

# WAFC

## YOUTH FOOTBALL WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS 2017-2020



WEST AUSTRALIAN  
FOOTBALL COMMISSION INC.



## OBJECTIVES

1. Within the youth football participation plan for 2017 – 2020, it is expected that the following objectives will be addressed;
2. To identify a suitable competition format to provide growth in male youth community club football.
3. To establish a strategy to improve player retention at the key drop off ages.
4. To assess the current development squad format and identify strategies to increase long term player retention once a player enters the talent pathway.
5. To identify strategies that increase the interaction of school football with community competitions and the talent pathway.
6. To identify an alternative football framework that engages youth who don't currently play football or who wish to play a different format to the traditional game.
7. To identify the influence of club coaches and volunteers on player recruitment and retention and establish a plan to positively impact this.
8. To provide direction on the appropriate allocation of resources and investment required to support the plan.

## PROCESS

1. Establishment of a **working group** (12 months),
2. Conducted research within the current youth football market (**youth survey**),
3. Conducted **consultations** and received input from key stakeholders,
4. Explored and researched current **global best practice** in engaging and retaining youth aged participants,
5. Debated the **merit of the research** and findings and sought input from appropriate football stakeholders,
6. Present to WAFC Football Affairs Committee,
7. Final recommendations discussed with stakeholders,
8. Final report finalised and released.



## RECOMMENDATION 1

Undertake a legitimate trial of night football for Youth participants over a four-week block during the regular season, with a coordinated evaluation approach implemented to collect participant satisfaction data.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

Throughout the consultation process and through participant and parental surveys there has been a wide belief that additional night games may provide different opportunities for both players and parents and that the shift from a traditional structure of football may help enhance youth retention.

#### Findings

The following considerations have been taken into account in the development of the recommendation:

- Consultation suggests that more night football should be played.
- The two key nights suggested are Thursday & Friday nights.
- Due to facility constraints it would be difficult to schedule all games for a single competition at night.
- No research has been conducted specifically into the satisfaction of participants and parents after night games.

The ability to evaluate the proposed trial will allow the WAFC to extend the pilot if warranted. The availability of venues with lighting capability for competitive games in some Districts may be a challenge that needs to be assessed and a determination on viability made.



## RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop a suitable competition format to deliver Year 12 football in order to drive transition from Youth to Senior.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

It has been agreed throughout the consultation process that the current link between youth and senior football isn't strong enough and the current structures and formats have a significant influence on this.



## RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop a plan for the inclusion of an additional phase to the junior football pathway via the implementation of a 15 a side competition for Years 7 to 9.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

Global trends and local surveys indicate that participation factors are strongly linked to enjoyment, and enjoyment can be directly linked to how many times a player touches the ball when playing a game of football. Further to this, at a key drop off age of Year 6 to 7, there is an increased requirement for players per team (jumping from 15 to 18) meaning a team has to recruit 3 additional players in order to be able to field a team. This often leads to teams merging around this age group.

#### Findings

The concept of reducing player numbers on team was developed based on the following positive elements:

- It will increase the chance of a player touching the football – a key factor in deciding whether a player has 'fun'.
- It will decrease the ability for coaches to hide players in forward/back pockets as there will be a push for more players up the ground – a key element of 'fun'.
- It has the potential to increase the number of teams (due to less required players) which will increase the ability to effectively grade sides.
- There will no longer be an increase in players required to field a team from Year 7 to Year 8 and therefore teams will remain together for longer.
- It is envisaged that this would be initially in the Year 8 – Year 10 age groups.

The concept was raised throughout the consultation process to generally positive feedback. All negative feedback revolved around the fact that the traditional game is played with 18 players on the field.

#### Findings

- Whilst there are some strong case studies for links between Junior & Senior clubs, these haven't been adopted across the board.
- The current format and competition structure of Year 12 football needs to be altered to attract more players and link current players between Junior & Senior Football.
- There wasn't any survey data specifically addressing how the pathway link can be improved.

Whilst the group explored a range of different models, it was identified that if a decision was to be made on altering the Year 12 competition to drive transition between Youth & Senior football, it would need strong buy in and engagement from Junior & Senior Club stakeholders as they will potentially act as a delivery mechanism.

The group found that a Working Group made up of appropriate stakeholders should develop a suitable competition format for the transition of players from Youth to Senior Football.



## RECOMMENDATION 4

W AFC High Performance (in conjunction with Community Football) establishes a more concise regional talent pathway that will provide consistency, direction and quality training to players in regional areas.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

The consultation process showed that there is a significantly inconsistent talent pathway across regional areas a lot of which is dependent on how strong a WAFL club is in the region. The two key effects on players which are:

- The ability for a player to move through a talent pathway is heavily reliant on the relationship with the WAFL club in the area.
- For a player to effectively be a part of a WAFL talent program is reliant on the ability to travel to and from Perth.
- The ability for a player to receive high level local training that will enable them to reach their potential is limited to the resources and systems within the area.

#### Findings

It was acknowledged that the Great Southern Storm model is effective and has anecdotal benefits on participation. It was also identified that the Department of Sport and Recreation can offer a lot to assist this process.

Whilst this is an issue that impacts on participation, it is felt that this group doesn't have the charter to develop and suggest a model for implementation across the state. It is thought that this is best developed through the Talent Advisory Group or a suitable group as determined by WAFC Executive Manager Football Affairs.



## RECOMMENDATION 5

To establish a reference group (that includes representatives from WAFC High Performance) to develop and implement a Long-Term Athlete Development approach to development of youth players that will propose and endorse a specific sport development model that will guide the direction and decision making for this segment of the game.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

It is imperative that the Talent Programs through sport are driven by a sport development model that best meets the needs of the stakeholders. It provides the philosophy behind a sports approach to talent development. Exploring the merits of the various player development models that currently exist and identify the preferred model for implementation within the WA talent pathway.

#### Findings

The following observations were made of the current talent structure;

- Concerns on the impacts deselection has on the youth market
- Initial Talent ID conducted by parents or community coaches
- Moving to smaller squads earlier is a concern for the game
- Youth players told at 13/14/15 that they have limited future in talent pathway moving forward and the possible impact on Youth retention within community football
- Reputational risk for WAFL

Through further consultation and research, we also discovered;

- All WAFL Clubs still rely heavily on Community Coaches for Talent ID
- WAFL Clubs recognise reputational risk deselection can have on relationship with District clubs
- Nearly all WAFL Clubs deselected, some up to 40% of intake
- Some clubs are changing and moving to a more educated Talent ID structure so they can limit deselection
- Issues sit with capacity to properly conduct TID and having expertise on the ground
- A number of TM's are the FM of Colts, which limits capacity to correctly deliver TID



## RECOMMENDATION 6

Develop a Youth Football Calendar to better align School, Community, WAFL and State Academy programs that further supports the welfare of the player and the existing stakeholder relationships

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

The various segments within football (community, talent and school) do not currently collaboratively approach the development of their fixtures and schedules. This process therefore puts the competition ahead of the welfare of the players as opposed to introducing a player first mentality that seeks to develop a coordinated approach to a player's football journey.

#### Findings

After investigating various case studies, it was evident that some talented players could be playing 40+ games in one season, which is universally agreed as far too many.

1. To develop an integrated youth football calendar that aligns community and school football (PSA/SSWA/ACC) more effectively
  - A formal, coordinated workshop with all key competition stakeholders (PSA, ACC, SSWA, WAFL, community and State Academy) be held post season to explore the concept of how we all better plan and subsequently fixture the various competitions that operate across the football calendar.
  - The WAFC facilitate a meeting prior to the end of Term 1 with each WAFL club (and their respective TM), the relevant schools in each district and the relevant JFC's to formalise the process for individual player planning to identify how many games each individual plays, who with and on what weekend, how many training sessions per week (and who with) in order to ensure a clear, agreed plan for talented players within each district that may be involved in multiple programs.
2. The WAFC to explore the following strategies to better support the relationship with PSA/ACC/SSWA schools;
  - WAFC issue a public 'statement of intent' acknowledging the role the ACC/PSA/SSWA plays in supporting football.
  - The development of an agreed MOU between the ACC/PSA/SSWA and the WAFC.



## RECOMMENDATION 7

Investigate if there is an alternative format of football that could engage youth who don't currently play football or who wish to play a different format to the traditional game.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

With the advent of shortened versions of sport such as Twenty20 and Fast Five should football develop an alternative version that can be picked up and played. It is imperative that Football does not go blindly down this path as it is currently 'trendy', but rather investigate through research, data and insights to determine if there are alternative ways in which the game could be developed.

#### Findings

It is acknowledged that football doesn't have an alternative structure in place to engage youth who don't currently play football. With this in mind the group explored various options taking into account the current social product, AFL 9s, and various other considerations.

Whilst we have a strong understanding of what our current football player's motivations are, we don't have strong sport specific evidence to show how we should engage youth that aren't currently playing football.

A working group will be established to identify if there is a possible alternative structure being mindful that there may well not be, and will look to gather sport specific evidence to support the decision that is made.



## RECOMMENDATION 8

Develop a revised staffing structure that would better support the delivery of a more targeted and considered approach to coach education and development across the state

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

It is acknowledged both locally, internationally and through research papers (including Troy Kirkham's Churchill Fellowship paper on Youth Retention), that the coach is one of, if not the, most important factors in engaging and retaining youth participants in sport. They play a critical role hence the WAFC need to refocus staff priorities into this important area of the game.

#### Findings

1. There are a large number of coaches who are unwilling to participate in ongoing education for numerous reasons. These include lack of interest, time poor, the need to travel to attend sessions, and individual opinion that they already have enough coaching knowledge
2. There are limited opportunities for coaches to engage in ongoing learning opportunities.
3. The opportunities available are often developed around what venue, time etc. suits the presenter not the attendee. So, the education sessions must be taken to the attendee to make it easier to engage
4. The current accreditation system sees coaches accredited after attending a one-off course that requires little to no follow up. Ongoing education is critical to better coach development and in turn better youth retention and engagement.
5. A large majority of coach contact is after an issue arises so is very reactive instead of being proactive.



## RECOMMENDATION 9

Develop a process to enhance team selection including manipulation of players and merging teams.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

The formation of youth team's year on year is a convoluted process which is exacerbated by the continuing drop out of players from youth football. As teams lose players (for whatever reason) each year they are required to reassess their position leading into the next season and often need to recruit, either from other teams or players not playing the game, to stay viable.

This process usually occurs close to the season start date, leaving players, clubs and competition organisers in the dark as to some team's player numbers and viability for that year as the season approaches.

#### Findings

- Clubs often wait too late to make decisions about team viability due to an unwillingness to commit to merging with or even conceding players to another club.
- Some club committees are unwilling to prioritise youth teams, leaving many team decisions to the coach and team support staff who may be more emotional and results driven when discussing player movement.
- District rules, policies and timelines regarding player/team formation are inconsistent and locally influenced

Therefore, the WAFC should implement the following measures to address this;

1. A team nomination timeline across all Districts should be standardized (within reason) starting from September the year prior with a set final date for nominations.
2. A "Hub" system should be introduced in local sub areas to provide assurance of team viability in traditionally difficult youth markets. This involves a club being nominated as the "hub" for a year group within a locality, where they would commit to hosting a certain team well in advance (potentially up to 2 years) to counteract uncertainty leading into a susceptible age group.
3. District involvement needs to increase throughout this process to provide back office support for early decision making. This would include statistical analysis of likely drop off areas, organizing of local hub meetings and support to youth team clubs to promote the likelihood of team and player retention. This simply requires a realignment of priorities around key times of year.



## RECOMMENDATION 10

Develop a reward and recognition program, coupled with accountability guidelines, for youth player retention.

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

For many years, the WAFC have educated coaches and clubs to prioritise player retention over winning. This includes introducing some rules and regulations to reinforce this education such as playing time requirements and player rotations. However there has never been any reward or recognition for those that comply with these actions. Conversely, each year we still celebrate the coach that wins the premiership with a flag and medal, whereas the coaches that may have taken a less competitive outlook (but rather focused on developing and retaining players) are forgotten.

The actions of winning-focused coaches, such as player recruitment or "poaching", minimising playing time and rotations for lesser players and an overly aggressive approach to results based outcomes are all detrimental not just to their team, but to their competition as a whole. This is a critical factor in youth drop out.

#### Findings

- Player recruitment by teams looking to improve the talent in their side has a negative effect on competition team numbers.
- Coaches who seek to alter their playing list for the benefit of improved team performance are doing so without focus or punishment.
- Coaches who excel at player retention through positive development strategies are not recognized in a way equal to those who win premierships.

The WAFC needs to elevate the status of coaches who retain player's year on year as opposed to those coaches who win, but turn their list over regularly. It is also important that other coaches learn from those coaches that retain greater numbers of players – what strategies do they use, what approach do they take, etc.



## RECOMMENDATION 11

Establish a sustainable Youth Advisory Council

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

There are a number of organisations (including sport) that have a Youth Advisory Council of some description both from a local context and internationally. Research clearly indicates that when youth have an ownership over an issue, structure or activity and are empowered through authentic opportunities to impact decision making then there is a real engagement in purpose and connection.

#### Findings

Create a Youth Advisory committee that has a strong inclusive component that engages youth from diverse backgrounds (both playing and non-playing). It is imperative that this is not viewed as tokenism, and is in fact an authentic opportunity to shape the direction and strategy of their football experience.



## RECOMMENDATION 12

Develop a comprehensive process that collects and distributes data, research and insights to assist all stakeholders

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

Sport as an industry has historically had a low investment into Research, Data and Insights, and as we start to focus more attention on evidence based decision making it is imperative that we have live Year to Date data and research available to inform our decision making.

Internationally, research has suggested that some sports invest as much as 8-10% of their annual budgets on this area as they see and understand the significant benefit that it can provide.

#### Findings

The WAFC to increase the amount of research, insights and data that they utilise for decision making around youth engagement and retention.



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