

Dear All

Finally we are in a position to communicate some information regarding the U13s next season along with some additional changes that will be forthcoming and I urge you to pay close attention to this email as your position in the EJA may depend on it.

Managers Meetings

Let's start with the upcoming manager's meetings, please can you ensure ALL managers are informed of the dates below and we would like ALL managers to attend however as long as one manager from your club is there to feed the information back to the others there will be no charge. If no manager bothers turning up then the Club will be charged, the fine is £50.

February all at 7:30pm so arrive for 7pm please:

9th – Godmanchester: The Peter Hodson Community Ground, Bearscroft Lane, Godmanchester PE29 2LQ

10th – Cheshunt: Theobalds Lane, Cheshunt EN8 8RU

11th – Chelmsford: Melbourne Park, Salerno Way, Chelmsford CM1 9SN

All Clubs that have Cups, Trophies, etc to return to the League MUST return them at one of these meetings if they have not arranged with an officer an alternative.

U13s 9v9 Format Season 2026-27

The Sanctioning Body (Essex FA) will continue to sanction the EJA for U13s football but at 9v9 format as decreed by The FA. There has been discussions and rumours about leagues offering an U14 Development League for those U13s that want to play 11v11 football but that is not viable in the EJA as that would then prevent you from entering an U14s team due to the one team at one age group Rule. There has also been discussion and rumour around players 'playing up' which will be allowed as per the current SCORY Rules, however players must meet the criteria in order to play up. This means that any player playing up an age group must have reached the age of 12 by midnight on the 31 August for the relevant playing season, ie for next season 12 by the 31 August 2026. This will potentially split your current U12s teams into two sections and neither be able to part of a team so it may only be an option for some. Equally, The FA have warned that if too many players are circumventing their formats they may remove the ability altogether to play up – so I'm passing that warning on.

Given all of that there is no reason that the EJA cannot run an U13s competition at 9v9 so we will plan to offer that to our member clubs and all those looking to enter next season. The Sanctioning Body have requested that we canvas our members to indicate if they will or will not be entering an U13s team next season so that we can see what the position looks like now incase there are any tweaks required. **With that in mind, please complete the form on this link: <https://forms.gle/SpAsQWvbQ6nqGXU77> by 8pm Sunday 1 February to give us an indication of your Club's plans.**

Please bear in mind:

There will be no changing of the EJA criteria, ie the need to changing facilities, referee rooms, hospitality being taken, etc. If we do not continue to maintain our standards then it is not "EJA Football" but a mirror of Football for All for which there is no point in it then being part of the EJA League.

This then leads me nicely into the next topic....

EJA Standards

I will start by reminding you of the League's Vision Statements that were circulated to all clubs last season as part of the work that was done to being League Accredited:

League Vision

The EJA League sees itself as providing the development pathway for players to work towards the member club's first team and beyond starting at U13. This is to include professional academy level standards at grassroots level: development opportunities of playing other teams with their best players at the age group, dress codes, match hospitality and respect for everyone in the game.

League Mission

To have a rigorous criteria for entry to the League and to expect our Member Clubs to adhere to the vision and rules laid down. This to mean that the best players at the club for the relevant age group to allow all players to develop with a good amount of playing time and fixtures every weekend with similar level players to provide good competition match days.

To introduce the correct match day environments for players which will include dress codes, changing facilities, club house hospitality after the fixtures, etc to replicate how the professional academies operate and to guide the expectations of players into the professional game.

To hold our standards at a higher level both of match day environments and behaviour of all participants, be they players, coaches, match officials or supporters.

League Values

League Officers to hold positions for which they are qualified and able to adhere to the role and responsibilities laid down and to have a succession plan to ensure that the league continues to provide the vision and mission set down.

Member Clubs who adhere to the vision and mission of the League and to provide the correct match day environment at their club.

Players to play at the best of their abilities, be willing to play every weekend during the playing season and to develop towards their Club's First Team and beyond by using the matches in the League system as their stepping stones to that aim.

For respect and discipline to be shown at a higher level and for everyone to look at being the best teachers and examples of holding themselves to a high standard in this regard. For the matches to be competitive to develop players in behaviours that will stand them in good stead for and even higher level of football and for life in general but not to resort to a 'win at all cost' mentality.

To ensure everyone involved enjoys being part of the EJA League and wants to uphold our vision, our mission and our values to the highest standard possible.

These visions and standards are not being met by a number of our member clubs and as such we have asked the Sanctioning Body what, as a League, we can do to raise the standards of the League. They have advised that now we have reached our 100 clubs we are in a position to recommend clubs are not only voted onto the League at the AGM but off as well. This will enable new clubs to join who are looking to meet the standards required to take the place of those who are only paying lip service to them.

In order for the League to undertake a review of all member clubs we will be identifying that clubs who are not meeting the relevant standards and talking to you about what, if

anything, you will do to raise your profile to the level required to remain in the EJA League.

Key criteria we will be looking into are the following:

Venues – ALL venues should meet the EJA criteria – this means separate changing rooms for the two teams, separate changing rooms with a toilet and shower for the match official, a separate room ON SITE for hospitality to be held.

This does not need to be your own clubhouse, a local venue with the facilities or a school that you can use a classroom to have hospitality in is sufficient. But a grass pitch with no changing facilities or requiring to change venues for hospitality will not be acceptable.

Hospitality – “Providing hospitality” does not mean a box of sandwiches at the pitch side, or a ‘doggie bag’ to take away. It does not mean popping into the club house grabbing what’s available and walking away and going home. It does not mean sitting down in your kit instead of getting changed into your tracksuit.

Hospitality means sitting down together, both teams, all players, and having something to eat whilst dressed in our tracksuit. It means having conversations, it means learning that even if you lost you pay your host the respect of eating the food that has been prepared in a civilised manner and leaving your gripes the other side of the white line. Hospitality is a life lesson – it teaches everyone how to behave after potential disappointments, just like in any walk of life from now into adulthood and is a standard, safe, environment to learn how. Any club/team not embracing this as part of the EJA are not meeting EJA Standards and will be recommended for removal.

Dress Code – It is a requirement that the players arrive in their club tracksuit or if they don’t have a tracksuit then a shirt and trousers (school wear like). Players do not arrive in the kit and leave in their kit. No first team player even in the NLS turns up in a kit ready to play, they get changed both in and out of their kit. We have had teams turning up in their kit to play, even at the EJA Cup Finals, and this is NOT acceptable.

And then the big one:

Discipline – I specifically asked about this subject because the discipline of a large number of teams in our League is quite frankly appalling. The number of E3s, E20s and E21s we see for misconduct is outstanding for what is at the end of the day youth football. I’m not sure what role models some of your coaches and parents are portraying but it is you the Club they are letting down if you don’t take action to eradicate it. Parents would not stand in a classroom and shout and holler at the children and teacher and yet deem it acceptable at the pitch side – it is NOT.

The County FAs already run a penalty point system for poor discipline on and off the pitch and the League have sight of this and are notified when teams reach the sanction mark, ie 25 points, 50 points, etc. I’m horrified to see that some of our teams reach the first one before even half the season has completed.

As Clubs there are some things that are already included in our Rules that you should be putting in place to reduce this. Some call them “Respect Marshals”, some called them “Match Day Volunteers” but whatever you call them you should have at least one for each team. They should be clearly visible and marked as such and there are hi-viz tops/jackets available to facilitate that. They then should be tasked with the role of meeting and greeting your oppositions and match official, showing them where the changing facilities are and where hospitality will be taken at the end of the game and just being visible and able to report any poor behaviour back to the League should, I believe, help deter supporters from poor behaviour and reduce your E20s and E21s.

In terms of your managers and coaches, it is the Club's responsibility to ensure your managers understand the Club's Code of Conducts and how to be an important role model for the players, I'm sure any Welfare Officer can advise a Club how best to implement a good ethos at your Club. However, I have also asked the County FA if there is a course that we can put together for all EJA managers to participate in to help them understand their vital role in player development, not just at skill level. I have been assured that once Essex FA have appointed their new Coach Development Officer there is work we can do to put together a course based on some of the behaviour ones that are used as sanctions once they've been issued with an E3. I'm hoping that by encouraging all EJA coaches to comply to sit through what we put together will help them understand how their behaviour feeds the team's behaviour and reduce the number of misconducts the players and coaches face.

As a League we will be looking at ways to look into the discipline of the teams and therefore the Clubs and working with the County FAs to try and head off some of the more serious misconducts and reduce the charges and fines and if the Clubs continue to not improve their discipline records then they too will be recommended for removal from the EJA League.

Two key points to bring to your attention regarding changes for next season:

Rule 4a

Rule 4a gave the League a number of issues last season that required some additional SGMs ahead of the season start and an Appeal case I needed to sit on. As such I have asked for the Sanctioning Body to look at this Rule and those around it to reduce the problems we have and the knock-on effect that they cause.

As we all know it is the League's requirement to have at least two teams in the EJA as part of the criteria and we had two incidents last season that caused problems. One was where a team withdrew and the Club was correctly removed from the constitution but the Appeal Board asked if the League could facilitate a vote to see if the remaining team could return. The other was where a handful of clubs pulled their 'bogus' team out just after the start of the season which reduces the teams in the Divisions without any ability to re-juggle and therefore reduces games for all the other teams in that Division. Both are unsatisfactory outcomes.

Therefore there will be a change to the Rule effecting when players need to be registered by. Instead of it being 14 days before the season starts we will be asking for 35 days before the season starts but reducing this number to 11 players. If ANY team does not have 11 players registered 35 days before the start of the season they will be removed from the constitution and if that reduces the number of teams to less than two the Club will be removed.

This will mean that when we hold the part of the AGM that relates to the Divisions we will already know that we have viable teams and Clubs taking part and the reduction in the number of teams pulling out late in the day will be reduced.

This will mean however that as a Club you will need to be on the ball with your registration submissions to the League. Once the Club has affiliated it's EJA teams then it can push through players for registration. Whilst the League will be unable to approve these until July as our system doesn't 'roll over' at the same time as affiliation it will show how many players are to be registered once we can start the process so there is no excuse for not submitting 11 players for your team before the 35 day before the season start deadline that it coming in. But you will need to be pro-active.

If you are in fact adhering to the EJA visions for a player pathway to your first team these players should already be in your club ready to take the next step, be it at U13s or older. I'm aware that there will still be the need for trials and that everyone will be clamouring for the best players but again, you're going to need to be pro-active and on the ball.

Referees

As we all know the lack of match officials is a bugbear of us all which hasn't been helped by some of the Ruling of Essex FA in determining fees we are allowed to pay for the age groups. However, there is currently an annual review being undertaken and the League have put forward some compelling arguments as to why the League should be in a position to suggest higher reimbursement for the officials. The three key ones are the additional travel to get to our matches as they are across 10 different counties, albeit match officials tend to be around their local County FA there is still some additional travel involved, so we have suggested perhaps travel expenses could be added. Another is that different County FAs have different fees and as such it makes it difficult to get officials who are being paid more in their own County FA areas that we are allowed to pay them. Equally we have an expectation that the League is of a 'higher standard' and parents are often paying a premium for a better 'product' and if the matches are not being officiated by an appointed official then it doesn't look good for the league's "costs" to parents, albeit the League does not have any bearing on the costs the Clubs charge.

These have all be brought to the attention of the review panel and we await the outcome.

From a different angle, it could be that with the U13s 9v9 format, we could start there with newly qualified officials and after some experience be able to move through our league quicker than before – a possible silver lining for the 9v9 format and lack of officials in our League.

Technology

Neville has been busy building a new website and installing "Help with IT" for the League to use to become more streamlined. Please check out the website and bookmark it as it will become the place to go to for answers to your questions.

<https://www.ejafl.com>

The new system will be introduced to the Clubs for the new season, some will already be familiar with it, for others it will be new but ultimately a lot better for the League to deal with its administrative tasks.

In conclusion, there is a lot of information to digest here but ultimately we are trying to bring the League's standards back to where they should be and with these solutions to some of the issues we face I hope that you can see we are working hard and trying to make this League better and return to something to be proud to be a part of. I hope that you all embrace what we are trying to achieve and work hard as clubs to meet the challenges you may face to remain in the EJA moving forwards. If you have any questions or need anything clarifying then please don't hesitate to ask and I'll do my best to answer.

Jules

League Secretary