

Original Paper

Strategic Program Development Practices to Enhance Grassroots

55-65+ Small-sided Football in Diverse International Contexts:

The Art, Science and Politics of Implementation

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Abstract

A significant growth in grassroots 55-65+ seniors' small-sided football (e.g., 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, 6v6/futsal and walking football) programs has emerged in diverse settings on a global scale. Given the ad hoc nature of many program offerings to meet the unique needs and circumstances of older players, very little research has examined strategic program development practices to enhance and sustain participation in seniors' small-sided football. Strategic program development is a complex and multifaceted process that provides a critical foundation for both quality assurance and quality enhancement. Case study research using multiple-case design suggests that no one size fits all, and that strategic program development draws upon a wide range of iterative and responsive program context, program planning, program leadership/coaching, and program impact assessment strategies to enhance and sustain player participation. This paper provides a conceptual framework and practical examples for strategic program development practices in diverse grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football contexts.

Keywords

international sport development, ageing, sport and health, seniors' small-sided football programs, coaching inquiry, program development and impact assessment

1. Introduction

An increasing older population has resulted in a significant growth of grassroots 55-65+ seniors' (sometimes called "Veterans" or "Masters") small-sided football programs on a global scale (Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi, & Horton, 2010; Hubball & García, in press). In these contexts, small-sided football is played in diverse formats, including 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, 6v6/futsal, and walking football, with or without goalkeepers, and may be played on fields with reduced pitch length and customized goal post sizes for competitive games. Teams may be male, female or mixed, and play may occur at various (and in some cases overlapping) levels of competition, including recreational (e.g., informal community-based "drop-in" games with mixed teams to enhance health and wellness participation), intermediate (e.g., structured team games and coaching to enhance skills improvement), and advanced (e.g., select team tournaments at regional, national, and international settings to enhance high performance competition). Thus, no one size fits all. In addition to health and wellness, the unique benefits of small-sided games for ageing 55-65+ players is that they 1) promote physical fitness while requiring significantly shorter running distances, thus reducing lower body impact; 2) include multiple game breaks and shorter game durations; 3) involve more dynamic box-to-box football action (including goal scoring opportunities and prevention); 4) provide more touches with the ball and therefore skills development; and, 5) place more emphasis on team effectiveness and decision-making for fast-turnover team defence and team offence (Aguiar, Botelho, Lago, Maças, & Sampaio, 2012; Dellal, Lago-Penas, Wong, & Chamari, 2011; FIFA, 2015; Hubball, Franks, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018). However, with the ad hoc and grassroots nature of many program offerings, very little research has examined strategic program development practices to enhance and sustain player participation in these settings. Grounded in interdisciplinary research and coaching experiences with grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football programs in diverse international settings, this article provides a conceptual framework and practical examples to enhance strategic program development. Readers might keep this question in mind: *"What are the indicators of program success and evidence of impact for a high quality/successful 55-65+ small-sided football program in your organizational/club context?"*

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

Addressing the unique needs and circumstances of ageing players in diverse grassroots small-sided football contexts is a complex and multifaceted process (Blatter & Dvorak, 2014; Lyon et al., 2018; Skoradal et al., 2018). In these contexts, implementation refers to a responsive set of planned football activities designed to integrate evidence-based practices in diverse 55-65+ small-sided football settings (Century & Cancellà, 2016; Fallon et al., 2018). Interdisciplinary sports science research pertaining to older athletes/players/participants such as physiological (e.g., injury prevention, cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility considerations), psychological (e.g., theories of motivation, exercise adherence, and mental health considerations), sociocultural (e.g., social, cultural, economic, historical, and political participation issues), and educational contributions (e.g., team and player development, effective coaching, evidence-based program development and impact assessment) provide valuable insight to key

influences and cutting-edge program strategies to enhance and sustain participation (Baker & Nunes, 2003; Corepal, Zhang, Grover, Hubball, & Ashe (submitted); FIFA, 2020; Hubball & Lopes, 2019; Reddy et al., 2017). Given varying levels of support and sometimes-limited resources, strategic program development can provide a critical foundation for both quality assurance and quality enhancement for seniors' 55-65+ small-sided football programs (Hamilton & Feldman, 2015; Mueller & Albrecht, 2020). For example, strategic program development can set standards for program impact and effectiveness; it can foster a networked improvement club/organizational community around evidence-based practice to enhance and sustain long-term participation; and it can align programs with broader host club/organizational structures.

FIFA (2012, pp. 131-141), the world governing body for football, provides the following program development guidelines, which are designed to support grassroots football development in specific populations, and can be applied to enhance 55-65+ small-sided football in local clubs and broader communities:

Assessment of the local situation: A study of football throughout the country, in all provinces and regions, will show the extent to which football is (or may be) practiced in all sectors. The following areas should be covered: population; administrative and technical organization at national, regional, and local levels; educational system; sport policies; existence of a grassroots football structure; infrastructure and sport facilities; and links between the member associations and government.

Analysis of football needs: Players and coaches: figures and qualifications, and existence of a football committee. Football activities: competitions, tournaments and festivals, equipment, material, and infrastructure.

Medium and long-term planning:

Aims:

- To introduce football to the specific target group.
- To promote the philosophy of football.
- To develop activities for football.
- To increase participation in football programs.
- To improve training and equipment.
- To instruct participants to become coaches and instructors.

Stages of Implementation:

- Initial consultations with current players and managers, volunteers, etc.
- Bringing together the essential decision makers: creation of an executive committee, identification of key individuals, etc.
- Preparation and presentation of a football development plan.
- Consultation seminars and meetings with member associations, ministries, and sponsors.

- Submission of a final football plan.
- Approval of the program by the regional or national member association.
- Launch of the football plan.
- Implementation program: short, medium, and long-term development.

Objectives to be Achieved:

- Increase football participation (for both men and women).
- Improve the standards of coach-educators and increase the number of training courses.
- Organize more football festivals and tournaments (in various formats adapted to the circumstances).
- Improve communication and develop relations with partners, including sports facilities.
- Encourage volunteers to become involved on a regular basis.
- Establish a professional unit for the development of football within the technical department of the regional or national association.
- Sign agreements with ministries, primarily the Ministry of Health and Sport.

The organizational template shown in Table 1 has been developed by FIFA (2012) to support grassroots football development over a 3-year period in specific populations, and can be applied to enhance 55-65+ small-sided football in local, regional and national contexts.

Table 1. Organizational Template to Support Grassroots Football Development in Specific Populations (FIFA, 2012)

Objectives	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 3 (II)
Impact	Local	Regional	National	National
Structure	Set up a specific football development unit and management committee	Establish a specific football department in each region with links to relevant football communities	Establish a specific football department within the technical department of the member association	Employ specialized and qualified personnel

Participation	Launch specific football pilot programs in clubs and local communities	Develop specific football activities in clubs and communities	Introduce specific football competitions and tournaments	Promote community football
Coach-Educators	Provide courses for coaches, referees, and volunteers regarding specific football initiatives	Develop alternative and advanced courses for different target groups on specific football focus	Increase access to training and courses for specific football focus	Provide resources to support research and development of specific football focus
Activities	Launch specific football events, festivals, and guest speaker sessions	Develop joint tournaments and festivals for specific football clubs and communities in the region	Establish a national specific football tournament and/or festival	Introduce alternative specific football tournaments and festivals (e.g., youth, co-ed, beach football)
Equipment	Use existing material and equipment for new football initiative	Improve existing resources for specific football. Establish links with relevant government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Health and Sport)	Broaden the range and resources for specific football initiatives	Improve existing resources for specific football initiatives

While these guidelines provide useful assistance for football clubs and organizations, much greater research and evidence-based practice is required to address the unique needs and circumstances of ageing 55-65+ players at the recreational, intermediate/developmental and/or high performance/advanced ability levels. Currently, research activity in this field lags far behind the prolific growth of grassroots seniors' 55-65+ small-sided football initiatives taking place in local, regional, and international settings.

We argue that strategic program development is key to enhancing and sustaining player participation in these initiatives (Chambers, Glasgow, & Stange, 2013). Further, strategic program development is inherently situated within broader communities of practice (i.e., host football organizations/clubs, with their particular cultural context and political landscape, priorities, access to available resources, and levels of support); it is socially mediated (i.e., shaped by key stakeholder support and engagement by respective on-site coaches/program leaders and players); and it is locally constructed (i.e., conceptions of “quality and effectiveness” will always be part of how it is continually improved, adapted, and understood within contextually-bound settings). Thus, strategic program development is not limited to an isolated event; rather, it occurs over time and requires engagement of key program stakeholder representatives (Franks, Lilley, Hubball, & Franks, 2019; Hall & Hord, 2015; Hubball, Reddy, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018).

For the purpose of this study, we investigated 55-65+ small-sided football programs in specific geographical, national, regional, and international locales. We hope to expand the representation and the resulting depth of understanding about the diversity, and the successes and challenges, of these programs across a broad range of settings. The following primary research question directed this pilot investigation: *What are strategic program development practices in diverse 55-65+ small-sided football contexts?*

2. Methodology

2.1 Case Study Research Using Multiple-Case Design

Case study research is a systematic in-depth inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life practice context (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015; Tight, 2017). Case study research methodology internalizes theory and practice by drawing on a wide range of contextually-bound data (e.g., engagement of key stakeholder representatives, which for this study includes key personnel at football club/organization institution, team leaders, coaches, officials, players, volunteers, etc.). Essentially, case study research methodology invites program leaders to consider which program issues are key for examination (e.g., participant recruitment, coaching methods, group organization, strategic team and player development initiatives, and/or program impact), how to engage key stakeholders in the process, what data to gather, when and how to collect and analyze these data, and, finally, to consider how these findings might be of interest to the respective club organizations and coaches/program leaders, as well as to the broader football community and football organizations. Multiple-case design refers to case study research in which several instrumental bounded cases are selected to understand the similarities and differences between the cases, and to develop a richer and more in-depth understanding of the phenomena than a single case can provide (Yin, 2017). Thus, case study research using multiple-case design is highly generative in nature and is therefore particularly well-suited for this study to examine strategic program development initiatives in a range of settings.

In order to gather evidence for this inquiry, site visits were conducted over an eighteen-month period in 2018-2019 at a purposeful sample of innovative and long-standing 55-65+ football organizations and clubs in North America, the UK, SE Asia, the Gulf States, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. For the purpose of this preliminary study, the primary research question focused on the following: *What are strategic program development practices in diverse 55-65+ small-sided football contexts?*

Specific prompts for this inquiry included:

- What are the origins of 55-65+ small-sided football in local contexts, and how have strategic program development practices built on that foundation?
- How does geographical context (e.g., cultures, languages, histories, and values) inform 55-65+ small-sided football programs in local regions? For example,
 - How is 55-65+ small-sided football understood, interpreted, organised, delivered, experienced, and/or institutionalised?
 - What are the most common areas of best practice to enhance and sustain player participation?
 - What are the most common challenges that hinder participation?
 - What are the roles of players and coaches/program leaders?
 - How is the impact of these programs made public?
 - What theoretical approaches, frameworks, or models are important for effective program implementation?
 - How are these programs expanded and further developed?

2.2 Data Collection

Integral to this inquiry, a purposeful sample of contextually-bound program data were gathered from the following:

- * Invited on-site coaching sessions, interactive research presentations, and program observations at national/regional football associations and local clubs in Canada, USA, England, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Hong Kong, Singapore, Gibraltar, Spain, Oman, Qatar, Australia, and New Zealand.
- * Meetings and focus group interviews with program stakeholder representatives, including team leaders, administrators, participating seniors' players, and officials. Participants met in groups of five to eight in either face-to-face venues or online video conference platforms, with a frequency ranging from once per month to three sessions in total during the study period.
- * Relevant program documentation such as historical program overview and website information, football format, rules, schedule, sports science applications, team/group picture gallery and related performance video recordings, participant numbers, team awards, budget information, and available program/team resources. This included longitudinal data from 2001 to 2019 pertaining to participation trends, performance/awards, research contributions, and evolutionary program changes,

innovations, challenges, and long-term program impact in the *Inter UBC Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* at The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Qualitative data sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method through categorization, and finally to thematization (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017; Friedman, 2008). Next, member checking was utilized to establish major themes and data patterns, and to discern complex commonalities, contradictions, and interactions. The use of iterative and multiple data sources established the trustworthiness of the research findings through triangulation.

3. Results

The iterative conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 was adapted and applied to collate a wide range of data pertaining to the primary research question and related literature (*What are strategic program development practices in diverse grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football contexts?*). Each specific component of the conceptual framework was an integral and ongoing factor for strategic program development to enhance and sustain participation in 55-65+ small-sided football programs. As such, each specific component of Figure 1 will be analysed in order to provide a detailed discussion of results pertaining to the primary research question and purpose of this study.



Figure 1. A Framework to Enhance Strategic Program Development in Diverse Grassroots 55-65+ Small-Sided Football Contexts

3.1 Program Context Strategies

A wide range of iterative and responsive program context strategies were employed in the study settings. Documentation analysis and interview data with coaches and program leaders revealed specific core strategies that were critical in order to enhance and sustain participation, such as:

- Conducting an organizational/club needs assessment to identify the strategic purpose (e.g., program aims, objectives, and values; and the who, what, where, and when process issues related to specific program offerings) and available resources (including specialised coaching expertise and facilities) for offering 55-65+ small-sided games programs.
- Conducting research on similar programs and/or guidelines for best practices in similar or alternative contexts (e.g., investigating FIFA/national Football Association guidelines, accessing 55-65+ international organization or club program websites, and inquiring through word-of-mouth professional networks).
- Conducting strategic player recruitment strategies (e.g., based on age, gender, ethnicity, and/or ability level such as recreational, intermediate, or high performance). Data suggest that, in addition to local social media recruitment strategies, the following target groups were particularly effective for recruiting players:
 - Local veterans football league
 - National/regional physical education association, e.g., former teachers
 - Various workplace organizations and their retiree alumni, e.g., airlines
 - Embassy and government staff alumni organizations
 - Police, firefighters, and armed forces alumni
 - Former professional or national players
 - Former club coaches
 - Football club alumni
 - Futsal club alumni
 - University faculty emeriti and student alumni
 - Community/private sports or fitness centre leaders to identify current clients who fit criteria
 - Ex-pats overseas
 - Guest players visiting from other countries

3.2 Program Planning Strategies

A wide range of iterative and responsive program planning strategies (e.g., age-appropriate, customized game formats) were employed in the study settings. Documentation analysis and interview data with coaches and program leaders revealed specific core strategies that were critical in order to enhance and sustain participation, including:

- Conducting players' needs assessment to identify participation motives, ability levels, and program expectations. For example, data revealed that participation by 55-65+ players was significantly impacted by their personal motives (e.g., fun, skills development, competition,

wellness, social fitness, and team experience); participation barriers (e.g., perceived ability and level of competition, commitment level, and competing work/family/leisure priorities; safety and injury considerations; seasonal weather challenges; and quality of program organizations, playing facilities, and conditions); and physiological considerations (e.g., need for ever-longer recovery periods and noticeable three to five year incremental declines in physiological performance after fifty-five years of age; the importance of fitness conditioning and conscientious warm-ups/cool-downs routines; and sensitivity to personal limits for “safe” competition on “good” quality fields and playing surfaces).

- Engaging key program stakeholder representatives through online/face-to-face meetings, email, and/or phone calls to establish strategic program goals while maximizing available organizational/club resources for 55-65+ small-sided games initiatives. The goals might be long-term (i.e., 2-3 year/annual goals for multi-level, age-specific, and male, female, and co-ed programs; and development of high performance teams for competition), intermediate (i.e., seasonal/monthly program goals), and short-term (i.e., weekly/coaching session program goals related to developing group/team/players’ knowledge, abilities and skills, and experiences).
- Creative scheduling (e.g., short “bite-size-chunk” program duration and frequency offerings such as once or twice per week for 6-12 weeks), including team field trips or tournaments, guest speakers/coaches, and seasonal indoor and outdoor sessions.
- Evidence-based program practices (e.g., customized small-sided games design with reduced pitch and goal size, modified rules, specific playing surfaces, and progressive session/games formats with frequent breaks and short duration games). For example, small-sided games for 55-65+ participants maximize emphasis on effective teamwork and development of individual ball skills (e.g., close ball control, accurate one and two touch passing, and accurate short-range shooting at ground level) while minimizing emphasis on excess physical play (e.g., by limiting sprinting and endurance running, and prohibiting slide tackling). Three-a-side football, for example, uses the smallest tactically-able unit to apply the principle of depth and breadth for effective team offence and defence. The repeated intensity of competitive 3v3 football increases the development of effective “game sense” through continual team problem-solving, decision-making, dynamic intra-team mobility on-and-off the ball, and interpersonal communication skills, and enhances players’ abilities to deal effectively with successes and failures of authentic game-based situations. The 3v3 format demands few rules (e.g., no goalkeepers; regular corners, sideline and end-line plays apply with kick-ins; and goals can only be scored by shooting within the opposition half) and is easily implemented as part of intra-squad warm-ups or team preparation for small-sided game tournaments.

3.3 Program Leadership/Coaching Strategies

A wide range of iterative and responsive program leadership/coaching strategies (e.g., offering player-centered activities, forming mixed teams for fairness and challenge, and fostering social interaction and team development) were employed in the study settings. Documentation analysis and interview data with coaches and program leaders revealed specific core strategies that were critical in order to enhance and sustain participation, including:

- Fostering a program culture of group/team/individual achievement and ongoing improvement (e.g., team and player development), consistent with needs assessment data and participation motives. For example, the following strategies were found to be particularly effective: setting the tone for a positive, challenging, interactive, fun, respectful, social, and inclusive small-sided game environment; learning names of participants, as well as something about each participant; frequently checking-in with participants regarding progress on group/team and individual goals; establishing common kit/jerseys to foster program/team identity, as well as program website; and sharing relevant 55-65+ football literature/stories/news/display/websites.
- Connecting 55-65+ program participants in meaningful and social ways throughout the duration of an event or small-sided football program, again consistent with needs assessment data. Coaches and program leaders used various strategies such as scheduled and deliberate refreshment periods; mixed team selections for internal competition; and entry into local, regional, and international tournaments/festivals. For example, in a *Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* held in Vancouver, specific strategies were employed to foster a culture of masters' team development by facilitating players through cyclical team stages of *forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning* (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977):
 - *Forming Stage*: Facilitating positive team interactions with continuing and new players; establishing participation and team goals; planning regular team social events; creating an online presence for posting team/participation pictures to establish a “critical mass” team identity and to support optional technology-enabled communications (e.g., use of social media networking and web-based communication tools).
 - *Storming Stage*: Dealing with fluctuating participation numbers and mixed ability challenges; establishing fair teams; setting the “tone” for fun and challenging games; and identifying issues for team improvement and celebration.
 - *Norming Stage*: Setting expectations that the team and players will begin to assist and self-organize team warm-up practices and pitch set-ups; identifying issues for team improvement; and progressively challenging practice conditions (Hubball, Dumbrille, & Reid, 2010).
 - *Performing Stage*: Team and players beginning to develop and assess strengths and weaknesses of specific game plan strategies regarding preparations against specific opposition teams.

- *Adjourning Stage*: Sharing tournament-related pictures, video clips, and local media reports, and team email recognition of collective effort, achievement, and future events and participation opportunities.
- Developing creative coaching plans with clear safety/risk assessment and developmental goals (e.g., small-sided football knowledge, abilities, skills, and experiences) for participation. These included varied stretching and warm-up/cool-down sessions (e.g., piggy-in-the-middle, 3v3 walking football, skills practices, etc.); technology-enabled performance analysis and maximizing games-based (e.g., 5v5, 3v3, attack versus defence, 3v2, etc.) participation time with selected coaching interventions during frequent break periods as required.

3.4 Program Impact Assessment Strategies

A wide range of iterative and responsive program impact assessment strategies (e.g., engaging key stakeholders, highlighting best practices, and improvement orientation) were employed in the study settings. Documentation analysis and interview data with coaches and program leaders revealed that specific authentic assessment strategies that engaged key program stakeholders (e.g., players, club officials, coaching staff, volunteers, and administrators) were critical in order to enhance and sustain participation. These included:

- Formulating context-specific priority criteria/indicators of program success (e.g., What is highly valued? What needs to be further improved?). Common issues included maintenance or growth of participant numbers; growth of program offerings; program satisfaction-level; team and/or player development outcomes; program-related awards and trophies; research/dissemination; and recognition of high quality.
- Aligning context-specific priority criteria/indicators of program success with relevant evidence of impact. Very often informal field data collection strategies (prior to, during, as well as at strategic formative and summative program stages) regarding evidence of impact included: interviews with players, team planning and debrief meetings, coaches field notes, group/team video analysis, performance records, media reports, and semi-structured survey questionnaires regarding program strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement.
- Analyzing data to further improve and/or publicly disseminate context-specific grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football programming in order to enhance and sustain participation levels.

3.5 Longitudinal Data Pertaining to Program Impact

Between 2001 and 2019, the *Inter UBC Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver Canada (<http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca/hubball/index.html>) evolved into three related small-sided masters football program offerings: 1) a 50-65+ program for university staff and players in the local community that uses 3v3, 4v4, and 5v5 formats and operates once per month; 2) a select high performance 50-60+ small-sided team development program with teams participating in local competitions, annual regional masters tournaments hosted in locations such as California and British Columbia, and the *International Super Masters 5-a-side/Futsal World Cup Football Tournament* hosted

annually in Europe and the UK; and 3) a competitive walking football program whereby a select team from this program competes in local masters walking football tournaments and the *International Super Masters Small-sided World Cup Football Tournament*. The strategic aim of this research-based masters soccer academy program is to promote 50-65+ small-sided football and enhance team (and player) development. Based on responsive program context, program planning, program leadership/coaching, and program impact assessment strategies, this masters-level small-sided football academy program has thrived for nearly twenty years. The select masters teams have been very successful in external age-specific small-sided football tournaments, winning multiple local (e.g., city and provincial), regional (e.g., California masters tournaments), and international (masters 5v5 and walking football world cup) trophies, as well as receiving invitations to play 50+ exhibition games at English professional football clubs (e.g., Chelsea FC and Aston Villa FC) against former professional players.

Equally important to enhance and sustain player participation, a masters football community has been fostered through a wide range of e-communications (including website) and team social engagement strategies. The organization of social events (e.g., team refreshments and socials, team photographs, rewards and recognition of oldest player, fair play, team competition, team penalty shootouts, trophies, etc.) and involvement with, and distribution of, masters football data (e.g., team video analysis and pictures) typically enhanced the sense of shared purpose for the players. The players themselves are also active participants in the masters football community by demonstrating concern for the well-being of their teammates (and competitors); by offering advice on fitness, conditioning, and warm-up; and, when suitably qualified, by providing first aid treatment. Clearly, the bond that has developed over the years between the players has nurtured community spirit, camaraderie, and respect, and has also resulted in cross-border and cross-continent connections with an array of talented and like-minded masters football enthusiasts.

Appropriate for a program hosted within a university setting, program research and evidence-based practice (e.g., team video analysis) has contributed significantly to team success and sustained participation. Further, a wide range of tournament-related team and player development and performance analysis projects have resulted in more than 20 co-authored peer-reviewed publications, small-sided football program support and research grants, and extensive media coverage. Guest coaches from neighboring clubs, many of whom have participated in local games, have visited the masters soccer academy program. Also, the Head Coach, who has served as Chairperson of the International masters world cup tournament for the period 2006-2022, has been invited to give more than 50 coaching and masters football research presentations around the world and has provided assistance to develop and evaluate multiple 50-65+ small-sided football programs in local clubs and organizations.

4. Key Challenges and Further Developments

Interview data with coaches and program leaders revealed a wide range of context-specific challenges (e.g., variable expertise related to program context, planning, coaching, and impact assessment strategies) hindering program effectiveness and participation levels in grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football programs. In many cases, perceptions of these challenges tended to focus on player commitment and attrition issues. Some programs had issues with inadequate local club/program funding, while others pointed to inadequate support from local football associations for 55-65+ initiatives. This included lack of 55-65+ football-specific materials, program research, development funding, and specialised coach education, and meagre facilitation of competitions and tournaments. A consistent challenge, however, was the management of competing program and/or participation agendas, which often resulted from program success and subsequent growth. For example, data revealed that a significant growth in the number of program participants and/or the diversity of participants' abilities often led to changing expectations for program goals and level of competition. Evidently, when this situation was not addressed or carefully managed it created frustrations, less than optimal football experiences, injury, and even drop-out in some programs.

Further, although levels of competition in 55-65+small-sided football (e.g., recreational, intermediate, and high performance) are to some extent interconnected and overlapping, they have distinctive characteristics, which were often confused or unclear. These levels of competition tend to differ on key variables such as strategic participant recruitment, primary motives for participation (e.g., drop-in recreation and social agenda contrasted with high-level team performance), as well as expectations for coaching/program leadership, player commitment, team roles, performance quality, and the extent to which performance analysis is utilized and influences further development. Thus, some coaches and program leaders reported tensions as programs expanded, which when unattended or they were unable to offer additional specific ability-level program streaming (i.e., recreational, developmental, or high-performance groupings) often resulted in losing some players at either end of the ability spectrum to alternative programs that were perceived as either more inclusive or more competitive to meet their respective needs. Interestingly, the data suggest that specific ability-level program streaming was not without problems either. In some cases players were unhappy not to be selected to play in the high-performance group, while in others players felt somewhat discriminated against, with a few feeling that they received less coaching/program attention and/or related resources. The data suggest that to achieve effective program adaptations, compromises, and improvements, coaches and program leaders had to engage in significant proactive reflection, positive energy, intra-program group communications and on-going player recruitment, collaboration, and flexibility. This very often meant continually revisiting, reviewing, and, if necessary, revising questions such as *“What is the intended purpose, vision, and priority for this specific 55-65+ small-sided football program?”* That is, *“To what extent is it recreational or competition focused, or is it both?”* *“To what extent does it focus on 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, or walking football, or combinations?”* And *“How is the program agenda aligned with strategic participant*

recruitment, program processes, and outcome expectations?”

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate strategic program development practices in diverse grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football contexts. This inquiry using multiple-case design pertaining to 55-65+ small-sided football programs in diverse international settings suggests that no one size fits all. Grassroots programs around the world take on many forms (e.g., 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, 6v6, futsal, and walking football); use variations in rules, formats (e.g., with or without goalkeepers), and sizes of pitches and goalposts; and offer different levels of competition (e.g., recreational, intermediate/developmental and high-performance). In order to enhance and sustain player participation, data from this study suggest that strategic program development practices (i.e., iterative and responsive program context, program planning, program leadership/coaching, and program impact assessment) help focus attention on the art (e.g., circumstantial flexibility, creative problem-solving, and responsive stakeholder communications), science (e.g., rigorous inquiry and evidence-based developmental/improvement orientation) and politics (e.g., program alignment, engaging key stakeholder support, and dissemination of program progress and effectiveness) of program implementation.

Coaches and program leaders around the world are increasingly responsible for high-quality grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football programs. These programs do not just happen organically in a given setting; rather they evolve by careful and effective program leadership. Given varying levels of support and often limited resources for these programs, our research and coaching experiences suggests that strategic program development provides a critical foundation for both quality assurance and quality enhancement, and is central to enhancing and sustaining participation. Data from this study suggest that strategic program development in diverse grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football settings is inherently situated, socially mediated, and locally constructed. However, the time-consuming and purposeful sample of data collection requires caution pertaining to the generalizability of these findings in alternative settings. Furthermore, strategic program development is not a panacea for high quality and sustainable grassroots 55-65+ small-sided football programs since problems can arise from inadequate support, time, commitment, and expertise of (often volunteer) coaches and program leaders. Although strategic program development in these contexts is still very much in its infancy, both theoretically and practically, we have provided a theoretical framework, as well as practical examples.

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