

5-a-side Football: Summary

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by

Kit Campbell Associates Edinburgh and
System Three Scotland

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Background to the study

Many local authority sports centre managers have long maintained that they could fill their sports halls with 5-a-side football at peak times and it is undoubtedly the case that it is one of the most popular indoor sports activities. As football is an outdoor game, however, many local authorities have responded by providing outdoor multi-courts used for 5-a-side, as well as other activities such as basketball, netball and tennis, with the intention of easing the pressure on indoor facilities. The commercial sector, too, has seen an opportunity and developed specialist 5-a-side centres, although they are exclusively outdoor. Anchor International Ltd (formerly trading as Pitz Super Football centres, but now as Power League) was the first company to develop these centres, but others, such as Fives, Goals, Champions League and Soccaerobics, have since entered the market.

In many areas there is a choice of 5-a-side facilities available to potential players. **sportscotland** (formerly the Scottish Sports Council) therefore saw a need to obtain details of players and establish the role of different types of provision in the market in order to inform its advisory planning work.

As a result it commissioned Kit Campbell Associates and System Three to undertake a research study in 1999/2000 with the following objectives:

- to provide better information for making planning recommendations at the national, regional and local level
- to determine the need, and potential, for the development of 5-a-side pitches
- to provide information which **sportscotland** can use to calibrate its Facilities Planning Model.

Methodology

A broad review of levels of provision was undertaken and an inventory of facilities was carried out in four areas. The selected study area was South Lanarkshire where the following groups of facilities are represented:

- Indoor facilities in school or joint use centres, public sports and leisure centres or sports barns
- Specialist floodlit outdoor 5- or 7-a-side facilities provided by the public or private sectors
- Sub-divided artificial turf pitches (ATPs).

The key elements of the study were:

- A bookings analysis to determine the overall size of the market for 5-a-side football.
- A survey of players carried out in two phases by interviewers at a selection of centres during peak times.

More information on the survey methodology is available in the main report (Research Report 76).

Bookings analysis

The following broad conclusions can be drawn from the bookings analysis:

- Demand is concentrated primarily on weekday evenings and, to a lesser extent, Sundays. Overall, weekday bookings starting between 1600 and 2130 hours accounted for three quarters of all bookings. There is roughly the same amount of demand on each weekday evening as all day on Sundays. Demand on Saturdays is very low.
- Outdoor facilities accommodated about three fifths of all demand, with specialist 5- or 7-a-side courts apparently more popular than sub-divided artificial turf pitches.
- Junior demand is much lower than adult demand, possibly because of the popularity of Soccer Sevens amongst junior players below the age of 11. Women's demand is very low, at least at present.

Player profiles

The majority of players were male (95%) and some two-thirds under 35 (67%). In terms of social class, AB was slightly under-represented and C2 over-represented. Two in five players were in social groups ABC1 (41%), a third C2 (34%) and 12 per cent DE. Compared with the Scottish population, 5-a-side players are more likely to be male, aged below 45 and in social class C2.

There are some key differences between the users of the three facility types. Specialist 5-/7-a-side facilities and ATPs are used most by players in the 16–34 age group while the social profile of the users of specialist facilities appears to be closest to that of the Scottish population as a whole. The full size ATPs, by comparison, had by far the youngest age profile and attracted the lowest proportion of users in social class AB but the highest in social classes C2DE. The indoor halls had the oldest age profile and, like the specialist facilities, users in social classes C1 and C2 dominated their use for 5-a-side football.

Participation by 5-a-side players

The vast majority of players at each of the three types of facility were taking part in casual games, although only the specialist Power League and Champions League commercial centres actually offered regular league play. Users of ATPs were significantly more likely than the users of other facilities to be taking part in training.

Overwhelmingly, for the players surveyed, 5-a-side football is a year-round sport, with only 1 per cent of players claiming to play mainly in summer or mainly in winter, with practically no variation between different types of centre. However, as both phases of the survey were undertaken during the autumn and winter months, there may be other players who play only in summer.

The main reasons why individuals participate in 5-a-side football were to keep fit, for enjoyment or social purposes and because they loved football. Other reasons – including practising or training for 11-a-side play – were significantly less important.

About one in six players played less than once per week; a quarter once a week; and two fifths more than twice a week. Overall, the average frequency of participation in 5-a-side football was 6.4 times in four weeks.

Frequency of participation tended to be associated with age, with younger players playing more (an average of 6.6 times in four weeks) and older players less (an average of 5.6 times in four weeks). There was very little difference in frequency of participation by social class, while casual players played less frequently than those taking part in 'other' games. Those who also played 11-a-side also played 5-a-side football more frequently than those who did not. The frequency of participation in 5-a-side football therefore tends to be highest amongst those who are under 24 and also play 11-a-side football; and lowest amongst older players, those who play 5-a-side football casually and/or do not play 11-a-side football.

Overall, 55 per cent of respondents had played 5-a-side football in the previous four weeks at a different facility from the one at which they completed a questionnaire. There was little variation by type of facility, but younger players were significantly more likely than older ones, and 11-a-side players more likely than those who did not also play 11-a-side football, to have used more than one facility.

As well as 5-a-side football, 26 per cent of respondents also played 11-a-side football regularly. Those respondents using ATPs were most likely to do so, as were those aged under 24, in social groups C2DE or playing a non-casual game of 5-a-side.

Players' preference for playing indoors or outdoors

Overall, about a third of respondents had a preference for playing outdoors and a little over a fifth indoors, with about two fifths indicating no preference. Those aged between 25 and 44 were more likely to prefer to play outdoors than those aged 45 or over. Conversely, players aged 45 or over were more likely to prefer to play indoors while those aged under 24 were most likely to have no preference.

Choice of facility

The factors most likely to affect an individual's choice of facility were, in descending order of importance, its location, its nature and the price. The nature of the pitch includes whether it is indoors or outdoors, the lighting, the type of surface, the size of the pitch or court, the ease of booking, the availability of a bar or facilities for food, and the changing facilities. Whether the facility is indoors or outdoors and the availability of a bar or facilities for food were relatively unimportant.

There was relatively little variation between different types of facility, although the ATPs were rated the best facility by a higher proportion of respondents than those at other facilities. The specialist facilities rated relatively highly for price; indoor halls for block bookings; and specialist facilities for league play. Interestingly, indoor halls were rated more highly for their size than the outdoor facilities, although smaller.

Expenditure and value for money

Expenditure per player was highest at the specialist centres and lowest at the ATPs, with the expenditure at ATPs reflecting the lower average age of users and therefore probably lower charges. Those aged 25–44 spent nothing on food, while younger players spent more than older ones, as did those from social groups C2DE and those who also played 11-a-side. The users of Power League and Champions League spent most on drinks and this obviously reflects the fact that these two centres have a bar. The younger players spent least on drinks and older players most. Players from social groups C2DE also spent more than those from groups ABC1.

Overall, those who spent least in total were the players over 45, those from social groups ABC1, infrequent players and those involved in casual games. Conversely, those who spent most were aged 25–44, from social groups C2DE and playing non-casual (league or tournament) games.

Approximately a third of all respondents (34%) were 'very satisfied' with value for money and an additional 46 per cent were 'quite satisfied' with value for money. Respondents rated the ATPs the best value for money, followed by the indoor facilities and then the specialist centres.

Travel patterns

The average time respondents had taken to travel to the 5-a-side facility at which they were surveyed was a little under 13 minutes. 33 per cent had taken five minutes or less to reach the facility while 28 per cent had taken between six and ten minutes. The specialist facilities had the longest travel time, suggesting that a significant number of users by-passed other facilities to get to them. This does not necessarily mean that players preferred these centres to others closer to home, but can be explained in a number of ways, including:

- Teams will probably have arranged to play at a venue which suited one or more team members best or which particular team members preferred.
- Teams may have been composed of workmates or 11-a-side team members from a fairly wide area.
- Teams may have wished to play, or be committed to playing, in a particular league.
- Players may have given up trying to get a booking at the closest centre.

The highest proportion of players travelled to the 5-a-side venue by car – either driving themselves (63%) or as a passenger (20%). A surprisingly high proportion walked or took a bus to the two ATPs (23 and 9 per cent respectively, possibly reflecting the younger age profile of users) but overall only 12 and 2 per cent respectively did so. Younger players were most likely to walk (22%) or use a bus (5%) while the respondents most likely to travel by car were those aged between 25 and 44 (93%) and ABC1s (88%).

The majority of players travelled home after playing (83%) while nearly an eighth (12.5%) went to a pub or club afterwards. Those using the specialist centres and indoor facilities were most likely to go to a pub or club after playing and those using an ATP the least. The proportions of respondents going to a pub or club from the two specialist centres with a bar (Power League and Champions League) were 13 and 10 per cent respectively, compared with 15 per cent from Hamilton Palace Sports Grounds.

Conclusions and policy issues

The evidence from this study is that there is a high level of **satisfied demand** and a relatively low level of **frustrated demand** in South Lanarkshire. There is also evidence that some **latent demand** still exists in the area, although this is unlikely to be evenly spread but concentrated in areas where access to facilities is poorest.

Planning 5-/7-a-side facilities

The low level of demand outside the midweek evening peak periods from about 1700–2130 suggests that 5-a-side facilities should be located where it will be possible to generate off-peak demand, for example on school or higher educational institution sites.

The average frequencies of participation for each of the identified age groups were:

- Under 24 6.4 times/4 weeks, equivalent to about 1.6 times/week
- 25–44 6.6 times/4 weeks, equivalent to about 1.6 times/week
- Over 45 5.6 times/4 weeks, equivalent to about 1.4 times/week.

Almost all of the visits identified in the study were for one hour, with a handful – mainly training sessions on full size ATPs – for longer. For planning purposes it will be appropriate to standardise on a one-hour length visit.

The fact that a significant proportion of 5-a-side participants regularly use more than one venue can be interpreted in a number of ways, including:

- Particular teams or groups of players have relatively little loyalty to a particular facility and may use more than one.
- Players are simultaneously members of more than one team or 5-a-side group.
- Groups cannot always book their first choice of time or venue.
- Players may be members of teams, which play other teams on a home and away basis.

This study disproved the third of these hypotheses as relatively few bookings, at any of the venues, could not be made when requested by groups. Close examination of the bookings records revealed that the same names cropped up occasionally at more than one venue and this therefore supports the first two hypotheses. As for the fourth, facility managers are of the view that most teams play at the same venue most of the time, although this study provides no evidence either supporting or contradicting their view.

There is anecdotal evidence from Power League that the opening of the Hamilton Palace Sports Grounds resulted in a noticeable loss of custom and the creation of spare capacity, presumably because some players were attracted to move by the lower charges at Hamilton Palace.

In declining order of importance, the things players most want at 5-a-side facilities are:

- good lighting and a good playing surface
- a convenient location
- a suitably sized pitch
- an easily booked facility
- an affordable facility
- changing.

Interestingly, affordability comes only fifth on this list and changing sixth. Many local authorities, however, would tend to regard price as very important for a sport which successfully attracts significant numbers of players in social groups C2DE and would provide adequate changing for all players as a matter of course. 5-a-side players, however, rate factors relating directly to their enjoyment of their game as much more important. The message to be taken from this, therefore, is that getting the playing facility right is more important than anything else.

Planning sports halls and ATPs

Sport 21, the strategy for Scottish sport co-ordinated by **sportscotland**, identified a need for a significant number of additional sports halls. Some of these are obviously in areas where there is no indoor hall provision, but in many urban areas there is a need either for greater access to existing halls or the construction of new ones. The provision of a commercial 5-a-side centre could help to reduce the need for sports halls in some areas. Against this, it could also lead to a reduction in the use of existing full size ATPs for small-sided football.

Maximising usage

The key factors in maximising usage of outdoor 5-a-side football facilities are likely to include:

- good playing facilities and lighting which meet players' expectations
- a well-organised league programme – this encourages regular play by teams and evens out the peaks and troughs of casual demand
- providing a referee for matches.

Value for money

Compared with many sports, 5-a-side football – especially at commercially operated facilities – is relatively expensive. In most categories of expenditure, however, those in social groups C2DE spent more on their participation than

those in groups ABC1. The greatest difference lay in the amount spent on drinks at the venue, with those in groups C2DE spending a third more than those in groups ABC1. In spite of this, players from groups C2DE rated value for money as marginally higher than those in groups ABC1.

The average amount spent on 'playing fees' was significantly higher for specialist 5-a-side football than almost all other sports activities at typical local authority facilities. This suggests that it is not price but players' preferences and perceptions of value for money that most determine their choice of activity and facility. This could have significant implications for the marketing of other activities – and ultimately the net cost of local authority facilities.

Social inclusion

5-a-side football appears to have a wide appeal, with the social profile of players significantly biased towards social class C2 (skilled manual workers) when compared with many other sports. In addition, there are few other sports in which the proportion of participants in the DE social groups (semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers, casual workers and pensioners and widowers) is broadly comparable with the proportion of participants in the AB groups (higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional).

The final word

The popularity of 5-a-side football is well known and amply confirmed by this study. Moreover, without the specialist outdoor facilities it is clear that there would be a need for significantly more sports halls in South Lanarkshire than exist at present. As such, the specialist outdoor facilities are contributing not only to the expansion of participation in 5-a-side football but also, indirectly, to other indoor sports by freeing time and space in indoor halls which could be used for these other activities.

There are perhaps two surprising findings from this research: the low level of participation in 5-a-side football by both junior and women players. Junior players – at least those under the age of 12 – of course have their own form of the game in Soccer Sevens, which tends to be organised on natural grass on Saturday or Sunday mornings. In addition, they may not find it easy to fit in further games of small-sided football at other times, and many will be dependent on parents for transport to playing facilities. This will obviously limit their availability. The lack of women players is more difficult to explain, given the rapid growth of women's participation in the game recently, albeit from a very low base. However, there would seem to be significant potential for growth in women's 5-a-side football – a conclusion obviously shared by the commercial operators, who normally provide women's changing in their centres.

Finally, social inclusion seems to be more of a reality in 5-a-side football than many other sports – even those which are generally cheaper and easier to organise such as swimming or badminton.

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