

GAELIC GAMES PLAYER PATHWAY



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Player Development in Gaelic Games

Gaelic Games have woven a rich tapestry through the cultural and social progression of Ireland and its people since the beginning of the 20th century. Stories of great players of the past, accounts of famous games and remarkable characters are handed on from parent to child. Such lineage to our past, copper-fastens the connection between our people and our games and stirs in us all, an impenetrable bond to something much greater than just sport.

This unique bond between our games and our culture is best described by the Irish word 'dúchas'. Dúchas, through its literal translation, refers to our heritage, to our native place and the natural affinity and traditional connection we have as Irish people to where we come from. Our dúchas is very much engrained in each one of us, it is what sets us apart as a nation. It has a richness and a hereditary that confers on Irish people a sense of empathy and care, a sense of warmth and togetherness, a sense of community and place, a sense of who we are today and what we have become.



It is these qualities, both individually and collectively, which make our Associations unique. We pride ourselves on our ability to function as modern and inclusive sporting organisations but yet retain ideals which are value-laden, community-based and firmly rooted in volunteerism. Through the vehicle of our Games, we provide communities all over the world with the opportunity to celebrate and sustain our culture. Many within these communities have positioned our Games and our Associations as integral facets in their daily lives. This is testament to the passion we, as a people, possess for Gaelic Games and the inferred values attributed to involvement with our Associations.

Such values bestow on us all a sense of responsibility and ownership. It is this sense of responsibility that drives the extraordinary levels of volunteerism and altruism visible across all levels of our organisations, inclusive of our clubs, schools, colleges and counties. Our people continuously give of themselves and ask for little in return. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our work with our youth and the development of our players. Thus, it is fitting that it is in this space, in a purposeful and exciting collaboration between GAA, LGFA and The Camogie Association, a shared vision for the development of all of our players has now been established.

Throughout the wide-reaching consultation process associated with the drafting of the Talent Academy and Player Development Report (TAPD), it was very much obvious how our unique culture plays a dominant role in the organisation of our games and the development of our players. From listening to our stakeholders, it is clear that our culture acts like a North Star, guiding and supporting development, constantly reminding us that we must align our behaviours to our values. At grassroots level, this consultation process found people who were very much in tune with our culture, who continuously brought our values to life, who were both passionate and resourceful. Unearthed within the process however, was a sense of the necessity for change. Stakeholders called for leadership and direction, for support and opportunity so that their interactions with players could become even more impactful. The overwhelming feeling on the ground, was the need for a new roadmap in terms of how best to



develop our players, in the context of our culture, within a contemporary and inclusive Ireland.

The TAPD Report made recommendations around such a roadmap so that player development of the future would become more holistic, balanced and coherent. The Report refers to designing a player pathway that is more reflective of the realities and complexities of the various avenues in achieving potential. Designing such a pathway, within our context, has involved innovation and creativity. It has forced us to challenge our thinking around how we attract, nurture and retain participants. We believe reflection and consultation have allowed us to develop a strong foundation of understanding of how we should run and structure player development

within our games, and what we want to achieve for the betterment of all involved. This foundation of understanding is critical to Gaelic Games remaining contemporary, culturally significant and the sport of choice within Irish communities.

Entitled 'The Gaelic Games Player Pathway', our Player Pathway attempts to will allow the GAA, LGFA and the Camogie Association with the right support at the right time so that are individually empowered to engage with the many challenges they will face along their player pathway journey. As a pathway, it is very much based on the FTEM athlete development framework, empirical evidence and international best practice. This framework has been adapted specifically to fit our



unique context and we believe that it will provide our stakeholders with the clarity they sought in relation to how best to support our players. It will allow the GAA, The LGFA and the Camogie Association to grow opportunities for everyone to experience Gaelic Games whilst providing the very best, most valid development experiences possible for all of our players. By doing so, our Player Pathway will allow more of our players to transition to adulthood as active members of our Associations and equip them with the physical literacy skills that will allow them remain active for life.

The Gaelic Games Player Pathway is designed around a set of principles that align with our Associations' core values. It focuses more on just simply the playing of our games. It aims to firmly root player development within our clubs and our communities. As a framework, it attempts to bring people together but places the player at the centre of their own development. Most importantly, the framework supports the acquisition of attributes within our people through their involvement with our clubs, schools, colleges and counties.

Our Pathway consists of three main pathway phases; Foundation, Talent and Elite/High Performance which in turn, are further sub-divided into eight sub-phases. Most of this learning takes place at club level or in the Foundation Phase. For some, portions of this learning may take place outside the club space in the Talent and/or the Elite/High Performance space. These spaces should be viewed as showcase spaces where our most talented players are challenged and tested. At these levels, the world gets to glimpse at the uniqueness and exceptionalism of our sports, where traditional county rivalries collide in expressions of passion, honed skill and finely tuned athleticism.



To cater for such diversity within our pathway and in order to simplify the complex, non-linear process of player development, we view development as an interaction of three different strands at each pathway stage; the player, their environment and the game. The player strand has the acquisition of six key attributes

as its focus. This journey of learning is enhanced by a process of guided challenge and discovery supported by coaches, teachers and parents, with each having a specific role at specific stages. This refers to the environment strand. Finally, the game strand refers to key capacities necessary to play our games and essential ingredients necessary at coaching sessions so that the personal assets developed within the player strand are complimented by the player's motivation and capacity to learn to play our games.

In many ways, the somewhat complex description of the interaction of the player with his/her environment and our Games can be very much simplified in terms

of our behaviours as members of the Gaelic Games family. Our new Player Pathway points us back at our dúchas. It continuously asks questions of us and steers us towards creating opportunities for our players which simply feel right and are very much aligned to our culture and context. This does not imply an overly simplistic approach to development, it implies the correct approach at a particular point in time.

Our approach is very much about people, our people. It's about how we will value and nurture them so that our Games remain central to who we are and what we want to become. Our dúchas is our reference point, our past is very much our future.



GAELIC GAMES
PLAYER
PATHWAY

FOUNDATION
PARTICIPATION
& ACTIVE
LIFESTYLE

F1
 Fundamental Movement Skills

F2
 Extension & Refinement of Movement

F3
 Commitment to Gaelic Games & Active Lifestyle

ADULT YOUTH

THE CLUB

T1
 Demonstration of Potential

T2
 Verification of Potential

T3
 Practising & Achieving

T4
 Breakthrough

E1
 Adult Intercounty Player

ELITE / HIGH PERFORMANCE
ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

TALENT
DEVELOPING POTENTIAL



Our Pathway

Our Pathway has three main phases; Foundation, Talent and Elite/ High Performance. These three phases are further subdivided into 8 sub-phases.

FOUNDATION

F1 – Fundamental Movement Skills

The emphasis during this phase should be placed on open play (general movement) with all children playing, exploring movement through new and fun experiences. Younger children will continue to participate in activities that are enjoyable and rewarding to them. The end product should be a fun and safe experience. Establishing a core set of motor skills related to Gaelic Games early in life enables children to gain a sense of achievement and establish a positive relationship with sport and physical activity.

F2 – Extension and Refinement of Movement

The emphasis during this phase is on further developing functional movement skills and the early acquisition of the specific skills of Gaelic Games. The child should have a number of years before participating in formal Gaelic Games competition.

F3 – Commitment to Gaelic Games and Active Lifestyle

After the consolidation movement skills and Gaelic Games specific skills, youths begin at this sub-phase to commit to training and competition. Ultimately, the target in this phase is to retain as many players as possible so as they become lifelong participants in Gaelic Games. This phase extends from the beginning of formal competition to achieving potential at adult club level as well as providing opportunities for social and adapted games for our youth and adult players. It is inclusive of all club activities. It is in this sub-phase in which most of our players reside.





TALENT

• T1 – Demonstration of Potential

This sub-phase is focused on player's initial involvement with development opportunities outside of the club environment i.e. school and development/academy/county Squad, at early adolescent age level. It is envisaged that as many players as possible within a county would have the opportunity to experience some or all elements of the development programme over these two years.

• T2 –Talent Verification

This sub-phase is focused on player's involvement at school's junior level. Introduction to and development opportunities outside of the club environment at mid adolescent age level. It is very much focused on synergy between club, school and county combining to provide players with a coordinated and conjoined approach towards fulfilling their potential.

• T3 – Practising and Achieving

This sub-phase is focused on player's involvement at school's senior level, inter-county level as well as fresher's competition at third level. These environments require the presence of best practice talent development principles allied to overarching strategic planning. This correlates to appropriate training volumes and relevant competition exposure whereby the player strives for continual performance improvement.

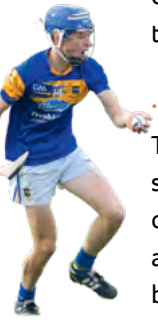
• T4 – Breakthrough and Reward

The strategies necessary at this sub-phase are best implemented when players breakthrough to senior 3rd level competition. Players who aspire to transition into Elite or to a High Performing level will gain invaluable experience if they participate in these competitions. However, players can also transition from F3 to E1 with high levels of support with their club. These players must benefit from proactive strategies that minimise the barriers to progression to elite adult level.

ELITE/ HIGH PERFORMANCE

• Intercounty Adult Player

Players at this stage achieve elite status through selection and representation on their adult inter-county team. This level is characterised by effective deliberate programming including guidance and support prior to, during and following early elite competition experiences. Support and management of the personal and sport careers i.e. Gaelic Games and work/study, is a critical component at this stage.



Our Philosophy

In order to engage our players and sustain their involvement in Gaelic Games, The Gaelic Games Player Pathway is underpinned by six guiding principles.



1. Club is Core

Our clubs are the bedrock of our organisations. They bring communities together and are the vehicle through which our associations have their greatest impact. The pathway promotes the club as the central tenet in the player development process. As a framework, it envisions our clubs as being resourceful and positive environments where players feel valued and supported. Through the proper implementation of our pathway principles, our players will develop over time, a love of place, a connection, a sense of belonging to where they are from.

2. Player Centred

The Gaelic Games Player Pathway supports a vision of player development that has long-term goals and outcomes which when achieved, equip players to become the best version of themselves, both on and off the field. The framework has many different developmental outcomes ranging from being active for life (through recreational activities) to becoming an Elite Adult Intercounty player. However, the goal of player development in Gaelic Games across all three organisations is one where people will become engaged in our games from a young age, encounter many positive experiences, transition through various phases and ultimately enjoy a sustained involvement over a lifetime. Placing the individual player at the centre of the processes involved in sustaining such involvement is of crucial importance. Our Pathway is very much about empowerment, connection and ensuring that our players feel listened to and feel in control of their own destiny within Gaelic Games.

3. Quality Coaching Experiences

The coaches' role is key in terms of creating environments that will stimulate learning and appropriate player development. Such development by its very nature is about people and how they relate to each other within a co-ordinated and supportive environment. In our context, we are relying on volunteer coaches and teachers to support players and their parents through a journey of guided discovery and learning. For our Pathway to truly be implemented properly, a synergy must be present around the player whereby all stakeholders display a real interest in how they relate to individual players as well as how they as coaches relate to each other (e.g., a shared responsibility for player development within a club or between club, school and academy/development coaches). It is the quality of these relationships that will determine the success or otherwise of The Gaelic Games Player Pathway.

4. Connection

Throughout the consultation process when constructing the TAPD Report, the committee continuously heard from all stakeholders how various groups and units operated in silos and have very limited integration with each other. The Gaelic Games Player Pathway promotes player development as a shared responsibility between all stakeholders. It supports a vision whereby players reside at the centre of the development process which in turn is enveloped by an environment that is synergised, co-ordinated and supportive.

Such environments promote connection whereby stakeholders utilise opportunities for communication, relationship-building and teamwork. It is these relationships, which focus on supporting individual players, that are the cornerstone of the pathway and they provide our volunteers with a sense of self-fulfilment, belonging and identity. It is this altruistic sense of care that ultimately connects our communities to our clubs and our clubs to our people.

5. Inclusive

Gaelic Games are for all regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, beliefs or socio-economic status. Our three organisations are very proud of our traditions, our cultures and our history. The Gaelic Games Player Pathway is very much framed on the many positive elements of our past but also as a framework, it has its eyes very much fixed on our future.

Our clubs provide a home for all regardless of abilities; The Pathway is very clear in relation to supporting player

development at all levels and in relation to sustaining player involvement and retaining players within our associations. For this to be the case, all players must feel valued and get a sense that they truly belong. This requires huge work from coaches and other stakeholders and can be viewed as our biggest challenge.

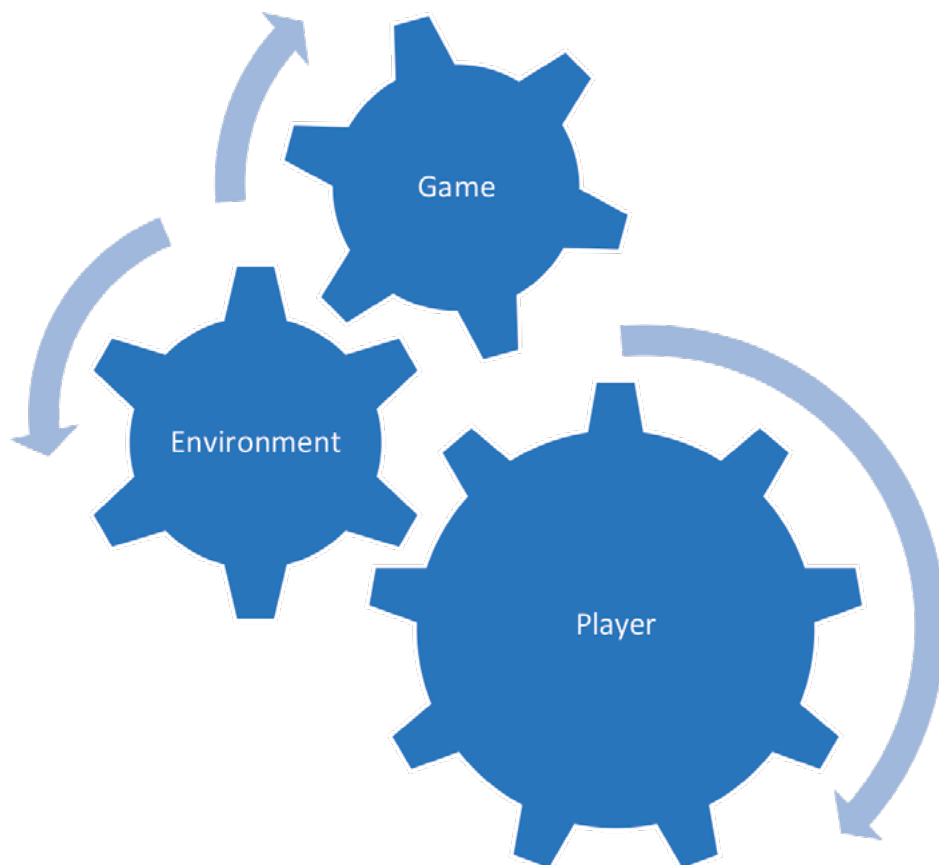
6. As Many as Possible, for as Long as Possible

This principle of the Pathway is central to achieving sustainability within our three Gaelic Games organisations. The framework supports early engagement in Gaelic sports so that children can acquire fundamental movements skills that will become the foundations for physical activity throughout their lifetime. However, in order to sustain the undoubted positive impact that Gaelic Games has on Irish society and culture, it is vital that we prolong this initial involvement and retain as many people as possible within the Gaelic Games family. By doing so, we are not simply sustaining our Associations, but more importantly, we are nourishing our cultural history and maintaining the lived values that are unique to Irish communities all over the world.





The Gaelic Games Player Pathway – 3 Key Player Development Strands



Having a framework built around key strands that align with what is most important to us in player development, we believe enables us to best develop all players in our Pathway. These strands bring the Pathway to life and are very much based on the stated core values of the Gaelic Games family, encompassing The Player, The Environment and The Game.

The Gaelic Games Player Pathway recognises that development is a complex interaction between the player, his/her environment and the game. Therefore, it is portrayed here as interlocking, supportive cogs with the player cog dominating both the environment and the game.

THE PLAYER

At the heart of our Pathway is the player, who should be the central focus of any effective player development environment.

The player refers to the individual person and the characteristics that are necessary to be developed over time in order for the person to reach their potential both on and off the pitch. We know that the journey from first involvement to reaching one's full potential is extremely complex, non-linear and individualistic – therefore it cannot be prescriptive. Players need a wide range of skills to succeed and these will be developed over time through a coaching approach that is adaptive to the player, his/her environment and the game.

The Gaelic Games Player Pathway has identified 6 interacting and connected attributes that sit at the heart of a player's Gaelic Games DNA, all vital in ensuring both the player and the person reach their full potential. These attributes are developed from a player's first involvement at nursery level right through to their last involvement at adult level i.e. from the F1 phase to F3 or E1.



These 6 key attributes are:

1. Passion

Passion is defined as a strong inclination and desire toward an activity one likes, finds important, and invests time and energy. Research has identified that young people today often cite that their lives are monotonous, boring and unexciting. Having a passion for Gaelic Games can be looked at as a means of countering modern day youth's discontentment and alienation and developing in young people a focus that may help to increase intrinsic motivation and self-worth. For this to occur, our coaching focus for our players must be loaded towards self-improvement and mastery of tasks rather than performance outcomes e.g. winning/losing. As coaches, we will only support the acquisition of passion when we create environments around our players that are caring, that allow for player input and choice and that provide players with clear feedback when they are attempting desired outcomes.

2. Respect

Respect is having a regard for other people and their lives; it is showing those around us compassion and empathy. The sports environment is a great place to grow and establish respect. While involved in Gaelic Games, players will learn the importance of respecting their teammates, coaches, referee, opponents and

spectators. Young players look to their coaches as role models and are likely to observe their coaches' behaviours. It is unlikely that players will be able to control their behaviours, if their coaches are unable to control their own behaviour. Coaches who show respect to their players, officials and opponents before, during, and after games can truly expect their players to do the same.

3. Responsibility

When children and youth become engaged in Gaelic Games, it is believed that they will benefit from their experience. Parents, coaches, and administrators often assume that in addition to physical fitness, children and youth will acquire important life skills just by being there. However, research indicates that mere sport participation does not guarantee life skill development, particularly responsibility. It seems that it is necessary to teach young people both how to lead and how to develop responsibility.

This implies that Gaelic Games players require experiential learning, where supervising adults allow them to make "meaningful" decisions and to become active agents in their own development. Research emphasizes that the coach has the critical role in conducting developmentally appropriate programs that focus on the enhancement of these strengths and personal resources. It is through the development of such skills, values and virtues, our youth will experience a successful transition to adulthood.



4. Commitment

When a child is in the right sports environment, it can yield positive social, physical, emotional and psychological outcomes. Every child who plays Gaelic Games should have the opportunity to consistently experience these types of outcomes. Therefore, the framework aims to support and sustain player involvement in our games so that youths enjoy such opportunities, Sport commitment is the extent a person wishes to continue participating in his or her sport. Undoubtedly, fun and enjoyment derived from playing Gaelic Games are of crucial importance in terms of developing one's commitment. However, it has been discovered that the motivational climate (mastery v ego orientated climates) and autonomy-supportive behaviours of the coach are even more important in terms of sustaining involvement. Such environments therefore, afford our players a prolonged opportunity for positive youth development.



5. Resilience

Resilience is a vital psychological attribute which we all require to overcome the various obstacles we encounter in life. Involvement in Gaelic Games provides many opportunities for both parents and coaches to catch opportunities that can be used to develop resilience in young people. We cannot protect players from trauma and disappointments but we must work on developing within them, the tools necessary to deal effectively with the emotions that these events are associated with. Our coaches must possess a philosophy that aspires to support our players personal development as well as their athletic development. Through the player/coach relationship, a level of connectivity must be present so that the player feels that the coach is a support to them, most especially when they experience confidence issues or have difficulty coping when things are difficult.

6. Creativity

Research has shown that as sport has become more professionalised and coaching becomes more prescriptive, players over time have become less creative. In the past, creativity had its genesis on streets and fields as children imagined themselves to be their heroes when playing against siblings and neighbours in daily games. These learning grounds have been replaced by structured coaching in clubs and schools where the coach prescribes how children develop skills.

If we want our players to be innovative, creative and have the ability to problem solve, then we must find a balance between exposing children to organised structured coaching sessions and unstructured 'free play'.

Gradually, these free play activities can give way to more deliberate practice activities such as scenario or games-based sessions which focus on solving tactical problems. However, in order to sustain motivation, it is vital that players feel part of the solution process and outcomes are focused on self-improvement, both individually and as a collective.



THE ENVIRONMENT

Whilst the central focus of the Gaelic Games Player Pathway is on the player, it is crucial that the environment around the player supports their development. It is also inclusive of our clubs, our schools, our colleges and our player development/academy/county squads.

As seen in the consultation process throughout the Talent Academy and Player Development Review process, aligning stakeholders and the various domains (i.e. clubs, schools and county) has proven to be very

difficult. Through new coach education opportunities, coaches will develop an approach that has commonality everywhere. These opportunities will allow coaches to become creative and facilitate learning within their own context and the context of their players.

Similarly, a shared understanding will be developed amongst other key people such as parents, teachers and administrators. This level of understanding is supported by an appropriate games programme and governance level i.e. The Gaelic Games System.

The following are the 6 key pillars within the Environment strand of the Gaelic Games Player Pathway:

1. Coaches
2. Teachers
3. Families
4. Role Models & Peers
5. The Games Programme
6. The Gaelic Games System





THE GAME

The focus of this Game strand is on building player capacities so players become more competent at playing our Games. By doing so, performance within training and games should improve. This should have a positive affect on the player's intrinsic motivation, thus increasing the probability of the player transitioning through the various phases of the pathway.

Building on the early elements of Fundamental Movement Skill at the F1 phase, players will, depending on the phase of the pathway, be exposed to a varying complement of capacity development. This complement is inclusive of the following:

1. Technical
2. Tactical
3. Physical
4. Psychosocial

Games or game-like activity should be an essential focus of each training session, so that the above capacities are acquired in the context of the game. The skill of the coach is to identify the skill-related problem or the area

for development and then think creatively about the best way to exaggerate the problem and create nuanced ways for players to find solutions to these problems through games-based activity.

When delivering such sessions, the role of the coach is to be a facilitator, who optimises learning in open environments where players feel valued and actively participate in their own learning through 'self-discovery'.

The following six principles should be present in all coaching sessions so as to ensure that learning takes place and players are challenged to reach their full potential.

1. Enjoyment
2. Challenge
3. Looks like the Game
4. All Players Involved
5. Player Centred
6. Constant Decision Making

GAELIC GAMES

**PLAYER
PATHWAY**

The text 'PLAYER' and 'PATHWAY' is rendered in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. The letter 'A' in 'PLAYER' contains a silhouette of a player with a hurley. The letter 'P' in 'PATHWAY' contains a silhouette of a player with a ball. The letter 'W' in 'PATHWAY' contains a silhouette of a player with a hurley.