



So You're Managing a Team This Season

A practical guide for new grassroots team managers and coaches

grassroute.co.uk

How to use this guide

You don't need to read this end-to-end. It's structured so you can skip to what you need.

- **Just said yes? Start at Section 2.** The first three sections cover the first few weeks in the role.
- **Pre-season focused?** Sections 2-9 plus the companion Pre-Season Checklist.
- **Already running, hit a problem?** Sections 10-12 cover communication, matchday, and the first month.
- **Thinking about next year?** Section 13.
- **Managing a youth team?** Read the spine, then Section 14.
- **Managing an adult team?** Read the spine, then Section 15.
- **Just want the actionable stuff?** Use the standalone Pre-Season Checklist - a separate document at grassroute.co.uk/resources.

Each section has a short summary at the top so you can decide whether to read it now, later, or skip it entirely.

Document scope

Audience: New team managers or coaches of a single grassroots team. All formats - youth, adult, women's, veterans, Sunday League, disability, walking football.

Not for: club secretaries, club admins, new club founders. Those each get their own document.

Coverage: from the moment you agree to take the role through the end of the first month of the new season.

Regional: written for England. Other UK nations flagged where it matters.

Shelf life: annual review. FA rules, league structures, tools, and Grassroute features all evolve.

Full document outline

1. Who this is for, and how to use it
2. The first week after you say yes
3. Setting your early framework
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17. Closing notes

1. Who this is for, and how to use it

You've said yes to managing a team. Maybe the previous manager stepped down. Maybe you've been helping out for a few seasons and someone nudged you forward. Maybe you're the player who kept showing up early to set up the cones and now, by some unspoken agreement, you're the manager. Or maybe you're a parent whose child's team needed someone and nobody else put their hand up.

However you got here, the next few months are going to involve a lot of small decisions, a handful of bigger ones, and more messages than you'd ever imagine. This guide is here to help you make those decisions with a bit more confidence, and to make sure the things that tend to catch new managers out don't catch you out.

A few things to know before you start.

This is not a club secretary's guide. There's a lot of paperwork involved in running a grassroots football club - league registrations, FA affiliation, insurance, player registration through the Whole Game System, welfare officer appointment, committee meetings, safeguarding policy. That's real work, but most of it isn't yours. Your club's secretary or committee handles the bulk of it. This guide covers what you own: your squad, your training, your fixtures, your kit, your communications, your matchday. If you're running a Sunday League, veterans, or standalone adult team where the manager is effectively the club, see Section 15 - you'll need to cover some of the secretary's territory too.

This covers all formats. Youth, adult, men's, women's, veterans, Sunday League, walking football, disability football. The core work of managing a team is broadly the same whatever the format. Where specific formats have distinct considerations, they're covered in dedicated sections. Section 14 covers the additional responsibilities that come with managing under-18s. Section 15 covers format-specific notes for adult football.

This is written for England. Grassroots football works broadly similarly across the UK, but specific rules, registration systems, and County FA processes differ between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. If you're outside England, most of this will hopefully still be useful - just double-check the specifics with your own FA.

This isn't a coaching manual. Where coaching is mentioned (mostly in Section 7), the guide is pointing you at what to think about and where real coaching support lives, not trying to teach you how to coach. There are far better, more specialised resources for that.

This is a guide, not a template. Every team is different. Every club is different. The approach that works for a U7 parent-run team at a new club is nothing like the approach for a Sunday League side that's been together for a decade. Read it as prompts to think about, not instructions to follow.

The club handles most of this - but "most" isn't "all". Even the best-run clubs miss things, particularly around what the manager specifically needs to know. Rule changes are announced by the FA and the leagues, but whether that news actually reaches the manager depends on the chain

of people in between. You'll need to do a bit of your own due diligence. This guide flags the most important places to check.

Use the tools your club already has. Most clubs have settled on a platform for availability, payments, and communication - Spond, TeamFeePay, Pitchero, Teamer, Heja, or something else. They're all similar and most clubs now have something in place. Before you introduce a new tool or spin up a new system, check what the club already uses and default to that.

The companion checklist. Alongside this guide there's a separate Pre-Season Checklist - a printable document of the actionable items you can't leave until the last week. It's deliberately short. It doesn't list every action in the guide - it lists the things that genuinely get missed: stuff that quietly expires (DBS, safeguarding, first aid), stuff that has lead times people underestimate, and stuff that's easy to assume the club has handled but worth checking. Find it at grassroute.co.uk/resources.

Ready? Let's start with the first week.

2. The first week after you say yes

This section helps you: set yourself up properly before doing anything for the team - handover, access, key contacts, coach alignment.

The first week is about getting yourself set up, not about doing anything for the team. You can't run training, arrange friendlies, or plan a season until you know what you're inheriting and who you're working with. Spend this week getting your foundations sorted - it pays back ten times over once pre-season properly kicks in.

Don't assume anything exists - confirm everything. This is the single most useful habit in week one. Don't assume the previous manager's records are accurate, the squad list is up to date, kit has been ordered, the pitch is booked, parents have the right phone numbers. Confirm each one as you find it.

Get a proper handover. If the previous manager, or at least somebody previously involved, is still around, get thirty minutes with them. Coffee or beer helps.

Five things worth finding out:

1. **Who's in the squad right now, and who's likely to stay.** Not a perfect list - people drop out over the summer - but a starting picture.
2. **Who you'll need to handle carefully.** Every squad has people who need thoughtful management. Better to hear about them now than discover it three weeks in.
3. **What's gone wrong before.** Missed fixtures, tricky opposition, referee incidents, disciplinary issues. Not to dwell on, but to be aware of.
4. **What's worked.** Training venues that ran well, opposition the team enjoyed playing, tournaments that were a good fit.
5. **What they'd do differently.** Most outgoing managers have a list. You won't follow all of it, but there'll usually be one or two things that save you a week.

If the previous manager isn't available - moved away, fallen out with the club, just can't face the conversation - ask the club secretary or chair instead.

Get access to the things you need. You'll need login access or contact details for the club's communication channels, the team's WhatsApp group (as admin, not just member) as well as any local groups (league/competition etc), the team's availability platform (Spond, Teamer, Heja, Pitchero, TeamFeePay, whatever the club uses), the club's website admin if that's in scope, and the shared folder where squad lists, contacts, and medical info live.

Chase this down over the first couple of weeks. It's easier while the previous manager is still fresh in the role than six weeks later when everyone's forgotten where things are.

Find out who handles what at the club. Know the names and contact details of the club secretary, the chair, the welfare officer (if you're managing a youth team), and whoever handles kit, pitches, and player registration. You don't need to have a formal meeting with each - you just need to know who to contact when something comes up.

Worth asking the previous manager: what meetings did they attend on behalf of the team? Club committee meetings, age-group coordinator meetings, league AGMs, league rules meetings? And what's expected of you. (More on meetings in Section 9.)

Specifically ask about the safeguarding and disciplinary escalation process. If something happens on a Saturday morning and you need to escalate, you want to know who to call and what the expected response time is. You hope to never use it; knowing the answer before you need it means you won't be panicking.

Work out the split with your coaches. If your role is solely as a team manager, have a proper conversation about how work splits. Who runs training sessions, who picks the squad for matches, who talks to the referee, who handles complaints, who decides if training's cancelled for weather. No right answers, but there needs to be an answer. Teams where the manager and coaches quietly disagree about who owns what end up with everyone else caught in the middle.

Don't commit to anything yet. In the first week, resist the urge to announce what you're going to do differently. You don't have enough information. A confident first message that turns out to be wrong is worse than a slightly vague first message that's honest.

Something like:

Hi all - taking over from [X] for next season. Will be in touch over the next few weeks with plans for pre-season and beyond. If anyone's not coming back, or knows anyone who wants to join us, let me know so I can start building the squad picture.

Short, clear, doesn't over-commit. You'll send the real plan in a few weeks.

⚠ Common mistake: assuming the records you've inherited are accurate. They almost never are - squad lists are out of date, contact numbers have changed, kit went missing in May. Confirm everything yourself before you rely on it.

3. Setting your early framework

This section helps you: turn the handover into a working framework for the squad to plan around - dates, venues, availability, coach alignment, and a proper opening message.

Week two and into week three. The handover is done. You've got access to the things you need. Now it's time to turn that into a framework the squad can plan around.

Lock the dates that matter. Before you do anything else, lock three dates for yourself: when pre-season training starts, when you want your first friendly, and when the first competitive fixture is (you might only know the weekend, not the exact date - that's fine).

Having these three dates locked privately lets you work backwards from each.

Confirm training venue and slot. Usually the club's responsibility. Confirm the venue, slot time, access arrangements, and backup plan if the pitch is unplayable. If booking falls to you, the main routes are council pitch booking portals, 3G providers like Powerleague, leisure centres, or Pitchfinder for wider searches.

Set your availability mechanism early. Whatever platform the club uses, make sure everyone in the squad is on it and knows how to use it, your pre-season dates are loaded in, availability requests are out for at least the first month, and the squad knows the expectation on response times. A 48-hour response window - even if it's a no - is a reasonable ask.

If the club doesn't have a platform, a shared spreadsheet works. A Google Sheet with dates across the top and players down the side is easier than people pretend.

Agree the shape of pre-season with your coach. By now you and the coach have had an introductory chat. Week two or three is when you have the more practical one. What's the shape of pre-season training? What's the philosophy - development, competitive, or balance? How are match-day decisions made? How are development conversations handled with individual players? Agree, write down, move on. You don't need a constitution - you just need not to be making this up on the fly in week six.

Send the proper opening message. Not the vague holding message from week one. A proper one: training starts on [date] at [venue], pre-season friendlies are being arranged for [window], the first competitive fixture is expected on [rough date], what kit is needed, how you'll communicate during the season, who to contact with questions. Short, confident, grounded in facts. This message sets the tone for the season. Take ten minutes to write it properly.

4. What might have changed since last season

This section helps you: avoid the rule changes, registration windows, and league updates that quietly catch new managers out every summer.

This is the section nobody writes and everybody needs.

Every summer, something changes. The FA updates a rule. A league changes its format. A safeguarding requirement is revised. A new player registration system comes online. And every summer, a chunk of team managers start the new season without knowing.

You can't rely on the information reaching you. You have to go and check.

Check these every season:

- **FA grassroots rules and format changes.** Substitution rules, squad sizes, match length, sin bins, retreat lines. The FA's grassroots section is the source. The FA FutureFit changes from 2026 onwards are a recent example - if you've not been told, you're behind.
- **Your league's new-season handbook.** It changes every year. Fixture timings, match lengths, substitution rules, respect programme requirements, reporting processes, fines, disputes. Usually 20-30 pages. Read it cover to cover. Most useful hour you'll spend all pre-season.
- **Player registration windows.** When they open, when they close, who at the club handles them, what the mid-season process is. Squad size limits and transfer rules vary by league.
- **Safeguarding and welfare requirements.** Reviewed regularly. For youth teams (Section 14), this is a major area. For adult teams, lighter but still real if under-18s are involved.
- **Tournament rules.** Set by each tournament individually, not the FA or your league. Read each tournament's information pack before entering.
- **Age banding cutoffs (youth teams).** Fixed by the FA, school-year based. Watch for late August/early September birthdays moving between age bands and for format transitions (5v5 → 7v7 → 9v9 → 11v11).
- **Kit colours.** Sounds minor, bites if you don't have home and away kits. Know your opponents' colours as early as possible.

What goes wrong if you don't:

- Wrong squad size on the pitch
- A rolling substitution rejected
- A match abandoned over a rule you didn't know existed
- An ineligible player in your squad
- A registration deadline missed and a player unable to play
- Fines for late team sheets or wrong reporting

Who to ask if you're not sure:

Club secretary for club-level questions. Welfare officer for safeguarding. League secretary for league rules. County FA for FA-level matters. Referees for rule-of-the-game questions. Don't over-use the contacts - read first, ask second - but never guess on something that matters.

League AGMs and rules meetings are also where rule changes for the new season tend to be agreed. If you don't attend yourself, follow up with whoever did to find out what was decided. Section 9 covers the meetings side properly.

⚠ Common mistake: assuming the club secretary will tell you everything that's changed. They'll tell you what they think you need to know, which isn't the same thing. Read the handbook yourself.

5. Building your squad

This section helps you: turn an inherited rough picture into a proper squad list, identify gaps, recruit honestly, and have the difficult conversations early.

Somewhere in the handover you got in week one, you got a rough picture of who's in the squad. Now's the time to turn that into a proper list.

Confirm who's staying, one by one. Don't rely on a group message. Some people won't respond. Some will respond vaguely. Some will say yes now and mean no later. Send individual messages - quick, personal, friendly - to every returning squad member. For youth teams, that means the parent. For adult teams, the player directly.

Hi [name], just confirming you're in for next season so I can lock in the squad. Let me know either way.

You're aiming for a clear yes, a clear no, or a clear "not sure yet" with a date they'll decide by. Chase the non-responders. The people you assume are coming back and discover in August aren't coming back are the ones whose absence ruins your pre-season plan. One note on slow or non-responders: do what you can to nip that in the bud early - it'll be the main frustration you find later in the season.

Identify the likely gaps. A rough rule of thumb: a healthy squad for an 11v11 team is at least 16 players, 14+ for 9v9, 12+ for 7v7, 10+ for 5v5. Build for the weeks when people are missing, not the weeks when everyone's available. Adult teams, especially Sunday League, often run with tighter squads and need to be honest about it. It only takes a couple of long-term absentees to significantly dent the size of the squad. Especially with children and lower-level teams, assume 2/3 absentees each week as a minimum. But also be careful not to go overboard and end up with a bloated squad. That creates a whole different issue to manage.

If your goalkeeper has left, that's a specific problem that needs solving specifically. Same for any position where you have one specialist and no backup.

At any level, the reliable attendee is often more valuable than the better footballer who's half-there. That doesn't just mean ability.

Think one step ahead. Especially worth doing for youth teams at or near a format transition (see Sections 13 and 14). For adult teams, it's about reading the signs of what the squad will look like in twelve months - who might retire from playing, who's talking about moving away, who's had a second child and is quietly dropping down the availability list.

Recruiting new players. For youth teams, word of mouth through the existing squad (friends, siblings) is usually the highest-yield source. For adult teams, it's more often league contacts, former teammates, and work connections. What works for both: asking the existing squad, club waiting lists, the club's social channels. Grassroute allows you to post for player requirements but sometimes you might need to be more active.

For adult teams specifically, league manager WhatsApp groups are often where "I've got a mate looking for a team" conversations happen.

Whatever route you use, have a clear reply ready for when someone gets in touch. Training nights, venue, format, age group, what they'll need. Responding quickly and professionally is how you convert enquiries. Responding three weeks later is how you lose them.

Running trials. If your club has a formal trial process, follow it. If it doesn't, keep it simple: two normal training sessions (not a special trial session), let them play in the same drills as everyone else, talk to them at the end, decide within a few days. Leaving someone in limbo for three weeks is unkind. If they're not right for the team, tell them kindly and quickly. If they are, welcome them properly. You've probably played yourself and, regardless of level, have probably had some sort of trial, even if it's just a "come and train and see how everyone feels" affair. Draw on past experiences and don't overthink it.

The difficult conversations. Sometimes you inherit a squad with someone who shouldn't really be there any more. These conversations are among the hardest parts of the job. Have them early in pre-season, not mid-season. Be honest but kind. Involve the club if needed. Don't put it on WhatsApp - phone call or face to face, always.

Tools for managing the squad. The communication tools normally double up as club management. As detailed above, most clubs typically have something in place but a spreadsheet is fine for smaller squads. Use what the club uses. Don't introduce a different one. Don't buy a subscription out of your own pocket without checking first.

⚠ Common mistake: building the squad for perfect attendance instead of reality. Everyone's available the first week of August. Few weeks look like that for the rest of the season.

6. Training - things to think about

This section helps you: decide how to approach pre-season for your specific team - what's set by the club, what's yours to decide, and what to plan around.

No two teams run pre-season the same way. The job of this section isn't to tell you what to do - it's to name the questions worth answering before the season starts. The specifics are yours and your coach's call.

Is the approach set by the club, or by you? Some clubs run pre-season centrally - all teams back on the same date, aligned training patterns, shared expectations. Others leave each team to decide. Find out which you're in. If the club has a fixed approach, you're fitting around it. If not, the decisions below are yours.

Will there be a summer break, and if so, how long? Some teams take a full break from late May through to early July. Others train year-round with no formal cut-off, planning around specific weeks when coaches or key players are away. Others sit somewhere in between.

None is right or wrong. What matters is that the squad knows what's happening. If your team has always taken a six-week break and you're thinking of changing it, talk to the squad first.

What does the squad actually need? A team that's been playing 7-a-side all summer needs different prep to one that hasn't touched a ball in six weeks. A vets squad coming back from a break needs longer to recover between sessions than a competitive U16 team, though any sort of training for a vets team is usually a rarity. A group that finished last season burnt out probably needs a lighter start than you'd guess. School holidays will no doubt come into play regardless of age or level.

An U8 team doesn't need to be thinking about fitness but maintaining momentum and keeping it fun should be at the forefront of thinking. Plan for what the squad's arriving with - rusty, sharp, tired, refreshed - not for a generic pre-season template, and think about what your squad actually needs (an U8 team has very different needs to a competitive U16 team or an adult side). It really depends on what sort of sessions you (or the club) want you to run and what can be put in place.

Do you want to ramp up, or stay steady? If you're break-and-restart, there's a question about how hard you ramp up. Some coaches want extra sessions before the first competitive fixture; others prefer to ease in. Both work. Depends on the squad, the level, and how much fitness you need to recover.

If you're year-round, the equivalent question is whether you shift the emphasis in the weeks before competitive fixtures resume, or keep it broadly the same.

Venue and pitch availability. The thing people forget until late. Things to check early:

- **Cricket crossover.** Many grass football pitches sit on or near cricket squares and aren't available until the cricket season ends - often late August. If your home pitch is shared with cricket, know the handover date.

- **Council pitch availability.** Council-booked pitches have their own timelines, sometimes with maintenance windows in midsummer.
- **3G and astro availability.** If you're using 3G for pre-season because grass isn't ready, book early - slots fill up in July and August.
- **Training venue changes.** Schools and community centres sometimes close over summer. Check yours is open on the dates you want it.

Coach and key-player availability. Work out when your coaches, assistants, and big blocks of players are away. Family holidays cluster around the school calendar. Planning sessions for weeks when half the squad is in Spain is worse than scheduling around it. Mark the gaps, skip those sessions or scale them down.

Communicating the plan. Whatever you land on, publish it clearly. Dates, times, venue, kit needed, attendance expectations, what happens if sessions are cancelled. Pinned in the group chat, loaded onto the availability platform.

Training equipment. Basic kit you'll want for most sessions: enough balls for the squad size plus a pump (an electric one for around a tenner off Amazon will save you a lot of stress), cones and markers, bibs (in two colours), a first aid kit, water, a stopwatch or phone timer, something to write session plans on. Check everything's in place and working before the first session - a session that falls apart because there weren't enough balls is avoidable.

7. Coaching and session planning

This section helps you: approach session planning with the right mindset and find the resources that'll actually help. It's not a coaching manual.

If you're coaching as well as managing, session planning is part of the job. If the coach is someone else, this section helps you understand what they're doing - you don't need to run their sessions.

This section is deliberately short. Session planning varies so much by age, format, squad size, venue, and experience level that any specific guidance here would be wrong for most readers.

You don't need to be a great coach to be a great manager. Plenty of effective grassroots managers don't coach at all. If coaching isn't your strength, build a team with someone who's stronger at it and focus on the manager job.

Things to think about before planning a session. A useful session plan answers a few questions. None has a universal answer.

- **Who's there?** Ages, numbers, experience, fitness level, energy on the day
- **How long have you got?** Typical grassroots sessions run around an hour but vary
- **What's the venue?** Grass, 3G, indoor, pitch size, goals available, floodlights
- **What happened last session and last match?** What did the squad do well, what struggled, what might be worth revisiting
- **What's the next match about?** General prep or a specific opponent or tournament
- **What's the group's headspace?** A squad that's just lost badly needs a different session to one riding high

Nobody gets all of this right first time. You'll adapt as you go.

Where to look for session ideas and support. Plenty out there, most free or cheap. Some of the more well known or obvious examples are:

- **The FA Boot Room.** Free, official, filtered by age and theme. Obvious starting point.
- **The Coaching Manual.** Paid, video-led, higher production quality.
- **FootballDNA.** Premium, used by academy and serious grassroots coaches.
- **YouTube.** Patchy quality, but search for your age group and theme and you'll find plenty.
- **Coaches' groups on Facebook and WhatsApp.** Where working coaches swap session ideas and ask each other for help.
- **Other coaches at your club.** If your club has a coaching lead or age-group coordinator, that's a real resource. If it doesn't, find a coach you rate and ask if you can watch a session.
- **FA qualifications.** If you want structure, the FA Playmaker or Introduction to Coaching Football gives it to you in a few sessions. Don't view qualifications as hoops - they're genuinely useful. Your club or County FA may fund part or all of one.

Adapt whatever you find. A drill designed for 16 adult players on a full-size pitch won't work with nine U11s on a 1/3 of a pitch. Scale the space, the numbers, the complexity. Print the plan, bring it, be ready to change it on the night.

When you're not enjoying it. Coaching is harder than people who've never done it realise. Some weeks you'll feel like nothing's working. If that becomes a pattern - not just a tough session, but a feeling that's still there after a month - be honest with yourself about what's happening.

Three options that are all fine:

- **Get support.** An assistant coach, a more experienced club coach who'll watch a session, a coaching qualification that gives you more tools.
- **Step back from coaching.** You can be the manager without also being the coach. Plenty of successful managers don't coach. Ask the club if they can find someone to take the coaching while you focus on everything else.
- **Keep going.** Most new coaches feel out of their depth for the first half-season. If you're broadly enjoying it and the squad is broadly progressing, stay the course.

What's not fine is grinding on in silence because you think you have to. Nobody does.

Coaching people, not just drills. Whatever else you do, the best grassroots coaches notice when someone's quiet, when the squad's lost focus, when to change the energy of a session, when a player needs a conversation rather than a correction. That's not a skill you learn from a session planner - it comes with time, and with actually paying attention.

Two small habits that help:

- **Watch the squad before the session starts.** Who's chatting, who's off on their own, who looks tired, who looks sharp. It'll tell you how to pitch the session before you've blown a whistle.
- **Read the room.** This is especially important with kids. They might have come off a long, tough week at school and just not in a place to engage for an evening training session.

8. Pre-season friendlies and tournaments

This section helps you: decide how much pre-season football is right for your team, find the right opposition, and avoid the mismatch problem.

Pre-season fixtures are part of getting the squad ready. The questions are how many, what kind, and where to find them - most of the answers depend on your squad, level, coaching capacity, and how you want to use the time.

Don't leave this late. Everyone's looking for friendlies and tournament places at the same time. The teams that secure the best opposition and the most appropriate tournaments are the ones that start in May and June, not the ones scrambling in mid-July.

Why pre-season friendlies matter. Training alone isn't enough. Players need match minutes against opposition they don't know, in conditions closer to a real fixture. Pre-season friendlies are where new players bed in, the coach sees how the team actually functions, positional decisions get tested, and the squad builds shared experience that carries into the season.

How many is the right question. Things to weigh up:

- **Squad size.** A tight squad can't afford injuries in three friendlies in a row. A big squad needs more games to give everyone minutes.
- **Coaching capacity.** Every fixture is time and energy. If it's just you running everything, fewer games may be right.
- **What the squad is coming back from.** A team coming off a long break usually needs more prep than one that's been ticking over.
- **The level.** Competitive older youth and adult teams tend to do more pre-season football than development-focused younger teams.
- **Other commitments.** Tournaments, family holidays, work - stack them with too many friendlies and you'll burn people out.

Common practice is three to five friendlies across pre-season, but that's practice, not a rule. Talk to your coach, look at your calendar, make the call.

Finding opposition. One of the specific problems grassroots football hasn't historically solved well.

Traditional options:

- Teams you already play regularly (low friction, limited variety)
- Other teams at your own club (useful for first run-outs, limited for variety)
- Local league or coach WhatsApp groups (often the fastest route)
- Facebook groups (the classic painful default - doable but slow)

Mix the routes. The teams you already know are your baseline - add one or two new opposition each pre-season so your network grows.

Grassroute (search by age group, format, and standard, filter by distance, message the opposing manager directly) is designed to try and solve one of these specific problems.

What to ask for when you get in touch. Make it easy for the opposing manager to say yes. Your team (club, age/format, standard), one or two date options, venue preference (home, away, neutral, flexible), match length, kick-off options. To some people, that 18:00 midweek friendly when the first team pitch is available might be a brilliant idea, but not for the team you are offering it to who have to travel 45 minutes to get there. Be sensible and put yourself in their shoes.

Hi, I manage [club]. Looking for a friendly in the second week of August. Happy home or away, any weekend morning. Let me know if interested.

Short, clear, easy to respond to. A fishing expedition with vague dates and no venue preference gets ignored.

Tournaments. Tournaments are different to friendlies. Festival-style (fun-first, participation), competitive (knock-out or group-stage), pre-season festivals (designed for squad preparation), summer tournaments (fundraisers or community events). Primarily the domain of youth teams but adult tournaments exist if you look.

Finding the right tournament. The mismatch problem is the main risk. A team entering a tournament pitched above or below their level has a miserable day.

Before you enter, check format, age cutoff, entry fee, closing date, and location/logistics. On Grassroute, every tournament profile carries format, age, eligibility, entry fee, closing date, venue, surface, and facilities. Ideally you'd like to know what the standard is and what teams are entered, but most existing tools don't surface that easily - it usually means contacting the organiser directly. Grassroute carries a standard band on every tournament profile precisely because that's the bit that decides whether the day is enjoyable or miserable.

How many tournaments. Same trade-offs as friendlies - squad size, coaching capacity, how many teams you'd take to each, what else is on. Tournaments are whole-day commitments, physically and logistically heavier than a friendly, and they stack fast across a summer.

Once you've entered. Confirm the registration with the organiser (don't assume your entry's gone through). Get the information pack and read it - share relevant bits with the squad a week in advance. Check kit for clash colours. Plan the meeting time, travel, food, water.

Honest expectations. Pre-season tournament results don't matter. Manage expectations before the day - some people come expecting to win everything and need reminding what pre-season is for.

⚠ Common mistake: overbooking friendlies. Three good ones beats five rushed ones every time.

9. Kit, equipment, logistics

This section helps you: know what the club has sorted, flag what hasn't, and avoid being the one scrambling in the last week before the season starts.

The club usually handles most of this. Your job is to know what's in place, flag what isn't, and make sure you're not the one scrambling at the last minute.

Physically check everything yourself once. This is the rule that catches more managers out than any other. Don't take "the kit's fine" or "the balls are all there" on trust. Open the kit bag, count the shirts, check the goalkeeper kit isn't ripped, count the balls, check the first aid kit hasn't been emptied. Things go missing over the summer in ways nobody flags.

Know what the club has sorted and what it hasn't. For most grassroots clubs, the committee handles match kit ordering, pitch bookings, insurance, affiliation, and the emergency action plan. These are not things you're doing - they're things you should have seen and know the answers to. Before pre-season:

- **Match kit.** Is it ready? Any players needing a new size? Who's ordering? Does the club have a process in place around match kit do's and don'ts?
- **Training kit and equipment.** Balls, bibs, cones, first aid - who replenishes and how.
- **Pitch bookings.** Training and home matches confirmed. What's the backup if a pitch is unplayable.
- **Emergency action plan.** What happens if a player goes down badly - who calls 999, who meets the ambulance, who has emergency contacts. Don't learn the answer at the moment you need it. The FA provides free courses, mandatory at most levels, that cover the basics.

If any of these aren't in place or you can't get a clear answer from the club, flag it to the secretary or chair now. Not two weeks before the first match.

Kit ordering lead times. If the club is ordering new match kit, customised kit typically takes 4+ weeks. If you're getting to pre-season and nobody's sure whether the kit's on order, that's a problem to raise now.

Funding. Who pays for the kit? Is it something players get as part of a subscription? Does the club have a shop for players or parents to order their own? Is there a sponsor? Does a new sponsor need to be found? Every club and every team is different. Understanding the situation sooner rather than later will always help.

First aid - non-negotiable. Every team needs a first aid kit at every training session and every match. If you or your coach don't have a current emergency first-aid qualification, get one before the season starts. The FA's Introduction to First Aid in Football is the right entry point - online, cheap, quick.

If you've got the kit but it hasn't been checked since last April, now is the time. Consumables go out of date. Things get used and not replaced.

Meetings. Worth knowing what's expected of you. Most clubs hold regular committee or coordinator meetings - frequency varies, anything from monthly to twice a year. Most leagues hold an annual general meeting (AGM) and may run additional meetings or pre-season briefings. The club will usually send a representative to league meetings rather than expect every manager to attend, but find out what your club's approach is - some rotate who goes, some expect each team manager to send someone for their team.

Club-level meetings are more variable. Your club may expect you at quarterly meetings, may invite you to the AGM only, or may not need you at any of them. Don't assume - ask the secretary or chair early in pre-season what's expected, so you can plan around the time.

League AGMs and rules meetings are also where rule changes for the new season are typically agreed and fines structures confirmed. Even if you don't attend, follow up with whoever did to find out what was decided. A rule change you don't know about is the kind of thing Section 4 was warning about.

If you're managing a standalone team with no club structure behind you (Sunday League, vets, etc.), this can get more serious - if there's nobody else to send, you're probably the one going. See Section 15.2.

Paying out of your own pocket. Don't quietly start paying for team equipment out of your own pocket. You set a precedent that's hard to unwind. If the club's coverage is less than you'd like, have a proper conversation with the committee - don't absorb the cost.

10. Communication - if you get one thing right, make it this

This section helps you: set up a weekly communication rhythm that prevents most avoidable problems before they happen.

Clear communication is the single biggest lever you have as a manager. It doesn't matter how good your coaching is if half the squad turn up at the wrong pitch on Saturday. If you only get one thing right in your first season, make it this.

Pick the channel and stick to it. Most teams run on two channels:

- **A messaging group** (almost always WhatsApp) for reminders, confirmations, last-minute changes, casual chat.
- **An availability/scheduling platform** (Spond, Teamer, Heja, Pitchero, TeamFeePay etc) for formal RSVPs, dates, fees.

Use both, but know what each is for. Important notices go on both - on the platform for the record, on WhatsApp for the "did you see?" moment.

Set up the messaging group properly. Clear name (e.g. "[Club] [Team Name] Squad" - not "Chat" or "Footy"). You and any assistant managers or coaches as admins. Pinned message with key info. Expectations on use.

A weekly rhythm worth building. Most managers benefit from a regular communication beat. A pattern that works for many teams if you really aren't sure:

- **Monday or Tuesday** - availability check for the upcoming weekend's fixture goes out
- **Thursday** - squad selection finalised, any team news shared
- **Friday or day-before** - meeting time, venue, kit, weather note
- **Sunday or after the match** - result, brief note on the game, when next training is

Adapt to your fixture day and your squad. The point is rhythm - people stop chasing information when they know it'll arrive at the same time each week.

Set expectations on RSVPs. Requests go out at least a week in advance. Response within 48 hours, even if it's a no. Late changes by direct message, not silence. No-shows explained afterwards. Adult teams especially suffer from the "I'll decide on Saturday morning" pattern. Name it, call it out, and expect better.

Most managers pack it in because it gets too stressful trying to organise other grown adults who aren't able or willing to help by responding in good time. Draw that line in the sand early. If you can, get a long-term calendar in place so nobody has an excuse to not know what's happening, and update it as soon as you know about changes.

Handling difficult messages. Some messages shouldn't go on WhatsApp: anyone being dropped, individual feedback, complaints about another player, safeguarding concerns (for youth teams, escalate immediately to the welfare officer), anything you'd be uncomfortable seeing screenshotted. Direct conversation - phone, face to face, or at worst a direct message - is always the right call.

The 11pm message. You will, at some point, get a message at 11pm the night before a fixture. Read it, reply the next morning unless it's genuinely urgent. Don't train the squad to expect instant responses at all hours.

You might even want a separate group for memes...

⚠ Common mistake: letting WhatsApp become chaos. The group with no rules, no admin discipline, and three people having three different conversations at once is the group everyone mutes. Set the tone in week one.

11. Matchday readiness

This section helps you: run a smooth matchday from confirming the fixture through to reporting the result - including the bits the league fines you for getting wrong.

Everything you've done builds to this: getting the team to the pitch, playing a game, getting home, and doing it again next week.

Have a fallback if the opposition cancel late. It happens - opposition pull out the day before with a thin squad, or on the morning with a pitch they can't get to. Have a plan B in your head: a training session, a small-sided game with another team at the club, a clear "we'll let you know by 9am" or maybe just "pub" message ready to go. Don't be caught flat-footed.

Before the match. The week of: confirm availability has come in from the full squad, confirm the fixture with the opposition manager, confirm venue/kick-off/referee, check the weather from mid-week, flag any clash-kit issues. Clubs and leagues tend to organise referees but that might not always be the case, so try to get a plan in place so it's not a last-minute request to a parent or supporter. Running the line is even worse - nobody wants to do it. Have a conversation with everyone involved in advance and try to get a pool of people willing to take turns. Not every team has the superstar club member that'll step in for all the worst tasks. Prepare everyone that they may need to step up.

The day before: send the day-before reminder, check the pitch status if weather's been difficult, make sure kit, balls and first aid are ready.

Opposition research. You don't need a dossier. You need enough to walk into the match prepared. Who they are, their home ground and how long it takes to get there, anything about their style or standard you can pick up from the previous manager, another manager, or their social is obviously a bonus and certain nuggets you will pick up over time. For many leagues, the FA FullTime system will send an email with basic details including opposition contact. Depending on the competition there may be guidance on when details should be confirmed, but it isn't always the case. If the club is registered on Grassroute, their club profile should carry ground details, surface, parking, directions, etc - worth a five-minute look the night before.

Things like What3Words and WhatsApp location pins can prove to be a godsend when playing in larger locations with multiple pitches or ones that are tucked away from the main postcode.

Meeting time and logistics. How long before kick-off you meet is your call - common practice is around an hour before for youth teams and somewhere between 30 and 45 minutes for adult teams, but the right answer depends on the warm-up your coach wants, travel times, and how organised your squad is. Build in time for a proper warm-up without a rush, and allow for stragglers.

Share a single, unambiguous message: meeting time, meeting location (specific - "car park at the main entrance" beats "the ground"), kit to bring, weather expectations.

At the ground and during the match. Normal manager stuff. Greet opposition, greet referee (flag any medical conditions the ref should know about), sort the team sheet if required. Depending on

the club and venue you may have to set the pitch up. Most levels require things like Respect Barriers to be in place, so know where they are kept for home matches. During the match you're the point of contact for the referee and the opposition. Substitutions, injuries, disciplinary - yours to manage, and you're the example to set to others.

After the match. Report the score per league requirements - deadlines vary, some leagues fine for late reporting. FA FullTime is widely used and typically there are fines if not filled out in good time, usually 24 hours after the match. Point to note: league matches below U12 are deemed non-competitive (cups can differ) and scores are typically not reported. There may also be other reporting restrictions in place (e.g. cap the score difference at ten - so 10-0, 11-1, etc). Check what your league or association requires, because the fines can quickly rack up.

12. The first month of the season

This section helps you: spot the avoidable problems early and react properly to the first cancellation, first complaint, and first refereeing issue.

The first month is where everything you've built meets reality. Most plans hold up broadly. Some don't. The key is to notice early and adjust.

What to watch for. Availability patterns - who's turning up, who's not, who's started strong and faded. Injury niggles - early season is peak injury risk. Manage load on anyone returning from injury or a long break. On-pitch reality vs pre-season assumption - you'll discover your team's actual strengths and weaknesses in the first three or four competitive matches, and some of what you thought going in will be wrong. Communications - are messages getting through, are RSVPs landing on time.

Expect the first cancellation. It's the UK, so matches will get cancelled - weather, pitch, opposition withdrawal. How you handle the first one sets the tone. Notify early. Suggest a reschedule if you already have one. Plan a training session to replace the lost match day if useful. Check what the league or competition requirements are. Most have rules and fines for not following process. It can get expensive very quickly.

Not only that, there will come a point in time where the fixtures start backing up, everyone wants to find a free date and pitch to play rearranged games. Best to get in there first.

Expect the first complaint. Someone will complain at some point. About minutes, positions, a refereeing decision, training, something a teammate said, something you said. Most resolve with a direct conversation. Some need the club involved. Listen properly, don't react defensively, take what's useful and leave what isn't, escalate if it needs escalating.

Expect the first referee issue. At grassroots level, referees are volunteers with varying experience. Some will make decisions you disagree with. Never lose your cool with a referee. Don't let your bench or sideline do it either. Follow up through the proper channel if something genuinely needs addressing. Without referees, nobody plays. It can be especially difficult at youth level as often the referees are children themselves. Expect some terrible decisions and exercise restraint. Nobody wins if you start arguing with a referee, especially if it's a child. The FullTime app - if used - allows for match reports and scoring. If the referee is genuinely bad, score it and go through the process.

When to call the club for help. Most things you handle. But involve the club on: any safeguarding concern (immediate - welfare officer), a disciplinary incident beyond what you're equipped to handle, behaviour that risks the club's reputation, anything involving police, emergency services, or external media. Don't try to handle those alone.

Month review. You are likely a volunteer. This might just be shoe-horned in to a million other things in your life, or it's something you allocate every spare minute to. Either way, take an hour to honestly assess. Is everything where you expected? Are all the relationships working? Are

communications clean? What's one thing you'd change for next month? Write it down. Act on it. You're not stuck with the plan you made when you started.

13. Thinking one season ahead

This section helps you: spot the long-term issues that quietly determine whether your team still exists in three years' time. You can skip this for now and come back mid-season - none of it is urgent in week one.

If you made it this far, the immediate work is probably under control. This section is about the kind of thinking managers might do in the background while running day-to-day.

You don't have to act on any of it right now. But the managers whose teams still exist and thrive in three years' time are the ones who've been thinking about this stuff all along.

There are five things worth holding in your head. (A sixth - youth-specific format transitions - is in Section 14.)

Squad sustainability. Is this team going to exist in two years' time?

Signs a team is sustainable: squad size consistently above the format minimum plus a few, mix of ages within the eligibility, a pipeline of potential new players, engaged committed squad, coach and manager who both intend to stay.

Signs a team might not be: squad permanently below the format minimum, most about to age out or retire from playing, no new players coming in for two seasons running, core committed members leaving faster than new ones arriving, coach or manager hinting at stopping.

If more of the second list applies, have a proper conversation with those involved in the club about twelve and twenty-four months. Sometimes the answer is recruit harder. Sometimes it's combine with another team. Sometimes it's accept the team won't continue and prepare a good ending. A team that dissolves cleanly and helps its players find new homes is a better outcome than one that limps on for a year and collapses without a plan.

Pathway clarity. Where do your players go next? For youth teams, this is about the older age groups at your club and that transition eventually to adult football. For adult teams, it's about whether the club has reserve, development, or lower-division teams for players whose level shifts over time.

If the pathway is clear, great. Talk to the managers at the next level up or down. Make transitions easy. If, as is usually the case at youth level, you're moving up with the team, reach out to coaches above you. This is especially important for the format-change years. Don't have an ego and ask for advice.

If there's a gap, don't leave it until the last minute. Start conversations early with the committee. Look at merging with another team at the club or a nearby club. Tell people a year in advance if the pathway runs out so they can plan.

Standard drift. A team can find itself in a division that's too strong (players lose confidence and stop coming), too weak (nobody develops), or still roughly right. In advance of the end of each season, honestly ask: are we going to finish where we expected to, are we playing at the right level, should we look at a division up or down, are the tournaments we've been entering still the right fit.

The worst outcome is a team stuck at a level that's wrecking morale. The second-worst is a team that stays in the same division and the same tournaments year after year regardless of how they're actually doing.

Retention. People leave grassroots football for all sorts of reasons. You can't stop all of it. But you can notice early when someone's drifting - missing training, going quiet, turning up reluctantly - and have a direct conversation. Sometimes the cause is fixable. Sometimes it's not. An honest conversation is better than losing them without a word. Youth-specific retention patterns are in Section 14.

Coach qualifications progression. If you're coaching as well as managing, think about qualifications as a pathway, not a single box. Most levels have a minimum coaching level requirement, especially at youth level. Find out what this is. FA Playmaker is the starting point. Introduction to Coaching Football (formerly Level 1) is a real qualification. UEFA C (formerly FA Level 2) is more substantial. UEFA B and above is significant time and money.

For most team managers, Playmaker or Introduction to Coaching Football is enough. Your club might fund part or all - ask. Some County FAs offer free or subsidised courses for active grassroots coaches.

The point of all this. None of it is urgent in week one. In aggregate, it's what separates a team that fades out at the end of a season from one still going strong five seasons later. Come back to this section once or twice a season.

14. Managing a youth team - additional responsibilities and tips

This section helps you: cover the additional obligations that apply when you're managing under-18s - qualifications, supervision, parent dynamics, format transitions, and safeguarding.

This section covers the specific additional obligations and practical tips that apply when you're managing a team of under-18s. Not a rewrite of the earlier sections - read those first - but a set of things that apply on top when children are involved.

The non-negotiables

Before anything else, three things that are not optional when managing under-18s. If any of these aren't current and in place, your team isn't operating safely or legally.

- **Enhanced DBS check current** for you and any other adult involved with the squad
- **FA Safeguarding Children course current** for you and any other adult involved with the squad
- **Two adults present at every session and match** - never alone with a child

Check out *The FA's Guidance 3.1: Safer recruitment of volunteers* - it's the canonical document on getting these basics right and what your club is expected to have in place.

Everything else in this section is important. These three are the floor.

Additional qualifications and checks

Dependent on the club and league there will be other requirements that need to be met, either per coach or per team, including things like Emergency First Aid in Football, and the Introduction to Coaching Football as a minimum. Check with your club and/or league to see what's specifically required for your context. The FA Learning platform and your County FA are the routes for the courses. Cost is modest and often subsidised.

These are additional to whatever coaching qualification you're working toward. If any are out of date when the season starts, sort them before your first match - a coach or manager with an expired DBS or safeguarding certificate can be barred from operating on matchday.

The likelihood is that if you're starting out at youth level it's with an existing club, so exact requirements and procedure should be managed at club level. Be proactive though, as the worst-case scenario is that your team isn't allowed to play.

Supervision ratios and the "two adults" rule

At youth level, you are never alone with a child. Minimum two adults present at every training session and every match. Never travel alone with a single child. Changing room protocols follow FA and club policy, typically same-gender adults where possible. Photography and video follow club

policy - never take images of players on a personal device unless explicitly allowed with parental consent.

If you can't meet the two-adult rule for a session, cancel the session.

Parent communication

Set expectations in writing at the start of the season - what the group is for, what it isn't, how quickly you'll respond. Route formal communications through the availability platform (fixtures, dates, payments). Use WhatsApp for reminders and casual chat, not for safeguarding-adjacent conversation or criticism of a specific child. Don't message players directly under a certain age - route through the parent, following your club's age-based policy.

The sideline parent

The most common long-running issue in youth football. Parents coaching from the touchline, shouting at referees, criticising their own children or others, contradicting the coach.

A short pre-season message to all parents setting expectations (silent support, no coaching from the side, respect for the referee) is easier than a confrontation in week six. If a specific parent becomes a problem during the season: first time, quiet private word; second time, more direct conversation; third time, involve the club.

The difficult parent

Separate from the sideline parent - the parent unhappy about minutes, selection, position, or coaching philosophy. Listen properly. Don't handle this in front of the child. Don't agree to anything in the moment. Loop in the club if it escalates.

The 11pm parent message

Inevitable. Someone will message at 11pm about kit, pickup, shin pads. You don't have to reply that night. Reply in the morning unless it's an actual emergency.

Format transitions

3v3 to 5v5 to 7v7 to 9v9 to 11v11. Each transition is a real change - bigger pitch, more players, different tactical demands, different squad size requirements.

The year you're making a transition: plan more friendlies at the new format, have conversations with parents about what's changing, think honestly about whether every player is ready (not to drop anyone, but to know where development is needed), and start recruiting at least a year ahead if you're approaching it with a bare squad.

Recruitment dynamics for youth teams

The highest-yield source by far is word of mouth through the existing squad: friends, siblings, school friends, cousins. Ask every family in your squad. This alone typically fills more gaps than everything else combined.

Other routes: the club's social channels, sibling opportunities at open training nights, local primary and secondary school PE teachers (longer lead time). Grassroute has a team recruitment flag for you to advertise if you're looking for players, and if you want, which positions you need.

Be prepared to lose players too. It's part of grassroots youth football. Players move clubs, change sports, drift away. You can't stop all of it, but a clear recruitment route is the way to keep ahead of it.

Retention and drop-off ages

Common drop-off ages: 6–8 (children trying football for the first time and deciding it's not for them - normal), 11–12 (first real drop-off as secondary school starts), 13–14 (the big drop-off - more social options, academic pressure, other sports), 15–16 (the girls' drop-off specifically - girls leaving football at significantly higher rates than boys, often tied to pathway gaps, social pressure, or the lack of a clear next team).

You can't stop all of it. But notice when a specific player is drifting and have a direct conversation - with the player and the parent. Finding this balance is one of the most difficult and contentious areas of managing and coaching youth teams. There's no one-size-fits-all approach.

Development-first defaults

For U11 and under, the FA default is development-focused football - playing time distribution over winning, position rotation, not running up scores. Grassroute auto-defaults the Development badge at U11 and under, matching FA guidance. You can untick it if your team is in a formally competitive context, but the default is intentional.

Practically: equal (or near-equal) playing time across the squad, not based on ability; players rotating through positions, especially goalkeeper where the format has one; not running up cricket scores against weaker opposition; focus on learning, not league position. This shifts gradually from U12 upwards, but the development mindset remains useful throughout youth football.

FA guidance exists on this and, depending on club accreditation, there may be specific policies and procedures in place to guide you.

Matchday specifics for youth teams

Pick-up and drop-off logistics - always clear, always communicated in advance. What parents need to know (timing, kit etc) vs what kids need to know (meeting point, kit, warm-up). Always have a plan if a parent doesn't arrive at pick-up - no child left alone. Communicate results and briefly how the game went in the group, but be careful - don't single out individual children publicly. If you can (especially if you have both home and away kit) pack spares, as there will always be someone who gets it wrong.

Safeguarding concerns

If you ever have a concern about the welfare of a child - behaviour that seems off, something a child has disclosed, something a parent has done, an injury that doesn't add up - escalate to the club welfare officer immediately. Don't investigate yourself. Don't try to decide whether it's "serious enough". That's the welfare officer's job.

Write down what you saw and when, as soon as you can. Don't confront the parent (unless immediate child safety requires it). Don't discuss with the squad or other parents. Just report.

15. Adult football - format-specific notes

This section helps you: handle the specific realities of managing adult teams - registration, fines, captaincy, the standalone team trap, vets dynamics, and other formats.

This section covers the specific realities of managing adult teams across different formats. The big differences from youth football: no parents in the chain, players manage themselves, league fines are real money, and the manager often doubles as the secretary. Most of what's in the main sections still applies - what's here is what's different.

15.1 Open Age (men's or women's)

The bulk of competitive adult grassroots football. Saturday or Sunday leagues, usually 11v11, with formal structures, player registrations, fines, and discipline records.

Player registration is tight. Deadlines are serious. Unregistered players cannot play, and playing one anyway risks fines or points deductions.

Fine culture is real. Most Open Age leagues operate monetary fines for late team sheets, late fees, unregistered players, disciplinary issues. Understand your league's fine structure before season one, not after a fine lands.

Disciplinary records follow the player, not the team. A suspended player isn't eligible at any team they might play for.

Captaincy and senior player dynamics matter. In adult football, the captain is often a meaningful on-pitch and off-pitch role. A good captain supports the manager; a bad one undermines you.

Recruitment is different. League manager WhatsApp groups, former teammates, work contacts, university networks. Grassroute's recruitment flag helps, but word of mouth through the league is often more direct at adult level.

15.2 Standalone teams

Some Sunday leagues, vets football etc. The classic place the manager-secretary blur happens. If your team operates as a standalone unit with no larger club structure behind it, you are effectively running a micro-club, and the admin responsibilities are yours.

You are the registrar (player registration through the league's system). You are the treasurer (fees, fines, kit costs). You are the disciplinary liaison (reds, bans, appeals). You handle affiliation and insurance through the County FA, including annual paperwork.

You are also the meeting attendee. League AGMs, rules meetings, pre-season briefings - if there's nobody else, you're the one going. These are usually evening meetings in church halls or sports clubs and they take a couple of hours, but they're where the league agrees rule changes, fines structures, and processes for the season ahead. Skipping them risks finding out about a change after it's already

cost you a fine. Build the time into your calendar early - league AGMs are typically late spring or early summer, with pre-season briefings often in July or August.

The committee-of-one trap is real. Most standalone teams run on one or two people doing everything. It works until it doesn't. Try to get at least one other person formally helping (a deputy, a treasurer, a match secretary) so the whole thing doesn't fall apart when you need a weekend off.

For a fuller treatment of the admin side of running a standalone team, see the planned New Club Secretary's Handbook (future Grassroute resource).

15.3 Veterans football

Vets teams - typically Vets 35+ and Vets 45+ - are a distinct format with distinct dynamics.

Eligibility is by age band. Know the cutoffs and don't field a player who isn't eligible - no matter how badly you need them (though some teams will bend the rules more than others).

The social-competitive balance matters. Some vets teams are intensely competitive, others are social-first. Know which yours is and manage expectations accordingly. Mismatched expectations are the most common cause of friction in vets squads.

Injury and availability patterns are different. Players at this level are more injury-prone, recovery takes longer, and work-and-family commitments mean availability is less predictable than youth or Open Age. Build for the realistic squad size.

Recruitment through old teammates is the single highest-yield route.

15.4 Walking football, disability football, and other formats

Grassroots football now includes walking football, disability football, futsal, and others. Each has its own rules and organising bodies, but the core work of managing a team applies.

Know your format's specific rules - walking football has contact rules, disability football has classification systems, futsal has its own laws of the game. Recruitment is often regional. Welfare considerations vary, particularly for disability football - your County FA has specialist officers.

Community visibility matters - these formats suffer from being harder to find than mainstream 11v11. Claim your club's Grassroute profile, tick the right format flags, and you become findable.

15.5 When adult football involves under-18s

If your adult team has any players aged 16 or 17 - legal in many Open Age contexts but triggering specific requirements - then the youth-specific content in Section 14 partially applies. You must have at least one adult with a current Safeguarding Children qualification. The two-adults principle applies when any under-18 is in the team. Changing room and photography protocols shift. Disciplinary and welfare escalation routes are different. Check with your welfare officer and your County FA.

16. The Pre-Season Checklist

The actionable items from across this guide are pulled together as a separate document - The Grassroute Pre-Season Checklist - designed to print, share, or stick on the fridge. It's a reminder of some of the things that tend to get missed: stuff that quietly expires (DBS, safeguarding, first aid), stuff with lead times people underestimate, stuff the club normally handles but worth confirming, and easy-to-miss specifics that bite if you don't know about them.

It doesn't list every action in this guide. It lists the things that genuinely catch new managers out - the difference between a working pre-season and a scramble in the last week of July.

Find it at grassroute.co.uk/resources alongside this handbook.

17. Closing notes

You've got to the end of the guide. Or more likely, you've skipped through it and landed here by accident. Either way.

A few final things worth saying.

You're doing a volunteer job that holds a huge amount of grassroots football together. Team managers make the game work. Without the people turning up on Saturday morning to sort the cones, check the kit, and get the team on the pitch, grassroots football doesn't happen. The work is often invisible, often thankless, and almost never properly recognised. Thank you.

You'll make mistakes. Everyone does. Every experienced manager has a story about the fixture they got wrong, the parent or player they handled badly, the tournament entry they missed. The good ones learn from it and keep going.

Ask for help when you need it. The club, the league, the County FA, other managers. People are usually more willing to help than you expect.

Remember why you said yes. On the difficult weeks, it's worth going back to the moment you agreed to take the role. Whatever that was, it's still true.

The guide will be wrong about something. A rule will change. A tool will rebrand. An FA process will shift. That's why this gets an annual refresh. If you spot something that's out of date, tell us at contact@grassroute.co.uk - feedback from real managers is what keeps the document honest.

Where to go next on Grassroute:

- **Your club profile** - make sure the team's looking-for-players flag, home venue, and key details are up to date
- **Discover** - search for friendlies, tournaments, and opposition at your level
- **Resources** - other guides as they launch (Tournament Organiser's Toolkit, Starting a Women's Section, Setting Up a Club From Scratch)
- **News** - FA and league updates, plus what other clubs are doing