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## Leading the line for the national game

**A little over four years after joining the FA as senior development manager for the national game, Pete Ackerley talked to the Leisure Review about progress to date and what the future might hold for football.**

The Leisure Review first interviewed Pete Ackerley when he was six months into his job as the Football Association's senior development manager for the national game, a post that effectively gave him responsibility for all aspects of the game that do not fall under the heading 'professional'. He was clear then about the need to apply the principles of the development process to the UK's most popular sport and enthusiastic about the opportunities that the role offered. A little over four years on he is still in post and still enthusiastic, requiring little prompting to begin talking excitedly about what his development team has been able to achieve and how the sport is changing in response to the demands of the people who actually play the game for fun, wherever and whenever they play.

We were speaking not long after Sport England had announced that it was cutting £1.6 million from its grant to the FA in light of a failure to meet participation targets and at a time when the launch of the Save Grassroots Football campaign had secured a lot of media coverage. Consequently the question of funding the grassroots game seemed an obvious place to start. Ackerley was happy to jump in.

"The Sport England funding cut is disappointing, of course it is," he said. "Was it expected? Yes, and we managed to mitigate it. All team sports are facing the same issues. But four years, three months and a few days into the job, have we done anything spectacular? Yes."

He explained that a comprehensive review of youth development has had a profound effect on the game for its youngest players. Children now play in age-appropriate games with an appropriately sized ball and pitch. The introduction to the game is now via five-a-side games before they move on to seven- and nine-a-side games. Juniors do not get involved with 11-a-side until the age of 13 and according to Ackerley plenty of clubs are realising that there may well be benefits in keeping players away from 11-a-side until the age of 16.

"We had 10-year-old kids playing on a pitch the size of Wembley and with goals the same size that Petr Čech has to defend," he said. "One of the kids in our consultation said, 'I've let four goals in today and my dad needed a stepladder to take the nets down.' When it's put like that it really hits home. I watched countless football matches and saw several right backs touch the ball no more than three times in a whole game; two of those were usually throw-ins and one could be kicking the ball away when he was substituted. Now we have young players playing the right-sized game with more touches, more passing of the ball.

"We're creating youngsters who can play football and understand the game. We've got retreat lines, plus a whole level of touchline behaviour that is immeasurable to four and half years ago. We have no issues with recruiting referees, which we did have four and a half years ago. Our measure now is not the number of referees that qualify but have we got a referee for every game, and in some counties we have more referees that we have games."

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Ackerley also emphasised that another of the game's historic issues has been addressed: "We have mixed football now. If you're a girl you couldn't play football with boys after the age of 11; now it's up to 16. And if you're a talented girl, playing boys' football is actually quite useful for you but you weren't allowed to. These changes are huge."

With a rueful laugh he agreed that the Football Association had not always been synonymous with change. "The machinations of the Football Association are a challenge, of course," he said. "All I said on my first day at the FA was that one thing that is going to be permanent here is change, and we'll challenge and challenge and challenge. What I would put on record is that people within the Football Association at all levels – council, executive, board, national game board – are all now of one view: that we need to look at what we do."

"Eleven-a-side football that kicks off at three o'clock on Saturday and 10.30 on a Sunday morning was what we [used to] do. We now encompass a football universe that is 6.7 million adults who say they play football. When asked 'do you play football?' they say, 'Yeah, I play.' They don't play by an Active People measure but they consider football to be part of what they do. Yes, they run, go to the gym and swim, and cycle with the kids, but they also play football. Which is why we've got the number one team sport, women's football is the number three team sport and disability football is the number seven team sport."

Much of our original interview had involved a discussion of the nature of the sports development process and now Ackerley is confident that this process has been embedded within the FA. He suggested that it is not uncommon to find that the chief executive of a county football association had previously been the county development manager. In such circumstances, the development of the national game on the basis that this is a game for everyone is a natural assumption. While the FA has always pointed to football for everyone as a central pillar of their work, Ackerley says he has seen a step change in attitudes.

"Eleven-a-side football is our heritage and it is very much in demand," he said. "However, what our customers want is flexibility, and that might be about the day they play, the time they play or the time of the year they play. Not too many years ago, the FA said you couldn't play football in June, even though the World Cup will be played in June. Traditionally you'll play in December, January and February. Or rather you won't: you'll schedule games but won't play many of them because local authority pitches are unplayable at that time of year; or in certain parts of the country they're underwater; or after a couple of the worst winters on record they're still unplayable."

We would get to the issue of local authority pitches later but meanwhile Ackerley stressed that the FA had embraced change and the need to make informed decisions. He also revealed one of the key drivers for a full-scale review of youth development had been an unlikely, although highly visible, incident a long way from Sunday morning football.

"In some ways, I would argue going out of the World Cup in South Africa on that goal, or non-goal, actually helped me and the FA create a whole load of change," he said. "If we'd have gone through with Lampard's goal and some momentum, arguably it would be better for football – a successful England team will always be huge and when we win a World Cup it will be the biggest shot in the arm – but in some ways it did help to expose where we were and the development of our game: [that] we need to get youngsters playing the game the right way, we need to get our coaching structure and infrastructure right, we need courses at St George's Park in place to produce a successful team in ten years' time."

This change process, Ackerley explained, is underpinned by research

and information to ensure that the decisions that are taken in the interests of the national game will withstand the extensive scrutiny that comes with the footballing territory.

"In football everyone has an opinion and they don't mind voicing it," he said. "It has made us acquire a rigour about everything we do. We don't do anything without an evidence base and research. We've got evidence-based insight into what makes [players] tick, what they want and how they want it. Are we then able to translate that into a real offer that we can deliver through our networks to that customer base? Do we have platforms we can reach and do we then measure feedback and listen? Have we provided the right thing?"

"Quite often it doesn't quite work. Five-a-side football has been around a long time but our insight now tells us that our consumers want to turn up and play. They don't want 12-week leagues. Younger markets might be on their way to play football somewhere and, thanks to texting, Facebook or Twitter, they might change their plans there and then. We have to understand that. The world of social media is changing rapidly and we have to embrace it."

In explaining that people want to play the game on their own terms, Ackerley offers his own experience as an example. He wants to play football for an hour on a Sunday or a Thursday night because that is when he is available. Because he is now 52, he wants half an hour each way with rolling substitutes and to play on a pitch that is not going to get rained or frozen off, so probably an artificial surface. This innovation of informality has now been brought to a game that has traditionally been very tightly controlled by the governing body.

Ackerley concedes the point about control. "It is a very regulated game – and for the right reasons, otherwise it would be the wild west – but we need to work out what are the regulations that we need and what are the regulations that need to review," he said.

One aspect of the FA's evidence-based insight is that players want to play on a decent surface, something that Ackerley predicts will see the national game increasingly embracing the use of artificial grass surfaces. Studies of third-generation (3G) artificial pitches used over the last three or four years suggests that they are popular with players and can cope with intensive use.

"Artificial grass pitches will support 60-70 games a week," Ackerley said. "Maintained grass pitches, like we have at St George's Park, will support five hours a week. And on council pitches, which might have had nothing done to them for 30 years, well, you get what you get. And now we're being asked to pay more and more to use them."

Ackerley agreed that the issue of local authority pitches has become a real issue for the grassroots game and that at the time of our last interview – March 2010 – there had been no real appreciation of how hard the local authority spending cuts were going to hit. While artificial surfaces might be popular and their use growing, there are still 30,000 grass pitches that need to be better used and better managed.

"Eighty per cent of our pitches are in local authority ownership," he said. "That model is broken and it will no longer fit. What we have to do is find a better way. We've got people now playing on worse and worse pitches; I used the word 'abhorrent' in a BBC interview only because you can't use the word 'crap' on the radio. Of course it's a generalisation. There are some very good ones but in the main they are rubbish."

Ackerley agreed with the suggestion that this is not necessarily the fault of local authorities, which are facing unprecedented financial pressures. "Of course. One thing that football has to learn is that it has had

subsidised public facilities for a long time. It has got used to it but now it has to pay.”

This issue of increased pitch charges levied on clubs already struggling to make ends meet has been central to the Save Grassroots Football campaign, a campaign that has also highlighted the contrast between the wealth of Premier League and the poverty of local parks football. Ackerley agreed that the campaign had been effective in drawing attention to the issue of pitches but was less convinced by the call for the Premier League to support the grassroots game.

“I constantly get thrown at me that the grassroots pitches abroad, in Germany, Holland and Spain for example, are much better,” he said. “But they’re not paid for by Bayern Munich, Ajax and Real Madrid. They are paid for by local authorities and regional government, who put great store by their facilities. So it’s a bit disingenuous. You can’t blame the Premier League for everything. Of course I want to save grassroots football but there is no silver bullet.”

For all the problems of pitches and the costs associated with them, Ackerley pointed to the strength of youth leagues as evidence of positive change within the grassroots game. He explained that the FA’s youth development review has resulted in 1,300 more mini-soccer and youth teams than in the previous year; and that a system to connect youth leagues with adult leagues had brought improvements in the transition of players and team from the youth to the adult game. Work with schools and colleges to create the Team 16 and Team 19 programmes has been successful in keeping young people in the game or bringing them back to it.

“It’s all about understanding these stages,” he said. “Without getting too ‘marketing-y’, we’ve segmented our whole market and we understand what our consumers look like.”

But for all the marketing experience and insight, the Leisure Review suggested, a sustainable future for the game must presumably include a requirement to make the game accessible and affordable for everybody. If people cannot afford to play, surely the game dies?

“The thing that gets bandied all the time is that it’s too expensive, that it’s all about cost,” Ackerley said. “It’s actually about value. People are very discerning. It might cost £10 to play a game but if it’s £10 to play on a 3G [pitch] with floodlights and I get a good experience with good customer service, I’ll value that. If I’m playing a fiver for every game I play and I’m getting changed in my car and the pitch is covered in dog crap, that’s expensive.

“And it’s getting more expensive because the price of the pitches is going up and up. I understand that we’re not subsidised. It’s a discretionary service and they’re passing on the full cost of maintaining that football pitch, whatever that cost is. And that is a massive shock to the system. Football has never had to pay the real cost of a football pitch but what we’ve got to do now is meet it half way. We have to pay but if we are going to pay we want value. I don’t mind paying £1,200 a season for our football pitch but I wouldn’t mind if the goals were straight, or if the pitch was marked, if it was cut and prepared. And I don’t want games called off on a Monday because it is going to rain during the week. I understand why it happens but it doesn’t help me.

“So I’ve got to look at a whole heap of factors. There’s the whole factor of people’s lives: social, family, work-life, all phenomenally different. Everyone’s busy, they’ve no time and they’ve got to fit it all in. We’ve got to reflect that in our offer. Then we’ve got to think about where, how and when do they play. And then we’ve got to make it easier for people.”

Taking the opportunity to preparing the ground for our next interview, we asked what the next four years might hold for Ackerley, the FA and the national game. Pausing briefly, but only briefly, to consider the prospect, Ackerley began to count off the likely developments.

“The next four years is not about four-year strategies: it's about a long-term, ten-year vision. What will football look like in 10 or 20 years? My view is that 11-a-side football played over 45 minutes each way will be the game that we all know. I think it will be played faster, there will be more of it and there will be much more flexible formats of the game. We will make it much easier. Technology will make a big difference to how we organise and communicate. We will still play on something that's green and there will be a round ball. As for everything else... well, the goals might change, the pitch might be a different length but at the end of the day, the ball will be round.”

**Our first interview with Pete Ackerley can be found via the Leisure Review back issues**

**The FA is online at [www.thefa.com](http://www.thefa.com)**

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