



THE TALENT PATHWAY MOVING FORWARD

A new approach to Talent

Volleyball England have the stated goal of Olympic Qualification for our Senior National Teams. That means the Talent Programme has as its core mission the development of athletes capable of competing at the highest standard of international volleyball. To do so we must identify those with the potential to reach that level, and see they have the structure – both directly through Volleyball England activities, and indirectly via clubs, Regions, etc. – to develop the technical, tactical, physical, mental, and other elements necessary.

To that end, we spent the Summer of 2023 doing a comprehensive examination of the existing Talent system and developing a plan to put it more in line with the above objective. The new plan has been discussed by the Volleyball England Board of Directors, and is now ready to go into action over the months and years ahead. The intention of the new plan is to lay the foundations for becoming highly competitive in Europe, and in doing so putting Olympic qualification in reach.



Pillar I: Expand and Improve Coaching

The first main element of the plan is to grow the coaching base across the country, in terms of both numbers and skills, to provide more athletes with better access to quality coaching at their clubs, schools, etc. We have multiple initiatives in the works in the area of coach development that we're excited to roll out in the months ahead.

Pillar II: Provide More Player Support

The second main aspect of the plan is to provide players in our Talent Pathway with better holistic support, because it's not just about what happens on the court. As you may have seen, Volleyball England hired a new Chief Medical Officer, Dr Dane Vishnubala. He will help us in all things related to athlete wellness. We also plan to develop some educational and other programming to support players along in their volleyball career path (e.g. playing at uni), and we're in the process of putting together a players' council to represent the athletes across all areas of Volleyball England.

Pillar III: Improve Competitive Opportunities

The plan's third big focus is making sure players have the best possible competitive opportunities – both internationally and domestically for clubs, etc. That means continuously evaluating VE competitions with regards to their influence on Talent athlete development, and making adjustments where we see benefits to be had. It also means identifying and pursuing opportunities for our national teams to compete more often in international competition, and at higher levels.

The three Pillars are reflected across our plans across all the disciplines – Indoor, Beach, and Sitting.

Changes to the Indoor Pathway

Here is a diagram that seeks to describe the scope of the Indoor Talent Pathway. Not only does it outline the various levels of involvement in the Pathway and progression through it, plus the primary international competitions, you will also see some of the key programmes and organizations which support us at different levels.

Volleyball England Performance Pathway (Indoor)



A big element of the competition piece just noted where the indoor Talent program is concerned is a 2023 change in the status of our [Northern European Volleyball Zonal Association \(NEVZA\)](#) tournament. Previously, the NEVZA tournament was just an annual U17 and U19 competition amongst the member countries. Now, the NEVZA tournaments in odd number years are zonal qualifiers for the [CEV European Championships \(Euros\)](#) U18 and U20 age groups in the following year. As we want to reach the point of regularly competing in the Euros with our age group squads, we now have a defined path to get there, as this diagram shows:



This NEVZA development has encouraged us to change our approach to the Cadet and Juniors.

New Age Group Cohort Structure

Everyone else will now be part of a new cohort structure based on the two-year Euros cycle shown above. Cadets will be players eligible to play in the next U18 Euros and Juniors the U20 Euros. The U22s, which we plan to introduce to bridge the gap to the senior teams, will also follow this pattern, though likely with a bit more flexibility. Thus, the new cohorts based on the age cut-offs for the 2026 Euros are:

- Cadets (U18s) - players born 2009 or later
- Juniors (U20s) - players born 2007 or later
- U22s - players born 2005 or later

Another way to look at it is that the new Cadets cohort will be eligible to play in the 2025 NEVZA U17 tournament, while the Juniors will be eligible to play in the U19 NEVZA that year. The U22s don't currently have a zonal qualifier, but instead do a unified qualification tournament the year before the next championship (e.g. 2025 for 2026).

Be aware that NEVZA are going through some organizational changes at the moment. That, combined with the shift in the odd-year tournaments into Euro qualifiers leaves us unsure at this moment as to the future of even-year events. That means we cannot say right now what we are doing about the 2024 NEVZAs. We should get some clarity early in the new year, however.

New Age Group Training Philosophy

With the move to the new cohort structure, we're also changing the philosophy of our national team training programme. It will be more narrowly focused on preparing for performance at Euros. As such, camps will feature fewer athletes than has been the case up to now (particularly in the case of the Cadets), and our intention is to move away from monthly 2-day camps to more of a quarterly calendar with longer camps (e.g. 4 days). This is to generally better line up with international tournament formats, and to allow for things like foreign training/playing opportunities.

ENG Camp Selection

Our shift in both cohort structure and training philosophy mandates a change in how we select athletes to attend national team camps as well. Cohorts will no longer be selected via mass trial, with players then set for a year. There may still be some smaller scale trial events, but we are changing to a new primary approach.

Selection will now be done on a camp-by-camp basis based on a combination of players' recent competitive performance (e.g. in the Juniors Grand Prix), performance at previous ENG camps and/or competitions, performance at developmental camps and any other opportunity we have to see them in action, their observed progression, and the staff's overall perception of their physical, technical, and mental ability to compete amongst the best teams in Europe. Keep in mind that the younger the athlete, the more perceived potential factors in selection over current ability.

This means selection to one camp doesn't automatically assure selection to future camps. At the same time, not being selected to one camp doesn't mean you can't be selected in the future. Either way, it's about continuing to work on getting better.

Alongside these changes, we are also changing the underlying mechanics of selection with new policies. This is to ensure a fair selection process without the influence of conflicts of interest, while taking into account developmental and competitiveness priorities.

We currently anticipate the first ENG camp under this new system to be at Easter 2024.

More Developmental Opportunities

National team training camps and competitions are by no means the only element of the Talent Pathway. We are dedicated to providing a number of regional and national developmental opportunities to give athletes exposure to good quality training and supporting educational programmes.

Futures Camps: These are national and regional training opportunities for U15 athletes to support the further development of younger athletes and provide them with an initial exposure to aspects of the ENG programme.

Development Camps: Intended to be the next step up from the Futures, we are rolling out these camps as opportunities for athletes in the 14 to 16-year-old age groups to work with national team coaches in a structure similar to national team training camps.

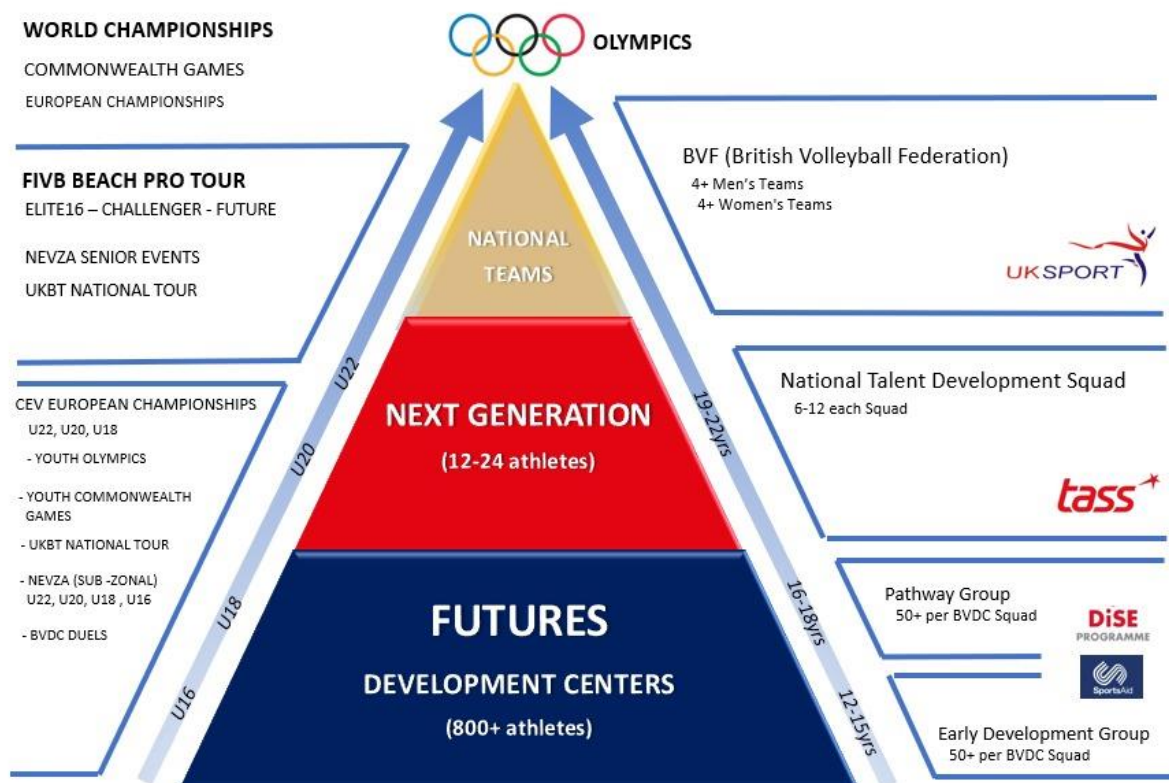
The Senior Teams

Although nothing has changed at this juncture with regards to funding the senior national teams, we are exploring a variety of routes to provide them greater opportunities for training and competition. And, of course, we are including them in our work to improve player support all around, per Pillar II above. Developing sustainable on-going funding to support them remains a challenge, but one never far from our minds.

Updates to the Beach Pathway

As this diagram shows, the Beach Pathway is similar to the Indoor one, with just a few differences reflected in the competition structures and the relative competitiveness of England athletes.

Volleyball England Performance Pathway (Beach)



Because CEV (and FIVB) competitive structures are unchanged, there's adjustment required in how we field teams as there is in Indoor. As a result, our focus is on improving the athlete identification and development processes. There are three pieces to this.

Beach Volleyball Development Centres

The biggest structural elements of our Beach Pathway updates are the new Beach Volleyball Development Centres (BVDCs). This is a group of eight clubs from around the country who went

through an application and selection process in the first half of 2023. The vision of this programme is to create a thriving and inclusive beach training and competition network across England. Through it, we will nurture the development of our players to excel into the next stages, while fostering a nationwide passion and love for the sport. The major objective is to increase the number of talented athletes in the pathway at a younger age, providing them with a fun and engaging regional weekly training environment.

National Camps

The second element of strengthening our Beach Pathway is running more national camps. These are training opportunities for the talented athletes to gather for further development from working with top coaches. They will also provide the national team staff the opportunity to observe them for selections for international events.

Coach Development

Expanding the base of Beach coaches and providing developmental opportunities for all coaches in the network is the third part of our Pathway improvements, though by no means the least important. The first Beach Coaching award is expected to run in Spring 2024 as a fundamental piece of those efforts. The coaches at the BVDCs will get regular developmental sessions and mentoring opportunities throughout the year, and we are exploring opportunities to provide similar to coaches across the country.

Expanding Competitive Opportunities

While athletes at the top end of our Beach Pathway have many competitions they can enter, those at the Age Group level don't currently have as many international playing opportunities as we would like. We want to expand the competitive calendar in that regard so we can have more athletes getting more valuable playing experience.

Selection Policies

Throughout 2023 we worked to improve our Beach selection policies and processes, and made considerable progress. This will continue as we head toward the 2024 season. The objective is to further ensure a fair selection process without the influence of conflicts of interest, while also reflecting our priorities in terms of player development and competitiveness.

The Sitting Pathway

Sitting volleyball at present operates somewhat differently than does Indoor or Beach in that the primary focus is on Para competitions as Team GB (there is currently no international structure for an England team). We at Volleyball England provide support to this, but team operations are primarily directed via the [British Volleyball Federation \(BVF\)](#).

That said, growing the Sitting game is a focus. We run the Sitting Grand Prix series to provide regular domestic competitions, and support clubs in developing Sitting programmes. We work with schools to running Sitting volleyball at their level as well, and have ambitions of eventually developing a Juniors level of club competition.

Additionally, there is a need in the Sitting game to develop more coaches, which is very much in line with our needs and designs in the other two disciplines. We are in the process of putting together a Sitting Coaches Award as a central feature.

Pathway Finances

Running training camps, going to competitions, etc. obviously cost money. We do get some support, and we seek to employ it in the most efficient ways possible, but there's no avoiding a participant cost in Pathway activities at the moment. We do everything we can, however, to keep that as low as possible, and to connect athletes with financial support options so we can be as inclusive in the Talent Pathway as possible. Our long-term objective is to reach the point where there is no cost to representing England.