

Scottish FA

Review of Youth Development in Men's Football

Executive Summary of Key Trends in Elite Development

The Issue

The 2024 Scottish FA 'Transition Phase Report' highlighted that the number and value of young Scottish players progressing into senior football had reached a crisis point.

Further research shows that Scotland has seen a reduction in the number of Top 5 European League playing minutes for Scottish players in recent times.

Meanwhile, a number of comparable nations through their approach to player development, have significantly overtaken us across a number of metrics in player development.

This report provides reasons why some comparable nations excel in player development and provides recommendations for the future strategic approach within the Scottish game.

Childhood (0-12) vs Elite Youth (12-16)

- Elite players are arriving younger than ever before to the highest level of the game, because structured training opportunities are beginning younger and accelerating the development of these players.
- Case studies show that no amount of investment in the best coaches, facilities, and development plans at the "Elite Youth" 12-16 phase can compensate for a lack of 'early years' development from 0-12.
- Nations with a strong development culture from 0-12 are able to develop elite players even with smaller populations & a lack of resources.
- The Scottish FA should establish a Long-Term Player Development Strategy which ensures intentional development and investment starting at the children's phase.

2-4 – The 'Golden Window' for Early Engagement

- Research shows that to become one of the world's best at football, or any other skill, early engagement at ages 2-4 is fundamentally required.
- Case studies show this culture can be stimulated even where it does not exist through marketing the benefits of mastering a ball with the feet in the earliest years. These benefits extend far beyond football and include improved cognitive, academic, and physical outcomes.
- This can be stimulated by leaving small balls in every room in the house and encouraging the child to manipulate the ball rather than kicking.
The world's best players did not fall in love with the game first – they fell in love with the ball. Pushing children towards "the game" rather than mastering the ball as the "favourite toy" ignores this basic principle in world-class development.

4-5 – First Engagement with the Game

- The child's brain has not developed to understand space or cooperation, and encouraging team play is both ineffective and harms the development of the players.
- Game formats such as 1v1 +GK seem more adapted to this age and stage than 4v4, for example.

6-12 – Volume of Play and Deliberate Practice

- The key to childhood development is in the number of hours spent mastering the ball and playing the game. The combination of both unstructured play *and* repetitive, practice with the ball is required for the development of creativity and technique.
- The world's top players spent hours with the ball 6-7 days per week, 12-months per year. Projects which focus on coaching children 2-3 nights per week is not sufficient for elite development.
- National projects should focus on increasing the number of opportunities for children to play football, through two main vehicles:
 1. Increasing 'space to play' – public access facilities which are free to use and open 24/7 in every community.
 2. Increasing supervised 'come and play' opportunities – using indoor games halls and outdoor facilities to allow children the chance to play football or futsal, 7-days per week, outside of organised training sessions with their grassroots club.

6-12 – Futsal & Hard-Court Surfaces

- Many of the world's best players engaged in a variation of futsal several times per week, particularly around the ages of 6-8, but often until the age of 12.
- Similarly, playing outdoors on a hard-court ('cage football') appears as another key trend in elite player development.
- These hard surfaces offer advantages in the development process of the player.
- This also provides a cost-effective solution to increase playing volume, as every school in Scotland is equipped with an indoor hall and building 'cages' in local communities is significantly cheaper and easier to maintain than a grass field.

6-12 – Grassroots Clubs & Professional Academy Structures

- A strong grassroots development culture, and/or professional clubs working with a wide base of younger talent, is the backbone of successful National Teams.
- In all nations which excel in player development, the approach within the children's stage is significantly more intentional and developed. These local clubs focus not only on participation, but also on allowing children the opportunity to develop their potential.
- Where these grassroots clubs are not well-structured with licensed coaches, it is the professional clubs who work closely with these local teams and deliver curriculums, coach mentoring and coach recruitment. Some of Europe's best academies work with more than 100 grassroots clubs to provide higher-quality coaching to a wide base of talent, which then forms the base of their academy. Even smaller clubs with limited resources are able to significantly enhance the level of coaching at their local clubs. These grassroots 'partner clubs' are also the development vehicle for future academy coaches.
- Some of the world's best academies begin offering additional training as early as U7 or U8, and others as late as U13 or U14. There is no key trend in this regard – the pattern is

to find a vehicle to provide higher-quality coaching for more hours per week to a wide base of players, rather than focusing only on a narrow talent pool.

- Scottish FA rules currently do not allow children who are registered to a professional club to also practice with a grassroots club, limiting their training volume.

6-12 – No National Games Programme or Frequent Travel

- Scotland begins a national games programme in this phase, which is directly opposed to the methodology employed in more successful nations.
- The focus of this phase should be on maximising contact time with the ball – time spent travelling, and a focus on formal ‘best v best’ games, significantly reduces the opportunity for this to occur, and increases stress and financial cost for clubs and parents.

6-12 – Importance of Movement Fundamentals

- This is the key stage to develop the coordination and movement skills of the child. Children should be active for several hours per day, both for optimal physical and mental health, although many children do not achieve this.
- Some elite footballers focused only on football & futsal as children, while others played multiple sports. There is no clear trend, but evidence suggests playing another sport can have crossover benefits for football players and increases movement diversity in childhood.
- Scotland faces significant challenges with sedentary lifestyle and childhood obesity. Partnering with government and other sporting organizations to increase the amount of opportunity for children to move could provide ‘wins’ for the objectives of all stakeholders.

0-12 – Birthplace Effect & 12-16 – Residential Academy Models

- Smaller towns and cities are disproportionately overrepresented in the development of elite footballers and Olympic medallists. This ‘birthplace effect’ suggests that being born in a smaller town or city may be advantageous in childhood due to the lifestyle compared with large cities.
- However, children born in small towns must relocate as a teenager for higher quality coaching and ‘best with best’ training opportunities. Residential Academies allow these children to move to fulfil their potential and may offer additional benefits in terms of academic achievement, nutrition, etc.
- These models are common in world football, but no such residential model exists in Scotland, meaning that talented children in rural areas are not given the opportunity to maximize their potential.

12-16 – Best ‘with’ Best, but not Best ‘v’ Best

- Concentrating talent together at this stage, creating a ‘best with best’ environment, is a notable trend in elite development. The majority of the world’s best ‘smaller’ nations that excel in elite development tend to have between 1-4 high-level Academies which recruit most of the elite players at this stage. National (FA-led) projects also replicate this concept.
- The notion that playing in a games programme against the best players is a key driver of elite development, however, is a myth. Many examples exist of elite footballers either

not being involved whatsoever in this kind of games programme or being regularly limited in game time (i.e. Not selected for starting teams). The same applies at international level across various countries, where the majority of National Team players were not involved in youth national squads at U15-U17. The same is shown in other sports – mastering the fundamentals is the key trend, match play appears to be significantly overrated as a development tool.

- A strong focus on match play may actually prove detrimental to player development in terms of enhancing overexposure at a young age, increasing overuse injuries, and magnifying selection bias.

12-16 – Reduction in Training Load Around PHV

- This stage of development is crucial and requires a high degree of specialist knowledge and understanding in order to ensure young talent is effectively managed and nurtured. This is an area where we can clearly see an opportunity for improvement and progression. Contrary to the childhood years, evidence shows that training volume and intensity should be reduced around the ‘growth spurt’ and carefully managed.
- A varied programme which focuses on balance, mobility and coordination can help players to navigate the challenges of this phase successfully.
- Teenagers also have an increased need for rest and nutrition during this phase, which may be difficult to attain on top of intensive training, education and demanding travel schedules. It is important for stakeholders to be aware of these factors when designing the training schedule of the adolescent footballer.

12-16 – Elite Academy Models

- Successful football bodies operate ‘elite youth’ academy models in various ways, with an emphasis on full-time age-group coaches and appointment of specialist multi-disciplinary staff

A criteria-based funding model, with resource coming from the league governing body (TV rights income) or, in some cases, national government.

1. Academy auditing and benchmarking, without funding, and competition management (usually the league governing body).
 2. Licensing system, where the league governing body mandates minimum academy criteria to compete in specific tiers of the professional leagues.
 3. Output based model, where funding is provided to those clubs who play young talent in the 1st team. This can occur either in the top, or top two divisions.
 4. The Grassroots-focused model, where the emphasis is on a more professionalized development structure of grassroots clubs, to ensure a wide base of talent receives a ‘mini academy’ level of education. Academies often pick up players at an older age and stage in this model, with some nations not allowing academies to register players until older age groups.
- With regards to which tier of the games programme competition an academy is involved in, this can either be linked to criteria and ‘benchmarking’, or based on the level of each team at each individual age group via a competition structure (for example, Club A may have a strong team at U13 competition in the top tier, but a weaker team at U14, competing in the second tier).

Prediction of Talent

- All evidence shows that prediction of talent in youth football is fraught with challenges. Many of the world's best players were not deemed to have high potential during their youth development years, and in the majority of cases, this was due to being physically behind their peers.
- This raises the question of whether facing this adversity is the reason for accelerated development, with several evidence points considering this to be the case.
- It also raises the question of narrowing the talent pool and spending budget on projects for a small group of youth players (for example, tournaments abroad) who may not end up in the 1st Team or A squad in later years. Instead, it proposes that a successful talent structure focuses on a wider base of players, allowing late developers to remain within the system and develop at their own pace.
- Scottish FA rules currently limit how many players an academy can register, forcing clubs to be more selective, even though Europe's top academies carry significantly larger numbers than we allow.
- Adding rules which allow flexibility of movement – for example dual registrations or 'youth loans', allow players to develop at the appropriate level at their own pace without having to be released from an academy.
- At National Team level, a strategy which focuses on a wider base, and constantly re-evaluating players after the growth spurt is an evidence-based approach, rather than focusing on national team provision for a narrow pool of players at U15-U16 age groups. 'Futures' programmes focused on late developers and regional projects can help to widen the pool of talent during the 12-16 phase.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence summarized above, the Scottish FA recommends a substantial change in the strategic approach taken in the development of young talent.

Summary of Recommendations for Change

Age 0-5

- The Scottish FA should look beyond formal, organised activity and consider how to begin a project which targets parents and encourages every child to have access to multiple balls at home during infancy.
- Additionally, research by Tom Byer and two top US Universities has shown that such a programme has holistic benefits in tackling obesity, benefiting overall brain development, and enhancing academic achievement. In this way, the Scottish FA can partner with government and education providers to develop this project, with potential gains for all parties.
- Finally, the Scottish FA should consider whether 4v4 is the best games format for the initial organised stage of player development, given the evidence at hand. Comparatively, Belgium's move to 1v1 +GK is seen as one of the factors that led to the development of their 'golden generation'. The Scottish FA is developing a 'Player Journey' plan which should be coordinated with the findings of this report.

5-12:

- Grassroots & Children's Education should focus on falling in love with the ball, rather than focusing on a games only-approach.
- A project should be aimed at encouraging children to master the ball and spend hours practicing *outside* of organised football training programmes.
- Technical "skills clinics" around the country would enhance the development of players at this stage.
- An emphasis on year-round, daily access to football and/or futsal for those children who wish to practice.
- Approach government and multi-sport stakeholders regarding primary school education, with the aim of enhancing movement fundamentals via the PE curriculum or after school classes.
- Senior professional clubs & the Scottish FA should aim to work with grassroots clubs around the country to provide clear training curriculums and aid in selection of coaches.
- Support large grassroots clubs with a professional role focusing on the development of coaches and players up to and including U12.
- Allow professional academies flexibility of how to work in Children's phase – varying models are shown to be successful.
- Integrate futsal into the grassroots game particularly below U10 – for example, winter activity.
- Creating free-to-use "space to play" facilities via building football cages, campaigning government to unlock school facilities, and creating access to indoor facilities (school gym halls) in winter.
- A project which focuses on tackling the challenge of the Relative Age Effect – e.g. Rules on percentage of late quarter birthdays, Average Age quotas, Rotating 6-monthly Cut-Offs.

- Develop a Movement Skills Curriculum with video content, to be shared with grassroots clubs (for warm-ups) and Primary School teachers (for PE lessons).
- Consider how to widen and improve the quality of workforce for grassroots football, such as developing and deploying young coaches via C License Qualifications and College and University programmes related to sport, who partner with Parent volunteers and deliver the Scottish FA curriculum to children at Grassroots level.
- Removing the mandatory nationwide 'best v best' games programme for elite academies at this stage as part of the Scottish FA competition structure and consider how to reduce travel and maximise contact time with the ball as part of any games structure – e.g. regional games, festival formats, etc.
- Create a dual registration system which allows children to train and play both with professional clubs and grassroots clubs in order to attain the recommended 6-7 days per week of practice.

12-16:

- Reform Club Academy Scotland.
- Employ experts in youth development, who can work closely with our top academies on an ongoing basis.
- A broader strategic approach to the Youth National Team structure, focused on working with a wider group of players for longer, including late developers.
- Phase out Scottish FA Performance Schools, and reallocate resource to new Scottish FA Regional projects, including supporting academies directly and a wider-based approach to the Youth National pathway.
- Build an internal, cost-effective 'Futures' programme for late maturing players.
- Allow goalkeepers who are 'on time' in their physical maturation to be able to play in younger age group, due to a bias in this position towards early matures only within matchday squads.
- Explore the possibility of a National 'Full Residential' Programme as has been established in comparable nations, with a focus on selecting those players who have not been selected for the nation's top academies (such as late maturing players) and providing opportunities to those from rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands.
- Consider regional elite development centres for children born in the Islands.
- Remove squad size restrictions to encourage top academies to cast a wider net, beyond those players who show as performing well through the youth phase.
- Include rule changes which allow for academy players to be dual registered with a grassroots partner club or move to another academy via a 'loan' system, to allow young players to develop at an appropriate level at each age and stage without needing to be 'released' if they show longer-term potential.
- Employ a more relaxed Licensed criteria to allow clubs develop younger coaches in their own methodology.
- An emphasis on elite tier academies having a strategic plan and managed approach to player loading and growth & maturation across age groups.
- Minimum standards enforced which ensure the health & wellbeing of children within the academy environment as it relates to topics such as player loading and strength & conditioning.

General

- Explore the potential benefit of moving the calendar towards summer football.
- Allowing for league tables throughout the academy programme “youth” age groups, and the gradual introduction to tournaments with trophies at the latter stages of the “children’s” age groups should be considered by the Scottish FA.
- The development of a Scottish FA Long Term Athletic Development approach and employing a full-time Physical Development expert (Youth).
- Consider bespoke education programmes for Doctors & Physios on the football-specific domain.
- Align with Head of Coach Education to embed best practice from strategic reviews throughout the License structure and ongoing CPD.
- Bespoke education courses for Academy Directors, Head of Coaching, Head of Phase
- Develop educational resources and communication strategies for Parents & Guardians.
- Consider the creation of a new Scottish FA Elite Development Board, which feeds into the Professional Game Board and other avenues on an ongoing basis.