



## **Ministry of Football**

### **4v4 Mini League July 2011**

# **Review**

#### **Description of how it worked**

We ran a three-week Mini League in July 2011. The Mini-League was for teams of 4 players. There were no coaches of teams, rather we had a Team Organiser. The Team Organiser's role was to ensure there were 4 players each Sunday. If a player dropped out or could not make it, the Team Organiser could find a replacement player, or contact MoF who could try to find a replacement player for that team.

Most enrolments came from Team Organisers who already had a team of 4 players. There were also enrolments for individual players looking to join the league, and it was usually straightforward to put these players in touch with a Team Organiser who was looking for an extra player. However, on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday, there were many children turning up at the Mini League not knowing which team they were playing for, where to be etc. There were several games with 5v5 on these first two Sundays, and considerable confusion about who was meant to be on what field/team.

The admin time involved in organising the Mini League was considerable. The most time-consuming task was emailing and contacting parents and Team Organisers to make sure everyone knew where they needed to be, checking each team had 4 players, and finding replacement players for those who couldn't play. There was also some admin time taken up in contacting parents to remind them of the Code of Conduct, and discussing behaviour with the couple of parents whose behaviour needed to be dealt with.

All parents enrolled in the Mini League were emailed the Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct was also put on the website. On arrival at the Mini League, parents were asked to register and sign-in at a desk, and then go to their pitch. There was a map of the pitches A to F. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, everything went much more smoothly – each team had 4 players, and everyone knew where they had to be and what time to be there.

The Mini League ran for three Sunday mornings in a row, with each team playing two 20 min games each Sunday. The first Sunday was a Grading Round, where MoF Coaches could observe teams play with a view to assigning them to a League for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays.

We had four Leagues: A Junior Girls training group (total of 12 players approx); A Junior League for 5-6 year olds (8 teams); A Championship League for 6-8 year olds (6 teams); and a Premiership League for 7 to 11 year olds (6 teams). We divided players into leagues based roughly on age/ability.

The Junior Girls training group were about 12 girls aged 5-6 who were almost all complete beginners. It did not seem appropriate to put them in a League, but we wanted to include them – so we gave them an hour's coaching session including small-sided games each week.

A total of 122 children were involved in the Mini League. 32 of these were girls. 44 of the 122 children were regular attendees at MoF weekly training sessions.

The Mini League took place outdoors, on a large astro field, divided into 6 pitches. Each pitch was about four metres shorter than 1/8 of a full-size field. We used Samba goals, and pop-up goals as goalposts. On the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Sundays we used larger hockey goals on one pitch. MoF Coaches arrived early to set-up the fields and goalposts, and we asked parents to also arrive early to help us do so.

We did not have referees. Rather the children were asked to organise and supervise their own games. At the end of the game, the Team Organisers were expected to report the final score to a MoF Coach. The MoF Coaches kept note of the score, and kept a league table for each League. At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, the players in the winning team of each League were presented with a size 2 or 3 football.

After the event, all parents were emailed an online evaluation survey to complete. They were asked to talk to their child about the Mini League and then respond with the child's thoughts as well as their own opinions. 28 parents completed the survey. Overall, 35% of parents said the Mini League was Excellent, 62% said it was Good and 3% said it was Average.

### **Objectives and Overall Success**

The Objectives of the 4v4 Mini League were to:

1. Promote children's football for children by children;
2. Help develop creative, confident, skilful footballers;
3. Enhance joy through Play.

There was definitely evidence of all of the above at each day of the Mini League.

Parent feedback:

100% of parents said their child felt included in the team they were in, and that they enjoyed the games and looked forward to coming back each week.

93% of parents said their child was able to play without the fear of making mistakes, and that they had the opportunity to practice skills in the games.

74% of parents said their child became more confident during the Mini League games.

82% of parents said their child was able to play without too much adult interference.

When asked what the best thing about the Mini League was, there were several main themes that kept coming up: Opportunity to play (10 parents of 28 mentioned this), Non-intimidating atmosphere (8), Enjoyment (7), Small-sided teams (5), Learning/confidence building (5).

When asked if they would want to be included in a Mini League next term, 27 of 28 parents said Yes. The one who said No explained that this was because next term was already very football heavy, otherwise they would be keen.

The thoughts of the MoF Coaching team is that the Mini League was a success. We look forward to running it again in the future, taking into consideration what we learnt.

### **What we learnt**

#### **(a) Enrolment and division of players into teams and leagues**

The main admin task was taken up putting players into teams, and finding replacement players where teams were short each week.

Feedback from parents:

57% said the Enrolment process was Excellent and 32% said it was Good.

Because teams of players tended to be friends of a similar age/ability, it was difficult to match teams against each other so there were always even contests. For example, the two youngest boys' teams could play each other and were evenly matched. But they were soundly beaten by all the other teams. It might be better to split these very young boys so there is one of them in each team, but this would be tricky administratively and also I wonder whether they would get much of the ball in the games they played. A better alternative would be to make each League more refined in terms of age/ability. This would require more teams overall to make sure that each League had at least 4 teams.

We divided the teams into Leagues based on what we saw in the Grading Round. One of the unique selling points of the Mini League was that families didn't have to commit to play every week, and it was ok to have a replacement player come in and play if the team was a player short. The problem this created was that teams were not comprised of the same players each week, so we may put a weak team in the weakest league for their age, but then the following week they have a new superstar player and win 10-0.

Feedback from parents:

Five parents mentioned that there were mismatches in team ability which lead to loss of confidence, loss of spirit, loss of motivation.

Solutions: Players cannot enrol as individuals. They must enrol as part of a team. This would save huge amounts of admin time and energy. Each team must have a Team Organiser. It is the Team Organiser's responsibility to enrol the team and pay for the team, and to make sure there are 4 players there each week. The Team Organiser enrolls the team to play in a specific age/ability category. These categories are very specific to age/stage of the children within them. MoF Coaches can check that these categories are correct during a Grading Round (week 1). There needs to be at least 4 teams in each age-ability category, otherwise that category cannot go ahead as a League. We must stress to the Team Organiser that any replacement players must be of the same age/ability as the player they are replacing. Teams and Team Organisers need several weeks to get their teams and players together.

### **(b) Equipment and venue**

Hockey goals were too big and just encouraged shooting from anywhere on the pitch. Using two pop-up goals didn't work as the goal was too wide and there was a gap in the middle of the goals. The Samba goals were expensive, but definitely worked best.

We paid for the venue from 15 mins prior to the first game, and we used this time to set up the goals and pitches. It wasn't long enough to do this comfortably.

Feedback from parents:

A few parents mentioned that the larger goals didn't work well and caused unattractive thoughtless football. Two parents mentioned that they thought the goalposts should be assembled and pitches set-up prior to the arrival of the children.

Having no team kits worked fine. Size 3 footballs were the correct size. We need to make sure all children have the correct footwear, as one child played in studded boots on astro and this is dangerous.

Solution: Buy more Samba goals. If the budget allows, it would be good to hire the premises from 30 mins before the first game in order to get in early and set-out goals and pitches. This would ensure we have a more relaxed/professional beginning to the games.

### **(c) Parent and spectator behaviour**

This was the biggest problem we faced. Many parents shouted instructions to children on the field. Some instructions were unhelpful such as 'Kick it' or 'Run', others were too complicated. A handful of parents took the event too seriously, getting angry with their children from the sideline when things didn't go well on the pitch. We noticed that it was parents of the younger age groups that were more likely to take the games too seriously and offer direct instruction from the sideline.

Feedback from parents:

92% of parents read the Code of Conduct. 2 of the 28 parents who completed the online survey either didn't know we had a Code of Conduct or didn't read it. Of those that did read the Code of Conduct, 100% either Agreed or Strongly Agreed with it.

Some parents were clearly annoyed at the behaviour of others, referring to "some obtuse parents who could not contain themselves". One parent explained "I also find it preposterous and thoroughly unrelaxing to have to listen to adults shouting at their children to 'kick the ball', 'run' and other such obvious inanities. They could just as well have shouted 'breathe' or 'play football'". Which pretty much mirrors the thoughts of the MoF Coaching team also.

Solution: (1) All parents must sign a Code of Conduct. (2) Parent education: We could take parents aside during Grading Round to talk to them about our values and what we expect from them in order to create a Positive Learning Environment.

A suggestion: It's not effective to tell parents to keep quiet. It doesn't work. Parents want to contribute to the game and their child's effectiveness within it. This is a very natural instinct, and

hard for parents to control. What if we have a sheet of what to say and what not to say? We could include for them some questions to ask, some alternatives to 'Kick it'. We could also include some warm-up exercises pre-game to prevent the pre-game time being filled with complicated adult-lead "team-talks".

### **(c) Organisation on the day**

Parent feedback: 36% of parents said the arrival at pitch process was Excellent, 54% said it was Good and 10% said it was Average. Three parents commented that the arrival process improved as the weeks went by – which is also the thoughts of the MoF Coaching team.

I think the process improved as the weeks went by. By week 3 we had a register at the door with: Player name A-Z, team name, pitches, times, pay status, sign in/out. It was then easy for all parents/children to find where they needed to be. We did have a map of the pitches, but maybe this needed to be bigger, and perhaps a sign at each pitch also.

Solution: Big map of pitches, team draw on website a week in advance. Register on arrival as described above.

### **(d) The games themselves**

On the whole, the games at the Mini League were played fairly and in the right spirit, with lots of passing, dribbling, creative play and some excellent goals and goalkeeping.

The main two issues with the games were Refereeing and Mismatches in ability between the teams. These issues have been dealt with in other sections.

Parents feedback:

Two parents thought the games needed a half-time for a quick drink break. The reason why we didn't do this was to prevent the unnecessary team-talk that a "half-time" would inevitably bring. We didn't feel it was helpful to the children to be filled with 101 instructions and a pep talk.

Solution: Include one-minute half-times for drinks only.

### **(e) Refereeing**

Refereeing is the most contentious issue we have to discuss. We decided against having referees at the games because we believe that children can organise and supervise themselves. After all it is what they do in the school playground all the time. Not having referees would encourage children to organise themselves, and to take responsibility for playing fairly.

However, there were one or two games where there were arguments between players. It is notable that the games which had the most arguments were also the ones where parents were on the sideline seemed most win-hungry.

Parent feedback:

Of the 28 parents who completed the online survey, five mentioned it would be good to have referees or someone assigned to look after a game. One parent mentioned that when a younger team was playing an older team, often the older team would referee the game and wouldn't give the younger team some decisions. Three other parents mentioned that they thought it worked very well without refs, and it was good to see the children sorting things out by themselves

In response to the question "Would you pay extra to have referees?" 56% of parents said Yes and 33% said No.

Solution: To be decided – to have refs or not to have refs?

#### **(f) Prize-giving**

On the final week, we had a Prize-Giving immediately following the last game. Here the top 3 teams in each League were congratulated and applauded. We gave prizes of a mini football to the top team. We did not take into consideration that there could be a draw for the top team in a division, and therefore we may need extra prizes to cater for this eventuality. Neither did we consider that a player who was not there for the final week but played all other weeks did not receive a prize as they weren't there at the Prize-Giving.

Parent feedback:

Two parents commented that everyone should get a prize, not just the winners.

I don't think prizes for participation mean anything at all, and I disagree with giving certificates or medals out to everyone as these cost money and forgotten by the child within minutes of leaving the field.

Solution: We need extra prizes to give out in the eventuality of a tie for first-place. And we need extra prizes for teams who have used more than 4 players over the League.

#### **(g) Competition and the Mini League as part of the MoF Programme as a whole**

The values of Ministry of Football are Learning, Creativity, Enjoyment and Inclusion. We do not usually run competitive events – this was the first such event that we have organised.

Parent feedback:

"As there was the emphasis on all kids having fun, the prize giving to the top team at the end seemed at odds with the whole idea."

"The principle under which MoF operate is hard to unify with tournament football."

There seems to be a conflict between our value of Inclusion and the idea of having a winning team. I'm also sure parent behaviour would be better if the event was non-competitive and there was no winner.

To discuss:

Does it work to put the stress on Enjoyment and Learning when we are keeping scores and league tables?

How do we introduce the idea of competition slowly to the children? It is important that they learn to be competitive, and they enjoy the idea of a League. But we don't want to create a win-hungry atmosphere for them because then they are under pressure too young. Can there be such a thing as semi-competitive - how?

We ran the Mini League on Sunday mornings. Our main indoor training sessions are on Sunday afternoons, and we noticed a drop in attendance in the afternoon sessions on Mini League weekends. We want children to take part in the Mini League and the indoor training session. The children will benefit most by doing both sessions rather than one or the other. For this reason it may be best to consider running the Mini League on a Saturday afternoon instead (or as well).