

# Why has Icelandic football been so successful recently?

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The recent success of the Icelandic men's national team has caught the attention of the football world. Media attention has grown steadily and the question here above is a frequent one. So where has this recent success come from? It is not an easy question to answer, but we can point to several facts all coming together and can, to a certain extent, explain the current situation.

## Facilities

Since year 2000, football infrastructure in Iceland has taken giant leaps, and the facilities Icelandic football players (young and old) can now train and compete in are top class all year round. Football halls, either with full size or half size pitches, give shelter from the winter weather when necessary. Artificial pitches in high numbers, with undersoil heating and floodlights, mean the days of the frozen gravel pitches of the past are long ago numbered. In total, there are 179 full size pitches in Iceland (natural grass or artificial turf, outdoor or indoor) which means that there are around 1.800 inhabitants in the country for each full-size pitch. In terms of registered players only (23.000), there is one full size pitch in the country for every 128 registered players.

Mini pitches have also been built all over the country, mostly next to schools. The aim was to give children a chance to play football, purely for fun, in good and safe conditions – school ground, artificial pitch, walls around the pitch, lit with floodlights wherever possible. In short, these mini pitches have been in constant use ever since they were built.

## Some statistics:

- Indoor artificial pitches (football halls) in full size = 7
- Indoor artificial pitches (football halls) in half size = 6
- Outdoor artificial pitches in full size = 24
- Outdoor artificial pitches in half size = 6
- Outdoor mini-pitches with artificial turf = 154
- Outdoor natural grass pitches in full size = 148

## Coach education

The level of coach education is very high. The benefits of having top class facilities can only be fully exploited if you have the knowledge to get the most out of them. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of qualified coaches working at Icelandic clubs. This development owes a lot to the demands of the Club licensing system, as clubs undergoing the system face sanctions if they do not meet the requirements for coach education, from the first team down to the very youngest children. Today, all clubs playing in the top two divisions and even most clubs outside these two divisions have qualified coaches with UEFA-A and/or UEFA-B levels working in all youth categories, i.e. more or less with children from 5 or 6 years old and up.

Icelandic clubs and the coaches themselves must be given due credit for this development. These have genuinely embraced the demands placed on them by the FA's Club licensing system. Clubs have pushed coaches, and coaches have pushed themselves to further their education. This means that children just starting their football education at ages 5 or 6 are already in the hands of people who are well educated and professional in their approach. This is paramount. Coaches at Icelandic clubs are more or less all paid coaches, i.e. club staff members, in contrast to many other countries where people coaching the youngest children are volunteers. This has of course helped with this transformation and there is an element of professional rivalry. No club wants to be left behind when it comes to the education of their coaches. Also, parents are aware of these demands, and feel safe knowing their children are being looked after and taught the basics of the sport by capable and well-educated coaches. Thus, football is the number one choice of sport for many parents, as well as their children.

### Some statistics

In year 2003 no Icelandic coach had completed a UEFA-B or UEFA-A level. The first Icelandic UEFA-B coaches graduated in January 2004. Status at end of year 2015:

- Coaches with UEFA B license or more - 669
- Coaches with UEFA A license or more - 240
- Coaches with UEFA Pro license - 17

In addition, an assistant coach working with any youth team within Iceland must have completed basic youth coach education through the FA of Iceland.

### A good generation

Twenty years ago, or more, the main characteristics of the archetypical Icelandic player were physical strength and a never say die attitude. Those elements still remain very much a key element, but with the facilities and high-level coaching from an early age, we can add technical skills and passing ability. In the past, we would rarely see one generation bringing through a high number of talented players, one like the generation now playing a key role for the national team. A major part of the group of players in the current national team was around the age of 10 when it all started, 15 years ago. There must be a link.

### Some statistics

- The total number of FA affiliated clubs in Iceland is 115. Annually, approximately 80 clubs participate in the Men's senior domestic league.
- The senior men's domestic league competitions structure is split into five divisions, with promotion/relegation at the end of each season.
  - Premier: 12 clubs (non-amateur)
  - 1st: 12 clubs (non-amateur)
  - 2nd: 12 clubs
  - 3rd: 10 clubs
  - 4th: Played regionally in groups
- The regular football season in Iceland is played from late April until late September.
- The population of Iceland is around 335.000.
- Out of a population of 335.000 people 35.000 thousand regularly play football.

- Out of 35.000 regular football players 26.500 are registered at FA affiliated clubs.
- Out of 26.000 registered players 18.500 are male.
- Out of 15.000 registered male players 7.000 are 16 years or older.
- Out of 7.000 registered male players 16 years or older approx. 70 are full-time professionals.
- Out of a pool of approx. 70 full-time professional male players, Iceland has a national team that reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA EURO 2016 tournament in France, and has qualified for the World Cup finals 2018 in Russia ...

## Summary

We can firmly point to three factors to explain the recent success of the Icelandic men's national team. First class training facilities, high level of coach education and a good generation of players. These three factors combined are the main contributors.

Factors such as mentality and culture may also play a part. Vidar Halldórsson, a sociologist from the University of Iceland argues in his book *"Sport in Iceland: How small nations achieve international success"* that there are some important cultural conditions which are currently favorable to the Icelandic teams. He argues that *while Icelandic sports are becoming more professional – which has been very important for Icelandic sports - they still build on valuable elements from amateurism, where the players somewhat approach playing for the national team as play rather than work. The Icelandic teams are in this sense built on; intrinsic motivation, friendships and strong teamwork – which are elements that have been fading from commercialized sports. The Icelandic national teams further benefit from strong social capital where the whole nation supports the national team at big events. National team games are to the Icelanders not only sporting contests, they are important for national pride and the national identity of the tiny population. This kind of social capital motivates the players to show their best character when playing for the national team resulting in teams that become something more than the sum of their parts.*

*Further information:*

FA of Iceland media office – [media@ksi.is](mailto:media@ksi.is)