

Title of Study: Is there a Potential Market for Futsal in the UK? A Critical Analysis.

In my study, there were 3 things I wanted to discover. Firstly, I wanted to prove that Futsal is a development tool for Football using peer-reviewed academic research. Secondly, I analysed how the market worldwide reacts to large scale Futsal events to see if there was general growth worldwide in viewing and participation rates. Lastly, I wanted to see if there could be a market for Futsal in the UK drawing upon results from interviews with key stakeholders of Futsal in the UK and using the analysis on the worldwide Futsal market.

In my opinion, it was of utmost important to undertake this research as I and many members of the Futsal community believe that in order for Futsal to truly take off and gain more profile in the UK, the Football Association (the FA) need to see more value in Futsal as a support tool for Football.

Objective 1:

There are many studies that show that small-sided games (SSG's) help improve the technical, tactical and cognitive capabilities of a player. Research shows that manipulating the size of the pitch and the goal provokes positive behavioural effects on participants. Factors such as reducing the space of play and number of players enable the participants to get many more touches of the ball in comparison to larger dimensions like 11-a-side. Minimizing the size of goals has proven to provoke a change of tactical behaviour in participants as studies have shown participants try to 'penetrate' the opponent by using width more and making use of more passes and dribbling to build up play to get as close to the opposition goal as possible. It was observed that the participants required more touches and had to think more when placed in such a condensed environment. Other research demonstrated that

using Futsal balls over 11-a-side balls had a more positive effect in PE lessons in a German school as participant improvements over time were associated with more successful control of the ball, an increase in the number of times one touches the ball, a significant improvement in attacking or offensive actions while participants also demonstrated markedly less fear to dribble or control with a Futsal ball and more confidence on the ball.

Interestingly and curiously, multiple research papers demonstrate that the most successful 11-a-side Football teams at the highest professional level (i.e. Premier League and World Cup competition) tend to score on average 80% of their goals in the box and the better teams seem to take more touches and field more players who are seemingly competent in building up play and who present strong attacking characteristics in order to achieve this objective of getting as close to the opposition goal as possible.

Using the aforementioned conclusions we can compare the effectiveness of traditional English 5-a-side against Futsal. 5-a-side had wider goals which discourages build up play as participants can shoot from virtually any distance while the use of walls encourages less team play as a participant can rely on the walls to relieve themselves from pressure in in-game situations as much as they may need to rely on a team-mate, thus inducing less strategic 'team skill' and team behaviour. This is obviously not conducive to player development. On the other hand, there is clearly sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that the objective of football is to get as close to the goal as possible before putting the ball into the goal and more teams will have more success doing so. As a result, it seems that Futsal's game conditions could perhaps support this process as the smaller, more condensed spaces, smaller goals and Futsal balls provoke participants to manifest more attacking behaviours that enable them to become more competent and experienced in building more attacking plays with the consequence of players being more likely to shoot when closer to goal. These skills are inextricably linked to those of the top teams in modern Football. As a result, it could be

argued that Futsal is a rare game that offers all of the conditions necessary to manipulate behaviour and promote skill development for the benefit of 11-a-side Football.

Objective 2:

It is true that in today's world, viewing figures are not the be all and end all to determine the visibility of a sport. The greatest example of this is that more people watch Rugby League on TV than Rugby Union but the latter is a lot more commercial and attracts the best players. However, in comparison to previous years, Futsal is becoming more popular around the world and that the market is getting bigger based on viewing figures and a growth in participations rates worldwide documented by FIFA. The Thailand Futsal World Cup 2012, for example, reached 36% more territories and had 45% more broadcast hours than the previous World Cup in 2008. In Europe, Eurosport broadcasted the matches with 3.8 million viewers and a total of 77 hours of broadcast.

The viewing figures for the UEFA Futsal EURO 2016 of 36.4 million represents an increase of 38.3% from the 2014 edition in Croatia. During this competition, Spain's viewer ratings for matches were up by 25% from the 2014 edition, Russia's was up by 280% while Portugal attracted more than 1.1 million live viewers on TV1 during their quarter final match vs Spain while Ricardinho's performances for Portugal caused a social media frenzy. In addition to this, in Serbia, the semi-final match against Russia attracted an audience of 1.2 million, representing a share of 37.8%, over 13 times the usual prime-time share of the channel (2.9%). More interestingly, this figure is higher than the viewing numbers from the FIBA Euro Basket 2015 third-place play-off between Serbia and France on RTS1, an already popular sporting event throughout most of eastern-Europe and especially Serbia. The FIBA

Euro Basket 2015 event was at the time, the most watched match of that event in the country before the Futsal semi-final. This is evidence that there is huge potential in Futsal.

These numbers alongside the increasing popularisation and exposure of Futsal in Brazil, India and the USA (all analysis included in my research) would suggest that Futsal is primed for more commercial opportunities should the increasing numbers continue to be sustained.

Objective 3:

After conducting interviews with 16 people who either play or coach Futsal at the highest level in the UK, there is a perception that the Football Association does not value Futsal enough and that the biggest barriers for participation include a 'lack of visibility' of the sport and a 'lack of facilities/infrastructure'. The research question 'Is There a Potential Market for Futsal in the UK? A Critical Analysis.' was also unanimously answered as 'there is no market for Futsal in the UK, currently' because the general perception is that most if not all stakeholders of Futsal (i.e. owners of Futsal clubs) do not make a return on investment on their involvement and as a result, many people do not want to get involved with Futsal on the operational side due to the financial and time commitments that would need to be made and this represents another huge barrier which further impacts the organic development of the game.

The Premier League is home to stars who grew up playing Futsal such as Aguero, Coutinho, Oscar, Willian, Lamela...

To partially resolve the issue of lack of visibility, **Futsal** in the UK would benefit from Celebrity or Athlete endorsement as such would engage more people to participate and

increase consumption of the sport. It is plausible to suggest that the Football Association or the Premier League could tap into the Premier League market by associating their stars who have played Futsal in the past such as Philippe Coutinho, Sergio Agüero, Willian, Erik Lamela, David Silva, Pep Guardiola, amongst others, with the sport of Futsal in order to promote and strengthen the image of the sport – a bigger market will inevitably be generated.

The question of course is; what would be the incentive for either sporting body to do this? This is where proving Futsal's worth to Football as a development tool comes into place (see *Objective 1*) and why it is so important for **UK Futsal** stakeholders to exploit this and take action accordingly.

Undoubtedly, Futsal's increasing popularity in India, the USA and, more recently, Germany has increased as a result of its associations with sporting celebrities. Futsal is beginning to take off in Germany and their governing body is seeing the benefits of the sport despite them being the current Football world champions. Football stars Douglas Costa, Matt Hummels and Tomas Müller have all publicly backed Futsal and/or have shared their support towards the sport. The Germans are known for owning one of the most successful and professional youth systems and even they are really beginning to embrace Futsal.

England must do the same and align marketing and/or broadcasting strategies with celebrity endorsement in order to create many short-term outcomes including increasing visibility, participation numbers, facilitate sponsorship opportunities for Futsal clubs/initiatives amongst other things. Failure to receive this sort of support from the FA means that hopes of professionalising the sport is simply a fantasy.

In regards to the lack of infrastructure, hypothetically, if all 5-a-side pitches in the UK would be converted into Futsal courts, it is possible for the nation to see a sharp increase in the number of talent coming through the youth systems. Participation numbers are so high in Brazil because out of every public school in Brazil, three out of ten have a sports hall (2014),

and as there are two-hundred and twenty-thousand schools (*Alves, 2011*) there is an estimated sixty-six thousand sports halls that are accessible only for school children. This number does not include Futsal courts from sports clubs, gyms or companies. There are strong suggestions that part of Brazil's success in Futsal is owed to the fact that there are many indoor and outdoor Futsal courts that fit the minimum requirements of **FIFA**.

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With this in mind, in order for Futsal to develop the **Football Association** needs to give more attention to and allocate senior staff members to spearhead its development. Perhaps, Futsal should try to blend with the existing 5-a-side culture in order to have or create a viable product and market as the small sided games market is very saturated and this can be done through a partnership between the FA and 5-a-side providers with the aim to try to incorporate promotion of Futsal (*5-a-side is very well marketed without the assistance of the FA*) and including the conversion of underutilised 5-a-side pitches and park spaces into Futsal courts as there is certainly a growing demand for Futsal friendly facilities, hence the perception of it being a major barrier to participation. The truth is, without a strategy and the support of local authorities, governing bodies and politics, the development of Futsal will never become anything more than just a fantasy.

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