



EFC Girls' Development Pathway Analysis



European Football Clubs' Women's Football 2026
in association with Sportsology Group

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Foreword



Martina Pavlová

EFC Vice-Chair and
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Women's football has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. With more young girls than ever playing the game, understanding and strengthening their development pathways has become essential. Women's sport requires tailored approaches that ensure athletes have the resources, opportunities and environments to thrive.

This project stands at the forefront of that mission, offering the first in-depth analysis of girls' development systems across Europe. It provides clubs with a unique opportunity to connect, share best practices and learn from one another, while also encouraging reflection on current strategies and future ambitions. The initiative aligns seamlessly with European Football Clubs' (EFC) vision, empowering clubs to strengthen their role in shaping the women's football landscape.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Claire Bloomfield, former Head of Women's Football at EFC, whose vision and determination were the driving force behind this project. Her recognition of the critical role girls' pathways play in the wider women's football ecosystem has been fundamental in shaping this work.

What sets this study apart is its exclusive focus on girls, recognising that their journeys cannot simply mirror those of boys. A holistic and inclusive approach is essential – one that supports players on and off the pitch and fosters environments where young female athletes can flourish.

This report is both a resource and a call to action. By engaging deeply, reflecting meaningfully and acting decisively, we can ensure every girl has the opportunity to pursue her passion for football and the next generation of players receive the support they deserve.



01

Executive Summary

The Girls' Development Pathway Analysis is an initiative by EFC aimed at helping its member clubs develop and professionalise girls' football. As the women's game continues to grow, a well-structured pathway becomes essential to offering aspiring female players a clear route towards personal and professional success in football.

Clubs play a vital role in the development of young talent for the women's game. However, not all aspects of the talent pathway are straightforward. There are still many unknowns about development practices in the girls' game and areas where leading practices can be highlighted. This is why EFC introduced this study: to shed light on the current landscape of girls' football at European clubs. This report should empower clubs to professionalise their talent pathway in girls' football

and *Be a Changemaker* for the next generation of talent for the professional women's game.

To ensure a wide range of clubs was represented in the study, 35 regions across Europe took part in an extensive survey which was complemented by more than 50 interviews. With the support of the global advisory firm Sportsology Group, some 'outside of football' perspectives were also included.

The findings are presented across five core chapters – club structure, athlete care, on-pitch development, infrastructure and player pathway – which explore how clubs currently operate, the key challenges they face and examples of best practice. The following provides a summary of the key insights across these five chapters.



Club Structure

The club structure refers to how clubs are set up to support a pathway into women's football. Key aspects include integrating girls' and women's football into the decision-making at a club leadership level while maintaining autonomy where necessary. Building a distinct brand identity for the women's game creates the opportunity for the women's side to differentiate itself. Moreover, securing both organisational and financial commitments from the club is vital for aligning the goals of the girls' youth programme with the club's broader strategy and operations. Ultimately, maintaining a consistent football identity across age groups helps balance player development with competitive success.



Current Landscape

- Many clubs have created a written strategic vision for girls' football. A longer-term strategy helps clubs set priorities and actions with clear goals that are tailored to the resources and budget available. This can include establishing relationships with international and local clubs and entities.
- Women's and girls' key decision-makers are increasingly part of broader club senior leadership and board-level structures. While still one club, they are given the freedom to operate as a separate entity



Key Challenges

- Clubs are establishing a strong brand identity for girls' and women's football, differentiating them from local and international competitors.
- Integrating a consistent football philosophy across all teams remains a challenge. Clubs must maintain a unified playing style aligning with their values, while balancing short-term success with long-term player development.
- Ensuring club organisational buy-in is also critical. This includes aligning the girls' academy's operational model with the broader club strategy, and ensuring resource allocation supports the objectives of women's and girls' football.
- Securing financial buy-in presents another challenge, with clubs needing to ensure adequate funding while balancing the budget between the first team and the academy.



Athlete Care

In any talent pathway, focusing on both the personal and professional development of athletes is essential. Athlete care plays a formative role in this, with tailored housing and education options creating a safe and stable environment for girls at the club.

Safeguarding and mental health support have become top priorities as clubs enhance their commitment to player wellbeing. Medical care is another key aspect, yet research shows only 54% of clubs feel confident in their medical onboarding procedures for new female players, revealing significant gaps in this area. The lack of women-specific research, particularly around topics such as the menstrual cycle, balancing academic and dual careers, and injury prevention, presents a major challenge for clubs.

This gap not only complicates medical evaluations but also increases the risks to player health, underscoring the urgency for more research and resources dedicated to the unique needs of female athletes.

Additionally, nutrition support, including guidance for players and families, is vital, especially when addressing eating disorders.



Current Landscape

- Clubs are increasingly providing housing and education support. This can be through host families, on-site housing, club-provided accommodation, local school collaborations or even on-site schools.
- Specific women's and girls' academy safeguarding procedures are increasingly implemented for players and staff. Mental health support is provided through regular check-ins, player surveys and psychological services.
- Girls are being educated on how the menstrual cycle impacts mental health and athletic performance.



Key Challenges

- A professional playing career/financial security is not guaranteed for female players, so they are encouraged to pursue academic and other professional careers, which can be tough to balance.
- A lack of research focusing on female athletes persists. Medical tests are often still based on male athletes, leading to uncertainties in medical evaluations.
- Ensuring consistent medical and mental health data collection is also a challenge. Besides the lack of structure and tools for data gathering and recording, the communication flow between players and medical staff is often difficult to manage in terms of sensitivity and timing.
- Addressing nutritional education and eating disorders is another key area. Proper nutrition is crucial to support muscle growth and complement the training regime. When dealing with young players, the language spoken around nutrition and education becomes paramount not just to the players, but to parents and coaches too.

On-Pitch Development

Player development on the pitch remains central to the pathway. The relationship with coaches has a significant impact on a player's journey throughout age groups.

In the girls' game, the need for enhancing coaching skills through targeted education and training – with a focus on developing personalised training plans for players, particularly in strength and conditioning – is very high. While more professionals are becoming qualified, the lack of experience in women's football remains a challenge.

As players often face an extensive workload, balancing frequent call-ups for national and regional tournaments with education and dual careers can take a physical toll. There is a need for better established performance functions, as current data tracking is insufficient and relies largely on manual systems. Lastly, goalkeeping development is hindered by a perceived low quality of coaching, contributing to a shortage of skilled goalkeepers.



Current Landscape

- Clubs are investing in coaching development and education, helping to improve standards and create a structured talent pathway within clubs.
- Club-wide coaching frameworks are being implemented, ensuring consistent and aligned methodologies across all age groups.
- Individual development plans are being prioritised, providing players with personal goals and training programmes that address specific needs and development areas.



Key Challenges

- There is a shortage of coaching and performance staff with experience in the women's game, impacting the quality of gender-specific player development. The representation of women on the coaching staff also remains low.
- Managing extensive player workload is also a concern. The demands of balancing education with football, including frequent international call-ups, create a risk of mental and physical burnout.
- Establishing effective performance functions remains a priority. Many clubs lack structured performance tracking systems necessary to monitor player development, often relying on manual data collection and basic storage solutions.
- Clubs often struggle to provide high-quality specialised goalkeeping training to players, hindering the development of goalkeepers who are ready to make the step up to the professional game.

Infrastructure

Effective operations and scheduling, as well as access to high-quality facilities, are key components in the growth of girls' football. Many clubs take the initiative to organise friendly matches and integrate mixed-gender competitions (typically up to age 15) to provide competitive match experience, but the lack of formal international competition for girls in Europe limits development opportunities against high-quality teams abroad.

Financial and logistical challenges further restrict participation in elite tournaments, highlighting the pressing need for continued improvements to structured domestic leagues across each age group. It is common for existing leagues to lack the quality required to challenge players and drive performance. Additionally, most girls' teams share facilities with boys' academies or women's first teams, resulting in scheduling conflicts and a feeling of being deprioritised. This reflects the need for greater investment in dedicated spaces that cater specifically to girls' programmes. Alongside facility challenges, clubs are beginning to adopt centralised communication systems to streamline processes between players, parents and staff. However, operations for girls' teams remain underdeveloped, with coaching staff often relied upon for kit management, scheduling and transportation due to the absence of dedicated team managers and operational support.



Current Landscape

- Clubs are beginning to adopt centralised systems for scheduling, player data management and communication with players, parents and staff to improve operational efficiency.
- Although most clubs provide access to training and matchday facilities, they are often shared with boys' academies or women's first teams, creating scheduling challenges and deprioritisation of girls' programmes.
- Clubs are increasingly organising friendly matches and seeking international competitions to expose players to varied competitive environments,

especially given the lack of advanced, structured domestic girls' league.



Key Challenges

- Clubs often lack dedicated staff for girls' academies, such as team managers and operations roles, placing additional administrative work on the coaching staff.
- Just over half of clubs provide free kits for all ages, but many rely on annual membership fees. Additionally, less than 50% of clubs offer transportation for matchdays, leaving logistical responsibilities to parents or guardians.

- Limited investment in dedicated facilities remains a challenge. Shared facilities with boys' programmes, women's first teams or external groups often lead to scheduling conflicts, hindering player development. Despite recent renovations, many clubs lack dedicated, high-quality facilities for girls.
- A lack of competitive match opportunities persists. Due to the absence of formal domestic leagues, many clubs are forced to compete in mixed-gender leagues, which presents challenges in terms of physical and tactical development. International competitions are limited by financial and logistical barriers.

Player Pathway

Lastly, the overall player pathway highlights how practices around recruiting and retaining players into the youth system to become professional players or set them up for another footballing career are established.

Overall, there is a strong desire among clubs to build a robust talent pipeline for the future of women's football in roles on and off the pitch. However, the lack of domestic incentives for the development of club-trained players makes it difficult for clubs to justify a heavier investment in girls' youth systems. Therefore, a significant gap exists between the level of women's senior teams and girls' youth age groups.

The increasing demands of the game often push clubs to recruit externally rather than promote internal talent. Scouting practices are frequently underdeveloped as clubs are struggling to cover

desired areas due to limited resourcing and data available.

A necessary aspect of developing a high-quality girls' talent pathway is the allocation of dedicated staff to support both the operational and developmental needs of young players. The results from staffing research indicate many clubs face challenges in providing sufficient full-time personnel, particularly in emerging and developing clubs.

Clubs at more advanced stages of maturity, however, are making significant strides by increasing the number of specialised staff dedicated to coaching, medical, performance, care and wellbeing roles. By investing in dedicated staff across key areas, clubs are ensuring their youth systems are equipped to provide tailored support necessary for long-term success.



Current Landscape

- Generally, there is a large desire to build up girls' football. Clubs engaged in the study all share a similar goal to build a pipeline that's well-equipped for the next generation of women's football talent.
- Clubs are looking beyond professional playing careers. Success is not only measured by first-team playing performance. Clubs are also dedicated to supporting players in pursuing a career in football off the pitch and setting them up for success to the best of their abilities.
- However, clubs frequently expose young players to



Key Challenges

senior-team environments prematurely to comply with national association regulations, which can see them rushed through the development stages.

- Reducing the gap between women's senior teams and the girls' academy remains a challenge. The increasing demands of the game are hard for girls to keep up with in general. Exposure to the first team is often premature, and only done to match national

association regulations, leading clubs to recruit first-team players instead of prioritising internal player promotion.

- Clubs experience difficulties in attempting to cover all the desired geographical areas to spot talent due to a lack of human resources. They also struggle with gathering data from other markets due to the lack of availability.
- With the absence of training rewards in their current form, clubs struggle to make a business case for the girls' academy and request dedicated resources to build up the system.



02

Report Methodology

This project marks the beginning of the latest EFC initiative to merge the youth and women's football workstreams to enhance youth development in women's football. Recognising the growing urgency to effectively advance girls' development, this innovative study aims to deepen our understanding of the diverse development systems for girls across Europe. Additionally, it explores how clubs can be supported in building and enhancing systems aimed at identifying, developing and nurturing young talent in all areas of the girls' youth pathway.

Establishing the Framework

To achieve this, different types of sources and research methods have been used, combining both quantitative and qualitative insights from in-depth club visits and interviews, as well as round-table discussions with industry experts and survey analysis.

This EFC-funded study was produced in collaboration with Sportsology Group, which specialises in providing premium knowledge, insights and strategic advice across global sport.

An EFC taskforce composed of club representatives was established to provide strategic direction and guidelines to the research, guaranteeing this project was a targeted investigation of the needs of the clubs and providing them with valuable resources to inform decision-making.



EFC Internal Taskforce



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Current State Assessment

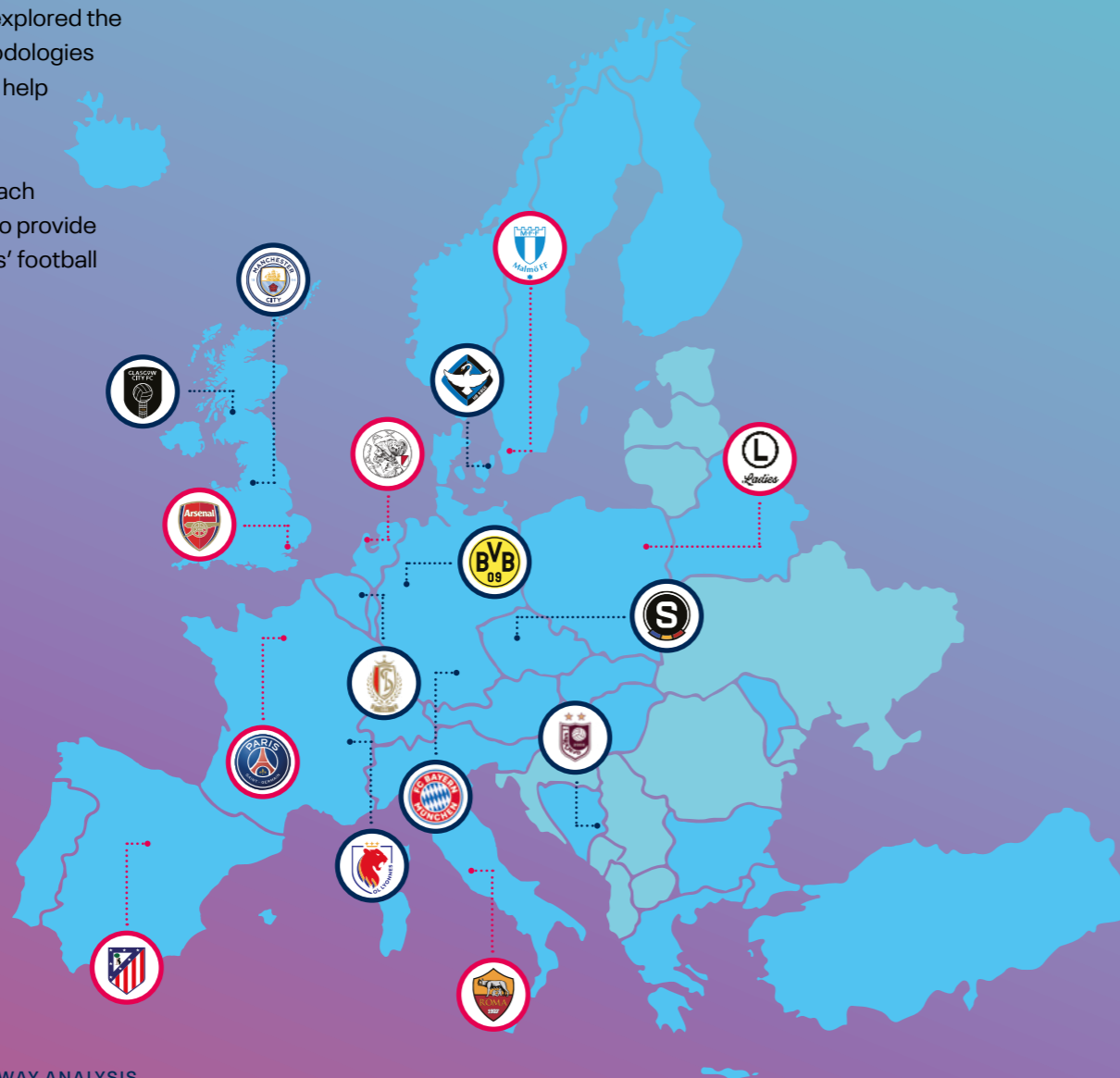
This report draws from a large survey of football clubs across 35 European countries. Responses were collected from both established footballing nations and emerging markets, each with its own set of challenges and different levels of investment in women’s football.

The survey was complemented by qualitative research, including nine online interviews and seven on-site club visits. These explored the organisational structures, methodologies and current practices in place to help guide young girls on the path to senior and professional football. Clubs shared their unique approach to player development, helping to provide a view of the current state of girls’ football across the continent.

By assessing a wide range of clubs from across Europe, the report provides a nuanced understanding of the successes, challenges and opportunities faced across different contexts and footballing cultures. The report identifies trends, highlights leading practices and acknowledges common challenges, all while ensuring its conclusions are not constrained to a single nation’s experiences.

Key

-  On-site interviews
-  Virtual interviews



Leading Practices

To bring a global perspective, we examined women’s sport beyond football and drew meaningful insights from successful practices related to girls’ youth development. To achieve this, we broadened our scope and engaged experts and leaders from sports in other continents through targeted interviews.

Industry experts from across the women’s football ecosystem also contributed, representing a range of varying roles and backgrounds. Through round-table discussions, they helped inform and challenge our findings, ensuring all aspects of the player development process were addressed.

We would like to extend special thanks to the following people and organisations for their invaluable contributions:

Focus Group

- Gemma Grainger (Head Coach, Norway Women’s National Team)
- Amy McDonald (Senior Auditor, The Professional Game Academy Audit Company)
- Sofia Teles (Director, Portuguese Football Federation)
- Kirsten van de Ven (Technical Director, Elitfotball Dam)
- Carys Delton (Head of Player Care, Chelsea FC)
- Jack Sharkey (Former Director of Performance and Innovation, OL Lyonnnes)
- Katrien Jans (Women’s Football Manager, Royal Belgian Football Association)

External Contributors

- Professor Kirsty Elliott-Sale (Professor of Female Endocrinology and Exercise Physiology, Manchester Metropolitan University)
- USL Super League
- Women’s Tennis Association (WTA)
- National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL)

Framework of Success Factors

The growth of women’s football in Europe has made significant progress, yet the pathway for young girls aspiring to reach the professional level remains varied and, in some cases, underdeveloped. EFC’s research study is guided by a framework of 11 success factors

critical to the development of young female athletes. This framework was used to create a toolkit of strategies and recommendations aimed at enhancing training environments, resource access and overall development opportunities.

Club Foundations

Strategy

A successful girls’ football programme begins with a clear strategy. This involves embedding the club’s DNA within the women’s and girls’ football departments, creating a football vision and philosophy, and determining a team identity and style that aligns with the club’s values. Establishing partnerships for talent development within the local community further strengthens the programme. A robust strategy ensures clubs set specific actions and goals that drive the long-term success of girls’ football.

Operating Model

A well-structured operating model is essential for integrating women’s and girls’ football into the broader organisational framework of the club. This includes establishing a clear organisational structure, defining staff roles and responsibilities, and setting budgets to support the programme’s growth. By doing so, clubs can ensure their girls’ football departments are seamlessly connected to the wider club structure, enabling more effective management and resource allocation.

FRAMEWORK OF SUCCESS FACTORS IN WOMEN’S FOOTBALL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Internal Capabilities

Medical

Medical support plays a vital role in player development and care. Establishing comprehensive onboarding and player assessment procedures, alongside rehabilitation and return-to-play protocols, helps to ensure athletes are cared for appropriately. Specific considerations for girls, such as gynaecological assessments and education on the menstrual cycle, further enhance health management. This focus on medical care is paramount in building a safe and supportive environment for young players.

Performance

Performance development is a core component of a successful player pathway. Defining training programmes, nutrition plans and incorporating sports science are areas clubs can focus on to maximise player potential. Real performance data and insights, when used effectively, help clubs to monitor progress and make informed adjustments to training plans. Preparing young players for the transition to professional football is another key focus, ensuring they are ready for the next stage of their careers.

Recruitment

A well-organised recruitment strategy helps to drive the long-term success of any girls' football programme. Clubs can focus on building a structured recruitment plan that includes scouting at local, national and international levels. By gathering and analysing scouting data and forming partnerships with local schools, clubs can expand their talent pool and ensure promising young players have access to opportunities. Recruitment efforts provide a steady pipeline of talent, crucial for long-term player development.



Coaching

Quality coaching is vital to the growth of young players, and having a clear coaching philosophy and methodology is essential. This includes ensuring coaches are well trained and continue to develop professionally. A focus on gender balance in coaching roles also adds value to girls' and women's football programmes. Clubs can benefit from providing individual player coaching and specialised training, such as set-piece and goalkeeping coaching, to meet the diverse needs of players.

Care and Wellbeing

The wellbeing of players is just as important as their technical development. Providing players with appropriate housing, safeguarding procedures, educational support and mental health resources creates a nurturing environment where they can thrive. These efforts help clubs to build strong relationships with their players and contribute to a positive culture that promotes holistic development on and off the pitch.

Operations

Operational efficiency is important for any successful football programme. By providing players with the necessary kits, equipment and transportation, as well as clear communication on schedules, clubs can make sure day-to-day activities run smoothly. Strong operations allow the coaching and performance staff to focus on player development while players can concentrate on their training and competitions without logistical distractions.

Competitive Environment

Competitions and Scheduling

Participating in competitive matches is essential for player development. Domestic and international competitions, along with training camps and friendly matches, give players the opportunity to gain valuable experience. Clubs can evaluate the balance and structure of their competitions and schedule, to ensure players are regularly competing at a level that promotes growth. A well-rounded competition and scheduling plan contributes to both individual player development and the overall success of the team.

Facilities

Access to high-quality facilities is fundamental to creating an environment where players can develop effectively. Clubs can assess their training centres, stadiums and support facilities to ensure they meet the needs of their girls' programmes. Dedicated training pitches, changing rooms, treatment areas and classrooms help to provide a professional setting for young athletes. Continuous investment in facilities demonstrates a club's commitment to the growth of girls' football.



Pathway Outcome

Professional Transition

A key area of focus for clubs is ensuring players have a clear pathway from youth to senior football. By establishing structured progression plans, clubs can help to guide players as they transition from the

academy to the first team. Measuring academy KPIs and tracking players' professional and off-pitch career development helps clubs to maintain a sustainable model for advancing talent. A focus on professional transition means the players are prepared for the challenges of senior football.

Club Categorisation

Given the variation in maturity of women's clubs across Europe, survey data was segmented to better understand the trends and factors influencing clubs at different stages of their development.

A scoring system assessed each club's level of professionalisation using multiple factors, which were weighted according to importance. The final score classified each club into one of four categories: Advanced, Established, Developing, Emerging.

This categorisation enables the data to be segmented based on a club's league infrastructure, investment and level of performance, offering a structured foundation on which to analyse girls' youth system pathways and their place within the broader women's football landscape. It should also serve as a benchmark for tracking progress over time.

Scoring Criteria

Country (Weighted 5x)

The market in which a club operates plays a significant role in its development due to significant variations in national investment in women's football, cultural attitudes and the competitive landscape.

UEFA Club Coefficient (Weighted 4x)

The UEFA women's club coefficient provides an objective measure of a club's success in European competitions. A higher coefficient indicates consistent performance against other top European teams, reflecting the overall quality of the club.



League Tier (Weighted 3x)

The league tier reflects the competitive level at which the club's women's team currently plays, with the standard of competition improving as teams move up the league structure. This increase in competitiveness correlates with better resources and enhances opportunities for player development.

Club Status (Weighted 2x)

The operational status of a club – whether professional, semi-professional or amateur – is another critical indicator of the level of resourcing it can provide to the development of the women's game.

Academy Age (Weighted 2x)

The maturity of the girls' youth system is an important factor in assessing its long-term commitment to talent development. Older academies tend to have more refined training programmes and more established pathways.

Scoring Calculation and Category Assignment

$(\text{Country Score} \times 5) + (\text{UEFA Coefficient Score} \times 4) + (\text{League Tier Score} \times 3) + (\text{Club Status} \times 2) + (\text{Academy Age Score} \times 2) = \text{Total Score}$

Based on the total score each club is assigned one of the following categories:

Advanced Club

Clubs with high scores across all criteria with well-established and successful women's football programmes.

Established Club

Clubs that are mature and competitive but have slightly less developed infrastructure or less success in European competitions.

Developing Club

Clubs that are growing and have potential but still have significant areas in which to improve.

Emerging Clubs

Clubs in the early stages of developing their women's and girls' football programmes or operating in markets with limited resources.

Development Phases

Based on the data collected during the study, the girls' youth system pathway has been categorised into three distinct phases: foundation, development and professionalisation. These phases reflect the specific needs and training focuses that players require at different stages of their development. By aligning data to these phases, clubs can more effectively assess their current setup and adjust their strategies accordingly.



Foundation (up to U11)

Focuses on the development of baseline skills and a basic understanding of football. This phase is centred on building technical fundamentals and introducing young players to the game.



Development (U12-U16)

Marks a shift towards more structured training, where players begin refining their technical abilities and deepening their tactical understanding. Individualised development becomes more prominent as players progress.



Professionalisation (U17 and above)

Prepares players for elite-level competition with a focus on performance optimisation, advanced tactical development and readiness for the physical and mental demands of professional football.

03

Building The Future of Women's Football

The Advantages of Developing a Structured Talent Pathway for Girls



1 Develop Homegrown Talent to Strengthen Senior Teams and Reduce Recruitment Costs

A structured girls' talent pathway enables clubs to produce homegrown players who can strengthen the senior women's team. By investing in youth development programmes for girls, clubs can establish a system where young athletes are given the tools, coaching and support necessary to develop into professional-level players, while also fostering their personal growth and understanding of the game. Nurturing young talent through a club's academy provides a clear progression route from

grassroots to senior football, meaning players are not only technically proficient but also ingrained with the club's culture, style of play and core values.

A well-structured player development pathway also reduces reliance on the growing cost of external recruitment and transfers. The transfer market in the women's game will continue to grow, leading to more costly transfers. Rather than solely allocating substantial resources to acquire players from other clubs or regions, clubs can focus on nurturing talent from within. This builds a pipeline of skilled players who are aligned with the club's culture, playing style and values, while minimising the financial risks and uncertainties associated with external scouting and recruitment. Beyond the immediate savings, investing in a girls' player pathway could create long-term revenue opportunities. As a hub for talent development, clubs can capitalise on their academy's success by negotiating transfer fees for players as the women's player trading market continues to expand, therefore getting ahead of the curve.

“

This analysis can be a guideline to improve the overall level and standards. If we want to continue to grow and create a sustainable ecosystem, it is crucial we offer our young girls the best professional and dedicated support possible.

”

Katrien Jans, Women's Football Manager, Royal Belgian Football Association

2 Support the Club to Become More Competitive in Domestic and International Tournaments

As the standard of women’s football improves globally, competition between clubs is intensifying. Those that develop a strong girls’ football programme now will be better positioned to compete in domestic and international competitions in the future.

A well-organised girls’ academy strengthens a club’s prospects in competitions by producing highly skilled players who understand the club’s culture and style of play. The majority of clubs successful in the UEFA Women’s Champions League have youth structures in place.

The potential for international success is a key sporting reason for clubs to invest in girls’ football. As women’s football continues to gain prominence on the global stage, European clubs with well-established girls’ programmes will be able to attract top players and compete for the most prestigious titles.



Developing players who are trained within your club’s game model and style of play is invaluable. It ensures they possess the technical skills and tactical understanding to make a smooth transition to the first team.



Charlotte O’Neill, Managing Director, Manchester City Women

3 Increase Participation and Strengthen Community Bonds by Demonstrating a Clear Player Pathway Within the Club

Investing in girls’ football goes beyond enhancing performance on the pitch. It is a key driver of participation, expanding the player pool and strengthening connections with the local community. By creating a direct and accessible pathway for girls to progress from grassroots level through to senior teams, clubs can encourage more young players to engage with the sport in a structured and supportive environment. It also helps players envisage a future within the club.

A structured girls’ talent pathway not only benefits on-pitch performance but also has a significant impact off the pitch. It offers young girls the opportunity to stay involved in the game as coaches, analysts or referees. When girls’ and women’s football is integrated into the club’s wider structure, it fosters a shared identity across men’s and women’s teams. This alignment promotes a stronger sense of community and loyalty among players, staff and supporters, while also enhancing coaching standards through knowledge sharing and collaboration across the club.

By making football accessible and providing clear pathways for girls to progress, clubs are also promoting diversity and inclusivity within the sport. Reaching out to girls from all backgrounds and offering them a place in the club’s structure helps to

create a more diverse player pool and encourages broader community involvement, while also demonstrating the club’s commitment to equality and growth.

Finally, investing in girls’ football strengthens ties with the community. Offering local youth programmes, as well as community engagement activities such as hosting training camps, matches or events for young players, can create a sense of pride from within the community, helping to build a stronger fanbase for the women’s team and, by extension, the club as a whole.



Whether girls begin at youth academy level or join through local programmes, seeing progression to higher levels builds a sense of belonging and ambition. This motivates players to stay engaged and committed, knowing they have the potential to grow within the youth system and perhaps reach senior women’s football, and become future role models.



Kirsten van de Ven, Technical Director, Elitfotball Dam

04

Club Structure

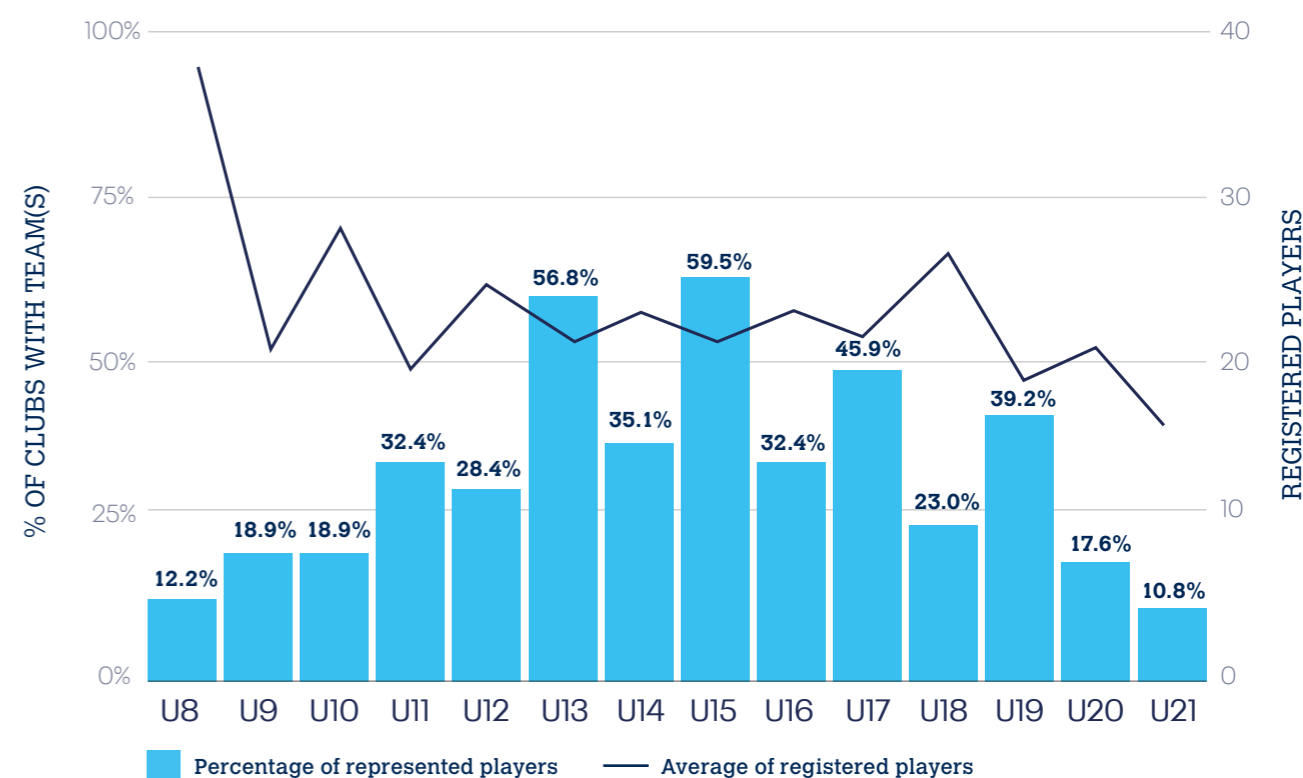
Organisational Buy-In and Structure

For girls' football to truly thrive, it's vital the key decision-makers for women's and girls' programmes are included in the club's senior leadership, allowing the club to function as a cohesive unit. At the same time, these decision-makers must have the autonomy to manage the women's and girls' programmes independently. This independence means they can concentrate on the growth and development of these programmes without being overshadowed by the men's and boys' initiatives. This dual approach not only aligns with the club's broader objectives but also ensures women's football receives the dedicated attention it needs.

A key strategic decision in a youth system is determining which age groups to include, and how many teams and players to develop within the club. This decision varies by club and is influenced by factors such as the number of girls participating in the sport, available resources and the average age of the first team. An analysis of girls' youth systems shows only a few clubs field very young teams (U8 to U10) during the foundation phase of their academies. This is likely to be due to low participation rates among girls in these age groups in many countries, making early recruitment challenging for clubs.



Age group representation in the girls' youth system



Talent Development Strategy and Club Partnerships

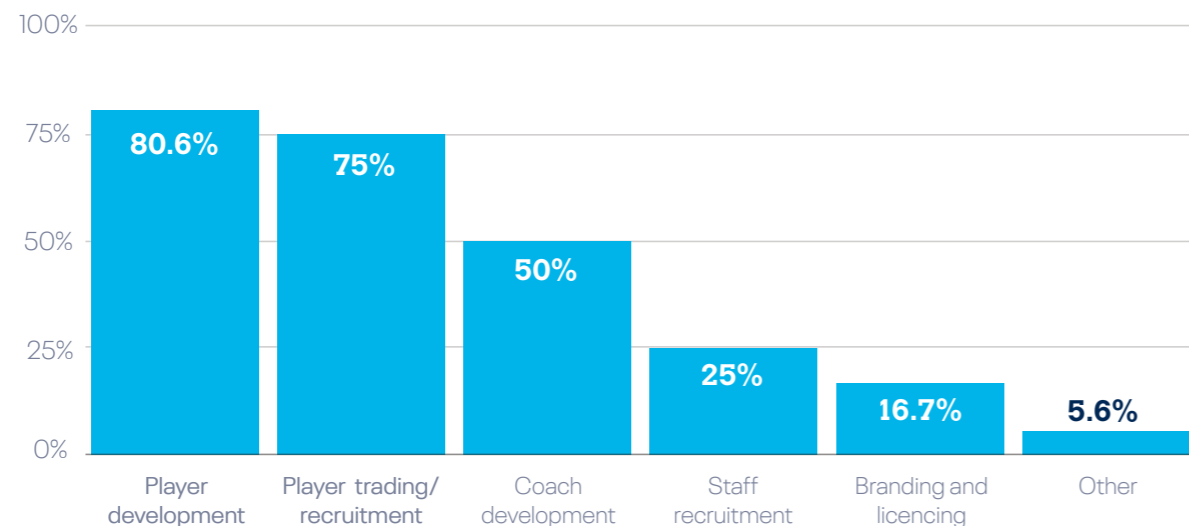
Effective talent development is central to the success of girls' football, and club partnerships can play a crucial role in this process. They can enable clubs to broaden their talent pool and enhance the knowledge exchange that can be beneficial for the entire women's and girls' football ecosystem. The research sheds light on how clubs are leveraging partnerships to enhance their talent development strategies.

The research indicates a significant number of clubs (53%) do not have any partnerships with other clubs, which represents a missed opportunity for enhancing player development.

Partnerships can be instrumental in providing additional resources, expertise and opportunities for players to develop their skills in different environments.

A primary reason for clubs to partner with other clubs is to develop playing and coaching talent. Among the clubs that do have partnerships, the primary focus is on player development, with an emphasis on trading and recruitment. Local partnerships are the most common, followed by regional, national and, to a lesser extent, international partnerships. These collaborations can be valuable for accessing broader talent pools and sharing leading practices in youth development.

Purpose of the partnership formed



NWSL

In the United States, National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) clubs operate as distinct brands, either as standalone women's teams or under shared ownership with a men's team.

Unlike many European football models, where women's teams are often viewed as extensions of the men's clubs with subsequent resource-sharing, NWSL teams are independent. This enables them to create unique identities, appealing directly to their fan bases and sponsors, and operate with women's football as their core product.

Even when ownership is shared – such as Orlando Pride and the MLS's Orlando City SC, or Houston Dash and the MLS's Houston Dynamo – teams retain separate branding, staffing and decision-making structures, reporting directly to the ownership or board rather than through the men's team hierarchy.

Each women's team in the NWSL sets its own business and sporting objectives, with a focus on fan engagement, community connection and on-

field success. This autonomy allows for tailored sponsorships, fan experiences and community outreach programmes aligned with their specific needs and audience, giving them greater control over their brand narrative.

This model also fosters growth opportunities specific to the women's sports ecosystem, creating pathways for women in coaching, administration and executive roles.

In contrast to traditional European club models, where women's sport is often seen as secondary, the NWSL's independent structure gives clubs the autonomy and flexibility to pursue growth strategies tailored to the women's game. This supports the development of sustainable business models and fan bases, in turn driving league growth and elevating women's sport more broadly.



05

Athlete Care

Safeguarding and Mental Health

Beyond financial support, housing and education, safeguarding and mental health programmes play a critical role in a successful athlete care model. In the intense environment of football, safeguarding measures are essential to protect young players from physical, emotional and

psychological harm. Leading women's youth systems have integrated specific safeguarding procedures tailored to the needs of female athletes, with all staff members trained to support and protect the players. Setting safeguarding procedures is typically a club-wide initiative.

65%

always require a safeguarding certificate for girls' coaches, while 20% consider it preferable, and just 15% have no requirement.

68%

of clubs regularly review and evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding policies.

68%

consider their current procedures sufficient for background checks on coaches, staff and others working closely with girls' youth players.

Clubs take a more proactive approach to mental health support



23%

provide access to clinical psychology services.

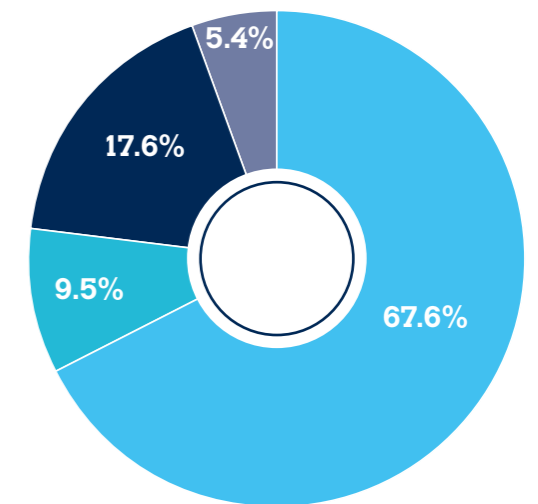
79%

of clubs do not track menstrual cycles in the girls' youth system.

Menstrual Health

An area of evolution in athlete care is the understanding and tracking of the athlete's ovarian hormone profiles, including the menstrual cycle and its possible impact on performance. This practice, though relatively new in sport, is gaining recognition for its importance in women's and girls' football. The menstrual cycle can have a significant impact on players' mental health and athletic performance and, by tracking it, clubs can tailor training programmes to better suit individual needs and abilities. For example, during certain phases of the cycle, nuanced individual adjustments can be made to training intensity or recovery strategies, helping to optimise performance. Educating players about their menstrual cycles and other ovarian hormone profiles – such as hormonal birth control – also empowers them to take control of their health and performance from nutrition to recovery tactics, creating a more informed and resilient player.

When is menstrual cycle education provided for girls?



- Not provided
- All ages or before U13
- At U13 or after
- For other groups

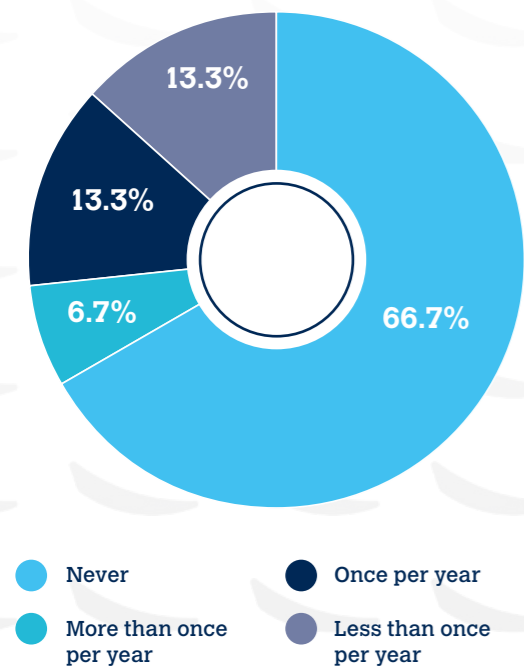
Gynaecology Assessments

Clubs are exploring providing off-the-pitch care such as gynaecology as part of medical assessments and support. They are increasingly integrating gynaecological assessments into broader medical assessments for female athletes, recognising the importance of holistic health and its impact on female athletes.

Of the established clubs questioned, 45% of them offer this service, the highest rate among all

categories. The frequency of these assessments varies significantly across club development stages – while emerging clubs mostly offer less frequent assessments (less than once per year), a portion of advanced and developing clubs offer more regular support (more than once per year). Established and advanced clubs make up the bulk of those providing this service, highlighting potential disparity in health support infrastructure across different club maturities.

Gynaecology assessments and support

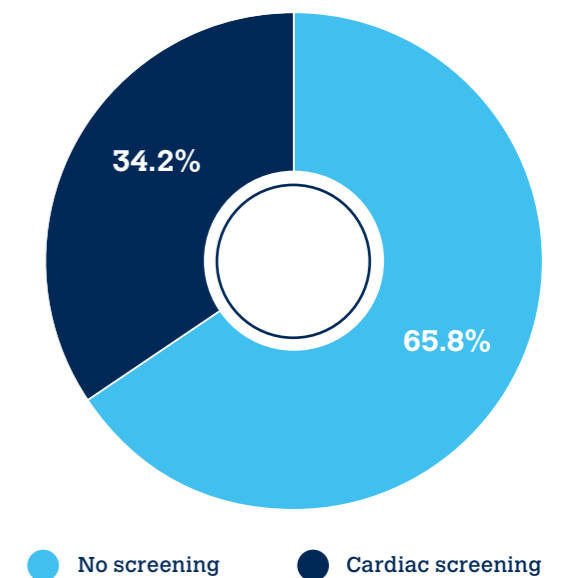


Cardiac Screenings

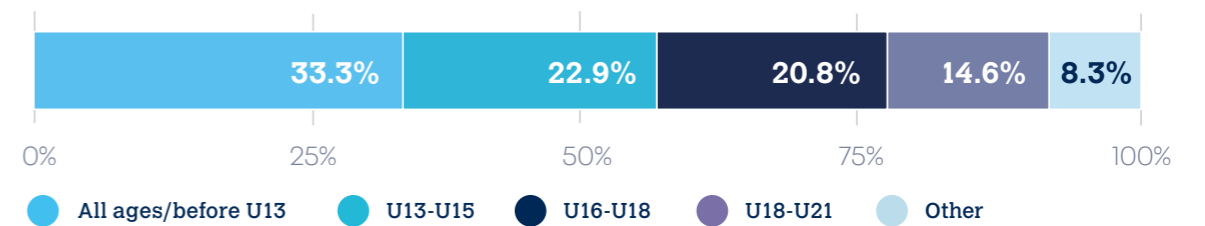
An example of clubs' player health data collection is the consistent logging of cardiac screening data for players in the girls' youth system. Survey results show the majority of clubs provide cardiac screenings, starting from a young age.

Clubs are often still building an internal database for related player health data for the women's first team. To be able to build that out, dedicated resources are important.

Clubs providing cardiac screening for girls in the youth academy



When clubs begin cardiac screening



Nutritional Education and Eating Disorders

Nutritional education is becoming increasingly important in professional football, as a balanced and well-calculated diet has been shown to enhance players' health and performance. This emphasis on nutrition is also being adopted by women's and girls' football. Almost 78% of surveyed clubs mention they provide nutritional guidance and education to their players. Despite its recognised importance, only a small percentage of clubs – around 6% – offer nutritional services across all categories.

Typically, clubs begin providing nutritional support between the U12 and U15 age groups when players' bodies are developing, and physical training demands are increasing. At this stage, proper nutrition is central to supporting muscle growth and complementing the training regime.

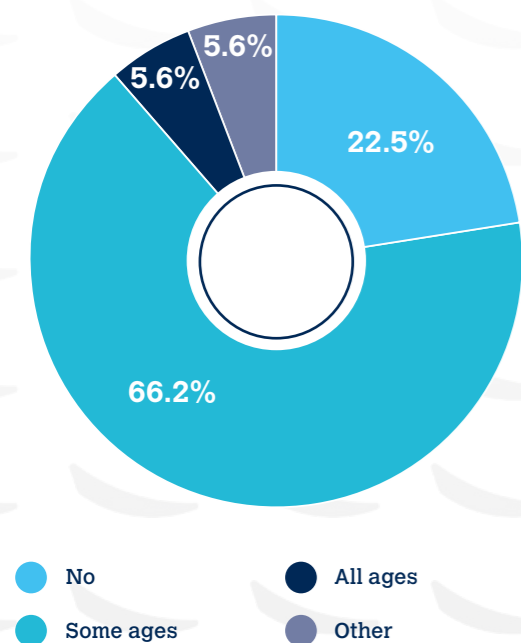
Of the clubs surveyed, 81% do not provide on-site meals. As a result, at this level, nutritional support is limited to education and setting guidelines without

direct oversight or control over what players consume. This approach places the responsibility on players to follow the guidance, which may lead to inconsistent adherence and reduce the effectiveness of the nutritional programmes.

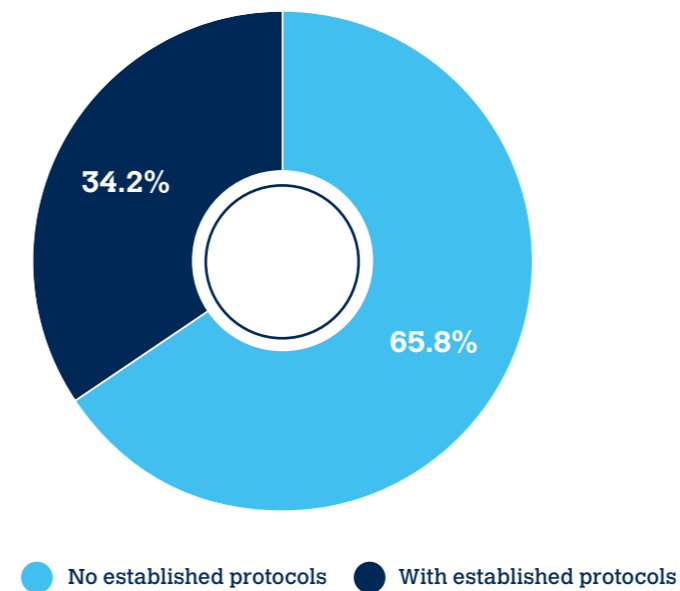
Currently, only 34% of clubs have implemented such practices. Advanced clubs are leading the way, with 80% of them already having these protocols in place.

To mitigate the risk of eating disorders, clubs are starting to implement targeted protocols to support female players and prevent these issues from arising.

Clubs that provide nutritional education and guidance



Clubs with established protocols to support players who may be at risk of eating disorders

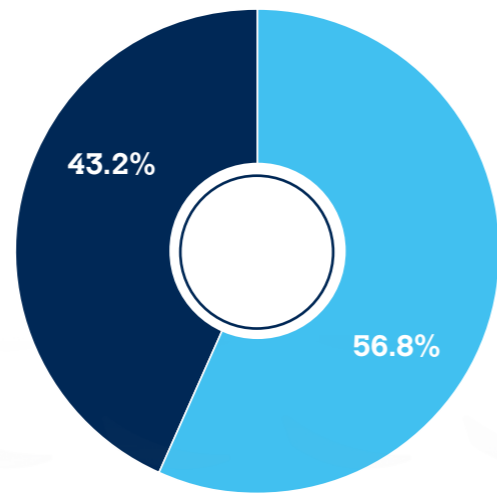


Doping Education

While doping issues are often associated with professional sport, more than half of surveyed clubs provide doping education within their youth systems. The percentage of clubs offering this type of education is higher among advanced and established clubs. However, more than half of both developing and emerging clubs are also increasingly recognising the importance of addressing doping as a key aspect of athlete care on the path to professionalism. Given the focus on youth systems, doping education, where provided, can be directed to players as well as parents.

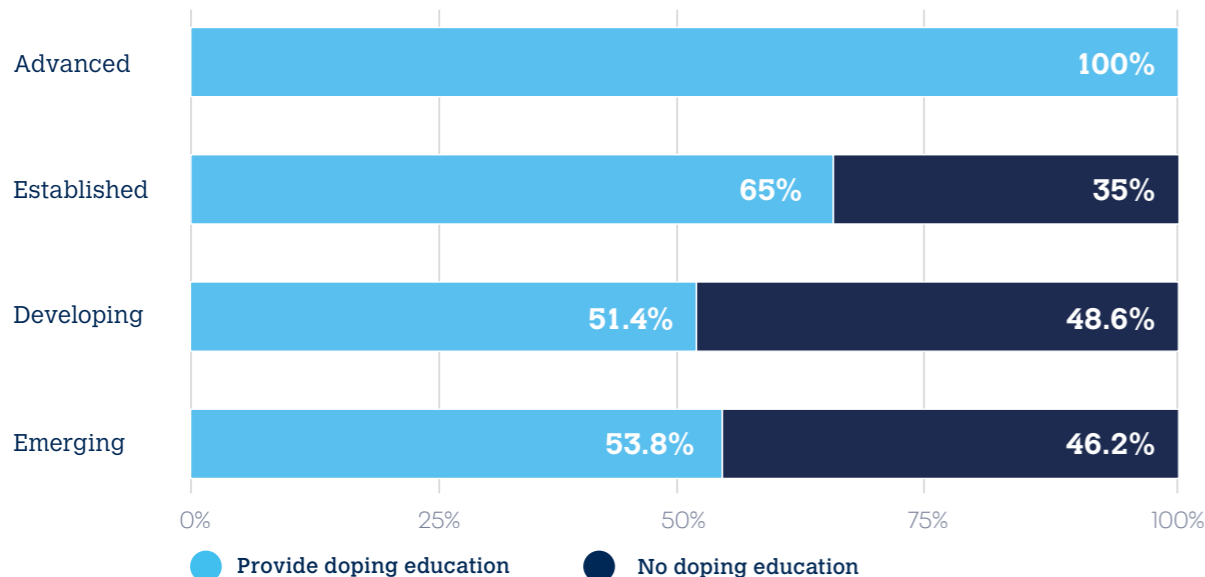
As the data confirms, it is reasonable to understand why doping education is primarily provided to older age groups, typically starting at the U13 level or after – as athletes move closer to the professional level, doping issues become increasingly relevant.

Clubs providing doping education



● Provide doping education ● No doping education

Clubs providing doping education



● Provide doping education ● No doping education



Women's Tennis Association (WTA)

The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) provides a strong model for integrating athlete wellbeing into structured development pathways, particularly for players aged 14-17. Its approach offers valuable insights for the development of girls' football.

Concerns about the premature retirement of young athletes due to burnout and injury led the WTA to recognise the physical and psychological challenges faced by adolescents entering the professional circuit. In the 1990s, they commissioned research into organisational changes that could promote career longevity.

As a result of these evidence-based recommendations, the WTA introduced a dual approach combining regulation and support. The Age Eligibility Rule (AER) phases young players into professional competition based on age, ranking and readiness, limiting exposure to physical and psychological stress. This is complemented by mandatory Player Development Programmes (PDP), which provides education, skill building and support mechanisms.

PDP extends beyond the athlete, incorporating parent and coach education, codes of conduct and ongoing feedback surveys to adapt to player needs. This creates a structured and progressive pathway that supports long-term development and career longevity.

The WTA has also implemented a comprehensive framework around safeguarding to ensure the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of an athlete throughout their entire career.

Recognising the unique challenges female athletes face, the WTA has developed specific strategies aimed at safeguarding its players from abuse, exploitation and undue pressure, whether originating from those in their own circles or from external influences like social media.

Female football players face similar challenges to those in tennis, including intense competition and physical demands that can lead to injuries, burnout and early dropout. Adopting elements of the WTA model – including PDP and a holistic framework for safeguarding – can effectively address these issues.

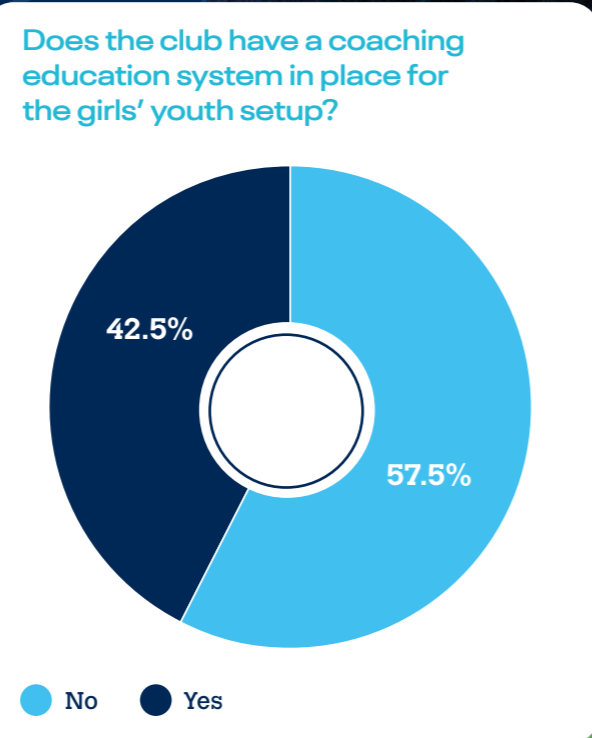
06

On-Pitch Development

Coaching Development and Education

A key aspect of producing young talent is the quality of the individuals responsible for player development – none more so than the coaches. Clubs that excel in on-pitch development place significant emphasis on the continuous education and growth of their coaching staff, recognising the foundation of success lies in the capability and consistency of the coaches within the club. This commitment is evident through the provision of additional training courses, workshops and professional development opportunities. These programmes ensure coaches are not only up to date with the latest advancements in the game but are also continually refining their own coaching methods.

By prioritising the development of their coaching staff, clubs create a sustainable model where coaches are well prepared to deliver high-quality training sessions tailored to the specific needs of the players.



Focus on Individual Development Plans

Leading clubs recognise the importance of individualised development plans (IDPs) to address the unique needs of each player. These plans are generally built around the pillars of player development – technical, tactical, physical, psychological and social/behavioural. The key to successful IDP creation is to ensure players have clear, concise, and actionable targets.

These goals should be easily integrated into both individual and team training programmes to make sure players understand precisely which areas they need to focus on and improve.

A rudimentary factor in the success of IDPs is player commitment. Players must fully engage with their

development plans, understanding the importance of owning their progress. However, it is important to strike a balance, as overwhelming players with excessive information can dilute the main focus and hinder their development. Clubs should prioritise simplicity and clarity so players are not overloaded, allowing them to concentrate on the most important areas for growth.

Consistency is another core component. Leading clubs emphasise the use of a standardised IDP framework across the youth system which can extend into the first team. This approach ensures consistent guidance across all stages and a unified coaching strategy, enabling smooth player progression through the development pathway.

Ongoing feedback and monitoring of progress is essential to ensure IDPs remain relevant and effective. Regular check-ins between players and coaching staff provide an opportunity to assess progress, adjust goals accordingly and maintain alignment between the players' current capabilities and their long-term development objectives.

Collaboration between players and coaches is a deciding factor in creating a sense of ownership and accountability, which are fundamental drivers in the success of IDPs.

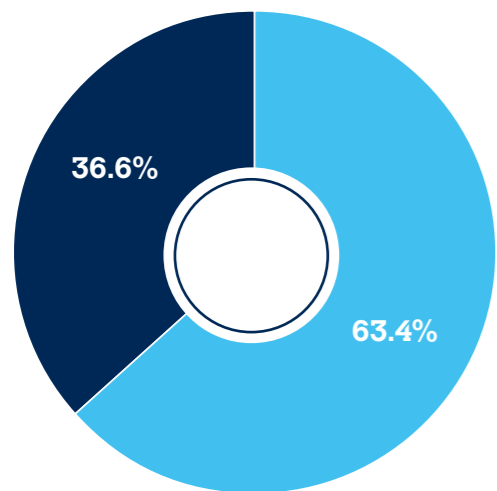
These regular coach-led IDP player touchpoints then feed into a series of macrocycle meetings with a broader multidisciplinary team (MDT), which may include coaching, performance and medical, player care, nutrition and psychology staff. Regular communication between these teams helps to create well-rounded development plans that ensure no element of the players' progress is overlooked.

This structured cadence within the MDT and with players ensures staff maintain consistent communication with all stakeholders, allowing them to develop a 'no surprises' culture through regular

touchpoints. By doing so, clubs create an environment where players benefit from holistic, player-centred support, ensuring their development is carefully monitored and adjusted throughout their journey.



Clubs that produce individualised performance plans for players



● Yes ● No

Representation of Women on the Coaching Staff

The representation of women on the coaching staff in girls' youth systems remains an issue across Europe. Despite efforts to promote gender equality in football, many clubs still face difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified female coaches. Representation matters – not only as a

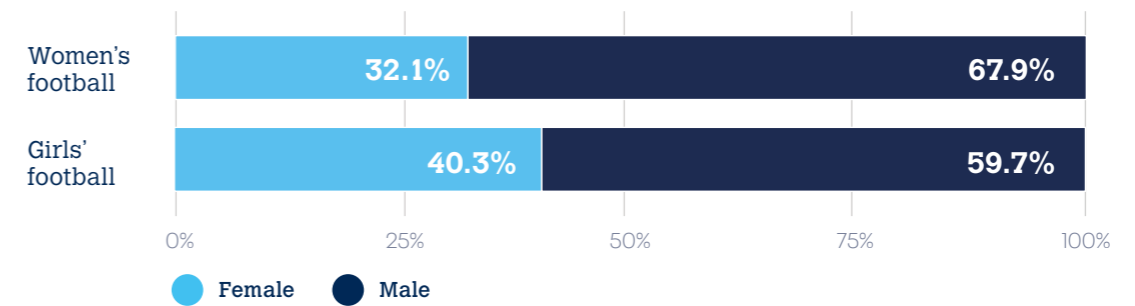


means of inspiring young female athletes, but also by providing role models who understand the specific challenges faced by girls in football.

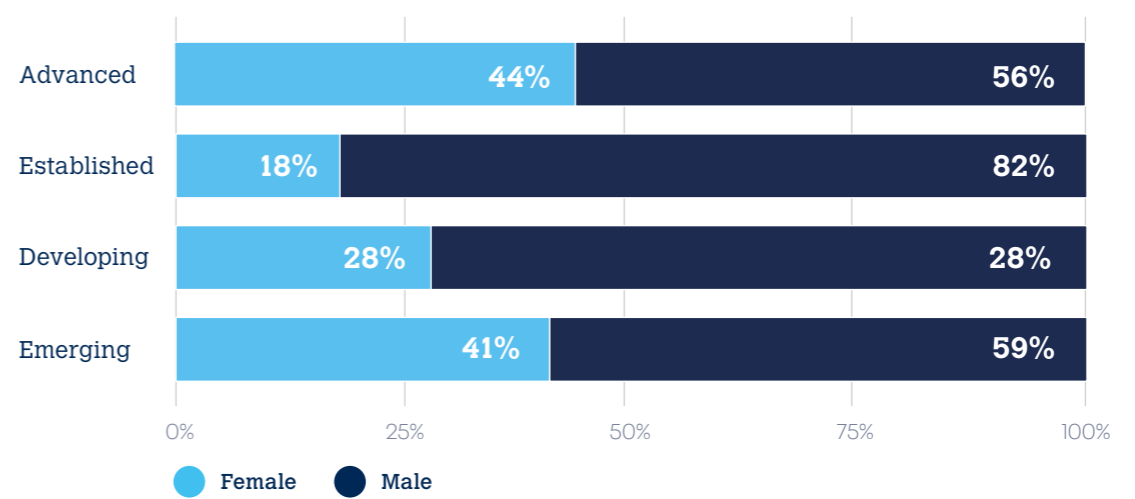
Increasing the number of women in coaching roles could help to close the experience gap and enrich the training environment. Female coaches often bring valuable perspectives to player management and development, especially in addressing the mental and social challenges that girls face. However, the pipeline for female coaches needs to be strengthened, with more opportunities for women to advance through coaching education programmes and into leadership roles within clubs.

In response to this, some proactive clubs are providing development opportunities for their own players to acquire the skills and certifications needed to pursue careers in coaching and other roles in the women's game. By offering education programmes and providing this career advice while they are still active in the game, clubs are empowering players and building the next generation of female coaches.

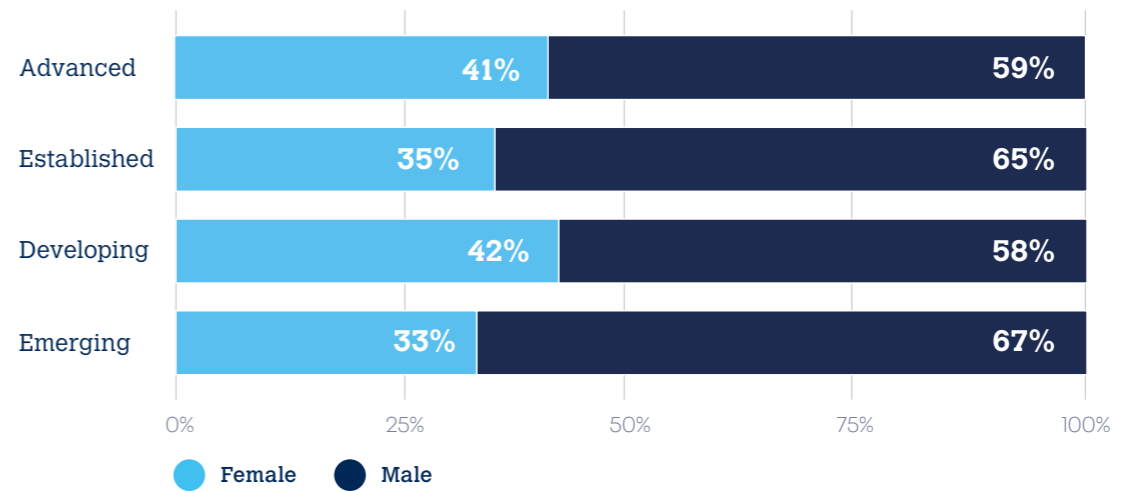
Women's and girls' football coach gender balance



Women's football coach gender balance



Girls' football coach gender balance



Rounded Development of Players

It is evident clubs have a shifting focus across the different stages of development within their girls' youth system as they adjust the prioritisation of technical, tactical, physical, cognitive and social/lifestyle development.

At the foundation phase, technical development is clearly prioritised, with nearly 60% of time dedicated to developing fundamental football skills. Tactical, cognitive and physical development receive considerably less time, as this stage primarily focuses on familiarising young players with the game. Social and lifestyle development also holds some importance, given the need for players to understand team dynamics and learn healthy lifestyle habits.

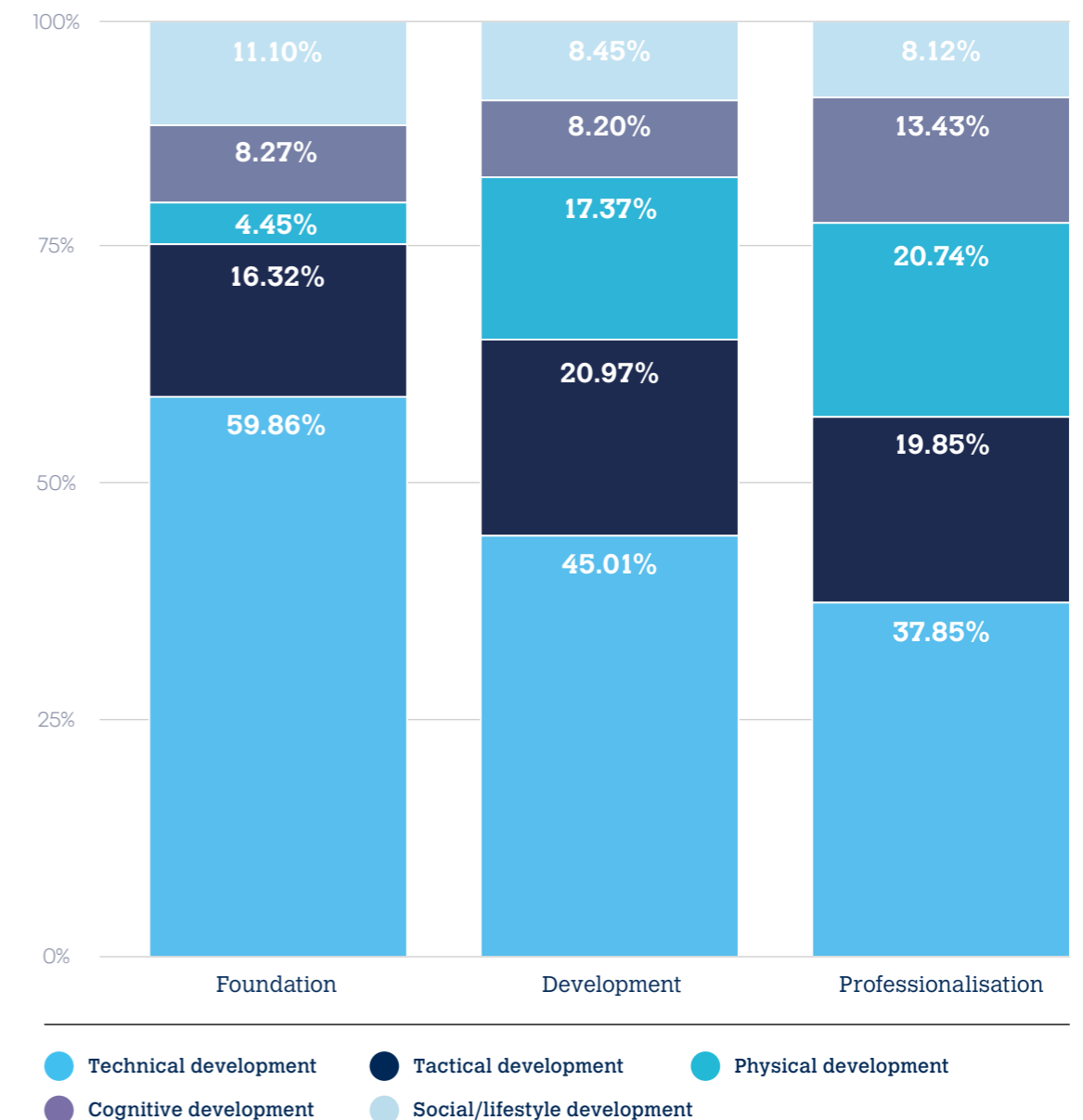
As players move into the development phase, the focus becomes more balanced across all areas.

Although technical development remains a priority (45%), the emphasis on physical development significantly increases (17.3%) as players begin to work more intensely on strength and conditioning to support their on-pitch development. It is also evident there is an increased focus on tactical development to just over 20%, reflecting the growing importance of players' understanding of the game.

As players progress to the professionalisation phase, technical development remains important but reduces to just under 38%, as clubs focus on other areas such as physical and cognitive development to prepare players for the step up to elite-level football. The increase in these two areas reflects the increasing demands of the professional game in terms of both athletic ability and cognitive skills, such as decision-making and game intelligence.



Time spent on each development area



07

Infrastructure

Shared Facilities with Limited Investment

For girls to reach their full potential and perform at the highest level, access to high-quality, safe and inclusive training and competition facilities is essential. However, many clubs still face challenges in this area.

The majority of these facilities are shared with the boys' youth system or the women's first team. This sharing does not always lead to positive synergies, often resulting in scheduling conflicts and girls' programmes being deprioritised. These situations, where facilities are not fully available or tailored to girls' needs, can create dissatisfaction and hinder development, leading to a risk of losing talented players.

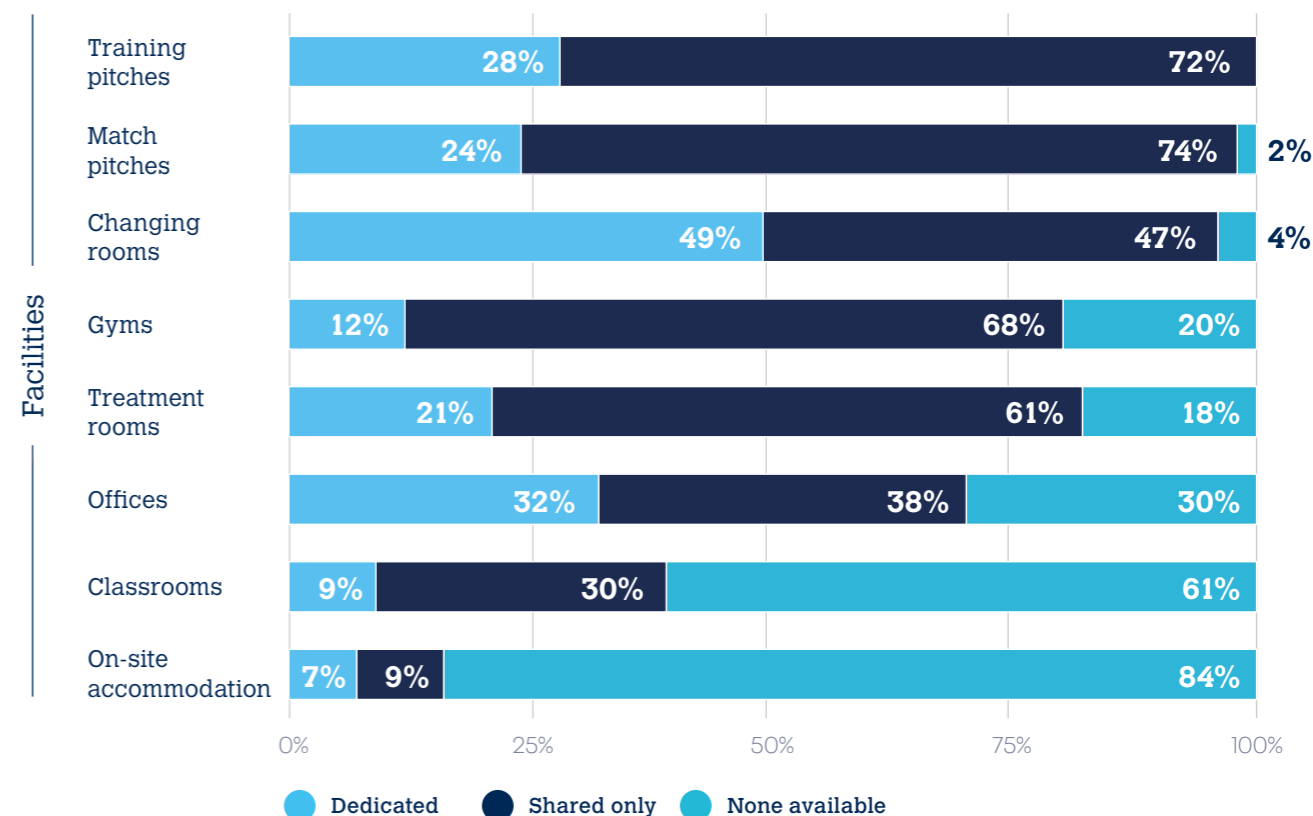
In shared environments, scheduling becomes critical. Many clubs rely heavily on scheduling compromises to ensure sufficient access for all teams, but girls' programmes are often seen as a lower priority than first teams or boys' academies.

This lack of prioritisation can negatively impact the quality of training and preparation, and can lead to a sense of neglect among players.

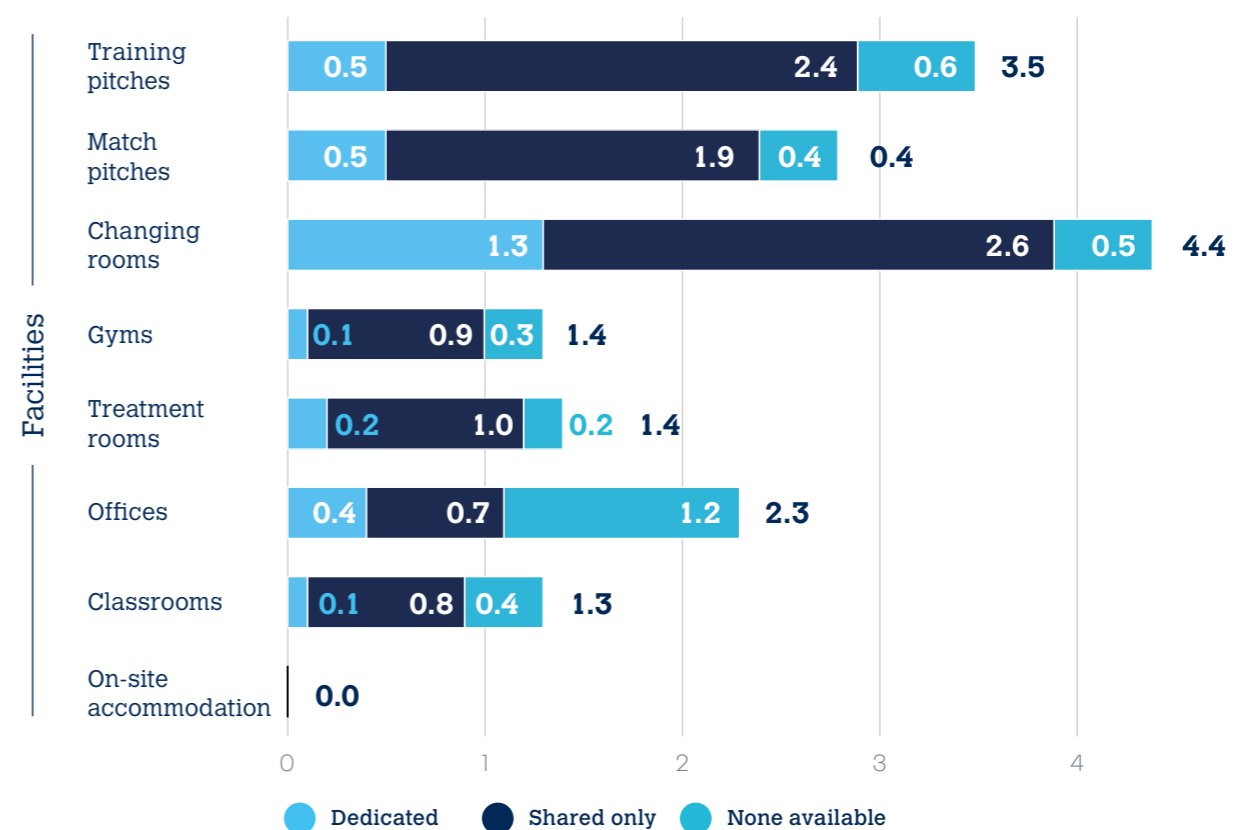
Despite these challenges, clubs are increasingly recognising the role that functional, dedicated facilities play in youth development. In fact, 72% of clubs have renovated their girls' youth facilities over the past five years, with 32% of those renovations occurring within the past two years.



Clubs with dedicated facilities vs those that rely on sharing



Average number of facilities per club (denoted by figures at the end of bars)



Insufficient Competitive Match Opportunities

One of the primary challenges faced by clubs in the girls' game is the limited availability of formal, high-quality competitions. In many countries, the lack of robust domestic leagues forces clubs to rely on mixed-gender leagues or friendly matches to provide players with competitive opportunities. While mixed leagues with boys' teams can offer a higher level of competition, they also present challenges by requiring female players to adapt to a different style of play, which may not always be conducive to their long-term development.

The central focus of girls' youth systems is to prepare players for professional football. However, a key challenge remains to provide adequate competitive matches to help players elevate their level of play and be continually challenged. Many clubs report the competition level within domestic girls' leagues is insufficient for proper player development, leaving them seeking other solutions. A common approach is balancing girls-only competitions with mixed boys' and girls' games.

Playing against boys is often considered a crucial part of the player development pathway, especially for younger groups, as it offers increased physicality and pace. Several clubs emphasised the importance of maintaining

a balance between girls-only and mixed competitions during these formative years.

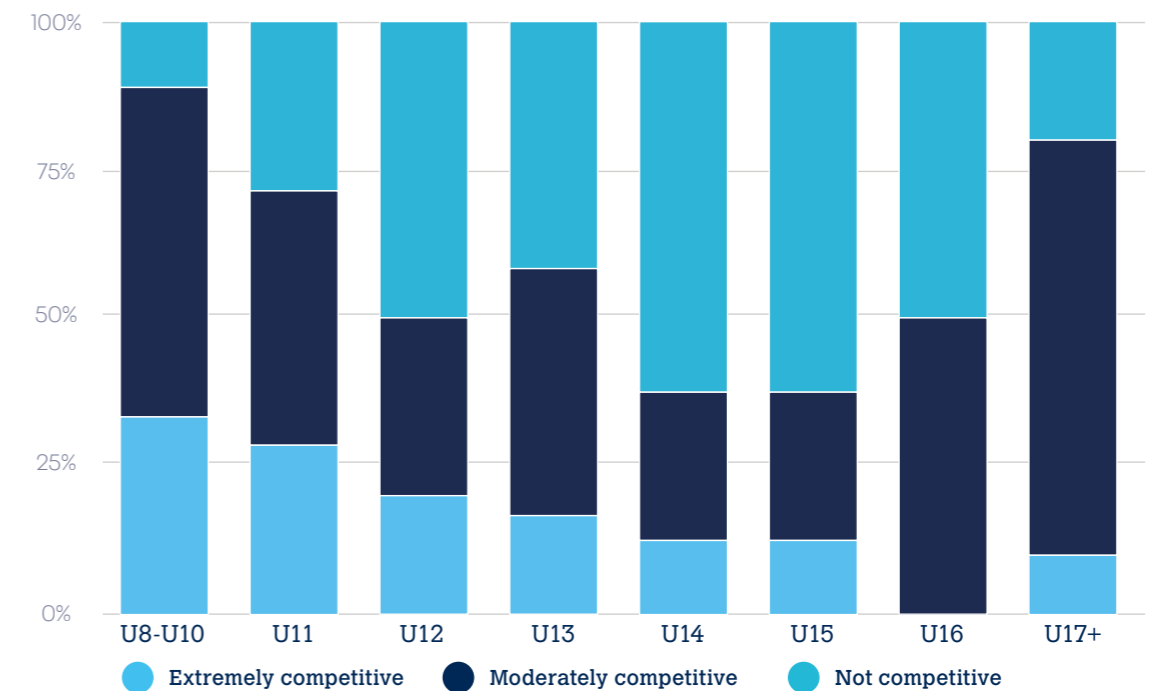
In some regions, clubs are forced to compete in boys' or mixed leagues due to the limited number of girls-only teams. To further raise the level of competition, many clubs arrange friendly matches, exposing their players to different playing styles and more challenging opponents.

However, the competition landscape for girls' football remains broad and inconsistent. Clubs continue to assess the most appropriate competitions for their teams, particularly when to use mixed formats and when the gap between boys and girls becomes too large. As players progress into the older age groups, the level of competition within girls-only leagues tends to improve, but the challenges of securing high-level matches persist.

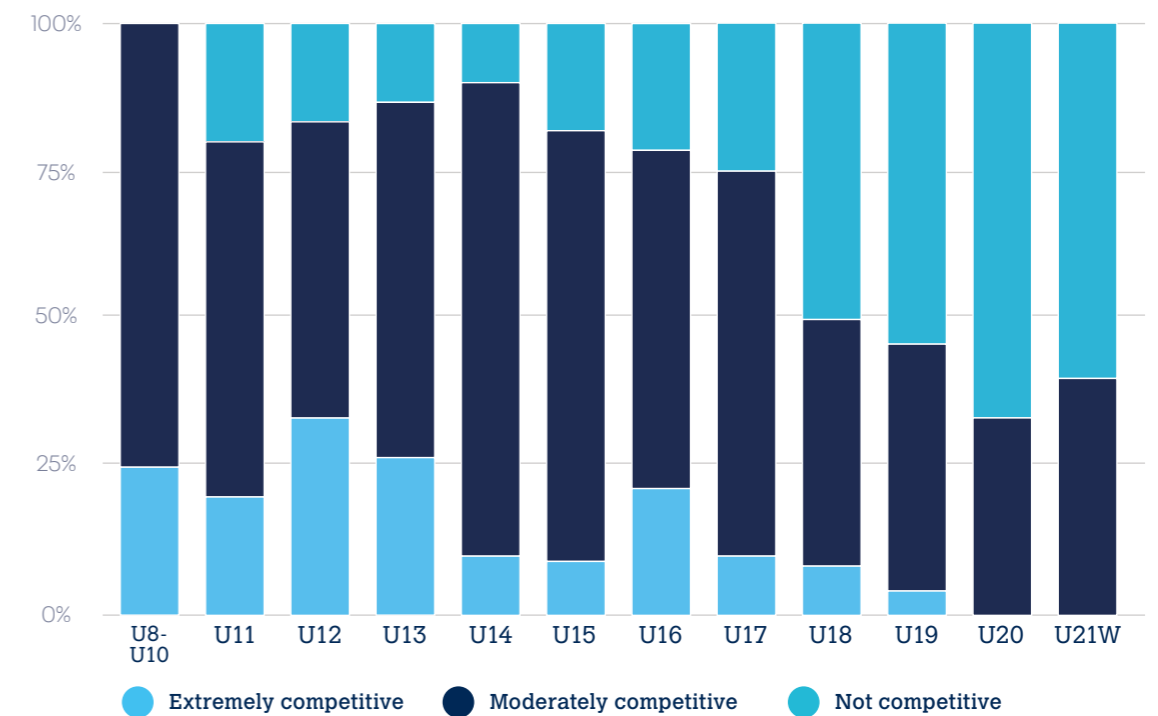
Furthermore, the cost of international competition restricts many clubs from participating, even though these opportunities are important for player growth. Financial and logistical barriers make it difficult for clubs to offer their girls' teams consistent access to top-tier competition, resulting in limited match experience and stunted player development.

Comparing competition levels between mixed and girls-only games

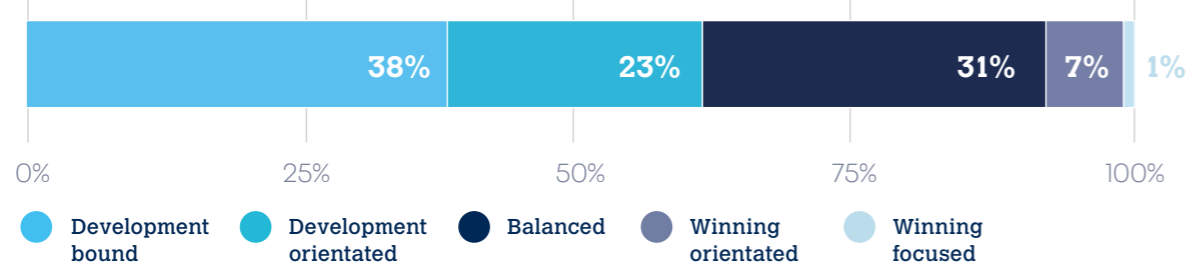
Girls'/boys' mixed competition



Girls-only competition



Primary focus of girls' youth system teams



Women's Basketball in the United States

When considering whether girls should compete against boys at different ages, examples from other sports highlight the potential benefits of mixed training environments.

In women's and collegiate basketball in the United States, it is normal for male athletes to be included on practice teams. Typically experienced players, they are used to simulate high-level competition and increase the intensity of training.

Their presence raises the physical and technical demands of sessions, helping female players improve agility, reaction time and decision-making under pressure. By training against faster and stronger opponents, players are pushed to execute skills more efficiently and adapt more quickly, making game situations more manageable.

Mixed practice environments also support tactical development. Competing against physically stronger or faster players encourages women's teams to develop effective strategies for managing defensive pressure, improving ball movement and navigating physical mismatches – key elements that translate into competitive success on the court.

Additionally, exposure to higher physical demands in training can contribute to injury prevention, helping athletes build resilience and better prepare for the intensity of competition.

While some may view the use of male practice players as unconventional, it is a well-established and widely accepted strategy in women's basketball. The arrangement is carefully structured to ensure male practice players contribute to a supportive role, helping the women's team prepare while respecting the professional and competitive environment of the female athletes.

Ultimately, the use of male practice teams is not just about adding a physical edge to training, but about creating a more challenging and dynamic environment that pushes female athletes to reach their potential.



08

Player Pathway

Addressing the Quality Gap Between Youth and Senior Teams

There is an evidential gap between the readiness of players to transition from youth football to the professional game in terms of tactical, technical, physical and cognitive development. Clubs face a tricky balancing act – easing the transition from youth to senior football helps to avoid overload and injury, preparing girls for a long career. But being called up to play with the first team before they are ready can also be detrimental. However, clubs should celebrate their successes and make sure that KPIs are being tracked.

For players transitioning from girls' youth systems to senior teams within the same club, there is a

noticeable difference between the club categories. Advanced and established clubs have lower transition rates (1.8% and 3.8% of their players, respectively) compared to developing and emerging clubs (10% and 7.6%).

This disparity is likely due to the intense competition in larger clubs, making it harder for youth players to break into the first team.

In contrast, smaller clubs may rely more on academy players to fill first-team roles as a cost-saving measure, given their limited financial resources for acquiring players from other teams.

5

girls' youth players training with the first team at a club per season, on average.

6

players, on average, making their competitive debut at each club in the past three seasons.

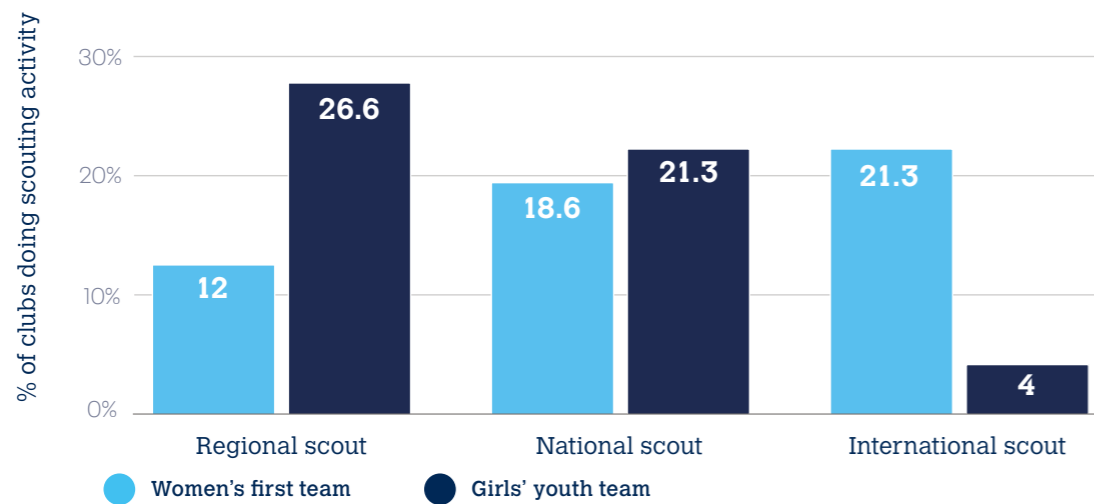
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is the average number of players transitioning to senior football per season within a club. On average, five transition to other clubs' first teams.

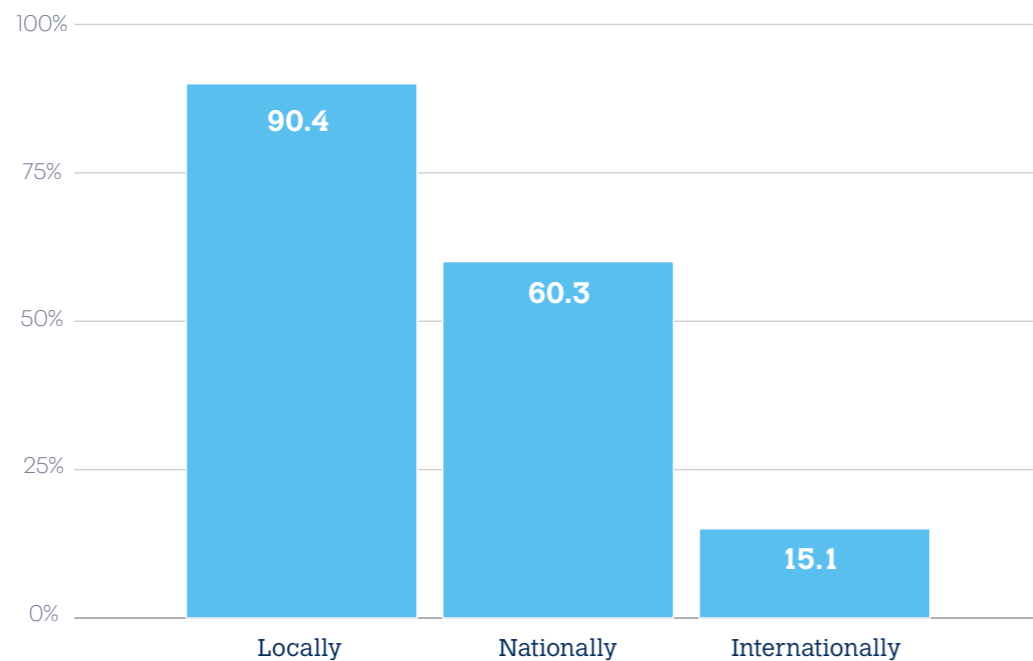


Underdevelopment of Scouting and Recruitment

How are women's football scouting roles structured (FTE)?



Recruitment sources



USL Super League/ USL W League

In the United States, the USL W League provides a structured amateur environment designed to bridge the gap between youth development and professional soccer. Crucially, it allows players to compete at a higher level while maintaining NCAA eligibility, preserving access to the collegiate pathway – a key route in the US sports landscape.

The league offers players exposure to mixed-age and mixed-experience competition, including former professionals and collegiate athletes. This broadens the development environment beyond age-group soccer, improving tactical awareness, adaptability and the ability to manage increased physical demands.

A higher volume of competitive matches further supports player progression. Regular exposure to meaningful competition helps players build consistency, refine technical skills and develop the mental resilience required for professional soccer.

The USL W League also acts as an important scouting platform, increasing player visibility to professional clubs, including the USL Super League. For those not yet ready for the professional level, it provides a critical intermediary stage to develop and demonstrate readiness.

In addition, its regional structure expands access to high-level competition, addressing geographic gaps in player development and creating more equitable opportunities across the country.

The USL W League has been an influential addition to the American women's soccer ecosystem. By offering players competitive matches, exposure to varied age levels and the chance to maintain NCAA eligibility, the league provides a crucial platform for development and growth, raising the overall standard of women's soccer in the US.



Paris Saint-Germain

Paris Saint-Germain has established itself as a leader in women's and girls' football, with a comprehensive and strategic approach to player development. The girls' academy, which focuses on players from U16 to U19, embodies the club's philosophy of holistic development, combining athletic training with educational and personal growth for the players. Currently, the academy houses all 34 players across three age sides – U16, U17 and U19.

A key component of PSG's success in developing young female talent is the set-up of on-site educational facilities and accommodation. This arrangement allows players to balance academic responsibilities with the demands of elite sports training in just one place.

The on-site school is a cornerstone of the girls' academy, ensuring education remains a priority alongside football development. The curriculum is designed to be flexible, accommodating the training schedules and travel commitments of the players. By having the school located within the campus, PSG reduces the logistical challenges that often arise when balancing school and football, allowing players to focus on both their academic and footballing growth.

Accommodation is provided on-site, offering a safe and supportive environment for the academy players. Living within the club's facilities fosters a sense of community and belonging, which is integral to PSG's 'one club' mentality.

The shared living space stimulates team building and social connections, and in turn fosters a strong team culture. The shared gym, medical facilities and dining

areas between the girls' and boys' academies and the women's first team highlight the club's inclusive approach and ensures the players and staff feel connected.

Being together in one place on campus also stimulates collaboration between departments. This is evident in the daily interactions between, for example, the

coaching, medical and performance teams to make sure each player's development is holistic and well-rounded.

Morning meetings between medical staff, coaches and performance specialists allow for the discussion of individual player needs and adjustments to training schedules.





Arsenal FC

Arsenal is a club with a rich history of success in English women's football, spanning decades. Building upon this legacy, the Arsenal Youth Academy is a key pillar in ensuring the club has the foundations for future success by focusing on the next generation of talent. The youth academy continues to align its developmental pathways with the club's broader vision, creating a well-resourced structure that supports on- and off-field development.

Integration of Standardised Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

The integration of standardised IDPs across the academy is central to its approach to player development. IDPs are developed for each player in collaboration with the multidisciplinary team (MDT), which includes coaches, performance and medical staff, and player care specialists. These plans address various aspects of a player's development, emphasising human development, psychological wellbeing and personal growth as well as athletic performance. Players are encouraged to actively participate in the creation of their IDPs, helping them develop a common football language to articulate their development goals and progress. This player involvement ensures IDPs are not merely top-down mandates but personalised roadmaps for individual growth.

Development Model

The academy's game model is designed to transition players effectively from the youth development phase (U9 to U16) to the performance phase (U21) and eventually to the first team. While the team



identity and style reflect a club-wide approach, there is recognition that formations must be adopted to suit the development needs at each level. This flexible approach allows the academy to maintain its core playing principles while developing the fundamental building blocks needed to suit the demands of the professional game.

A critical component of this pathway is the academy's transition model, which ensures players are adequately prepared to progress to the first-team environment. This model includes a high-potential group where bespoke programmes are developed, with the head of player development overseeing discussions with department heads. A comprehensive handover document is created for the first-team head coach, ensuring the transition is as seamless as possible.

The model also tracks the progress of loan players, making sure their development remains aligned with the academy's overarching goals.

Consistency and Alignment

Coaches at Arsenal are equipped with standard session planner templates that allow them to create engaging and varied sessions within a clear, academy-wide framework.

To further enhance this consistency, the club has developed a comprehensive coaching glossary creating a common language so there is clarity and consistency in communication across the academy.

This approach supports a cohesive learning environment where all staff members are aligned to the same developmental objectives, regardless of the age group or phase they work with.

Additionally, the use of third-party platforms for communication and organisation further ensures all planning and execution are seamlessly integrated throughout the academy.

Individual Player Support

Player welfare and support are fundamental elements of the Arsenal youth academy. The academy's player care strategy is deeply embedded within the overarching player development plans, which incorporates performance, personal and career development.

The player care department provides both group and individual support on a wide range of topics essential to the players' growth and success. These initiatives help equip players with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of their careers and personal lives, ensuring they are adequately prepared for any challenges that lie ahead. More specifically, the club provides a season-long human development curriculum that runs across all age groups.

As part of its broader commitment to player wellbeing, the academy includes menstrual health support within its welfare initiatives. This includes providing free and easily accessible menstrual products and promoting a 'no ask' culture that normalises conversations around, for example, mental health. Additionally, the academy offers education on managing the menstrual cycle in relation to training and performance, helping players to better understand and respond to their body's needs.



AS Roma

The women's football set-up at AS Roma is driven by the club's commitment to establishing a programme grounded in strong sporting values and advanced training methodologies. The project began in 2015 with the launch of the girls' youth system followed by the creation of the women's team in 2018. Everyone involved in the women's football department – players, staff, employees – is part of a comprehensive club structure integrating all resources, positioning AS Roma as one of Europe's leading women's football clubs. The team consistently competes for the Serie A title and participates in the UEFA Women's Champions League.

The club's vision centres on the athlete and young girls, focusing on their development and setting objectives to optimise their growth. The women's football department includes ten different age groups, starting with girls in the U9 category and progressing to the first team at the top of the pyramid. Currently, more than 170 girls are registered with the club, spanning from U9 to U17. They are supported by a dedicated team of 58 professionals, including coaches, medical and performance staff, and psychologists, who guide and nurture young athletes throughout their football journey.

Medical and Performance

The club's medical and performance departments, while focused on women's football, also collaborate extensively with the men's department to share knowledge and enhance the overall ecosystem. This integrated approach adds significant value to the programme. The medical team work closely with staff across different age groups to ensure the conditions



are optimal for players to perform at their best. The process begins with a comprehensive medical assessment before the season starts, followed by daily check-ups from team doctors and physiotherapists. For specific cases, such as chronic conditions, the team arranges visits with orthopaedic, osteopathic or endocrinological specialists and conducts the necessary tests, followed by the development of a tailored prevention plan.

In partnership with the performance and nutrition departments, they have developed an injury-

prevention protocol. This protocol outlines the minimum requirements for players, including necessary tests and medical evaluations before the new season begins. It aims to prevent major injuries by making sure all essential assessments are completed and prevention strategies are in place.

Further Practices

To maximise player performance and support the growth of young female athletes, the club's performance and sports science department is

developing and regularly updating a multi-year development plan that takes peak height velocity (PHV) into account. This plan carefully balances training loads and methods to prevent injuries while fostering optimal maturation and growth.

In addition, the department implements biological age-based training sessions ('bio-banding') for the U13 and U14 age groups throughout the season. This tailored approach means training is aligned with each player's developmental stage, further enhancing their overall progress and performance.



Atlético de Madrid Feminino

Atlético de Madrid Feminino dates back to 2001, beginning with two teams and trials at a time when women's football in Spain was still emerging. The club has undergone significant growth and transformation, including the professionalisation of its women's department in 2015-16 and important titles in the following years include three league titles, two Copa de la Reina, one Supercopa de España, qualifying six times for the Champions League, and setting records such as the world's largest attendance

for a women's club match (60,739 in 2018-19). Now the women's area has more than 300 players and 18 teams across elite and school-age groups, starting from eight years old. The club is seen as a leader in football and player development.

Academy Model

The club is renowned worldwide for its core values – teamwork, effort, sacrifice and never giving up – and

its spirit, characterised by its mantra Coraje y Corazon, instilled in players from the youth system onwards. The academy serves as a strategic pillar for the club, featuring a 360-degree model that encompasses all areas and age groups, with 70 teams (boys and girls), including high-performance and development teams, making it the largest academy in Europe affiliated with a professional team. This model is defined by a robust and efficient organisational structure, integrating key areas such as education, scouting and international expansion, with a strong emphasis on internal strategic alignment and integration of gender.

With almost 400 dedicated staff members – coaches, athletic trainers, scouts, analysts, healthcare professionals and educators – the academy's mission is to foster a sense of identity and belonging among young players, ensuring they integrate and develop both on and off the field.

Infrastructure

The club's long-term vision and commitment to women's football are evident in its substantial infrastructure investments, such as the training centre at Alcala de Henares, inaugurated in 2019. This state-of-the-art facility serves as the home for 12 teams from the girls' academy and the women's first team. It features a dedicated stadium with 2,600 seats and cutting-edge amenities, including an 800sqm gym.

Individual Plans

In its pursuit of elite coaching for academy players, Club Atlético de Madrid emphasises individualised training through a meticulously guided and monitored development process, allowing the creation of reports and a standardised platform for monitoring progress across different age groups and teams. This approach involves crafting tailored technical and physical preparation plans for specific 'club project players', offering individual video performance analysis and holding daily meetings to support self-evaluation and track progress.





AFC Ajax

AFC Ajax is renowned globally as a top talent development club, nurturing players for its men's team year after year. In 2012, the club expanded by launching its women's football department. The goal was to unify both branches of the club while honouring the distinct histories and values of men's and women's football. The core mission of AFC Ajax remains unchanged: to inspire people in the Netherlands and develop future stars. It is essential for players and staff alike to take pride in AFC Ajax's traditions and history, as these values form the foundation for continued growth and development.

Club Strategy for Developing Girls' Academy Players

Player development has always been a priority for the club, first with the men's team and now extending to women's football as well. A core concept is 'micro-dosing', where everyone involved in shaping the girls' pathway focuses on understanding each player's needs. The teaching processes are designed to help

youth players make independent decisions, develop strong values and grow as well-rounded citizens. The emphasis is on players taking ownership of their development journey. Girls are given the necessary tools and support for physical, cognitive and socio-emotional growth, while the club leverages departmental synergies including coaches, medical staff, performance and sports scientists, skills trainers, educators and video analysts.

AFC Ajax's football programme is the third deciding element, complementing family and school at primary and secondary school levels. Players for the U16 age group are enrolled in a full-time programme designed to maximise their performance on the field while ensuring they focus on their education off the pitch. The on-site school at Sportcomplex De Toekomst provides greater flexibility in managing the weekly schedule, allowing players to train and attend classes in one location. This means the girls can start their day at the training centre, feeling fully immersed in the club's environment from morning until evening.





Malmö FF

The Malmö FF girls' youth system is an evolving and ambitious project that has placed a strong emphasis on integrating player education at the heart of its player development model, alongside athletic growth. This focus is deeply embedded into the core values of the club, which is committed to raising strong individuals and creating a winning team. As an open member association, Malmö FF maintains a direct link to its community, and each member has a vote at its annual general meeting to determine the highest policies at the club. This reinforces the club's mission to develop well-rounded individuals who can contribute to society. Formed in 2020, the girls' academy has steadily grown with a clear objective of mirroring the success seen on the boys' side. This is evident in the academy's structure and the club's holistic approach to education and development.

Integration of Education and Football

One of Malmö's standout features is its commitment to making sure players receive the best academic education possible alongside their football training. The academy collaborates closely with the local education system, offering players the opportunity to attend two on-site, community-owned schools and producing a seamless education pathway that complements their football development.

The on-site school, known as the Gymnasium, is particularly notable for its location within the stadium and has impressive graduation rates of 99%, reflecting the club's strong focus on academic success. The significant majority of girls' youth system players

attend the Gymnasium school, which provides them with the ability to balance their academic and athletic responsibilities effectively and mitigates any impact of travel on the contact time with players.

In addition to the close alignment with the two on-site schools, Malmö FF also has strong partnerships with 18 local schools within a one-hour radius, providing 75 coaches across a range of age groups. This network of partner schools expands the reach of Malmö FF and enables the club to provide high-quality education alongside dedicated football-specific resources such as coaching and equipment to girls outside its immediate area.

Educational Alignment with Player Care and Wellbeing

The alignment between the educational endeavours of Malmö FF academy players and their football development is carefully managed by the club's sports mentor and education tutor, who act as the vital bridge between the two organisations. Both provide a crucial neutral voice to ensure the girls' academic and football development are effectively managed.

The education tutor's role is focused on maintaining girls' educational continuity when they are taken out of school for football commitments. This is done through tutoring sessions to help them catch up on missed work and stay on track academically. Additionally, the sports mentor makes sure that the quality of care is prioritised, using group sessions to



develop mental skills as well as individualised sessions where needed.

The confidentiality between the mentor and students is strictly maintained with referrals to the club psychologist available for more specialised attention. Both of these roles play an important part in ensuring safeguarding policies are maintained at all levels of the club.

Holistic Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

Holistic IDPs are central to Malmö FF's approach to nurturing well-rounded players both on and off the pitch. These plans are developed for every player in the academy from the age of 13, and focus not only on their athletic and technical development, but also their academic and mental growth.

The IDPs are tailored to the players' needs, beginning with foundational skills and gradually incorporating more advanced physical, tactical technical and mental development as they progress.

Regular reviews ensure the plans are on track, with the coaches, performance staff and sports mentors collaborating to adjust goals and monitor progress every three to four weeks.

This holistic approach guarantees players are not only equipped to succeed on the pitch but also prepared for life beyond the sport, emphasising Malmö FF's commitment to developing athletic, educated and well-rounded individuals.



Legia Ladies

Although Legia Ladies have been part of the football community since 2016, a significant turning point came in January 2024 when Legia Warszawa established a separate entity to manage the transition from semi-pro to a professional team. This demonstrates the club's commitment to elevating the status of women's football in Poland and eastern Europe. By acquiring a second-division

licence, Legia Ladies are poised to make an impact on the field and in the broader movement for women's empowerment through sports.

The club's core mission extends beyond just winning matches or generating revenue – although they believe financial success will naturally follow. The focus is on women's empowerment, and this commitment is

reflected in the team's use of the Legia training centre as their training and matchday home. This world-class facility offers Legia Ladies access to state-of-the-art medical and physiotherapy resources, gym and fields, the same that are provided to Legia Warszawa's men's team.

This investment in player wellbeing means the women's team is treated with the same level of professionalism and care as their male counterparts.

Menstrual Cycle Tracking

Legia Ladies is distinguished by an innovative approach to player performance and wellbeing. The club has implemented menstrual cycle tracking as part of its training regimen. This method, based on the mini-cycles profiling approach, aims to enhance training efficiency and reduce injury risks by tailoring sessions to players' physiological states. The team performance coach explained the data highlights the athletes' progress from March to September. The metrics gathered from Wednesday's training sessions during these months show significant improvements in the players' running performance across different zones. The team is continuing to analyse data to assess the impact of tracking menstrual cycles on injury rates.

Branding and Strategic Partnerships

In May 2024, the team played their first professional league match at the main Legia Warszawa Stadium, and the club kept the objective of using the facility for the most prominent matches in the future. As part of the club's mission to break stereotypes surrounding women's sport in Poland, Legia Ladies understands

the need to create a distinctive identity that resonates with a new and diverse audience. While rooted in the rich Legia Warszawa DNA, the women's team is building its own community and visual presence, designed to attract fans who may not have previously engaged with women's football.

Legia Ladies has also been strategic in forming partnerships that align with their vision of empowerment and growth. The club's collaboration with TikTok is a forward-thinking move aimed at embracing a younger audience, tapping into a digital-savvy generation that is eager for fresh content and dynamic interactions.

At the same time, a partnership with Klarna is geared towards a more mature audience, with a focus on women's empowerment and creating meaningful connections through lifestyle and leadership initiatives.

As the team continues to climb through the Polish Orlen I Liga Kobiet, the ultimate goal is to advance to the top-tier Orlen Ekstraliga and eventually compete in the UEFA Women's Champions League. The team's growth strategy is supported by its structure, which includes two senior sides and an U13 team.

With the backing of Legia Warszawa and a clear commitment to both player development and expanding visibility, Legia Ladies is laying the groundwork to becoming a significant force in the sport, step by step.



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A stylized soccer ball is the background of the page. It features curved panels in various shades of teal, light blue, and pink, with thin white outlines. The ball is positioned on the right side of the page, partially cut off by the edge.

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