

# FAI Player development plan

Briefing document for Clubs  
and Leagues, March 2015



Creating better players for the future

# Welcome

Irish football has come a long way from the dark days when we dared to dream that the Republic of Ireland national football team would ever play in a World Cup finals from the fantastic days of the Jack Charlton era, through to the 2002 World Cup and on to Euro 2012.

We've grown up as a football nation and the brilliant thing is that we're still growing. I've read many times that the two greatest jumps in numbers playing football in Ireland coincided with the 1966 and 1990 World Cup finals tournaments.

Television obviously played a huge role in spreading the word about our game to those who may not have really understood why football was so important but particularly after we qualified for Italia '90 and USA 1994 there wasn't a person in the country that didn't realise how special our game truly is.

Since then the world appears to have become a smaller place. Now we have influences from across the world and on any given weekend you could be watching a match from Moscow to Los Angeles – and the remarkable thing is that in recent years there could even be an Irish player playing in one of those games.

The traditional football community now has the opportunity to see the game played with many different influences and what is now very apparent is that standards are rising across the world and we want to ensure that we are not left behind.

We want to see Ireland teams for long into the future playing in World Cups and UEFA European Championships and we want to see our underage international sides regularly qualifying for the major tournaments.

With that in mind the Football Association of Ireland Board and Executive sat down with our High Performance Director Ruud Dokter and set up the Technical Advisory Group in March 2014 to review all aspects of how the game is played here in Ireland and how we can make the changes required to increase standards across the country.

I would like to thank Ruud, Niall Harrison, SFAI representatives Jimmy Jackson, John Devine and Joe Boyle, FAIS representatives Hugh Culhoun, Paddy O'Reilly and Ollie Horgan and SSE Airtricity League representative Martin Russell for their contributions and debates which led to the drawing up of the Player Development Plan.

The consultation process with the clubs and leagues around the country commenced in January 2015. We are now taking the first steps towards implementing the necessary recommendations which will impact most on those who need to reap the benefits of this work – the players themselves.

It is our collective responsibility to make this plan work. I would urge anybody who has an interest in helping young footballers learn to play the game they love to the best of their ability to embrace the recommendations of this plan and have the patience to allow the impact of that change be felt over the coming years.

By working together with an open mind and putting the players first we can all play our part in raising the standards of our game across Ireland.

*John Delaney, Chief Executive Officer,  
Football Association of Ireland*



# A player-focused philosophy

Over the past numbers of months I have met with many people from the football community around Ireland and have received very positive feedback on the recommendations we have put forward to change the way we develop our young football players.

There is certainly huge appetite for change right across the country.

This briefing document gives detail on the recommendations of the Player Development Plan and when implementation will commence, a full and comprehensive implementation plan will be issued in due course.

A great deal of work has gone into putting these new structures in place which will see improvements at all levels of the game if these recommendations are followed and supported by those people who are working with our young players.

With the formation of the Technical Advisory Group we brought together experienced football people from the various sectors of the game with a view to creating a Player Development Plan with the aspiration of producing better football players in Ireland in the coming years. We set out to develop an overall philosophy that will be a player-focused model.

We compared what was done with the youngest players in other countries including England, Spain,

Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands with what we have done here. We also looked at the various different playing formats being used around Ireland at present.

To be successful in our objectives we need the whole football community in Ireland to work together to create uniformity in what young players experience when playing our game no matter where they are in the country.

We acknowledge of course the good work that has been done by coaches here for many years but we are now seeking to build on those efforts so that every player can benefit, which will improve standards across all levels of the game.

This document will help guide coaches, clubs, parents and others involved in the development of our young players to understand how the game will change at the different levels and how our young players will all reap the benefits of our actions.

By using the experience our coaches already have and putting a clear plan in place we believe the future can be very bright for Irish football.

***Ruud Dokter, High Performance Director,  
Football Association of Ireland***





## Recommendation 1: Implement a player-focused model based on enjoyment and skill development to reduce the emphasis on winning at all costs

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2015*

Player development and players enjoying football is the core philosophy central to our new 'Player Development Plan'.

Whilst understanding that kids are naturally competitive, we need to focus on, and understand the importance of player-development versus simply winning matches.

Winning at all costs inhibits player development and can lead to a sense of frustration and failure. The match result is secondary to the quality of play and the enjoyment of playing. It is essential that young players are free from the constant pressure of winning and are allowed freedom of expression on the pitch.

As players get older, the process will become increasingly more team-efficient, with a greater onus on results.

### a. ***Introduce a uniform playing style and coaching style in order to develop skilful and creative players.***

An attacking style of play is the best guarantee of learning and development. To develop creative players, freedom of expression is key.

Players need to learn from their mistakes and should always be encouraged to try again. If young players are criticised for losing the ball, or discouraged from trying something new, they will not learn.

Our philosophy sees the 4-3-3 system of play as the best format in which to develop young players. Within this formation, roles can be clearly outlined and there is a greater set of options for passing, ball retention etc which facilitates learning and provides flexibility in attacking and defending. This system of play is recognized in many successful European countries as the best approach for player development.

Coaches should encourage young players to play out from the back, through midfield, linking up with attack. Whilst the long-ball can be effective, it is no longer considered the only method of attacking play.





## Recommendation 1: Implement a player-focused model based on enjoyment and skill development to reduce the emphasis on winning at all costs

### ***b. Minimum playing time per game for each player (see Table 1).***

Players need more playing time at a young age, otherwise, there is no learning, no development and little enjoyment – which may result in young players dropping out of the game. All players deserve playing time – this is how they will develop.

### ***c. Roll on / Roll off (Ro Ro) substitutes will apply at all age levels.***

This allows for more playing time for the players and more opportunities for the coach to develop the players. For example where a player is struggling to cope with an opponent or has lost their discipline the coach can use the substitution to replace the player, give him/her advice on how to deal with the situation and then bring the player back on. It creates a “live” learning environment for both coach and player.

### ***d. Mini-blitzes/Festivals in a Twin-game Format at U6-U11. League Tables will be introduced from U12.***

Twin-games means that a squad is split into two equal teams, who play mini-blitzes or festivals. This results in more opportunities for children to play and at their correct level. For example an Under 8 squad will consist of 12 players, for the blitz they will be split into two smaller squads of 6 as will their opponents. They will then play two 5v5 games against their opponents with both matches taking place at the same time. Both teams will have 1 substitute and roll on/roll off substitutions will apply.

League Tables will not be introduced until U12 in order to take away the winning at all cost mentality and take away the pressure from the players, coaches and parents. This will give more focus on player development at the younger ages.



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### *e. From U6-U9 guided play, referees to be introduced at U10.*

Guided play means that there is no referee involved, leaving the players to solve any problems amongst themselves (mirroring what happened in Street Football in the past). One of the benefits of Street Football was that the players organised and “refereed” games themselves, solving problems as they arose, learning mutual respect and honesty in a creative environment.

Coaches of each team remain on the sideline and watch closely how players act, in some cases they may need to help resolve disputes. This may seem strange to some but is an approach that has proven very successful in many other countries.

Referees will be introduced at U10. It is important that players learn to respect the officials at all times, play by the rules and accept the rules.

### *f. Parent Education Workshops.*

Coaches and parents need a good working relationship which is important in developing young players. The ‘winning at all costs’ mentality often emanates from coaches and parents.

Workshops will be vitally important to educate parents and help them understand the philosophy behind player development, its aims, goals and objectives. There will be a parental ‘Code of Conduct’ which will outline parents’ responsibilities.

A resource pack will be developed and consultation will take place with leagues as to the method of implementation and delivery of workshops.





**Recommendation 2: Restructure the playing model for underage football (boys/girls) to a clear policy on the best age-specific formats of the game to be implemented by all leagues. (See Tables 1 & 2)**

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2015*

Currently there is no consistency across leagues in terms of pitch size, goal size, match duration etc. It is important to have a common structure implemented by all leagues. For example a player in Donegal should be playing the same format as a player of the same age in Kerry, Dublin etc.

**a. A gradual build-up towards the full game (4v4, 5v5, 7v7, 9v9, 11v11).**

It is very important to understand that each age-group has its own specific requirements and characteristics. From a psychological, social and physical viewpoint players needs differ according to age. A clear structure is required, gradually building from 4v4 to the full 11v11 game.

Small Sided Games are important to develop the necessary football skills. 4v4 can be considered the smallest simplification of the real game. Players have three options when they are in possession, namely to play forward, sideways and backwards. Small Sided Games allow players to have more ball contact and more involvement in the game. The focus is on scoring goals leading to greater enjoyment for the players.

Young players should have the opportunity to play in many different positions, only specialising when aged 15 or 16 and heading towards the

adult game. The coach should focus on the quality of play and the development of the player rather than the result alone.

**b. Uniform pitch and goal sizes (see Table 2).**

Under the plan there will be consistency in terms of pitch size and goal size across leagues.

**c. One size ball, weight to be adjusted to the age group (see Table 2).**

From a development point of view a size 5 football will be introduced at all age levels. However the weight of the ball will depend on the age of the players (from 290 grams to 450 grams).

The larger ball surface helps the player develop ball mastery (passing, receiving, dribbling, shooting etc).

Because many clubs already have an existing stock of footballs these can continue to be used but when being replaced by the club they must restock with the new Size 5. During this transition period where clubs have an opportunity to play with the new weighted size 5 we encourage them to do so.



**Recommendation 2: Restructure the playing model for underage football (boys/girls) to a clear policy on the best age-specific formats of the game to be implemented by all leagues. (See Tables 1 & 2)**

Recognising that some leagues / clubs have different suppliers the FAI will provide the ball specification required to these suppliers.

*Full implementation of the new size 5 football will take place September 2016.*

**d. Uniform match playing time by age group (see Table 1).**

Under the plan there will be consistency in terms of playing time by age group across all leagues.

**e. Maximum number of squad players per team (see Table 1).**

This is required to ensure that maximum squad numbers are such so as to enable all players to be given the recommended playing time.

**f. Female players allowed to play at all underage levels.**

Female players who are not being facilitated – by age, standard or lack of a girls team – in their own leagues will now have the opportunity to play on boys teams (playing one year down, for example a 16 year old girl will be able to play with a boys U15 team). In reality, this would probably apply more so to the “elite” players who need to be challenged to further their development.





## Proposed Game Formats (Table 1)

age	Squad Size	Team Size	Match Format	Substitutions	Match Duration	Minimum Playing Time	Referees	League Tables
U6	10	4v4	Twin	Ro Ro	4 x 10 mins	75%	No	No
U7	10	4v4	Twin	Ro Ro	4 x 10 mins	75%	No	No
U8	12	5v5	Twin	Ro Ro	3 x 15 mins	75%	No	No
U9	12	5v5	Twin	Ro Ro	3 x 15 mins	75%	No	No
U10	16	7v7	Twin	Ro Ro	2 x 25 mins	50%	Yes	No
U11	16	7v7	Twin	Ro Ro	2 x 25 mins	50%	Yes	No
U12	12	9v9	Normal	Ro Ro	2 x 30 mins	25% to 50%	Yes	Yes
U13	12/16	9v9 / 11v11	Normal	Ro Ro	2 x 35 mins	25% to 50%	Yes	Yes
U14	16	11v11	Normal	Ro Ro	2 x 35 mins	25% to 50%	Yes	Yes
U15	16	11v11	Normal	Ro Ro	2 x 40 mins	25% to 50%	Yes	Yes
U16	16	11v11	Normal	Ro Ro	2 x 40 mins	25% to 50%	Yes	Yes



## Proposed Game Formats (Table 2)

age	Team Size	Pitch Size (m) Min/Max	Goal Size	Ball Size & Weight
U6	4v4 (no GK)	35m x 20m max • 30m x 20m min	1m x 3m	5 (290gms)
U7	4v4 (no GK)	35m x 20m max • 30m x 20m min	1m x 3m	5 (290gms)
U8	5v5	45m x 25m max • 40m x 25m min	1.88m x 5m	5 (290gms)
U9	5v5	45m x 25m max • 40m x 25m min	1.88m x 5m	5 (320gms)
U10	7v7	65m x 40m max • 60m x 35m min	1.88m x 5m	5 (320gms)
U11	7v7	65m x 40m max • 60m x 35m min	1.88m x 5m	5 (320gms)
U12	9v9	80m x 50m	Full	5 (370gms)
U13	9v9 / 11v11	Full	Full	5 (370gms)
U14	11v11	Full	Full	5 (370gms)
U15	11v11	Full	Full	5 (450gms)
U16	11v11	Full	Full	5 (450gms)



## Proposed Game Formats

### 4v4 (no GK)

Here we see the 4v4 “Twin Game” layout for U6 and U7 players. For these age groups Squad Size is 10 and the squad is then broken down into two teams of 5 playing 4v4 matches with one rolling substitute per team (no goalkeepers). The goal size is 1m x 3m and this can be created by using cones or poles.

There are no goalkeepers in this format as we do not want early position specialisation.

If required for blitzes etc., additional pitches can be created at the other end.



### 5v5

Here we see the 5v5 “Twin Game” layout for U8 and U9 players. For these age groups Squad Size is 12 and the squad is then broken down into two teams of 6 playing 5v5 matches with one rolling substitute per team (with goalkeepers). The goal size is 2m x 5m.

Here we have goalkeepers but they should rotate after every playing block.

If required for blitzes etc., additional pitches can be created at the other end.





## Proposed Game Formats

### 7v7

Here we see the 7v7 "Twin Game" layout for U10 and U11 players. For these age groups Squad Size is 16 and the squad is then broken down into two teams of 8 playing 7v7 matches with one rolling substitute per team (with goalkeepers). The goal size is 2m x 5m.



### 9v9

Here we see the 9v9 layout for U12 and possibly U13 players (depending on ability). For these age groups Squad Size is 12, rolling substitutes apply and the full size goal is used.



## Proposed Game Formats

### 11v11

Here we see the normal 11v11 layout for U13 players (depending on ability) and for U14, U15 and U16. For these age groups Squad Size is 16, rolling substitutes apply and the full size goal is used.



## The role of the coach

In an ideal world, no football team would play a game without a qualified coach appropriate for that level. It is a specialised skill to be working with young people – you are essentially a teacher if you are working with children. You need to learn and develop the skills required to coach children to maximise their potential.

Players need coaches whose focus is on player development, helping to build confidence, motivation, freedom of expression and thereby creating a positive learning environment, making playing and training enjoyable for the players.

Coaches who just dictate to players all through the game undermine their confidence, hindering development.

Young players must learn to play as part of a team according to simplified guidelines when attacking (e.g. creating space, building up and creating scoring opportunities) and when defending (e.g. defend together to win the ball back quickly).

They must learn to deal with all elements of the game; team-mates, opponents, the officials, the laws of the game, weather conditions, the score etc.

The task of the coach is to facilitate the players, to help them learn, play and enjoy the game.

### *Key principles in coaching:*

- ◆ Motivate your players, whilst coaching always in a positive way. This helps build self-confidence and self-motivation.
- ◆ Praise and encourage your players to have the freedom to express themselves.
- ◆ Let players make their own decisions on the pitch. Constantly instructing them on what to do does not help their development. Coaches must accept that mistakes are part of the game and part of player learning and development.
- ◆ Focus on the quality of play (when attacking, defending and in transition) rather than on winning games.
- ◆ Set development 'goals' in what you want to achieve with your team/players. For example, "Today we will be focussing on attacking play."
- ◆ Engage with your players by asking questions. Talk and discussion will help create improved awareness in their role, on and off the field.
- ◆ Encourage your players to show respect for the opponents and match officials (no comments) and to play by the rules.
- ◆ Encourage your players to work together and achieve team objectives.





## The role of the coach

- ◆ Engage with parents after games/training sessions.
- ◆ The coach must intervene immediately where his / her players fail to show high standards of respect, good attitude and behaviour. Failure to intervene will lead to this behaviour being repeated.
- ◆ Be patient, stay calm and always be in control of your emotions.
- ◆ Lead by example on and off the pitch.

### *Outcomes:*

- ◆ Improved motivation, confidence, enjoyment and satisfaction.
- ◆ Increased learning and development.
- ◆ Enhanced creativity and problem-solving ability.
- ◆ Better team and individual efforts.
- ◆ More quality play.



### Recommendation 3: Establish an agreed set of criteria for good competitions

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2015*

It is recommended that, to provide good competition, a league would comprise of ideally 10 to 12 teams in each division providing 18 to 22 matches per team. Additional games in two cup competitions consisting of a League Cup and a National Cup should also be provided.

Where a division comprises of less than 10 teams consideration should be given to additional rounds of fixtures so that 18 to 22 matches per team is achieved.

Where possible it is recommended that all fixtures are notified to clubs prior to the commencement of each season.

- ◆ Minimum number of balanced teams
- ◆ A consistent number of matches for players regardless of their geographical location
- ◆ A mixture of league and cup games
- ◆ Schedule and fixtures outlined before competition begins

### Recommendation 4: Establish improved Elite Competition Structures

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2015*

The National under 19 League is currently in place and has provided an excellent competitive platform for elite players nationally. The League is divided in two regions and has greatly assisted in the development of young players for clubs participating in the National League. The establishment of an Under 17 National League will add to the player pathway and this is due to commence in August 2015.

There is a need to cater for those players who have not moved into the National League and still want to remain playing in good quality

competitions. Therefore maintaining quality competitions for 17 to 19 year olds in local leagues is vital to ensure the retention of players in the game.

The player pathway will look as follows:

- ◆ U6 to U16 Local Leagues
- ◆ Under 13/14/15/16 Elite Competition
- ◆ Under 17 National League - 2 regions
- ◆ Under 19 National League - 2 regions



## Recommendation 5: Utilise the National Sport Campus for Elite Player Development & Coach Education Programmes

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2015*

The National Sports Campus is currently being developed into a high performance training centre for the country's top athletes. The FAI is developing its own National Training Centre on the Campus that will provide football in Ireland with a base for the development of elite teams, coaches and referees.

The National Sports Campus will become a centre of excellence for player development and coach education in this country. It is also envisaged that the FAI National Training Centre

would become a hub for the development of our volunteer football workforce through the delivery of a variety of education and training courses.

- ◆ ETP Centres of Excellence
- ◆ ETP Elite Summer Camps
- ◆ Training Camps Underage National Teams (male/female)
- ◆ UEFA A, B and Pro Licence Courses
- ◆ Futsal Development and Education





## Recommendation 6: Increase coaching standards and recommended coaching levels at all age groups

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2016*

The number of Coach Education courses delivered continues to increase year on year, with the number of qualified coaches at each level also continuing to increase. Clubs should strive to have as many qualified coaches as possible.

We have made massive strides in recent years in the development and provision of our Coach Education pathway and will now look to build on these foundations by providing courses that are more tailor made and client friendly for our coaching workforce. For example, we will endeavour to make our Coach Education courses more age-specific, whereby coaches who work with youth players will attend courses for this specialist age range. This will result in us delivering courses that have a higher specialist provision of course material and lead to a more robust, holistic course curriculum to better equip coaches in working with their chosen age range.

In turn, we will align minimum criteria of coaching qualifications to be attained by team coaches and staff in order to give our young players the best possible opportunity to be

coached and mentored in the most purposeful way. For coaches of teams playing in Elite Competitions or at National U17 and U19 levels there will be minimum compulsory coaching requirements.

Other planned initiatives will be the adoption of a National C Licence, UEFA Elite Youth Licence and a more refined, structured goalkeeping pathway culminating in the UEFA Goalkeeping Licence.

### ***Coaching pathway:***

- ◆ U6-U9 National D1 Licence (Kick Start 1)
- ◆ U9-U12 National D2 Licence (Kick Start 2)
- ◆ U13-U19 National D3 Licence (Youth Cert)
- ◆ Elite U13/U14 National C Licence
- ◆ Elite U15/U16 UEFA B Licence
- ◆ National U17 UEFA B Licence
- ◆ National U19 UEFA A Licence (UEFA Elite Youth)
- ◆ SSE Airtricity League UEFA Pro Licence



## Recommendation 7: Establish FAI approved Underage Football Academies in local clubs providing a pathway for all Players

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2016*

The Emerging Talent Programme at League and Regional levels caters for elite players aged from 11 to 16. It is important that player development is also catered for in all clubs especially in the formative years 6 to 12 (boys and girls). This is what the new Academy structure will help achieve. To be an FAI approved Development Academy a club will have to meet a range of set criteria (for example, contact hours, syllabus, coaching qualifications, child welfare policy, written philosophy, parent workshops, facilities,

code of conduct etc). It is envisaged that a club would register online and assess itself against the agreed criteria.

The local Development Officer would audit the club against the set criteria before the FAI grants approved Academy status.

It is essential that the player pathway has a strong link to the senior game and International football. Senior clubs also have a significant role to play in the development of underage football.

## Recommendation 8: Develop an overall joint strategy between FAI, SFAI and FAIS

*Implementation Timeline: commence 2015*

Both the SFAI and FAIS draw from the same pool of players and there are a large numbers of players playing for both club and school. A committee will be established to progress the "joint strategy" and be responsible for the implementation of the Player Development Pathway.

This committee will produce and coordinate a comprehensive calendar of underage football activity with a view towards managing player welfare. Increasing the participation of boys and girls in football is also extremely important.



## Recommendation 9: Providing higher levels of competitive football for elite performers

*Implementation Timeline: commence September 2016*

This recommendation is aimed at providing higher levels of competition for players and teams that excel at local level and need to be challenged more on a weekly basis. All 32 existing leagues will remain in place as they currently operate. The proposal is to establish additional competitions above local league level that allow the best play against the best.

For all players to develop to their full potential it is important that they compete at the appropriate level and consistently face opposition of a similar standard. For many players this currently does not happen. Players / Teams that excel in their local league should have the opportunity to progress to an elite competition at a higher level. As a result,

the players will train and play at the level that challenges them throughout the entire season. It also means that the players / teams that remain in the local league also face opposition more appropriate to their level which in turn will encourage their continuing participation.

Regardless of the level the player plays at they remain registered with the local league their team is affiliated to and are eligible to represent that league in inter-league competitions.

Further consultation is to take place with leagues to determine the best format for this higher level of competition.





## Recommendation 10: Create continuity of football by shifting to a one season calendar: March - November

This recommendation deals with the proposal to start moving towards a consistent football calendar from March to November across all underage leagues.

This potential change brings many benefits:

- ◆ Player development would be improved through playing on better quality surfaces and weather circumstances
- ◆ Less matches will be cancelled
- ◆ Evening matches can be spread out
- ◆ Better access to players in off season for the Emerging Talent Programme
- ◆ Allows for multiple matches on same pitch on same evening

- ◆ More spectators
- ◆ Reduced costs for lighting
- ◆ Pitches are protected in the winter

Discussions with the Mayo, Clare and Roscommon leagues who have moved to a calendar season have reaffirmed the benefits outlined above.

However, it is also recognised that this is a considerable change and will present challenges. Further consultation will take place with all leagues to discuss the proposal and agree the best way forward.

