

LONG TERM PLAYER DEVELOPMENT – GIRLS AND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

By Brent Hills



TO ENSURE OPTIMUM DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT A PLAYER'S CAREER A SPECIFIC, PROGRESSIVE AND WELL PLANNED TRAINING, PRACTICE, COMPETITION AND RECOVERY PROGRAMME MUST BE IN PLACE

In the first of a series of articles Brent Hills, Assistant National Coach for Women's Football, outlines The FA Long Term Player Development (LTPD) system for girls and women's football and discusses the various components of this system.

The Football Association has been engaged in the re-design of a LTPD strategy which will inform all stakeholders working with players of all ages and abilities. As part of this strategy FA staff in the Football Division have been working with Sport England and Dr Istvan Balyi to bring some of the benefits of Dr Balyi's Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model to women's football. This has been done in the hope of producing a player development philosophy which is tailored to the women's game in England and will meet the varying needs.

It is envisaged that this system, and the resultant player development pathways, will support the work being undertaken in LTPD and will inform any debates that take place as to the nature and philosophy of Long Term Player Development.

Scientific research supports the reasoning that it takes eight to twelve years of training for a talented athlete to reach elite levels. There are no short cuts if these elite levels are to be reached and maintained (Bloom 1985, Ericsson et. al., 1993, Ericsson and Charness, 1994). For all concerned in the players' development this translates to slightly more than three hours of daily practice for ten years (Salmela, 1998). At present many involved in the development of young players continue to approach the playing and training in a way that can be described as "Peaking by Sunday". Research indicates that a long-term commitment based on sound and demonstrable scientific principles is needed for training and practice to produce elite athletes in all sports.

To ensure optimum development throughout a player's career a specific, progressive and well planned training, practice, competition and recovery programme must be in place. The greater the quality of preparation the more likely it is that the peak will be higher and be maintained over a greater period. Rushing into competition will result in shortcomings in technical,

physical, tactical, psychological and emotional preparation and will actually detract from performance.

The three ways that young footballers will improve their performances are by:

- Training and practice
- Application of growth, development and maturation principles
- Providing an optimal structure for a games programme for all stages of LTPD will assist in promoting optimal performances throughout a player's career and particularly during the adolescent growth spurt when performances can become unstable and can lead to actual dropout.

The Aims of the LTPD System

- To map out a clear development pathway for female footballers
- To identify and fill current gaps in the development pathway
- To adjust and integrate the current programmes available to talented female footballers in England
- To provide a scientifically based planning tool for coaches, educationalists and administrators
- To be used as the guiding light in planning for optimal performance.

Sporting System Issues

The following reflect issues of concern for a number of young female footballers, which are common around the world, not only to England:

- Young players under train and over compete
- Competition to practice/training ratios are too high particularly in the early years
- Young players often follow adult competition schedules
- Young players often follow adult training/practice schedules
- Young female players often follow programmes designed for males
- Training/practice in the developmental years often focuses on winning and not on performance (process versus outcome)
- Chronological age influences coaching and selection rather than biological age (readiness)

- The so-called critical periods of accelerated adaptation are under utilised
- Poor programmes between the ages of six to 16 result in athletes never reaching their genetic potential
- The "best" coaches are encouraged to work at the elite levels
- Coach education tends to "skim" the growth, maturation and development of young females
- Parents/guardians/partners need to be re-educated in LTPD principles and implications
- Administrators and officials need to be re-educated in LTPD principles and implications.

Women's football has grown enormously in the last five to ten years and the people at grass roots are more responsible for this growth than anyone. At present women's football is characterised by fantastic support but is still plagued by too little preparation/practice and too much competition at all levels. Most young players do not spend enough time developing fundamental movement skills or fundamental sports skills at an early age and therefore miss out on developing their full genetic potential. This is something that the current Tesco sponsored FA Skills Coach initiative is designed to address. They also miss out on developing a love of the game through the development and mastery of skills, as much of their practice is in the form of competitive games and a win at all costs environment.

Many coaches, through no fault of their own, do not understand that the windows of opportunity for developing certain qualities are not being utilised and the deficits created can never be replaced in full. This issue if tackled sympathetically and with foresight can make a significant improvement to women's football at all levels.

Through an innovative and enlightened physical education and sport programme young girls will also be experiencing a number of other beneficial activities whether they are formalised or through informal play. These will all have a cumulative effect and support the notion of developing females who are movement and sports literate.

The LTPD pathway for players should be an integrated system which will take account of the individual player's needs first and foremost and will also encompass calendar planning, the games programme, coach education and parental education. Without addressing all of these issues the gaps outlined earlier will continue to arise and negate any other proactive developments achieved.

The table below outlines the major themes and developmental stages involved in Long Term Player Development.



STAGES	FUNDAMENTAL STAGE 1	LEADING TO TRAIN STAGE 2	TRAINING TO TRAIN (Growth & Development)	TRAINING TO COMPETE 1 STAGE 4	TRAINING TO COMPETE 2 STAGE 5	TRAINING TO WIN 1 STAGE 5	TRAINING TO WIN 2 STAGE 5	RETIREMENT & RETENTION STAGE 8
Age	Chronological/ Biological/ Developmental 6-9 years	Biological/ Developmental Age 6-11 years	Biological/ Developmental Age 10-14 years	Biological/ Developmental Age 13-16 +/- years	Biological/ Developmental Age 16-18 +/- years	Chronological/ Developmental Age 19-21 +/- years	Chronological/ Developmental Age 22 +/- years	
Development Stages	Fundamental Movement Skills	Fundamental Sports Skills including Football Skills	'Building & Engine' & sport specific skills	'Building & Optimising the Engine' & position specific skills & fitness towards the end of this phase	'Optimising the Engine' & position specific skills & fitness	'Maximising the Engine' & position specific skills & fitness	'Maximising the Engine' & position specific skills & fitness	

In subsequent articles Brent will outline each stage individually and explain the type of activities and practices that can be undertaken with female players in order to provide them with the tools to progress.

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