Football Starts at Home

By Tom Byer

With Fred Varcoe

First published in 2016

Second Edition 2019

ISBN xxxxxxx

Tom Byer *was born in the Bronx and grew up in New York State where he was a standout player for Rondout Valley High School. He attended perennial national powerhouse Ulster County Community College before persuading the University of South Florida to accept him after turning down a football scholarship at the University of Baltimore. He became the first American to play top-level football in Japan when he was signed by Japan Soccer League team Hitachi. After a short playing career in Japan, he moved into coaching, concentrating on technical development and introducing Coerver Schools into Japan. Tom has spent over 20 years travelling around Japan conducting clinics for kids, coaches and parents. As well as coaching over half a million kids, Tom had his own spot on national TV in Japan for nearly 15 years and his instructional DVDs have been No. 1 sellers on Amazon Japan. His success has also taken him to other parts of Asia, notably Indonesia and China, and he is now an Official Advisor to the Chinese Ministry of Education's School Football Programme, supervising the training and coaching of grassroots football at 20,000 schools across China. He also had a daily slot on CETV in China. Tom has been sponsored by major companies such as Nestle, adidas, Canon, Disney and Volkswagen. In 1997, Tom was recognised by adidas International for his outstanding contribution to grassroots development at a ceremony in Marseille, France, following the 1998 World Cup Draw. He lives in Tokyo with his wife and two sons.*

Fred Varcoe *was born in London and grew up in the west of England. He is the former sports editor of* The Japan Times*, and a former editor and writer for the Japan Football Association and the Yokohama F. Marinos. He is the author of* The Dark Side Of Life In Japan. *He lives near Tokyo with his wife and daughter.*

To my boys,

Kaito and Sho,

and my wife, Midori

'TODAY'S FOOTBALL IS completely different especially when it comes to the physical aspect – the players are in better physical shape, which is probably the result of all these coaching courses. There's nothing wrong with having fit footballers, but their technical and ball skills have not grown at the same pace, and that's all too apparent when you watch the game these days.

'These coaching courses are much too theoretical and this is what you see reflected in the basic technical skills of the average player. My generation put in a lot more hours playing football after school than kids today. These days all the football kids play is at their clubs, so the clubs need to work seriously on basic skills. You hardly ever see a young player who can use both feet, for example.

'I watch all football but rarely find it interesting. I see way too much pinball football. The ball just goes to and fro, with teams unable to hold onto it. There are very few players who can dominate the ball – mostly it's the ball that dominates the player. The coaches and trainers ought to take that to heart, as they are the ones responsible.'

Johan Cruyff

European Player of the Century

UEFA Magazine, March 2004

Preface

ENGLAND WON THE WORLD CUP in 1966 with a new brand of English football. In 1970, the team lost in the quarterfinals to Germany although in some respects they were an even better team than the 1966 winners. But that loss started a nightmare period for English football. England's failure to qualify for the 1974 World Cup had everybody questioning our style, our ability and our self-belief. English football didn't know where to go and blindly looked at the successful teams in Europe and South America as role models.

'We have to play like them,' was the rallying cry.

The only problem was we weren't equipped to play like them. Very few players had the technical skills to play the kind of football that was being demanded. And nothing was done to change the nature of English football. Nevertheless, England blindly pushed on in a vain attempt to play a brand of football they weren't prepared for.

There were different factors involved. Managers tended to be old school while the real talents (Brian Clough, John Lyall, etc.) weren't considered or weren't given consideration soon enough. Football pitches, meanwhile, were so awful that you had to keep the ball off the ground if you wanted it to travel anywhere.

But the fundamental hole in English football was the lack of technique. The English game was built on power and strength, not skill and artistry. English football was still an exciting game to watch, but our national team was inferior to the opposition. In terms of skill, we weren't even close.

Unfortunately, some of these problems still exist. OK, football pitches have improved and the introduction of foreign players has allowed English players more exposure to the 'other' kind of football, but the sad truth is that children's football is still about running around, kicking the ball and slamming it into the net.

I've known Tom Byer for 25 years and over those years we've talked a lot of football. In that time, he's focused his coaching skills on children and reached the point where he is, without any doubt, one of the world's leading thinkers on teaching children the technical skills of football.

This book should be bought by every parent in Britain, Canada and the United States – countries where I've had involvement with football – and beyond to understand what a child who likes football can learn and how they can learn.

It's not a textbook; it's a guide. It's a philosophy that is so basic and so true it's just amazing that it's taking so long to be recognised. Many people in football still don't get it.

I've been involved in football as a player and coach for over 40 years, so trust me when I tell you that this book is gold dust for your kids.

Paul Mariner

Ex-England international (35 caps)

UEFA Cup winner (1981)

F.A. Cup winner (1978)

FOREWORD

By Professor John J. Ratey, M.D.
Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School

THIS BOOK IS A REVOLUTION. Tom Byer's approach to coaching football is a game-changer. It focuses on two of the most important points that I teach in relation to physical and mental exercise:

1. The mastery of a skill that stimulates the functions and development of the brain, and is important in building self-confidence, or what we call a 'good self-concept';
2. The importance of fun and free will in imitating and interacting with parents, in learning new skills that children can develop with older, higher-level children and, at a later stage, coaches.

Tom's belief that in order to improve a class or team, you must raise the lower level rather than develop the high achievers is wisdom I never expected to find in a book about football. Part of my job as a psychiatrist is to instil confidence in people – men, women, children. Many of these people feel inadequate or inferior, but they aren't. Society sometimes pushes them down, but everybody has a talent and ability that should give them something to push back with. It doesn't have to be a highly developed skill, money-making ability or earth-shattering discovery; it just has to be enough to know they are *not* inferior, they can be accepted as equals, and have a capability of rising to new levels.

Tom's example (see below) of Little Chen, as he calls him, is heart-warming and profound. Apart from the emotionality of this story, it shows how we have talents and abilities that we, ourselves, don't believe we have. Even Little Chen's mother couldn't believe it. It's a story that every parent should discover.

What Little Chen's mother didn't know was that Tom's contribution as a football coach was also helping to develop her son's mind and brain functions. You don't have a brain for maths and a brain for football skills; it's the same brain, and one discipline helps the other. They're like siblings helping each other to move along in the world.

I will explain more as to how this works in the *Afterword* that

Tom has kindly asked me to contribute.

For now, let me just say this: The acquisition of skills – maths skills, piano skills, football skills – and the encouragement to acquire skills is absolutely fundamental in the development of the brain, and the development of children. What Tom Byer has done is to focus on football skills. Through his own experience as a coach and through the experience of his own children, he is transforming how football skills are acquired and can be taught. His is a brilliant insight.

Not only is it a revolution, it is a revelation.

Little Chen

I've taught football to hundreds of thousands of kids. There can be hundreds of kids in one session. It's hard to keep track of them all. But I frequently record the sessions I supervise on video and review them afterward.

In 2015, one of these sessions was in China as part of a pilot programme I had created for the Beijing Bureau of Education. Many of the children in these pilot programmes had never played before, so I wanted to record their progress. We focused on kids learning the core skills needed to build a foundation for technical competency.

But it wasn't just about learning the skills. We were taking kids who weren't athletic and had little or no experience of football or, indeed, other sports. In other words, we had a blank slate.

So, what are you going to do with such kids?

One thing you're not going to do is throw them on a football pitch and play a game to see how good they are. That's a recipe for instant failure. It's also a recipe for crushing a kid's confidence not only as an athlete, but also as a person. Football's a competitive

game, but at this age and at this level, we're not interested in the competitive side of football; we're interested in the potential of individual children to acquire fundamental skills and to gain confidence so they are able to eventually participate in games and have a positive experience.

How do we do this?

Well, in the first instance, you encourage children – and they don't have to have any athletic history or even be athletically inclined – to master simple skills. Basically, you teach them how to control the ball. They each have their own ball and they are encouraged to form a bond with the ball so they learn to master the ball. They're not competing for a single ball with kids of vastly different athletic and technical abilities. They are learning mastery of the ball – their ball – by themselves. It's a self-motivating exercise whereby the child is given simple, achievable tasks that help to improve self-esteem, and this achievement gives them something to hold on to early in their learning to spur them on and improve further.

On this particular day, I was supervising a group of young children on a school sports ground. There was nothing remarkable about the group or the session and I wasn't focusing on any particular aspect of the session, but, as usual, I was recording the session so I could review it later on.

I noticed one kid in this group. He was easy to spot because

he was the biggest kid in the class. He was quite tall but also quite heavyset and he had poor coordination. He didn't look like a 'football player,' but he fitted the profile of the kind of child I can help.

We're not looking to finesse the high achievers in our football classes; we're looking to transform the low achievers into high achievers. In order to increase individual technical ability or the technical level on a broader scale, the key is to concentrate on making the worst players better and expanding the pool of technically competent players. You do this by showing the low achievers a pathway to competence and raising their level so that they become active and positive participants able to compete with the 'high achievers.'

One important aspect of what I'm doing is to work with young kids who have never touched a football before. This is a rarity in sports coaching where usually the good kids get all the attention and the low achievers are largely ignored.

When I first saw 'Little Chen,' he wasn't a high achiever. In terms of football, most people wouldn't have expected him to achieve anything at all. In China's one-child world, kids are precious. For the parents, studying is important; sports are a distraction and are often regarded as dangerous.

That's not the way it should be. As my friend, Harvard Professor John Ratey, explains elsewhere in this book, the two are

complementary. Learning sports skills can help develop academic and other skills.

Little Chen was noticeable at first because he wasn't interested in participating. He sat on the sidelines. He didn't feel part of the group. You could see a fear of failure, humiliation even, in his eyes. He didn't believe.

It took some time, but eventually he grabbed a ball and joined in. The ball was at his feet and I'm not sure he could see it or feel it or sense it, but he was taking the first step. The requirement was to dribble up the pitch as fast as possible using both feet, turn and come back again. He tried. He was committed to the task, but the task wasn't proving easy. It was outside his realm of experience.

Why? Because Little Chen, who was around seven years old, had *never* done anything like this before.

All too often, parents, teachers, coaches, even friends give up on the Little Chens of this world. It's obvious they don't have a talent for football or some other 'superfluous' skill, so why bother trying?

Little Chen found it tough in the beginning. He had difficulty controlling his ball, his body language was wrong, as he chased his ball his running was laboured, and you could see his confidence was deflated. I hoped he would make progress but it was hard to have much confidence.

I visited his school on a monthly basis and tried to encourage

him as much as possible. The key was to give him simple tasks with the ball that I knew he could master.

I went back to the school several months later. The school had selected some kids to demonstrate what they'd been learning and practicing.

Little Chen was one of them.

Little Chen held the ball with his foot as he waited his turn. Then he set off with the ball, moved it from foot to foot and – I'm not kidding you – almost danced down the pitch before turning and dancing back the other way. He's still a big kid, but in his mind he's an athlete.

And do you know what? He is. His self-belief screams at you from the video screen. You can see what he wants to say.

'I can play football.'

I took him aside after the demonstration and told him if we were picking sides for a game, I'd select him to be on my team. He just beamed with pride.

His mother was on the verge of tears. She said she hadn't seen her son smile like that for a long time.

Towards the end of the week, I review these videos for a very specific purpose: To help the parents. Parents are key to the whole programme, so I want them on board as soon as possible. They must believe in what we're doing and have faith in their children.

I'd rather take twenty knowledgeable parents of an under-six team rather than one experienced coach with an impeccable resume. You can hire or fire a top-level coach but you can't replace parents, and they are the key.

The reality is that in most schools in most countries around the world, Little Chen wouldn't get a look-in, wouldn't get encouragement and wouldn't get to see, let alone realise, his potential. He'd be lucky to get a game of any kind either inside or outside school.

In my football schools, Little Chen is the star.

INTRODUCTION

Maybe I'm Doing It Wrong

MAYBE I'M DOING IT WRONG was a song by Randy Newman about a normal human function that we assume is instinctive and therefore natural to all of us. But maybe what is natural to one person is different to another.

Is that the same with football?

People often say of technically gifted players, 'He's a natural.' But is that true? It suggests that football ability is something that's already inside a youngster, hidden away in the DNA, just waiting for something or someone to bring it out. The truth is that there will always be different levels of innate ability, but that's not to say many important skills can't be taught or learned.

So when can we learn football skills? And where can we learn them? And who can we learn them from? You might be surprised at

the answers.

Because if you're a parent or a coach, you may be doing it wrong or you may be looking in the wrong place and you may be looking at the wrong things.

So, where should you look?

You can search the internet and find plenty of advice on how to teach kids football. There's a lot of information there. In fact, probably too much and it's likely to be confusing.

Ask FIFA? No. Don't. They don't know either. They basically ignore kids until they are around seven years old.

You can ask coaches, parents, players, football associations and federations. They all have answers for you.

But maybe they're also doing it wrong…

Parents and Coaches

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *My Side,* David Beckham remembers his parents' influence in getting to know football as a youngster:

'I'm sure Mum could dig it out of the pile; that first video of me in action. There I am, David Robert Joseph Beckham, aged three, wearing the new Manchester United kit Dad had bought me for Christmas, playing football in the front room of our house in Chingford. … As a father watching my own sons growing up, I get an idea of what I must have been like as a boy; and reminders, as well, of what Dad was like with me. As soon as I could walk, he made sure I had a football to kick. … After he got in from his job as a heating engineer, we'd go to the park together and just practice for hours on end. All the strengths in my game are the ones Dad taught me in the park.'

This book is aimed mainly at parents and coaches of young children under seven (although many of the points are applicable to kids of all ages). This is a crucial age for teaching children skills. Yes,

you can learn skills all your life, but the old adage that a kid's brain is like a sponge can be true not only for language, music and other forms of learning, but also for football skills.

A good friend of mine was amazed when he decided to play football with his three-year-old daughter for the first time. In fact, he was playing more for his own amusement rather than hers. So he'd trap the ball, roll it around, knock it from foot to foot and play it through his legs. He may have been over 50 but he, too, wanted to play like Ronaldo. What he saw next astonished him: His daughter was trying to copy all the skills he was doing and not doing them too badly for a three-year-old's first experience with a football.

This was something that having kids of my own brought home to me. I had been a technical skills coach for children for over twenty years when my first son, Kaito, was born. I had been responsible for opening up eighty football schools across Japan and was at the forefront of Japan's technical coaching revolution through my schools, sponsor events, instructional videos, technical sections in football magazines and even appearances in manga (comic books). For more than ten years, I had my own daily corner demonstrating football techniques on a national television show.

I was confident in my ability to teach football to children.

My experience of working with kids, usually in the six-to-twelve age range, led me, like many coaches, to believe that around six or seven was a good time to get hold of a kid and start teaching

him or her about football, to teach them ball control and skills with the ball as well as how to play in a game. But in the back of my mind, I knew kids could handle learning technical skills at a younger age.

For kids of that age, playing a game has always been about kicking the ball and running after it. Typically, a kid will chase the ball and when he gets it, kick it to someone else. Hopefully, it gets further up the pitch where someone will be on hand to whack it into the net.

Untutored kids will often spend their time kicking their ball against a wall or back and forth with a parent, relative or friend. Running and kicking is what they learn, not control and ball skills.

When I was a youngster growing up in upstate New York, the closest we got to improving our skills or ball control was trying to juggle the ball. The good players could keep the ball up for ages and we assumed this would improve our technical capabilities and eventually our game. It *is* a form of skill, but it's a basic and largely useless one. (FIFA, for some reason, thinks that juggling, or 'keepy-uppy' as they call it, is one of the 'core' skills; certainly it's a clichéd part of demonstrating players' skills in commercials and videos.) But there's a lot more to football technique than kicking and juggling.

Street football, common in South America, is frequently mentioned by traditional football analysts as a reason for the seemingly endless supply of technically gifted players who ensure success there and also as a reason for the lack of success in other

places.

We often hear British commentators and analysts bemoan the disappearance of street football as a reason for the decline in technical standards in the British Isles. I think these commonly accepted rationalisations are trite. For example, Japan and Korea do not have a tradition of street football but they are now producing players who are highly technically competent. However, these views do point us in the right direction.

I believe, and I don't think it would be controversial to say, that the development of technically gifted players is based on having a 'football culture.' What this means is that in countries with a football culture, young children are exposed – in some cases as soon as they can walk – to football and playing football with parents, relatives and friends. The content of this 'football culture' will vary from place to place, but it will be a core part of the overall culture, wherever it is.

Having spent my life teaching football in Asia in places where no football culture existed, I know now that a football culture can be developed. Even better, this new football culture can be created free of the traditional beliefs, myths and dogma that tend to infect the cultures of traditional football-playing nations. With the right support, a football 'ecosystem' can be created where none previously existed.

One of the biggest problems in football is that coaching is

often carried out on a 'one-size-fits-all' basis. In fact, it should be more organic, meaning that programmes should be created according to local needs. Instead, everyone is trying to import the most popular football 'flavour of the month' – German, Spanish, Brazilian, Italian, French, etc. – to guide their football development.

The Japanese approach in becoming the dominant team in Asia is instructive. They've tried to learn as much as they can from all parts of the world, localising and adapting various aspects to fit their own needs. If you look at the history of the Japan Football Association, you will see coaching and other influences from Germany, England, Holland, Brazil, Spain, Argentina, France, Korea, Croatia and Serbia. They didn't try to replicate any country's complete model but they were good at understanding what would work well for Japan, and they imported those concepts and ideas to help with their football development. While they still have some way to go before they can challenge for football's highest prize, they've been very successful in the last two decades in establishing themselves as the top nation in Asia. Japan is recognised as producing highly technically proficient players, many of whom have played in top overseas leagues.

The truth is that if you manage to develop technically gifted players from a very young age, whether as a result of your own existing football culture or through a planned development as in Japan, anything is possible in football. No one has the magic formula

or special ingredient for developing great players and teams, but there is one thing for sure: Without technically competent players, it doesn't matter what system, tactics or formation you play – the results will always be dependent upon the individual qualities and characteristics of the players. Results at team level will rely to a great degree on the technical competence of the players. So, for long-term success, either at an individual level or at the national team level, it's clear that results will depend on developing technically competent players.

But how do you do this? And when do you start?

As with many learning processes with kids, the later you leave it, the harder it is to do (or fix). But coaches and parents have the wrong idea about the when and how of teaching young kids.

Nearly all coaches and parents (and, to be fair, most professional football administrators and technical directors) assume that young kids – three, four, five, six years old – can't handle even the basics of football until they are aged seven, eight or beyond. I'd been guilty of this, too, to some extent. Many coaches also assumed, and still assume, that children can't be taught high-level techniques at a young age. As I mentioned before, the main initial experience kids have with football is with their parents at the park or maybe on the beach hoofing a ball around as best they can. These days, to me, that's like watching a couple of Neanderthals trying to make a wheel by bashing a rock with primitive hammers. The rock may eventually

form a rudimentary wheel, but it's not going to get you very far.

Learn the skills to make the wheel and then you get a better wheel.

Learn the skills to make a football player and then you get a better football player.

It really can be that simple.

Motor Skills

THERE IS CERTAINLY NO DEFINED age as to when a child has the motor skills to learn the technical skills of football. A lot of people believe that such skills cannot be learned until late in childhood. From the research I've done on federations and coaches and through the many, many football people I've met around the world, it seems that ten is regarded as the 'Golden Age' of technical development in children.

In an article titled *'What is the age to start playing football,'* former Liverpool and Real Madrid manager Rafa Benitez states: *'The ten-year-old derives pleasure from simple physical activity. …. It is the age of mastering manual skills.'*

According to one football federation, kids in the under-six to under-nine age group 'are still 'clumsy' (lack fine motor skills),' while kids in the under-ten to thirteen age group 'are very adaptive to learning motor skills.' The federation calls it the 'Skill Acquisition Phase.'

Meanwhile, 'the world's foremost mentor of football coaches,' Horst Wein, in his book *Developing Youth Football Players* states that *'the golden age of motor learning'* occurs between seven and eleven years of age.

And the National Center for Biotechnology Information under America's National Institutes for Health states that it is between the ages of ten and twelve that *'most children are able to master complex motor skills.'*

But not everyone is in agreement and this established 'wisdom' is not borne out by what I have seen in my own experience of teaching kids. Thankfully, there seems to be some support.

In the recently published (January 2016) *Best Practice for Youth Sport: Science and Strategies for Positive Athlete Experiences*, authors Robin Vealey and Melissa Chase, both professors in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University in Ohio, state that the key development phase for motor skills is from two to eight:

'It is extremely important that children acquire mature movement patterns in multiple fundamental motor skills during their childhood years ... Children need opportunities for practice, play, instruction, and encouragement to develop these skills. … Fundamental motor skill development is recommended from ages two to eight. Although this may extend a few years beyond age eight, it is much more difficult to develop mature patterns of these skills after childhood. …

'The athletic proficiency barrier occurs when mature patterns of

fundamental motor skills are not developed due to a lack of opportunity or practice during the optimal learning time of childhood. Without these skills, kids are unlikely to become involved in sports, and if they do try, they are likely to drop out due to the frustration of not having the prerequisite fundamentals skills to be successful.'

Because so many people have *assumed* kids can't do something before the age of eight or nine or ten, it has become a self-fulfilling theory; people don't try to prove it might not be true. Coaches find it a lot easier to work with a ten-year-old with good fundamental skills rather than a fidgety five-year-old with little more than enthusiasm and hope.

But how did the 'talented' ten-year-old become talented? Surely the development has to start much earlier?

One federation tells us that their programme is only for players with *'genuine talent,'* and then says this applies to kids around ten years of age. Well, you can certainly see some talent at that age, but there can also be a lot of hidden faults. Similarly, those kids you just sent back to kickabouts in the park can have unbelievably hidden reserves of talent that won't be on show at age eight or nine or ten.

Are you really going to start your programme for youngsters around the age of ten? As one mother pointed out to me, kids start kicking before they're even born. OK, that's a joke, but infants know how to move their limbs. Not very well perhaps, especially

compared with other mammals, but after practicing for around a year, they are up on two feet and ready to run. By the time they are two, most kids have a decent sense of balance and coordination, and are increasing in speed. They've already got pretty good motor skills and are expanding and improving on them all the time, grabbing things, pushing things, climbing on things and, if you give them a ball, kicking things.

So, some federations believe that kids under ten are 'clumsy,' lack motor skills and are still figuring out how to put one foot in front of the other. Almost every football association, federation and confederation in the world ignores kids under six. FIFA's Grassroots Programme is for kids who are six to twelve. Football is missing something. Or just ignoring it.

And you don't have to take just my word for it. Increasingly, studies like the one cited above are showing the importance of learning physical skills early in life. Professor Nuala M. Byrne of Bond University's Institute of Health and Sport and Professor Andrew P. Hills of Mater Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, state in their article *The Importance Of Physical Activity In The Growth And Development Of Children*:

'Early in life, particularly in infancy and early childhood, physical activity has an important role in the physical, psychosocial and mental development of the child. Most importantly, self-initiated informal play should be stressed, as the opportunity for the young child to experience a wide range of physical activities is

likely to provide the greatest chance of developing the set of motor skills needed for participation in later lifestyle and/or sports activities. The early years of life should be the time of motor learning foundation for all children and the subsequent development of progressively more complex skills.'

This message hasn't gotten through to most football federations around the world, not to mention the governing body of world football.

Football federations compound this error with elitism, or what they call 'identifying players.' In other words, tossing out those players who they decide are only 'semi-gifted' or talent-free and keeping only those who are superior *at that age level*. Basically, the federations want to concentrate their resources at the top of the player development pyramid.

In the long run, this becomes self-defeating. A lot of those discarded kids could become 'elite' given the right coaching. Conversely, a lot of those who are elite at a young age will never make it. In my view, this approach fails as it involves making judgements on only partially developed players.

The Learning Curve

OVER THE YEARS, AND ESPECIALLY after having two sons, it was obvious to me that there was some kind of 'black hole' in football development. Who helps kids develop their skills at two years of age? Or three or four? The truth is that kids in this age group and all the way up to six or seven have been largely ignored by those who should know better: the professional coaches and the federations. The only substantial influence on their development at this time is the parents. Let's examine this key factor through a glimpse into my own family.

I have two young boys – aged ten and thirteen – and, as is the case with most families in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, Mum dictates the daily routine for our kids. It's interesting to take a look at the mothers' experience when it comes to their children playing football.

Often, a child's first experience with football will be in kindergarten. In Japan, many kindergartens hire outside companies to provide physical education teachers for their schools. In addition

to teaching physical education classes, these companies also provide after-school activities in the form of various sports. Some kindergartens have their own football coaches, but nearly all these coaches make the same mistakes.

In the case of my sons, their after-school football programme had a large number of participants, but I could see the instructors were not overly knowledgeable about football development. Mothers, especially younger ones, are rarely aware of the quality of the football instruction their children are receiving, but with the pressures of bringing up children, they are more than happy to send Junior off to football practice and have an extra hour or so to themselves, either in the form of free time or time spent with other mothers on the sidelines while Junior appears to be having lots of fun and using up that excess energy.

I've watched many of these kindergarten sessions take place with physical exercise masquerading as football development. While these kindergarten programmes don't provide high-quality football instruction, they do provide fun and exercise for the kids – and happy kids equal happy mothers.

On the rare occasions when fathers visit, they're usually unimpressed (if they have any opinion at all), but they don't dare suggest pulling their children out of the programme as both mother and child have joined a new circle of friends and have established a routine.

And it's a braver man than me – even as a football professional who wants the best football instruction for his kids – who would suggest a change in education plans based solely on the quality of the football instruction at a kindergarten.

I'm not suggesting that parents should alter their education plans based on the quality of football instruction available but I now know that the problem with the development of football technique starts here. Parents are in control of their children's leisure time when they are young. In Japan and other countries, much of this leisure time – up to fifty hours in some cases – is outsourced to schools, gyms, clubs, etc. To maximise the results of this leisure time, parents need to be well-informed and to understand what kind of instruction their child is receiving – and to ensure the timing is right.

My whole philosophy for technical development in football is based on a child learning to feel and manipulate the ball from as early an age as they can. The later the children start – and, more critically, if their initial instruction is flawed, as I believe it is almost all over the world – the more likely it is they will fail to realise their full potential. It's the same as a student who, without proper instruction and time expended efficiently in learning, will lag behind in school studies. I believe that, as with academic studies, it's important for parents to ensure their kids get the right instruction.

Most coaches are coaching other people's kids for a limited period of time every week. I wondered what would be different

about coaching my own child. At first, I didn't have a plan, but one day the proverbial apple fell on my head. I was signing some miniature balls for adidas, one of my sponsors, when it suddenly dawned on me that the balls would be good even for a very young child to play with.

Small child, small feet, small ball.

It seemed so obvious.

My first son, Kaito, had just started walking and so I ordered sixteen of these little balls and put three or four in every room of the house. From Day 1, I discouraged him from just kicking the ball. Instead, when Kaito went near the ball, I would encourage him to try and manipulate it, to keep it connected to his foot and do things with it. I would show him simple things like pullbacks and rolling the ball and he would try to copy me. I suppose that if I'd just kicked the ball against the walls or the furniture, he would have done that, too. But that wasn't what I wanted and I knew my football experiment would be quickly terminated by his mother if the ball hit the TV or something breakable.

At first, I just wanted him to become accustomed to manipulating the ball, but I also wanted him to learn early on to protect the ball. When a small child who can't control or manipulate a ball is challenged for the ball, they will almost always kick it away and either stand still or chase after it. If you challenge a kid who knows early on how to protect the ball instead of kicking it away, he

or she will pull the ball back and protect it, just like children at this age will protect their treasured toys. This reflex, taught at an early age, is priceless in conditioning the young child to possess and keep the ball rather than kick it away.

When do kids learn the quickest? They are learning from Day 1. A child can recognise words by around seven months of age and they will understand complex sentences before they can actually speak them. Most kids are fairly fluent in their native language before they are five. Some can be bilingual or trilingual, to varying degrees, by such an age.

Have you tried teaching a thirty-year-old non-native speaker a foreign language? Or have you tried learning one yourself? Have you figured out how to programme your TV recorder to record yet? Can you use all the functions and find stuff on your smartphone? Isn't it weird how your little kid can figure out your tech stuff intuitively and you can't figure it out at all?

A young child's brain has an incredible capacity to absorb and process knowledge.

According to the website of Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families, *'The number of neurons peaks even before birth; some 100 billion are formed during just the first five months of gestation. … a newborn's brain is only about one-quarter the size of an adult's. It grows to about 80 percent of adult size by three years of age and 90 percent by*

age five. …The number of synapses in the cerebral cortex peaks within the first few years of life.'

Even before birth, the brain has developed and can carry out various functions. But the physical development of the brain after birth runs in parallel to learning and experience. According to Phyllis Porter, a specialist in human development: *'The first three years see the most rapid changes of all of life due to the bombardment of experience (everything is new!). At this time, the brain is most flexible and prepared to learn.'*

Parents can see changes in their kids' development on an almost daily basis. Suddenly, your kid can figure out how to get the ice cream out of the freezer or how to navigate YouTube on your ultrasmart TV (that you still can't operate). But there's an awful lot behind the process that gets the child to that point. Children observe, understand and compute the things they must do to make their world better. And the child gets to do this much quicker the younger he or she learns.

Football is no different. If you give a child the right input, the output increases dramatically. Just as you don't hand a child a musical score and say, 'Play Beethoven's Fifth Symphony,' you don't give a child a ball and say, 'Play like Ronaldo.' The child has to learn how to operate the instrument, be it a piano, a guitar or, in our case, a simple football.

So the child needs to learn the skills and, as stated previously, you don't have to wait. Walking and language skills don't come in a

rush. They are progressive. Football skills are the same. Kids should be encouraged to interact with a small ball as soon as they show interest. And the interest can be created by the child's instinct to copy the parent. And if the parent is showing the correct simple basic techniques of ball control and manipulation, then ball control and manipulation will become as natural to the child as language or playing a musical instrument.

But What Can I Teach Them?

JUST KICKING THE BALL around aimlessly with your kid is not the answer. Forget the mistaken notion that a kid is just a kid and limited in his or her capacity to learn. We've gone over that. Their capacity to learn is almost limitless.

So, what do we want to teach young kids?

We want to teach children to love the football.

A football should not be something you hit, thump or kick to get rid of; it should be something you love, caress, protect and take care of. And when you're ready, you can pass it on to someone else who will love, caress, protect and take care of it. When you have that ball, it is your best friend. You can hold on to it and play with it and do magic with it. You want the ball to have as much fun as you. And there should be no limit as to what you can do. It's an open-ended scale.

In practical terms, it's ball manipulation. The child must learn to control the ball and move the ball and stop the ball at will. With both feet.

Two feet? At that age? Yes, you can always talk about Argentina legend Diego Maradona and his astonishing left foot. But can you imagine how good he would have been if he'd been able to work his magic with both feet? How many players have you seen who are equally as good with their right foot as with their left? Even today, it's hard to think of any.

In Japan, I can remember Ken Fujita of Ventforet Kofu as one of the rare players who could take free-kicks and corner kicks with both his left and right foot. He was a fine, underrated player and perhaps should have played on a bigger stage, but he stands out for his uniqueness as being truly two-footed.

Another great example is Aya Miyama, the former captain of the Japan Women's National Team. She is also completely two-footed and can also take free-kicks and corners with either foot.

Most players use both feet at some stage, usually because they are forced into a situation where it is necessary to play the ball with their weaker foot. They've always been able to use their weaker foot, but they've never really had to try, so one foot remains weaker than the other. Could you imagine trying to tell Maradona to use his right foot more often at the age of twenty? But if someone had persuaded him to do that when he was four or five, the result could have been amazing. Why would you even want a weaker foot?

Get children to use both feet from a young age. Like using your left hand when you play the piano, it's an acquired skill. But the

younger you teach it, the easier it is to learn.

It's much easier to learn the right skill at a young age than to unlearn a wrongly acquired skill at an older age. At an older age, it will be too late. Too many people in football think that the window of opportunity for learning skills comes after six or seven. But the window is open way before that. Condition the brain at a young age to accept the concept of using both feet. It can be done and the dividends can be enormous.

The Love of the Game

NURTURING A CHILD in the game of football differs around the world. In Africa, poor kids often play barefoot with a rolled-up newspaper or something similar in plots of wasteland. In South America, the lucky kids will have some kind of ball and play in the streets or maybe on the beach. In Europe and rural Japan, kids will often have footballs and very often a free public ground to play on. So the Europeans and Japanese should be ahead of the game, right?

But wait. Pele and Diego Maradona, two of the greatest players ever – many say *the* two greatest players ever – grew up in poverty. Pele, for example, used to stuff a newspaper or rags into a sock to make a rudimentary football to play with. These two football geniuses certainly didn't have the advantages some Europeans have, yet they mesmerised football fans all over the world and grew up to humiliate established football powers such as Italy and England.

In some ways, they were lucky because they weren't exposed to 'traditional' methods of football development. Zinedine Zidane

extolled the benefits of playing football on the streets of Marseille until he was 14, the implication being that he learned his skills without anyone trying to coach him into a style or 'box.' He developed freely and imaginatively.

Pele and Maradona may not have understood their advantage, but they were lucky not to be exposed to a football machine. Some of the more developed countries are so obsessed with football and football development, they can't see the wood for the trees. For these people, football is almost an obligation, a codified form of education. Japanese sports teams are traditionally taught to 'fight' and 'endure.' Unfortunately, that often means fighting against ridiculous training regimens and enduring criminally inept coaches steeped in a method of sports training that is fifty years past its sell-by date.

It's almost surprising that athletes in Japan aren't tattooed with the slogan: 'No pain, no gain.'

Too often, sport is seen as a discipline, but why do most people play sport? Initially, at least, for fun. And if you're a kid, only for fun. Yet all too often Japanese kids are encouraged to train till they drop and led to believe that this form of endurance is what sport is all about.

Is that what it's about for a five-year-old?

Of course not. It's an opportunity, not an obligation. It's a game, not a discipline. Do kids need discipline to improve? Sure.

You don't take that out of the equation, but you don't make it the bottom line. If you give a kid a piano or a drum or a whistle, the first thing they want to do is make a noise. Any noise. And they'll love it. But that same day, you're not going to take away your child's ambition and tell them to start playing the instrument properly, are you? No, you'll let them keep banging away for a while, letting them discover some of the sounds they can get from their instrument, giving them the freedom to express their happy, childish feelings.

Have you seen a child's face when he or she bangs on a piano or a drum or blows a whistle? It's beautiful. It's happiness. It's what a parent wants to see.

So, are you going to take that smile away from your child?

No, of course not. That's the one thing you want to hold on to. That's the one thing that you want to use to help your child develop. After years of training and development and playing, that's the thing you want a player – your football-playing child – to keep to the end. I can't tell you how to be a parent to your child, but I can tell you how to help them develop their skills. It makes me so angry to see parents of child football players abuse their kids, other kids, referees and other parents in the mistaken belief that they are helping their child's football development. How?

What does a child respond to? A child wants parental approval, parental love, parental appreciation. A child's reward is making Mummy or Daddy happy. The parent's reward is making the child

happy. It's about smiles not scowls. Of course, discipline is part of a child's upbringing and is also part of learning a sport or a musical instrument or maths or biology.

But pain doesn't equal development.

Football Evolution

IT'S EASY TO SEE HOW FOOTBALL has developed over the last fifty years. Take a look on YouTube at football from forty or fifty years ago. OK, so the hairstyles and uniforms may look a little strange, but many other aspects of the game have improved. At the professional level, football grounds are much, much better, making it easier to play 'the beautiful game.' The venues are often modern, all-seater stadiums with great access, refreshment areas and merchandise shops. Massive screens show slow-motion highlights and the fans sit in relative comfort rather than stand on cramped and dangerous terraces.

Technological innovations mean that football is shown all over the world on TVs and computers and even telephones. The action is analysed in slow motion by panels of experts, referees' decisions are examined in fine detail, and players and managers respond with interviews and opinions. The FIFA World Cup is the biggest

sporting event on the planet and is broadcast to virtually every country and territory in the world.

Coaches no longer smoke in the dugout (which is no longer a pit in the ground but a high-tech customised 'technical area' with seats provided by the likes of Audi or Recaro) and their methods have evolved from the Dark Ages ('Just get out there and kick 'em, hoist the ball up to the forwards and get it into the back of the net.') to complex statistical analysis and real-time monitoring of the players' condition.

Games are broken down by specialised analysts, while physiotherapists, dieticians, clinicians and doctors work in the background to bring the players to maximum physical fitness for every game. Players have agents, managers and spin doctors to keep their careers and profiles on the up and the ranks of the professionals go way, way deeper than fifty years ago with salaries supporting whole industries. Youngsters are signed up even before they reach puberty.

In the old days, you'd play in the park with a few of your friends and maybe one of the teachers at your elementary school would organise a game. Nowadays, kids often come into contact with a football coach in elementary school, sometimes even in kindergarten. This has to be a good thing, right?

If only it was. Many of these 'coaches' have no coaching qualifications or experience at all. And much of the coaching is

rudimentary, illogical and even counter-productive.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First, let's return to the topic of how kids develop in football.

The 10,000-hour Rule

THERE IS A THEORY, posited by Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson and popularised by author Malcolm Gladwell, that in order to master a skill, 10,000 hours of practice is needed. Popular though the theory is, it has now been shown that other factors are equally important. However, a study by Princeton University showed that the difference in the number of hours an activity is practiced is most significant for 'games' and to a slightly lesser extent 'sports.' The difference depended on the standardised aspects of the activity. So, according to the study it is easier to become good at chess through practice than it is to become good at, say, rock 'n' roll.

The theory has been applied to football with experts saying that kids in South America reach the 10,000-hour mark by the age of thirteen, while kids in Europe don't reach it until they are twenty.

In his autobiography, *My Side*, David Beckham recalls visiting Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach and seeing the skills on display there:

'There were goalposts and little sets of floodlights planted along the whole length of it. And, as far as the eye could see, kids – thousands of them – out playing football on the sand. No wonder Brazil are world champions. All these youngsters were either playing games or doing tricks, like keepy-uppy and head tennis or showing off flicks and turns in twos and threes. The level of natural ability was unbelievable. … If football's got a soul, that's where it lives: on that beach.'

Whether or not 10,000 hours of skills practice really is the benchmark figure is not exactly the point. The study shows there is, at least, some credence to the theory. If you think about it, the best surfers live near the sea and the best skiers live near the mountains. They're not good because they live in those locations; they are good because those locations give them the opportunity to improve their skill level and practice over and over again. In other words, they get their 10,000 hours in quicker than others.

In football, young players need to reach a certain skill level and the higher the skill level they reach, the better equipped they will be to become good football players. But in football, you don't need to live near a football pitch; you just need to have a ball and practice with it at your feet – a lot (10,000 hours would be good!). South American kids are ahead of the game in this respect, but there's no reason why any child from any country shouldn't be able to reach

this level at the same age.

If you think kids can't acquire such skills at a young age or they are not taught such skills or given the expectation that they can reach such a level of skills, then quite simply they probably won't reach that level.

If you allow them to aim high, the level they can reach at a young age will astound you. But if you allow that golden age to pass, it's much harder to teach the skills at a later age. One of the reasons I made videos of my kids was to show what a two-, three-, four-, five-, six-, seven-year-old is capable of. There's no benchmark out there. No one is showing what these young kids are capable of.

The flipside of this is the number of kids quitting football in their teens. People say it's due to burnout or pushy parents or overtraining, but one of the main reasons is that they realise they are not good enough, having never mastered the essential skills.

The football world must work much harder and better at educating the parents of young players who have just started their development.

Wisdom That Isn't

ONE MAJOR PROBLEM IS that many young children have been held back by the received, or perceived, wisdom of the times. This might include pearls such as:

They don't have motor skills;
They can't be coached;
They're too difficult to coach;
They just want to kick the ball and play around freely;
They're too young.

You can theorise all you want and get all the opinions you want, but I can tell you this is simply not true. I have coached around half a million kids from the age of two upwards. I've seen how kids have developed over and over and over again. When I started writing this book, my sons were seven and ten and I was proud seeing what they could do. And they're not able to master skills just because

Dad's a coach. They're not the only two kids in Tokyo who can make a ball dance around their feet. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of kids can do it. And my sons didn't learn everything from me. My older son possesses skills I could only dream about. What I've given them, and the other children I coach, is the opportunity to improve their skills. Most football coaches don't want to go near a three-year-old. Even if they did, most of them wouldn't know what to teach them.

In fact, what most coaches do at this stage is set the kids up for failure – and then discard the failures.

You don't expect a child to be able to do algebra, geometry, calculus or trigonometry without learning the basics of mathematics: adding, subtracting, division and multiplication. So why would you expect a kid to be able to play football without acquiring the single most basic technical skill of football, which is:

Learning to manipulate the ball.

Some coaches throw young kids into games and start talking tactics, formations, systems and responsibilities. Parents get emotionally involved. Too many people believe their kids have to think about winning and in the modern age of football that usually means winning at any cost.

These are kids. If you have winners, you have losers. Kids can be devastated to lose when adults put so much pressure on them to win. Of course, they will experience this aspect of the game

eventually. Not every kid can be a star, not every kid can play at the highest level, and not every kid can be on Manchester United's books.

There's another very important aspect to this that isn't just ignored, it's not thought of to begin with. But it forms a key part of my coaching philosophy and has the prospect of raising the level of football – at any level – to a whole different plane. It's simple and true.

In order to raise the overall level of football, you have to raise the lower level. Pick up the bottom and the top has to go higher.

It seems so obvious, but invariably football coaching is not approached this way.

It's almost the complete opposite of the elitist system found in most leading football-playing countries today. You wouldn't expect that in education, would you? If you're kid's no good at maths, would you expect the teacher to throw him out of the class? No, you'd expect the teacher to pay more attention to your kid and bring him or her up to a higher level, closer to the level of the really good kids.

The best way to make the 'elite' player better is by raising the level of the lower-level players. They in turn will push the elite players to become better. Imagine you have a team of twenty eight-year-old players. Three of the twenty are very skillful and the other seventeen are not. Those three good players know they will most

likely play every minute of every game and in their preferred position, even if they goof off or miss practice. So there is often a complacency with the best players who invariably are not pushed into making themselves better. But imagine if all twenty of those players have a similar technical ability. The competition then becomes much more fierce; they will fight to retain their position on the team and work harder to become better players.

You don't discard failures. Well, let's stop there; they're not failures. They're just operating at a lower level. So you bring them up to a higher level. You help them, the teacher helps them or you get someone else to help them. Given the right encouragement and put on the right path, it's incredible what kids can do, how they can improve and even excel.

Remember this: On his first day at school, Lionel Messi was told he was too small to play football.

In truth, most of the better kids will probably reach that high level anyway. The trick is to raise the level of all the kids. If you're running a school of a thousand kids, you don't want just 100 kids doing well in their exams. You're not going to look like a good headmaster with that kind of success ratio. What you want to do is raise the level of all the kids so that they're creeping up to the level of the Top 100. Then your school will be at a much higher level.

It's the same with football. We've all seen teams where one player is better than all the others. The other players often think:

Better pass to him, he's the star. It's almost like the other players feel inferior. But imagine if you had eleven players all playing at a high level. Think of England in 1966, Brazil in the 1970 FIFA World Cup, Liverpool in the 1980s, AC Milan in the 1990s, Manchester United under Sir Alex Ferguson and Spain in recent times. Dominant teams with strength in all areas. They were great teams. Yes, they had some great individual players, but they were the sum of their parts. The teams were strong because all the players were strong. Even the subs were strong.

Simple Starting Steps

'SKILL WAS, AND NEVER WILL BE, the result of coaching. It's a love affair between Child and Ball.' – former Manchester United midfielder Roy Keane.

Lionel Messi's brother, Matias, once revealed his brother's love affair with the ball as a child: *'When his mother sent him off to run errands, Leo always took his football with him. If he didn't have one, he would make one out of plastic bags or socks.'*

Messi's La Liga rival, Cristiano Ronaldo, summed this relationship up in his book *Moments*: *'The ball has always been my best friend.'*

In the old days – my day – typically the steps toward learning football were:

- Get your parents to give you a ball, preferably a 'real,' full-sized one;
- Go outside and kick the ball around at random, against a wall if there's one handy;

- Meet up with friends and kick the ball around at random with them, in a park if there's one handy;
- Hope you get better … somehow.

In truth, there was no method, no clear pathway to becoming a better player. Nobody knew how football players became football players. The good ones started playing and somehow became better than everyone else. The kids who couldn't play well might still get selected for pick-up games to make up the numbers, but no-one would pass to them anyway, so they were already cast aside. And they weren't going to get better.

Why?

Because they weren't going to see or touch the ball.

So how did the good kids get good? Did they have coaches? No, of course not. More likely, they had a ball. And maybe a brother. Or a father. Or an uncle. Perhaps they were taught a trick or two, or maybe they'd try juggling. Sometimes they might kick the ball around with their friends or have one-on-one contests. What mattered to them from a young age was learning to keep the ball, to make it theirs, to love it and protect it.

Cristiano Ronaldo recalls in his book: *'I cannot help caressing the ball or enjoying juggling. I used to do it when I played in the street. I kept on doing it all throughout my training and I still do it now. And I will keep on doing it. This is the real Cristiano Ronaldo.'*

Of course, some kids are going to have more aptitude than others. But I'll repeat what I said earlier: What if all the kids had the opportunity to be good? Here's some easy steps you can take.

Give the young child a ball

Not a big UEFA Champions League or FIFA World Cup replica ball; a small ball. Their feet are small, their legs are small and, at this stage, their football brains are small. Give them a ball and their football brains will soon get bigger.

At that age, their football brains are brand new and waiting for input, for data. Where do they get the input? TV is one likely source. A parent is another. A kid can see a football technique on TV or on YouTube and start trying it straight away. And some kids will master it in unbelievably short time. Children's brains don't just lack the input and the data; they are screaming out for input and data. Why can your six-year-old use the remote control on the TV easier than you? Because your brain's not empty. And it's probably been converted from an analogue system. To adapt to the new remote control, you have to dump the old stuff that's slowing down your brain. The kid's got a new brain; all you have to do is boot it up, set it up and start filling it up.

Show the kid a technique

OK, maybe you're a parent and you don't have a lot of football

skills to show your kid. Don't worry. You've got a smartphone, a tablet, a laptop, a TV, a DVD, YouTube. There are loads of sources for football techniques. The fundamental techniques are listed toward the end of this book. Parents can learn as easily as their children. We are not asking parents to become super-skilled football coaches and we're not asking the children to become super-skilled. Most likely the parents won't want to practice hard every day; most likely the children will, and this will lead to proficiency.

Do not resort to detailed explanations of how to perform a skill. Rather, only explain the rudiments of the skill and have the child imitate it from a demonstration. If a child has to think too much about how to replicate a skill, it will cause stress and inhibit the learning process. The idea is to eliminate the thought process as much as possible.

Belgian teacher and trainer Michel Bruyninckx, a renowned youth coach and mental trainer, offers this advice to help a child's brain adapt to different situations and quickly retain football knowledge:

'Continuously changing from one drill to another to provoke mistakes while performing is a way of helping retain information better in the long-term memory and enabling it to be regenerated during games. Differentiation involves changing the training conditions and circumstances to get the child to adapt to changes. Name the various skills a child practices so that you can ask the child

to change rapidly from one skill to another. The child will make mistakes but will learn to memorise the different skills and adapt to the changes. Such changes will force the brain to adapt. Football games are fast and highly unpredictable, so training the awareness of continual changes will help the child make decisions quicker and make more efficient technical adaptations.'

Bring the child indoors

Parental care develops within a physical and emotional environment that we know as HOME. This is where new lives are built. Michel Bruyninckx firmly believes that the power of the home is a crucial development tool:

'In Steven Spielberg's science fiction fantasy E.T., one of the key emotional strings that tugs at your heart is the repetition of the word 'home.' In the movie, E.T. is helpless like a child and like a child just wants to go home. In life, as in the movie, the irresistible pull of home is a cornerstone of our existence. Home should always represent a major part of our developmental foundation. The power of 'home' and what 'home' can do for a child is something that can't be ignored. Without the foundation that home provides, exposure to life can be so much tougher. The home environment and emotional endorsement are key elements to a child's development, not only as a child, but also as a potential football player. The non-competitive home environment provides comfort to very young children.'

Japanese homes are among the smallest in the world, yet,

paradoxically, they can also have lots of space. Why? Because Japanese home furnishings are often mobile. Many houses don't have big sofas or dining tables or beds. That's been changing over the last couple of decades, but there is still enough room in a typical Japanese house for a kid to practice football.

How's that? Well, you don't need much more space than the full width of your child's legs. Because that's all the space needed to manipulate the ball. There's no kicking the ball against the furniture or aiming it at TVs, glass cabinets or expensive pottery. The ball stays on the floor around the feet.

Of course, there's nothing stopping you taking the kid outside to a playground or a park. That's fine, but the truth is a lot of kids today spend most of their time indoors. I managed to persuade my wife to let me place very small footballs everywhere around our house. There was a little football or two in almost every room, so my boys could always practice their techniques. And even though I have two boys, they weren't usually practicing with each other; they were practicing their own skills by themselves and getting better and better.

Encourage, Validate

Bruyninckx specialises in helping players grow in confidence and achieve success. Liverpool and AC Milan are among the teams

that have benefited from his knowledge, and he applies this knowledge to children as well:

'You have to train and encourage your children from Day 1 to learn better and achieve success. So, when your child is trying to master the ball, encourage him or her, even when – or especially when – the child fails in the beginning. Encouragement is the fertiliser of learning.

'Social psychology tells us that success in taking control of an object such as a football (or other tasks like making music or dancing) increases feelings of self-confidence. Through self-confidence children also develop their self-regulative capabilities. Researchers have found that self-confidence is one of the most influential factors in how well an athlete performs in competition. Robust self-confidence and self-belief correlate to 'mental toughness' – or the ability to cope with demands better than your competitors and opponents, and to remain determined, focused and in control under pressure. …

'When athletes confront stress while playing sports, their self-confidence decreases. However, feedback from colleagues, coaches, friends and family in the form of emotional and informational support reduces the extent to which stresses in sports reduce their self-confidence. Self-confidence feeds well-being and a feeling of general happiness. So, you should regularly tell your child not only that they are improving, but also show them how. You can do this by making a video record of their progress to show improvement on a technical level. This will have a knock-on effect of reinforcing mental skills.'

Refine, Repeat, Perfect

JOHN WOODEN, America's greatest ever basketball coach, defined the learning process as: Demonstrate. Execute. Refine. Repeat.

Some coaches think repetition is an ugly word. Perhaps a better word would be 'perfectionism.' When you start to learn a piece of music on the piano, you'll probably learn the right-hand melody first and then add the left hand. And you'll start out slowly to gain precision before speeding up to the tempo the composer had in mind. It's not much different with football. Nowadays, it's easy to work out a technique/skill on TV, on YouTube or with a phone/tablet app. Copy the technique slowly and build up speed.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Of course, repetition of boring, useless stuff won't help with motivation. Just how many times can you kick a ball against a wall or to your brother or parent? Football is not about just one technique. There are hundreds of techniques, so your child won't be bored during the learning process. But it is important to learn

specific, deliberate techniques. You don't just put a kid in front of a piano and tell him or her to practice pressing the keys. Targeted training is important (details further on). The aim is to have the child master the ball and repetition is key to this development. He'll soon be expanding not only his ability to manipulate the ball, but also the range of techniques that he can see and understand – and even come up with his own techniques. The development can be exponential. Repetition will allow the child to perfect techniques and expand on them. And yes, we're still talking about very young children.

And we're not talking about coaches. I've seen kindergartens and schools with their own football coaches and they usually make the same mistakes. The session will always end with a game, usually on a pitch that's too big and with a ball that's too big. Some will have what they term 'individual training.' I call it: 'Kid taking the ball for a walk.' Or, more accurately: 'Ball taking kid for a walk.'

These coaches often try to make kids do things with the ball before they've even learned how to manipulate and control the ball. In my schools and training sessions, every kid has a ball and no kid is going up against another kid. It's one kid learning how to master one ball, unopposed. He is the master of his own destiny.

A lot of what I'm talking about here is for parents. Why are my kids good at football? Is it because I'm a coach? OK, yes, partly. But I've never forced my kids to play football. They're not saying to themselves: 'This guy's a football coach; better do as he says.'

No. They are responding to me as a parent. And only that. I'm not asking parents to become football coaches and your kids don't need you to become a football coach. I am only seeking to empower parents to empower their children. Everything really starts at home. And you only need to do simple things. Leave a few small balls lying around the house and don't get stressed by your child's desire to practice in the home. Children need to be exposed to learning materials and encouraged. Help them to have a football dream. Help them achieve something. Kids want to succeed, to achieve for both themselves and their parents. They are learning new things every day and they want Dad's or Mom's approval or endorsement. And at the young age level, it's usually only a parent who can set the kid on the right path.

Cristiano Ronaldo says he owes so much to his late father: *'Whatever I do, wherever I am, I keep many fond memories of him, because he was fundamental to my development as a football player, as a person, as a man. He was truly one of the people responsible for what I am today.'*

You are responsible for what your child can do.

Football Culture

BUT, YOU MAY SAY, I live in Japan or China, not Brazil. We're not competing on a level playing field. Football is not ingrained in our culture.

But what does this mean?

Does it mean it's something to do with DNA? Where you were born? Your height? Your build? Your environment? True, these elements are contributory factors to the development of a football player, but at a very young age they are far less significant.

In fact, the young age means that the slate is clean. You can overcome what you perceive as disadvantages. Don't accept that your child is at a disadvantage. Football is played in every country and territory in the world. These days, football is so big, it's a part of the global culture. Football players can transcend their environment if they are taught the right things and set on the right road.

Remember Christian Karembeu? He was a key player in the French team that won the 1998 World Cup. So, was he from a strong

football-playing nation with a solid football culture? Was he even from France?

No, not originally. Karembeu was born on the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific. New Caledonia's population is less than 300,000. Karembeu didn't move to France until he was 17. A little over 10 years later, he was a World Cup winner.

Don't believe that you are disadvantaged by your environment. Some of the best players in the world come from small or poor countries, but they discover football, learn football and transcend their environments to become great football players.

There Is No Short Cut

THE FIRST STEP on the road to becoming a football player is to form an attachment with the ball – physically, spiritually, romantically, whatever. It's meant to be a 'love affair,' as Roy Keane says.

Maybe after your child wakes up in the morning, he'll want to have a few touches with the ball before he goes to school. He'll play at school and will probably want to practice after school. I'm not saying this is exactly what will happen, but what will happen is that the child and the ball will become one.

Have you ever seen a video of rock legend Jimi Hendrix playing the guitar? It was like the guitar was part of him. It almost was. He had the guitar around his neck almost everywhere he went, especially when he was at home. Apparently, he'd even sleep with his guitar at times. Whether it's a ball or a guitar, you're aiming at a level of comfort and familiarity that's almost like a parent and child. Young kids often become attached to teddy bears or dolls. In the case of a young football player, it should be the ball.

When you see a professional musician, you can see a talented person that is the master of his or her instrument. It's a combination of the physical, the mental, emotional, spiritual and artistic elements that make up music. It's an interaction between mind and body and instrument. The mind and the body have been conditioned to react to, or with, the instrument. If we're talking about a piano, the fingers know which notes to hit almost before the brain does. With a guitar, there's a fantastic interaction between the brain, the left hand, the right hand and the instrument. It means extraordinary things are happening. And if you check YouTube, you can find countless examples of supremely talented – and quite young – kids mastering musical instruments.

Kids can do the same with a football. They'll turn a simple exercise into a piece of magic, and when a kid can do magic, he's entranced. And he'll want to do more. And he'll find out the more he practices, the more he can do – to such an extent that it will seem like the ball is working with him, is part of him. The ball becomes a collaborator in the kid's quest to make magic.

Give the kid a ball.

Give him a small space.

And he can work magic.

Technique is the foundation on which we build all the other elements of the game. Tactics, systems and formations are dependent on the individual qualities of the players that are available.

I am not saying technique alone will produce a brilliant football player. Teams have players with different levels of technique and there comes a time when players have to learn to play with other players on a team, but any coach will tell you that if you can get a whole team to have superior technique, you have the best chance to produce a superior team. And from my own experience, those with superior technique are more likely to do everything else in football at a higher level, to understand the game more and to produce better performances for their teams. I've seen it. It's not a coincidence.

Motivation

GETTING KIDS TO PRACTICE the piano can be tough. Listening to a kid practicing the piano can be tough.

In the beginning, a kid's piano playing sounds stilted. Plonk, plonk, plonk, plonk, plonk, plonk, plonk. It drones on and on. This isn't music, you think. Maybe my kid's not got what it takes.

It's really not much different in acquiring any skill. As a rule, it doesn't come easily. You, the parent, can hear the noise your kid is making on the piano. And you hear it as noise. That's not music, you think to yourself. When will this constant plonk, plonk, plonk turn into music?

Many parents have seen that transformation, when your little plonk-plonk duckling becomes a beautiful, musical swan. But how did the kid get to that stage? It's not just a question of jumping from plonk, plonk, plonk to sweet, sweet music.

In the beginning, the kid might not understand music and won't be able to add soul to his playing. And there'll be too many

mistakes. In fact, the kid will often get disheartened. Even he/she can recognise this isn't the same piece of music they hear on the CD.

The teacher says the kid needs to practice. So you take your child home and both of you sit through the torture of practice. Where's the music, you both ask yourselves, silently. Well, the teacher said practice, so practice.

Then the plonks start to disappear. The notes start to fall into the right places at the right times. You can start to hear music. Your child can start to hear music – music that he has learnt himself. Suddenly, he's playing more right notes than wrong notes. There's rhythm coming into the playing. You recognise the succession of notes as a tune. When your child makes a mistake, he can correct it without your help. The mistakes get fewer. This practice-and-repeat thing is really something.

Then one day, the plonks disappear. You can hear music. Your child is becoming a musician, an artist.

What you've experienced is the amazing ability of a child to understand a concept, self-correct, to improve, to perfect and to find fulfilment.

OK, children still need guidance early on, but when a child feels that he or she is able to achieve something through their own efforts, and they see (or hear) a concrete result from those efforts, a goal that they've been striving for, they start an incredible line of progression from which they can grow exponentially.

They've discovered motivation.

Watching video recordings of my kids through the ages, you can see how they made mistakes early on when they practiced. Could they keep the ball at their feet? Not always. Could they knock it from foot to foot? Sure, in the beginning they would do that a few times at a slow pace. But once they'd done it, it would drive them on to do it again, faster, better, more frequently.

We're talking one kid with a football. Challenging himself. Motivating himself. Improving himself.

What we're not seeing is the ugly parent or the ugly coach. And we're not dealing in failure, only success.

The ability for a child to self-improve and to experience success is the key to motivating that child to keep aiming higher. And as it's an individual process, there's no one to knock the child down, to give up on them, to label them as failures.

The kid wants success way more than you do. Yes, they want validation from seniors – parents, teachers, elders, coaches – but when your child first makes music, he or she is awed by their own ability. Many people say overcoming failure is the surest way to success. When you see initially that you can't do something but you overcome the obstacles in your way, you feel empowered. This is what a young child feels as they build up their football techniques.

'I can do it. Mom, I can do it!' There's no greater motivator than this to get them to do it again and to keep doing it.

Success

WHEN COACHING KIDS, I find that one of the most important factors for running an effective coaching session is the success rate that children experience. I have watched too many sessions where coaches are playing with kids in mini-games. All too often, after a young player makes it past two or three opposing players, the coach moves in to dispossess the young child or block his shot. The young player's disappointment is evident and quickly loses enthusiasm.

At my academy in Japan, we don't allow coaches to take the ball away from young players. We also don't play with goalkeepers, encouraging players to score more goals. Success is what motivates kids to continue playing.

I've seen how the behaviour of my son Kaito changes depending on whether or not he scored a goal. If he fails to score, the drive home is quiet and he doesn't want to talk. However, if a few goals have been scored, he is jubilant and can't wait to arrive back home where he can quickly inform his Mum of his success.

He'll ask when the next practice is and look forward to going again and achieving more.

Coaches need to be skilled at setting kids up for success. Unopposed technical training is a must in order for kids to master the skill of ball manipulation along with learning how to turn, cut, change direction, and stop and start with the ball. These are the basics of football and must be learned from a young age.

Creative passing, vision, and game intelligence are all by-products of good technical ability. Setting up good drills where kids only have to cross over a line is a victory for them that can and should be repeated over and over again. Repetition is key in developing technique and this repetition should be uninterrupted. I often see coaches spending half of the training session talking to their charges when they should be getting in the crucial practice time that is so important for development.

Coaches must also encourage 'homework' and emphasise this to the parents. Technical training is like practicing musical scales over and over again, and learning to play those notes to perfection. We can take a novice player from nothing and make him or her into a decent football player, but if you want to be great you have to put in the hard work.

'My dad would give me tests, getting me to dribble down the pavement with my ball to the shops and back, timing me, and then making me do it again, only

quicker. When I did a paper round, I used to kick a ball with me all the way, in and out of the houses.' – Gazza, My Story, Paul Gascoigne.

At our schools, we teach repetitive training, and we show players many things that they can work on by themselves. We regularly make presentations to parents in order to make sure they understand their child's goals and how they can help their children achieve them.

Travel to any football pitch in any country and you will see kids gathered before practice doing one of two things: Either they are lined up together with their friends and shooting at the goal – with or without a goalkeeper – or you will see them juggling the ball. The reason for this is simple: It's competitive and kids like to play either together or against their friends. Neither activity does much for development, but most kids have never been shown the things they can do on their own to help them develop technically.

Technical ability is like reading and writing or adding and subtracting. It's a basic building block of knowledge that, if learned early enough, can change the whole dynamic of a child's development. Both coaches and parents need to contribute their time and patience in order to give young players the proper tools to succeed.

Putting It Into Perspective

I WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND what very young children can do and so I've broken down the basics into simple, core techniques:

1. Stopping and starting;
2. Changing direction at different angles;
3. Using both feet**;**
4. Pulling the ball back with the sole of the foot – again, both feet;
5. Cutting and turning with the ball with both the inside and outside of both feet.

When former England manager Glenn Hoddle saw my videos, he pointed out that what happens when kids can change direction and use both feet is that it creates genuinely two-footed players who can then play through 360 degrees. They can go in any direction with equal confidence.

And that's what I've found with my two sons, particularly the older one, Kaito. They learned the skills and became two-footed so quickly even I was surprised.

As soon as you start mastering these kinds of techniques, it makes it easy to execute combinations with the left and right foot. The idea is that the left and right feet are like teammates and they follow each other. Even I'm amazed at how well Kaito can use both feet to move past players at speed. It's a different world when players create skills with both feet.

Looking back, one of the reasons my kids became so good technically was because we focused on the same thing over and over again. Some schools try to get their kids to attempt hundreds of different moves and when that happens you will find that the kids will have practiced many skills but mastered none of them.

If you look closely at some of the best players – Lionel Messi, for example – you will see that they don't have many specific moves as such, but what they can do is execute crucial moves impeccably. What's Messi's clever trick? Really, he doesn't have one, unlike, say, Ronaldo, who has several. Messi's game is all about terrific acceleration, sensational stopping and starting, and an almost unbelievable ability to quickly change direction.

Football is about making space and getting past players. At two or three or five, when kids master core techniques, their confidence with the ball will be such that as they grow older they will be able to

play with no pressure. So instead of worrying about what they are going to do with the ball – or what they *can* do with the ball – they can relax. They have the skills to do something. Even more importantly, they have the skills to put defenders under pressure rather than the other way around. In short, when they play, they are much more relaxed.

When I look around at some professional players – including very highly paid players – I can see the biggest thing missing from their armoury is technique.

Many top players have terrific skills – physical fitness, the ability to read the game, heading ability, etc. – but lack basic techniques.

Why?

Because they were never taught them!

You tend to get one shot when you're young to learn these core skills. Many coaches and federations still believe that you can only teach these skills at a later age – nine or ten or even later – but when they are older, kids are usually already playing games and learning other stuff. The core techniques have to come first.

In my schools and coaching sessions, the kids learn the techniques exclusively at first. Their young heads are not confused with anything.

Their task is simple: They have to look after their ball, keep their ball and learn to manipulate their ball.

I look at some millionaire football players around the world and then look at my kids and I know my kids' technical skills are as good, if not better.

When my oldest son was ten, he attended structured, organised practice every week. Twice a week, he would go to football practice for two and a half hours and for half a day on either Saturday or Sunday. In Japan, the kids are not divided by skill level; they are divided by grade. My kid was on a completely different technical level from the other kids. I'm not saying that to be vain; I'm saying it because it was plainly obvious.

Why was he on a different level? Simple, because he was learning the core techniques away from the structured practice. I knew he had to have technical competency as a prerequisite before going to play for a club team. It's what he's been able to do away from the formal, old-style practice that is the game-changer.

Imagine if a class of kids were sent home after school each day and only half of them were required to do homework. It's obvious that the kids who didn't do the homework would fall further and further behind the other kids. If they're not studying away from the classroom, they won't be able to improve themselves and match or outstrip the other kids. It's the same with piano practice and it's the same with football. The kids need that practice away from the structured lessons to improve their technical skills.

Fifty years ago, hardly any kid went to pre-school. Now kids

start attending schools of different kinds even before they can walk. Gradually, people have realised that pre-school helps kids learn. First, it was just a year, then two years and now it's three, four or even five years. You give your kids an advantage by getting them to learn stuff earlier.

For football, the technical part of the game is the foundation for building the rest of football's education. I wanted my kids to have that advantage. OK, maybe they got it from me because I'm a coach, *but any kid can do it.*

I don't know if my kids will want to become professional football players and I don't know if I want them to become professional football players. I only wanted my kids to have the necessary tools to be able to enjoy playing football. They are technically competent at a high level already, so now they can go and enjoy themselves. If they want to take football more seriously and learn more stuff, that's fine, but the most important part is done. They have the technical skills to play the game.

I think with the level of expert opinion and input we have in the game today, the fact that so many children playing are still technically incompetent is tantamount to a dereliction of duty. That sounds harsh, but if your kid came home with a report card full of D's and E's and F's, wouldn't you get angry? Wouldn't you do something about it? Wouldn't you want to find the magic formula to help your kid get A's and B's?

Too many kids playing football are getting D's and E's and F's and they don't have to. Teach them when they're young and it's easier for them to learn and the results come much, much sooner.

And the reverse side of this is that the kid is far less likely to become disheartened. In fact, the more skills children learn and the better they become, the more they want to learn and the more confidence they have and the more they can achieve. This brings us back to that all-important word: SUCCESS.

Success does breed success because the kids want it as much as the parents.

Two other factors come into play here: parenting and culture.

Look at any kid who has excelled at something and I am sure you will find a home that emphasises education or music or achieving something. The culture to improve, to learn and do better will be there. Some parents come up to me and ask me why their kids are no good at football even though they go to practice sessions two or three times a week. The answer is that they weren't taught the skills, and the football schools and teams they go to aren't teaching them either. If you're reading this book, you're well ahead of the game because you're learning something that most parents don't know. If you send your child to a cram school, or music school or football school, you expect your child to become better at what they are doing. If they're not getting better, there's a good chance they are being taught wrongly or are at the wrong school.

But to be fair to the parents, it's sometimes tough to know which school is the right school.

At my schools, we try and educate the parents and tell them what *they* need to do.

With education, you've got homework, textbooks and you're tested on stuff. There's a pass and a fail grade. But in sports it seems that you're allowed to be useless for several years and no one does anything about it. Get the right teacher or the right coach and more than likely the kid will make the grade. And the kid will know it himself. He'll see himself advancing and he'll want to do more. And he'll enjoy it. I see it with my kids. It becomes self-motivating. You just give them the tools to achieve their goals.

As a coach and consultant, I also have to look at instances where things are being done wrong.

When I went to China to coach six-year-old kids in a pilot programme at five elementary schools in Beijing, I wanted to see what they were doing before I started with my contribution.

All the kids had a big ball.

Wrong**!**

Have you ever seen what kids do when they are trying to control a big ball? They spend half their time bending over and stopping the ball with their hands. The kids had to take the ball along a path and then bring it back. Half the kids would give up using their feet and carry the ball back to the starting line in their hands.

So, I got rid of the big balls and gave them much smaller balls. What happened next? None of the kids picked their balls up. Why? Because the balls were small like them. They could relate to the small balls. And when they were doing things right, they found they could control the ball instead of losing control. Then they had the confidence to master it. In short, they were not intimidated by the smaller ball. It totally transformed the way these kids approached the football and the exercises they were doing.

When your kids are young, you can put these small balls around the house like I did. Yes, I had to convince my wife it was a good idea, but she was happy to go along with it. The balls weren't big and they weren't likely to do much damage to the house. And learning the basic skills doesn't require a lot of space. The kids are not trying to score goals or bounce the ball off a wall. They are trying to control the ball in a small space.

How far does Lionel Messi let the ball get away from him? It's right there at his feet all the time. As it was when he was a kid. At his feet. I don't know if his mom yelled at him. I suspect not. My wife accepts the value of my sons practicing in the house and doesn't yell at them. With this book, I'm not just trying to convince the dads that a good football education is important, I'm also trying to convince the moms. If you allow your kids this little bit of freedom, the results can be remarkable.

Parents can make such a big difference.

Michael A. Taylor, Chair of the United States Elite Coaches Association, put it this way:

'Research strongly suggests that parents play the largest role in influencing the development and healthy socialization of their children involved in sports. … What is the difference between the children who reach the stage where their talent blooms forth and those who don't? These children experienced something from their parents that seemed to make a huge difference.

'The research is very clear – what a parent says and does has a tremendous influence on their child. The more you as a parent support your children, the more your children will reach the highest level of talent development possible for them.'

You look at almost any successful sportsperson and it's nearly always a parent (or parent figure) who sets that athlete on the path to success. Pele – father; Japan women's team captain Aya Miyama – father; golfing great Tiger Woods – father; Japanese golf star Ryo Ishikawa – father; five-time tennis major winner Martina Hingis – mother; England football player Frank Lampard – father; former Italian captain Paolo Maldini – father; tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams – father; Japanese baseball legend Ichiro Suzuki – father. Coaches are relevant at some stage, but the driving force behind all the above athletes and many, many more were parents.

Coaches invariably are *not* the driving force behind the acquisition of technical skills. So outsourcing your kid's desire to

make it as a football player – or even just to get better as a football player – is not necessarily the best way to go. At least, without a good knowledge of what your budding football star should be taught, and how and when the teaching should be done.

I have to admit it took me thirty years to fully realise the importance of what I'd been doing. I had two sons and learned from them as I was teaching them. I couldn't figure out why no one else had figured it out. And looking back, it's hard to see why it took me so long to figure it out. But now it's so obvious to me. It's not a theory; it's a reality. My sons have developed way faster than I anticipated, picking up skills that even I hadn't expected them to learn at their age. Even I find it hard to believe what I'm seeing sometimes.

How did this happen? It basically comes down to my decision to introduce the small balls to my sons when they first started walking. I made the balls part of their environment. We had baby toys stacked up to the ceiling that were played with once or twice and then discarded because they became bored very quickly and wanted a new challenge. So I introduced these small balls into their environment and was amazed at how quickly they wanted to manipulate them after I'd shown them very simple things like placing their soles on top of the ball and pulling it back. And I always encouraged them to use both feet. The balls were always available to them to use or not as they wished. But they also represented a

challenge to achieve something. It was a learning process and they could gauge their own success through their ability to manipulate the ball.

So why can I see it and others can't?

It's all about taking the right first step. Football is a passing and shooting game, but passing and shooting has to come after learning how to control the ball. And passing and shooting comes so much easier if you do that.

I watch kids' teams play football and despair sometimes. 'How can they be so bad?' I ask myself. Most kids can't even move the ball from one foot to the other.

What's the problem?

The problem is people don't know what the problem is.

Federations are prescribing the wrong medicine for the wrong symptoms. Federations see inferior performances from their teams and then come up with solutions they can't implement because their players aren't skilled enough to execute them. They apply science, psychology, advanced training, more training, residential training, training that is totally irrelevant and bad training to the wrong people at the wrong time.

South American and African kids rarely get this training, but still manage to acquire superior skills. Don't give players the wrong training and they will have a chance. Give them the wrong training and their chances diminish. And, as is the nature of football, they'll

soon be discarded and left on the scrap heap. Give them the right training and the sky's the limit.

I see parents pay crazy money sometimes to get their kids coached, but the parents usually aren't smart enough or knowledgeable enough to understand what their kids need. So they end up paying good money for bad coaching. Not only do most parents not know what it means to be a competent football player, they have no idea how it can be achieved or coached. They don't know what's required or when it's required.

And yet they can still open the door to good training.

Allowing children to play with the ball from a young age in the home and helping them learn to control the ball and use both feet equally is a great first step. My videos (you can find them on my home page: www.tomsan.com) are designed to help people understand what can be done. It's simple stuff – controlling the ball between the feet, stopping the ball, pulling the ball back with the sole of the foot. And you can also watch the world's top players do their magic on YouTube. Kids love watching the skills of Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, Neymar, Ronaldinho and others.

Learning control gives children confidence. The usual reaction of a child (or even an adult) when faced with an opponent, especially a bigger or better opponent, is to get rid of the ball as fast as possible. This comes down to a lack of confidence. Just having the simple ability of stopping and/or pulling the ball back with either foot can

create the time and space a player needs to evaluate a situation and take action in a football game.

Watch South American kids. They usually have the confidence to hold on to the ball and protect it rather than kick it down the pitch. I teach kids to do this and this helps build up great confidence so that bigger or better players won't faze them. They'll control the ball, give themselves time to make a move and have the confidence to take appropriate action. My dad was a cop; he would understand this. You have to gain control of tough situations and retain the upper hand.

I see my elder son, Kaito, and he can control the ball with either foot, move it quickly from one foot to the other and do what he wants with either foot. You don't know what foot he will use to fool you. He'll use all 360 degrees. Many players are lucky if they can use a fraction of that.

Falling Behind

"I FEEL THAT WE'VE GOT TO do something in this country pre-coaching, before [the age of] eight. We've got to get up a system that all they can do is manipulate the ball, to be at home with the ball. From five to eight, don't coach them, don't let them pass the ball even; let them play 1-v-1s and manipulate the ball, to feel comfortable with the football. That's what it's called: football. It's not head ball, chase-ball or kick-ball; it's football, so you've got to master that football. Then at eight years of age, you feel as if it's part of your body. And then it goes on from there."

– Former England player and manager Glenn Hoddle in January 2016 on coaching kids in England

In three (or maybe four) continents, English-speaking countries play a leading role in football. In Europe, the English Premier League has proven to be incredibly popular, USA qualified for the FIFA World Cup seven times in a row (after failing to qualify for the previous nine tournaments), and since its transfer from

Oceania to Asia in 2006, Australia has become one of Asia's leading teams.

All three countries have strong leagues with an attractive blend of international players, but the national teams of England, USA and Australia have struggled to make a strong impact on the world stage.

Why is this? Let's have a look at how they have developed.

England arguably has the most famous league in the world and perhaps the most competitive. The Premier League is awash with money and has big-name players, top managers and coaches, fantastic stadiums and wonderful fans. But the national team was slow to improve after early success.

It's not hard to see why.

The level of fundamental skills in England was poor. I spent a year playing football in England and enjoyed it tremendously. And there were many skilled players there. But mainly they were skilled at traditional English attributes: physical strength, team unity, stamina and the ability to kick the ball from one end of the pitch to the other.

England won the World Cup in 1966 with an imaginative tactical lineup by manager Alf Ramsey, but after their 3-2 quarterfinal loss to Germany in the Mexico World Cup in 1970, England struggled to shine at major tournaments.

For many years, England teams tried to play a game that didn't

really suit their players – the passing game. Since the Premier League was launched in 1992, things have improved as different skills are required to play a much more technical game. The fact that all Premier League teams are stuffed full of foreigners who have grown up learning and using the skills that English players lacked has changed the game in England.

But the English game at the amateur and youth level still has a strong tendency towards the physical side – big tacklers, big headers, big strikers, big centre-halves. While Premier League football pitches are beautifully presented, amateurs and youngsters still have to make do with muddy parks that kill skill.

'Get rid of it!'

How many times have I heard that on an English football pitch? Just hoofing the ball away is the route to safety. Few players have the confidence to hold and protect the ball. Even fewer can take players on.

After England lost the World Cup in 1970, they didn't appear in the World Cup for another 12 years. England were overtaken by almost every other major football-playing country.

The five football-playing nations in the British Isles (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland) struggled for a long time with the same problem: They didn't have the skill level of their competitors in Europe and the rest of the world. It shouldn't have been a surprise when a Japanese, Shunsuke Nakamura, was named

Player of the Year in Scotland in 2007. Technically, he could wipe the floor with almost any player in Scotland.

David Beckham recognised the skill gap when he joined Real Madrid in 2003:

'Lining up with those players and pulling on the white shirt, it was every bit as exciting as I could have imagined it would be. … Tricks, control, attempts at goal from impossible angles, and they do it all in games, too, of course. The very first week I was at Real, I saw Ronaldo get the ball off the floor and under control nine different ways in training, nine different tricks I'd never seen anybody do before.

'It's a very different approach to the game and you see it everywhere in Spain: in training, on street corners, on the beach. The Brazilians are the masters of it, but I think that most foreign players seem to have been brought up in the same way, more or less. In training, we'd do our running, our weights and the rest, but really sessions were all about stretching and fine-tuning your technique.

'I see it everywhere in Spain. Whatever age you're talking about, it seems that young players here have an edge, in terms of technique, over their English counterparts. … Every player at every club has good touch and is comfortable with the ball.' – *My Side* by David Beckham.

For many years, the English Football Association largely ignored young kids with their elitist approach. Today, skill training

is given more attention, but it still doesn't have the priority it should have.

In the United States, you've got 23 million children under the age of six out of a population of nearly 320 million people (compared to 64 million in the United Kingdom and 23 million in Australia), and they have far more kids registered to play in an organised environment. But they don't produce technically sound players. There have been some really good players, such as Landon Donovan and Clint Dempsey, but like England they've struggled to produce great technicians. Typically in the U.S., they try and throw science and money at the problem. Nothing is happening for the youngest kids, the two- to seven-year-olds. But look at kids in Africa and South America. They're not rich and they don't have huge, organised football academies; they're poor and they learn on the 'street.' And they're better. Much, much better.

I think another problem these countries – the United States, England and Australia – have in terms of their national teams is that they believe they're one great coach away from success. It's that elitist thing again. England hired Sven Goran Eriksson and Fabio Capello, America tried Juergen Klinsmann, while Australia has had people such as Terry Venables, Guus Hiddink and Holger Osieck. All great coaches, but that's not where the problem or the answer lies.

The simple truth is these countries are not producing enough

players with decent technical skills to take on the world's best. Latin countries do and it's not because they have better coaches; it's because the culture allows kids to develop their skills.

Twenty years ago, Australia seemed to be on the rise in terms of football, but the Australians haven't sustained that boom. I don't know if it's true, but at one time I was told there were more Australians playing in the top leagues of Europe than Brazilians. There have been some great players from Craig Johnston through to the likes of Tony Popovic, Mark Viduka, Marco Bresciano, Harry Kewell, Ned Zelic, Brett Emerton, Josip Skoko, Paul Okon and Tim Cahill. My theory is that they were the offspring of a generation of immigrants – Serbs, Croats, Greeks, Italians, English, Irish – and benefited from the national and familial influences of that generation who were from strong football cultures. It was natural that this generation would want their kids to play football. But I don't think this has been sustained. Australia seems more intent on stopping immigration nowadays and there are more sports, more distractions and less parental influence from the 'old country,' whatever that country might be.

That said, I think the coaching of kids, especially at older ages, is much better in Australia and the U.S. than in Korea or Japan (where I've seen six-year-old kids on a JFA programme playing eleven-a-side matches!). But Australia is now an Asian football-playing nation and technically it has some work to do to match its

Asian rivals, particularly Japan and Korea who are producing better technical players from a young age. When former Japan international midfielder Shinji Ono went to play in Australia, he mesmerised fans with his skills and helped steer a new club – Western Sydney Wanderers – to trophies. But this was a Japanese player in the twilight of his career. Australia, like England, has a fantastic sporting culture and produces some great football players, but their players are not at the level of technical ability they need to be to improve the country's standing in world football.

Over the last 25 years, the U.S. have moved forward. Since 1990, the Americans have qualified for every World Cup bar one. They have some good attributes, like fitness and spirit, but they also fall down on technically competent players.

When asked what it would take for the U.S. to make significant progress in results at the Under-17 World Cup, former USA Under-17 coach Wilmer Cabrera said it wouldn't happen, 'Unless we have an unbelievable team where we have six, seven very skilful players who can make the difference on the pitch. But we don't have those types of players. I haven't seen those players yet.' He didn't blame coaching, tactics or physical fitness; he blamed poor technical skills. The U.S. produces below-average players in this area.

American 'soccer' has been handicapped in part because it has always lived in the shadow of other sports: American football,

baseball, basketball, even ice hockey. Football has taken root through various immigrant cultures but it has had to compete with sport's big boys. If you're looking for fame and fortune in the U.S., you're not looking at football. Football's a recreational sport. 'Football Moms' pack their kids off to football school once or twice a week, but they have no interest in what that football school does. Junior's running around. It's gotta be healthy, right?

But Junior doesn't have to be good at it. In fact, when kids start playing organised football in the United States, they have virtually no technical ability at all. And even in the organised setup, the technical side is either ignored completely or a minor part of training.

So where do they get the training required?

They don't. *Hudson River Blue* football writer Rafael Noboa y Rivera made a withering analysis of kids' coaches in America:

'In the United States, kids are being coached by [English] League Two and Conference National rejects, who never tire of talking about the one time they got defensively pantsed by England's Brave John Terry in the fourth round of the League Cup. I mean, I would too, but I'm not coaching kids, and neither should they.'

In some ways, it's unfair to single out certain countries or football associations. In truth, many countries get football

development wrong. Sometimes, they have the appearance of getting things right, but even then some programmes are just glorified baby-sitting exercises or a way of boosting the coffers of the association. Someday, they may see the light. Don't forget, the world was officially flat until a few hundred years ago.

The Challenge

SO MANY KIDS TODAY ARE either getting no input on the technical side or the wrong input. Kids play for years and years and never improve, because no one is telling them how to improve. Everyone wants to be like Messi or Ronaldo, but, in truth, no one believes that can happen.

And they're right. If you don't teach kids technical skills, nothing's going to happen. They might pick them up accidentally, but the chance has already been missed.

I look at my ten-year-old boy when he's playing with his club team and he's on a different level. I'd be much happier if all the kids were on the same level as my son. That's where the secret to football-playing success lies.

And I think to myself: What would it be like if all these kids were just given the opportunity to develop their skills?

And I think to myself: How fantastic would it be to be asked to take control of all the kids in a country, a region, even a city and teach them what I know?

And then I got a call from China.

Twenty years ago, China looked like it was going to become a powerhouse in football. The country's developing football team looked like it might surpass South Korea and Japan, the kingpins of East Asia.

But China had other priorities. The one-child-per-family policy meant that a family's single child would get everything to be a better person – education, music, attention, indulgence – but probably not sport. Sport was often seen as a distraction. It wasn't ignored – China has always produced a number of great sporting talents – but football faded from the radar. In fact, football declined rather than developed.

There are around 100 million kids under the age of six in China, but that doesn't mean there are 100 million potential football players out there. A lot of children in China aren't in the best of shape. As the economy grew, so, it seemed, did the size of some of the children.

Something had to change.

Luckily, the President of China, Xi Jinping, is a big football fan and wants China to be represented on football's biggest stage: the FIFA World Cup. So the government of China has decided to make football compulsory in schools both as a health initiative and with sporting objectives in mind. This was set out in State Council Document [2015] No. 11 on March 8, 2015:

Point 19 – To use football to improve our children: to reform school sports, to nurture talent, to utilize school football to increase the football population, to expand the talent base, to raise student qualities, to build a foundation to improve youth health, to strengthen understanding and support by parents and society in order to encourage more children to follow and participate in football and to learn social skills and moral codes.'

My involvement with China goes back to 2011 when I started working with one of China's top clubs, Beijing Guo'an, and subsequently the Chinese Football Association. Eventually, the Ministry of Education hired me as a consultant to formulate a programme and curriculum for 20,000 schools. My work covers all 32 provinces in China and includes a daily corner on CETV to promote football and help develop the game. My advice was to concentrate on young children with the emphasis on technical development.

Initially, I set up some goals for the kids to achieve because I wanted to build up their confidence. So the targets were simple and achievable. But I also wanted to involve all the stakeholders in this project and that included the parents, teachers, coaches, school principals and the Education Bureau. It was essential that they were with me and we were all on the same page.

I drew up a list of issues that needed to be addressed:

- Motor skills
- Balance
- Coordination
- Concentration
- Confidence
- Competence
- Self-esteem
- Stopping/Starting
- Change of Direction
- Acceleration
- Deceleration
- Ball Protection
- Stakeholders involvement.

Involving the parents, teachers, etc., was vital. They had to believe in the programme and understand it. The initial programme went well and produced very positive results. I am proud to be helping the world's biggest country become a powerhouse in world football.

Imagine what such countries can do – at the highest level – if they are able to emulate the football-playing success of teams such as Uruguay and the Netherlands, small countries that have had major success in football. But you have to create a movement to make it part of the culture for kids to get that ability with the ball at

their feet. And you have to make sure it's fun, not a task, not a form of homework.

No pain. Gain!

Kids play football for social reasons, to be with their friends and to have fun. The more they can do, the more they enjoy it. And it's more fun when everyone can do it. My son gets frustrated when he plays with his club team because when he passes the ball to one of his teammates, he's not sure he'll ever get it back. I can see the other kids aren't at the same skill level as him and don't have the confidence needed to interact with teammates who have higher-level skills. Development is minimal; I don't see these other kids getting better.

So, should we blame the coach?

Generally, no, because the coaches aren't responsible for technical development. I've said it before and I'll say it again: When a kid gets to the coaching stage, he or she should already be technically competent. At a higher level, it is assumed that if you're going to be a professional football player, you must have technical competence. In a perfect world, that would apply at almost any organised level. So, it's what happens before that stage that is important. It's going to start with the parents, not with the coach.

I'm not saying coaches don't help players, teach players or develop players. Players should never stop learning, whether they're at the start of their football-playing lives or the end. But coaching

courses often concentrate on things such as tactics, psychology and fitness rather than technical skills.

What I'm saying is that parents can teach the basics, can give their kids the opportunity to be technically competent and give them a better chance of enjoying and succeeding in a pastime that, for most, will just be a game for fun. And this could – should – start as soon as the child can walk.

All I'm asking is for you to just give your child the opportunity to be better, to develop skills and to grow.

And never underestimate what your child is capable of!

And Then ….

So, you've helped teach your child the fundamental technical skills of football. Job done, right?

Well, no.

Technical skills are the building blocks of football and I believe that these are key to the development of a well-rounded football player. But mere possession of these skills doesn't mean your kid is a football player, just as being able to read and write doesn't mean you're a novelist or journalist. You have to add to your skill set to become what you want to be.

It is part of my job as a coach to make it clear to parents and help them understand that acquiring football's technical skills is the first – and most crucial – step on the path to becoming a good football player. In this skill acquisition phase, I discourage kids from kicking the ball at random. Of course, most children will try to do this, but I want them to do this after they have learned how to become masters of the ball, to be comfortable with the ball at their feet and to be in control of the ball. Once acquired, they won't lose

these critical, fundamental skills. And as they progress in their football career, at whatever level, these technical skills will always give them an advantage over those less technically gifted.

In the next phase of learning football, a kid with advanced technical skills will stand out. Even with a poor coach – and sadly there are too many of these – the skilled player should be able to do well.

In the United States, 38.5 percent of kids give up football by the age of seven. Another 50 percent drop out by the age of ten. Yes, this could be due to poor coaching or poor parenting or other distractions, but more likely it will be down to a lack of enjoyment, and this often transpires when they feel they don't have the requisite skills to compete with their peers. If you look at videos of my kids or other kids on YouTube showing off their skills in the house or elsewhere, you can see they are proud of what they can do, they are happy in what they are doing and they enjoy receiving praise from their parents.

When these children enter a competitive environment, they want that same approval from their coach or even their fellow players. And success among their peers will likely lead to more parental approval. Pushy parents are not welcome. A seven-year-old does not want to be scolded for what he or she sees as a fun pastime. As they enter into a coached environment, they will have added pressure, more commitment and more practice. The one thing they

don't want to lose is the sense of enjoyment they associate with football. Unfortunately, it is often the parents who fail their children, not the other way around (although you wouldn't believe that from some parents' reactions).

As we've seen already, the football world has been reluctant to recognise what science already knows – that skill acquisition occurs at a very young age, much younger than football authorities recognise. Many football authorities believe that the 'discovery phase' occurs in the six-to-nine age bracket and kids at this stage should just kick the ball around and play fun games.

After a private presentation of my work, one famous England international said to me: 'Is it too late for an eight-year-old? Because I've been doing everything wrong with my kid.'

Don't get me wrong. It's never too late to learn technical skills, but the earlier you learn, the better it will be to develop and the easier it is to transition from having football skills to playing actual football.

For children, the skill process becomes automated. They download the skills into their brain bank and after that they are available on demand. Players like Eden Hazard and Lionel Messi can stand still just a meter away from a defender and the defender daren't move in. Why? Because Hazard and Messi have their skills hardwired into their brains. If a defender moves in, they will access these skills so fast, THEY WON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT

WHAT THEY ARE DOING. Meanwhile, the defender is thinking consciously; he has to programme in any move he makes. Hazard and Messi aren't thinking at all; everything is pre-programmeed, their reactions so much faster.

But don't expect your skillful kid to immediately replicate on the pitch what you've seen them do in the house. It's a different environment and interacting with other players requires additional skills. I saw that with my own kids. Children entering a team environment are likely to be nervous and unsure of themselves no matter how good their technical skills. The coach isn't Dad and the coach has ten, twenty, thirty kids to assess. Approval won't come so easily. There'll be a bedding-down period. My kids were technically superior when they entered teams at the age of six, but they had to grow into that team environment. There came a point with both of them when they themselves recognised what they could do within that team environment and, to be honest, how they were actually better equipped than their teammates to carry out the wishes of the coach.

What did this do for them?

It gave them confidence. They could think to themselves: 'I've got something here. I can do things others can't. I can use this. I can perform.' But I will admit it wasn't instant. They had to grow into that understanding. They not only had to recognise their own skills but also the absence of skills in others and they had to

understand how they could contribute to and help their fellow players. It's a new learning process and part of the puzzle that makes a football player.

Brain Power

According to a report published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, physical activity and brain development go hand in hand. And not just in parallel.

Physical activity boosts brain power.

So, when Lionel Messi was kicking the ball along the path to the shops as a kid, his brain was working out the parameters of how the ball reacted to his foot. Essentially, he was doing maths, and the more he played with the ball and the more skilful he became, the more the 'maths' got harder and the brain developed to accommodate the new information.

The report put it this way:

'Benjamin Sibley and Jennifer Etnier conducted a meta-analysis and found a positive relationship between physical activity and cognitive function in school-age children (age four-eighteen years). … Examination of the findings revealed that physical activity participation was related to cognitive performance … with results indicating a beneficial relationship of physical activity on all cognitive categories, with the exception of memory. Although this effect was found for all age groups, it was stronger for children in the four-to-seven and eleven-to-thirteen year groupings.'

As Harvard Professor John Ratey says elsewhere in this book, exercise involving technical skills stimulates growth in the brain and this growth reciprocates by improving those skills. The more you do, the better you get and, as stated above, the four-to-seven age group is one of the prime beneficiaries.

But it starts at home.

Why the home?

From a practical point of view, the limited space of a home forces the child to control the ball. More importantly, the home is the ultimate safe environment. This is really important, as children can learn in a safe, protected environment where they are largely free from peer ridicule and can make mistakes without consequences and get encouragement from parents and others. Good emotions and parental validation supercharge the learning process.

There's also the issue of the child's free will. Children are expanding their boundaries from a very young age, but particularly after they learn to walk. They relish their newfound freedom and they look to set their own boundaries. I could see it in my own children when my sons developed fun by themselves and 'owned' their own time. They get pleasure and a sense of fulfilment in doing something on their own and doing their own thing. If they are the

masters of their own fun and are not being forced into doing something, they will enjoy it more. At this young age – when skills can be taught – they are in the right environment and in the right emotional space.

It's important that a child is doing something that he or she wants to do. Start them off early and that free will develops naturally. Success and parental validation breed pleasure, and a good home environment makes that easier. Soon, the notion of football will be imprinted on the brain. Remember how my friend's three-year-old daughter instantly took to imitating her father's skills. The parent acts as an ignition switch for the child's love of football. A few minutes of encouragement a day can give your child a lifetime passion. You need that passion to be there before your child is taken on by a coach at a club or school. That passion will result in the practice that brings out and enhances the technical skills.

Once at school or in a club, the child can build on the foundation of technical skills. No child with such skills is going to be intimidated by the ball, by receiving the ball. He or she has already learned to control the ball and protect the ball. The ball is their companion, not some other kid's. The confidence is already there. Of course, schools can be intimidating, other kids can be bigger, or faster or more skilful. But the technically competent kid has already learned how to control a football and the path to further learning becomes that much easier.

Pushy parents certainly won't help. Don't take away that pleasure in learning and playing. Help your child gain experience and build confidence.

Don't put your expectations above your child's.

Can your child improve? Of course. Any player can improve at any stage of their career. I was a professional football player in my 20s, but I'm much better technically now than I was then. You can always learn and improve your skills, but the younger you learn them, the easier it is to deploy them and learn more. Your brain will do all the work for you.

Arsene Wenger said that technical skills are the DNA of football players. The reality is it's harder to learn the other parts of the game if you don't have the technical skills to deal with the various situations you will face on the pitch. It's easier to learn those other parts of the game when you have those technical skills.

As a child moves into playing games and learning tactics and formations, that child must be able to carry out the tasks the team coach demands.

It's hard to develop as a football player if you can't carry out the simplest of tasks. Just playing games won't do it. I watch my sons' games and I see twenty kids who aren't improving; they're just running and kicking. The only ones doing anything with the ball are the ones with the technical skills. Who wants to pass to a kid who can't even stop the ball?

The easy out for a lazy coach is to organise games. Games without purpose. Kicking games. The learning process is not difficult. It sometimes requires patience.

Remember Little Chen? Imagine if I'd put him straight into a game. His whole being would have resisted. He would have been embarrassed. How would that have helped him as a child, as a human being or as a football player? Little Chen needed some patience, some encouragement, some football love. He got that instead of rejection or humiliation.

This book aims to smash the preconceptions that are damaging football around the world. I'll admit it's not been embraced by everyone. Some people are making more money out of failure in football. Some just can't get their heads around the concept, some just want to stick with their tired old 'knowledge,' and some are just too lazy to give it a chance.

But I have seen the results. With my own kids. With the thousands of children I've coached. With Little Chen. I've made presentations to players, clubs and federations around the world and many of them realise the benefits of what I'm doing: greater participation; getting more kids into the game early on; having a higher technical ability at entry level; creating a bigger elite pool of players; raising the overall standard of football as improving players from below push the 'better' players above them; better retention rates as fewer kids give up the game.

One former Premier League player said to me: 'After watching your presentation, I couldn't sleep for three nights.'

Can you sleep at night?

THE BASIC SKILLS

and

AFTERWORD

By Dr. John J. Ratey

THE BASIC SKILLS

1. **Controlling the ball with both feet**
   Using the inside of both feet, pass the ball from one foot to the other and stop the ball with the receiving foot. Learn to control both the speed and direction of the pass and how to stop the ball with the other foot. Repeat using both feet.

2. **Controlling the ball with the sole of the foot**
   Gently roll the ball backwards and forwards with the sole of the foot and then from side to side. Repeat using both feet. Try to move a meter in each direction. You can touch the ball more than once to do this.

3. **Moving left and right with the ball**
   Keeping the ball under control on the inside of the right foot, move to the left, initially for 1 meter but further if you have space. You can touch the ball as many times as you want, but keep the ball under control. Then do the opposite using your left foot and moving to the right.

4. **Moving forward with the ball and stopping**

   Keeping the ball under control with the inside of both feet, move forward as quickly as possible and then stop as quickly as possible. You can stop the ball by using the sole of your foot.

5. **Turning**

   Keeping the ball under control with the inside of both feet, move forward as quickly as possible, stop as quickly as possible, turn 180 degrees and move in the opposite direction. Use both feet to do this.

6. **Protecting the ball**

   Ask a family member (brother, sister, father, mother, etc.) to try and take the ball away from you with their feet like a defender in a football match. Turn your back to them so that they can't see the ball and keep the ball under control with your feet.

7. **Repetition**

   Don't just practice these moves once. They should be practiced over and over again so that they become natural and so you can perform the moves faster and faster.

AFTERWORD

By Dr. John J. Ratey
Associate Professor, Harvard Medical School
Author of 'Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain'

WHY IS A PSYCHIATRIST and Harvard professor interested in the coaching of football to young children?

Greek philosopher Plato said that combining physical and intellectual activity would help a person achieve perfection. From a biological point of view, we are descended from hunter-gatherers; we had to move, and move intelligently, to find food and survive. So the relationship between learning and moving is hard-wired into our brains.

The simple answer to the above question is that elements of a child's development cannot be taken in isolation. What you learn and the way you learn things spills over into all the various parts of a child's development. How you teach something helps the brain

learn to learn, and that will be important for the next phase of a child's learning, whatever that is.

So learning the skills of football should not be seen as a separate or inferior branch of learning. In fact, as I shall explain, learning the skills of football can be as much a part of the whole learning process as studying maths or science.

In my book *Spark*, I address the issue of how sports and exercise can help the learning process and improve cognitive processes.

Some people have likened the brain to the hard drive on a computer, but it's more than that. The brain is far more than just a repository of knowledge. It is closer to being a whole computer. It is a processor, a power source and an expanding knowledge generator. Damage one part of the whole and the thing can break down.

But you can also improve your computer. Clean the disk, defragment the disk, delete unused applications and files, upgrade the RAM.

In the same way, the brain can be refreshed and upgraded.

The brain is not just a lump of grey matter sitting in your head. It is a living organism that needs feeding and looking after. It's like a muscle that needs exercise and energy and stimulation.

And it needs that from Day 1.

Tom Byer understands that and on that basis Tom has made

a revelation. He has shown how football coaches around the world – and at the highest levels – have largely ignored children under seven.

Yet scientists, psychologists, educators and doctors all know that the learning process is most crucial in the early years of life. How can football coaches be so wrong?

Tom points out how rapidly the brain develops in the first few years of life. By the time a child is five, they have learned and mastered an astonishing number of things: walking and movement, language, speech, coordination, decision-making, the ability to lie, to joke, to understand pain and disappointment, to use objects, to kick footballs.

Of course, these elements are improved and refined as life goes on, but the important thing that many people overlook is just how advanced and developed the brain is by this age. A child is fluent in their native language by this age and can understand complex grammatical structures. As Tom points out, the brain is desperate for knowledge, for input in the early years and it has no problem in processing this new information and knowledge.

But that's only the start. I mentioned stimulation above. The brain responds to stimulation and grows and develops as a result. For the best results, the stimulation should be both physical/ aerobic and mental/ intellectual.

Tom's method of teaching football fits the bill perfectly. Children move with the ball, which provides them with physical exercise, but they also have to control the ball, which provides the mental exercise. Tom emphasises movement, stopping, starting, changing direction and using both feet while controlling a ball and these elements are fantastic nourishment for the brain.

As I stated earlier, the learning processes for the brain do not exist in isolation, so the benefits and stimulating effect of learning football using Tom's methods carry over into other fields, such as academic studies or learning the piano. To repeat, one benefits the other. As I show in *Spark*, exercise not only benefits the learning process, it also helps to control psychological aberrations such as depression, mood swings, apathy, etc.

Let's look at the learning process.

In *Spark*, I introduce the readers to Naperville High School in Illinois. The staff at Naperville understood that exercise wakes the body up and performs a similar function for the brain. So, they put 2 + 2 together and started a programme where the students did exercise before classes.

The result?

Naperville signed up to take the International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) test in 1999 to compete with 230,000 students from 38 countries. The school finished first in science and sixth in maths (behind Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and

Japan).

The Naperville programme was split into two parts: the regular exercise programme and the Learning Readiness Programme, which had students do exercise before classes to stimulate the brain for those classes. Those on the Learning Readiness Programme showed dramatic improvement in their studies and were way ahead of the kids who weren't on the Programme. The real reason we feel so good when we get our blood pumping is that it makes the brain function at its best. I often tell my patients that the point of exercise is to build and condition the brain.

As well as the body.

The Naperville kids were far healthier than your average American kid. Thirty percent of children in the United States are deemed to be overweight with another 30 percent in a 'gray zone.' At Naperville, studies in 2001 and 2002 showed that the ratio for the school was just 3 percent, and an independent assessment of 270 students from sixth-graders through to high schoolers at Naperville found just one male out of 130 students to be overweight.

Paul Zientarski, who was key to starting the programme at Naperville, pointed out that part of the programme involved making kids do P.E. before the classes they found the most difficult: 'We're putting kids in P.E. class prior to classes that they struggle in

and what we're doing is we're finding great, great results. Kids who took P.E. before they took the maths class had double the improvement of kids who had P.E. afterward.'

Exercise optimises the brain and the body and sets it up for learning. It creates the right environment for all of our 100 billion nerve cells. It produces growth factors, one of which is call BDNF, which I call 'miracle-grow for the brain' or brain fertiliser. BDNF helps the brain cells stay alive and live longer, and helps the learning process.

More than anything else we are aware of, exercise promotes the growth of new brain cells. And rather than wearing kids out, the kids say that exercising before class makes the school work seem easier.

Tom's method of having small balls around the home and encouraging the child not to kick the balls but to manipulate them with their feet is important. What is actually happening here is that the child is laying down circuits of learning and building cellular networks in the brain – what we call cell assemblies – that become basic and natural. The brain practices the skill and makes it more automatic. Lionel Messi doesn't have to look down at the ball as he is driving forward; his brain and his feet and the ball are operating in perfect harmony. We call this a Fixed Action Pattern. The repetition that Tom espouses makes the functioning of the brain much, much easier. If you apply the 10,000-hour rule, Messi is doing

the same as he was in the first hour, but 10,000 hours later the brain is operating 10,000 times more efficiently. The repetition of the exercise makes the brain operate fantastically faster. But also, importantly, it is fun for the kids, which means they will keep coming back to it, especially if a parent or adult watches them and validates what they are doing. But without diminishing the enjoyment factor. It must remain fun, just like it was fun for Messi to run to school or to the shops with a ball at his feet.

I like to use the example of former Chicago Bulls star Michael Jordan as an athlete whose brain function is demonstrably superior. Jordan could take your breath away with the things he could do on the basketball court. He only had to do one thing – get the ball into the basket – but there are 10,000 different ways of doing this. For routine stuff, Jordan didn't have to think. The process was wired into his brain. But there were circumstances when he came up against something new. Here, he had his frontal cortex to help him decide what to do. In a split-second, he had to figure out how to respond with his body and the ball.

This wasn't a simple decision of 'Should I dunk it or just throw it up?' This was a mathematical calculation of unbelievable complexity. It would probably take a scientist a month to programme it into a computer. Michael Jordan could execute the equation in milliseconds. All that practice and perfecting and

repetition would come together at that miniscule, brain-storming moment. And it's another two points to the Bulls.

Don't expect your child to become Michael Jordan just because he's learning basketball or Lionel Messi just because he's learning football. But please believe me when I tell you that by learning a sport like this – one that combines physical and mental stimulation – you are helping your child's development and training their brain.

While many Americans do play football, most North American sports – baseball, American football, basketball – use the hands. The whole issue of foot control is mainly ignored in our development texts, but I think every brain development expert would agree that it's an important and significant brain-body function and promotes development. It challenges the cerebellum and this is a really hot topic today. The cerebellum is the balance and rhythm controller of our brain, thought to be mainly for physical co-ordination but now seen as doing a lot more than that. In fact, it is now seen as being crucial to attention, memory, reading, emotional control and even social skills.

I find it amazing that top-level coaches and sports organisations can ignore sports development in the under-sevens. Tom Byer is opening the door for a complete rethink as to how we encourage children to learn sports.

And let's emphasise this element of 'learning.' As far as your

child's brain is concerned, learning how to control a football is just as valid as learning maths or learning the piano. I would encourage all parents to get their kids to play, and to love doing it, without worrying about having to succeed. This is really important, especially when they are young. Little ones need to play with other kids in interactive physical ways. They need to be encouraged to make up games, lose and get back up and play again. This is an important part of the learning process.

Tom Byer is a smart coach. And believe me when I tell you that he's making your kids smarter, too.

Acknowledgements

The ideas for this book have crystalised over many years and there are countless people I need to thank for helping me realise how the development of young players needs to change. I have appreciated the input – both good and bad – of many football professionals, people associated with the game and others. If I haven't mentioned anyone by name here, please rest assured that just being involved in the discussion has helped me get to the point where I am at today and I am grateful for that.

It will be obvious very quickly that this book would not have been possible without the fantastic contribution of my own family. The motivation for a better understanding of how development takes place started when my first son, Kaito, was born, in 2006. He made me understand certain things and the plan I put in place early on in his life is still being played out today. My second son, Sho, was born in 2008, so I was able to apply the same philosophy for a second time but with the experience I gained from Kaito. The process was born from love for them and a love of the game.

My wife, Midori, also deserves a special mention as she gave me unconditional support from the start and allowed our house to become a laboratory for football development. It took a lot of faith from her for our home to become a football testing ground and I appreciate her forbearance and support.

I would also like to mention my sister, Renee Byer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who has supported me every step of the way. She has been an inspiration to me. And many thanks also to my brother, John, who introduced me to Paul Mariner.

I started discussing writing a book with Fred Varcoe several years ago. Fred is a friend of over 20 years, a veteran sportswriter and one of the top football journalists in Japan. It took nearly a year of interviews, discussions and research to finish the book and it wouldn't have been possible without Fred's patience, persistence, dedication and supreme writing skill.

I have presented my ideas around the world over the years and this has required enormous support from my family and business partners as I sacrificed family life and business opportunities to spread my message. I am grateful for those who have believed in me and invested their time and resources in helping me.

First among them has to be my business partner and friend Miro Mijatovic, who I thank for wise advice and great friendship as well as practical support from his corporate group and associates.

It's been a long journey and I'm happy to say it's a journey that's far from finished.

Equally supportive has been my closest friend in Japan, football commentator and all-round good guy Jay Kabira, who invested in our vision and continues to support me in so many ways. Thank you!

Much appreciation and gratitude goes to former Japan head coach Takeshi Okada for his constant support and invaluable feedback, and also to Japan women's team captain Aya Miyama whom I have had the privilege of working with on TV and in other areas.

While writing this book, I was stunned to receive a communication from noted author and Harvard University Professor John J. Ratey endorsing my methods. I was even more stunned when he agreed to write both a Foreword and Afterword to this book. It's a great honor.

Many, many thanks to former England international Paul Mariner, who convinced me over 25 years ago to focus on technical development. Paul has taught me so much as well as giving me invaluable feedback on my coaching philosophy. Paul also opened the door to many people in the English football world. Thanks also to another former England great Glenn Hoddle, who lent me his valuable time and offered great insights that helped develop my philosophy in the early days. Much appreciation to FIFA agent Mike

Morris, who flew from London to Tokyo at short notice to meet me and listen to my ideas. Mike also introduced me to Ryan Giggs who in turn introduced me to Gary Neville and others in Manchester to whom I made a presentation and received valuable feedback.

Christophe Bezu, the former President of adidas Japan and adidas Asia, supported me for many years and recognised the importance of grassroots development. He contributed great friendship, advice and resources to my projects.

My work in China would be much more difficult without the marvelous input of Marcus Kam, who got us into the market and made things happen in a big, big way. He's worked miracles on our behalf and now we are proud to be helping the Chinese government implement their football programme.

Much appreciation to Tang Zhenyi from the CITIC Group, who introduced me to Dr. Dengfeng Wang, Director General of Physical Health and Arts Education from the Ministry of Education. Dr. Wang oversees the School Football Programme in China and is also Vice President of the Chinese Football Association (CFA). After seeing my presentations, he was convinced China needed to introduce our philosophy into China.

Also from China, Beijing Guo'an Football Club General Manager Gao Chao, who flew to Tokyo to meet me and convince me to work with his club; former national team star Li Tie, who is

currently the assistant coach of the Chinese national team; Zhu Guanghu, former national team head coach and currently Chinese Football Association Senior Technical Advisor; and former China captain Li Weifeng. Top Chinese journalist Ma Dexing was also a massive help, writing an influential article that was a major boost to my profile in China.

Also from the media world, I owe a lot to Bob Woodruff of ABC News, who has been making a documentary about me; Asian football expert John Duerden for some great reporting; Jack Bell from *The New York Times*; a whole host of interviews with host Anto on the excellent podcast *Beyond the Pitch*; Brian Blikenstaff who wrote some great pieces on *Slate.com* and *Vice Sports*; Richard Conway of *BBC Sport* for continued interest; Raymond Johnson who introduced me to the producer of ShoPro; Masakazu Kubo, the producer of TV Tokyo's *Ohasuta* morning programme; and last, but certainly not least, Gerry Harrison, the creator of *FIFA Futbol Mundial* and one of Britain's best-known football commentators.

Thank you to Michel Mommertz who taught me more about the Wiel Coerver Method than I thought possible; to Roland Biegler, who has offered advice and resources whenever I needed them; to Kuniyuki Matsuo, for believing and investing in my idea to introduce technical coaching into Japan and allowing me to build up the Coerver Coaching Brand of football schools; to Nobu Yajima, who worked with me to launch T3 Japan in 2008 after

getting his MBA at Liverpool University; and to our partners at T3 Australia, Ehsan Popal and Matt Sim.

There are so many people around the world I want to thank and I apologise for not being able to name all of them. They include: Oscar Gonzalez in Australia who I've worked with for nearly 20 years; two U.S. coaching legends, my former college coach George Vizvary and National Football Hall of Famer Anson Dorrance; my good friend in Indonesia Bob Hippy, who I grew up watching as a child in New York and who helped us access the Indonesian football community along with Ryan Gozali; former Australia captain, Lucas Neill, who gave me such positive feedback; Stuart Larman at the Asian Football Confederation; Alex Phillips, Head of Stakeholder Affairs at UEFA, Noel Mooney, Marketing Manager of UEFA, and UEFA Grassroots Advisor Robin Russell; Guam Football Association President Richard Lai and Guam coach Gary White; John Merrifield, Google Chief Creative Officer Asia, and Dr. Joe Fry of Google Zoo, Tokyo; Patrick Newell, co-founder of TEDxTokyo; part-time kids coach and major rock tour manager Ian Jeffery, a friend for 20 years; artist Jean Paul Buquet for helping me with my presentations and lending me his creative genius; Yogesh Maurya in India for providing huge assistance in nailing down my philosophy and doing great research; good friend and one-time pro golfer Paul Jones; and my former agent Yasushi Imatoki.

Once again, I would like to thank the many people I haven't named here for their loyalty, friendship, advice and support in helping to develop children's football. You are truly valued.

Tom Byer
Tokyo
May 2019