

MCDONALD'S JUNIOR FOOTBALL

TEAM FORMATION AND GRADING

Objective

To create a unified approach in Junior Football for how teams are formed and where teams play within on Game Day. This will mean every player is engaged, offered a high level of provision and appropriate levels of play on game day. All players will be provided a quality experience and have time to develop and enjoy the game.

Background Information

In 2018 NZF undertook a Junior Framework Review (click [HERE](#)). Information taken from this review where 276 junior players were asked why they play football responses show that:

- The highest response from players was 69% - for fun/enjoyment.
- The second highest response from players was 10% - to play with their friends.
- The third highest response from players was 7% - to learn new skills.

In 2018, NZF alongside Sport NZ and four other sporting codes signed a statement of intent committing to the “Balance is Best” philosophy and “Keep Up with The Play” campaign focusing on ensuring our rangitahi (young people) stay playing for longer and gain the required skill and experiences to instil a lifelong love for the game. As a part of this commitment there are three messages that are important to share, which are:

- Childhood success is not a reliable predictor of future success.
- Early identification, selection and specialisation of young players is having a negative effect on young people.
- A focus on enjoyment and development, over winning, will encourage players to stay playing our game for longer. This focus will ultimately have a positive effect on player motivation, and physical and mental wellbeing.

Relative Age Effect

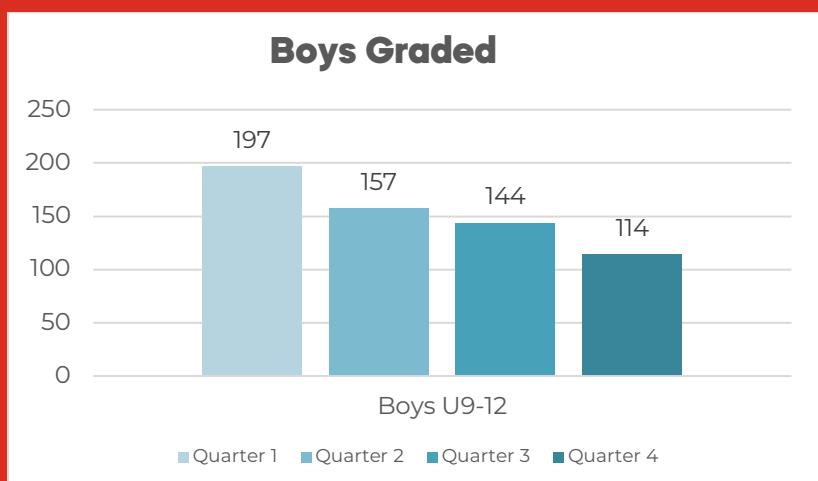
Relative Age Effect (RAE) is where the older more physically, emotionally and/or cognitively mature players within an age group are selected into the “top” teams due to their advanced attributes in comparison to their peers. A player born at the beginning of the competitive year (1st January) has a relative age advantage of almost 1 year, relative to players born at the end of the competitive year (31st December).

Relatively older (more mature) players are more likely to be identified as “talented” and selected into top teams which provides them with more support and investment in their development from a young age.

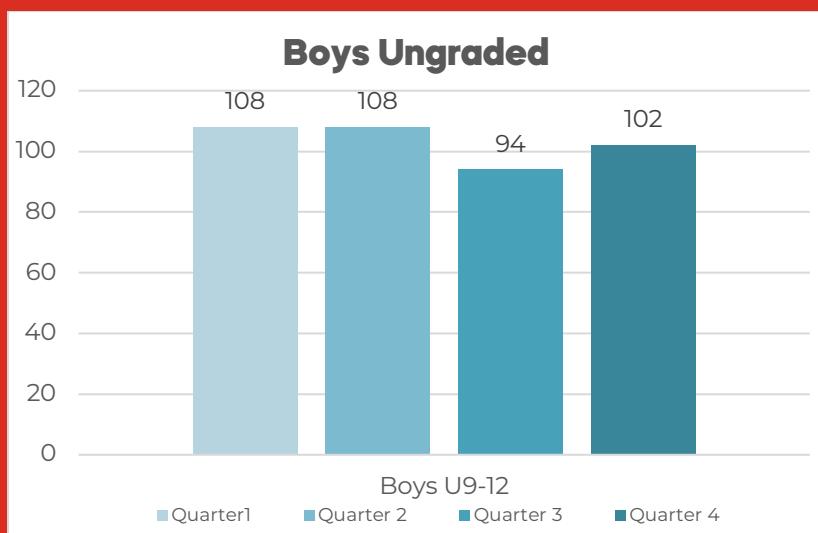
Below are four graphs based on data gathered from a selection of McDonalds Junior Football teams in New Zealand during the 2020 season.

Note: ungraded players are from teams formed through a non – selection policy, graded players are from selected teams.

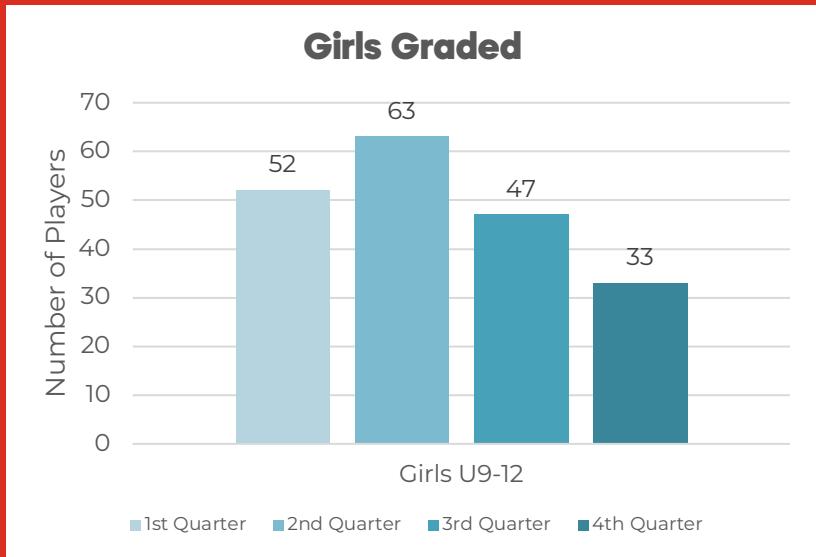
612 Graded Players



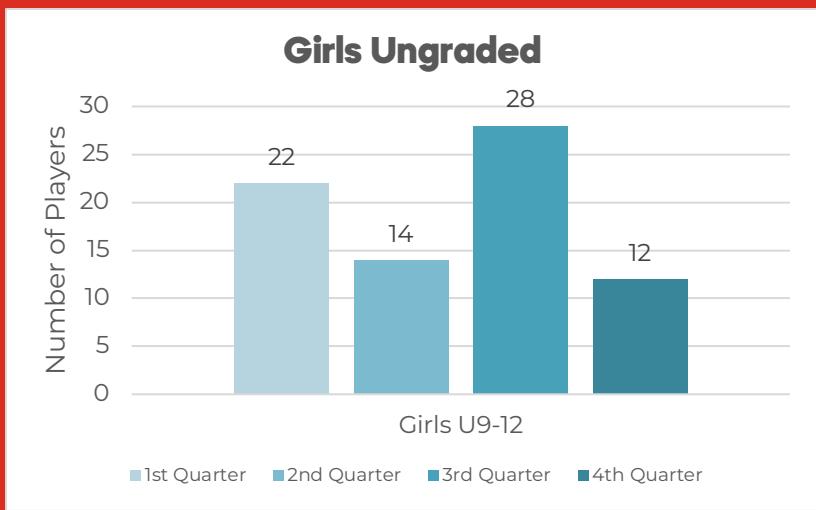
412 Ungraded Players



195 Graded players



76 Ungraded players



Note: Research states that the relative age differences are much less pronounced in female footballers, due to the fact that girls mature at an earlier age than boys do, and the overall playing pool is smaller.

This data clearly shows that RAE is prevalent when teams are selected as opposed to being non-selected and is consistent with similar data taken from football studies across the globe.

The tendency at present, as shown in the data, is to select players who are advanced in chronological age and maturity. These selections target short term success over the long-term development of players and reduce opportunities for less mature players.

RAE has been viewed as a contributing factor in causing players to drop out of football. Younger players within an age group can become discouraged with not being selected and in turn drop out of the game demonstrating why it is important not to identify or select players at a younger age.

Current State of Play

Currently, clubs choose at what age to start selecting teams based on their own beliefs and the outcomes they seek. This varies from club to club and is often driven by the desire to win football games and leagues over long term player development.

Currently Federations around New Zealand administer the grading process for the competitions in their region. This process is not consistent across all Federations.

Through feedback from the Federations, there are a number of challenges being faced within junior football such as:

- Priority of “Winning a League” over Player Development from parents and coaches.
- Selection of “top teams” that are prioritised for resources such as equipment and coaching.
- Teams being selected without a full knowledge of what constitutes a ‘good’ player.
- Player drop out for those not selected in “top teams”.
- Declined player development and declined pool of players at future age groups.
- Lop sided scores.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is imperative to provide all junior players with the best experience possible so they can continue to have fun and enjoy playing football without the external pressures of winning, facing possible selections or non-selections and league tables until they enter their youth years.

NZF have been working collaboratively with our Federations to develop the following recommendations within this document relating to both how teams are formed and how teams access the appropriate level of play within Junior Football throughout NZ.

1. Team Formation within Junior Football

- Recommended that at all times, a focus on fun and enjoyment and kids playing with their friends is at the forefront of any team formation.
- Guideline that there is NO selection of any Junior teams from U6 – U10.
- Guideline that there is no selection of a single ‘top team’ for U11 – U12.
- Guideline that there are no trials in any Junior football age groups.

2. Appropriate Level of Play

- Teams should be continually re-graded throughout the season in small pools of 4-6 teams to provide the appropriate challenge for all teams throughout the season.

3. Game Day Provision

- Recommendation that U9 & U10 football continues locally, ‘in hubs’, as per U6-U8, either in full or alongside intra federation competitions (this may vary across Federations due to playing numbers and geography)
- Equal or fair game time is recommended for every junior player providing all players with the same opportunities.

- Recommendation that the following three options are provided for U9 – U12 age players.
 - a) Football delivered locally, 'in hubs', within one club or a group/cluster of local clubs coming together.
 - b) Intra Federation competition (within Federations)
 - c) NZF Accredited Skills Centres (note this may be accessed through another club environment or through your Federation)
- Guideline that all junior tournaments are to be held as festivals and not named with a winner or trophy being played for at any ages in junior football. In addition to this, no festivals should be marketed or referred to as 'Nationals' or 'Championship' for any junior age group.

Developed by the NZF Football Department in consultation with our Federations.

