



RESEARCH ON NETBALL AT STREETGAMES / US GIRLS PROJECTS May 2012

AIM OF THE REPORT

The aim of this report is to gather information about netball from a range of StreetGames/Us Girls projects throughout England in order to identify what is working well, identify key learning points and key challenges for projects. Eight projects were contacted and interviewed by phone. These findings have been based on their responses.

The following areas of information were collected:

1. Why the projects decided to deliver netball
2. The advantages of netball as a sport
3. The promotion of the sessions and engaging new young women
4. The venues for the sessions
5. The age groups at the sessions
6. The profile of the young women at the sessions
7. The best days and times for netball sessions
8. The number of participants at the sessions and retention levels
9. The format and structure of the sessions
10. The profile and style of the coach
11. The role of the coach at the netball sessions
12. The role of the clubs
13. The competitive structure
14. The 'big issues'
15. Links with the *Back to Netball* programme
16. Links with England Netball
17. Future aspirations for the sessions

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The majority of projects involved in this research study reported that netball was one of the most successful sports in their programme. Indeed, many of these projects were running netball sessions which had the 'winning combination' – the right coaches in the right venues with the right session format offering fun and the opportunity to progress.

Projects were very positive about their existing or potential involvement in England Netball's *Back to Netball* (BTN) programme. Furthermore, projects confirmed that they wanted to strengthen their links with England Netball as a national governing body and in particular identified that they would like to receive further practical on-going support for their sessions and tournaments. Many of the projects had already developed strong links with their local netball clubs. Many of these local clubs had integrated these sessions into their own programmes and were giving young women the opportunity to return to the sport, have fun, develop their skills and progress to competitive opportunities if they wanted to.

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The key to success for netball within the Us Girls programme is without doubt the strength of the local and national netball infrastructure which provides the projects with good quality playing sessions, strong links to clubs, the right style of qualified coaches, access to a high profile national programme for beginners and returners to netball and developmental competitive opportunities. The strength of this infrastructure is complemented by the nature of netball as a sport and the familiarity of netball for young women from their school days which for many of them had been a positive experience.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. WHY THE PROJECTS DECIDED TO DELIVER NETBALL: *A strong local netball infrastructure and the nature of netball as a sport.* This strong local netball infrastructure was one of the main reasons that the majority of projects chose to run netball sessions. This infrastructure consisted of local netball coaches, clubs, leagues and tournaments. Some of the project coordinators also had good links with England Netball staff or played netball themselves which gave them the confidence and motivation to work with netball. Only one project reported that they had chosen netball as a result of survey work that they had done with young women beforehand and two projects confirmed that they had run netball beforehand as regular sessions and as part of a sports taster day. All the projects agreed that the nature of netball was right for engaging young women in their programmes.

2. THE ADVANTAGES OF NETBALL AS A SPORT: *Well-suited for 'adult casuals' and 'returners'.* Project coordinators agreed that the nature of netball as a sport contributed to its success within their programmes. Netball was seen as:

- Easier to play as all young women have played it before at school. They already have an idea of how it works. Netball is often the one sport that they have enjoyed at school
- All ages, sizes and abilities can play together (great for mums, daughters and aunts to play together)
- Easier to join in and play than sports such as “badminton where it doesn’t work if you can’t hit the shuttlecock”
- Lots of fun and laughing
- When you get them there, they love it and come back.
- Non-contact sport, not like football
- More of a challenge than a typical fitness session. It’s not like being on a treadmill, you don’t realise how hard you’re working.

3. PROMOTION OF THE SESSIONS AND ENGAGING NEW YOUNG WOMEN: *word of mouth and regular council newsletters.* Projects had used a range of promotion tools for their sessions such as taster sessions in schools and colleges, leaflets, postcards, posters, Facebook, Twitter, council magazines and word of mouth. The three most successful forms of promotion were word of mouth, sending the coaches into local

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schools and colleges to promote the sessions and for projects based in the London Boroughs, their borough-wide council magazines which came out every two weeks and had on-going adverts and features about the sessions. The word of mouth aspect was seen as the most effective way of encouraging young women to come to the sessions especially where projects had local coaches who often brought young women to their sessions either from their local community or local colleges.

4. **THE VENUES FOR THE NETBALL SESSIONS: *Schools or leisure centres were best but indoor venues were a necessity for beginners during the autumn/ winter season.*** Netball sessions were usually held in two different types of venues – schools or leisure centres. Projects had different views and experiences of these types of venues but they all agreed that netball sessions for beginners or returners were best suited to indoor venues especially during cold, wet and windy weather. Projects agreed that it was great to use outdoor courts during the summer when the weather was good but that beginners and returners were unlikely to be passionate enough about playing netball to turn up to play netball outdoors in bad weather.

The majority of projects had very positive views about the use of school venues:

- Good discounts at some schools
- More private as some schools were not open to the general public on a drop-in basis, less milling around
- Better for encouraging young Muslim women to attend sessions as facilities tended to be more private and could be ‘women only’
- Easier access to outdoor courts during the summer if good weather
- BUT/ some projects had found that it was sometimes hard for young women to find the sessions on some school sites e.g. where the entrance is and then where the sports hall is as the reception areas are not always staffed at weekends.

5. **THE AGE GROUPS AT THE SESSIONS: *An open age group (with between 20-50% of participants in the 16 - 24 year age range) was important for a number of reasons.*** All the netball sessions attracted a wide age range of women from 16 to 50 years and over. They all attracted young women aged between 16-24 years and at most sessions this age group constituted between 20 to 50% of the participants.

Many of the 16-24 year old young women came with their mums, sisters and friends and it was agreed that this wide age range was important for keeping the young women coming to the sessions – sharing transport, someone to go to the session with which increased confidence and motivation. Projects also appreciated that the core of the participants at their sessions came from this broad age range and it contributed to the success of the sessions. As one project pointed out, you feel as though you stand out at a session with only four or five other people, it’s uncomfortable, but if you go to a session where there are already a dozen people, it’s easier to join in.

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6. THE PROFILE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN AT THE SESSION: A mixture of returners and adult casuals. The majority of young women at the session had played netball before at school but had not played it since. They were a mixture of 'returners' and 'adult casuals' and it was clear that these sessions were attracting the right target group. The young women at the sessions fitted this profile and included single mums, college students and young women in employment. The overriding view of many of the project coordinators was that netball was the one sport that they had all played before at school and most had had a positive experience and that made it easier to attract them to the sessions.

7. THE BEST DAYS AND TIMES FOR NETBALL: weekday evenings starting after 7pm. Most projects ran their sessions on weekday evenings – Monday to Thursday. One project was running a session on a Thursday morning but said that it had been difficult to attract young women to the session as they weren't able to provide a crèche. Another project had also tried to run a netball session on a Saturday morning but had had very low numbers unlike the *Back to Badminton* session which had been running at the same time.

Earlier start times such as 5.30pm worked well for young women on their way home from College or work without family commitments. However, the best days and times for most beginner/ returner netball sessions were Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays starting at 7pm or later. One project said that one of the local netball sessions with high numbers started at 8.30pm. Many sessions lasted for 1 ½ hours or consisted of 2 x one hour sessions as shown later in this report in the section on the format/ structure of the sessions which meant that a 7pm or 8pm start time worked well.

8. THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE SESSIONS AND RETENTION LEVELS: 20-30 at many sessions with good retention rates. Twenty to thirty participants regularly turned up to most sessions with more on the registers. Most sessions had a core of 10-12 young women attending the sessions with usually half in the 16-24 year old age range. Project coordinators confirmed that the high number of participants at sessions made it easier for new participants to join the sessions - also demonstrating the need for the wide age range of participants.

Projects identified the main reasons for the good retention rates at the sessions:

- Fun, enjoyable sessions – “they really like it, changed their attitude”
- Ability to progress into a team – “they want to be in a team”
- Able to play against other teams locally at the same standard in the tournaments/ leagues
- Can tell that they've improved at playing netball and are more confident – “they know they've improved”, “they try playing in different positions”, “more confident after just five weeks at the session”

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- Motivation to continue and improving as tournaments to look forward to – they have a goal to work towards – “keeps them interested”.
- Can play at the level of commitment they choose – play for fun, become part of a team
- Some projects do give rewards such as vouchers/ t-shirts and although this is seen as nice to do, it isn’t seen as the main factor for their retention rates.

9. THE FORMAT AND STRUCTURE OF THE SESSIONS: *Fun, flexible, ‘turn up and play’ with the opportunity to develop skills and progress.* The sessions were all run on a flexible ‘turn up and play’ basis which meant that the young women did not need to make a regular commitment to the session – perfect for ‘adult casuals’. The structure of the sessions usually consisted of a warm-up, some fun skills and drills and then some fun netball games or a friendly game at the end of the session. The coaches integrated skills such as passing, footwork and catching into the sessions which were then put into practice at the end with a fun friendly game which made it into a worthwhile session for everyone regardless of ability level. The coaches did not build in a separate social element to these sessions. As one project coordinator said, the young women often came with their family and friends and so the social element was already there and this was then developed by the coach through the use of fun games involving everyone.

One of the most effective structures was to have two one-hour sessions which were run one after each other by the same coach. The first hour was the *Back to Netball* beginner session and the second hour was more competitive and structured and often used for team training. The young women were able to attend either or both sessions. The coaches often encouraged the young women to consider playing as part of a team when they had improved and were becoming more passionate about the sport. However, they could choose to stay at the first session, move up to the second session or attend both sessions.

10. THE PROFILE AND STYLE OF THE COACH: *Fun, friendly, relaxed, responsive.* The majority of coaches running netball sessions were female voluntary coaches with an NGB Level 2 award in netball. Most of them came from local clubs and leagues. The style of the coaches for the sessions that worked well was: fun, relaxed, “a bit of banter and having a joke”, friendly, helping beginners to learn, patient, passionate about their sport and keen to do the session. Projects found that there was a wealth of qualified club coaches who were well-suited to running these sessions and who also brought their local knowledge to the session.

Another common theme was the responsiveness and flexibility of the coaches. The best sessions were run by coaches who asked the young women at the session what they wanted to do such as skills and drills, fun games or a friendly game and they then ran the session to suit what the young women wanted to do. They often asked them at the end of the session what they wanted to do the following week so that they could plan for

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it in advance. Some of these coaches also ran the second follow-on session which tended to cater for teams and was more of a team training session. This second session was more structured and demanded a higher level of commitment from participants as it focused more on developing skills for playing in leagues and tournaments. Some project coordinators described the coaches as having the ability to adopt different styles for different sessions.

The majority of coaches running the sessions were doing it on a voluntary basis often in partnership with their own netball clubs. This meant that they had chosen to run the session and were keen to do it. This had a number of advantages – more enthusiastic, understood the sport as they had started as a beginner in the sport themselves, more likely to make the sessions sustainable as the club or project only had to find the cost of the facility hire. It was also easier to make the link to the club for the young women and the coaches understood how to develop new teams ready for entering local competitive leagues and tournaments. There were a small number of disadvantages such as it was harder to find a replacement voluntary coach if they were off sick/ on holiday (an organisation providing paid coaches would usually have access to a bank of sessional coaches who could come in at short notice to run the sessions) and the project was dependant on the club to find a coach with the right style for the session.

In most cases the coaches from local clubs were the best coaches to run the sessions, however, it was still important to ensure that they had the right style for this group of young women. One project coordinator said that when their own male Level 2 netball coach had been off sick or on holiday and they had used female coaches from their local clubs, the young women at the session had asked for their regular male coach to come back to the session as the replacement coaches weren't as good – not the right style. One project had also run their netball session in partnership with their local netball club who had provided the coach for the session. However, the session had had low numbers and had not been successful – feedback had identified that the coach wasn't 'right' for the session, rushed the session, wasn't enthusiastic and the project was now working with the club to find a replacement as the coach had left the session.

- 11. THE ROLE OF THE COACH AT THE NETBALL SESSIONS: Taking a participant-centred approach with a constant mix of new and established players.** The coach had a central role to both the success of the session and the transition of the young women into the local netball scene. The primary role of the coach was to develop the skills of the beginner in a fun, enthusiastic and often hidden way so that they could enjoy playing netball on a regular basis. At the same time the coach would be working with the core group of young women to help them to develop their skills even further, give them a 'safe' first experience of friendly competition (usually against each other in the session) and then help them to develop their own team. The *Back to Netball* friendly tournaments were often the catalyst for this team building at the session and provided motivation and a focus for them. The local knowledge of the coaches was important so that they could gauge the playing level of their participants and ensure that they played at tournaments

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or in leagues that suited their playing ability. As one project coordinator said, “they don’t want to get battered each week, they want to be reassured.”

Projects recognised that these sessions could often be challenging for the coaches; there was always a core group of young women who would attend every week and who wanted to develop their skills but who weren’t ready to leave the session and join a team; there was a turnover of young women coming to the sessions to try it out – some would stay, some would turn up once a fortnight or once a month and some would try it for a few weeks and decide it wasn’t for them and not come back. This meant that the coach had to work with ever changing dynamics at the sessions – getting to know the newcomers and making them feel welcome, running a session with different levels of skill and fitness, young women who knew each other, others who hardly knew anyone else, ensuring that new young women were integrated into the session and that it didn’t become too cliquey.

The coach also had a role to identify talented players from their session and signpost them to a local club and to the right level team. Although some young women might have played at a good standard at their school, projects felt that it was too large a jump for many of them to join a local team and so this session was seen as a bridge into a local netball club. This made it attractive for clubs to support these beginner sessions as it was an effective way to recruit more young women into their teams at all levels. This was also beneficial for the young women as they had a clear pathway in place for them for playing netball on a regular basis.

- 12. THE ROLE OF THE CLUBS: *Integrating the sessions into their own club programmes.*** The majority of sessions were closely linked to local netball clubs and indeed, in many cases the sessions were run by the clubs themselves as part of their own programmes. Some sessions had been run by the clubs from the beginning and other sessions had been handed over to the local netball club after several months and were now being sustained by the clubs. The clubs clearly recognised the benefit of these sessions as they provided a clear sustainable pathway into the sport for the young women. New teams of players had been developed from most of the sessions. Some of these teams played in the local *Back to Netball* tournaments and others played regularly on Saturday afternoons in the summer in local leagues.
- 13. THE COMPETITIVE STRUCTURE: *Back to Netball tournaments are an ideal introduction to playing competitive netball.*** Most projects either organised *Back to Netball* tournaments or signposted their teams to events organised by others. These tournaments were seen as the first step into competitive netball and gave them a taste of what it was like to compete as a team against other teams. Projects agreed that these tournaments were important as it gave their teams the chance to compete against other teams locally at the same playing standard. It also helped to give them the motivation to develop as a team and indeed one team that had developed from one of the *Back to Netball* sessions had set themselves up with their own committee and one of the players

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had become a Level one coach and assisted the main coach at the session. Some projects had also worked with their regular players to get them qualified as umpires so that they could support their own *Back to Netball* Tournaments.

The local league structure was the next step for these teams and one project reported that one of their teams had now started to play every Saturday afternoon in the bottom division of the County-wide league as this was the right standard.

14. THE BIG ISSUES: *Childcare, transport and outdoor facilities.* The biggest issue for many Us Girls projects was childcare for young women with children. None of the projects had a crèche or childcare solutions during the evening and depended on family and friends agreeing to babysit for them. This factor was likely to be the reason for the popularity of netball sessions later in the evening at 7.30 – 8pm onwards. One project had offered crèche provision for a daytime session but as the crèche had closed in February the numbers of young mums attending the sessions had dropped and had not picked up since then. At one session, the young women had brought their own children along in the evening but this had been stopped as one of them had brought a boyfriend along to help look after their children which then made it difficult for the young Muslim women to attend the session.

Projects did identify other issues such as lack of transport to the sessions. Young women often shared lifts with each other, especially with the older young women at the sessions such as their friends and family who had access to a car. The issue of outdoor sessions and outdoor leagues was also a barrier for some young Muslim women who needed to play in an indoor environment. One London borough was aiming to set up an indoor *Back to netball* league with similar teams from other boroughs. One project also identified that the perception of netball from experiences at school around clothing, cold weather and their playing experience was also a barrier although most projects felt that young women came to them with positive perceptions of the sport.

15. LINKS WITH THE *BACK TO NETBALL* PROGRAMME: *Strong links, seen by projects as a positive programme.* The majority of sessions were part of the *Back to Netball* programme. Project co-ordinators were very positive about BTN and recognised the benefits that they received from being part of the programme;

“Back to Netball is a great concept built upon an ethos of turn up and play, non-competitive, women love it, more relaxed than a club, it’s a transition to a team or to form a team.”

Some projects had set up their sessions with the help of an England Netball Development Officer or Community Coach who had advised them to develop it as part of the *Back to Netball* programme. However, one project had set up a tournament without any support from England Netball and had called it a *Back to Netball* tournament without realising that it needed approval from the NGB. They had received an email from the NGB “telling them off”

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for using the branding but they were still keen to work closely with the newly appointed England Netball community coach for their area and to officially be part of the BTN programme.

16. LINKS WITH ENGLAND NETBALL: Ranged from “no” contact to “lots” of contact, many projects wanted more support from England Netball. The level of contact between projects and England Netball ranged from “no” contact at all to a “very close” working relationship especially with local England Netball staff. Two projects had had no direct contact with England Netball but didn’t feel that it was necessary as they were working closely with an experienced coach or member of their local netball club who already had a very good working knowledge of netball, the infrastructure and links with the NGB.

Some projects had had a small level of contact with the NGB such as the promotion of their sessions or tournaments on the NGB website. Some said that they had asked England Netball for support but had not received a response. These projects did state that they would have liked more support from England Netball. This support included:

- Links to clubs and who to contact
- Contact details of coaches suitable for running BTN sessions
- Practical support at tournaments such as providing umpires (one project stated that they had received umpiring and hands on help from other NGBs such as badminton and basketball)
- More incentives to give to their participants e.g. goodie bags at tournaments
- Ideas on the best ways to promote the sessions, one project said that they found the branding of the session really hard.
- Help to set up sessions, stay involved and increase the number of participants and then sustain the netball sessions

Some projects said that they worked very closely with their local England Netball staff especially their local Community development officers/coaches. Some of them had helped these projects to set up sessions and some were also the coaches at the sessions. All of the projects had found this role very positive and said that it had contributed to the success of the sessions.

17. FUTURE ASPIRATIONS FOR THE SESSION: More 16-24 year olds, more sessions, more teams and more volunteers. Most projects shared similar aspirations:

- To attract more 16-24 year olds to the sessions through working more closely with schools and colleges
- To set up new teams from the *Back to Netball* beginner sessions which would enter tournaments and leagues
- Support the sessions to become more sustainable with more volunteers qualified as coaches

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- Setting up new sessions in different areas.

Author: Caron Walpole

Date: May 2012

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