

# Fast tracking and player development

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In today's dynamic world of football, the fast tracking of players is becoming much more apparent. However, do we fully consider the principles of development and address the appropriateness of this course of action for each individual. 'Fast tracking' is a phrase which describes elevating a player who is at a stage where continued involvement at the current level will fail to meet their progressive needs. The examples are usually found within chronological age groups and are demonstrated by players dominating opponents and having a significant impact on matches. In these cases the players require an increased level of demand together with the appropriate challenges.

**They appear to outperform their year group.**

**The question to consider is, how?**

In football, these players will undoubtedly demonstrate an exceptional technical and understanding quality. This is apparent to the experienced coach and in order to increase the developmental challenge, the player is usually introduced to playing with older players. With this in mind we have to consider the methods of fast tracking, whilst being aware of the strengths and potential weaknesses of this strategy.

'Overload' is a principle of development which addresses not only chronological age but also the player's biological age and maturational phases of growth and development. These factors impact every form of increased demand programmes.

An example of a structured approach is demonstrated by 'The 4 Corners' long term player development model consisting of; technical, psychological, physical and social components. Each corner has to be considered for ongoing development although the priorities will vary during the player's different ages and phases of maturity and in a variety of sequences. There are a number of additional contributions from a wide number of people as shown in the model.

**Questions for the coach.**

- 1 In which corner/corners does the player dominate?
- 2 How mature is the player within the other corners?
- 3 What are the benefits of increasing the challenge?
- 4 Are there any possible weaknesses or threats in fast tracking?
- 5 Is the move intended to be intermittent or continuous?

Activity in any corner will produce a reaction throughout all aspects of the model.

**A positive example could be:**

Increasing a suitable demand in the technical corner may be complimented by a mature physical capacity. This outcome is capable of creating an increased level of psychological confidence whilst enhancing the player's social standing within a group of peers.

**A negative example could be:**

Increasing a suitable demand in the technical corner may be compromised by a possible lack of physical capabilities. This outcome is capable of creating a level of psychological anxiety whilst reducing social standing within a group of peers.

Therefore very few aspects of the programme are considered in isolation.

**The fast tracking decision**

This action considers the appropriate challenge whilst reaching decisions on the amount of exposure required in any period of maturation for each individual player. The experienced coach will call on supporting information from all of the disciplines within the development model. From these discussions the profile of the player will be established and the prescription for long term development can be drawn up. Variability amongst young players between the ages of 14 and 21 years is vast when regarding age alone; however, if we include some other factors such as gender, race and culture, then the complexity can become even more confusing.

Fast tracking complications often arise as a result of people making comparisons between players during the growth and development phases and often view one particular element, eg the technical contribution. In this situation, the other developmental contributions have to be considered fully before elevating the demand on the player in one specific corner. If the decision is to increase the challenge, the range of overload may be relatively narrow and

specific, or broad and across a number of disciplines.

Establishing a capability grade across all four corners of development may clarify where the player sits in each section.

- In which corner/corners do the players strengths lie?
- Is the player effective within the match-play environment?
- Can the player cope with the demands of the game?
- Is their recovery time the same as the experienced mature players?
- Can they re-produce a similar level of performance?
- Is consistency sustained over time?
- How flexible is the time frame for inclusion?
- Does the plan include alternatives to fast tracking?
- Are all of the learning requirements addressed?

- When is practice included in the competitive programme?  
[ ]
- Is there a possible price to pay for fast tracking?  
[ ]
- What are the potential benefits?  
[ ]
- Is the decision based on the needs of the player or other motives?  
[ ]

Is it necessary for the player to demonstrate a 'tick all of the boxes' status, or can we fast track an appropriate challenge in one or two areas whilst making allowances for ongoing development in the others?

An additional feature to consider is the number of players fast tracked within a team. The choice of introducing a young player into a team of experienced and mature performers may well create a beneficial outcome which could be reversed if integrated with a number of inexperienced and immature team mates. The opposition standard is another vital consideration.

Establishing one player's status across many parameters is difficult, but imagine the impossible task of trying to create an exact science which has to take into account the impact of numerous and ever changing maturational factors in each player and then comparing the findings. Therefore managing this complex process over time is part of the decision to fast track.

Managing change whilst making sense out of these complex situations is a vital requirement for player development. The ever changing needs of individual player's have to be recognised and provided for by all contributors.

With reference to 'The 4 Corners' (long term player development model) it is necessary to

recognise that interaction between all the developmental factors are unavoidable and that no aspect can contribute in isolation. With this in mind, the decision to fast track a player has to be flexible and constantly reviewed for changing demands.

The pathway to successful fast tracking in football is littered with disappointment and the reasons may be many and varied.

Complexity is inherent throughout this process with 'change' becoming a key issue. The changes occur **within** the player, as well as **from** the environment **on** the player. This matrix of growth and development is what makes 'growing up' the individual element that it surely is. It is for these reasons that understanding all the contributions involved in fast tracking will not be a simple generic template but more a changing and flexible reaction born from day to day contact with the player.

**Reminder from previous articles**

*The player's tolerance to stress in all 4 corners has to be considered when comparing the comfortable and enjoyable options of minimal loading; against suitable, progressive, appropriate but demanding 'challenge'. This acceptance is often born from the player's experiences gained over time and will represent the individual player's right of choice and usually determine the level of participation.*

*As we 'challenge' and stretch the player's capabilities we may decide to err on the side of caution in some corners of the programme, whilst appropriately loading in others.*

*There may of course be a combination of loading ratios from all of the corners at any specific time.*

- *Attempting to force change in the wrong age and time zones is likely to be non-productive and maybe occasionally damaging.*
- *Seeking the balance of suitable challenges whilst avoiding excessive overload is the ideal scenario.*

- *The vital aspect of development is the player's ability to learn and this feature impacts all of 'The 4 Corners'. Whichever elements of the programme we are focused on at any time; learning is paramount.*

*It's important to define what 'learning' is.*

*Nigel Pearson, ex professional player and National Coach for The Football Association offers the following points;*

- *Learning is not just the ability to mimic (although this contribution may help on occasions) but to understand and apply. Coaches, parents and teachers need to be mindful that players may not learn in the same way as themselves, therefore a variety of teaching techniques and styles will help the appropriateness of the challenge.*
- *Some individuals may develop better in the technical and physical corners if allowed to stay in or around their psychological and social comfort zones. However, it's important to recognise what the parameters of these comfort zones are.*

**Summary**

Does fast tracking address these issues?

**As developers it is important to ensure that we establish realistic and appropriate expectations when fast tracking!**

Fast tracking players is widely used in today's football and this feature is often complimented by the loaning of players. In these alternative environments, the benefits of fast tracking (increased challenge across the four corners) are compared against the nurturing strategy of reducing some of the demands during a phase in which the player needs more time.

The fast tracking aspect of development maybe an intermittent introduction or more continuous, either process can be acceptable.

**Questions**

- 1 If we are to consider the benefits of appropriate and progressive fast tracking then we should also recognise some of the possible threats of moving outside the more gradual and conventional approach.
- 2 Do we accept the more obvious technical and physical developmental principles yet fail to address other aspects of 'The 4 Corners' programme?
- 3 Is there a fast tracking consideration for different teaching styles which also recognises the varied phases of individual learning during different time zones.

We have recently established a discussion group for people interested in "player development".

Please feel free to contribute and forward your ideas on this subject to; [craig.simmons@TheFA.com](mailto:craig.simmons@TheFA.com)

*Acknowledgement to; Nigel Pearson, The Football Association.*

