MY SPORTING VIEW

Singing the praises of grass roots football

by Mark Hignett

With 44 national competitions and two international squads, it's fair to say that the offer of schools' football from the national governing body has never been stronger.

When we consider the addition of county and district level competitions that supplement the football diet of our schoolchildren, there is definitely a level and an appropriate challenge for any individual wishing to participate beyond PE lessons.

Schools' football really is for everyone and it is the educational philosophy as well as teaching and coaching expertise of its workforce that make the English Schools' Football Association (ESFA) unique amongst the multitude of other providers. Football within the ESFA family is very much about education through football as opposed to solely football development and opportunity.

As with everything in life there always has been and always will be challenges along the way that have to be overcome. The nature of the challenge changes from time to time but what is important is that all organisations work together to find solutions for the benefit of our children who we must remember are children first and footballers second.

As with the vast majority of organisations, funding is a significant challenge in the current climate. We have a small but very committed number of excellent sponsors and partners in PlayStation, Danone, The FA, The Premier League, PFA, Inspire Sport and Pendle but we are always looking for other potential sponsors who share both our philosophy and love of the game.

It is well publicised that despite the phenomenal amounts of money at the top end of the game, there is significantly less lower down and schools' football is certainly not exempt from this.

Another significant challenge that faces us is the decline in representative football in some areas of the country. Whilst there are a number of different reasons for this relevant to each area, a reducing number of volunteers (largely due to the changing nature and ever-increasing demands of the teaching profession) and competing products in an increasingly saturated market place are arguably most prevalent.

In recognition of the latter issue and in an attempt to keep representative district football alive in particular, we are working extremely closely with The Premier League on the U11 district programme for boys and girls and this is already showing signs of some success. Indeed, since 2015 the joint project has supported over 250 district teams from Torbay to Tyneside.

With regards volunteers, this is proving to be an extremely difficult issue for us to resolve at present not only in terms of coaches and team managers but equally in relation to filling vacancies on our national council (where we have four elected council members in each of the four regions – North, Midlands, South East and South West).

We are determined to ensure appropriate representation as the national governing body and have dedicated much time to not only achieving a full complement but also in achieving genuine diversity within the organisation. With volunteers in its widest term reducing, so it is becoming even more challenging to attract volunteers who represent the diverse nature of our country.

Of course, the schools' football movement does not only contribute to the development of players into the professional and grassroots game. Over the years, we have also provided early opportunities and crucial development for a number of teacher-coaches who have gone on to become some of the most successful youth coaches in the country.

Only recently, Dave Parnaby (former ESFA U15 Manager) spoke of the importance of the role of education and of the ESFA in shaping his legendary career as academy director at Middlesbrough Football Club.

He highlighted another success story in John Owens (who later became academy manager at Liverpool Football Club) under whom he served as assistant manager when John was the ESFA national team manager.

Paul Clement is another former teacher who has gone on to grace the professional football world and who has enjoyed coaching roles at some of the biggest clubs in the world including Chelsea, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich.

Clearly, the ESFA and schools' football in general has always been a tremendous breeding ground for talented individuals who have been nurtured as individuals as well as future professionals in their chosen field whether it be player, coach, physiotherapist, sport scientist or any number of other careers.

Each and every one will undoubtedly have a story about a specific teacher, district, county or national team coach/manager or member of the ESFA who have gone above and beyond in providing opportunities, support and guidance that have helped them get to where they are.

At the other end of the scale, there are those who have never aspired to play, coach, officiate or administer football beyond the grassroots level but these people have also benefited enormously in the positive habits and educational philosophy that schools' football encompasses.

So, where are we? In many ways, we are in the best shape we have ever been. Our portfolio of competitions and wider offer is larger than ever before as is student participation and the quality of experiences we are providing. Our internal structures and governance have been impressively modernised in the last eighteen months and our staff (based at ESFA HQ in Stafford) are an incredibly talented and driven group.

They are complemented by the generous and talented, albeit reducing, volunteer workforce who each bring a wealth of experience and their expertise to the table. Of course, we face challenges moving forward but the most important thing is that the schoolchildren of England are receiving a fantastically varied, ability-appropriate and professional offer with the key educational philosophy at the heart of their experience.

For the vast majority of students, schools provide the first experiences of playing football in their lives and for some, the last. Schools' representative football whether it be for an individual school, a district, a county or our national squads is the football playing pinnacle for all but a miniscule percentage of people and this is why schools' football is so important and why there will always be a place for what the ESFA has to offer.

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