

Abstract

To compensate for the demise of street football in recent years a number of Westernised football federations, such as the Scottish FA, have recognised that if they have any desire to develop world-class footballers in the future and revive street football, or introduce a modern-day equivalent, then they must replicate a fun and enjoyable small-sided games environment for young players. As a result, the Scottish FA has formulated and implemented a programme – *Developmental Fours* – in an attempt to replicate street football and thus replenish the lack of creativity throughout the Scottish game.

The main aim of this study was to use video analysis software – *Focus X2* – as a reliable observational analytical tool to collect data on the Developmental Fours programme. The experimental procedure involved 16 young football players (aged 6-9 years) from the ‘community-select’ team at Stenhousemuir Football Club. Players’ performance in the eight different Developmental Fours’ game-related practices were video recorded and then later analysed. In total, 10 aspects of performance were extracted for the analysis.

Results strongly support the Scottish FA’s claim that Developmental Fours is an excellent teaching tool for all young players. The research findings also revealed that innovative adaptations to the basic 4-a-side format prove to be the most valuable ‘teaching tool’ for young footballers.

Keywords: small-sided games; Scottish FA; Developmental Fours; Phased Model of Long-term Player Development; quantitative research.

Introduction

The demise of street football has become a growing concern in recent decades as this form of play has always been the basic developer of the world's most talented players. In response, a number of progressive Westernised Football Federations have recognised that if they are to develop world-class footballers in the future then they must replicate a fun and enjoyable small-sided environment for young players. The Scottish FA, for example, has formulated and implemented a programme – *Developmental Fours* – which replicates some of the vital experiences of street football. As a result, the Scottish FA recommends *Developmental Fours* as an excellent teaching tool for all young players. The present study aims to investigate if this recommendation is, in fact, a valid claim.

Outline of Study

The main aim of the present study was to use video analysis software – *Focus X2* – as an observational analytical tool to collect data on the Scottish FA's *Developmental Fours* programme. In addition, as highlighted in Chapter 1, to sufficiently answer the central research question three primary objectives were proposed. Therefore, in relation to these primary objectives, the following conclusions have been devised:

1. *Developmental Fours* is an excellent teaching tool for all young players.
2. The Four Goal Dribbling game-related practice is the most valuable 'teaching tool' of the entire *Developmental Fours* programme.
3. *Developmental Fours* can be effectively integrated into the Phased Model of Long-term Player Development at both the 'Desire to Play' and 'Learning to Play' phases of the model.

It must be noted that the present study is very much a starting point or a base for future discussions regarding Developmental Fours and its correlation with the development of young football players in Scotland. Therefore, a great deal of academic research must still be conducted to further support the research findings. Nevertheless, it is very clear that the study supports the majority of past empirical research evidence regarding the benefits of small-sided games.

Most importantly, however, the present study has clearly demonstrated that innovative adaptations to the basic 4v4 format, created by Marinus Michels and the KNVB (i.e. ‘The Dutch Way’), prove to be the most valuable ‘teaching tool’ for young players, as they can further enhance the development towards more creative and well rounded footballers.

Results

Through the experimental procedure the present study has generated a number of key findings. The most significant finding to be extracted from the analysis is that the Four Goal Dribbling game has clearly been identified as the most valuable ‘teaching tool’ of the Developmental Fours programme. In contrast, the data has identified the basic 4v4 game-related practice as the ‘least valuable teaching tool’.

Table 4: Grade System Points & Overall Ranking

Game-related Practice	Total No. of Grade System Points	Overall Ranking
4v4+GK	61	6
Line Ball	42.5	2

Four Goal Wide	53.5	5
Possession Box	52.5	4
Four Goal Long	50	3
Creative Player	65.5	7
4v4	71.5	8
Four Goal Dribbling	35.5	1

Note: the lowest number of grade system points represents the most valuable 'teaching tool'.

Research Conclusions

In spite of the constraints, several key findings and conclusions were formulated:

- ❑ Developmental Fours *is* an excellent teaching tool for all young players as it has the potential to develop more creative and well rounded footballers.
- ❑ Developmental Fours, if organised appropriately, can replicate street football and thus leave children to their own devices and enable them to practise skills and techniques without pressure and/or fear of failure (i.e. self-expression and self-discovery).
- ❑ Developmental Fours offers a wonderful learning environment for young players to engross themselves in constant repetition of 1v1 scenarios and creative skills and moves. In addition, the programme also incorporates a strong interaction with passing and maintaining possession of the ball through several of its game-related practices (e.g. Possession Box, Four Goal Wide and Four Goal Long).

- ❑ One of the most valuable features of the Developmental Fours programme is its ability to provide an abundance of opportunities for young football players to continually demonstrate and execute spontaneous moments of creative attacking play.
- ❑ Through the application of a systematic and statistical grading system the Four Goal Dribbling game-related practice is clearly identified as the most valuable ‘teaching tool’ of the Developmental Fours programme. In contrast, the 4v4 game can be labelled as the ‘least valuable teaching tool’.
- ❑ Findings support the Scottish FA’s decision to integrate Developmental Fours into the Phased Model of Long-term Player Development at both the ‘Desire to Play’ *and* ‘Learning to Play’ phases of the model. Moreover, the Phased Model of Long-term Player Development ensures a logical ‘stairway of development’ for young players to grow into the adult game of 11-a-side football.
- ❑ During a participation period of only 8-minutes, Developmental Fours produces a relatively high number of touches per player per game; in particular, Creative Player generates a remarkably high number of touches (204 and 166). The game involving the most number of players – 4v4 Plus Goalkeepers – produced the lowest number of touches per player per game (25.7 and 24.2).
- ❑ The innovative game formats with four goals or an end zone (e.g. Four Goal Wide, Four Goal Long, Four Goal Dribbling and Line Ball) generate a higher number of goals scored than the ‘standard-style’ format of two goals (e.g. 4v4 and 4v4 Plus Goalkeepers). Moreover, innovative adaptations (e.g. Four Goal Dribbling) to the basic 4v4 format prove to be a more valuable ‘teaching tool’.

Recommendations

To further enhance the application, effectiveness and potential base for further empirical research into the Developmental Fours programme, the researcher would like to propose the following recommendations:

- ❑ To enhance the development of more creative and well rounded footballers, young players should experience regular exposure to the variety of the entire Developmental Fours programme.
- ❑ At least one game-related practice should be integrated into *every* coaching session for young players with particular attention shown towards the three most valuable ‘teaching tools’ of the Developmental Fours programme – Four Goal Dribbling, Line Ball and Four Goal Long.
- ❑ The game-related practice which has been selected for a coaching session should be directly related to the specific ‘theme’ of the session. For example, the Four Goal Dribbling game should only be selected if the main focus of the session is related to ‘creative dribbling’, whereas if a session places a strong emphasis on ‘passing and maintaining possession’ then the Possession Box game would be more appropriate.
- ❑ Creative Player is ranked as the seventh most valuable ‘teaching tool’ of the Developmental Fours programme, but as it produces highest number of touches per game (1632 and 1328) it would, therefore, be advantageous to integrate this game-related practice into every coaching session as either a warm-up and/or cool-down practice.