benefits, social opportunities and sporting worth. Belonging to a club encourages social integration and inclusion, allows youngsters the opportunity to develop skills, build friendships and enjoy themselves.

Significant benefits include offering healthy alternatives to those who might otherwise be lured into alcohol, tobacco or drug abuse, and it can serve as a solid educational platform for basic social and human values, such as tolerance and respect. In a time when 30 % of the youth are considered to be overweight and 16 % are officially classified as obese, and the forecast is for those numbers to continue to increase, soccer provides a healthy alternative for a healthier well-being.

What is success ? It should not be measured by trophies, but rather by the level of participation, the fun and friendships created in the soccer environment, and the availability of training and playing facilities within walking distance of the children's homes, and the number of parent volunteers who want to join in some capacity.

One of the primary objectives is to avoid subjecting youngsters to 'performance pressure' (from parents and coaches) and to allow them to simply enjoy a game of soccer, win or lose.

In other words, a 'successful' grassroots structure is not just about setting up league and tournament competitions. It's all about pinpointing needs and investing time and effort in catering for those needs in a way that will allow as many people as possible to continue enjoying a game of soccer for as much of their lives as possible.

'Success' is, quite simply, helping people to fall in love with the beautiful game and keeping the flames of affection burning for as long as possible.

Research has shown that many players, particularly in the 13-15 age group, have given up soccer because they were substitutes in their clubs and were given few opportunities to play. Some of their friends would leave with them and never return to the game. Solutions should be based on allowing as many people to play as possible.

The Dutch FA (KNVB) is one of the national associations which encourages parents to become involved in grassroots soccer through their numerous clubs. They stage regular clinics and have a 'KNVB Road Show' which tours the country visiting as many clubs per season as possible. They stage a course consisting of four 3 hour meetings and include a book and a CD-ROM. These parents will act as coaches in the 9-13 age group. They will receive guidance from coordinators at the club level and also from the regional coordinators.

UEFA has agreed to endorse projects to build some 1200 mini pitches and has pledged over 16 million Swiss francs in support of the project. The mini pitches, for free play areas, measure 21 x 13 meters and the maxi pitch measures 40 x 20 meters, with goals 3 x 2 meters, suitable for 4 or 5 a side games. Games are played with or without a keeper, with rolling substitutions, and without referees, but 1 adult present per field.

Street soccer of yesteryear was played by children in the anonymity of the streets. Today, children play in much more organized, structured ways. Street motivation was intrinsic, with a love of the game and a fascination for the ball the dominant reasons for children to participate. If soccer was in the blood before the age of 12, it was there for life. The community encouraged it, the schools promoted it, and the children loved it.

Yesterday's child was self-reliant – the children of today learn to be passive. Spontaneity, independence and free expression can disappear if grassroots coaches organize everything. Free play must be part of the process.

Yesterday's child learned by trial and error, by experimenting, by constant practice. Today the daily practice with the ball is missing, thus the coaches need to find ways to speed up skill acquisition, while still maintaining the emotion of the game in the children's program.

Yesterday's child loved tricks and clever moves and were hungry for imaginative skills and adventurous play. Today we need to create small-sided games and practices which encourage children to find their solutions to the game's problems. This requires creative teaching methods.

Yesterday's child lived in a different world – an imperfect world of modest means and poor infrastructure where, for many, soccer was for entertainment, social interaction and creative expression. Today's child is bombarded by electronic and sporting options.

### **Big Time + Small Time = Great Time**

UEFA has been pegging grassroots projects to major events since the starball match was introduced in 2002 as a prelude to the Finals of the Champions League. The starball match is a 24 hour five-a-side match contested in shifts by around 1,000 young players representing 2 'teams' played on mini pitches dressed up to look like the UEFA Champions League venue. The game is played in the city hosting the Final and the 'small-time' players get to feel a part of the 'big-time' players. This gives players at the base of the pyramid to get a glimpse of life at the top of the pyramid. This is open to boys and girls of all ages.

Goals are plentiful as the game in Istanbul in 2005 proved, where a total of 850 goals were scored and the final score was: 427 to 423 after 24 hours of playing !! Goals were scored at an average of 35.4 per hour or one every 1.74 minutes.

Grassroots development today depends on human resources. Volunteers, grassroots leaders, youth coaches and event organizers are in great demand to provide the support

the game needs. The 'soccer for all' philosophy requires activities which can appeal to the widest possible elements of society. Soccer for the disabled, the homeless, the unemployed, ethnic minorities, and the disadvantaged are just some of the groups which can benefit. Social inclusion and integration have been successfully achieved as a result of many grassroots programs. The cross-culture project of the Danish FA, where one of the club's youth team embraces players of 47 different nationalities, has been an outstanding success in this respect.

Grassroots soccer has a vital role in terms of reducing anti-social behavior patterns such as vandalism, drug abuse, bigotry, sectarianism and racism. It has been noted that sponsors favor programs that support tangible social values. It's more than just sport, it is through sport that social values are promoted.

Grassroots soccer needs to be tailored to meet the needs of its players. This means acquiring more knowledge about children and how they develop. The right equipment needs to be available – even if it is loaned or shared.

It is important to forge links not only with sporting organizations but also with government and local agencies who deal with education, health and welfare, crime, drugs, the homeless, anti-social behavior, rehabilitation programs or refugees – all of whom stand to gain from grassroots soccer program.

The aim is that at least 20 associations should be members of the UEFA Grassroots Charter by the end of 2007. But what happens once you have charter membership? To motivate the associations to achieve more than the basic requirements for entry, we plan to introduce a star system of recognition.

To achieve 1 star, an association must gain membership and satisfy the minimum criteria: basic grassroots structure, grassroots philosophy, and organizing the required number of training programs for players and coaches.

After overcoming the first hurdle, 4 additional stars can be acquired, with 1 star per each of the following: 1) the number of players participating in the programs, 2) the number of girls and women who play, 3) the number of social programs, 4) and the number of promotional activities and events. These can be collected in any order.

To get a 6<sup>th</sup> star, you must have achieved the previous 5 stars, plus: have proof of special investments in the grassroots, high-level training programs for players and coaches, a well-developed infrastructure, 'education through football' schemes, and imaginative promotional activities.

A 7<sup>th</sup> star for those who have achieved the previous 6 stars, plus: an advanced, comprehensive program, both in terms of quality and quantity.

