

**NORTHBRIDGE FC**  
**REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION AND UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS OF**  
**SMALL SIDED GAMES**  
**December 2006**

**Introduction**

In the summer of 2006 a sub-committee of Northbridge FC undertook a comprehensive and multi-faceted study of best practices in player development following critical self-analysis of what “product” Northbridge FC was offering its “customers.”

Our observations were as follows:

- Overall our children have limited technique and lack confidence with the ball at their feet (we play kick and rush)
- We accepted the reality that many children barely touch the ball or get meaningfully involved in a Saturday game (2-3 children seem to dominate most junior games)
- We accepted the reality that most kids rarely score goals (even after playing the game for many years and that this really cannot be much fun particularly if positioned as left back for years)
- We remain concerned with the continued drop-off in numbers as children enter teen years (a lot of effort goes into our juniors for very little long term reward for the Club– see points above)
- There was nothing for our children, parents and coaches to aspire to; or to use as a benchmark as there were no Club policies such as a Club “style of play”.
- There was negligible resourcing from the Club to Players, Coaches & Managers and a low level of coaching accreditation which exacerbated the problems outlined above

**Research Parameters**

Our brief addressed 3 main points of interest;

- 1 What policies should the Club adopt as benchmarks for player development
- 2 Understand how children learn & what their limits are
- 3 Investigate how the best footballing countries train their kids

## **Findings**

### **1. Club Benchmarks and Policies**

The findings of the committee were broad ranging and long-lasting and centred around adopting a “style of play” for the Club to use as a benchmark for its players and coaches. This policy was then agreed to be supported by a Club Mission Statement, Player Development Policy and others similar policies with the Club Style of Play to be “possession” based and have the following attributes:

- Always encourage the passing of the football as opposed to kicking it long;
- Begin our play from the defence, who are encouraged to start our attacks;
- Use a short passing game, with longer passes only when appropriate and as the exception rather than the rule;
- Encourage technique and skill, and reward these throughout our Club;
- Play attacking, entertaining football;
- Focus on the development of young Australian footballers, as opposed to a results based focus;
- Encourage flair, creativity and improvisation on the football pitch;
- Will always play a talented footballer before an athlete

### **2 Research into how children learn and their limits**

The research into youth development clearly identified that Small Sided Games – small numbers of players on small fields - are the best way for our children to learn and play the game and our conclusions were fully supported by educational research. What became obvious was that just as with their academic education, children’s soccer education needs to be progressive.

Our research efforts were greatly assisted by documents obtained through USYouthSoccer (copies of which were provided to the KDSA). The 104 page USYouthSoccer PowerPoint presentation featured research undertaken by the;

- California Youth Soccer Association & USYouthSoccer
- Manchester Metropolitan University & Manchester United
- German Football Association & the Sports University of Cologne

The research was overwhelming in its detail and covered:-

- Mathematical formula
- Observational Analysis( eg the California Youth Soccer Association used Soft Sport Second Look software to collect data between 8v8 & 4v4 games)
- Physiological data
- Biological stages of growth
- Cognitive stages of growth
- Social/Emotional stages of growth
- Common Sense

In addition to the research findings, we also interviewed the following people or attended workshops where the people involved supported SSG for pre-teen players;

- Branko Cullina – Head of Technical Development Soccer NSW
- Paul Bentvelzen – Manager Coerver Coaching
- Osoqar Gonzalez – Coach Coerver Coaching
- Tony Judge – Coach Coerver Coaching
- Any Harper (Sydney FC- now with FFA)
- Craig Foster – Former Socceroo and SBS Football Analyst
- Aime Jacquet – World Cup Winning coach and French Technical Director
- Blaise Fagan – Director of Coaching – KDSA
- Arsenal Soccer Coaches (December 2005)

It was also instructive to note that the KDSA already promotes small-sided games in the Junior and Youth Licence courses that they run as these courses exclusively promote the benefits of small-sided games to player development.

Furthermore, the “official” literature handed out by the KDSA at these courses promotes in its pages the benefits of children playing small-sided games in a stair-step approach to the adult game. E.g. 3v3, 4v4 etc up to age 13 when the children would play the full adult game.

The KDSA also promoted the benefits of SSG in its original Coaching Manual prepared by David Lee.

### **3. *How overseas countries train their kids***

Finally, our confidence in the merits of SSG were cemented with the knowledge that many leading football nations have adopted SSG for pre-teen players including ;

- Brazil
- Holland
- France
- the USA
- Spain
- Sweden
- Hungary
- Portugal
- Norway

## **Implementation**

### **1 Parent & Coach Education**

Following the release of the research findings the Club undertook an extensive consultation program with its members including coaches, managers and parents. At the end of that consultation program and after consultation with the Ku-ring-gai Soccer Association (KDSA) it was determined that the Club should offer a choice of this program in 2006 - playing Small-Sided Games or continuing to play in the interclub Association games program.

The awareness program for small-sided games was an overwhelming success with the majority of parents supporting the vision of Northbridge Soccer Club (NSC).

The KDSA agreed to support the program for ages under 6 and under 7 only on a trial basis although it was the preferred position of Northbridge FC to offer the programme to U8 as well.

During the season the Club the approximate percentage opting for the SSG Academy was :

Under 6	21 teams in SSG and 2 teams in KDSA (94% of players opted for SSG)
Under 7	18 team in SSG and 7 teams in KDSA (85%% of player registrations)

Expressions of interest in the SSG program were received from approximately 75% of all Under 8 registrations

### **2 Interclub Competition & Key Management Criteria**

Due the fact that Northbridge was trialing the programme Saturday SSG games were all intra-club games.

This was managed very effectively by Northbridge FC with all key criteria originally tabled in our Implementation Plan completely satisfied.

#### ***Maximum player numbers per session***

We believe that 100-120 players are the maximum for each session. That would mean that age groups would need to be spilt into 2 sessions – one after the other.

We believe that Bales Park could in fact accommodate more players. We ran 4 sessions each morning.

### ***Capacity to accommodate SSG Playing Fields***

Capacity to accommodate 12 SSG playing fields in one area is necessary. Ground utilization at Bales in the morning sessions was 67% greater than on the old model of 6 a side

We believe that more fields can be set out at this oval

### ***Central Venue***

Ideally the venue should be centrally located to the catchment area of NSC.

Bales Park proved to be ideal

### ***Adequate Parking***

With up to 100 cars per session sufficient parking must be available including allowing for cross-over of sessions. Mitigation strategies will be developed and adopted to minimise local impacts. For example, parents will be encouraged to car pool to minimise traffic and parking issues and players will be asked not to arrive early (if it can be avoided) and to leave as soon as possible.

There were no reported traffic problems

### ***Multiple Access Points/Roads***

A playing field with multiple street accesses is preferred to minimise traffic and issues with neighboring residential areas.

Bales Park satisfied this objective.

### ***Parking close to Venue***

Additionally, sufficient parking should be available in close proximity to the playing fields.

Bales Park satisfied this objective.

### ***Public Toilets***

The facility needs public toilet facilities adjacent to the playing fields

Bales Park satisfied this objective and provided a community hall as well.

## ***Playground***

Ideally, the facility should have a secure children's playground adjacent to the playing fields.

Bales Park satisfied this objective.

### **3 *More efficient use of Playing Fields and less wear & tear***

Using the SSG format Northbridge FC was able to increase by 67% the number of players using Bales Park taking pressure off the need for further grounds in our area.

Additionally, by using portable goalposts the ground was able to withstand usage better than fields with permanent goalposts.

### **4 *Grading of Teams***

All Northbridge FC teams were formed on the basis of school groups and friendships. The Club developed its own grading system for teams which worked very well.

### **5 *Saturday Extended Programme***

The Saturday programme offered players an extended football experience (63 minutes) with an emphasis on technical skill and then games. The Club was also able to put on Coach and Player demonstration of skills, technique and suggestions for training.

#### ***Saturday Age-Group Teams Schedule***

8.00	- 9.05am	Under 6 Group A
9.15	- 10.20am	Under 6 Group B
10.30	- 11.05am	Under 7 Group A
11.15	- 12.20pm	Under 7 Group B

#### ***Saturday Team Schedule***

Warm-up

0-5	minutes	individual ball work/dribbling/both feet/skillet game
5-12	minutes	1v1
12-15	minutes	pre-game preparation/break

## Games

15-28	minutes	game #1
28-31	minutes	break/change fields/teams
31-44	minutes	game #2
44-47	minutes	break/change file
47- 60	minutes	game #3
60-63	minutes	Penalty Shoot-out (all players participate and have a chance to score a goal)

Upon review we believe that 30 minutes should be allocated to skill and technique training and 30 minutes to free-play games

We believe the penalty shoot-out is a great way for the day to end

### **7     *Same Time, Same Venue***

This aspect of the programme was a universal success with all parents expressing pleasure at the convenience of the venue and always knowing when they had to be at the venue.

The benefits to the environment were also seen as a positive.

### **8     *Talent identification***

Because all Northbridge Players played at the one venue it became very easy to spot talented players. In one instance a player was moved to the 8A's and 8 B's.

### **9     *Club Culture & personality***

One of the key outcomes was the contribution to the Club Culture as a result of all players and parents attending the one venue. The ground became festive with all parents primarily getting along very well with all the interests of the players being served.

### **10    *Parent Behaviour***

One of the impressive features of the programme was the very relaxed attitude and persona of parents with this new format.

## **11    *Introducing new youth referees***

Another benefit we see SSG offering football is that Under 8 and older players can referee Under 6 games because the rules are so simple. This should encourage more players into refereeing.

## **12    *Coach Demonstrations***

As discussed previously, it was very easy to put on demonstrations as we could reach every parent and player on a Saturday morning. Parents found this innovation to be very important so that they could later practice in the park

Negatives

- No rationale from the KDSA for not allowing our under 8's to do this format

### **Player Development KPI's**

Top understand our approach to measuring the success of the trial at the player level requires the reader to comprehend the Northbridge FC Policy on Results

Based Criteria which reads as follows;

- Northbridge FC does not encourage a win-at-all-costs mentality.
- Our results based criteria differs with age but our over-riding criteria is performance based – to play outstanding football.
- Youth football is a delicate balance between development and results with the later gaining importance as age increases.
- Up to under 17 player development is paramount and players should be focused on learning to deal with tactical situations, to adjust during games to opponents, and maintain possession against various football styles.
- For teams up to Under 17 the style of football played and the performance are as important as results.
- At Under 20's players need to add the ability to win to their now ingrained football technique and tactical awareness.

Accordingly, the Club would expect that our All Age teams, in addition to playing outstanding football should be capable of winning the Division 1 Premier League.

### **KDSA KPI's**

We were never provided with KPI's the KDSA use to measure performance within the KDSA. We were pleased that Eddie Watson attended late in the season the programme.

### **SSG Trial KPI's**

We have no reason to believe that the findings referred to in this paper (USYouth Soccer; Manchester Metropolitan University and the Sports University of Cologne) are anything other than research of the highest academic standard.

In relation to our Under 6 and Under 7 teams the SSG committee is completely satisfied that the SSG trial matched and even exceeded our expectations. As a club with volunteers and limited financial resources we do not have the time or inclination to conduct anything other than to collect feedback and undertake

simple surveys of our players and parents and in every instance the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

Anecdotal feedback can be summarized as follows;

- Our Brazilian parents confirming that this is the type of football kids in Brazil play and it is the right way to go (de Oliviero)
- Branko Cullina & Craig Foster advising Tony Palermo that Northbridge FC has the best development programme in Sydney
- Ton Palermo (SBS football commentator) reviewing the programme and advising that his 6 yr old will join the Club next year
- Parents of U6 & U8 children telling us how fantastic the SSG program is for kids compared to the KDSA format (Doust)
- A parent telling us his under 6 child has more skills than his 9 year old (Name can be confirmed)
- Multiple occasions where KDSA teams have commented on how well our SSG teams control the ball. (McEvoy, Muston ex NSL players).
- SSG completely living up to all expectations and everything we said it would (U7 coach – name can be provided)
- Obvious increased use of skills and moves (Grace, Webber)

***Specific detailed feedback from Under 7 and Under 6 parents follow.***

**Under 7 Team (Had experienced KDSA format in 2005)**

Declan,

While the official manager (John) will be there tonight, he's been on the dawn - to - sunset return trip to Canberra and will probably be flagging, so please pop this in the folder /shred/send to Rory/ignore as you see fit.

As you know, the Panthers are not the strongest team. We have 4 kids who are technically young enough to play in under 6's; 3 kids who have never touched a soccer ball before; and to add a bit of flavour, a couple of kids who are strong players. In the under 7's world, the Panthers must be about as mixed as you can get. All Panther players, and parents, are enjoying the SSA format. All the kids are noticeably improving in their confidence, & skills - and the smaller field and team is definitely helping to speed this up - and the multiple game format is really helping them to realise that it's about fun, more than the score. Our players are walking off the paddock with at least one "good thing" done (whether it's a save, goal, or pass,) and are looking forward to the next time.

The kids and the parents are also responding well to the idea of "same place & time". We have a couple of "one to music/netball, one to soccer"; families; scheduling for family members is much easier. The parents are turning up relaxed, sandals on, ready to have a go with the kids, rather than stressed out

finding the field & coordinating with the other family members. Training is OK - the suggestions are more than gratefully received! - we're still a bit disorganised, but getting there.

More than half our team will be "doing Coerver" at a field near their home this holidays. This alone speaks volumes - last year, a lot of parents felt the kids would not really enjoy a soccer camp and were reluctant to commit; this year, the kids themselves want to do it. It's not just the age difference between 6 and 7, or the "second season" growth - this year, they all feel they're really playing; all know they're making a difference; and they all want more fun.

The coffee cart is magnificent. What more could anyone want????!!!

If the KDSA wants money, participation in a game or two, blood, etc in order to continue the SSA, then we're happy to pay, play, or donate whatever is needed to keep this format going. If the size of our kids grins are any guide, it's working. We're having fun.

Cheers Katy Williams

### **Under 6 Team (Playing both KDSA and SSG games)**

Hi Rory,

I know you have been inundated with comments re KDSA and SSG but I thought I should forward some comments from our team - 6I regarding our KDSA game against St Michaels last weekend at Tunks.

- Our kids did not really get the throw ins - but as kids they just got on with it.
- Corners - who knows the difference between a goal kick and corner - lots of time wasted as the attacking team decided on who was taking the kick and where they were trying to kick to.
- Obviously we had not trained for goalies - kids were keen to try out as goalie - but no one wanted to stay there and the opposing team knew the role of goalie and stopped 90% of our kicks on goal - where with our rotating goalie - we missed 80% of their kicks (most were easy saves) - purely through not understanding the role (that was with one of our parents standing behind goal continually directing and helping our goalie.)
- the bigger field meant mainly long runs by the better players in both teams - rather than close passing and touches
- their goalies understood long "punt" kicks - so in their case they rarely played the ball in their own half - our kids did not understand this.

Summary - we scored a few goals and the kids loved that - with the big field and all the rules - created unwanted confusion and it over complicated a simple format.

We definitely want to play as many SSG games as we can but understand the current situation. Look forward to the next update.

Regards

Melissa Smelt - 6I

## **SOCCKER NSW**

Clearly new programmes need to be evaluated and we await some further feed back from Northbridge outcomes.

## **FFA WORKSHOP ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

The FFA has just completed a report on the junior development and Elite programmes from around the world. All 8 countries that were visited all supported SSG for players under 13 years of age. Andy Harper to present these findings at the work shop 9/12/06 KDSA

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Northbridge have completed significant research. Clearly Michael Webber and Rory Grace should be commended for their approach and the implementation of SSG, their inclusion of running 6 work shops and prevailing against the general apathy that existed.

The focus has been on the players and their development and enjoyment. Clearly the programme can be developed further and Northbridge football Club have excelled in the delivery and perseverance with this programme.

Sponsorship dollars and opportunities have poured into the club.

The acceptance from the players and the parents has been excellent.

This programme of training of SSG was used extensively with our under 8 As at Northbridge.

We had no under 7 As returned to the club in 2006 at Northbridge so the whole team was new.

Only 20 kids turned up for grading out of 157. The 8 As won Gala day in group one on the North Shore and became an excellent team in their competition. However most of the children would not touch the ball very much during the KDSA competition games on a Saturday.

The deliverables have all been exceeded and we look forward to providing further information and the further development on this base.

**END OF REPORT**