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Is Futsal Kicking off in England? A Baseline Participation Study of Futsal

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Abstract In England, there is a growing interest in futsal, driven by people who enjoy participating in the sport and others who see futsal as a development tool for those looking to succeed in football - dubbed the countries national sport. Nationally, the development of the sport has been overseen by futsal's governing body, The *Football Association* (FA), to improve the fortunes of the national futsal team and to provide a structure for the sport to grow at both grassroots and elite level. A lack of research into futsal exists, particularly around participation in the sport, and therefore there is insufficient knowledge to supply the elevated interest in the sport. The study establishes baseline measures to gain a greater understanding of futsal participation in England, to provide an indication of how many people participate in the sport; who participates, where, why and how? The study methodology was two-fold, firstly, analysis of primary and secondary data was undertaken to identify the number of teams and participants playing competitively between 7th January and 4th March 2013 - to provide a snapshot of futsal participation in England. The results, although indicative, show that during the course of this research there were 1975 teams playing organised competitive futsal and approximately 12,449 participants playing the sport during this period. Secondly, the research provides insight into participation trends of futsal from online survey responses of 108 futsal participants and 30 *County* FA coordinators, responsible for the development of the game nationwide. The evidence from respondents indicates that futsal is more popular than other variants of small sided football, with many respondents substituting or displacing their participation in other formats, to play futsal, while many also wish to increase their participation in the sport. Barriers to participation are also prevalent, particularly with regards to the availability and quality of facilities.

Keywords: *players, teams, facilities*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Futsal

Futsal is *FIFA* and *UEFA*'s recognised version of five-a-side football [1]. Consequently, because futsal is governed by football governing bodies it is structured similarly to football with worldwide competitions such as the *UEFA Futsal European Championships* and *FIFA World Cup* the pinnacles of the sport [2]. The English FA describe futsal as '*...an exciting, fast-paced small sided football game that is widely played across the world...*' [3]. Although futsal is an established worldwide sport in its own right, played both at amateur, semi-professional and professional level, its world wide appeal is supplemented by the fact that many elite football players endorse and speak of its importance to their own development [4].

1.2. English Futsal - Governance and Structure

Futsal is an emerging sport in England; played at grassroots and national level. The growth of futsal in

England has been well documented, particularly as to many people it is a relatively new, fun, vibrant and fast paced sport in its own right, but partly because it is also employed as a tool, used by some football clubs, to develop young footballers. This vision is supported by *The FA* who state that the, '*...game places a large emphasis on technical skill and ability in situations of high pressure, and is subsequently an excellent breeding ground for football competencies that can be translated into the 11-a-side format of the game*' [3].

In relation to futsal as an independent sport, *The FA* has developed a *Small-Sided Football Strategy 2013-2017*, with one aspect to promote futsal participation in England and to develop the sport nationally, through the county FA structure [5]. This strategy incorporates elements of the *National Game Strategy* for football, targeting increased participation [5]. Part of this strategy is to maximise the potential of smaller sided formats which proposes fewer demands on time than traditional eleven-a-side football and aims to engage with footballers who no longer participate because of this time demand. The aims of the *Small Sided Football Strategy 2013-2017* are to increase participation nationally in the sport (youth participation,

adult participation and elite development) and improve the fortunes of the English national team; to qualify for the showpiece global competitions; the *UEFA Futsal European Championship's* and the *FIFA World Cup*. Qualification for these events is of national importance, as, for example, The FIFA World Cup, attracts a 'global television audience', demonstrating the opportunity for international exposure, the potential inspirational effects for domestic participation growth and increased commercial revenues [6]. Furthermore, the FA has set an overall target of increasing the national number of small-sided teams to 30,000 by 2015 (28,370 in 2012), with futsal incorporated into this figure as part of the *National Game Strategy* [5].

In terms of elite participation, England players are selected from the *FA National Leagues*, the pinnacle of English competitive futsal [3]. Teams in these leagues are predominantly amateur and are grouped geographically according to their region (North, South and Midlands) and the season culminates in a national play off to decide the national champion [3].

At grassroots level, *The FA* also operates two participation initiatives. The *FA Futsal Fives* is designed to increase adult participation and is organised and facilitated by *County FA's* and through partnerships with commercial operators [3]. *FA Youth Futsal Festivals* are held nationally at under 12's, 14's, 16's in addition to the *FA National Under 19's Futsal Championships* which are held for both males and females [3]. Both schemes aim to grow and sustain grassroots participation and provide a pathway for players to progress into the FA National Leagues and potentially into the England national futsal team [3].

1.3. Futsal Participation

In addition to *FA* initiatives, the education sector provides further opportunities for competitive futsal to take place through organisations including *British Universities and Colleges Sport* (BUCS) and *British Colleges Sport* (BCS). Universities compete nationally, in leagues organised regionally, in conjunction with the academic year [7]. Furthermore, intramural futsal leagues in universities provide recreational playing opportunities for students [8]. *The FA* [3] has emphasised the significance of university futsal for increasing participation nationally.

Funded programmes which encompass futsal activity have enabled a wider audience to engage with the sport. For example, 39 professional English football clubs operate a futsal scholarship programme, which provide regular training in futsal linked to further education which enables young people to gain a recognised qualification [9]. Commercially, *@Futsal* arenas have revamped warehouses to create purpose-built, modernised centres to run futsal competitions around the UK [4]. At the time of this study *@futsal* operated five centres in total (Leeds, Stoke, Swindon, Sunderland, and Birmingham) but have since established a number of other facilities [4]. Other local providers also run commercial futsal leagues and run coaching clinics locally and in schools.

1.4. Academic Research into Futsal Participation

FIFA's Big Count participation study in 2006 reported that 265 million male and females are playing football worldwide [10]. The breakdown of the *Big Count* shows that there are just over 1 million male and females registered through their national governing bodies to play futsal [10]. Many people worldwide play futsal socially or in leagues not affiliated to governing bodies and therefore would not have been included in this calculation. It is expected that this figure will have increased significantly since this date. Furthermore, it is acknowledged in England that more people play futsal in Brazil than they do football, and that in Japan there are around 300,000 registered players, although no clear evidence is available in the English language.

The FA measures football participation against their own strategic aims, as a desire to increase participation collectively, thus boosting the chances of improving the national standard [11]. Therefore, measuring English futsal participation is fundamental to provide insight into strategizing an increase in futsal participation.

1.5. Barriers to Participation Growth

Although, there is a lack of research in relation to futsal, it is possible to identify barriers to participation in football which may also impact on futsal. For example, *The FA's National Facilities Strategy 2013-2015* surveyed football players, referees, coaches and administrators, finding that 84% of respondents identified 'poor facilities' as a barrier to participation [11]. Additionally, frequent responses pointed to concerns for the increased cost to use facilities and reduced maintenance of facilities [11]. As futsal is an indoor sport it could be argued that facility problems are more prevalent as they rely on the quality of indoor facilities - which football teams also use. Therefore it is of interest to identify any causality existing between facility conditions and barriers to participation particularly when assessing both supply and demand of futsal participation.

1.6. Justification for the Research

Academically, the body of evidence around participation in futsal is sparse. Little evidence exists in relation to futsal in England, and although it is anticipated the sport will continue to grow, it is important to understand more about futsal in terms of participation and the reasons why people play. This is particularly important, as *The FA*, the sport's governing body, aim to increase participation, while clubs at all levels seek to attract support to continue to develop. Little, if no research has been carried out to investigate futsal participants' perceptions of the game and how it is delivered in this country. Participation studies are notoriously difficult to conduct, but considering the constrained nature of futsal participation and the role of key organisations involved in its development it is possible to gain an indication of competitive participation in futsal.

2. Methodology

2.1. Secondary Analysis of Participation Data

To calculate a baseline figure for the number of clubs and participants involved in organised competitive futsal,

it was crucial to identify organisations delivering competitive futsal opportunities. At the outset, support was gained from The FA, the largest provider of competitive futsal, to provide data pertaining to its various competitions. *The FA* provided data for the *FA Futsal Fives League*, *FA Youth Futsal Festival* (aged under 10 to under 16 competitions) and the *FA Under 18 Championship*, (currently the under 19 championship). This was significant, as although some of this data was available online, the majority was not, and therefore it was necessary that this support was provided.

The timeframe for collecting participation data was between the 7th January and the 4th March 2013. During this period, data was collected either online, via the telephone or provided through email. This period was chosen as the majority of leagues, identified prior to the study, were operating during this period. As a result, the decision was made to ensure that the data collated during this period would be representative of a single 'snapshot' in time. Furthermore, *BCS* futsal league was originally identified to form part of the study, but as the league was not running during this period, it was excluded from the study, so as to be consistent with the methodological approach.

The following considerations were made to identify participating futsal teams and leagues to participate in the study:

- Junior and Adult leagues providing competitive futsal opportunities.
- Male and female teams and participants.
- Availability of club and participant data.
- Leagues operating during the study period
- Only English teams were included

Once data was collected, the numbers of clubs in each league were calculated to provide a cumulative figure. Participant data was collected at source, if available. Missing participant data was either obtained by contacting appropriate personnel directly, or assumptions were made based on indicative figures, equivalent to five players per-team, which is conservative, but ensured that calculations were not overestimated. The following details how data was collected for each competition:

2.1.1. FA Youth Festival

The number of clubs participating in the *FA Youth Futsal Festival* was provided by *The FA*. Participant data was not included in the data provided and therefore an assumption was made for each team based on the minimum number of 5 players required to form a futsal team.

2.1.2. FA Futsal Fives

Team data was provided by *The FA* for all *County FA's* apart from Middlesex, and therefore this county were subsequently excluded from the study. Participant data was obtained for 7 *County FA's* from their official websites. An assumption was made for the remaining *County FA's*, based on a minimum of 5 players per team.

2.1.3. FA National Futsal League

The number of teams and participants data was obtained from *The FA Full time* website. Team lists were not provided for all teams and therefore squad lists were

included, although it is possible, considering the study time period, that some participants did not play during this period.

2.1.4. @Futsal

The number of teams competing in *@futsal* leagues operating during the study period was obtained for 4 out of 5 centres. The data for the Stoke centre was not able to be identified and therefore this centre was excluded from the study. Participant data was obtained for two of the four centres from the *@futsal* website, while an assumption of 5 players per team was made based on the 2 centres where data was unable to be obtained.

2.1.5. British Universities Colleges Sport (BUCs)

Team data was captured from the *BUCs* website for all English teams competing in the futsal championships. Player data was obtained from thirty one universities who were contacted by either telephone or email. Participant data was not obtained from 11 universities, so an assumption was made based on 5 players per team.

2.1.6. FA National Under 18's Championships

Team data was provided by *The FA*. In the north, accurate player data was provided by 4 clubs who were contacted by email or telephone. Assumptions of 5 players per team were made for 6 teams. One team did not participate in the competition. In the midlands, 2 teams were contacted to obtain player data, and assumptions were made for 2 other teams. One team did not participate in the league. In the south, 12 teams were contacted to provide player data, 3 teams could not be contacted and therefore an assumption was made for these teams. One team did not compete in the competition.

2.1.7. Football League Trust Futsal League

The number of teams involved in this league were collected from the league website. No participant data was provided and therefore an assumption of 5 players per team was calculated.

2.2. Online Survey of Futsal Participants and County Football Association Staff

To capture views on futsal, participants and *County FA* staff were surveyed over a 3 week period in January. An online survey was designed to capture responses from each group. The survey was then distributed by *County FA's* and through social media. The purpose of the survey was to identify participation trends and individual perceptions of futsal. Surveys were electronic and were distributed via email and advertised through *FA Futsal Fives* and *FA National League* administrators and social network websites (Facebook and Twitter). In total, 148 survey responses were analysed; 108 from participants and 30 from *County FA's*.

3. Results

Table 1 displays the overall number of teams and participants playing competitive futsal during the 8 week snapshot.

Table 1. Number of futsal teams and participants

Provider	Total Teams	Total Participants	Average no. participants per team
FA Youth Futsal Festivals	1,100	5,500	5
@Futsal Centres	596	4,334	7.3
FA Futsal Fives	135	1,129	8.4
FA National Futsal Leagues	32	803	25.1
BUCS Futsal Championships	84	451	5.3
FA National Under 18's Championships	28	282	11.3
Football League Trust Futsal League	39	195	5
Total	2,014	12,694	6.3

Table 1 shows that 2,014 teams participated in futsal competition between the 7th January and 4th March 2013, providing opportunities for a total of 12,694 people playing futsal. The FA competitions provided opportunities for 64% (1295 teams) of teams and 61% (7714 players) of players. The highest number of teams and participants were competing at junior level in the *FA Youth Futsal Festival* (1,100), followed by participants in the @futsal centres (596 teams) which included both junior and adult teams. Commercial @futsal centres provided opportunities for 30% of clubs and 34% of participants demonstrating that it is a significant provider of participation alongside *The FA* competitions.

These figures demonstrate that futsal currently contributes 2,014 (7%) teams towards the FA's 2015 target for 30,000 small-sided teams. As the figure was previously 28,370 it can be assumed that other small-sided variations remain dominant. Although the figures presented are conservative, considering the limitations of the research, they do provide a baseline to measure future participation.

3.1. Participation trends

One hundred and eight futsal participants completed a survey regarding their involvement in the sport. The results show that 87% (94 participants) were male and 13% (14 participants) female and 76% (82 participants) were of 'White British' ethnic origin. The majority of respondents were aged between 21-25 (43%, 47 respondents), 26-35 (32%, 35 respondents) and 16-20 (19%, 21 respondents). The survey was targeted at adult participants and therefore this is reflected in the overall response.

The majority of respondents currently participate for between one (32%, 34 participants), two (24%, 26 participants) and three (33%, 35 participants) days per week, with 91% (97) of respondents training or playing in competitive matches for between one and six hours per week. Over half (53%) of participants had only been playing futsal for between one (36%, 39 participants) and two years (17%, 18 participants). This demonstrates, the emerging nature of futsal, with the majority of participants not experiencing the sport until recently.

It is interesting to note that 80% (75) of respondents participate more now in futsal than they have ever done, while 94% (101) of participants would like to participate in futsal more often. Evidently, these respondents have experienced the sport, and enjoy participating, which

consequently has led them to participate more. It appears that there may also be latent demand, as participants want to participate more, but for some reason, do not. This is either because barriers exist to participation or because there is a lack of opportunities to play futsal. Furthermore, the view from *County FA's* is that futsal participation is increasing, according to 30 members of local county football associations who completed a survey for this study. Twenty-six (87%) members of *County FA's* stated that futsal participation is increasing, although 40% (12 *County FA's*) describe participation in their county as 'below average' demonstrating that they are aware that further development in the sport is required.

According to *County FA* staff, 73% (22 staff) felt that the most common reason for taking up futsal, was because it was relatively new in this country. Other reasons stated included 'skill development' (77%, 23 participants), and 'enjoyment' (77%, 23 participants). Key promoters of futsal include universities and colleges, as just under half (46%, 46) of participants first heard of futsal at college or university, while 14% (14 participants) of people heard of futsal through the *The FA*.

3.2. Participation Change

According to the results, the trend is that participants are playing more futsal and want to play more in the future. In relation to other formats of football, the literature shows that the 11 aside game is most popular, followed by other versions of 5 and 6 aside. The results demonstrate that displacement and substitution is occurring with regards to participation in other formats of football. For example, the results show that 98% (105) of respondents have already played 11-a-side football; 96% (103) 5-a-side football (not including futsal); 69% (74) 6-a-side and 75% (80) 7-a-side. As the majority of participants only took part in futsal 2 years ago, this suggests that the majority of futsal participants, were firstly engaged in another format of football, before participating in futsal. Evidently, 58% (63 respondents) still play 11 aside; 26% (28) 5-aside (26%, 28); 17% (18) 7-aside and 16% (18) 6-aside, which indicates that substitution is taking place, or participants are decreasing other football activity to find time to play futsal. Interestingly, 24% (26) only play futsal, with the largest drop in these respondents habits occurring when participants only play 5 aside (70%) rather than the 11 aside game (42%). This represents clear displacement, participants who completed the survey now favour futsal, ending their participation in other formats of football.

Furthermore, 94% (101) of people think that futsal is better than other versions of 5 aside, which is supported by 93% (28) of *County FA* staff while 76% (81 respondents) stated that futsal could become more popular than generic version of 5-aside, supported by 70% (21) of *County FA* staff. Participants stated that the structure of futsal, including the rules of play, speed, technical and tactical nature of the sport were all reasons why people were drawn to futsal.

3.3. Futsal Participation Sites

In terms of identifying where participation takes place, *BUCs* provided competition for 52 (55%) participants; *FA Futsal Fives* for 50 (53%) and *FA National Leagues* 41

(43%) participants. Competitive futsal players who completed the survey all played in multi-use facilities, which cater for a wide array of different sports. These include 'sports club or community association use facilities' (51%, 54 participants), 'pay and play facilities' (40%, 40), 'private use facilities' (38%, 40), and 'specialist @futsal facilities' (30%, 32 participants). Predominantly, the surfaces in the majority of facilities are marked out for other sports according to respondents with 91% (98 participants) of people playing on such surfaces. This is unsurprising given the competition for indoor space in sports that use similar facilities. Thirty nine percent (31) of respondents play futsal outside on facilities such as 'astroturf', 'tarmac' and 'grass'. Futsal is an indoor sport and therefore participation on such facilities could represent a barrier to future participation, if the reason for this usage is because of a lack of availability in indoor facilities or a lack of knowledge of how the sport should be played.

Futsal players also report a number of issues including availability (50%, 53 respondents), the condition of facilities and appearance of facilities (both 28%, 20 respondents). Twenty-one (70%, 21 staff) County FA staff stated that there are not enough suitable futsal facilities to maintain current demand in England for futsal to take place, while the 'cost of participating' (62%, 18 staff), and 'no opportunities to play train' (86%, 21 staff) were also cited as potential barriers.

3.4. Participation Impact on 11-aside Football

Interest in futsal as a sport, as the literature suggests, is often due to the potential development affect the sport may have on footballers. The majority of participants (96%, 102 respondents) and County FA staff (100%, 30) believe that futsal should be used as a development tool for football. County FA staff also think that using futsal as a development tool for football will help to increase participation in futsal, presumably because the link helps to promote the sport and allow more people to experience it. Seventy-six percent of County FA's believe that futsal can mirror the growth seen in other countries to eventually become a professional sport in this country.

4. Conclusion

The study provides a baseline calculation for futsal participation in England, to help contribute to the knowledge of the sports development in this country and to enable future studies to track the growth of the sport. Although there are certain limitations to the research, the study provides a comprehensive account for the number of teams and participants involved in futsal. The study also provides insight into the potential development of futsal providing evidence that participants are substituting and displacing participation in other formats of football, to take part in futsal. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that people are drawn to the sport, partly because it has a structure both nationally and internationally, but ostensibly because people enjoy the sport; the fast paced nature and technical and tactical aspects which differ from other formats. On the whole, survey respondents believe that futsal will continue to grow and will eventually become more popular than other small sided formats. There are though a number of barriers to participation

which exist and could slow the development of the sport particularly regarding the availability and quality of facilities. Finally, the popularity of football means that their will continue to be a link between the two sports, which may help to increase participation, but could undermine the aspects of futsal which people enjoy, particularly if the sport is played in facilities traditionally used for football.

5. Limitations of the Study

There are certain limitations which affect the validity of the results in calculating a baseline number of futsal teams and participants involved in competitive futsal. The figures are indicative, predominantly because they do not include all competitive leagues and participants, due to the availability and accessibility of information. For example, it is anticipated that a number of private operators were not included in the study, partly because it was difficult to gain an overall picture of the number of futsal leagues, considering time, resource and the availability of information. Furthermore, university intra-mural leagues, who provide opportunities in futsal were excluded from the study as we could not confirm the number of teams participating nationwide during the study period.

The study was carried out during a limited period so as to decrease the possibility of double counting, when players play for more than one team or transfer to another team. However, there is still a possibility of this occurring particularly as some players may have played in national league competition, university competition and under 18 competition as well as @futsal sites. The study does not claim to provide data on all clubs and participants playing competitively in this country. It does however provide the most comprehensive account of the number of clubs and participants playing futsal in England during a 'snapshot' in time.

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