

Original Paper

International Perspectives of Strategic Team and Player Development in Diverse Amateur/Grassroots 60+ Small-Sided Football Contexts

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Abstract

Despite the significant growth of amateur/grassroots over-60s (60+) small-sided football in diverse indoor and outdoor settings around the world, scant attention has been afforded to related research, coach education, and strategic team and player development initiatives within these unique seniors' football contexts. Drawing upon case study methodology using multiple-case design, this paper examines whether and how Strategic Team and Player Development (STPD) initiatives are implemented in diverse amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football coaching contexts. Data suggest there is substantial interest among players and coaches for age-appropriate STPD initiatives, which require organization-specific support structures and integrated, progressive, and evidence-based activities customised for the unique needs and competitive circumstances of players/participants. STPD initiatives can significantly enrich participant experiences and maximize program outcomes such as player and team skills and sustained participation. STPD initiatives in these contexts are still in the early stages, both theoretically and practically. While there are many challenges and areas for improvement, strategic organizational support including a commitment to customised football coach education can be the basis for implementing STPD in diverse amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football contexts. Key challenges and implications for customised football coach education are discussed.

Keywords

Amateur/Grassroots 60+ small-sided football communities, game-based learning, strategic team and player development, coach inquiry, customised coach education

1. Introduction

As the population has aged, growth of seniors' participation in a wide range of age-specific (e.g., 55+, 60+, 70+ years of age) amateur/grassroots football programs, leagues, and tournaments for different levels of ability in various formats has occurred on a global scale. Seniors' (predominantly men's) participation in traditional community-based 11-a-side (11v11) football competition tends to fall off dramatically from the age of early to mid-50s; thus, this growth is predominantly in seniors' (including men's, women's, and mixed/co-ed) participation in customised amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football programs and related competition in local, regional, and international settings (Corepal, Zhang, Grover, Hubball, & Ashe, 2020; Hubball & D'áz-Cidoncha García, 2020b). 60+ participants are a unique target group for participation in amateur/grassroots small-sided football for reasons including:

- *Seniors are typically a priority public health population.* Some countries have identified their 60+ citizens as a priority population for strategic national health goals and support in order to reduce public spending (e.g., for chronic physical disease, mental health issues, and social needs), as well as help their 60+ citizens improve their well-being and active life years (Blatter & Dvorak, 2014; Qatar Ministry of Public Health, 2020; Krustup & Associates, 2018);
- *Seniors are typically significant learners and contributors.* Given their stage of life, 60+ participants are more likely to have the inclination, time, and resources to develop and improve specific team and/or individual football skills, as well as to volunteer and contribute their experience within their football communities. Furthermore, sustained participation by 60+ players can inspire other potential participants, as well as younger age groups within their football clubs and organizations (Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi, & Horton, 2010);
- *On a mass scale, the 60+ age group is a relatively new biological age frontier for participation in competitive team football (FIFA, 2020b).* 60+ participants have significant age-related needs and circumstances for participation in amateur/grassroots small-sided football, which presents a compelling rationale for research and coach education in this field. Interdisciplinary sports science research pertaining to seniors' participation in competitive team sports has addressed physiological (e.g., ageing and fitness for sport, injury prevention, cardiovascular health, strength conditioning, and flexibility), psychological (e.g., theories of motivation, group dynamics, exercise adherence, mental skills, and mental health), sociocultural (e.g., social, cultural, political, economic, and historical participation issues), and educational considerations (e.g., game-based learning, coach education, strategic coach inquiry, program development, and impact assessment). Findings from such research provide considerable insight to key influences and cutting-edge strategies that shape and enhance team and player development for 60+ participants.



Figure 1. Spectrum of Amateur/Grassroots Seniors' Football Formats

Customised amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football formats include 3-a-side, 4-a-side, 5-a-side, and 6-a-side futsal and walking football. Play may be indoor or outdoor; use modified *Laws of the Game* (e.g., without goalkeepers and/or with customised pitch sizes and goal posts); and occur at various, or even overlapping, levels of competition including recreational (e.g., informal community-based “drop-in” games with mixed teams to enhance health and wellness), intermediate (e.g., structured team games and coaching to enhance skills), and advanced (e.g., select masters team tournaments at regional, national, and international settings for high performance competition). The specific benefit of small-sided games for ageing players is that they 1) promote physical fitness while requiring significantly shorter running distances, thus reducing the impact on lower body skeletal and muscular systems; 2) include multiple game breaks and shorter game durations to prevent excess fatigue; 3) involve more dynamic box-to-box football action, including greater goal scoring opportunities and defensive situations; 4) provide more touches with the ball and therefore enhance skill development; and, 5) place more emphasis on team effectiveness and decision-making for fast turnover team defence and team offence transitions (Dellal, Lago-Penas, Wong, & Chamari, 2011; FIFA, 2015; Hubball, Franks, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018; Skoradal et al., 2018).

Despite significant growth of seniors' small-sided football competition, scant research attention has been afforded to Strategic Team and Player Development (STPD) initiatives within these unique contexts. In addition to the intrinsic joy of playing amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football, STPD in these settings has the potential to enrich participant experiences and maximise participation outcomes (Ford & Whelan, 2016). Grounded in interdisciplinary research, coaching experiences, and case study methodology using multiple-case design, this paper provides a conceptual framework and examines STPD initiatives in amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football.

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings for Strategic Team and Player Development

Team and player development is a familiar core concept for coaches; however, it is far from clear whether and how it is enacted in amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football settings. Traditional approaches focus on various aspects of technical, tactical, mental, physical, and interpersonal skills training (FIFA, 2012; Ford & Whelan, 2016). For example, traditional technical skills training

activities include ball control, passing, shooting, heading, and tackling; tactical skills training activities include assessment of individual, team, and opposition strengths and weaknesses, as well as particular positional cues and aligned movement responses in order to gain advantage during team offence (with the ball) and team defence (without the ball) situations such as transitions, “open” and “set-piece” plays; mental skills training activities include goal setting, visualization, positive self-talk, and game arousal management; physical skills training activities include aerobic and anaerobic exercise, strength conditioning, and flexibility; and interpersonal skills training activities include cooperative, constructive and positive contributions to team building, group dynamics and intra-squad communications, team roles and responsibilities, and team game plan and debrief sessions.

A strategic approach to team and player development in amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football builds on these traditional training activities. However, STPD in this context is dependent on organizational support structures (e.g., program outcome expectations, allocation of resources, and coaching supports) and requires systematic implementation of integrated, progressive, and evidence-based initiatives customised to the unique needs and competitive circumstances of senior players (Hubball & D áz-Cidoncha Garc á, 2020a). Evidence-based practice here involves situating specific amateur/grassroots coaching programs and initiatives within the relevant research and professional literature; focusing on organization-specific priority coach inquiry objectives; employing appropriately aligned research methodology and ethical inquiry; systematically collecting and analyzing qualitative and/or quantitative data; and disseminating best practices (Allison, 2016; Hubball & D áz-Cidoncha Garc á, 2020a). Qualitative data sources can include relevant team documents (e.g., player recruitment and team selection criteria, sequential game plans, and team debrief meeting minutes); focus group interviews (e.g., of club staff and/or players) in either face-to-face venues or using online videoconference platforms; team performance video recordings and vignettes; formative and summative player feedback surveys; and/ or coaching observations and field notes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In contrast, quantitative data might include team effectiveness ratings; performance analysis variables including effective team defence and offence transitions; and/or physiological measures such as aerobic capacity, anaerobic threshold, heart rate recovery, step counts, and percentage body fat.

Diverse perspectives of STPD are shaped by macro, meso, and micro context-specific frameworks. These include cultural (e.g., consider Brazilian versus German versus Chinese versus Australian perspectives), football association guidelines (e.g., FIFA, national, and regional), strategic organizational priorities (e.g., public health, sports performance, and coach education), and coaching (i.e., signature methods) considerations. For example, FIFA (2012, pp. 131-141), the world governing body for football, provides program development guidelines designed to support grassroots football development in specific populations, which include assessment of the local situation, analysis of football needs, medium and long-term planning aims, stages of implementation, and objectives to be achieved. Implementing STPD in amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football programs is far from a simple and linear process and involves multiple situational factors.

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 has been adapted and applied to STPD initiatives for recreational, intermediate, and advanced-level amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football teams. Specifically, this integrated framework guides coaches to implement progressive and evidence-based initiatives that are focused on game-based learning experiences and are customised to the unique needs and competitive circumstances of their 60+ small-sided football players/participants.

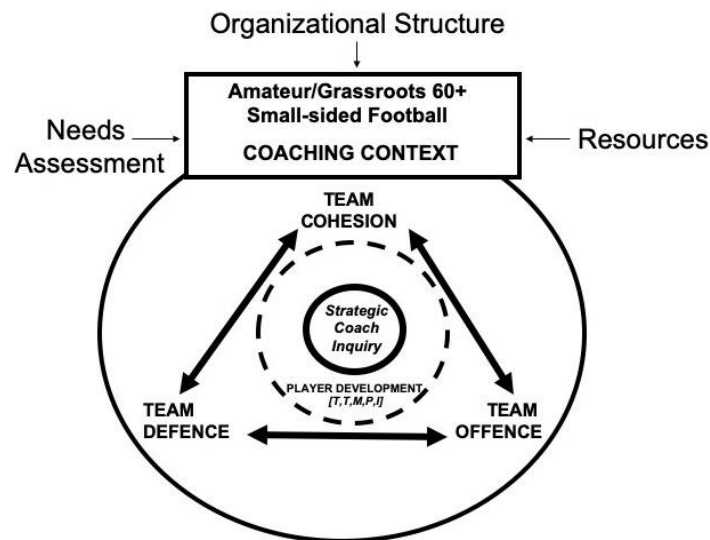


Figure 2. Framework for Strategic Team and Player Development

Coaching context (CC) strategies. Grounded in evidence-based practice and a comprehensive team needs assessment, CC takes into account key organizational and political structures that shape the implementation of STPD initiatives. These include the club/organization's mission, goals, priorities, leadership personnel, coach education supports, and program budget allocations; access to available club/team facilities and resources; and relevant competition factors such as level/standard, format/rules, player recruitment, and player/team experience (Baker & Nunes, 2003; FIFA, 2012; Hubball, & D áz-Cidoncha Garc á, 2020b; Hubball & Lopes, 2019; Webb, Gainey, Hill, Christensen, & Hubball, 2020). These CC factors frame all STPD strategies.

Team cohesion (TC) strategies. TC attends to small-sided team building processes (Hubball, Reddy, Sweeney, & Kauppinen 2018; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) and principles of effective teamwork such as positive team dynamics, interpersonal communications, cooperation, mutual support, determination to succeed especially in the face of adversity, and leadership. For example, team practice sessions might include evidence-based team meetings to discuss team goals, game plans, and debriefs, as well as relevant online activity such as team video analysis.

Team defence (TD) strategies. TD attends to basic principles of team defence such as delay, depth, balance, communication/support, and composure/discipline/concentration. Delay refers to a team's ability to disrupt and prevent the opposition from moving the ball forward quickly. Depth refers to a

team's staggered formation (neither too deep nor too shallow) to prevent an effective opposition attack. Balance refers to a team's formation to provide defensive strength all over the field, while primarily defending the immediate threat posed by the opposing team. Composure/discipline/concentration refers to a team's ability to maintain an effective team shape with anticipation and readiness for changing offence/defence game circumstances (FIFA, 2015; Hubball & Lopes, 2019).

Team offence (TO) strategies. TO attends to basic principles of team offence such as penetration, communication, support options, width, mobility, and creativity. For example, penetration refers to a team's ability to effectively advance directly toward and/or strike on the opposition's goal. Width refers to a team's ability to provide options across the width of the field for passing and advancing toward an opposition's goal. Mobility refers to a team's ability to respond with various options to changing game situations and to make rapid transitions for passing and advancing toward the opposition goal (FIFA, 2015; Hubball, Franks, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018; Hubball & Reddy, 2015).

Aligned player development (APD) strategies. Framed by unique CC, TC, TD, and TO factors, player development is situated within a team context and goes far beyond generic or isolated fitness and ball skills activities. Rather, strategically-aligned player development, including tactical, technical, mental, physical, and interpersonal skills training, is customised for individual players with particular team role-positions in order to maximize their unique contributions toward TC, TD, and TO (Franks, Lilley, Hubball, & Franks, 2019; Hubball, Dumbrille, & Reid, 2010).

Strategic coach inquiry. This is a flexible and rigorous approach to practitioner research and is particularly useful for amateur/grassroots coaches, often with limited resources, to implement evidence-based CC, TC, TD, TO, and APD strategies. Strategic coach inquiry invites coaches and team leaders to consider which STPD issues are a priority for improvement, how to engage key stakeholders in the process, what data to gather, when and how to collect and analyze these data, how to initiate positive changes to STPD practices, and, finally, to consider how evidence-based findings might be of interest to the broader coaching community.

Figure 2 provides valuable insight to key influences and cutting-edge strategies to enhance STPD in diverse amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football contexts. Furthermore, it provides coaches with a reflective diagnostic tool to assess strengths, weaknesses, and potential improvements to their current STPD practices. Extension activities for STPD include the customised design (using context-specific adaptations, scale, scope, and collaboration) and implementation of intra-squad/group, local, regional, and international tournament/festival competition practices (Hubball, Reddy, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018). Grounded in coaching experiences, and drawing upon interdisciplinary research using case study methodology with multiple-case design, this study addressed the research question "To what extent are STPD initiatives implemented in diverse amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football contexts".

2. Methodology

2.1 Case Study Research Using Multiple-Case Design

Case study research is a systematic in-depth inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life practice context (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015). Case study research methodology internalizes theory and practice by drawing on a wide range of contextually-bound data and engaging with key personnel. Accordingly, researchers in this study included the Chairperson of the Amateur/Grassroots 60+ *International Masters Small-sided Football World Cup*, and FIFA's manager for amateur/grassroots and youth football. Multiple-case design refers to case study research in which several instrumental bounded cases are selected to understand the similarities and differences between the cases, and to develop a richer and more in-depth understanding of the phenomena than a single case can provide (Yin, 2017). Thus, case study research using multiple-case design is highly generative in nature and is particularly well-suited to examine whether and how STPD initiatives were implemented over an eighteen-month period (2019-2020) at a purposeful sample of innovative and long-standing amateur/grassroots 60+ football organizations and clubs in Canada, USA, England, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Hong Kong, Singapore, Gibraltar, Spain, Oman, Qatar, Australia, and New Zealand. Specific prompts for this inquiry included:

- How does the coaching context, with its particular features such as geographic region, organizational structure, strategic objectives, and allocation of resources, shape STPD initiatives? For example:
 - How is STPD in 60+ small-sided football understood, interpreted, organised, delivered, experienced, and/or institutionalised?
 - What are the most common best practices and challenges for implementing STPD initiatives?
 - How can STPD be better supported in these settings?

2.2 Data Collection

Integral to this inquiry, a purposeful sample of contextually-bound program data were gathered from the following:

- * Invited on-site coaching sessions, interactive research presentations, and team observations at national/regional football associations and local clubs.
- * Meetings and focus group interviews. Mixed focus groups (including coach leaders, administrators, participating players, and football scholars) with members ranging from five to eight stakeholders per locality met in either face-to-face venues or by using online video conference platforms, ranging from two to three sessions in total over a 1-month period.
- * Relevant team documentation pertaining to STPD (e.g., team/program website information, football format, team performance video recordings, participant numbers, team awards, and available organizational team resources). These data were supplemented with longitudinal data from 2001 to 2020 pertaining to participation trends, evolutionary team changes, innovations, challenges, team performance/awards, research contributions, and long-term impact of STPD initiatives in the *Inter UBC Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* at The University of British Columbia,

Vancouver, Canada.

Qualitative data sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method through categorization, and finally to thematization (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). Next, member checking was utilized to establish major themes and data patterns, and to discern complex commonalities, contradictions, and interactions pertaining to whether and how STPD initiatives were implemented. The use of iterative and multiple data sources established the trustworthiness of the research findings through triangulation.

3. Results

The integrated conceptual framework shown in Figure 2 was applied to collate a wide range of data for this study. Each iterative component (CC, TC, TD, and TO) of the framework was an integral factor for analysing whether and how STPD initiatives were implemented in each setting studied.

Coaching Context (CC) strategies. Coaches employed multiple CC strategies focused on three key, inter-related factors to enhance STPD: a) responding to organizational/club needs assessments; b) evidence-based coaching practices; and, c) strategic participant/player recruitment.

- Examples of responding to organizational/club needs assessment included: a coach's tacit knowledge of the strategic purpose and vision of their coaching programs/initiatives; how to maximise available organizational/club resources such as facilities, funding, and connections; the motives, ability levels, and expectations of their participants/players; best STPD practices from within the organization, as well as ways to adapt STPD practices from similar programs (e.g., via searching the internet for Football Association guidelines and club websites and inquiring through word-of-mouth professional networks).
- Examples of evidence-based coaching practices that focused on STPD included: analysis of integrated and progressive game-based sessions in 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, walking football, and "set-piece" situations for their 60+ players that focused on effective team cohesion, team defence, team offence, or aligned player development skills training.
- Examples of strategic participant/player recruitment activity, with attention to specific age category, gender, and/or ability-level, included coaches' contacts with local social media; local veterans football league; national/regional physical education association; workplaces and their retirees, such as former airline staff; embassy and government staff alumni organizations; police, firefighters, and armed forces alumni; former professional players; former club coaches; local football and futsal club alumni; university faculty and student alumni; community/private sports or fitness centre leaders; and ex-pats or guest players visiting from other countries.

Team Cohesion (TC) strategies. Based on particular team needs and circumstances, such as level of play (e.g., recreational, developmental, or advanced), coaches employed a range of TC strategies to foster social interaction and progressive team building. Social activities were designed to connect 60+ players/participants in frequent and meaningful ways. These included communication through social

media, online and face-to-face meetings, email, and phone calls, as well as social gatherings prior to or following football sessions that often included refreshments. Progressive team building activities, such as mixed team selections for internal squad practice games and participation in local, regional, and international tournaments/festivals, tended to be strategically designed to provide variety and/or challenge in order to sustain participation or for effective team preparation for an upcoming competition. For example, in an amateur/grassroots 55-65+ masters-level small-sided soccer academy program held in Vancouver, Canada, specific team building strategies (and aligned player development activities) focused on facilitating 60+ players through cyclical team stages of *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning* (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977):

- *Forming stage*: Facilitating positive team interactions with continuing and new players; establishing participation and team goals; planning regular team social events; creating an online presence for posting team/participation pictures to establish a “critical mass” team identity and to support optional technology-enabled communications (e.g., use of social media networking and web-based communication tools);
- *Storming stage*: Dealing with fluctuating participation numbers and mixed abilities; establishing fair intra-squad teams; setting the tone for fun and challenging small-sided and walking football games; identifying TC, TD, and TO issues for team improvement; and celebrating early team progress, e.g., by sharing team video highlights;
- *Norming stage*: Setting expectations for the team and players to assist with and self-organize warm-up practices and pitch setups; identifying issues for team and individual improvements; and providing progressively challenging practice conditions with accompanying team debrief sessions and video analysis (Hubball, Dumbrille, & Reid, 2010);
- *Performing stage*: Engaging players positively in discussing team strengths, weaknesses, and specific game plan strategies in preparation for upcoming competitions; and,
- *Adjourning Stage*: Sharing tournament-related pictures, video clips, and local media reports, and sending email recognition of collective effort, achievement, and future events and participation opportunities.

Team Defence (TD) and Team Offence (TO) strategies. Based on specific team needs and circumstances, coaches employed various TD (when a team did not have the ball) and TO (when a team did have the ball) activities. Carefully selected coaching interventions during practices maximised emphasis on team effectiveness and decision-making during fast turnover team defence and team offence transitions. Notably, three-a-side football sessions provided the smallest tactically-able unit for 60+ players to analyse and effectively demonstrate principles of effective team offence and defence. The repeated intensity of competitive 3v3 football with 60+ peers required continual team problem-solving, decision-making, dynamic intra-team mobility on-and-off the ball, and interpersonal communication skills, which enhanced players’ abilities to deal effectively with successes and failures of authentic game-based situations (Hubball, Franks, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018). Further, the 3v3

format with few rules was easily implemented by coaches as part of intra-squad warm-ups or team preparation for competitions.

Depending on analysis of specific team needs, various TD and TO strategies were employed by coaches, including:

- TD warm-up practices with drills focused on shadow-tag with a partner or “player-in-the-middle” games with one player (or two) trying to gain possession of the ball from opposition players in a small passing circle;
- TD practice simulations of zonal, half-court, or one-to-one full-press marking, depending on the competition circumstances and the individual and collective ability and experience of players. Also 1v2 and 2v3 overload and set-piece plays;
- TO practice simulations with rapid-fire speed shooting drills for individual strikers at random locations within the final third of a small-sided football pitch (without defender present), as well as 3v2, 2v1, and 4v2 overload and set-piece plays;
- TO and TD-focused video vignettes in order to discuss specific strengths, weaknesses, and improvement plans; and,
- TD game plans with team formations that prioritized a “clean sheet” or “high press” one-to-one marking strategies, or special marking assignments for particularly strong opposition players.

Aligned Player Development (APD) strategies. In a few cases, and based on particular needs and competitive circumstances, coaches reported working closely with individual players on personalized skills training activities that aligned with specific team role-positions in order to maximize their unique contribution toward TC, TD, and TO in small-sided football competition. Individualized skills training focused on physical (e.g., interval and fartlek hiking and jogging; lower body, upper body, and core strength conditioning; flexibility and yoga; and injury prevention strategies such as customised warm-up and cool-down routines and strategic rest, exercise, and game day schedules); mental (e.g., goal setting, visualization, positive self-talk, game arousal management, and critical thinking for performance analysis); technical (e.g., 1st-touch, weighted passing, shooting, and positional and tactical awareness); tactical (e.g., team positional role and effective transitioning from team offence to defence and vice versa); and/or interpersonal (e.g., cooperative, constructive, and positive contributions to effective teamwork and intra-squad communication) factors. These extension activities were facilitated through 1-to-1 mentoring (e.g., around perception of game-based situations, decision-making, and execution of appropriate skills), independent practices, and/or video analysis sessions.

3.1 Long-term Impact of STPD Initiatives in a Canadian Amateur/Grassroots 55-65+ Small-Sided Football Program

With high quality playing facilities, support for coach inquiry, STPD initiatives, and 1st place team trophies in 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, and competitive walking football in local, regional, and international tournaments, the amateur/grassroots *Inter UBC Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* (2002-2020) at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver Canada

(<http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca/hubball/index.html>) has evolved and expanded into three related programs:

- a monthly indoor recreational program of 3v3, 4v4, and 5v5 football for university staff and senior players in the local community;
- a STPD program for a select high performance 3v3, 4v4, and 5v5 team to compete in age-specific local football competitions, annual regional masters tournaments hosted in locations such as California and British Columbia, and the 60+ *International Super Masters Small-sided Football World Cup Tournament* hosted annually in Europe (e.g., FIFA, Switzerland, 2022); and,
- a STPD program for a select intermediate-level walking football team to compete in local tournaments and the 65+ *International Super Masters Small-sided World Cup Football Tournament*.

STPD, including evidence-based CC, TC, TD, and TO activities, over a 20 year period within this setting has contributed significantly to team and individual player improvements, successful high level team performances (including invitations to play exhibition masters games at English professional football clubs against former professional players), and sustained participation levels. Consequently, this amateur/grassroots football organization has gained a reputation for promoting 55-65+ small-sided football and for disseminating best practices within and beyond the community it serves. For example, an extension of successful STPD initiatives within this context led to international coaching and research collaborations for the development of a 2-day international masters small-sided football world cup that has been hosted annually since 2006 at excellent football venues throughout the UK and Europe, including FIFA Zurich, Switzerland in May 2022. Even under supportive CC conditions, however, it was far from easy to sustain STPD initiatives within this setting.

4. Discussion

In general, coaches afforded substantial strategic attention to organizing and maintaining specific game-based activities with implicit and highly valued team and player development benefits. Coaches reported various interpretations and understandings (e.g., knowledge regarding theory-practice applications) about implementing STPD initiatives for their players/participants. In light of these understandings, as well as varying levels of organization-specific support structures, it is not surprising that team and player development initiatives were typically implemented in a fragmented and ad hoc, rather than a strategic (i.e., customised, integrated, progressive, systematic, and evidence-based), manner. TC strategies were by far the most prevalent team and player development initiatives employed by these coaches. Nevertheless, coaches acknowledged that each component of the STPD framework was applicable and could be adapted to their particular setting. As a result of these discussions, many coaches recognized their strengths and shortcomings, as well as further opportunities and improvements to their current practices. For example, in recreational team contexts, with a coaching emphasis on play, wellness, and sustained participation, most attention tended to be given to team cohesion initiatives (e.g., team building, social activities, and mixed position and mixed team

selections), often at the expense of attention to effective team defence, team offence, or aligned player skills development. In contrast, in advanced level team contexts, with a coaching emphasis on competitive football excellence, although all components of the STPD framework were addressed, most strategic attention tended to be given to player recruitment (e.g., aligned age, position, and ability), often at the expense of explicit attention to high impact TC, TD, and TO skills development.

Many coaches reported critical challenges and barriers for implementing STPD, including player commitment issues and lack of available coaching time, key supports, and specific coaching skills. For example, STPD was not deemed a priority by particular coaches or players in some settings. In other cases, coaches reported that 60+ player commitment issues were influenced by the changeable health and fitness condition that occurred with many ageing players, as well as negative perceptions toward repetitive (e.g., same players and game format each session) or changing (e.g., from participation to competitive focus, or from inclusive to streamed ability-level focus or vice versa) program experiences, which significantly impacted continuity of attendance and thus impaired the implementation of STPD initiatives.

Notably, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic presented significant and unique challenges regarding health, safety, and continued participation in amateur/grassroots small-sided football for the 60+ age group around the world. Many programs closed down as a result of the seriousness of the COVID-19 threat, and many 60+ participants discontinued playing football for the same reason. However, some coaches reported that the pandemic provided new opportunities to develop holistic approaches to team and player development. For example, close participant/team bonds were formed using videoconference technology to facilitate team/sub-group or 1-to-1 football related meetings, and there was a notable increase in individualised 60+ skills (technical, physical, tactical, and mental) training, such as independent football practice sessions using mobile rebound-boards and modified goal posts, fitness activities, and the use of team video analysis. Some coaches reported that they were able to conduct official organizational risk assessments at their facilities and continue with small-sided intra-squad games during non-lockdown periods, albeit in a restricted manner (FIFA, 2020a). In these instances, COVID-19 restricted-play adaptations and re-start preparations focused on responsive age-appropriate risk assessment and football experiences, and related modifications to facilities, equipment, travel, and enhanced safety protocols for limited contact. For example, intra-squad games were purposely limited to eight invited participants for 4-a-side football; no goalkeepers were used to minimize touches of the ball with hands; multiple soccer balls were used and balls were cleaned every 20 minutes; players brought their own jerseys, came dressed to play, and wore masks if preferred; players were not allowed within 1.5 meters of each other, which was enforced during games using a maximum of three touches with the ball; physical distancing was implemented throughout non-play; and shared drinks and refreshments were prohibited.

Clearly, the strength of amateur/grassroots coaches lies in their deep understanding of their specific players/participants and organizational contexts and their vested interest in team/program issues and priorities, and their related experience is critical to STPD initiatives. However, preliminary findings from this study suggest that coaches were frequently unfamiliar with evidence-based coaching methods to enhance STPD. They were also typically volunteers, facing heavy and competing coaching priorities and a lack of time and support. Given these critical implementation challenges, the importance of strategic organizational support, including customised football coach education and skills training (e.g., access to state-of-the-art customised technology-enabled professional development experiences and expert mentorship) cannot be overstated. Coach education can take many forms. It may be individualized or cohort-based, led by internal and/or external coach leaders with appropriate expertise, and offered in flexible and responsive formats including technology-enabled modules to accommodate competing time and coaching priorities, workshops, one-to-one mentoring, networking opportunities to disseminate best practices, and certification options. Customised coach education with a focus on amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football might include applied theory-practice topics and learning outcomes as follows:

Sample topics:

- Introduction to seniors' small-sided football; public health and sport considerations;
- Strategic research methods and evidence-based coaching methods for 60+ small-sided football;
- Strategic program development, implementation, and impact-assessment for 60+ small-sided football;
- STPD for 60+ small-sided football; and,
- Strategic tournament development in local, regional, and international contexts for 60+ small-sided football;

Sample learning outcomes: Coaches/program leaders will be able to:

- Think critically and discuss the unique needs and circumstances of 60+ small-sided footballers in diverse contexts, including participation motives, competition and ability levels, injury trends and prevention, active health, training, and performance enhancement;
- Develop a research-informed and evidence-based approach to strategic development, implementation, and impact assessment of a 60+ small-sided football initiative in their own context;
- Develop customised 60+ small-sided football team and player development initiatives;
- Examine customised 1-day or multi-day 60+ small-sided football tournament considerations in local, regional, and international settings; and,
- Experience customised 60+ small sided football initiatives, e.g., 3v3, 4v4, 5v5/futsal, and walking football, and related coaching implications (practical session).

STPD is thus viewed as one part of a larger context of customised coach education and skills training in diverse amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football participants/players contexts. With strategic organizational support, data suggest that customised football coach education can predispose, enable,

and reinforce coaches to implement STPD initiatives within their particular settings.

5. Conclusion

STPD initiatives to meet the unique needs and circumstances of amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football players is a complex and multifaceted process. No one size fits all. While health outcomes and competition in team sport are core participation motives in seniors' football communities, data suggest there is substantial interest among players and coaches for age-appropriate STPD initiatives. Organization-specific support structures were integral to effective STPD initiatives, which focused on integrated, progressive, and evidence-based activities (e.g., game-based learning experiences) customised to the local context. The data also suggest that STPD initiatives can significantly enrich participant experiences and maximize program outcomes, such as team and individual skills improvements, performance, sustained participation, and dissemination of best practices within and beyond the local football community. STPD initiatives in these contexts is still in the early stages, both theoretically and practically. While there are many challenges and areas for improvement, strategic organizational support, including a commitment to customised coach education, can be the basis for implementing STPD in amateur/grassroots 60+ small-sided football settings.

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