

# How to keep your subs engaged

With the chill winter winds blowing, and rain lashing down, being a substitute in grassroots football is no picnic. Whether it's setting them tasks or labelling them 'game-changers', here are some tips and advice on boosting your bench



Being prepared for the elements is a key way of keeping young subs focused

**Players don't like being on the subs' bench at the best of times and in wet and cold weather it can be even harder to maintain their levels of enthusiasm.**

But — for making them feeling valued, learning for their own development, giving support to their team-mates and, of course, their preparedness to join the action when called upon — it's important to keep substitutes as engaged as possible.

Here are some top tips to consider to keep your subs engaged on your next matchday.

## 01 REGULAR WARM-UPS

Having completed the pre-match warm-up, it's difficult for players to then sit on the sidelines and remain prepared to join the action at a moment's notice. So be sure to keep them doing regular warm-ups until it's their turn to go onto the pitch.

If you have an assistant coach or a willing parent, it can even be used as an additional coaching opportunity. 1-v-1s and 2-v-2s, or keepy-uppy competitions, are always more fun and engaging than simply jogging up and down in a straight line.

## 02 SET THE PLAYERS TASKS

Depending on the age of your players, it can be a good idea to set a few tasks or challenges to help keep them watching and

thinking as the game goes on.

Perhaps split them into pairs and ask them to consider the opposition's formation, style of play, strengths and weakness, or alternatively to assess their team-mates and think about 'what are we doing well?' and 'even better if...'

If you've set a certain focus for the game, such as winning the ball back in the opponent's final third, ask your subs to count how many times this happens and think about why their team-mates got success.

To help team cohesion, you could give each substitute a team-mate to watch, then at half-time or full-time, it becomes their job to share two things they did well.

You could even give them greater influence by asking them to lead the half-time team talk, or come up with a formation change for your team to adopt in the second-half and discuss the reasons why.

## 03 MAKE USE OF ROLL-ON, ROLL-OFF

Most youth and some senior leagues will allow roll-on roll-off substitutions. In cold and wet weather, this is a great opportunity to keep all players warm, active and involved, so try to make use of them at fairly regular intervals, without interrupting your team's flow. Your substitutes could even act as time-keepers to keep them occupied and allow you to concentrate on the game.

## 04 ENSURE YOU'RE PREPARED FOR THE ELEMENTS

It's no fun for substitutes to be sitting on a wet floor, freezing cold, while their friends are running around a football pitch. So, where possible, try and make sure you're prepared for the elements.

Maybe ask your club to fund the purchase of a pop-up subs' bench to keep players off the floor, or see if one of your parents could bring along an easy-assemble gazebo for shelter.

## 05 ROTATE YOUR STARTING LINE-UP

It may seem obvious, but where possible, try not to have the same players starting as substitutes week after week. Hopefully, at foundation and youth development phases, many coaches will be focused on the improvement and enjoyment of players, over and above results.

But equally, lining up against a strong side with several weaker players in your starting team could serve to demoralise them, knock confidence and hamper development - especially if they can't get near the ball.

To counter this, plan your matchday squads several weeks in advance, with player availability and opposition in mind. That way, you can ensure weaker players can get more game time in matches where they can have some individual and collective success, leaving your stronger players to be challenged with more game time against tougher opponents.

All players should then hopefully enjoy plenty of time on the pitch over the course of a month and season.

## 06 CHANGE UP THE LANGUAGE

Telling players they are 'on the bench' or a 'substitute' for the game can have negative connotations.

While it's good practice to explain the decision to players - be it a tactical choice, because they've missed a couple of training sessions or simply due to rotation - players can still feel demoralised by sitting on the sidelines.

So it can be a good idea to put a positive spin on it, especially for younger players. Even professional clubs keep their squad players involved - when they first joined the FA Women's Championship, London City Lionesses referred to substitutes as 'game-changers'. Or perhaps your non-starters could be 'impact players'? Either way, keep them feeling valued.