

'OF COURSE IT'S A GOOD IDEA....BUT....': CHANGING THE NON-PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL SEASON IN SCOTLAND

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Abstract

AIM OF PAPER

This abstract sets out research commissioned to inform the start of a substantial and significant change in non-professional football in Scotland – a move to summer football. The overall aim of the study was to assess the feasibility of changing the season for non-professional football and to identify associated practical issues.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The debate about summer football is raised in Scotland annually following periods of poor weather that result in matches at all levels being cancelled. There is, however, not a universal desire for change and opponents of summer football have focused their arguments on tradition and the culture of football in Scotland and the need for 'something' to help with the bleak winter months. Waddell, Cummings and Worely (2000) have identified how the management of change should include five key aspects including the need to motivate a desire for change; building a shared vision about what the change should be and developing a support base that includes key stakeholders. Lewin's (1951) classic model of change sets out three stages of change, which are unfreezing the organisation to motive change; implementing the change and then returning the organisation to stability (freezing). In commissioning this research, Scottish Football Association (SFA) sought to establish whether there is a desire for change and what that change should 'look like'. This research also begins the 'unfreezing process' (Lewin, 1951) associated with the introduction of substantial change by seeking evidence and information to inform the debate and consequently attempt to overcome associated resistance with communication and consultation (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

METHODOLOGY

Cognisant of the strength of feeling amongst the opposing sides, rather

than dealing explicitly with summer football, the research investigated the following three scenarios:

Fixture Scenario 1: Traditional season (August to May)

Fixture Scenario 2: Extended season to include a winter shutdown (4-6 week off)

Fixture Scenario 3: New season – summer football (March to October)

A mixed method approach was taken to the research and the first phase involved a systematic review of existing literature to allow consideration of generic issues impacting on fixture calendars. A range of key search words, such as playing surface, injury, weather and ‘called off’ were used singularly and in combination to identify potentially relevant pieces of literature. Interviews, surveys and focus groups were then held with key stakeholder groups, including the affiliated National Associations, players, coaches, administrators, referees, local authority pitch managers and ‘groundsmen’ and sportscotland. The surveys were analysed using SPSS, while the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and subject to manual content analysis to identify preferences, barriers, advantages and implications and solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four key findings emerged from the research. First, there is no documented evidence or research to support one season over another. Second, there is an appetite for summer football. It is not wholehearted, nor widespread, but is present amongst all stakeholder groups, at all levels of the game. It is also apparent that those who are ‘closer to the pitch’ are more supportive of change. Second, it is also clear that there is significant resistance to change that should not be underestimated. Any change to a summer season will change the way that players, coaches, administrators and local authorities live their lives. Finally, the availability of pitches should not be assumed as a barrier to change – a significant finding for the research as this was perceived to be a major area of resistance to change.

This research raised the possibility of change within the non-professional game, however, it is not clear that there is a shared vision of what the change should look like (Waddel et al., 2000). Nor is it clear that there is any substantial motivation for change (Lewin, 1951; Waddel et al., 2000). However, the research did provide evidence to undermine a number of keys areas of resistance to change, which is necessary should any change be introduced (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). As the support of local authorities for change is most paramount, the next action in this ‘unfreezing phase’ of the process is to consult more fully with all local authorities to fully test the potential for a change of season.

References

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