



The future is bright

In a modern world where football revolves around extortionate wage bills and multi-billionaire owners, Fast Feet Football provides an alternative way of looking at the beautiful game

By DANIEL SANSOM

During the month of March 2010, in the quiet village of East Stour in Dorset, Saturday mornings were transformed into a fun-filled hour of football for the whole family to enjoy. The sport had poured energy into a community where its only other sign of life was the early morning coffee meetings or the fortnightly jumble sale. Neil Coates' academy *Fast Feet Football* has enriched the lives of children from all around the local area. Parents bring their young ones to a place where anyone is welcome, boys and girls of all ages and abilities, to enjoy the sport they love. The academy has simply brought the fun back to football, and its impact has been quite incredible.

Neil Coates, founder and head coach of *Fast Feet Football*, recalls how the academy came about almost by pure chance. After offering to help out as a coach at his son's school and being swiftly turned away, Coates decided to start his own. With only "about six kids to begin with," the 48-year-old wanted the academy to be "non-competitive" and wanted to stress the fact that "no matter what standard you are, you will always be welcome."

In an environment where players can express themselves freely without being judged, the academy is perfect for children of all abilities

In the past, having confidence in young players has led to significant success. 1992 marked the birth of a generation that will never be forgotten. Twenty-four years on, it is still the subject of many conversations in *The Bishop Blaize* pub just outside Old Trafford. Manchester United's *Class of '92*, featuring the likes of David Beckham, Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes, has gone down in British folklore as possibly the best group of young talent that has emerged together in Premier League history. Just across the English Channel, the same was happening in the Netherlands. *Ajax's Golden Generation*, at the time led by Louis Van Gaal, was beginning to dominate the Dutch league. In 1995, a side with an average age of 23 went the entire season unbeaten and won the Champions League Final. Over half of that team came through the club's academy system.

Left Children smile and laugh before a Saturday session

Right The snow does not prevent youngsters from turning up every week

Below Neil Coates (back row, centre) and fellow coaches have formed a strong relationship with the players

Although *Fast Feet Football* is not a professional academy, one of its key objectives, according to Coates, is to "enhance the development of the players in order to allow them to make the next step into club football." This friendly, fun and non-competitive approach is obviously working, as many youngsters from the academy have already made the step-up to professional clubs such as AFC Bournemouth and Exeter City. As the kids playfully rolled around on the freshly cut grass, harmlessly pushing and shoving one another, eleven-year-old Klarc took a moment to suggest that an important part of this academy is the way "you can have a laugh and mess about a bit, but still learn which is great."

Another unique aspect of *Fast Feet Football* is that the coaches do this voluntarily. For Coates this is brilliant, and he still can't believe they do it. However, he also sees it as "a stepping stone for coaches to go on and achieve their official coaching badges." Daniel Watts, a coach at the academy, enjoys helping the kids and seeing them develop their confidence and ability. For Watts, it is important that they see a "familiar face every week" and have a "role model away from family."

The fact that the academy welcomes all abilities demonstrates the type of attitudes and values the volunteers at *Fast Feet Football* hold. According to Coates, "if we didn't exist, these kids wouldn't play football." It is a sad reality, but if they're not playing in a competitive



Kids shouldn't be grilled at a young age. You've got to enjoy football. Especially during the time you're at primary school it should just be for fun

side, most kids give up football, simply because there is nowhere for them to play the sport in a relaxed environment.

As well as football bringing players and coaches closer together, an ever-growing community spirit is evident at East Stour on Saturday mornings. Laughing and joking on the side of the pitch, parents sip their coffees and give signs of encouragement to their little ones. The sweet smell of freshly baked cakes moseys around in the spring air, and the faint fumes of sizzling bacon drift across the pitch. Whether the sessions take place in the pouring rain or in the blazing heat, this surreal family experience is epitomised by smiles from both children and parents. Jo Tidbury-Coates works behind the scenes at *Fast Feet Football* and sees the other side of the academy that isn't obvious to the

coaches. After a typically hectic morning in the kitchen, she paused for a minute and said: "I love the fact that the children enjoy their start to the weekend. I get to see how it bonds the entire family together, and it's absolutely brilliant."

It isn't just about Saturday mornings for *Fast Feet Football*. As well as the hour-long sessions at the weekend which run all year round, Coates and his team of coaches run sessions in the week during the school holidays. The academy is developing quickly, and has recently started its own futsal training programme. Future hopes and aspirations for the academy include securing its own official training facilities, as well as opening its very own coffee shop so it can continue to encourage the whole family to experience this friendly, welcoming atmosphere.

In an age where football revolves around finances, *Fast Feet Football* has shown the importance of developing the youth of today, as well as emphasising the focal factors that bring a local community together. For Coates, the academy is serving its purpose brilliantly. As water dripped down his face after a deluge of rain following a Saturday session, the 48-year-old smiled and said: "Overall we're achieving exactly what we set out to do in the first place. It's about guiding kids and giving them the confidence to do well in the future."



All images courtesy of Fast Feet Football