

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Ball skills and thought drills

With the World Cup about to kick off in South Africa, **Simon Creasey** speaks to the young founder of a football academy in Humberside who says children and young people can learn much about life and themselves from the 'beautiful game'

The phrase 'I can't' doesn't register with Gérard Jones.

Jones is a strong advocate of positive mental attitude and it's a belief that has stood him in good stead. Once identified as one of English football's up and coming talents, he was released by a professional club when aged 19 and was faced with a tough decision: shop around for another club willing to give him a chance or accept that perhaps his future lay off the pitch not on it.

Jones opted for the latter. His childhood dream of making it as a professional footballer may have been dashed but he picked himself up and embarked on a career

coaching children. Today, the Gérard School of Football, based in Hull, is one of the UK's leading specialist football development centres, coaching youngsters from the age of five up to 14 (the school is affiliated with a number of professional football clubs and has even attracted the attention of Premier League giants Arsenal who are interested in forming a relationship with the school).

Aged 20 Jones' mature outlook belies his youth – aside from setting up the football academy, he's an ambassador for organisations championing young entrepreneurs and a motivational speaker at schools across the UK. For all

of these roles Jones borrows from his own career experiences – both highs and lows – and shares his thoughts about how people of all ages can achieve greatness regardless of circumstance.

While the football school has a strong emphasis on developing impeccable technical skills and physical conditioning, of equal importance to Jones is character development. He feels that the UK is 15 years behind some parts of the world when it comes to coaching young people as the focus is too much on individual ability at set ages.

"In youth development programmes in Britain the ones that don't develop at a certain

rate get cast aside," explains Jones. "However, in other countries it's far from that: if you're not quite at the same level as others they still keep you in the same system and train you because years later you could still progress up the ranks. Another big difference is those who don't have the opportunity to go into pro football are given programmes to enhance their character and mental attributes. This teaches them how to solve problems and become better decision makers which will help them in future life."

A large part of Jones' coaching techniques revolve around the practice of "active learning". Children are split into small groups where they discuss what they are about to do and why they're doing certain technical or physical training drills. During drills the activity is regularly stopped so that Jones can ask questions – why did they make a particular pass, what do they think about the decision that was made, what might they have done differently? Every time a question is asked the youngsters thrust their arms into the air desperate to provide the answer. It's clear that they're engaged and are on the road to becoming what Jones describes as "theoretical decision makers".

"Young people are like a sponge – they can absorb a lot of information. We teach them how to identify problems, how to solve them and we get them to understand the reasons why," explains Jones.

In addition to coaching in local schools, hosting football academies and providing one-to-one private tuition for the particularly gifted – both

male and female – who have a strong chance of making it as professional footballers, he also does a lot of work in the community with young people with drug or alcohol problems.

"We put these kids into programmes where they learn about teamwork – how to communicate, how to solve a problem. They adopt what we teach them because they want to learn. If you want to be here and make something of yourself then you'll learn these things easily but if you're not bothered then you won't. It all comes down to the right mental attitude."

To ensure the right attitude is adopted a large part of the coaching sessions focus on what Jones terms "education and application".

"We're educating them on how to become better people and how to break down all sorts of barriers, for example barriers to their own performance. We're making them stronger mentally and helping them to realise that they've got potential and that they can live better and have a better lifestyle. So we educate them and teach them how they can apply what they have learnt to their everyday lives."

A positive mental attitude is crucial in all walks of life but particularly in the ultra competitive world of football where there is a high failure rate. Jones says that psychology plays a major factor – the ones who make it at professional clubs tend to be the ones who are mentally toughest – and he readily admits that one of the major failings during his short-lived playing career was a negative attitude, which ultimately stopped him from succeeding. Hence his banning of the words 'I can't' during training sessions.

"If I hear a five or six-year-old say 'I can't' I say no – that's not allowed here. Can't is such a negative word and as soon as you start getting into the habit of saying 'I can't' you're already defeating yourself. You might as well just give up because you've put a mental block – a big brick wall – in front of yourself. My

attitude is don't say 'I can't', say 'I can'. The more times you keep saying that you will do it. I'm a big believer in what the mind believes it can conceive – so if you think it you can do it."

True to his word Jones has an outlandish ambition: to one day manage the England national side – he's pictured above with former England international Nick Barmby (centre). "I want to manage Middlesbrough [the team he supports], make them a big premiership club, then move onto a bigger club and establish my name there and after that become England manager. People will laugh; I guarantee it and rightly so I suppose because it is a very big dream. Some people might say that I'm a football fantasist and I accept that. But the proof will be in the pudding. I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is what I was meant to do. This is what's going to make my name."

It may be a monumental ambition – particularly when you consider Jones' age and playing CV – but following an appearance on a regional TV news programme a bookmaker in Hull was so impressed by his confident



demeanour that they offered odds of 1,000-1 of him one day becoming England manager.

"My attitude is if you don't aim high in life then you won't achieve anything. You've got to aim high because if you don't achieve that particular thing you will achieve something still great just less so. But, if you set your sights lower and you fail then your achievements will be even lower."

And he is motivated by the children that he works with on a daily basis. "I see kids and I think you know what, I've got to help you. I motivate myself to give these kids the best shot that I can. When I see the look on the faces of the ones that improve it gives me an immense feeling of satisfaction, to know that they've taken what I've said on board, developed and improved not just as a player but as a person. That's very rewarding." ■

Resources

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Expert view: Ernie Brennan of the Children's Football Alliance

"As a football coach I can see the value of the mental wellbeing of children that play the game – it's paramount. When children turn up to play football they bring an awful lot of different pressures from school or from their family. If I've got a child of seven or eight years of age who turns up at football I can clearly tell by their body language, their decision making skills and their energy levels, if they are here under duress. So when I coach children my philosophy is you come here to have fun and forget about everything else. Children who turn up for an hour or two of football will find they can forget about absolutely everything and enjoy the game. The things they take away from the game include decision making skills, social skills and interpersonal skills."

www.childrensfootballalliance.com