

Irish Hockey – National Senior Development Group/Ireland A An Overview

1. Introduction:

The National Development Groups were introduced to Irish hockey formally in May 2005. This paper is to clarify the following:

- o Rationale behind the groups
- o Objectives
- o Where the groups fit in the development of senior international athletes
- o Selection to the groups
- o Individual management of athletes
- o Expectations of the athlete
- o Staffing of the groups

2. Rationale behind the Squads

It was identified at a meeting in September 2004 that the Irish Hockey Association could no longer continue to run and finance four gender squads (U16, U18, U21 and seniors). On the appointment of David Passmore in 2005 the situation was reviewed and felt that the U21 squad would be the best of these to lose, but only on the proviso that senior development squad were created. Originally the proposal had been that the U16 squad should be lost.

Neither U21 squad had qualified for the Junior World Cups in 2005, both had been relegated to the B Division for the 2006 European Nations following under financed programs in 2004 and further more the introduction of Bi-annual senior European events were further straining the budgets of the IHA.

The ratification of the Development Group was given by the management Board of the IHA at a meeting on 28th February 2005, within the overall High Performance Plan presented by David Passmore at this meeting.

Since then the international senior competitions programs have been increased further with expanded world and Olympic qualification processes.

3. Objective of the Development Groups and Ireland A Squads:

3.1 Overall Objectives:

The objective of the development squad is to prepare the most talented players in Ireland to be senior international athletes.

With a small player base and weak domestic competition structure Ireland is unable to produce a stream of international athletes ready to compete at the highest level and there is currently a big gap between those in the senior squads and those on the verge of them. Both Dave Passmore and Riet Kuper had problems with this when bringing in new senior athletes in 2005/06 although there has been a trend towards increased national panel sizes to help minimise this gap, especially since Gene Muller was appointed senior women's coach.

It is also essential that Ireland starts to identify and develop their best athletes at a younger age if they are going to impact, rather than just play at the top level in the future. It should be widely understood that this will take a minimum of two to four years of extensive preparation. It should also be known that many athletes reach a ceiling during this period and may never reach senior hockey, or their perceived potential when selected into the development squad.

There has to be a change in culture within Irish hockey that international cycles last 3-4 months per year.

The development of these athletes will be through the National Development Group but they will compete as Ireland A to identify where the squad fits within the international continuum.

3.2 Objectives/Responsibilities of Management

The Head Coach and staff involved with the Development Groups are tasked with providing an **environment** and **framework** for squad members to develop into senior athletes. It is the athlete's responsibility to use this framework to drive and best develop themselves.

The Senior Squad Head Coach and Development Squad Head Coach should provide regular opportunities for interaction between senior and development group athletes through camps and game play. The Senior Head Coach, in consultation with the High Performance Director has the final say on programming etc.

3.3 Responsibilities of the athlete

Development squad athletes need to recognise the following:

- That they must drive and motivate themselves – this is not the responsibility of the staff
- Development to the senior panel can take up to four years (and even longer for goalkeepers)
- Being part of the Development Group does not guarantee future involvement at senior international level
- Athletes are continually being viewed who are younger than yourself so even if progress is being made in relation to other Development Group members, this does not guarantee continued involvement or progression

3.4 Responsibilities of IHA

The IHA, through their senior budgets should ensure there are sufficient budgets to fund programs for these athletes to ensure future international success.

4. The Development Continuum – where the Development Group fits

Whilst having other purposes, from a senior perspective U16 and U18 squads provide the following functions:

- Identification of future senior international athletes (through international hockey)
- Introduction to and education about international hockey
- Start the athletes on a development pathway in all aspects of development (core skills, fitness, core stability, nutrition/hydration/psychology etc)
- Develop a winning, not competing culture

Given that the U16/U18 international teams and U21 inter-provincial tournaments facilitate the identification of potential athletes the Development Squad and Ireland A matches provide the environment for assessment and for the gap to be bridged to senior hockey.

The keys areas the development group training environment will aim to improve are:

- Core skill development through regional development and camps
- Strength and injury prevention through core stability and conditioning programs
- Exposure to senior match play
- Education about nutrition, hydration, psychology etc

Programs will be individually tailored where possible by the Head Coach but there may be regional variations in terms of what can be offered to each athlete. Priority will be given to those who show the most promise and potential. Positional needs at senior levels can also be a consideration.

5. Selection to the Development Group

Selection will ultimately be at the discretion of the Senior National Head Coach in co-operation with the Development Squad Head Coach.

5.1 Principle mechanisms for Talent Identification will be:

- U18 (and for exceptionally talented athletes U16) international programs
- U21 Inter Provincial tournaments
- Senior Inter Provincial tournaments

The following can also be used:

- Top club level hockey
- SINI program

5.2 Nominations can be made for assessment into the group by:

- National Senior and Development Group Coaches
- JAG Head Coaches – this will be done formally through U16/U18 tournament reporting

5.3 Recommendations can be made to the Development Group Head Coaches by:

- Inter-provincial coaches
- Principal club coaches

Athletes will only be included on the approval of the National Senior Coach

5.4 Criteria for inclusion into the Development Group

- The potential to play at senior level within 1-4 years (as identified in the IHA Talent Identification Strategy)
 - Physical ability namely speed, acceleration and agility
 - Decision making/Games awareness – especially under pressure
 - Core skills (innate ability e.g. hand to eye co-ordination, balance etc)
 - Decision making – especially under pressure
 - Mental toughness/attitude

5.5 Process for inclusion

Athletes will be called into the squad for a trial period as determined by the Ireland A Coach. Athletes will have this made clear to them at the time. Following this period athletes will either be added to the squad or not. Notification should be made in writing (by email) with the objective of the group clearly outlined and stressing that there are no guarantees of movement into the senior squad.

The Development Group will be reviewed along similar timings to the senior squad.

5.6 Notification of non Selection/Being dropped

Athletes being dropped from the Development Group will be notified in writing by the Development Group Coach in consultation with the National Senior Coach. This will be made in writing (by email) with a feedback sheet outlining development areas. This can be followed up with verbal communication if required by the athlete. Athletes dropped from the group can continue to be considered for selection in the future.

6. Individual Management of Athletes

Each Development Group athlete will have a different background, experiences and current circumstances. They should therefore be managed in a way that fits both their current situation (study/work/location) and their proximity to the senior squad. Whilst this may cause inconsistencies in workload and opportunity this is unavoidable and should be accepted by all. For example, some athletes may be included in the senior organised conditioning sessions if appropriate; others may have to source this support themselves.

The Head Coach will be responsible for meeting with athletes on a regular basis to review circumstances and outline key areas for development. At these meetings it will be important to identify key action points for the athletes, who are ultimately responsible for their own development.

U16/U18 Athletes:

It is likely that some athletes in the Development Groups will still be of U16/U18 national Junior Age Group (JAG) eligibility. These athletes will require careful management to ensure they are not compromised or over played. This will occur by collaboration and agreement between the JAG Head Coach and the Ireland A Coach in consultation with the athlete. All decisions regarding the development of these athletes will be overseen by the National Senior Coach in their role as Director of Player Performance. In most instances JAG programs will take priority over the National Development Group activities to ensure over playing does not occur.

7. Expectations of athletes

The Development Groups are to facilitate athlete's progress towards achieving and performing at senior level. They are therefore ultimately responsible for driving their own development and progress in all areas of their hockey progress. Motivating themselves, despite their being no guarantees of success, is a key pre-requisite for their continuing involvement within the group.

8. Planning/Programming

The program, planning and budgeting for the Development Group program and Ireland A matches will be done in collaboration with the Senior Head Coach and High Performance Director. Programs will ultimately come under the umbrella of the senior squad, but will also have independent fixtures. There should be matches against the senior squad, travelling senior opposition and where possible a tournament such as the U21 or Senior Celtic Cup (when appropriate). Teams will include members of the senior squad and where appropriate with caps. Regular opportunities will be sought to play national senior teams and series of matches against top level (e.g. Germany/Holland) U21 national teams.