

# American Football

## Touches Down on the School Field

Gary Marshall

In February the Chicago Bears took on the Indianapolis Colts in one of the largest annual sporting events on the planet – Super Bowl; the last game screened on Sky Sports before a new broadcast deal kicks in which will see over 2400 hours of action from the NFL screened across Sky's satellite channels throughout the year. In the autumn of this year London will play host to the first competitive NFL game ever staged outside of the Americas, a game which has already started to capture the nation's imagination.

2007 will see the British American Football Association, (BAFA), launch its Whole Sport Plan, a CCPR/Sport England compliant document, that will be the development plan and vision for the future of the sport in this country. The sport is enjoying something of a renaissance, something which has not gone unnoticed in schools.

The increased visibility of American Football and the strengthening of our domestic game has seen an upsurge in interest in the sport, in particular from schools. Supporting schools in delivering American football both in and beyond the curriculum as part of a wider programme of high quality physical education and school sport has therefore; manifest itself at the heart of our strategy development.

The grassroots programme of the British American Football Association is based

around Flag Football. Developed recognising that the early experiences of young people in a sport are vital both in encouraging a positive attitude to sport and physical activity and in providing the base for the development of talent, Flag Football is a co-educational, non-contact, five-a-side version of the game which introduces to young people many of the skills and thrills of the sport, but without the need for the protective equipment required in the full version.

A progressive programme of games and game-related experiences developed with the support of qualified coaches enables teachers to use Flag Football to deliver parts of the curriculum right through the Key Stages, from supporting the establishment and development of the basic motor skills which will underpin a child's involvement in a range of sports and activities, through to encouraging the creation, selection and evaluation of complex tactics similar to those employed in the full game.

In appreciating the valuable role of both inter- and intra-school contests and acknowledging the recent work undertaken in this field as part of the development of the Whole Sport Plan, the current competition framework for schools is under review.

BAFA, in partnership with the NFL, have established a Flag Football Leaders Award which guides teachers into the sport and provides the stepping stone to continuing

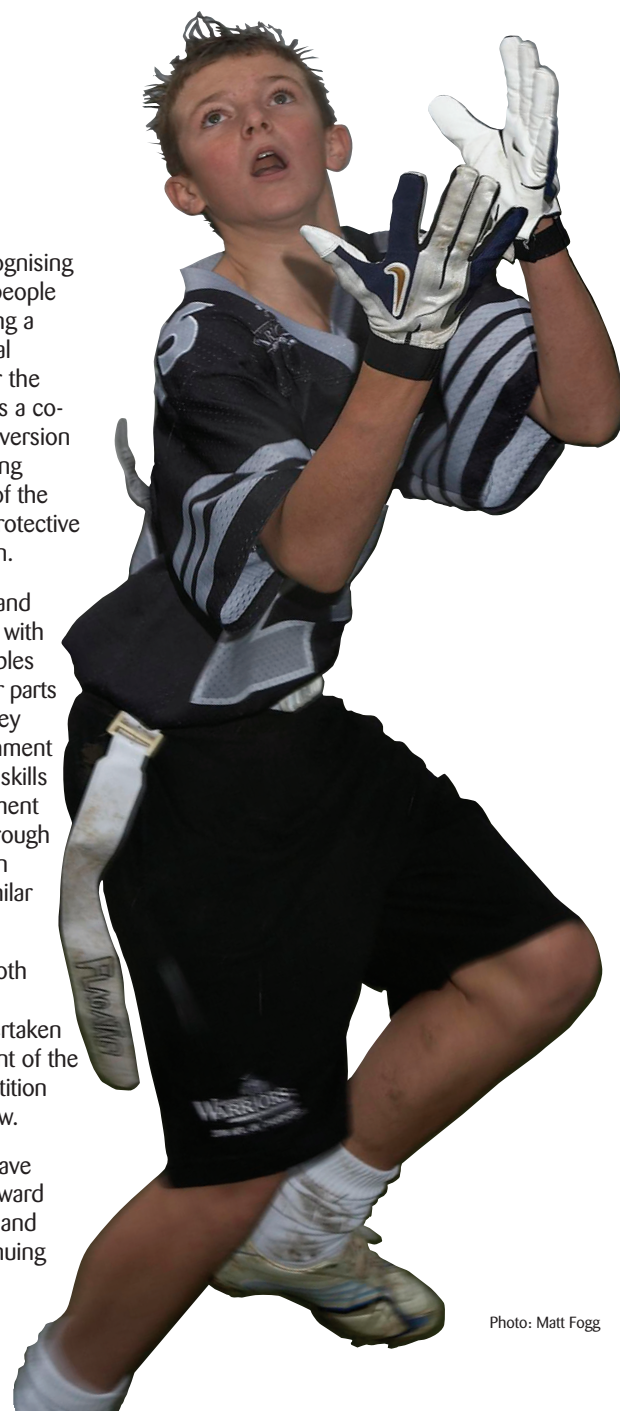


Photo: Matt Fogg

professional development through the coaching continuum providing quality assurance for standards in delivery. A differentiated Leaders Award programme also operates to empower older children through sports leadership.

There are a growing number of success stories of American Football programmes in schools which are used to refine ongoing work in this area. Woodham Community College, Newton Aycliffe is one example.

### Case Study from Jon Tait: Woodham Community College

Over the past three years here at Woodham we have been introducing and developing American Football into extra curricular school life. It has now come to the stage where we have between 80 and 90 students regularly participating twice a week including over 20 girls. It has fast become the most popular and biggest extra curricular activity at the school.

Flag Football is very similar to tag rugby, in that no pads or helmets are needed and it is safe for all ages to play. Not only does this let the boys play against the girls, but it develops many of the core fundamental sporting skills that teachers are always keen for young people to grasp in a fun, dynamic and different way.

Spatial awareness, hand eye coordination, throwing and catching, dodging, tactical methodology, teamwork and discipline are taught very carefully through American Football. Most of these skills are vital in almost every team sport and with the help of American Football it has enabled the school to teach these skills in a new and dynamic way.

No longer is football the main sport in the school and this has appealed to lots of students, who until American Football came along, were classed by their peers as not being good at sport if they were not in the school football team. Some of our students have even gained international recognition through American Football.

This has also now spread out onto the playgrounds with students bringing their own American Footballs to school. Remarkably, traditional games of football have now taken a back seat at lunch times with more and more games of American Football popping up all over the school fields and yards.

The introduction of the sport has also led to strong leadership qualities being displayed by the students, many of whom had not been involved in any extra curricular sporting activities before. As the school has a sixth form college, students are also encouraged to take up a coaching role once they hit 16, so that both the long-term future of the sport within the school can continue, and to also help the students become young sports leaders and coaches. Since this coach education programme started two years ago, we have seen these young students become role models to younger students in the school and both their confidence and maturity increase significantly. We now have ten young coaches working with younger student groups twice a week in after school sessions. It has been amazing to see how enthusiastic they are with each of these young coaches planning weekly training sessions, putting the students through regular fitness tests and becoming responsible for the progress of a team of students.

Cross-curricular links have also been carefully planned for so that students can take their learning experience in the classroom and put it into practice on the field. Individual player and team statistics are taken in competitive games and are constantly analysed and evaluated by both coaches and players, giving the sport accurate information on how performance can be improved.

Overall, the introduction of the sport has been a massive success, with nine school teams being entered into the national league this year, including three 'all girls' teams. These girls' teams are the only teams of their kind in Britain, and are entered in the national boys' league, playing against boys' teams from all over the country. This has been a huge bonus to the school. Getting over twenty girls involved in the sport has helped raise the profile of girls' sport and it has provided young girls with a different and challenging way to access a healthy lifestyle.

On the boys' side, the under 14's team have won the NFL UK Schools' championship for the past two years and have represented Great Britain in the European Schools' finals in Germany twice, coming third this year in the whole of Europe.



Photo: Matt Fogg

The general success of the introduction of the sport cannot be undervalued. Not only has it helped more young people into sport, but also it has been paramount in creating a positively disciplined student culture. Students who play the game value the importance of team work, rules, and personal discipline, all of which are essential to the day to day well being of both young people and schools.

The College also has well developed links with a local Club, Gateshead Senators, to provide exit routes for the players and coaches should they want to take their interest to the next level, whilst the national collegiate league supports those leaving Woodham and going into Higher Education.

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