



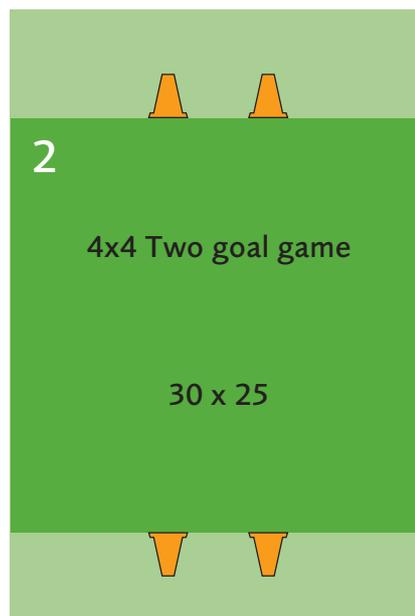
The Manchester United U9 4 v 4 pitch layout and equipment

The pitch sizes are adaptable to specific requirements.
For example, the format below is based on a total of 34 players including 2 goalkeepers



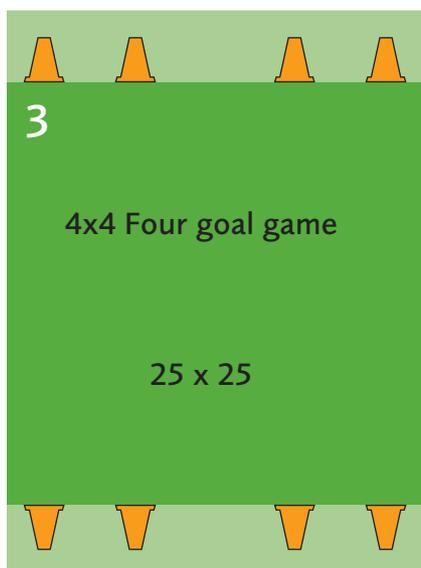
Equipment

- 2 junior size goals 6 x 18ft
- Marker cones to set out pitches or white line pitch marking



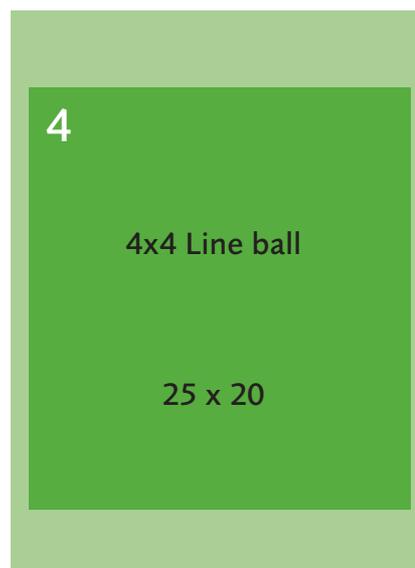
Equipment

- 4 traffic cones
- Marker cones to set out pitches or white line pitch marking



Equipment

- 8 traffic cones
- Marker cones to set out pitches or white line pitch marking



Equipment

- 4 traffic cones to set out the pitch
- Marker cones to set out pitches or white line pitch marking

The Manchester United 4 v 4 Pilot Scheme for U9s

In a previous issue of *Insight* (Issue 4, Volume 5, Autumn 2002, pp 12-14), John Allpress identified many of the characteristics that make 4 v 4 an excellent training method for young players. The goals of this article are to highlight the key features of a bold and innovative 4v4 games format currently being piloted, and to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the future development of young players and youth football.

Initial Developments

In May 2002, Les Kershaw, the Academy Director of Manchester United Football Club, was granted permission by The FA Premier League to play an alternative under 9s games format in the Northern Academy League for the 2002/2003 season. Instead of playing a single 8 v 8 competitive match, players of teams agreeing to take part in the Scheme are divided into teams of 4, and then play in four different conditioned small-sided games on a rotational basis. The four different games are (see Figure 1):

- 1 **Goalkeepers game:**
4v4 plus two Goalkeepers. Normal throw-ins and corner kicks apply.
- 2 **Two goal game:**
4v4 with four large traffic cones as goals. No goalkeepers.
- 3 **Four goal game:**
4v4 with eight marker cones as four small goals. No goalkeepers.
- 4 **Line Ball:**
4v4 with a dotted line as a scoring line.

Re-creating the Environment

A fundamental concept guiding the primary developers of the Scheme – Paul McGuinness, Assistant Academy Director, Tony Whelan, Deputy Assistant Academy Director and Rene Meulenstein, the MUFC Skills Development Coach – was the re-creation, as much as possible, of the playing environments in which the world's greatest players first learned and then developed the skills they needed for top-level performance. To accomplish this, the Scheme has incorporated some of the competitive values and best features of youth football as it used to be played in the parks, playgrounds, streets and back alleyways around the world, into the more formalised structure of modern Academy football. These features, known to most players, include:

- 1 Plenty of individual possession, ball control and touches
- 2 Trying new skills without fear of ridicule or recrimination
- 3 Taking players on and challenging defenders
- 4 Little or no pressure from significant others (parents, coaches)
- 5 A vibrant, creative and fun atmosphere

By initially re-evaluating the traditional 8v8 games format from the perspective of the experiences of the young player, the Scheme has attempted to re-balance the dynamic of the match day programme and give more ownership of the play back to the young players themselves.

The Format

Besides the training benefits noted by John Allpress (2002), there are several other innovative characteristics to be found in the MUFC Scheme:

Programme

The games format is adaptable and can easily accommodate up to 68 players, including goalkeepers, at very short notice.

Teams

No player sits out any game; because of the varied 4v4 formats, teams of 4 from the same Club may even play against each other!

Substitutions

If a team has more than 4 players then, substitutes are brought into the game on a strict rotational basis.

Game Duration / Referees

Each game lasts for 8 min and there are no referees! By refereeing themselves, player co-operation is fostered and the young players consistently learn to take more responsibility for their own actions.

Scoring / Goals

Because so many goals are scored in the conditioned 4v4 games, scoring itself is de-emphasised and no scores are held. Except for the Goalkeeper's Game, the use of cones instead of real goals and nets re-directs the emphasis of the games back onto build-up play and technical execution.

Playing Time

Each boy plays a minimum of 6 games and there is a minimum 2-min break in between each game for rest, rehydration and games organisation. This exercise-to-rest ratio increases energy levels and mental awareness during competitive play.

Pitch Layout / Viewing Areas

The 'roping off' of pitches and the control of viewing areas purposely ensures that the influence of parents, fans and others is kept strictly to a minimum. Parents at MUFC are routinely briefed on the aims and underlying philosophy of the Scheme.

Coaching

The MUFC coaches responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the Scheme and its player-centred values are Phil Brogan, Eamon Mulvey, Mike Priest and Tom Statham. There is very little overt coaching performed during competitive matches – no raised voices, no disciplining and no playing-the-game-for-the-players. Instead, consistent encouragement and praise are given to players of both teams for brave attempts and creative decision-making.

Related to Training

Underlying this novel approach to the games format is the technical and skills development programme of Manchester United. In short, 4 v 4 matches are the focal point for the systematic technical training and 'skills homework' undertaken by the club's U-9 youth team members. In training and in matches, players are routinely taught to take the initiative, take players on and 'show their tricks'. On the pitch, players are repeatedly encouraged to make their own decisions. It is also considered that players who are routinely instructed to play simply, eventually, will be only able to play simply. Players at this age, it is felt, need time and encouragement to build the toolkit of skills they will use in future years.

Assessment

In order to evaluate the Scheme's overall effectiveness, MUFC have openly requested and received ongoing written feedback from home and visiting team coaches, players and parents, and from representatives of the game's ruling bodies, amongst others. Staff and students from Manchester Metropolitan University are also collecting match data during Academy matches and, experimentally, on U9 players from a local development team (Alderley Edge FC), as well as additional qualitative information.

Summary

The MUFC Scheme is an exciting pilot programme that is attempting to optimise the 'window of opportunity' that exists for skill development in the U-9 age range. Great players learned and perfected their talents in secure, vibrant and challenging football environments. In the advancement of a way forward for young players as they progress up to full 11-a-side football, the benefits of 4 v 4, and the playing environments in which competitive matches take place, require careful consideration.