



**Post-Covid Grassroots Football and
Youth Soccer Report**

2020

01 INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the Coronavirus pandemic is a defining event in societies across the world. The loss of lives, livelihoods and the effect of lockdown will be profound. In the scheme of things, grassroots football¹ is a minor cultural aspect but, nevertheless, it is important to millions of players and their families. A recent study² shows 80% of parents reported a decrease in their children's wellbeing due to the lack of youth sport during lockdown.

I accept that it may be some time before pre-Covid conditions exist. But I wanted to find out from those involved in the sport, what they thought the trends would be if and when some element of normality returns.

I, therefore, invited a sample of my colleagues in the three regions where I work—Europe, Asia and North America—to complete a short survey. I am very grateful for their responses and for agreeing to publish their remarks in this report.

In her book "On Trend",³ Devon Powers notes that "people who know their business, consult, research and are well connected are (unsurprisingly) pretty good at seeing where things might go."

In "Anatomy of a Trend",⁴ Henrik Vejlgard describes a trend as "a prediction of something that is going to happen not something that has happened".

Grassroots football, like grassroots sport is dynamic. This report is, therefore, a summary of what people, who are engaged in grassroots football, predict is likely to happen post-Covid.

The final section of the report also asks you to consider your "post-Covid plan"—how will your club, business, charity, school, programme or your Association exploit the opportunities of these likely trends to provide grassroots football for more players?

Put simply, identifying trends can help spot opportunities, or as Devon Power writes, "trends are the fuel which power innovation".

Robin Russell
www.sportspath.com

¹For clarification Grassroots Football is football (soccer) which isn't professional or Academy/Youth Development Football. Male and Female and all ages. Youth Soccer is a simple reference to Grassroots Football in North America for those Under 18 years of age.

² <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/coronavirus-information/news/not-just-a-game-nearly-80-per-cent-of-parents-report-decrease-in-childrens-wellbeing-due-to-lack-of-youth-sport-during-lockdown>

³Devon Powers, On Trend: The Business of Forecasting the Future, (University of Illinois Press; First Edition, October 9, 2019)

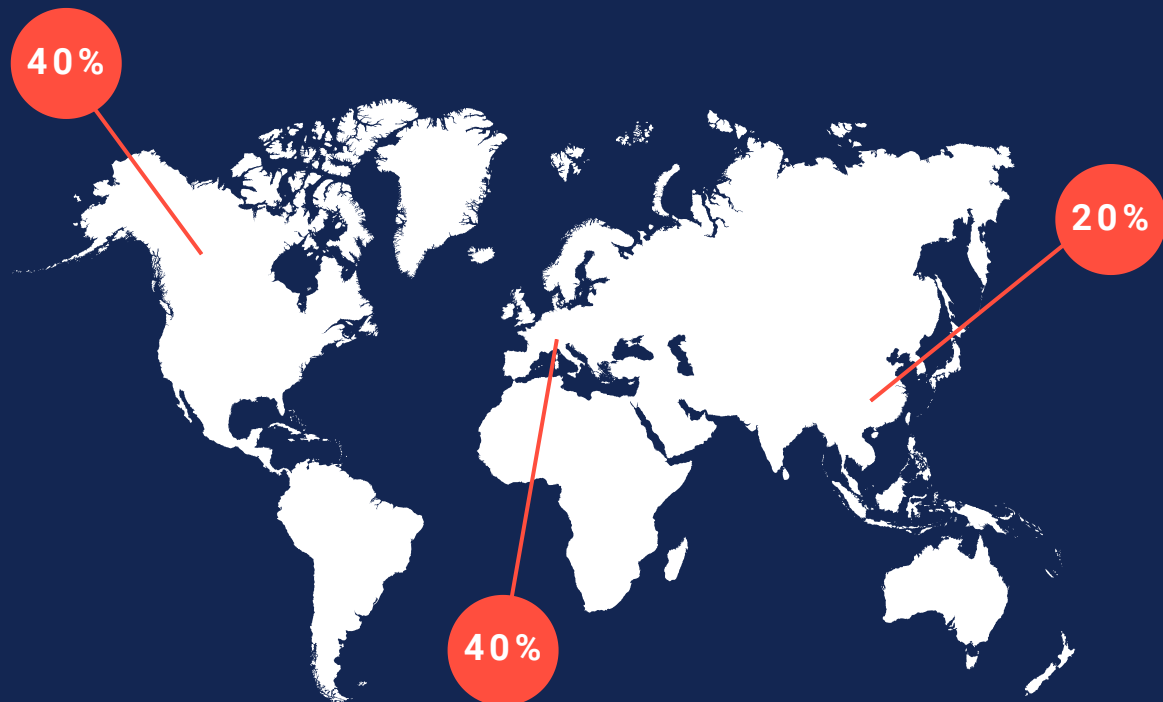
⁴ Henrik Vejlgard, Anatomy of Trend, (McGraw-Hill; First Edition, August 27, 2007)

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02 SUMMARY

A GLOBAL VIEW



200 Grassroots Managers, Technical Directors, Directors of Coaching, CEOs and Grassroots Coaches responded from more than **25 countries** in **North America**, **Europe** and **Asia**.



Two thirds of respondents believe there will be a decrease in the number of registered players post-Covid.

75%

Of respondents believe the demand for low cost, local programmes will increase.

88%

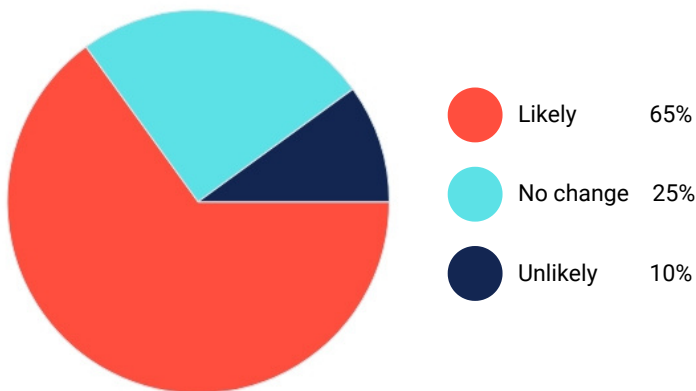
Of participants in the survey believe there will be greater demand for online education.

03 MAJOR FINDINGS

Identified as likely trends once grassroots football/youth soccer resumes after lockdown.

3.1 Health, safety and hygiene

"There will be more emphasis on the value of football for health and social activity."



“Clubs will be more conscious of hygiene of players and coaches.”

Úlfar Hinriksson, Coach Breidablik FC Iceland and formerly with the Icelandic Football Federation (KSÍ)

“In society in general and in the sports sector in particular, more attention will be paid to hygiene and health. Sports clubs may be required to take specific measures for their athletes, whether or not imposed by the government or federation.”

Stefan Verheyen, Grassroots manager, Flemish Wing, Royal Belgium, Football Association

3.2 Mental health

“There is a greater need in coaches for understanding mental health and wellbeing of young people.”

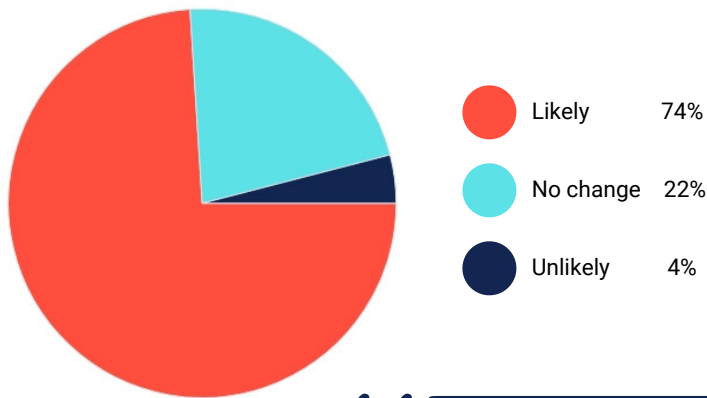
Nick Levett, Head of Coaching at UK Coaching, UK

“Consider the impact on players' mental health e.g. the fear factor to normalise life on and off the field.”

Anju Turambekar, Technical Director, Dempo SC, Goa, India

3.3 Cost

"There will be an increased demand for low cost programmes."



“Recreation programs will flourish as families look for the cheap alternative to "competitive" soccer.

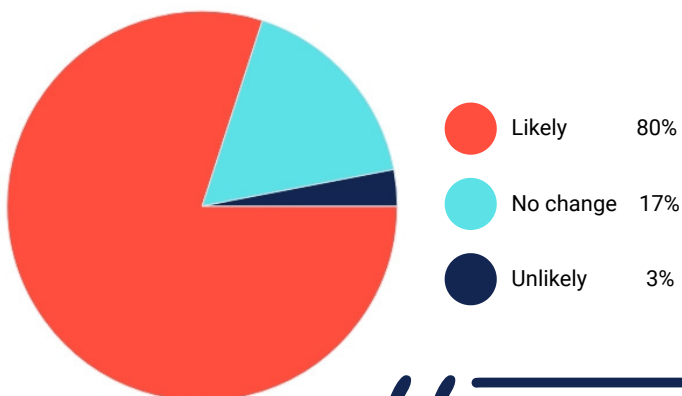
Crag Warner, Executive Director Idaho Youth Soccer Association, USA

“There will be financial challenges when some of the parents/families have lost their jobs or have suffered layoffs.

Timo Huttunen, Deputy General Secretary/ Director of Club Services, Football Association of Finland

3.4 Location

"There will be an increased demand for Local Programmes."



“Simplify the process. Local play. Try to get schools and parks/rec involved.

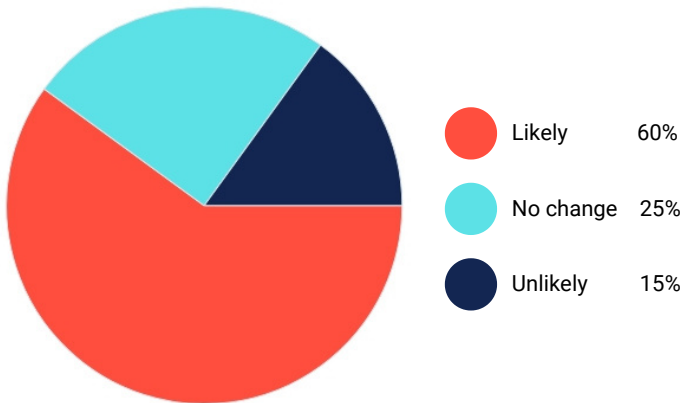
Matt Madeira, Executive Director Minnesota Youth Soccer Association

“More hyper local systems: More day long festivals over leagues. More mixed aged football that is informal.& More facilitators than coaches.

Richard Hood Head Coach, Bengalru United FC, former Head of Player Development, All India Football Association

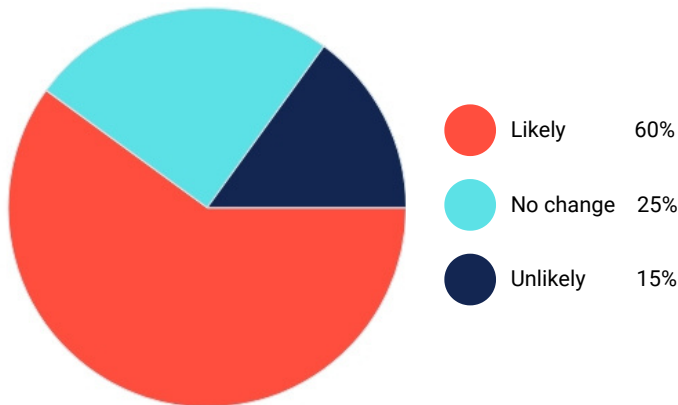
3.5 The role of grassroots/soccer clubs

"More clubs will amalgamate."



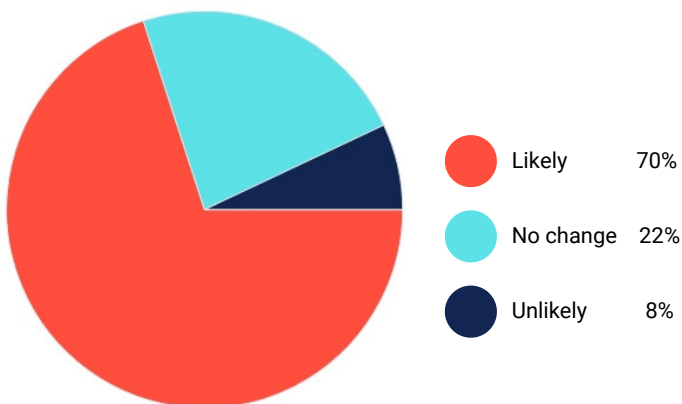
“
There will be a consolidation of the US youth soccer market.
Burton Haimes, former Chair and President of the American Youth Soccer Organization & Board Director, US Soccer
”

"More clubs will cooperate to pool resources."



“
I anticipate that clubs will begin to change their culture to a long-term transitional club designed for the overall development of the child as a partner vs. the short-term transactional club where the club is looked upon as a vendor. The Covid Impact seems to be causing clubs to be more introspective.
Dave Guthrie, Executive Director, Indiana Soccer Association
”

"Increased difficulty in obtaining the services of Volunteers"



04 ESTIMATED EFFECT ON THE NUMBER OF PLAYERS

-  Likely
-  No change
-  Unlikely

“ In August, when we are submitting teams for the autumn season, it looks like there's a 20% decline in numbers of teams. Clubs are reluctant to submit their teams and choose to only have training sessions in their clubs.

Alf Hansen, Director of Development, Norwegian Football Association ”

Increase in the number of registered grassroots players



Decrease of up to 10%



Decrease between 10-20%



Decrease of 20% +



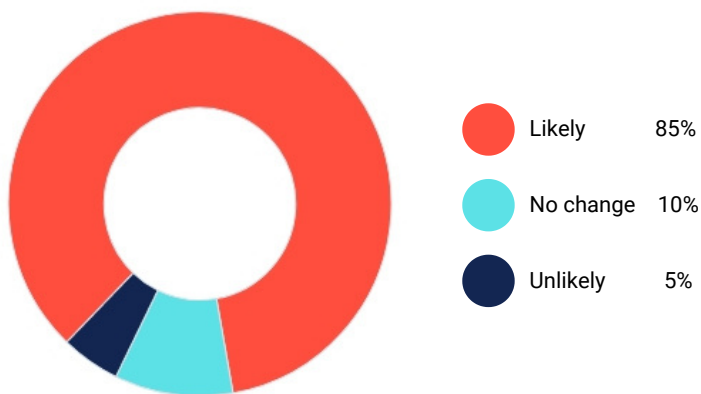
The Aspen Institute Project Play Initiative's National Survey with parents in the USA (in conjunction with Utah State University) reported in June: <https://www.aspenprojectplay.org/>.

"Only 53% of parents expect their child to resume sports activity at the same or higher amount when current restrictions are removed. That's down from 70% in early May from a similar survey by North Carolina State University in partnership with Project Play" and "just 44% of parents in June were comfortable with their child participating in travel, elite and club competitions against teams located outside their city or county, down from 52% in May."

05 LIKELY TRENDS TO INCREASE REGULAR SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION

5.1 Parents

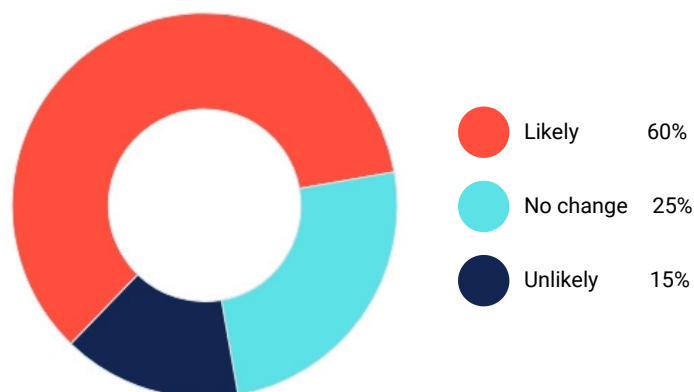
"Clubs will continue to maintain significant digital contact with parents even after the lockdown."



“There will be a need for more local programs with volunteer coaches and for increased parent coach education (face-to-face and online).

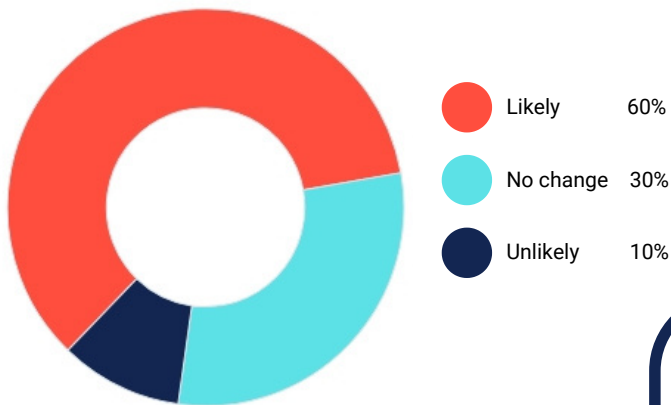
Dave Carr, Associate Professor and Coordinator of Coaching Education at Ohio University, USA

"With parents required to maintain social distancing between parent groups and from the field of play, there is an opportunity that spectator behaviour improves."



5.2 Flexibility

"There will be a demand for more Grassroots Festivals for teams in one day rather than Leagues over a period of time."



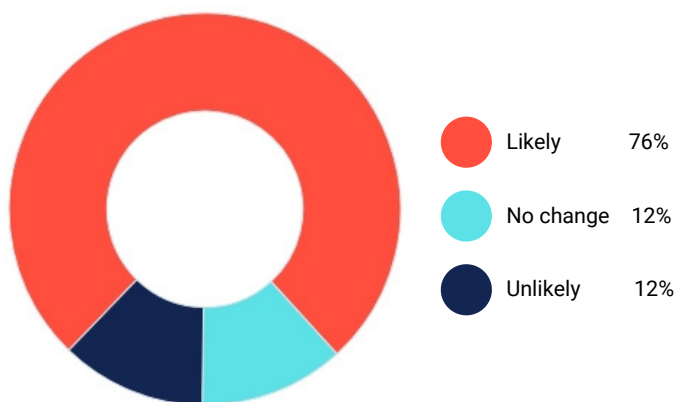
“ I think there will be shorter, more condensed seasons to balance out the lack of ability to potentially complete a full season.

Chris Yiu, Grassroots Manager, Hong Kong FA ”

“ Associations and clubs must become more flexible. If there is a 2nd wave, they must be able to switch quickly to the new situation (and back). This mainly concerns organising trainings for the clubs and competitions for the associations. Fast switching also means supporting digital processes. And social media is becoming increasingly important in the communication with players and parents by coaches and leaders.

Piet Hubers, UEFA Grassroots Consultant & Participation Mentor ”

"Clubs need to provide different payment options for parents e.g. monthly, bi-monthly."

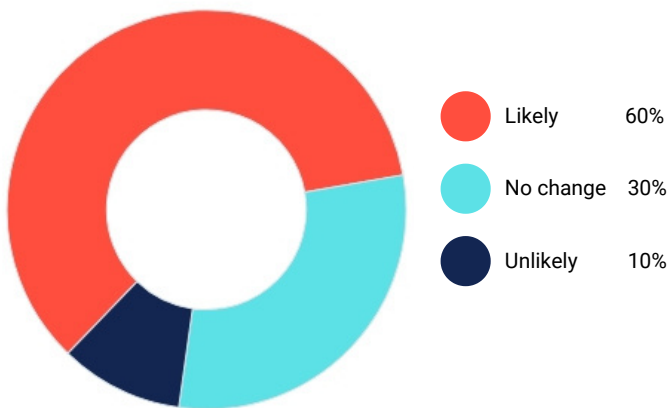


“ Short term - parents will be happier for their children to miss football matches in favour for other family activities (e.g. weekend trips away).

Gareth Long, Director of Program Innovation & Development at The Australian College of Physical Education & Youth Technical Director, Stanmore Hawks FC, New South Wales, Australia ”

5.3 Free play

"More clubs and organisations providing organised "Free Play" for young players where they pick their own teams and organise themselves to play."



“Facilitate different forms and ways of football and get away from the more traditional approach. And start this by letting the youngsters tell what they would like to see and in regards to playing football again after the lockdown.”

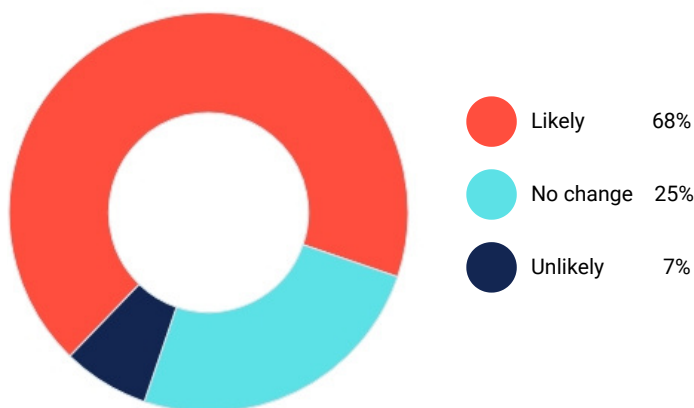
Jorg van der Breggen, Director of Football Development, KNVB (Dutch FA)

"Give the children free opportunity to play, less rules during practices, increase their joy of the game." *Carl Darlington, Head of Coach Education, FA of Wales*

"Let them play as much as possible during training. Lots of free play." *Manni Klar, Sport Director Albuquerque United Football Club, New Mexico, USA*

5.4 Training and Practice

"The need for more variety in training structures."



“Return them to the love of the game and socialization. Be explicit with schedules and certainty. DO NOT be a drill sergeant or amateur psychologist, but be a coach, and facilitator. Make return to play a safe and fun space for the kids.”

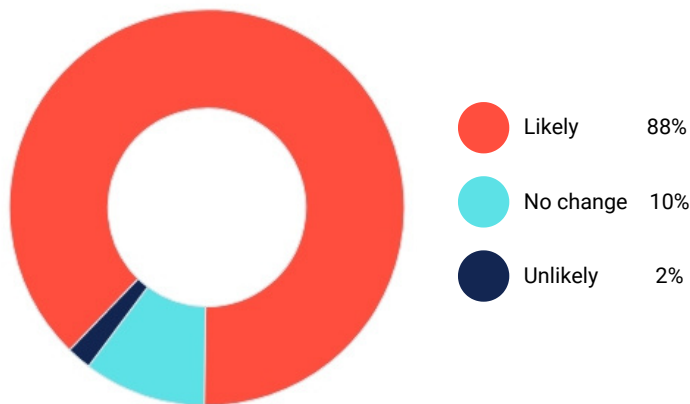
Ian Barker, Director of Coaching Education Products & Programs at United Soccer Coaches (formerly NSCAA), USA

"More organic, less structured, less time, free play environments." *Scott Snyder, National Director of Programs & Education, AYSO*

"Small Group Training sessions, where you could implement small sided games to older ages and actually implement the games based on Q1, 2, 3 and 4 to try and counteract the ongoing issue of RAE." *Niall O'Regan, Head of Coach Education Football Association of Ireland, Republic of Ireland*

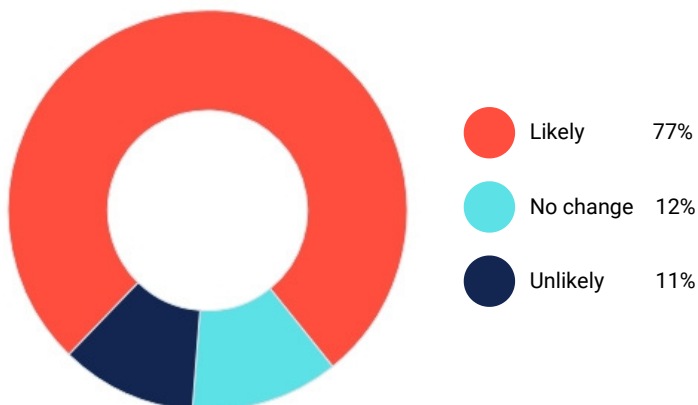
5.5 Education of coaches, volunteers and players

"There will be more demand for online coach education as increased reluctance of adults to give up time to take part in face to face grassroots coach education especially for indoor theory sessions."



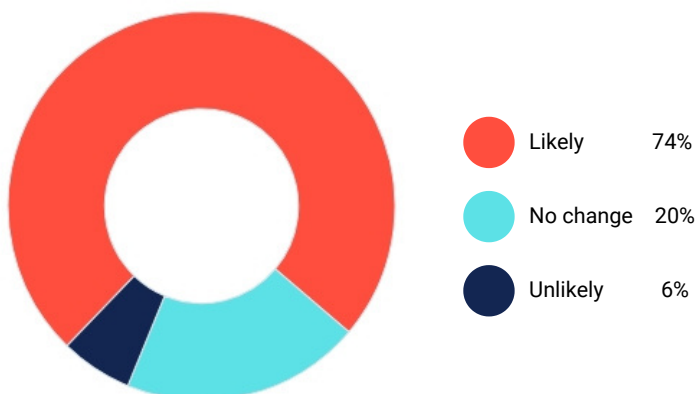
“
More blended learning where clubs utilise online tools for coaching limiting in person contact.
Dai Redwood, Executive Director at Fremont Youth Soccer Club, California, USA.
”

"Coaches maintaining significant digital contact with players even after the lockdown between practices and games."



“
Due to the increased usage of internet to connect people through Zoom meeting/online course, the international network of people exchanging information will increase.
Tsuyoshi Takano, Manager of Club Support & Head of Coach Education and Development, J League, Japan.
”

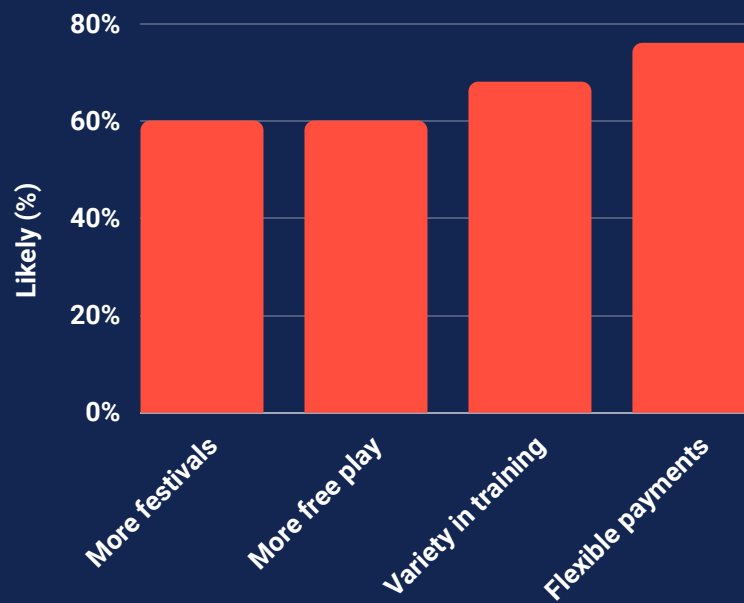
"Using Digital tools to make volunteering quicker, easier & more effective"



06 KEY SECTOR OPPORTUNITIES

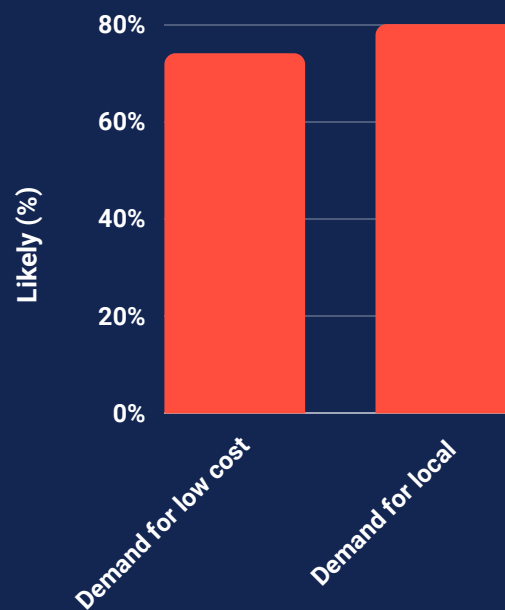
6.1 Free and flexible play

"Likelihood of clubs offering more free/flexible play."



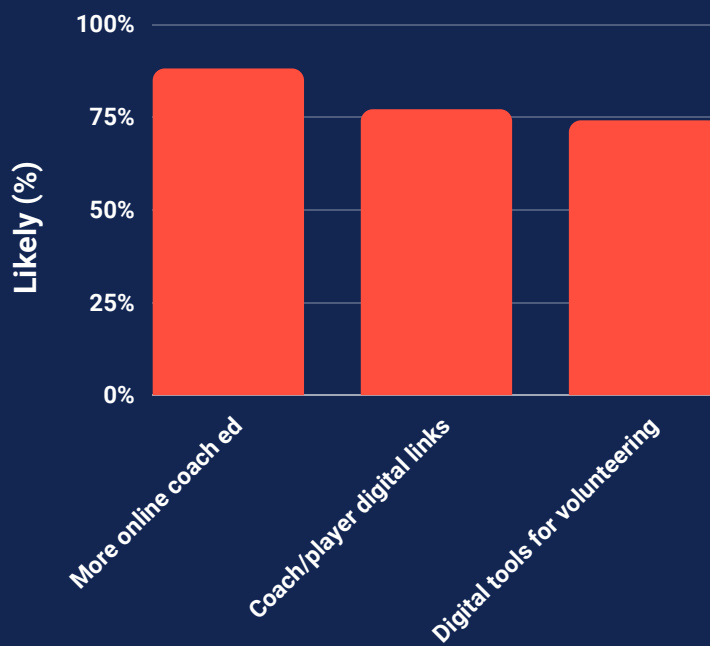
6.2 Low cost and local programmes

"Likelihood of demand for low cost or local programmes."

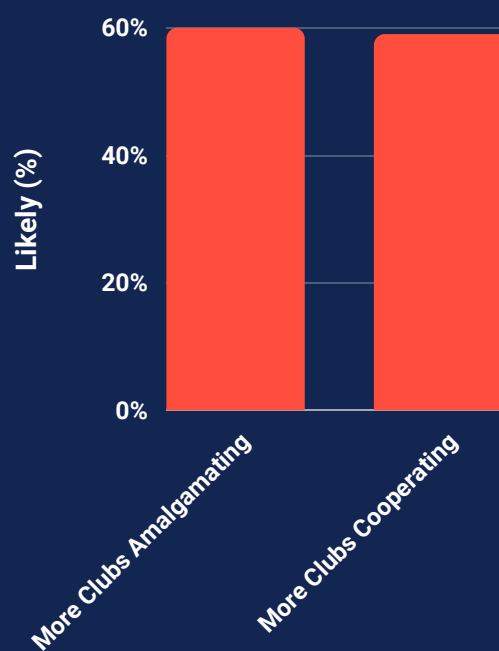


6.3 Online education

"Demand for online education for grassroots coaches, volunteers and players."



6.4 Club networks



07 NINE ANTICIPATED SHIFTS IN GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

1 Why every brand now needs to behave like a health and wellness brand.⁶

Managing Risk: it's not possible to manage uncertainty but it is possible to manage risk. Look out for parents searching for safety protocols per club, per programme and per team e.g. SportsEngine,⁷ TeamSnap⁸ and GotSoccer.⁹

See the case study below from the Alf Hansen at the Norwegian Football Association:

“

Our strategy has been to "show how to live with corona for months," we knew we would have local break outs, and we have prepared our clubs to meet the challenges. Our "corona guideline" is quite advanced and contains all sides of precautions a club and player must take. It has proved successful for clubs in areas of local break outs.

One of the cornerstones in our strategy, is an educational module on Covid 19 for football, through e-learning. We have made it mandatory for all players above 13 yrs to do it. They have to log in with their personal ID and do the course. It has three sections, first an introduction to the virus and how it spreads, second how football must handle the situation, and finally an "exam" with a diploma as result. We can track who has done the module and the club must check if all players have completed the exam before they are allowed to play. After a week, 70,000 players have gone through it. The potential is 100,000 more. In addition, after demand from some of the regional school ministries, we are launching a "Football federations C19 module for schools," it is an adjusted version of our concept directed to schools.

”

For further details see: <https://www.fotball.no/tema/nff-nyheter/viktig-informasjone-vedrorende-koronavirus/>

2 Early Learning in safe small groups using football as a medium to enhance social interaction, coordination, physical activity and self esteem e.g. <https://www.soccershots.org/>

⁶ The Fast Company 08-11-20

⁷ <https://www.sportsengine.com/return-to-play>

⁸ <https://www.sporttechie.com/teamsnap-adds-covid-19-screening-feature-for-youth-sports>

⁹ <https://www.soccertoday.com/gotsoccers-solution-to-playing-youth-soccer-games-with-social-distance-due-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

- 3** Free or low cost, local, drop-in/drop out flexible soccer in "smaller social bubbles" – coeducational with mixed ages, e.g. <https://www.salisburyroversfc.co.uk/> and <https://www.joyofthepeople.org/> or in another sports Flag Football <https://nflflag.com/> – see also the article in Medium.¹⁰
- 4** More adult self-organised, informal football, probably using dedicated social media apps like: www.fubles.com.
- 5** The continued popularity of girls and women's football helped by innovative programmes like UEFA's Playmakers Programme: <https://www.uefa.com/playmakers/en>.
- 6** Simpler and more effective online learning to support coach education examples like FA Learning's Playmaker.¹¹
- 7** Using data and surveys with parents and players: combining pre and post-season surveys for parents and coaches, player evaluations with tracking the growth and retention rates of individual players, e.g. <http://satorisoccer.org/>.
- 8** Key User Reviews:¹²
90% of customers read at least one online review before deciding to visit a business. Almost two-thirds of shoppers think that online reviews are an essential part of the decision making process.¹³
An example of an online review service in soccer would be:
<https://www.tipevo.com/home>.
- 9** Grassroots Club Accreditation
Clusters of Clubs, Associations and Leagues increasing the growth of Grassroots Club Accreditation Programmes, see examples here: <https://sportspath.typepad.com/sports-path-e-learning-bl/grassroots-club-accreditation-overview-.html>

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/@brettniebling/the-extinction-of-play-u-s-soccer-75776b311fe3>

¹¹ <https://www.thefa.com/learning/courses/the-fa-playmaker>

¹² <https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/>

¹³ <https://mention.com/en/blog/online-reviews/>

08 WHAT IS YOUR POST-COVID PLAN?

We think the situation is an opportunity for a Grassroots Football Participation RE-SET

Whether you are a Programme Organiser, Administrator, DOC, Technical Director, Social Entrepreneur or Business Owner we would suggest that your post-Covid plan should focus on targeting these 4 groups:

1. 'Re-starts'

Regularly played before Covid and are committed players.

2. 'Returners'

Stopped regularly playing before the pandemic.

3. 'Renewers'

Played previously, occasionally and informally, not as registered players.

4. 'Reachers'

Had never really played grassroots football.

From our experience in England from the 1980s & 1990s and in reviewing the success of programmes in Europe, Asia and North America from the 1990s, the one common theme to the successful growth of grassroots football has been "innovation" and indeed "disruptive innovation".

Coined in the 1990s by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen, "disruptive innovation" describes a process by which a product or service initially takes root in simple applications at the bottom of the market – typically by being less expensive & more accessible.

We think the committed "Restarts" will be largely enthusiastic to restart their participation, but we believe that the most significant opportunities for post-Covid growth in grassroots football will be to attract those non-consumers as identified as groups 2, 3 & 4 above. Please also refer to the Sports Path paper on "The Relative Age Effect (RAE) and Post-Covid Grassroots Football Participation".

We at Sports Path will be launching a new online course in October 2020 based on "Innovation in Grassroots Football". If learners complete the course within 4 weeks, there will be no fee. For further information, go to www.sportspath.com > Online Courses.



www.sportspath.com

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