



**FERNTREE GULLY EAGLES JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB
PLAYER GRADING POLICY
APRIL 2008**

**A DISCUSSION PAPER:
“GRADING....A REFLECTIVE EXERCISE:
LOOKING BACK AT 2006....LOOKING FORWARD TO 2008 AND BEYOND.”**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to proactively (and not reactively) consider the issues arising from our experiences in the recent past in relation to ‘grading’, consider the options for the future, and for the Junior Club to develop a ‘position’ on this issue for the present and the future.

BACKGROUND

In the main, the Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club predominantly fields one team in each age group. In recent times, a feature has been the recruitment of children playing football in the local area resulting in more than one team being fielded in some age groups. For example, there were two teams playing under 9 and two teams playing under 14 football in season 2007.

Whilst the issue of grading is not necessarily an issue for the non-competitive years (ie: under 9, 10 and 11’s), it has become an issue in the competitive years. Our situation arose at the beginning of the 2007 season.

OUR SITUATION AT THE END OF THE 2006 SEASON

In 2006, the then under 13’s age group fielded two teams – one team each in ‘B’ and ‘C’ Division. The ‘C’ Division team played off in the grand final and were Runners-up. This resulted in the ‘C’ Division team being elevated into ‘B’ Division. Therefore, the club potentially had at the end of the 2006 season two teams in the same division ‘B’.

In the 2006/2007 off-season, the Club needed to consider how it would best manage this matter.

The EFL was strong in their view – they would have forced the club to play the ‘B’ grade team in ‘A’ grade and the ‘C’ grade team that was runners-up would then play in ‘B’ grade if the club did not accept grading. This was a very strong position and view held by the EFL – so basically the club had no other choice but to grade the boys.

The Eastern Football League (EFL) made a decision, after consulting with the club, that it would list one team in 'B' Division and the other in 'C' Division with an expectation and agreement with the club that the composition of the players in the teams would be changed – in other words introduce a grading system.

The coach of the 2007 Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club under 15 'B' team subsequently submitted a letter to the EFL guaranteeing that the players would be graded and that the best possible team would be fielded in 'B' grade. This letter basically confirmed that the 'B' graded team would be stronger than the 'C' graded team. The criteria used to grade included the club and the EFL Best and Fairest count results – this had to be demonstrated to the EFL.

In the 2007 pre-season, the then under 14 coaches were left to their own devices in selecting the teams that would represent the respective teams. The coaches had to develop their own criteria and made changes as they agreed. This resulted in 11 players from the 2006 under 13's 'C' Division being elevated to the 'B' Division team; 4 players from 'B' Division went to play in the 'C' Division team; 3 'B' Division players left the club to play with other clubs; 5 'B' Division players stopped playing football; and 5 new players were recruited to play in the 'C' Division team in season 2007.

These changes would have pleased the EFL as the two teams became mixed and were composed of players from each team. However, criticism from within the club cited the strengthening of the 'B' Division team at the expense of the 'C' Division team; that the 'C' Division team would not be competitive; that there was no transparency in the criteria used in selecting the players for each of the teams; and that there was no stated or documented criteria; etc.

The lack of access to football grounds for training and practice matches due to the drought only exacerbated the perceived problem – however decisions on the grading of players nevertheless **had** to take place, there was no other option given the guarantee given to the EFL by the club and the agreement the club entered into together with the EFL (as outlined earlier in this paper).

It is important to note that the Club Committee places no blame on any one or collective of individual(s) – rather notes the absence of any club policy on such matters and applauds and thanks the coaches on their commitment and endeavours in doing the best they could under difficult circumstances. In fact, the events of 2006 forced the situation that required addressing in a reactive manner.

The absence of any club policy on this matter has resulted in the nurturing of an unhealthy criticism; negativism and alienation amongst players and parents; festering of old wounds; and a passive response to a potentially explosive and destructive atmosphere.

QUESTIONS ARISING

Would the club have had an issue if the original teams remained in their original Division? (ie: If the under 13 'C' Division team had not played in the grand final).

Would the club have graded anyway?

- If 'yes', what is the club policy or position on grading?
- If 'no', why not?

ISSUES ARISING FROM OUR EXPERIENCES IN 2006/2007

- Coaches left to manage the situation in a reactive manner in the absence of any club policy/position on grading.
- No transparency in the club decisions or on the criteria used to grade.
- Alienation of players and parents.
- Criticism levelled (unfairly) at some individuals.

RESEARCH

Discussion with the EFL suggests the following:

- The club will receive complaints whichever way it decides to proceed.
- The majority of clubs would grade the better players in the higher division/grade.
- EFL do not need kids playing 'C' Division if they can play in a higher Division.
- It is a good idea to have a club policy on this issue.
- In considering grading issues, the club should use the B&F count from 2007 as part of the criteria.
- Other clubs have successfully considered and implemented a policy on this matter.
- If a team is to forfeit a game during the year and there are two teams in the one age group, the EFL expects that the lower graded team will forfeit the game.

Discussion with another club (where they do not grade) suggests the following:

- The teams will remain the same throughout their junior football – no grading.
- Thought they would lose too many children if they graded.
- If 2 teams in the same Division, they will still keep the teams in tact and will then decide which team will play the lower and the higher Division.
- It is a club/committee decision.

Discussion with another club (where they do grade) suggests the following:

- The teams are graded – resulting in one stronger team than the other.
- Started to grade in competitive years (ie: under 12's).
- Each year it's taken more seriously the higher the age group. This is more realistic for players given that the seniors are graded on merit and performance.
- If there was no grading, the club was concerned that they would lose players to other clubs who wanted to play higher grade and be successful.
- In the under 16's, secured the top twenty spots and left four for flexibility.

- This policy was introduced as a means of attempting to prevent poaching; and a need to develop and promote a strong culture of success.

In researching the web, the following statements have been taken from various sporting clubs:

- *“The Football Club is committed to ensuring that all players enjoy their football by being placed into teams commensurate with their skill levels and friendship preferences, where possible. The club is committed to ensuring that graded, competitive age groups compete on a fair and equitable basis for the benefit of players and the betterment of the football code.”*
- *“At our club, we make every effort to grade all players into the team appropriate for their age and skill level. Extensive research shows that children enjoy their football much more and develop their skills much more quickly when they are playing at a level commensurate with their abilities.”*
- *“Player Development & Assessment when Grading: Our Club is moving towards a Football Development Policy based on technique, ball skill and football intelligence. We will develop young Australian footballers to enjoy the game above all else and play with a smile on their face. This will be achieved through technique and skill development, rather than by a focus on running and hard work. We will focus on and teach our players the following football areas in descending order:*
 1. *Technique*
 2. *Ball skill*
 3. *Football Intelligence (insight)*
 4. *Personality*
 5. *Speed*

This Development Policy will ensure that all our players enjoy the game throughout their life, as physical strength diminishes, through an emphasis on the ball. In addition the Policy gives our talented players the best opportunity to achieve wonderful things in this great game. Our Club’s junior players will now be graded using these criteria. We will choose a talented footballer in preference to a talented athlete.”

- *“AT U8-U9 level, all teams are graded even though the games are non-competitive. As mentioned, this is to ensure that players are placed in teams which will assist in their skill development through playing against opposition of similar calibre. We are generally able to rely on Coaching Assessments from the previous year as the starting point for Grading assessment, and this is augmented with skills assessments and small-sided games on Grading Days.”*
- *“Grading of Competition Players: Once children reach competition level, the nature of the game changes significantly for the players. They are starting to play in specific positions on a much bigger field. All teams at Competition level are graded. They are competing for a Championship, and it is important that they are placed with players of similar ability to ensure their continued development and enjoyment of the game. The Coaching Assessments from the previous year is the starting point for Grading assessment, and this is augmented with skills assessments and small-sided practice games on Grading Days.”*

- *“Playing with Friends: We know that some families want their child to play with their friends, especially in the younger age groups. Where possible and where appropriate, we do our best to accommodate this in the younger years provided that the request is made prior to the commencement of Grading, and preferably at the time of Registration. No such requests will be considered once Grading has commenced. Where we feel that a child will be significantly disadvantaged by such a request (ie in circumstances where they are extremely talented), we will discuss the matter with the parents or guardians of the player involved and make appropriate recommendations. In all circumstances, decisions re placements are at the sole discretion of the club.”*

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

The club will need to develop a policy position in the event that this situation arises. We have an immediate issue now for the under 15's in season 2008; and potentially a similar situation when our under 10's in 2008 enter into the competitive years in under 12's from season 2010.

Given the ages of the children as they grow and play in the older age groups, there is a need to involve the players in the decision making.

There needs to be a transparency of the process that is communicated to all players and parents.

There needs to be an acceptance by all players and parents of the policy position taken by the club to prevent the culture of criticism and negativity.

POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD – THE OPTIONS

Option #1: Do nothing and keep status quo – no immediate conflict but Club has potential of there being a conflict in the future.

In this option, there is no decision made and will only be addressed should there be another similar situation as that which arose in 2006/2007. Introduce a policy only when there is a conflict such as that which arose in the 2006/2007 season. Each team recruits to their own vacancies as they arise.

Option #2: Recruit enough players for one team only in each age group – no conflict exists.

In this option, there is no grading decision to be made given that there will be only one team per age group. Each team recruits to their own vacancies as they arise.

Option #3: Players remain in their team for the entire period of their junior football – no grading.

In this option, there is no room for movement. The club will need to ensure that there is at least one division that separates the two or more teams in that age group (ie: one will be in 'A' and the other in 'C' or 'D' Division) so that the 2006/2007 situation will be minimised.

However, this does not address the requirement of the EFL who suggest that "...the EFL do not need kids playing 'C' Division if they can play in a higher Division".

It also does not address the issue of potentially losing some players and their families to higher Division clubs.

This does not also address the issue if a situation from 2006/2007 arises again in the future as the EFL will expect that the teams be mixed and the better players play in the higher division.

Option #4: Introduce a grading system as from the competitive years – under 12's and above.

In this option, the club decides on this policy and all players and families are made aware of this. Players will be graded once they reach the under 12's.

However, this does not address the issue of creating one 'super' team at the expense of the second team – who may feel hard done by.

It also does not address the issue of alienation and divisiveness amongst the players and families.

It also runs the risk of losing players and families to other clubs given the discontent.

Option #5: Introduce a staggered approach to grading that involves the active participation of players in decision making – commencing no later than in under 12's but becoming more serious and realistic each year.

In this option, grading is based on the following principles:

- The best team is selected on ability and merit;
- All registered players in an age group train together for pre-season;
- The players are asked for their opinion as to the Division they would like to try out for, and the position that they are best suited to play. This will give players the opportunity to trial for a higher Division team and vice-versa. There is no compulsion to trial for a higher Division;
- This option will allow for multiple teams to be selected based on transparent decision making with a view to ensuring competitive teams in both or more Divisions;
- It would generally be acknowledged that the higher Division team be stronger than the lower Division teams – albeit all should be competitive in their respective Divisions;
- The selection process will involve a 'Panel' that will include the Club Coaching Co-ordinator (as the Chair), the Coaches of the teams effected, a Club office holder and two other appropriate people as appointed by the Committee/Executive – a panel of no more than six people. The Panel members will work co-operatively to select the teams in the best interests of the players.
- The criteria used could include the following:
 1. Club Best and Fairest count result
 2. EFL Best and Fairest count result
 3. Performance in Practice games

4. Performance in the new '3 game rule'
 5. Good Communication between the coaches in the same age group is critical
- Each year after the Under 12's this approach will be taken more seriously with a view that the grading will be more realistic given the selection processes that are undertaken in the under 18's and senior football teams.

RECOMMENDATION

On balance, the working group recommends Option #5, with a view that this approach be reviewed after the first twelve months (ie: at the conclusion of the 2008 season and before the 2009 season).

It is believed that this option will:

1. promote the club more positively
2. be more in line with the philosophy of the Club as outlined in the Constitution
3. promote a culture of inclusion of players and families
4. promote a culture of success
5. provide a balance so that two or more teams are competitive on the field within the same age group
6. minimise the need for players and their families to seek alternative options at other clubs
7. promote a culture of transparency
8. address EFL requirements and/or expectations.

There has been considerable discussion at the General Committee Meeting around the timing of the introduction of the grading system. That is:

- Should grading be introduced in under 9's?
- Should grading be introduced in under 11's so that teams have one year experience in grading to prepare them for their first year of competitive football in under 12's?
- Should the players be rotated across both teams in under 11's so that they start to get used to playing with children from the other team in preparation for grading in under 12's?
- Should grading be introduced in under 12's?

This matter was referred to the Coaches' meeting in March 2008 with the following recommendation agreed:

"That the FTG Eagles JFC adopt the Grading Paper and its recommendations as is; that the Club endorses and trials a policy whereby grading commences in under 12's; that the two Coaches of the 2008 season under 10's begin to promote and discuss the policy with parents to seek their views in preparation for the 2009 season; and for these Coaches to report back to the General Committee later in 2008 as part of the agreed review process of this Policy."

Should this option be agreed upon by the majority of Committee members, then further work will be required to communicate this decision; and to develop the frameworks and structures to support this approach.

This recommended approach is consistent with a paper presented by the then coaching co-ordinator to the General Committee from the coaches meeting dated 14 August 2006. That paper addressed issues of “Should players play in their correct age group”, and “Grading of players if there is more than one (1) team in that age group”. (A copy of that report is attached).

In that report, it stated that Coaches “...were unanimous to grade teams”. It went on to state:

- No need to grade at under 9’s and 10’s
- Start looking at the players in under 11’s to grade them for their first year of competitive football
- Grading would consist of pre-season training to be carried out together to allow both coaches to evaluate all the players under the same conditions. By the end of the last practice match these sides should be settled
- If required, previous coaches can be asked for feedback on previous years
- Someone independent should also be available to help. This would allow for an outsider’s opinion (coaching co-ordinator or another independent coach)
- A grading committee is required to conduct the process and should include:
 1. All coaches involved in the teams to be graded
 2. Any previous coaches that could pass on previous knowledge of the players
 3. An independent assessor that could give an unbiased point of view including the Coaching co-ordinator and/or independent coach.

Furthermore, it is also recommended that the Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club introduce a skill analysis review of each player before and after the season.

The skill analysis has a ‘developmental’ and ‘teaching’ aspect to it – a generic format that is age appropriate (taken from AFL literature) would be modified and/or developed with a view that someone (more likely a team of people or alternatively the coach of one team can do this for another team) from within the Club and independent of the team with whom they are associated would undertake a skill analysis of every player highlighting the strengths and the learning opportunities. The outcome would then be discussed with the player and the coach (and families as required). This will provide each player with an outline or a program of skills that perhaps they themselves have identified and wish to work on during the season or the off-season. This will also provide a transparent approach for the players and their families.

However, this concept is new and could be extremely time consuming. People would need to be trained and a communication strategy devised. It also implies a formal ‘mentoring’ structure and opportunity for players within the club – a concept that has neither been discussed nor attempted previously at the club.

It could also allow for the club to consider introducing ‘extra’ and targeted skill based training for those players who wish to further develop the skills that they possess. This approach could involve players from across age groups coming together – but would need to be focussed on an age-appropriate level – again, a concept that the club has not previously discussed.

Please refer to the Club's recently accepted skills analysis documents:

- Player Skill Assessment Policy (for all players) – *Appendix # 1*
- Coaches' Assessment Of Player – *Appendix # 2*
- Independent (player) Skill Assessment – *Appendix # 3*

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Finally, it is recommended that this policy be posted on the *FTG Eagles Junior Football Club* website (www.ferntreegullyeagles.com.au) with a follow-up presentation on the document on one of the Sunday night awards gatherings.

Furthermore, a brief outline of the policy will also be posted on the website (as per *Appendix # 4*).

On behalf of the Working Group:

Gary Bass
Bruce Brunton
Sam Cavarra
Simon Clark
Joel Farrelly
John Turner

Appendix # 1:

FERNTREE GULLY EAGLES JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB PLAYER SKILL ASSESSMENT POLICY FOR ALL PLAYERS

REASON:

From time to time F .T. G Eagles junior football club fields two teams in the same age group. This does not cause a problem until the team in the lower division plays off in the grand final, thus elevating them to the next division the following season. Under EFL guidelines a club cannot have two teams in the same division. As a club we have two options,

1. we push both teams up a division, and more than likely have two uncompetitive sides; or
2. grade all players into appropriate divisions, trying to achieve two competitive sides.

PURPOSE:

F.T.G Eagles Junior Football Club player assessment is done for a number of reasons:

- To give every player the opportunity to play at the highest level
- To make sure all players are playing at a level where their confidence and skills will continually be improving
- To be given the opportunity to go down a level if they choose
- Identify player strengths and weaknesses
- Player development

Skill assessment will consist of the following - coach's assessment, and independent skills assessment that considers:

1. Ball control
2. Agility and fitness
3. Handball, technique /execution
4. Marking, technique/execution
5. Kicking ,technique/execution

METHODOLOGY:

Testing will take place before the season starts and at the end of the season.

Appendix # 2:

**FERNTREE GULLY EAGLES JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB
COACHES' ASSESSMENT OF PLAYER**

Be honest and open the idea is to identify strengths and to develop weaknesses.

Player name: _____

Age group: _____

(2)Poor (4) Developing (6) good (8) Excellent (10) Outstanding

Please tick appropriate box

	2	4	6	8	10
Training attendance					
Fitness					
Discipline					
Confident use of voice					
Work rate					
Defensive skills					
Efficient ball use by foot					
Efficient ball use by hand					
Decision making					
Clean hands					
Reading of play					
Win their own ball					

Total score _____

Coaches' comments:

Appendix # 3:

**FERNTREE GULLY EAGLES JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB
INDEPENDENT (PLAYER) SKILL ASSESSMENT**

PLAYER NAME:

INDEPENDENT SKILL ASSESMENT

- (1) Ball control run and bounce a ball through a set of 7 cones placed at 10 meter intervals, both hands, to be done at game pace.

- (2) Agility and fitness weave through a set of 15 colored cones at 5 meter intervals against the clock 20 second break then back again. 400 meter time trial.

- (3) Handball, technique/execution hit running targets at distances between 3 and 6 meters, at least 5 per hand, run hand ball and receive from stationary player lane style min 5 per hand.

- (4) Marking, technique/execution, marking on a strong lead from the goal square min 5 over head/chest ,player to receive running straight trough lane style, min 5 chest /over head.

- (5) Kicking, technique/execution, kicking lane style, short kicks first then longer ones min 5 per foot, at least 20 in total, kicking to set position on the run, place 4 cones in a 6 meter square, player to kick on the run at around 30 meters from different locations/angles around the ground min 5 per foot..

INDEPENDENT (PLAYER) SKILL ASSESSMENT

SCORING

3 CONSOLIDATING 6 GOOD 9 VERY GOOD

Ball Control

3

6

9

Right hand			
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Left hand			
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Agility

Cone weave			
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400 time trial			
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Handball

Running target preferred			
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Running target non preferred			
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Stationary target preferred			
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Stationary target non preferred			
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Marking

On a strong lead, over head			
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On a strong lead, chest mark			
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Lane work over head			
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Lane work chest			
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Kicking

Set position preferred			
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Set position no preferred			
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Kicking on the run preferred			
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Kicking on the run non preferred			
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Appendix # 4:

Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club Player Grading Policy April 2008

At the *Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club* General Committee Meeting held on Monday 7 April 2008, a decision was taken to introduce player grading commencing from no later than the under 12 age group, and will be relevant to all age groups from under 12's to under 16's where more than one team is fielded in any one age group. It was also decided that a review of this policy be undertaken after the first twelve months (ie: at the conclusion of the 2008 season and before the start of the 2009 season).

The General Committee spent considerable time and energy in debating what has become the Club Policy, and it believes that this is the best proactive approach in managing the issues arising in situations whereby the Club fields more than one team in any age group.

Please refer to a more detailed document titled: '*A Discussion paper: Grading...A Reflective Exercise: Looking Back at 2006...Looking Forward to 2008 and Beyond*' dated 8 March 2008.

This document outlines:

1. The recommended model;
2. The grading selection process of players that will involve a 'Panel';
3. The criteria that will be used to assist in the grading process; and
4. The introduction of a 'Skill Analysis' assessment tool to be used by the coaching group on every player before and after each season that identifies player strengths and learning opportunities - as part of the Club's new direction in providing a player 'developmental' and 'teaching' approach.

By publicising the Grading Policy, the *FTG Eagles JFC* wishes to ensure that all players and families are fully aware of this change, and to encourage feedback from anyone in relation to this Policy. The *FTG Eagles JFC* welcomes comments which can be made to any of the General Committee members so that a more informed Review process can be undertaken at the end of the 2008 season.

Any developments on this or any other Club Policy will be posted on the *FTG Eagles Junior Football Club* website (www.ferntreegullyeagles.com.au).

**Ferntree Gully Eagles Junior Football Club
Executive and General Committee
April 2008**