

**Is futsal a donor sport for football?: Exploiting complementarity for early diversification in talent development**

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1 **Is futsal a donor sport for football?: Exploiting complementarity for early**  
2 **diversification in talent development.**

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## 1 **Introduction**

2 Athlete development in sport emerges through the continuous interactions between an  
3 individual's personal capabilities and possibilities for action in performance environments  
4 (Davids & Baker, 2007). Specifically, in team sports like football, it has been shown that the  
5 development of skill and expertise can be achieved through the experience and practice of  
6 varied activities under a variety of task and environmental constraints (Araújo et al., 2010).  
7 These constraints include playing football on the street, on the beach, on different fields with  
8 different formats, with or without goals and with different team conditions and rules (Araújo  
9 et al., 2010; Uehara, Button, Falcous, & Davids, in press). Such variations in environmental  
10 and task constraints observed in Brazilian culture, for example, provide variable practice  
11 opportunities and experiences that promote an enrichment of the learning process through  
12 enhanced transfer, and the discovery of individual capabilities through diverse, functional  
13 play activities (Araújo et al., 2010). In this commentary, we discuss theoretical insights that  
14 suggest how the sport of futsal can provide a useful basis for supporting the transfer of skills  
15 to performance in association football. With reference to tenets of the Athletic Skills Model  
16 (ASM) (Wormhoudt, Savelsbergh, Teunissen, & Davids, 2018), we outline how the  
17 relationship between futsal and association football may be exploited, providing a  
18 conceptually and practically important means for understanding athlete talent development in  
19 sports generally.

20 Previous research in many different sports has clarified how expert athletes tended to have  
21 taken part in a higher number of different sports as youngsters, whilst also experiencing a  
22 greater number of hours of practice in different sports than non-experts (Côté, Baker, &  
23 Abernethy, 2007; Davids, Güllich, Araújo, & Shuttleworth, 2017). These findings clearly  
24 support the proposal that early specialisation in sports practice and training in young children  
25 should be eschewed for an early diversification of experience in different physical activities.

1 Research has pointed to the physical, psychological, emotional and social problems,  
2 including dropout, which may result from early specialization. In contrast, from an ecological  
3 dynamics perspective, a more balanced experience, focused on early diversification, can  
4 enrich athletes' adaptive capacities in different domains that supports a possibility of transfer  
5 to specific performance contexts (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009).

6

### 7 **Before specialising, the individual and the athlete**

8 It has been argued that early diversification experiences, in the form of participation in  
9 different sports, might strengthen the adaptive capacities of athletes by providing a platform  
10 for skilled performance in sport (Araújo & Davids, 2011). A key question concerns how we  
11 may conceptualise and empirically verify the transfer of behaviours emerging under a  
12 particular set of task constraints to another set in elite sport performance contexts? In  
13 practical terms: how closely related or differentiated do different sports need to be to avoid  
14 early specialisation issues and accrue early diversification benefits in development?

15 Prominent ideas in ecological dynamics propose that early practice and play experiences in  
16 children and developing athletes need to focus less attention on early specialisation to avoid  
17 detrimental effects, and more attention on enhancing athleticism and general perceptual,  
18 cognitive and motor capacities. Based on these ideas, coaches need to understand when and  
19 how an athlete's practice task constraints can be modified to range between specific and  
20 general activities to encourage athleticism as a foundation for performance in a sport, even at  
21 more advanced learning stages. This type of practical intervention in coaching and learning  
22 designs requires a theoretically-supported notion of the concept of transfer, and how it may  
23 work in practice.

1 To verify the transfer of behaviours emerging under a particular set of task constraints to  
2 another set in elite sport performance contexts, in ecological dynamics some attempts have  
3 been made to evaluate and compare the emergent behaviours between practice tasks or  
4 between practice tasks and performance environment (Pinder, Renshaw, Davids, & Kerhervé,  
5 2011; Travassos, Duarte, Vilar, Davids, & Araújo, 2012). However, there is a clear need for  
6 studies in sport contexts which examine the practical utility of measuring transfer. But that is  
7 not an easy task, nor one that coaches and practitioners welcome due to the potential for  
8 disruptions to athlete performance in sport environments. Transfer needs to be carefully  
9 investigated in future through action-based research in sport performance environments,  
10 without affecting athlete behaviours through intrusions of manipulations. Ecological  
11 dynamics proposes that the evaluation of transfer could be based on the notion of *action*  
12 *fidelity* (i.e., the comparison of movement patterns between practice and performance  
13 contexts to identify more functional ones) (Stoffregen, Bardy, Smart, & Pagulayan, 2003).  
14 Action fidelity should be viewed and assessed in relation to performance goal achievement,  
15 not considering 'idealized' modes of acting. In line with this idea, the degree of performance  
16 goal achievement (e.g., in football, the number of successful passes completed or mean  
17 distance of shots to a target) could be considered as a measure of transfer. Ideas such as  
18 generality and specificity of transfer as advocated here, positive and negative transfer,  
19 positive and negative variability, need to be accounted for to capture action fidelity and how  
20 transfer of behaviours can occur between contexts of practice. General transfer occurs when  
21 an athlete undertakes non-specific activities (playing futsal or other team games) which  
22 benefit performance in a target sport, by supporting adaptation of perception, decision-  
23 making, actions and cognitions during performance. Specificity of transfer is likely to emerge  
24 from practising under specific task constraints of a target sport (e.g. playing football to  
25 enhance football performance). Understanding positive and negative transfer effects in

1 practice requires consideration of goal achievement and the positive (functional) or negative  
2 (non-functional) adaptation of players to constraints of specific performance environment.  
3 Related to the idea that movement variability can be positive or negative, there is a need to  
4 understand the activities that contribute to enhance performance functionality and those that  
5 decrease functionality. However, at this time there has been little research into this important  
6 topic. Theoretical work and empirical evidence is necessary to identify activities that could  
7 contribute to general or specific transfer in different sports. Regarding the important role of  
8 early diversification in the acquisition of skill, expertise and talent development, ecological  
9 dynamics is a theoretical model which can help us understand the intricate process of cross-  
10 fertilisation between sports. This is an important process that can provide a general  
11 development of athlete capacities and skills at an appropriate time in their careers, helping  
12 them to become better specialised athletes later, and avoiding some of the potential problems  
13 caused by premature specialization (e.g., see Araújo et al., 2010; Bahr, 2014; Phillips,  
14 Davids, Renshaw, & Portus, 2010). Early diversified practice and play in children and  
15 developing athletes can provide a behavioural foundation before talented athletes engage  
16 extensively in specialised practice, a significant amount of which can occur when the athlete  
17 is ready for it, physically, psychologically, socially and emotionally (Davids et al., 2017).

18 These theoretical ideas are aligned with practitioner models of athlete development, such as  
19 the ASM, which clearly proposes how a dynamic transitioning can emerge between diverse  
20 sport experiences and specialisation in a target sport (Wormhoudt et al., 2018). First and  
21 foremost, the ASM advocates the need to respect the development stages that individuals  
22 need to be exposed to in a variety of learning contexts that will help them explore functional  
23 movement solutions, while expanding their psychological, physical and physiological  
24 capabilities. The process of holistic development of individuals when interacting with  
25 different performance contexts contributes to improving the functional co-adaptation of

1 individuals to performance environment constraints (Araújo et al., 2010). Also, the pleasure  
2 and fun associated with the constant discovery of new individual actions and possibilities for  
3 play in different performance contexts, increases their engagement with long-term motives  
4 for practice (Wormhoudt et al., 2018). Key ideas in ecological dynamics and the ASM point  
5 to a major problem with early specialisation being an over-emphasis on specificity of transfer  
6 in practice at all levels, which is especially problematic in young children (Davids et al.,  
7 2017). While clearly important, there is a fundamental misconception that *only* specificity of  
8 transfer has utility in continuous athlete learning and development during practice. In this  
9 respect, the theory of ecological dynamics and the ASM argues that there needs to be a more  
10 nuanced understanding of the concept of transfer. Generality of transfer is useful at different  
11 times in practice, but especially early in learning to provide a foundation for more specialised  
12 experiences later in an athlete's development. Therefore, it is useful to consider transfer to  
13 exist on a continuum between high specificity and high generality (Davids et al., 2017).  
14 Consequently, a question of theoretical and practical importance is: How to use specificity  
15 and generality of transfer in sports practice and when?

16

### 17 **From general to specific transfer**

18 Whilst it is clear that specificity of transfer (predicated on specifying information from  
19 representative task constraints, fidelity of actions in practice and task goal achievement) is  
20 highly significant for the acquisition of skill and expertise in sport, its over-use and  
21 imposition very early in childhood does not come without some risks and challenges. The  
22 suggestion is that generality of transfer (predicated on non-specifying information, task  
23 constraints which may be varied and less representative of a specific performance context and  
24 involving actions which are not specific to particular sports) may be useful in the

1 development of general processes and capacities which can be harnessed in later specialised  
2 training programmes (Davids et al., 2017; Wormhoudt et al., 2018). The ASM is particularly  
3 important in suggesting with some clarity how general capacities or movements skills can be  
4 transferred into five practical components: stability, flexibility, agility, power, and endurance.  
5 Also, the ASM suggests that the process of coordination can be subdivided in seven abilities:  
6 adaptability, coupling ability, ability to react, rhythmic ability, balance ability, spatial  
7 orientation ability and the kinetic differential ability (Wormhoudt et al., 2018). According to  
8 the ASM, such fundamental components of sport performance constitute the tools that each  
9 individual needs to have to develop skill, expertise and talent as an athlete.

10 It is now well established that the development of adaptive biological systems depends on the  
11 level of variability that such systems accommodate to face internal and external variations in  
12 performance conditions. In sport, increasing variability of practice promotes the exploration  
13 of new coordinative solutions through the exploitation of movement degrees of freedom to  
14 perform (Davids, Glazier, Araújo, & Bartlett, 2003). It allows individuals to enhance their  
15 'dexterity' (Bernstein, 1967) in becoming more flexible in re-organising movement system  
16 degrees of freedom and exploring different information sources to satisfy changing task  
17 constraints (Chow, 2013). Summarizing, variability of movement experiences and of practice  
18 in different contexts leads to the development of a broad foundation of perceptual, cognitive,  
19 social and movement skills (Côté et al., 2007). Thus, to promote general transfer, in early  
20 ages, children should experience a variety of physical activities and sports, even if the  
21 requisite movement patterns do not seem to have a specific relation with a specific target  
22 sport. Movement experiences could be designed to engage with open tasks in a range of  
23 environments, from more varied to more specific (Wormhoudt et al., 2018). The main idea is  
24 to develop more skilful individuals through exposure to a variety of non-specific and specific  
25 practice, allowing a more functional learning at the moment of specialization (Fransen et al.,



1 2012). This process needs a careful and continuous *transitioning* between generality (non-  
2 target sports and activities) and specificity (engaging with various forms of a target sport) of  
3 transfer (Davids et al., 2017).

4 Engagement in the practice of complementary sports could contribute to develop early  
5 diversification with a focus on the holistic development of individuals that will support more  
6 specific transfer processes, ensuring a *better* (less detrimental) process of specialization in  
7 one specific sport. In the ASM (Wormhoudt et al., 2018) it has been proposed that some  
8 sports can act as 'donor sports' which can benefit a *transitioning phase* between  
9 diversification and enhanced specialisation of practice and training. Engagement with donor  
10 sports should be experienced especially before or at the beginning of the specialization phase  
11 in an athlete's development. For example, this proposition suggests that the sport of climbing  
12 can act as a donor sport to enhance performance in a target sport like gymnastics. The  
13 transfer may be enhanced due to similarities in the way that athletes in both sports need to use  
14 inter-limb coordinated actions for displacements in space and time, exploit externally  
15 available forces like momentum and friction, maintain equilibrium using one or more limbs  
16 on occasion, dynamically transfer weight, perceive information from a surface during  
17 engagement, and much more. Thus, the main issue for enhancing specificity of transfer is the  
18 exploitation of functional patterns of coordination in 'donor sports', that are similar to the  
19 patterns of coordination required in a target sport. Furthermore, with regards to tactical  
20 behaviours in team games, transfer can be enhanced, by using 'donor sports' that have  
21 similar perceptual-action requirements as in a target sport. These ideas suggest how,  
22 compared to sports in the very early diversification phase of development, donor sports  
23 should have a *greater level of congruence and correspondence* with target sports captured by  
24 specifying information available to regulate actions, representative tasks and action modes  
25 which are functional (related to goal attainment). Perception-action couplings developed

1 through experience in a donor sport can be functionally relevant for supporting performance  
2 in a target sport, with practice and experience in both sports having mutually beneficial  
3 effects. This relationship can be harnessed during later specialised training while avoiding the  
4 documented risks associated with too much early specialisation.

5 This theoretical rationale provides a principled basis to help coaches understand how they can  
6 explore and exploit the complementarity between sports, such as futsal and association  
7 football.

8

### 9 **Exploring the complementarity between “donor” sports**

10 The manipulation of practice task constraints or the variability of experience exploited in the  
11 practice of different sports could help individuals to strengthen the quality of the perception-  
12 action couplings that can be stabilised in learning, practice and experience to exploit sport  
13 affordances (i.e., action possibilities) during specialisation phases. However, the same cannot  
14 be said for traditional practice methodologies which are over-focused on repetition and  
15 rehearsal of specific movement techniques (i.e., independently of the affordances that make  
16 these techniques functional) during structured drills in highly regulated practice conditions.  
17 Experience in donor sports (e.g., futsal in relation to association football) for athletes could  
18 facilitate the transitioning and exploitation of athletic abilities, based on how action can lead  
19 to perception, and how perception can guide action towards goal achievement in a target  
20 sport. This performance flexibility is predicated on system degeneracy, which is a key  
21 property for elite performance in competitive sport (Seifert, Komar, Araújo, & Davids, 2016).  
22 To summarise, this is the fundamental theoretical conceptualisation to explain how  
23 experience and practice in futsal can contribute to the development of skills in association  
24 football, just like association football can contribute to performance development in futsal.

1 The complementary relations between different sports could support coaching interventions  
2 to design practice tasks that highlight informational constraints that promote exploration,  
3 discovery and adaptations in learners.

4 What could these theoretical ideas imply in the futsal-association football complementary  
5 relationship? Futsal is a 5-a-side game played indoors in a 40mx20m playing area (80m<sup>2</sup> of  
6 area per player). It is an intense sport which requires constant changes of direction,  
7 accelerations and decelerations, quick and precise tactical and technical actions with and  
8 without the ball to successfully perform (Castagna, D'Ottavio, Granda-Vera, & Barbero-  
9 Alvarez, 2009). The restricted variations in space for performing individual actions, as well  
10 as the variations in offensive and defensive collective playing systems, offer a great  
11 opportunity to players to improve individual technical and tactical capabilities, but also the  
12 management of space from a collective perspective (Travassos, Araújo, Duarte, & McGarry,  
13 2012).

14 In contrast, association football is an 11-a-side game played in a 90mx120m playing area  
15 (490m<sup>2</sup> of area per player). Football is characterized by intermittent actions, combining  
16 periods of maximal / near maximal efforts with unpredictable movement patterns and  
17 explosive technical actions (Di Salvo et al., 2007; Mohr, Krusturp, & Bangsbo, 2003). The  
18 large space for action and the number of players involved in the game leads to players  
19 spending large periods of the game without the ball in physical states of lower intensity and  
20 engaged in fewer decisional activities, in contrast to less frequent periods spent performing  
21 high intensity activities when near or in possession of the ball (Di Salvo, Gregson, Atkinson,  
22 Tordoff, & Drust, 2009).

23 Previous studies have highlighted that individual and collective tactical actions in futsal  
24 (Corrêa, Alegre, Freudenheim, Dos Santos, & Tani, 2012; Travassos et al., 2016) and

1 association football (Duarte et al., 2012; Lago, Casais, Dominguez, & Sampaio, 2010;  
2 Sampaio, Lago, Gonçalves, Maçãs, & Leite, 2014) are context-dependent. In this sense, ball  
3 management and general movement patterns are information-regulated in both sports.  
4 However, due to the number of players involved, and especially the space and time available  
5 for playing, futsal requires precise technical and tactical actions with and without the ball. In  
6 contrast, football requires high intensity activities with and without the ball, but with more  
7 time and space to perform these actions in comparison with futsal.

8 Highlighting similar basic movements comparing futsal with association football, due to the  
9 small space available for play, futsal's main emphasis is on ball control and manipulation,  
10 taking different types of touches of the ball in tight spaces (i.e. using 'soft feet' to gently  
11 manipulate the ball in small spaces), using different parts of the feet (such as the sole, the  
12 sides, back and toe) and timing to pass, shoot and dribble the ball (which is smaller (size 3),  
13 and has a lower coefficient of restitution than a regulation size 5 football ball) (Araújo,  
14 Davids, Bennett, & Button, 2004). In contrast, in football the emphasis is on performance of  
15 gross movements, due to higher space and time to perform, requiring more strength and  
16 explosive power. Associated with the need to move the ball quickly and with precision, or to  
17 maintain defensive equilibrium to recover ball possession, in line with the ASM proposals,  
18 futsal promotes general individual agility, in terms of coordination, coupling ability, ability  
19 to react, rhythmic ability, and balance ability.

20 From a collective system perspective, futsal requires equilibrium in defensive and offensive  
21 moves with precise adjustments according to variations in the space-time interrelations  
22 between teammates and opponents, promoting the development of players' spatial orientation  
23 and the ability to functionally manage space and time during performance. The constant  
24 changes in players' positioning increases variability in space covered and in relationships  
25 established with teammates and opponents, providing a broader perception of game relations.

1 Additionally, the fewer number of players constituting a futsal team, in comparison with  
2 football, contributes to the development of a wide range of technical and tactical abilities.  
3 Futsal also provide more frequent opportunities to perform skills and engage with the ball,  
4 compared to football (see Davids, Araújo, Correia, & Vilar, 2013; Fenoglio, 2003). Every  
5 player is required to use both feet to perform all the skills needed during competitive  
6 performance, as well as engage in collective tactical behaviours, with and without the ball.  
7 Such a reduction in the number of players in futsal decreases the complexity of the game,  
8 compared to association football, focusing players on available possibilities for action in a  
9 narrower field of affordances during performance. Based on the notion of affordances  
10 (opportunities for action) ecological dynamics, suggests that futsal can help football players  
11 to explore local affordances in an affordance landscape (Davids et al., 2017). That is, to  
12 discover, explore and exploit information and possibilities for action that can help players  
13 manipulate the ball in tight spaces to move the ball past opponent and create instabilities in  
14 defensive lines (Lopez-Felip & Turvey, 2017).

15 Furthermore, futsal could be a better option to promote transfer effects in practice than small-  
16 sided football games (e.g., 4v4), due to the different perceptual-motor adaptations of actions  
17 required because of the type of ball used, the characteristics of futsal court surfaces and the  
18 even the type of futsal shoes used. Also, by taking up futsal at an early stage, future football  
19 players will have the opportunity to explore different offensive and defensive tactical  
20 behaviours, founded on those in futsal, that will enrich their developing perceptual-motor  
21 landscape. This landscape can provide a resource of developing movement patterns and  
22 behaviours that players can exploit when seeking to enhance transfer between donor and  
23 target sports. Summarizing, to ensure a complementary transfer of capabilities between the  
24 sports, coaching interventions should highlight informational constraints to improve the  
25 coupling of perception and action in players in futsal and association football and promote the

1 utilisation of relevant affordances available in practice task designs. The development of such  
2 complementarities cannot be based on practice tasks that promote repetition of structured  
3 drills or pre-determined practice tasks (Araújo & Davids, 2015). Rather the complementary  
4 nature of the two sports can be exploited for skill acquisition in early diversification through  
5 emphasising selected performance-based affordances, behavioural correspondence between  
6 sports, and self-evident advances towards task goals.

7

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