



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE WILDERNESS.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE BADGE.

Nobody plans to become a grassroots coach. Your kid starts playing, the club needs a volunteer, and suddenly it's you. This paper is about what happens next, and why we leave a million volunteers to work it out alone.

FOR COACHES · CLUBS · COUNTY FAS

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1 THE MOMENT

I know how it goes because I lived it.

I set up a not-for-profit coaching girls' football. It started with five girls on one pitch. Within a year it was twenty, then a hundred, then somewhere between five hundred and eight hundred boys and girls playing with us every single week. Some had disabilities. Some were carrying mental health struggles nobody had words for yet. Most just wanted to play football with their mates on a Saturday morning.

You cannot grow that fast on the people you started with, and we didn't. We grew on parents. I watched it happen dozens of times, and it always followed the same script. A mum or dad stands on the touchline for a few weeks. Someone asks them to take the warm-up because we're a coach short. A month later they have a squad of their own, a bag of kit and a fixture list, because no one else would do it and they couldn't bear to see the kids let down.

To be fair to them, and to the system, they did everything that was asked. They completed the online coaching course. They did the safeguarding module. They sat the first aid course. They got the badge. And then the structured learning stopped, and the season started.

What comes next is the bit nobody talks about. A wet Sunday morning. Fifteen kids of wildly different abilities, some who live for it and some whose parents just needed the hour. A pile of bibs, a bag of balls, a rectangle of grass, and thirty adults watching from the touchline. No session plan. No curriculum. No one to ask. The course finished weeks ago and the season stretches out until May.

"We were given 15 kids, 15 bibs and 15 balls and told to go and get on with it."

A FELLOW VOLUNTEER COACH

That line has stayed with me for years, and not because it was bitter. It wasn't. It was said with a shrug, the way you describe weather. He wasn't complaining about his club, and neither am I; nobody at a grassroots club is to blame for this. The clubs are run by the same exhausted volunteers. The line stayed with me because it describes, precisely and without drama, what the system is designed to do: qualify you, congratulate you, and leave.

I call what comes after the badge the wilderness. This paper is about how big it is, why the current answer doesn't reach it, and what it would take to bring every volunteer out of it.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

The wilderness is not a hard-luck story from one club. It is the standard operating condition of British grassroots sport, and the numbers say it is getting worse, not better.

62%

of youth sport coaching in the UK is delivered by volunteers

UK Coaching Population Study, 2024

-1.7m

fewer sport volunteers in England than at the 2016-17 peak

Sport England, 2024

44→38%

the falling share of coaches who are women, 2022 to 2024

UK Coaching, 2024

3.1m

adults, 6% of the UK, coached sport in the last 12 months

UK Coaching, 2024

THE WORKFORCE IS VOLUNTEERS, AND IT IS THINNING

Start with who actually delivers youth sport in this country. Not academies, not paid professionals: volunteers. Roped-in parents deliver 62% of all youth coaching in the UK. Around 3.1 million adults, 6% of the UK adult population, coached sport in the last 12 months. That is the workforce standing in the wilderness.

And it is shrinking. England has 10.5 million sport volunteers, generating an estimated £8.2 billion a year in social value, but that is 1.7 million fewer than at the 2016-17 peak. Every one of those missing volunteers is a team that folded, a session that stopped, a kid who lost their Saturday.

WHO LEAVES FIRST

The losses are not evenly spread. Between 2022 and 2024 the share of coaches who are women fell from 44% to 38%. Over the same period the paid share of coaching rose from 38% to 53%: the top of the pyramid is professionalising while the volunteer base underneath it thins. The people most likely to walk away are exactly the people grassroots sport most needs to keep.

AGAINST THE VALUE AT STAKE

£15.9bn

grassroots football's annual social and economic value to England

The FA Grassroots Strategy, 2024

£3.2bn

of that is annual savings to the NHS

The FA, 2024

1m+

people work or volunteer in grassroots football

The FA, 2024

£5.8bn

their annual contribution to the game

The FA, 2024

The FA's own Grassroots Strategy values grassroots football at £15.9 billion a year in social and economic value, up from £10.2 billion in 2021, including £3.2 billion in annual NHS savings, carried by more than a million people whose work and volunteering it values at £5.8 billion a year. Hold those two pictures together: a sector valued in the tens of billions, delivered at the coalface by unpaid parents whose entire structured preparation was a few weeks long. That mismatch is the subject of the rest of this paper.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWER FAILS

Let me be precise about what a new volunteer coach in football is actually given, because the detail matters, and because none of what follows is a criticism of the course itself.

THE PATHWAY AS IT REALLY IS

The old FA Level 1 has been discontinued. Today's entry point is the Introduction to Coaching Football: a digital course of around four weeks, made up of e-learning modules, live webinars and a short online assessment. Bundled with it come the Safeguarding Children course and the Introduction to First Aid in Football. Complete those and you are qualified to stand in front of a squad. The next formal rung on the ladder is the UEFA C licence, a serious commitment of time and money that the overwhelming majority of volunteer parents will never make, and were never expected to.

Credit where it is due: the course is accessible, sensibly designed and honest about its own scope. The clue is in the name. It is an introduction. The failure is not the badge. The failure is that, for most volunteers, the badge is the last structured thing that ever happens to them as a coach.

FOUR WEEKS AGAINST FORTY

Do the maths on what we are asking. The course is measured in weeks; the job is measured in seasons. A grassroots season runs roughly forty weeks, with training in midweek and a match at the weekend. That is somewhere near eighty contact sessions a year, each one needing a plan, a progression and a point, delivered to a squad whose abilities span from county trialist to first-time player. A four-week introduction cannot cover a forty-week season, and it was never designed to. Yet nothing arrives afterwards to fill the gap: no season plan, no session-by-session structure, no feedback on whether any of it is working.

THE CLASSROOM AND THE CAR PARK

Here is the strangest part. The methodology exists, and the FA teaches it. Every coaching course covers the four corners model: the technical, physical, psychological and social development of the whole player. It is a genuinely good framework. But between the classroom where it is taught and the wet Sunday morning where it is needed, there is no delivery mechanism at all. I have looked hard, and I have yet to find a platform that systematically puts the four corners into a volunteer's hands, session by session, at grassroots level, despite it being taught on every FA coaching course.

So the framework stays in the classroom, and the coach improvises in the car park: half-remembered drills from their own childhood, videos found the night before, whatever worked last week. The kids get inconsistent coaching through nobody's fault, the coach quietly concludes they are not really a coach, and both drift away.

The qualification is real and valuable, and it ends on the day delivery begins. The problem is not the badge. It is the silence after it.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

A badge is a licence to start learning, not a curriculum. Every volunteer deserves the session-by-session structure an academy coach gets, because their players are somebody's whole world.

An academy coach walks into every session with a syllabus behind them: a season plan, a block plan, tonight's objectives, a record of every player's progress. A volunteer with the same fifteen kids gets none of it. The principle is simple and it does not depend on us: treat the qualification as the start of a coach's education, and put a real curriculum around everything that follows. Any club, county FA or governing body could adopt it tomorrow. It looks like this.

1

A PLAN FOR EVERY SESSION

Not a drill library to rummage through at 10pm, but a structured answer to "what should this squad work on this week", laddered to where they are in the season.

2

THE WHOLE ATHLETE

The frameworks the courses already teach, technical, physical, psychological and social, plus the person underneath, delivered on the pitch and not left in the classroom.

3

BUILT FOR VOLUNTEER TIME

Minutes, not evenings. Anything that asks a volunteer for paperwork after a full day's work and two hours of coaching will simply not be done.

4

PACED TO THE SEASON

A four-week course cannot cover a forty-week season, so the structure must run the full forty weeks, block by block, the way the season actually unfolds.

5

THE PLAYER'S VOICE INCLUDED

Development is a conversation, not a verdict. The player's own sense of their progress belongs in the record alongside the coach's observation.

5 THE BUILD

This is what we built PERFORM to be: the curriculum in the coach's pocket. It covers 47 sports, each aligned to its governing body's development pathway. In football that means the FA's four corners, plus a fifth pillar, Personal, because the kid who learns to organise their own kit bag is learning something no corner covers. Every squad gets a full season of structure, split into four-week blocks that follow the real calendar, from the first session in pre-season to the last game in spring, across seven levels from a child's first ever session to elite.

The loop is deliberately light. Players answer a couple of preparation questions before a session and reflect briefly afterwards. The coach adds an evaluation in 30 seconds on a touchline, not 30 minutes at a kitchen table. Each rating sits on a five-rung confidence ladder, from Foundation to Confident: a measure of how sure the player feels, not a verdict on mastery, so a nervous ten-year-old and a county trialist can both see themselves climbing.

And it is free. Not free for a trial period, not free until the club grows: free for every club, team, school and coach, forever. No card. No catch. The wilderness exists because structure was only ever built for the coaches somebody paid for. Pricing volunteers out of it again would rebuild the problem we set out to fix.

6 THE INVITATION

I wrote this paper because I still see that volunteer with the fifteen kids and the bag of bibs every weekend, at every club, in every sport. Here is what I am asking, depending on where you stand.

1

IF YOU COACH A TEAM

PERFORM is free for you and your squad this season, and it always will be. No card. No catch. Set your squad up at shotclubhouse.com, run the Prepare and Reflect loop for one four-week block, and see what changes on your Sunday mornings.

2

IF YOU CHAIR A CLUB

Your volunteers are your club, and most of them are in the wilderness right now. Give every coach at your club the same season structure at no cost, per coach or otherwise, and take this paper to your next committee meeting as the case for doing it.

3

IF YOU RUN A COUNTY FA

You already teach the framework. Help us close the gap between the classroom and Sunday morning. PERFORM delivers the four corners methodology your courses teach, and I would like to put it in the hands of every newly qualified coach in your county. Talk to us.

None of this requires you to believe in us. It requires you to believe what the numbers on page three already say: that the volunteers carrying a £15.9 billion game deserve more than four weeks of preparation and a wave goodbye. The wilderness is not inevitable. It is just unbuilt.

The parents who got roped in at my club a decade ago were never the problem. They were the best thing grassroots sport has: people who turned up, badge in hand, ready to learn, for someone else's kids as much as their own. What happens after the badge is up to the rest of us.

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SOURCES

Every statistic in this paper is cited below at claim level. Where a claim is experience rather than measurement, it is flagged as such.

- UK Coaching, Coaching in the UK Population Study, 2024: 62% of youth sport coaching in the UK is delivered by volunteers; 6% of UK adults, around 3.1 million people, coached sport in the last 12 months; the share of coaches who are women fell from 44% to 38% between 2022 and 2024; the paid share of coaching rose from 38% to 53% over the same period.
- Sport England, volunteering in sport data, November 2024: 10.5 million sport volunteers in England, an estimated £8.2 billion a year in social value, and 1.7 million fewer volunteers than at the 2016-17 peak.
- The FA, Grassroots Football Strategy 2024-2028 (October 2024): grassroots football's total social and economic value to England of £15.9 billion a year, up from £10.2 billion in 2021, including £3.2 billion a year in NHS savings; more than one million people working or volunteering in grassroots football, contributing £5.8 billion a year.
- The FA, coaching pathway documentation (FA support pages, accessed 2026): the Introduction to Coaching Football as the entry qualification (digital, around four weeks, e-learning, live webinars and a short online assessment), bundled with the Safeguarding Children course and the Introduction to First Aid in Football; the UEFA C licence as the next qualification; the four corners model (technical, physical, psychological, social) as taught on FA coaching courses.

NOTES ON STORIES AND CLAIMS

The girls' football story on page two is the author's own and is told first person; the participation figures within it are recollection, not audited counts. The quoted line "We were given 15 kids, 15 bibs and 15 balls and told to go and get on with it" is reported speech from a fellow volunteer coach, shared with permission and left unattributed by agreement. The observation that no platform systematically delivers the four corners methodology at grassroots level is the author's own assessment from reviewing the market during 2025-26, offered as experience rather than a measured survey; if you know of one, we would genuinely like to hear about it.

Season length (around forty weeks) and session frequency are stated as typical for English grassroots youth football rather than as measured statistics.