HJK awarded grassroots gold

HJK Helsinki have been named as Best Club - rewarding their renowned work in the grassroots sector, in particular with children - following the announcement of the 2018 UEFA Grassroots Awards.

HJK Helsinki have long been Finland's most successful professional football club, with 28 league titles to their name, but now their work in the grassroots sector has also been acknowledged with the gold award for Best Club in the 2018 UEFA Grassroots Awards.

An increased focus on grassroots activities for boys and girls of all levels of ability, from the age of three upwards, has seen the number of players at the club increase by over 600 during the past three years to over 3,100 registered players, plus over 1,000 children involved in football schools across the city and 500 more in post-school afternoon activities.

"The grassroots is very important, as we really want to be successful in top-level football and build teams from our own players," said club president Kai Koskinen. "Investing in both the academy and grassroots football is very important towards this goal. The grassroots activities are also important in the sense that they help develop our social role."

The club's director of grassroots, Noora Mikola, added: "It’s really important. It is great that we can offer the chance for people to play at so many different levels. Each player can therefore experience the challenges at their own level, and that brings a real feeling of achievement and that’s the real joy of football.

"It aids mobility, motor skills, cognitive and social skills. Football brings people together, brings friends together, and at HJK we have divided our activities by city zones to bring football nearer to homes, families and everyday life."

One of the club's most successful initiatives has been its afternoon activities involving 500 children across ten sites directly after they have finished school. Organised in conjunction with the City of Helsinki, the scheme involves 50 instructors and coaches with the key aim being to aid the children on living an active lifestyle.

While many of those recreational players may not progress to the elite levels of the club, its player development has seen a high level of success, with 80% of its academy players having risen through the younger age groups at HJK.

"One of our most well-known success stories is of someone who joined the club as a six-year-old, and went through every age group before reaching our senior team, and then the national team. That was Aki Riihilahti, who also played in England as a professional," said executive director Timo Muurinen. "In addition, in terms of women, Heidi Lindström joined the club as a 10-year-old, and she also played at every age group and reached our senior team and the women’s national team."

On achieving the accolade of UEFA Grassroots Awards Best Club - an award he received for HJK from UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin at the House of European Football in Nyon - Koskinen said: "It is a fantastic honour for us, and we appreciate it a lot. It’s important for us to realise that the work we have been doing is bearing fruit. We are still eager to succeed in international football, but we also think it is important that we are doing our social duty, and having been granted this honour shows that we are indeed doing well in this respect."

Timo Huutunen from the Football Association of Finland added: "It is a great honour for HJK as a club, but at the same time, it’s a great honour for Finnish football, particularly for grassroots development in our country.

"We have invested in grassroots development for 20 years, and it's fantastic to see that it's bearing fruit."

“I would like to congratulate HJK Helsinki for its fantastic grassroots work," said Aleksander Čeferin. "As a result of their efforts, boys and girls of all ages and abilities are relishing the chance to play football and being given the opportunity to learn to love the game, as well as make friends and pursue active and healthy lives.”

“Grassroots football is crucial to the well-being of sport, and I want to ensure that UEFA continues to work closely with all our member associations, to enable everyone to be able to play and enjoy the sport which we love.”

**About the UEFA Grassroots Awards**
The UEFA Grassroots Awards have been run annually since 2010, and invite national associations from around Europe to put forward candidates in the following categories: Best Leader, Best Club and Best Project. The awards reward excellence in the grassroots field – seen by UEFA as crucial in helping to nurture football's overall good health.