THE FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT STORY BEHIND GEORGIA'S IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE AT EURO 2024

Georgia's success on the pitch was the culmination of a well-executed, long-term strategic plan from a national association with a clear vision.

01

Georgia's run to the knockout stage of EURO 2024 was one of the standout stories from this summer's tournament in Germany. On their first-ever appearance at a European Championship, Willy Sagnol's side demonstrated both defensive discipline and attacking adventure on their run to the last 16, where they were defeated 4-1 by eventual winners Spain. Along the way, Sagnol's side produced a number of memorable performances, defeated Portugal 2-0, and, most impressively, captured the hearts and minds of football fans across the globe. Understandably, the response from the people of Georgia was euphoric.

"The impact on society in Georgia has been huge," said Sagnol. "In light of its history, people in this country crave unity. They got that throughout this EURO.

"The story we've been writing with the Georgian national team has had the most powerful impact possible. In a way, the team and the players on the pitch, who played and performed so well, might have given the Georgian people a new sense of hope, optimism for a better life."

During a decorated playing career for FC Bayern Mûnchen and the French national team, Sagnol is no stranger to success. However, the former defender counts his achievements as Georgia's national team coach at EURO 2024 as a unique and heartfelt experience. "I have never before experienced what I was able to see in the eyes of the Georgian people," said Sagnol. "And for that reason alone, the experience has been worth living."

'Defend like adults and attack like children'

Sagnol believes Georgia's performances on the pitch in Germany owed much to playing with a sense of freedom, as well as channelling the players' childlike enthusiasm for attacking football.

"When the tournament kicked off, our objective wasn't to win the EURO, as we were perfectly aware that we wouldn't win it," explained Sagnol. "So, the social or sporting pressure was different from the one faced by other head coaches. For us, the only major ambition we had was somehow finally to put Georgia on the map of European football.

"That meant making our fans and country proud, and going out of the tournament with no regrets. Those were our only objectives. Work comes much easier when you have no unhealthy pressure around you."

During the tournament, Georgia's head coach was keen not to overload his players with complex tactical information, but instead asked them to be mature when defending and 'childlike' when attacking.

"We tried to picture what our football should look like in the competition," he said. "I told the players, 'Defend like adults and attack like children.' I wanted to convey the fact that you need to be strong and solid to defend, but more importantly, you need to be organised and structured, and do it as a team. As for 'attack like children', we know that whenever children attack, they want to be extremely fast and not necessarily pass the ball.

"They want to run fast towards the opposing goal. That was what it was about, and we wanted to build our game on that, as it was somehow in keeping with our players' attributes and profiles."

The approach worked and although Sagnol's side did not leave the competition with any silverware, their performances will live long in the memories of all those who witnessed the energy and endeavour displayed in Germany.

Strategic approach brings rewards

For all those involved in the development of Georgian football over the last two decades, the impressive performances on the pitch at EURO 2024 are the result of having a clear vision, a well-executed strategic plan and no shortage of dedication and determination.

For many years the Georgian Football Federation [GFF] has been ambitious in its football development plans and put a focus on a number of key areas: growing the player pool in both men's and women's football, investing in elite youth development, grassroots and coach education, and hosting major tournaments. The investment of time, effort and resource into these important strategic areas is now bringing success.

"Since the day I took office at the GFF, one of the biggest challenges facing my team has been to rebuild and strengthen the grassroots game," explained Levan Kobiashvili, GFF president. "It is this which is the foundation of the football pyramid upon which our success and future rests. The projects that we have implemented with UEFA's help in this field and in coach education over the past decade have been →

02

a prerequisite for the progress that Georgian football has achieved in this period."

To increase the player pool at the elite level of the game, growing the popularity of playing football has been one of the GFF's key aims. Between 2015 and 2021, the number of registered male football players in Georgia rose from 14,676 to 37,600, with the number of female players increasing more than tenfold. Much of this work has been supported by the UEFA Grow programme, which helps national associations to align football development projects with their strategic priorities.

Changing mindsets

Communicating the societal benefits of grassroots football is one tactic the GFF has used to help Georgian football turn a historical fixation on the elite game towards a greater focus on participation, says vice-president, Nika Jgarkava. "Georgia comes from a Soviet past," explains Jgarkava. "In the past, our work was always elite-based and elite-focused. Everything was driven for international success and a desire to be first. The public opinion about football in Georgia has always been elite-focused. All of the critique, dialogue and discussion was focused on elite football," he adds.

Changing these attitudes has been no easy task and a project that started nearly ten years ago. "Since 2015, we have changed our way of thinking in the federation and we moved a lot of our everyday work towards grassroots development, and not only the work, but also the mindset."

Communicating the benefits of grassroots football has been key in changing the mindset of important advocates," says Jgarkava. "The general idea that we wanted to get to the public was that football is much more than international competition," he says. "Instead, we wanted to get the message across that football is there for Georgian society and that it brings societal benefits.

"So, the external communication messages changed but also the attitude of the decision-makers inside the federation," he adds. "Starting from the president, general secretary, executive committee and the congresses, we always tried to emphasise that grassroots comes first. We also explained that when we do proper work in grassroots, then there will be outcomes in the elite level as well. So, we all worked together to raise the awareness about grassroots football and to emphasise the importance."

New coaching pathways for players

Developing coaches for both the grassroots and elite game has been another important part of Georgia's development strategy and one that provides a bespoke educational pathway for current and former national team players.

"Football development is unimaginable without proper coach education and a strong grassroots game," explains Zaza Zamtaradze, GFF technical director. "In that respect, the support that we received from UEFA has been invaluable for us. Coach education is both my job and my passion, and observing the progress in this department has been particularly heartening for me.

"The highlight of this process was the recently completed UEFA B and A diploma course, which has given several current and former Georgian national team players an opportunity to fast-track their coaching careers".

Launched in 2022, the GFF offers a bespoke coaching programme tailored for current and former national team players. The course recognises and builds upon the experience and knowledge professional players have, while also equipping them with key content on the coaching process and methodology.

"We are not trying to teach these experienced players something new, but they need information about the methodology," said UEFA expert Kris Van Der Haegen, speaking at the inception of the programme.

"The players have a big advantage, because they already know everything about football," he added. "The main challenge is to convey the coaching ideas to younger footballers and select the right coaching methods to improve players. This is what the course participants must learn. Only by becoming involved in the coaching process can they transform themselves into coaches, and this requires some time."

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia scores the first goal within the opening two minutes of Georgia's 2-0 victory over Portugal.

Georgia reached the Round of 16 at its first UEFA EURO finals.

Developing young players for Georgia's national team

Some former national team players are now involved in developing the next generation of Georgian footballers in the GFF's academy. The programme, which was launched in 2014 and co-funded by the UEFA HatTrick programme for the first four years, now includes six regional academies that provide strong links between the national association, schools and clubs.

"The main purpose of our academies is to strengthen the base of the professional football pyramid," Levan Kobiashvili explains. "Academy graduates should be able to play in the youth national teams. That is the principle of the academies – we aim to train players from a young age to prepare them for the national team." →

Olivier Doglia

UEFA head of technical education and development.

"The performance of Willy Sagnol's team at EURO 2024 has been impressive and serves as a positive example both on and off the pitch. Georgia's success at this tournament is firstly a fantastic achievement by the players, the staff and everyone surrounding the team. But it is also the result of over a decade of dedicated efforts by the GFF. They have focused not only on grassroots and elite youth football but also on ensuring high standards in coach education.

"Their regional academies for U14 to U16 teams have significantly boosted player development, allowing the best talents to train together at a crucial stage. The fact that UEFA's technical department has been able to contribute to this beautiful journey over the years is a rewarding achievement, both from a sporting and personal perspective. Hopefully, this excellent work will continue, bringing more success and joy to a deserving football nation."

Georgian players hail impact of head coach Willy Sagnol

From EURO 2024, Giorgi Mamardashvili and Georges Mikautadze discuss the impact of Georgia's performance in Germany and the influence of head coach Willy Sagnol.

On how Georgia's performance at the EURO will influence football in their country:

Giorgi Mamardashvili: In my opinion, this year's EURO was a turning point for Georgian football. From this point on, we will start to rise. The players gained a great deal of experience, which was priceless, and, of course, it was important because a new stage is beginning now. We are preparing for a new tournament and this experience is going to help us emerge victorious in the upcoming matches.

Georges Mikautadze: It was an honour to take part in EURO 2024. Of course, we know how proud it made us and the fans to wear the national team jersey.

We know that expectations around us are higher now. Everyone expects us to win, and we'll do everything we can to make the Georgian people proud as we did last summer.

On the influence of head coach Willy Sagnol:

Giorgi Mamardashvili: In my opinion, Willy Sagnol has written his name emphatically in the history of Georgian football because he has managed to achieve results that many other coaches could not.

I know how much work both Willy and every single member of staff has put in. It may be not visible from a distance, but it is clear up close how much work he has put in over the past five years and how much we have all worked to achieve this result.

But I think we will not be satisfied with all this, not me, nor anyone in the national team, nor Willy, and we will still continue to develop and bring happiness to the Georgian people.

Georges Mikautadze: I obviously spoke with Willy before I joined the national team, even though I had already made my decision before he was appointed as the team's head coach.

When I spoke with him and he detailed the project he had for me and the team, it made me want to join the team even more.

In terms of what the coach brings: he passes on his experience. We know that he was a huge player, having competed both at FIFA World Cups and at EUROs. He knows what elite-level sport requires, and he tries to teach that to all the players here.

The six regional academies provide an elite training programme for players in the U14 to U16 age categories. From these centres, players with high potential are selected for the GFF's main academy at the Rustavi technical centre. "Under the investment project component of the last UEFA HatTrick programme cycle, we opened the Rustavi technical centre, which houses the GFF's main academy," adds David Mujiri, GFF general secretary.

"I would like to emphasise the importance of the incentive payments and the investment projects implemented under the UEFA HatTrick programme. This is because in Georgia, we have a shortage of the necessary infrastructure for realising the goals that the GFF has set for itself.

"Such facilities are needed across the whole country to develop elite youth football, and [thanks to] the financial support provided by the UEFA HatTrick programme, we are able to implement these and other projects each year, aiding also the development of women's football, corporate social responsibility and coach education," added Mujiri.

The benefits of hosting major tournaments

Another football development initiative that the GFF has dedicated itself to is hosting UEFA youth tournaments. The GFF has cleverly used the opportunities offered by hosting major UEFA tournaments to drive interest in the game and give their youth teams valuable experience. In 2017, Georgia hosted the UEFA European Under-19 Championship final tournament and in 2023, co-hosted the UEFA European Under-21 Championship final tournament with Romania.

Alongside record-breaking attendances, there was also excellent progress on the pitch. In the U21 competition, Georgia reached the knockout stages – having never previously even qualified for the finals – after finishing top of a group that featured Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal. At men's U17 and U19 level, Georgia qualified for the elite round of UEFA's age-grade tournaments for the first time in the 2019/20 season.

Hosting major tournaments was an ambition outlined in the federation's 2022–26 strategy. The document, which was formulated with support from UEFA's Grow programme, details a framework for continued success and a plan for how to maximise the impact of hosting UEFA tournaments.

Continued professional development at the heart of UEFA's 14th Conference for National Team Coaches and Technical Directors

National team coaches and technical directors from UEFA member associations came together in Berlin in September to review the technical and tactical findings from EURO 2024 as well as discuss the implications for the future of player and coach development.

Members of UEFA's technical observer team from the tournament, Rafa Benítez, Packie Bonner, David Moyes and Michael O'Neill, took to the stage to present a number of key findings from the official technical report. Presentations covered key areas including goalkeeping, build-up play, final-third creation and pressing.

An on-stage discussion with head coaches who competed at the competition followed. France's Didier Deschamps, Georgia's Willy Sagnol, Germany's Julian Nagelsmann and Portugal's Roberto Martinez all provided a fascinating insight into their tournament experience and life as a national coach.

The tournament winning coach, Spain's Luis de la Fuente, was the guest speaker at the event and provided an insight into how he and his staff helped lead Spain to a record fourth EURO success in the summer. The 63-year-old described how strong relationships with his players, picking 'good people as well as good players', as well as a consistent way of working from the Spanish youth teams helped his side pick up the EURO trophy in Germany.

A key opportunity for continued professional development

In addition to the formal presentations and on-stage discussions with national team coaches, participants welcomed the opportunity to exchange ideas with their peers in a more informal setting.

"It's exciting to meet and talk with colleagues outside of tournaments or matchday routines," explained Austria head coach Ralf Rangnick. "I think everyone who comes here feels that. At the end of the event, everyone enjoyed exchanging ideas with colleagues because normally there is no time during the games or tournaments."

Having an arena to interact with other coaches and share ideas was also welcomed by De la Fuente. "I keep coming back to the value of interacting with other coaches and trainers because there's always something to learn and ideas to exchange," he explained. "You have to stay true to your own thoughts and what you want to implement with your teams or national teams, but it's always beneficial to see other approaches and ideas, as they can help strengthen your own."

For Julian Nagelsmann, it is important for coaches to set the example to their players: improve at every opportunity. "It is important to look beyond the end of your nose and do what you demand and preach to your players, to constantly strive to improve, and as a coach you also try to constantly develop. That is a very important factor to maintain your level," he explained. "The process that you ask your team and your players to go through is also important for you to go through."

Even the most experienced coaches should stay up to date with modern trends and advancements in technology believes former Liverpool and Real Madrid manager Rafa Benítez. "For me as a coach, with experience in the UEFA Champions League and the top leagues, it's really important to hear other people, and then try to be always ready to know what is going on, the evolution of football, the new software that is progressing."

A panel at UEFA's 14th Conference for National Team Coaches and Technical Directors, including Julian Nagelsmann, Willy Sagnol, Didier Deschamps and Roberto Martinez.

GRASSROOTS

Football in Schools programme continues to help grow the game across Europe

Since its launch in 2020, UEFA's Football in Schools programme has provided over three million children across Europe with the opportunity to access and enjoy the game. With the programme now renewed through to 2028 with a further €11 million of investment, many more young people will have the opportunity to participate in physical activity, further their education through football and fall in love with the game. Here, we provide four case studies looking at the positive work of the Football in Schools programme in Denmark, Austria, Lithuania and Ukraine.

Portuguese legend Luís Figo celebrates with a participant at a UEFA Football in Schools event.

Volunteering in football brings multiple benefits to young people in Denmark

Young people in Denmark are learning more about the social and psychological benefits of volunteering in football through the Danish Football Association's (DBU) Mind, Body, Club project.

Mind, Body, Club (MBC) is a unique concept that supports schools in delivering physical activity sessions, as well as engaging more adolescents in volunteering at local clubs. So far, the project has 'twinned' 95 schools with football clubs over the last three years, with more than 9,000 children and over 200 teachers involved so far.

School activity is three days long, with two days focusing on mental and physical health. On the final day, a number of pre-schools and high schools work together at a local club with 13–15 year-old students supporting children aged 6–9.

"The pre-school students are learning about how sport and physical activity can support their well-being, and the high school students talk about volunteering and sports club life," explains Tina Enestrøm, project manager at the DBU. "The high school students then take the pre-school students through a two-hour long physical activity where they are coaches, mentors and role models."

As well as facilitating sustainable links between schools and local clubs, the Club Day has helped change the mindset of the adolescents involved in the programme, believes Enestrøm. "They were able to see for themselves how they were making a difference," she explains. "By helping the pre-school children, they were delivering more value than they thought they could."

Feeling connected to a task and helping others, supports the adolescents with their own ambitions and purpose, believes Enestrøm. "There is a good match between the adolescents' stated motives for becoming a volunteer and the Open School day content.

"These reasons relate to feeling useful and making a difference for others, having good experiences with others, acquiring useful skills, and learning through practice to discover their own strengths and weaknesses."

Physical workouts ensure Austrian schoolchildren get fitter through football

Physical workouts in the classroom are helping Austrian schoolchildren to be active while also teaching additional life skills. "The concept starts with the teachers, and the goal is to ensure that they can deliver daily physical workouts in the classroom for their children," explains Stefan Gogg, head of grassroots at the Austrian FA (ÖFB). "We believe that by instilling this routine, it will create additional benefits such as improving the concentration spans of the children, as well as teaching them to work together in teams," he explains.

To date, almost 60,000 children from more than 1,100 schools have taken part in the programme, which initially spans four weeks. "The goal is to ensure that all children come away feeling like winners," adds Gogg. "Every child that participates over the course of four weeks wins a medal. To also engage parents actively, we built an element into the programme where children can earn extra points if they are active during the weekend as well."

Training teachers to deliver physical activity

For teachers who want to learn more about delivering football and physical activity in school, advanced training equips them with knowledge and activities for children who want to further develop their skills. Thanks to the additional support of a ball sports app in Austria – which also incorporates handball and volleyball – teachers are also able to access videos that demonstrate how to master different physical skills. There is also a focus on healthy lifestyle and the importance of nutrition.

Lithuanian grassroots football flourishes thanks to school and club partnership

A link between primary schools and grassroots football clubs has helped increase participation figures across Lithuania. During the 2023/24 season, over 40,000 children from kindergartens and primary schools, as well as more than 2,000 teachers, benefitted from an innovative relationship that pairs them with junior football clubs.

Coaches from grassroots clubs host training sessions within schools which, in turn, creates player pathways for children to take part in further training activities. "The programme lasts for eight months and seeks to combine both physical activity with the development of core educational skills such as numeracy and literacy," explains Ignas Marcinkevičius, head of grassroots at the Lithuanian Football Federation (LFF).

Training more grassroots coaches

With an increasing number of young people wanting to access coaching from qualified volunteers, the LFF has targeted school teachers and older children as a strategy to train more coaches. "We are trying to provide basic training to school teachers, as well as targeting older children too," explains Marcinkevičius. "If they decide not to continue playing themselves, we are encouraging them to consider a coaching or refereeing course. This ensures we try to keep pace with the growth in children playing, by also expanding the number of participants in other key roles."

Clubs also provide educational videos that help kindergartens and primary schools lead basic PE sessions or mini festivals. The LFF also organises coaching courses for teachers as well as providing specialist training to tailor sessions for children with disabilities.

School teachers in Ukraine access specialist training to engage pupils in football

School teachers in Ukraine are helping children to access football and physical activity by developing their knowledge and skills through the ministry of education.

"The ministry of education has agreed to implement a special programme for teachers in Ukraine," explains Yevgeniy Stolitenko, national social project coordinator at the Ukrainian Association of Football (UAF). "After 30 hours of learning, teachers will receive a special certification."

The programme consists of a series of lectures, seminars and practical sessions. Seminars cover topics including training trends; Laws of the Game; training considerations when working with children; communication methods; and how to organise and structure lessons.

"The teachers are also incentivised to run the best sessions through special rewards," adds Stolitenko. "As a sizeable proportion of schools have little or no equipment, teaching kits will be provided, including branded backpacks with safety compliant football equipment."

The support for teachers in Ukraine is part of a nationwide school programme that embraces children aged 6 to 17. Children benefit through high-quality football sessions in schools, as well as organised tournaments and festivals.

Linking schools and local football clubs

Developing stronger links between schools and local clubs is another key part of the programme. The relationship encourages the sharing of facilities and equipment, as well as the development of player pathways. Children are guided towards local clubs with club coaches delivering additional school sessions.

To date, more than 500 schools, over 14,000 children and approximately 1,700 teachers have been involved, with an additional 8,000 children and approximately 1,600 volunteers participating in fun festivals in regional communities.

"We want to ensure the football training is tailored to be age, gender, and physical ability appropriate – as well as a firm emphasis placed on fun. Our aim is simply to make the programmes as inclusive as possible," says Stolitenko. "Irrespective of gender, age or physical ability, we want to run football everywhere, and for everyone."