

## UEFA Research Grant Programme 2023/24 season

### **Forced migration and competitive football: A socioecological analysis of footballers and clubs in Germany and Italy**

#### **Final report**

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## **1. Executive Summary**

In the aftermath of the never completely resolved ‘European refugee crisis’ and amid the ‘Russian invasion of Ukraine’ (as well as other emergencies around the world), this project examines the process of integration of athletes with a refugee background in football clubs across Europe. The project employs an instrumental case study of Germany and Italy, two countries with significant immigration of refugees and asylum-seekers. Drawing from 38 qualitative interviews conducted with different actors within the football system, data is analysed to specifically focus on the processes of both refugee players and football clubs. By applying socioecological theory and thematic analysis, the research explores the interactions with and for refugees amidst their pursuit of a football career in Europe. In doing so, the report evidences both barriers and facilitators for a successful and safe career pursuit, benefitting both football clubs and refugee players.

Success in sports depends on talent, social inclusion, appropriate support, hard work, and health, with refugee players facing additional physical, psychological, social and economic pressures. Resilience is crucial for refugee athletes pursuing an elite football career despite the burdens of forced migration. Football players with refugee experience have different biographies, mainly influenced by age differences in migration, geopolitical situations and gender.

Although football is fundamentally open, it is tough for refugees to become elite footballers. The lower professionalisation of women’s football is a further obstacle for women. Legal hurdles for refugee players are considered surmountable, but they are still an additional challenge. Football clubs have enormous potential for integration, but professional clubs face economic risks when recruiting refugees. Although openness and empathy prevail in football clubs, exclusion strategies, institutional discrimination, and the presence of right-wing groups pose fundamental problems for the integration of refugee players.

The inductive analysis of the data and its interpretation through the ecological system theory are applied to provide recommendations for optimising the inclusion of players with a refugee background in football clubs. The analysis identifies critical actors involved in the integration process and thematically highlights challenges and elements of success across the different environments of refugees. In this way, the methodological implications, positionalities, responsibilities, complications and ongoing necessities of studying elite football as a particular social and cultural space can be illuminated. The research results aim to support relevant sports organisations and actors in refugee aid in the integration process.

## 2. Introduction

*A kid born in a refugee camp wasn't supposed to make it!  
But here we are GOING TO THE WORLD CUP.  
Don't let no one tell you that your dreams are unrealistic.  
KEEP DREAMING, KEEP ACHIEVING!*

(Alphonso Davies, 2022; literally quoted from his official Twitter/X account @AlphonsoDavies)

This quote from Alphonso Davies expresses the pride of a footballer being selected for the (Canadian) national team despite his refugee background. While Alphonso Davies' resilience, determination and talent are indubitably the key factors, many other elements, ranging from his network (family and friends) to the organisational level (football clubs and school) and the socio-political context (the resettlement system and national legislation) play an essential role beyond this exceptional case of success.

Sport is traditionally considered a relevant integration tool. Football is a particularly significant sports discipline, as it is widespread across Europe and worldwide, and it is particularly inclusive (Becker et al., 2017; Breuer, 2017; Doidge, 2018; Nunn et al., 2022; Truskewycz et al., 2021; Zec & Paunović, 2015). Most of the existing research on forced migration and sport (Michelini, 2020b; Middleton et al., 2020; Spaaij et al., 2019) concerns football at the grassroots level, while the elite level presents only a few examples (Norrito et al., 2023). However, there are various good reasons to explore the integration of refugees within elite football in-depth.

First, the integration processes of highly skilled migrants in the European labour market have recently been intensively researched (Cangià et al., 2021; Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Fedrigo et al., 2021; Hercog & Cangià, 2021; Udayar et al., 2020). Instead, sports have considered forced migration in its recreational, educational, health-enhancing, and charitable dimensions. However, refugee athletes systematically pursue the profession of sportsperson before, during, and after their migration.

Second, integration in elite sports cannot occur like in grassroots sports (Kahn, 1991; Roderick, 2006; Rosen & Sanderson, 2001). In elite sports, performance is the decisive factor for inclusion, which is difficult to reconcile with grassroots sport's social, charity, and integrative goals. This does not mean *per se* that elite sport is less integrative, as the dominance of the performance principle should theoretically guarantee equal treatment and the irrelevance of ethnicity and migration background. However, the effective meritocracy of elite sports is being called into question in the light of several issues, some related to discrimination.

Third, many examples of refugee athletes have risen to the highest levels of competition despite the adversities associated with forced migration. During the 'European refugee crisis' alone, numerous footballers such as Bakery Jatta, Ousman Manneh, Ebrima Darboe, Victor

Moses, Siad Haji and Awer Bul Mabil were able to establish themselves in professional football immediately upon arrival. At a time when identifying and nurturing talent is crucial to sporting success, the largely unexplored conditions that allow refugee athletes to reach the highest levels of performance are scientifically fascinating and relevant to the sporting system.

For these reasons, a multi-level analysis of social conditions, focusing on the individual and organisational levels, can fill this research gap and clarify why some football players with a background of forced migration succeed in making the leap to elite sport – while others do not. At a conceptual level, the research results will be used to identify opportunities for organisational and network development relevant to the condition of refugee footballers. The knowledge generated aims to support athletes after forced migration and relevant (elite) sports organisations and actors in refugee aid. The following will describe the research questions, the current state of research on forced migration and sport, and our adoption of ecological system theory. This is followed by a more detailed explanation of the qualitative methodological approach and a presentation of the results. The report ends with conclusions and a discussion focusing on possible ways to support the integration of elite refugee footballers in Europe.

### **3. Research Question(s)**

By focusing on both the experiences of the players and the clubs, this project examines ‘What social conditions facilitate the successful integration of elite athletes with a refugee background into the European football system?’. According to Esser (2006), integration<sup>1</sup> is broadly defined as the inclusion of actors in an existing social system and occurs in four dimensions: cultural, structural, social and emotional. We use this word in a narrow sense, referring to the structural integration (sometimes used synonymously with inclusion) of refugees into sport as a form of labour market. When integration is used in a broader sense, it is accompanied by the adjective ‘social’. This query leads to the following two subordinate questions:

#### **1. How do European football clubs integrate talented athletes with refugee backgrounds?**

Professional football clubs are organisations dedicated to competing at the highest level of the game and have a set of peculiar characteristics (Blumrodt et al., 2013; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012; Hamil et al., 2004). Structured around a hierarchy of management and players, these clubs operate within a complex ecosystem that includes competition, fans, sponsors and stakeholders. At the heart of each club is a management team responsible for strategic planning, financial management and operational decisions. This team oversees

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<sup>1</sup> Despite being generally considered less problematic than alternatives like ‘assimilation’, the term ‘integration’ has also been the subject of heated debate (Schinkel, 2018) and is used in a normative way, at least at the political level.

various departments such as coaching staff, scouting, marketing and youth development. The key to the success of a professional football club is its ability to attract and retain talented players through contracts and negotiations. These organisations often have commercial interests, fan bases and historical legacies that contribute to their identity and sustainability within the sport. The perspective of football clubs – of their programmes, hierarchies, personnel and culture (Thiel & Mayer, 2009) – are central to understanding integration processes of players with a refugee background. To explain the factors of (in)success, the club perspective is fundamental to complete the picture and avoid a one-sided analysis based on the refugee footballers' perception. The holders of different organisational roles (coaches, teammates and officials), as well as structural aspects of the clubs, need to be examined deeply to understand the organisational conditions that facilitate or hinder the integration of elite athletes with a refugee background.

2. How do talented athletes with refugee backgrounds integrate into European football clubs? Recognising the complexity, specificity and heterogeneity of 'refugee footballers',<sup>2</sup> this project builds on and refines academic work that outlines this social role (Michelini et al., 2022; Norrito, 2023; Norrito et al., 2023). With regard to the 'refugee' dimension, it is important to emphasise the heterogeneity of refugees, who come from different countries of origin, have different cultural backgrounds and have different experiences of forced migration. Although this experience is in most cases a critical life event, it has not prevented them from achieving success in their sporting careers. With regard to the 'footballer' dimension, against the background of different career paths, the refugee footballers see themselves as competent footballers who deserve to play professionally. While they see themselves as naturally talented, hard-working and highly motivated, they recognise that their background puts them at a disadvantage in the past and present compared to their local competitors. Forced migration adds a further and relevant obstacle to the already precarious trajectory of a 'normal' sporting career in football. One of the harshest criticisms of integration research is its tendency to reproduce assimilative thinking, despite modern definitions and theories conceiving integration as a reciprocal process of adjustments between the receiving and migrated communities (Smith et al., 2019). Moreover, the agency of refugees tends to be underestimated in general and concerning the integration process (Ley et al., 2021). Although this warrants specific methodological and ethical considerations, the project pays special attention to footballers' perspectives, expertise and knowledge production (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> We use here scare quotes to stress the potentially discriminatory dimension of this label (Zetter, 2007)

To investigate these two questions in Germany and Italy, the project analyses and compares the perspectives of football clubs and of footballers with a refugee background through primary (interview) and secondary (internet) sources as well as expert opinion.

#### 4. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

##### 4.1 Literature Review

Due to the topicality and relevance of the ‘refugee crises’, numerous aspects of their impact on different social contexts have been intensively researched, inclusive of the field of sport and leisure (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021; Michelini, 2023; Spaaij et al., 2023). Despite widespread interest, many aspects of sport and forced migration still need to be explored, including the field of elite sport. This project addresses this gap by examining the integration processes of footballers with refugee backgrounds in professional European football. Existing and ongoing studies by the research team show that inquiries on the sports careers of refugee athletes are of great significance (Michelini, 2018, 2020a; Norrito et al., 2023), regardless of the sport and the level of competition.

Recent literature reviews (Michelini, 2020b; Middleton et al., 2020; Spaaij et al., 2019) on the general topic of *refugees and sports* show that the sociology of sports has intensively studied the effects of sports on refugees’ health, barriers to active participation in sport, and the impact of forced migration on sport participation. The literature confirms the general assumption that sports can positively affect refugees, as sports can help with social integration, establish a sense of belonging, and contribute to acculturation. However, these positive effects cannot be generalised. Indeed, violence, discrimination, and exploitation can reduce the positive impact of participation in sports. While football is the sport most often considered in these studies, these works focus extensively on the grassroots level.

Building upon the state of research examined in recent publications (Michelini et al., 2022; Norrito, 2023), the following section focuses on three influential studies<sup>3</sup> which have informed our work and from which this project intends to build.

In their research, Nunn, Spaaij & Luguetti (2022) comprehensively address the sport of football, which functions as a mobile, transnational area of belonging for young people with a refugee background. Their research is based on three ethnographic and participatory studies conducted with young people from refugee backgrounds in three countries (the UK, Australia and the Netherlands). They analysed how engagement with football in the everyday lives of

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<sup>3</sup> Other relevant research has been done on football, but again at grassroots level (Dukic et al., 2017; Luguetti et al., 2021; Nobis et al., 2021; Nunn et al., 2022; Paškevičė et al., 2021; Stone, 2022; Webster, 2022).

young people from refugee backgrounds precedes and exceeds social integration. The authors demonstrate the need for instrumental sport-based approaches to social integration to be placed in a broader transnational and historical context. The consideration and vast sports possibilities for young people from refugee backgrounds were also at the forefront of the research. Promoting connections and bonds is made possible through football, among other things, representing a permanent and sustainable area of belonging for young refugees. Football is an essential source of continuity, connection, trust, and comfort for young refugees, who bring this sport to their refugee journey as a resource for belonging. Although the refugee journey is briefly discussed, our project intends to explore the processes of integration further from an experiential perspective in the specific case of professional football. Moreover, in their research, Nunn, Spaaij & Luguetti (2022) refer to young refugees in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands. Our study presents cases from Italy and Germany, advancing knowledge within different geographical locations.

Jurković and Spaaij (2022) considered refugee athletes in football leagues in various European countries and suggested that integration can fail in many respects. Among other things, they point to problems in registering refugee footballers with clubs and associations. The reasons for this vary from country to country and lie in the lack of preparation and insufficient knowledge of the clubs, in the absence of authorisation to register outside of professional football, and in an inadequate ‘welcome culture’ and lengthy residence procedures, which are a prerequisite for registration, as well as the lack of support for players from the clubs. As a result, refugee footballers are denied the opportunity to participate in competitive matches in official leagues, which means they cannot demonstrate their football skills and be discovered as a talent. This aspect is particularly problematic for those players who associate their flight to Europe with the opportunity to realise their dream of becoming a professional footballer. Having highlighted how such challenges exist for aspiring players, we build upon their work to further explore mechanisms that lead to successful inclusion in the professional realms of football.

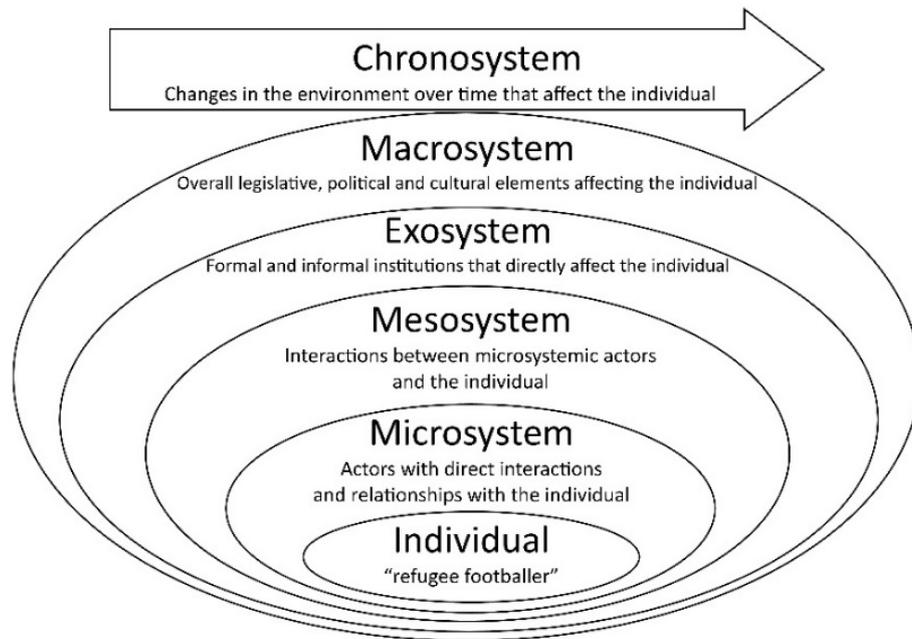
Recent research –sometimes merged– of the two authors of this interim report (Michelini et al., 2022; Norrito, 2023; Norrito & Mason, 2022; Norrito et al., 2023) is central to the present research project. This research shows that refugee athletes have had positive and negative experiences in European sports clubs after their migration. From the interviewees’ perspective, forced migration usually negatively impacts their sports careers. Despite their former professional career, football players in Germany often could not even get trial training at the desired clubs after their forced migration. They had to return –and usually remain– at a low

level of competition. The lack of a network is cited as the main reason for this. In Italy, however, bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of financial compensation were identified as the main problems. When recruiting refugees, the clubs operate primarily from a functional logic and thus focus mainly on the added value for the team's performance and economy that the players can bring to the team. Refugee players are, therefore, welcome insofar as they can strengthen the team and do not cause any additional costs or problems. In addition, preference is usually given to local players located at the hubs of talent development programmes (e.g. youth academies), who are already integrated into top-level (youth) development structures instead of refugee athletes. The foundational knowledge of existing work has led to a better exploration strategy, identifying a necessity to focus not only on refugees but also on the surrounding communities that shape their effective integration in professional football. This project is, therefore, grounded in this existing knowledge, purposefully extending and focusing the exploration of the interactions that shape inclusion or exclusion.

#### **4.2 Theoretical Framework**

To explore the inclusion process, mainly focusing on the interactions and experiences that shape a football career, we need to understand the perspective of the players, the football clubs and the relationship between the two. To do so, we resort to socioecological and interactionist paradigms. Indeed, this study applies Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecologic system theory (EST) from an interactionist standpoint. EST is intentionally used to a) identify thematic areas that highlight challenges and facilitators across the system and b) identify the key actors being shaped in the contexts of such challenges and facilitators. The intentional focus on identifying actors and their social relevance ensures the production of practical recommendations for specific functionaries within the football system.

EST outlines the relationships and interactions between the individual and the environment, and how these shape and are shaped by the individual's development and the environment's constant evolution. The environment comprises five different systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. With the individual positioned by the researchers at the centre of the environment, each system is represented by critical actors interacting with the individual and differing systems. Different systems need to be understood as networked rather than nested (Neal & Neal, 2013), meaning that systems overlap and, therefore, interact with each other through the social interactions of the individuals within. These interlink not only with their proximal system but also across different systems. Figure 1 explains the definition of each system for the individual who is defined as a 'refugee footballer'.



**Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecologic system theory applied to 'refugee footballers'. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979)**

While EST is originally used in various disciplines other than sociology (Neal & Neal, 2013), the theory has also been applied to studying career development (King & Madsen, 2007; Leong & Tang, 2016; Xie et al., 2019). The focus of EST on human development allows the precise but flexible use of the theory to explore interactions between the environment and the individual in different instances. The focus on the interactionist element combined with ecological system theory has also been advocated for understanding indigenous worldviews (Ali et al., 2022). In this sense, it provides an important focal point of understanding centred on the refugee worldview.

The decision to choose a human development theory to analyse the football-related professional development of refugees lies in acknowledging the interconnectedness that employment plays within the experiences of forced migration (Strang & Ager, 2010). Career development is a part of the broader resettlement process that occurs upon refugee migration and resettlement (Campion, 2018). Given the experiential focus, the model acknowledges that a refugee career in football is inevitably shaped by the distinguishing elements of the individual (e.g. refugee status and possibly related trauma) and of the environment (e.g. football clubs and governing bodies), necessitating a broader developmental focus that allows the exploration of these intersecting elements. Therefore, while the perspective is still centred on the individual, the role of football clubs holds critical relevance within the model we are proposing.

From a sociological perspective, EST enables our in-depth analysis of the career of refugee footballers, providing a structure within, and positioning of, the various multi-dimensional

elements influencing resettlement (Arakelyan & Ager, 2021; Ganassin & Young, 2020; Paat, 2013). In the sociology of sport, EST has been used to evaluate sport for development programmes (Burnett, 2015; Robledo et al., 2022), as well as a lens to explore barriers faced in sport (Marshall et al., 2023), and specifically in relation to refugee footballers careers (Norrito et al., 2023). However, a thematic exploration of the factors that shape the challenges and facilitators of a refugee footballer career is still missing, as the theory suggests that multiple factors across the interactive environment influence development (Neal & Neal, 2013). There is a much deeper need to immerse with the journey and trajectory of refugee careers in football, to identify what a successful pathway may look like and further comprehend where challenges arise.

The focus on identifying actors in the player journey is closely related to networks' critical role in accessing and sustaining a football career (Parnell et al., 2023). In the context of refugees, a forced migration results in a sudden change of environment that erodes existing social capital, with an apparent necessity to create new social ties upon resettlement (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). As refugee issues pertain to transformative crises within the ongoing process of globalisation, it is essential to recognise environments as interconnected within the global society (Young et al., 2006). Modern football expresses globalisation, refugee crises and resettlement (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012; Zetter, 2007). Therefore, within this global logic, the cases of Germany and Italy are interconnected due to their prominence in the football world as two key representative federations within UEFA and their central involvement in ongoing refugee crises in Europe. Within the global context, EST allows us to analyse both comparatively and contextually the socio-environmental lived experiences of refugees and football clubs within a shared European context and against contextual factors within Germany and Italy.

## **5. Research Design and Strategy**

This research project adopts an instrumental case study approach (George & Bennett, 2005). We adopt a design bounded to Germany and Italy to analyse the social environment of actors shaping the integration of refugees into football clubs. As the purpose is to explore such a social environment while providing recommendations for action, the instrumentality of the case study lies in its ability to identify social challenges for football players and clubs precisely. The design is also quite flexible, allowing the researcher to zoom out and in within socioecological environments to identify relevant themes across multiple levels and dimensions.

Directionally aligned, we have selected the sample population for their capacity to provide insights on the research topic across multiple levels. The primary recruitment strategy in Germany and Italy was based on email contacts to request interview partners for an online interview on the subject of forced migration and sport. Access to participants was also gained through the mediation of gatekeepers in the researchers' social networks, who were able to put available interview partners in contact with the researcher directly.

The research participants are grouped into three directional categories. All interviews have been conducted by the two authors over four months, from November 2023 to February 2024. Interviews have been carried out in the respective official language of the country or another language desired by the interview partner and translated into English. Our interview partners were differentiated into experts, footballers with a refugee background and club functionaries with specific expertise in integrating refugee players at least at the 3 top leagues (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> *Bundesliga* in Germany and *Serie A, B and C* in Italy). First, 'refugee footballers' in Italy and Germany (n=14), meaning individuals who have experienced forced migration and have experienced competitive football. Second, guided by the insights of refugee footballers, we identified key members within football clubs (n=14) who have influenced their careers. Third, we have included topical experts and members beyond the club to provide further information that may not be captured within the first two groups (n=10), particularly about the macro environments and the developmental elements not exclusively related to football. As a vulnerable population group, research on and with refugees focused on safeguarding participants, thoughtfully engaging with ethical concerns and best practices (Smith et al., 2022).<sup>4</sup> Participation in the project was voluntary and consisted of semi-structured anonymous interviews, mostly conducted online (Zoom and Teams were used as video telephony services). A total of 24 participants informed the German side, while 14 participants informed the Italian side. While coordinated in the effort, Norrito conducted the data collection in Italy, while Michelini undertook research in Germany. Table 1 provides descriptive information of the study participants (n=38).

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<sup>4</sup> This project received approval from the ethics committee of the TU Dortmund.

**Table 1: Interview partners**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>League</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Category</b>
1	Male Player	<i>Serie D</i>	Italy	Player
2	Male Player	<i>Serie B</i>	Italy	Player
3	Male Player	<i>Serie C (former)</i>	Italy	Player
4	Male Player	<i>Serie D</i>	Italy	Player
5	Male Player	<i>2. Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Player
6	Male Player	<i>Regionalliga</i>	Germany	Player
7	Male Player	<i>Regionalliga</i>	Germany	Player
8	Male Player	<i>Oberliga</i>	Germany	Player
9	Male Player	<i>Oberliga</i>	Germany	Player
10	Male Player	<i>Kreisklasse</i>	Germany	Player
11	Retired Male Player	<i>Bundesliga (former)</i>	Germany	Player
12	Retired Female Player	<i>Bundesliga (former)</i>	Germany	Player
13	Retired Male Player	<i>Bundesliga (former)</i>	Germany	Player
14	Retired Male Player	<i>Bundesliga (former)</i>	Germany	Player
15	Scout, Agent, and Sport Director	<i>Serie A and lower</i>	Italy	Club
16	Technical Collaborator	<i>Serie B</i>	Italy	Club
17	Sport Psychologist	<i>Serie C</i>	Italy	Club
18	Chief of Communication	<i>Serie B</i>	Italy	Club
19	Football Coach	<i>Promozione</i>	Italy	Club
20	Scout	<i>Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
21	Chief Pedagogue, Elite Youth Coach	<i>Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
22	Chief Pedagogue	<i>Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
23	Chief Pedagogue	<i>Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
24	Chief Pedagogue and Psychologist	<i>Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
25	Coach Elite Youth	<i>2. Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
26	Chief Pedagogue	<i>2. Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
27	Sport Coordinator	<i>3. Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
28	Chief Pedagogue	<i>3. Bundesliga</i>	Germany	Club
29	Talent Scout	n.a.	Germany	Expert
30	Referee	n.a.	Germany	Expert
31	Researcher and Coach	n.a.	Germany	Expert
32	Researcher on Otherness	n.a.	Germany	Expert
33	Researcher on Racism	n.a.	Germany	Expert
34	Football Federation Expert	n.a.	Germany	Expert
35	Sport Journalist	n.a.	Italy	Expert
36	Sport Journalist	n.a.	Italy	Expert
37	Adoptive Father of Refugee Player	n.a.	Italy	Expert
38	Spouse of Refugee Player	n.a.	Italy	Expert

Data was collected through a pluralist qualitative approach, which relied on three approaches to qualitative interviews. For the experts, an open approach to expert interviews was applied to maximise the possibility of grasping their specific expertise (Bogner et al., 2005; Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Meuser & Nagel, 2002). For football players, we used semi-structured conversational interviews (Glinka, 2016; Küsters, 2009; Nohl, 2010). Finally, a structured approach to expert interviews was preferred for the football club functionaries, following a more structured protocol (see annexe). To include these primary sources, secondary documents such as newspaper articles, official information of clubs and social media interactions of football players were included to inform macro environments within the refugee player

socioecological system and triangulate the information gathered through primary data collection. Therefore, the documents were selected after the primary sample had been defined, the primary data collection had been concluded, and the analysis had reached a defining stage. All data not gathered in English was then translated into English using online translator services and refined through the language skills of the multilingual research team.

The researchers undertook the data collection process with a refugee-centred approach, both for an ethical rationale of ensuring that research was beneficial to the population and did not harm (Smith et al., 2022) and to best adopt the lens of EST. Indeed, the individual has to be positioned at the centre for the environment to be understood within their perspective and fully grasp their worldviews (Ali et al., 2022). Ethical issues were also considered central, particularly ensuring the anonymity of participants at all stages and that they fully understood the objectives of the study. Participants were free to drop out at any stage of the research and to have input in the direction of the study when they deemed the questions or approach out of focus, leading to exciting and co-produced directions for our insights.

To this point, it is essential to mention that many players refused to participate in the interview, particularly within the higher divisions, due to the research topic. While the importance of the research was acknowledged and generally welcomed by the clubs, a frequent response from the players was that they were happy to participate in a research interview, but not about this topic. It is essential to raise awareness of this dynamic, as future research should be particularly mindful of the amount of involvement refugees want. Existing research shows that those who participate appreciate the interview process when done through a football-centred strength-based approach, not prompted to talk about their condition or experience of forced migration (Norrito, 2023).

To analyse the online and video-recorded narrative interviews and the complementary sources, a qualitative content analysis approach was used, which is based on thematic analysis (TA), ‘a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Among all existent patterns across the data set, the analysis sought to identify critical factors, commonalities and differences to evaluate the research question: ‘How do European football clubs integrate talented athletes with refugee backgrounds?’ These methodological choices characterise how TA was used to analyse the data: deductive and inductive approaches were combined for an iterative approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), a descriptive sociological orientation was chosen, and a constructionist epistemological position based on the EST was applied. Following Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) and Thompson (2022), we have constructed methodological guidelines

for a systematic, yet open approach to our data analysis. The process followed 5 steps: (1) familiarisation with the material; (2) inductive analysis of the material on clubs and players; (3) deductive analysis of the material through the categories predetermined by the EST; (4) review of themes and removal of overlaps and untreatable topics; (5) theory-based and discursive reflection on the themes.

## **6. Research Findings**

In this chapter, we present different analyses and interpretations of the collected data, which inform multiple levels of the topic of forced migration and competitive football. The first section summarises the contents of interviews and, therefore, the perspective of football players and clubs. The second applies the EST to deliver a multi-level analysis of the social conditions that facilitate the successful integration of elite athletes with refugee backgrounds into the European football system. It does so by mapping the interaction process between clubs, footballers and other key actors. Consequently, we delve into a deeper thematic discussion, divided by the system of the social environment where refugees and football clubs operate.

### **6.1 Integration of Refugee Footballers into the European Football System**

The *Bundesliga* and the *Serie A* are amongst the best football leagues, and the German and Italian national teams are among the most successful (UEFA, 2024). In addition, football is the most popular and most frequently practised sport by male athletes in both countries. On the one hand, footballers with a history of forced migration in Germany and Italy have numerous opportunities in a performance-oriented and capillary league structure to find the right league according to their performance and even gain a foothold in the top leagues. On the other hand, there is a high level of competition, and the players have to compete with countless others who have the same dream of playing professional football. It is, therefore, improbable for most active youth athletes to make it into the top leagues. Depending on the source (Deutsches Fußball Internat, 2022; Inside Jugendfußball, 2019; Sport Business Magazine, 2022), youth players in Germany who are already in academies or the elite system of football have between 0.03744 and 3.5% chances of becoming professional footballers. According to different sources (Corriere della Sera, 2022; La Repubblica, 2013), this number is even lower in Italian football, with a success rate between 0.017 to 0.2%. As mentioned, refugees who have struggled with many other problems in their past and possibly also in the present must overcome further hurdles.

The following sections analyse the integration of elite athletes in elite football with a refugee background from the dual perspective of European clubs and the players themselves. To do so, we highlight differences and similarities between Germany and Italy, as the two case studies in object.

### **6.1.1 The Clubs' Perspective on the Integration of Refugee Footballers**

*And that in a competitive football society, competitive sport, nobody cares whether you're a refugee or not. If you're a refugee and you're the best footballer, like Sadio Mané, they'll get you. No matter what, no matter what hurdle. They'll get you. No problem at all. And they'll also get clearance, they, they, if, if that's the top man, then they'll get everything done and that's it, he's still there, he only has a Senegalese passport, but all of a sudden it worked. All doors opened for him. France, Austria, England, yes.*

Interview material from the project

This section first introduces the characteristics of the German and Italian football systems, then delving deeper into the case specifics for clubs within each system. The German Football Association (German: Deutscher Fußball-Bund, DFB) is the governing body of football, futsal, and beach soccer in Germany. The German football system is explicitly committed to 'refugees' through programs and campaigns such as 'Football with refugees' (DFB, 2015, 2020a, 2023) and 'At home in football! Refugees in football clubs' (DFB, 2020b).

Although the systems of women's and men's football are conceptually very similar, the number of women's clubs, teams and players is significantly lower. Football is a male-dominated sport in Europe, and Germany is no exception. In 2023, 4,326,447 male members and 845,664 female members are listed in the senior sector in Germany (DFB, 2024). Although the professionalisation of women's football is underway and developing steadily, it is still far from men's football. Women's football is generally less professionalised and only in rare cases offers a possible professional perspective (and nowhere near the salaries and fame that football players can achieve).

It is also important to emphasise that several legal issues must be considered before a refugee player can be signed. Although the legal framework may vary slightly from state to state, refugee players must usually obtain the required work permit and visa to play for a football club legally. In Germany, getting a player pass in an official football league is simple, up to 9. From the age of 10 to 17 and after the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, players require increasingly extensive documentation (DFB, 2015, 2020a, 2023). Regarding the regulations for players without German citizenship, several professional-sector regulations have been frequently revised over the past decades. Special restrictions apply, which, in principle, make it possible to issue Ukrainian players with a match authorisation quickly. This takes around seven days from when the DFB requests clearance from the Ukrainian association.

The Italian Football Federation (Italian: *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio*), FIGC, is the governing body of football in Italy. Recently, the FIGC has made significant progress within the remit of their social responsibility, launching a football strategy for development linked to the ‘Sustainable Development Goals 2030’. The high number of first-time arrivals from boats crossing the Mediterranean are a solid explanation that refugee issues are high on the federation’s agenda. At the same time, the FIGC has run the *Progetto RETE!* (now called *Progetto Rete Refugee Teams!*) for ten editions, already showing commitment to social inclusion and intercultural exchange (FIGC, 2024), the new strategic direction of the federation will mean increased operations and better services for refugees through football. Nonetheless, limitations on the number of non-European players allowed per team in the professional divisions (*Serie A, B, and C* for men’s football, *Serie A* for women’s football) indirectly limit the inclusion of refugee players from a regulatory perspective (FIGC, 2023). The FIGC clearly regulates the signing of non-EU footballers and no exception seems to exist for people holding refugee or asylum-seeker status. Being a resident in the country is the necessary condition to participate, something that refugees or asylum-seekers may hold only temporarily. At the non-professional level (*Lega Nazionale Dilettanti* and *Women Serie B*), there is more leeway in terms of the documentation, where proof of residence can be satisfied with a wider variety of documents, allowing for players to be included with more ease (FIGC, 2023). At the grassroots level and for minors up to 16 years of age, Ukrainian footballers can be signed with a easier and faster process implemented since the Russian invasion of Ukraine (FIGC, 2022).

Similarly to Germany, including men in the game is more accessible due to the significant numbers of football teams and a long history of professionalisation. Nonetheless, legislations apply equally. As progress is steadily made, the integration of women refugee footballers is expected to increase. Yet the difficulty of becoming a professional footballer is significantly higher for women. Quantitatively, the spots are considerably less, as only ten football teams participate in the *Serie A*, the only league to be considered professional.

In contrast to the deficit stereotypes of refugees (Wigger, 2019), the data on Italy and Germany shows that refugees are often associated with better football performance than their native teammates at the club level. This positive stereotype is usually linked to the perception of an increased ‘hunger’, as commented in this interview: ‘[...] They want that, like, that’s their life. Yes, they want that, like, that’s everything for them. Every pass counts for them. The whole family is at the back of it.’ Clubs, therefore, see great potential in a player with a forced migration background due to the ambition required to reach an elite level of football despite their critical life experiences.

## **Germany**

*Um, we have a social responsibility as a club. Both in the city and when help is needed from us. And that wasn't primarily about maybe getting a good player. First and foremost, it was about offering humanitarian aid to the family, the wife and then the player. That was the only thing that mattered and we simply said to ourselves, that's what we're going to do. So, we also collected as a club. Um, we also went to the border and dropped off relief supplies. We simply said as an association: we want to provide this humanitarian aid as far as we can and have freed up the resources to do so. Quite simply. So that's why it's an extraordinary thing and if there's a war near us again, we'll probably react in the same way.*

Interview material from the project

With 26,000 clubs in five regional and 21 national associations, football offers unrivalled potential for integration in other sports, which has already proven its worth in the past in dealing with different migrant groups (Seiberth, 2012). At the amateur level, in particular, many clubs are involved in overall programs and initiatives for refugees and are committed to a welcoming culture. Examples include tournaments in refugee shelters, organised clothing donations and free training opportunities. Clubs such as Leipziger SV Lindenau 1848 e.V., BSG Chemie Leipzig and 'Welcome United', the refugee team of SV Babelsberg 03, have teams for players with a refugee background. However, it is critically noted that there are also fears of contact due to language barriers, cultural differences and legal grey areas. Clubs are often unaware of the framework conditions and unique opportunities for people with a refugee background.

While social purposes can be set as the main goals of amateur clubs, professional clubs work and recruit according to strict performance criteria. Despite their focus on performance and economics, football clubs sometimes include athletes after their forced migration. This is usually an investment in the future, as clubs take risks but rely on the long-term returns from the player's performance. Nevertheless, other cases show that integration can also serve charitable purposes. For example, places are offered in the club's facilities to help a player in a difficult situation despite average ability. However, there is evidence that regardless of talent and performance, local players are usually favoured over refugees for reasons that have more to do with the cultural closeness of clubs. It should also be noted that professional clubs are well-equipped to take in a refugee player. Due to the availability of financial, structural and human resources, professional football clubs can integrate and support refugee players, especially if this interests the club. Most of the interviews were conducted in the pedagogical departments of the clubs, which can offer psychological, linguistic and social integrative support to the players (and their families). The necessary legal measures are well documented and unproblematic for professional clubs, which can work with legal experts to manage these issues successfully.

Professional clubs usually already have full squads and favour investments in young players with development potential; instead, taking on refugee players is a risky investment from an

economic point of view, among others. One of the problems seems to lie in the systems of early professionalisation and player scouting of professional clubs, which seem to be sometimes unable or unwilling to include quickly newcomer elite players. For example, getting a trial training session may sound like a reasonable request, but clubs often do not contemplate it. Amongst other explanations, it was stressed that making an exception to arrange a trial training could lead to negative consequences for the clubs. They would have to explain to all other ambitious footballers why they were not given that same chance. In several interviews, moreover, it was emphasised that the scouting departments specifically observe matches and partner clubs so that talent cannot be overlooked. If a player consistently performs convincingly, they can advance in their career.

However, it is known that sports clubs are places where right-wing extremism can also find fertile ground (Delto, 2021; Müller et al., 2022; Seiberth, 2012). Ethnicity-based exclusion strategies are practised in the German football system (Müller, 2009; Nobis et al., 2021). Racist insults are often the trigger for tangible confrontations that can set ethnic boundary processes in motion (Seiberth & Thiel, 2014; Zifonun, 2008). In addition to insults on the pitch or social media, right-wing extremist symbols or chants from the fan stands are regularly reported (Geisler & Gerster, 2016; Ribler, 2012). Athletes with a migrant background also experience various forms of institutional discrimination, for example, at the level of sports courts (Pulter et al., 2006; Scherer & Winands, 2010).

## **Italy**

*Our social responsibility is anchored on principles that are fixed in time, a coherent guide on all the choices we make [...] they are choices about us, and all the individuals that represent the different areas of our city (including refugees)*

Interview material from the project

In Italy, less information is available on how elite-level clubs deal directly with refugee players. However, social responsibility initiatives such as the ‘*Progetto RETE!*’ suggest that they are primarily involved in the issue with a charitable outlook. According to our respondents, a higher emphasis on the care of refugee players is present within the lower leagues within the Italian system. Semi-professional clubs often offer tailored assistance to the players, who are then ready and already well-integrated into the Italian football system. When talented, these players are signed by the professional clubs and integrated as regular squad members. While this system has a positive element, particularly concerning players who want to be known as ‘footballers’ over ‘refugees,’ reliance on semi-professional clubs to care for refugee players presents some negatives. First, there is a lack of expertise in appropriate care from paid professionals, as semi-professional clubs’ backbone lies in volunteers. Second, safeguarding issues exist for the

players, particularly their potential exploitation by hostile agents. Third, refugees have to rely on the goodwill of their surroundings and the ongoing activism of the club to be supported in their sportive endeavours.

The aspect where Italy aligns the most with the German club system is within the ‘positive’ stereotype that is associated with refugee footballers. The concept of ‘hunger’ and their perceived physical prowess were often cited as positively related to their football performance, particularly from the perspective of performance-related decision-makers. Such performance-decision makers represent scouts, coaches, and ultimately sporting directors or club owners, who have the final say on the player’s acquisition.

The most explicit challenge comes from the legal frameworks within and beyond the legal football system. From a sociological perspective, we would like to highlight the experiential points of delays and uncertainty. While clubs are moved by an aspect of care in looking after refugees training under them, they also have to deal with a liminal element of not knowing when and whether that player can make an on-field contribution. While a well-established club may not have such an issue, a lower-division club may suffer on-pitch from such liminality, creating a ripple effect for the well-being of the refugee player.

Beyond the legal aspect, there are clear synergies to be created between professional and semi-professional football clubs, particularly in sharing educational and psycho-social resources for the well-being of players within and beyond football. Such synergies would fit with the logic of sports development and talent recruitment. Still, most importantly, they would expand the charitable operations and consequent social impact of the club within its community. Indeed, clubs will need socio-pedagogical resources similar to what is currently available in Germany, presenting two possible pathways. First, the partnership between semi-professional and professional teams is strengthened to share resources aimed explicitly at developing refugee football players. Otherwise, elite clubs will need to create a specific system to cater for refugee players, which would virtually be identical to the German one. However, the first option would be preferred to sustain the sports ecosystem and the players themselves. Semi-professional clubs are much larger and cover more expansive areas where refugees may be. Moreover, the mutual exchange of resources would mean a more comprehensive development and sharing of information that has positive spillovers concerning refugee issues and the entire football ecosystem.

### **6.1.2 The Players' Perspective on the Integration in European Football Clubs**

*That's a handicap for now. So even if I was really good in my national associations in my country of origin, I have times when I'm not training because I'm on the run. Where I gain experience. Where I arrive here. I'm not as good as I was before. I then have to train again, I have to work in other structures. There's a problem everywhere and I can imagine that it's not just a little stone in the gears, but that it can also destroy a career simply because of this experience of fleeing.*

Interview material from the project

In this section, we highlight the perspective of refugee footballers as they attempt to achieve a professional football career. Becoming a professional football player in Germany or Italy is an excellent source of motivation and a very ambitious goal. It should be emphasised repeatedly that the players interviewed are very different people and have very different biographies, despite their shared experience as refugees and sporting careers at an elite level in the same sport. We have not considered interactions yet, but we would instead focus on the identity and experiences of the players before delving into their professional journeys in the next section. First, we present common aspects within Germany and Italy and then explore some context elements.

For all of the cases considered in Germany and Italy and generally for all professional athletes with and without a history of forced migration, success in sport is the result of a complex mix of different factors (Pulter et al., 2006; Scherer & Winands, 2010; Vaeyens et al., 2009). Talent is the foundation, while appropriate support, hard work and maintaining health are crucial. Success in sport results from the balanced interplay of these factors, enabling high sporting performance.

It can be assumed that, compared to athletes who have not experienced a radical critical life event, a refugee background was a burden that had to be compensated for. This is because people with a refugee background are subject to various health, psychosocial, sociocultural and economic burdens (Strang & Ager, 2010), which make an already very demanding sports career more challenging. Due to the difficulties experienced before, during and after migration, the footballers did not receive optimal support in sports. After migration, they had to compensate for the deficits of sub-optimal support, fight against discrimination, and compensate for the lack of a football network. Nevertheless, it can also be observed that these critical life events did not lead to a career setback.

Racism against refugee footballers was cited as one of the stressors in the host country. This leads to the phenomenon of 'othering': in sports, too, people are differentiated into a 'we' and an 'other' (Seiberth, 2012). Physical characteristics or playing styles are assigned to a 'racialised being' in the context of sport (Alkemeyer & Bröskamp, 1996). Footballers are increasingly being publicly attacked in a racist manner, mainly through social media. The

‘Bakery Jatta case’ in particular caused racist insults on social media. Jatta described the hostility on social media as a ‘witch hunt’ (Michelini & Seiberth, 2022). However, footballers Youssoufa Moukoko and Jessic Ngankam were also subjected to racist insults on social media after they missed a penalty shoot-out for the German U21 team.

A social network can be described as a network of social relationships in which individuals, collective or corporate actors are embedded (Jansen & Wald, 2007, p. 188). Social relationships are essential for a career in any profession and for a football player (Parnell et al., 2023). However, the abrupt and radical change in the social environment caused by forced migration leads to the dissolution of social and football-specific networks. An entire youth career in a region or country can be a dense network of teammates, coaches, clubs and within the performance development system that can be crucial for the leap into the professional realm - despite a capillary scouting system. The lack of a network forces young or adult refugee players, in particular, to rely on lesser-known brokers (professional or not) who can act as intermediaries for them or approach football clubs on their initiative. However, experience shows that brokers are sometimes willing to profit from mishaps and that contacting them often goes unanswered. Even a trial training session at a club at a high amateur level without internal contacts is challenging to obtain.

A key thematic aspect of the individual characteristics of refugees lies in the concept of resilience. Resilience can be defined based on two factors: (1) the ‘restoration of normal functioning after suffering trauma’ and (2) the ‘maintenance of functioning despite the presence of impairing circumstances’ (Staudinger & Greve, 2001, p. 101). In the context of refugee backgrounds, resilience refers to the ability to cope with life-threatening situations without long-term impairment (Okroku & Yohani, 2020). A high level of resilience is also highly relevant in sports, for example, in the event of injuries and defeats (Whitley, 2021). For example, an interviewee spoke about resilience as something that ‘depends on how you process your experiences. It can also be a compelling resource to say that I’ve already experienced so much; I’ve been through so much. I’m here now, I’m building something.’ Of course, resilience is only one aspect of psychological factors, which have a complex relationship with environmental, physical and social factors, as our study shows. Also, according to the ‘Immigrant Optimism’ assumption (Kao & Tienda, 2002), refugees, like first-generation migrants, might be highly motivated to improve their living conditions against the background of their complicated past.

Refugees, in general, and the footballers considered here, are a highly heterogeneous group and migrated to Germany or Italy at different stages of their lives: some were born in the host

country, necessarily after their parents had migrated; some migrated as children and were able to complete their football training in the host country; some migrated as teenagers or minors and had to familiarise themselves with the German and Italian football systems; and others migrated as adults and trained footballers. The diversity of age groups when fleeing implies different challenges and adaptation processes that people at various stages of development are exposed to when they migrate to a new country under life-threatening circumstances and aspire to a football career, which usually lasts around ten years on the performance prime and is already professionalised at a young age. Overall, the study shows that age is a very influential factor for the examined sports careers and that migrating during childhood diminishes the impact of forced migration.<sup>5</sup>

### **Germany**

*[...] that showed me again and my parents also made it very, very clear that I always had to work twice as hard as a local, so to speak. And I continued to go through life with that mentality, trying to fulfil that dream of playing football, even if it wasn't within reach until I was 15.*

Interview material from the project

Despite many commonalities, evident differences between the German and Italian cases emerged. First, interviews with players in Germany stress the difficulty of getting a trial training in a club. As explained above, the fact that trial training occurs in exceptional cases shocked many newly arrived players, who believed in getting a trial training session at their desired club but were often turned down. This was interpreted as a sign that many professional clubs and, in some cases, even semi-professional clubs were not seriously interested in them or even discriminated against them. Here, an apparent discrepancy between the narratives of clubs and players is palpable. Players also argue that waiting to be scouted has negative consequences because getting from an amateur league to a higher-class club can take several seasons. Instead, the topic of licence and bureaucratic issues is minimally discussed by players in Germany.

Despite the shared history of flight, the country of origin is connected with specific geopolitical situations, which are considered a push factor (Lee, 1966) of migration and play a significant role in the development of the football career. In the German case,<sup>6</sup> these include crises in West Africa, West Asia and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, which implies different reasons for escaping. The origin plays a role in sporting experiences prior to migration and implies a specific socialisation (e.g., culture and religion). Germany has one of the strongest

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<sup>5</sup> This topic is also considered in Norrito et al. (2023).

<sup>6</sup> In the Italian case, all players have migrated from Africa because of various life-threatening reasons, like civil wars, military conflicts, catastrophic living conditions, lack of food and clean water, few educational and work opportunities, violence, human rights violations, poverty and lack of prospects.

economies in the world and is characterised by European and Christian traditions despite strong migration movements. This implies that integrating players who are geographically and culturally further away can be more difficult due to prejudices and a lack of welcoming culture on the part of the host society (Esser, 2006). This is particularly striking for the case of Ukrainian football players, whose good acceptance in society and sport raised discussion about racism against other migrant groups (De Coninck, 2022).

According to our research, two female footballers (Fatmire Alushi and Tugba Tekkal) with a forced migration background reached the highest level in German female football. Intersectionality, or the accumulation of inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2020), is an important explanatory factor for the low number of female football players with a refugee background, rarely found in the clubs surveyed. Considering our interviews on female football and further material, four explanations for this lack are below. First, since 2015, at least 57% or more of first-time asylum applications have always been made by men (bpm, 2024). Second, women migrate more often alone as the head of a family. Compared to male migrants, they are not only discriminated against as migrants but also as women and footballers (Donato et al., 2006). Third, there is no professional women's football, at least in parts of the refugee countries, so direct integration at a high-performance level is impossible due to a lack of previous experience. Fourth, traditional gender roles in parts of the forced migrant population can represent a further barrier to participation in sports. However, it is essential to emphasise that women's rights and equality differ and depend on many factors. Even in Germany, football is not yet equally accessible to both genders.

### **Italy**

*In [Serie A team], I had the experience of training with both adults and youngsters. I was training with champions, very friendly people and they welcomed me very well [...]. They were all so good, giving you advice, what you should do, what you shouldn't do. I had a wonderful experience with them*

Interview material from the project

In Italy, a contextual point to highlight from the player's perspective is that of the community refugee footballers belong to and the high variability of such a community. Players mainly recognised the role that teammates and coaches have had in their integration, how they have helped them develop technically and tactically, and how they have helped them feel included within their football community. This integration often happens through players of similar geographical areas or backgrounds who have been in Italy for a more extended period or within the context of professional football. In what is an effective mentorship, players have a more proximal feeling of inclusion while not being 'singled out' for their exceptional circumstances.

Indeed, they can find role models to emulate, engage with the players they want to be in the future, and focus on their strengths and possibilities.

Similarly, coaches are rightfully seen as figures of authority, for which, in turn, players have either gratitude or hostility (even if hostility is implicitly manifested rather than explicitly). While from the club perspective, we have seen that the role of educators and psycho-social assistants is deemed of crucial relevance, further data shows that the rapport between coach and player, particularly at a semi-professional level, is the most influential for the player perspective in the process of integration within the club. This influence happens because of the technical power of the coach over the player and because the player sees the football performance as the ultimate aim of their involvement with the club.

## **6.2 The Socioecological Environment of Refugee Footballers**

After sketching the individual experiences and characteristics of refugee football players and clubs, this section further tackles the aim of the research, which is to explore the social conditions facilitating the successful integration of elite athletes with a refugee background into the European football system. Following the EST, we focus on exploring the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems to clarify the broader factors influencing the interactions between football clubs and refugee footballers. The ecological approach here implies that actors in the systems affect and are affected by each other in their trajectories at different societal levels. In the case of the refugee-football club relationship, it means that both may work with and for each other to have a successful career and fulfil sportive objectives. The following subsections explain this ecological relationship by examining the different systems within the social environment.

The social-ecological perspective can help map refugees' experiential journey to become professional footballers successfully. This mapping exercise is essential for two reasons. First, it allows us to describe an ideal journey from displacement to professional football to identify critical points in space and time where beneficial interventions should occur. Second, it further identifies the key actors facilitating or hindering such a process through their interaction with the individual (see Annex 2). Due to the interactionist setting of the socioecological model, we call such actors 'enablers'. Interactors are vital people or entities within the footballer development environment that either shape or are shaped by the intended pathway of the individual. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the 'inhibitors'; thus, the actors and interactions amongst actors are creating barriers for the pathway of the footballer to be fulfilled.

We first explore the ideal pathway of the refugee footballer, then highlight challenges in the process and the actors involved.

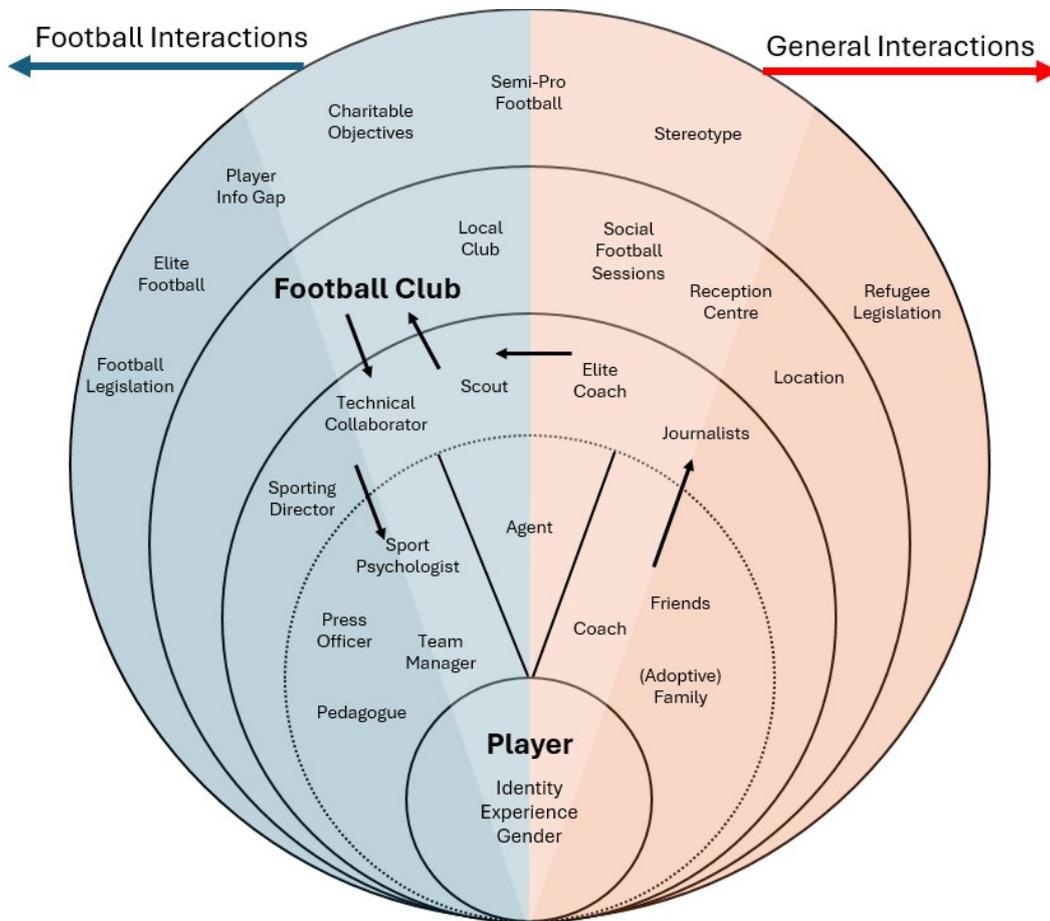


Figure 2: Interactions of refugee football players in the EST

Figure 3 presents a visualisation of the process of interactions that leads to the achievement of integration in professional football. The model is structured to show interactions across a spectrum. Towards the right side, interactions are general, while on the left side, there are interactions that strictly operate within the logic of elite football. Four key findings are highlighted from our exploration of the refugee pathways into football. First, we have found that refugees often enter the football system by reconstructing social networks and the weak ties within their networks. Second, we have identified potential challenges concerning the direct involvement of football agents with aspiring refugee footballers. Third, there is a distinction between younger and older players, where young players are provided with better resources than their older counterparts, often dealing with the resource limitation of smaller football clubs. Fourth, refugee inclusion within professional football opens up the door to critical club-related resources, highlighting the bi-dimensional role of clubs in shaping the professional career and personal development of refugees.

Following a precise pathway, the first interactions are related to the reconstruction of social networks within the society of resettlement. Such first-point interactions are an essential premise, as, in a recreational context, football has often been reported as a possible tool to achieve integration (Dukic et al., 2017; Parnell et al., 2015). Instead, when talking about professional football, we have observed that social inclusion is a necessary pre-condition for players resettled at a young age to pursue a football career.<sup>7</sup> Aspiring refugee players must have rebuilt their social networks as a precondition to pursuing a football career through friends and family or sports activities. Microsystemic interactors here play a crucial role in expanding the player's social embeddedness, very much in line with the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). Indeed, an interactor, often attached to the individual not for sportive reasons but because of genuine affection or solidarity, will help connect the refugee to a trusted person with a decision-making role in a football club. When a football decision-maker is unavailable, they will contact someone who is proximal, which may help. For example, in agreement with the aspiring player, some interactors in the microsystem decide to contact a journalist due to their perceived extended network and expertise. When matched with talent, such weak ties lead to the integration of refugees in the competitive dimension. This finding aligns with the networked dimension of football recruitment (Parnell et al., 2023), suggesting that refugees must achieve a 'social' level-playing field with their competitors to receive a fair chance to become professionals.

At this stage, agents may enter the ecosystem to help the player pursue professional football. Agents can be necessary gatekeepers and elements of support for the player, working for their personal and professional best interests (Gohritz et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2018). Other than the safeguarding aspect, the appropriate care from a genuine and ethical agent is, at this stage, key to preventing the loss or exploitation of talented players. However, our study suggests that unethical agents may approach refugee players early on in their careers, like young Ukrainian players in Germany. As we discuss in the thematic sections of the report, this is the phase in which refugees are more vulnerable to being exploited by malevolent individuals acting as their agents (Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2020). Specifically, we have found that the danger is maximised when an agent and player enter into contact without a mediating interactor, mainly when an unethical agent attempts to recruit the player directly. This puts the agent in an exciting intersection: an authentic agent is the main interactor, while an unethical agent is a significant inhibitor. This is a crucial challenge to highlight, possibly leading to severe exploitation,

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<sup>7</sup> Older and more professional players can instead use their football career for re-constructing a new network and maintain the core of their previous (for example familiar) network.

because at this very entry stage, refugees are in an urge to ‘make it’ and are, therefore, most likely to believe in false promises of immediate success.

Once the player has been successfully scouted and evaluated if, in line with the expectations of a club, it is then signed by a professional team. This deal, however, is likely to occur if the player is still young and can be aggregated to the youth team. If the player is deemed too old for a youth team, the paths diverge. The older player will try to climb through the ranks of semi-professional football to ‘earn’ professional football through promotions or transfers. This is an important finding of our study because the level of support available for those who do not make it is significantly less compared to refugee youth included in football clubs’ pedagogical and developmental programs. At this stage, those pursuing a career face the concrete challenge of making a livelihood while dealing with specific micropolitical aspects of semi-professional football (Molan et al., 2016; Potrac & Jones, 2009). This, for example, is particularly relevant in the case of women players, where the earnings are not enough to make up for their livelihood, and players resort to dual careers. While allowing for flexibility, dual careers hinder player development (Pink et al., 2018).

In the case of the younger player, integration in elite football opens the door to new key enablers that benefit most professional football clubs, with dedicated pedagogues and psychologists as stand-out examples. Indeed, research has shown that pedagogical and psychological methodologies can improve players’ performance (Machado et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2020). Generally, we have observed that the higher the league the club participates in, the higher the resources available. These enablers become important members of the footballer microsystem on the edge between a work, a social and a support relationship. Nonetheless, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of refugees pursuing football mean that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and confirm that, while personalised help is needed, that help is often related to the attitudinal and experiential aspects of the refugee player. The diverse and contextual needs of refugees within the professional football environment align with what is generally found in research (Rivera et al., 2016). However, it must be noted that such support is available for men’s games, while the same resources could not be explored for women footballers in Germany and Italy. After this initial adaptation stage and the career of a refugee footballer has effectively begun, the refugee aspect becomes much less salient in the athlete enablers.

While the process shows that the most critical beneficial enablers are found within the micro and meso systems, we see how the exo and macro systems are characterised by general neutrality and hostility.

We have transactional enablers towards the refugee player within the exosystem, as the thematic sections will show more in-depth information. The locations and community where refugees are found often frame their involvement within the dualism of inclusion and exclusion, highlighting the role of sport towards integration. Reception centres have a transactional nature towards refugees, as their primary function is to provide accommodation services for refugees that are assigned to them. Semi-professional clubs, while trying to cater for the refugees with special attention, do so because of an on-pitch return, often with a logic of how talented that player is. Elite football clubs, instead, as we have seen in the earlier section, generally look at players with the logic of performance and can integrate them only as long as they may be functional for reaching the sportive goals. The integration process also aligns with the social duties and expectations that clubs may have towards their fans (e.g. presenting themselves as an inclusive club). However, it is known that sports clubs are places where right-wing extremism can also find fertile ground (Delto, 2021; Müller et al., 2022; Seiberth, 2012). For example, ethnicity-based exclusion strategies are practised in the German football system (Müller, 2009; Nobis et al., 2021). Racist insults are often the trigger for tangible confrontations that can set ethnic boundary processes in motion (Seiberth & Thiel, 2014; Zifonun, 2008). In addition to insults on the pitch or social media, right-wing extremist symbols or chants from the fan stands are regularly reported (Geisler & Gerster, 2016; Ribler, 2012). Athletes with a migrant background also experience various forms of institutional discrimination - for example, at the level of sports courts (Pulter et al., 2006; Scherer & Winands, 2010). Therefore, according to our results, the exosystem presents a gap of care necessary for safeguarding refugees and maximising their ability to achieve talent, particularly in managing the expectation of pursuing a football career. In the context of the individual's development beyond that of a footballer, organisations operating in the sport for development field could fulfil this missing role in the exosystem at the intersection between elite and semi-professional football. Indeed, sport for development programmes caters to the individual's development beyond the on-pitch aspect, focusing on elements of social integration and livelihood, among others (Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

Instead, the macrosystem is characterised by hostility, which generally creates challenges for successful micro and mesosystemic processes. Interruptions of the refugee football career typically stem from this dimension. Starting from a non-sport-related perspective, the biggest challenge comes from legislation limiting the mobility of refugees and delaying their migration process. A significant time gap occurs from displacement to resettlement, where football cannot be practised, and migration to a safe country takes necessary priority. These delays are

contextually based on the country of origin and depend on whether safe routes for that given country exist. For example, an asylum-seeker from Ukraine has a different migration experience in terms of time and space than an asylum-seeker from the Gambia or Senegal. Furthermore, refugees face a general stereotyping that sees them as a population in deficit. Within football, particularly for African refugees, they are often stacked, with their perceived physicality or ‘hunger’ for the game as a common descriptor of their football-related abilities. Macrostructures within football also impact how refugees experience their inclusion in elite football, although with less hostility than in general interactions that occur at a societal level. For example, charitable objectives from leagues and individual clubs are generally helpful towards the refugee population. They may help achieve the foundation of social inclusion that refugees also need for professional integration. Nonetheless, they could also misframe the refugee individual as a non-athlete rather than an individual in exclusive need of help. Other elements point to involuntary hostility based on an ongoing necessity to gain an edge in the competitive football market.

## **7. Limitations**

Three elements must be taken into account when critically assessing this research. Firstly, data collection is partly hampered because some football clubs and players did not respond or declined our invitation to participate in the study. Although we met and exceeded the minimum number of participants for our data collection, the discussion could have benefitted from better involvement from a few more clubs and players. Secondly, this project offered the opportunity to obtain comparable data, but the above problem and the diversity of the subjective perspectives collected make our data very heterogeneous. While this is not a limitation per se but rather a result, it has shaped how we approached the project and its analysis. Third, the case of women footballers would have benefitted from a disaggregated approach, exclusively looking at the features and patterns of inclusion within women’s football for refugee footballers.

## **8. Impact of the Research**

This project has examined the question, ‘What social conditions facilitate the successful integration of elite athletes with a refugee background into the European football system?’. To answer this question, we have looked at how an elite football career may be possible despite a refugee background from the perspective of the footballers and the clubs. The results show how critical actors within the social and professional development of the refugee footballers hold the power to ‘make’ or ‘break’ their careers across different levels of their human environments.

While the cases of Germany and Italy present contextual differences, there is consistency in the role that interactions play towards the individual's professional and social development. In discussing the implications of our research, we provide targeted recommendations for the federations, clubs, and footballers to work synergically and facilitate the integration of refugee players in the elite football system.

### **8.1 Recommendations for Action**

This section recommends optimising the inclusion of players with a refugee background in elite football clubs. To maintain a fair level of complexity, our recommendations are based on the project's theory and data and the state of the scientific discussion, as explained below.

The EST can also be applied normatively as a social technology. To safeguard the multi-level feature of the analysis and to maintain closeness to the material, three recommendations for the federations and the clubs are formulated below, which are theory-guided, derived from the statements made in the interviews and feasible. After careful reflection and intense discussion, we have decided not to formulate direct advice for refugee players, as they are in the weakest position of the network. Additional burdens should not be placed on their shoulders because, in most cases, they are doing everything they can for their football careers, and the system and the clubs should be more supportive of them. Nevertheless, this project recognises the agency of the athletes examined, who have shown in most cases a great deal of creativity, self-organisation and entrepreneurial skills (Ley et al., 2021; Malkki, 1995; Thorpe & Ahmad, 2013).

To avoid discovering what has already been found and instead to broaden the discussion, a brief description of the literature precedes each of the three categories of recommendations above. An extensive but not exhaustive work on sources on refugee integration in sports shows that there are publications of a practical (Amnesty International UK, 2019; Fare, 2019; IRTS, 2018; UEFA, 2018) and scientific nature (Dukic et al., 2017; Jurković, 2020; Norrito, 2023; Nunn et al., 2022; Stone, 2018; Truskewycz et al., 2021) specific to football as well as existing literature reviews on sport in general (Michelini, 2020b; Middleton et al., 2020; Schwartzkopff, 2022; Spaaij et al., 2019), which contains recommendations or valuable information for their formulation.

Therefore, the next three sections begin by highlighting key points generally accepted in the literature on refugee integration in sport and football at the grassroots level and which we believe are applicable at the professional level. Based on our theory and material, we then formulate more specific recommendations.

### 8.1.1 Recommendations for the Football Federations

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is important to stress that the context, and within it, the football system, plays a crucial role in including refugee players in football. Despite the existence of campaigns and programmes on the refugee cause (UEFA, 2021), right-wing extremism, racism and xenophobia are on the rise in general and in football. Therefore, efforts against discrimination, racism and violence, and to promote democracy, diversity and respect should be continued and, if possible, intensified.

As a refugee background is a competitive disadvantage for a player, there is a need for systemic programmes to support players and clubs and level the playing field. UEFA is already formally and practically engaged in the refugee cause. Evidence of this includes the cooperation protocol with UNHCR (2021), the inclusion of ‘Refugee Support’ as a sub-point (9.6) of one of the 11 targets of its ‘Sustainability Strategy’ (UEFA, 2021) and the recently established ‘Refugee Grant Programme’ for engaged clubs and the tournament for refugee teams ‘Euro Cup’ (UEFA, 2023) initiatives. These projects, however, target the grassroots level. Our study highlights that strategically addressing the professional dimension is further necessary. Against this background, we make the following recommendation for UEFA and its football federations:

**1. Provide financial support towards refugee integration:** It is clear from the material that the integration of refugees in competitive football is the exception rather than the rule. Given the vast availability of talented players and the risks involved in recruiting those with a refugee background, clubs are naturally reluctant to take on them. UEFA’s support for both clubs and players could be crucial in this context. Clubs could be financed to offer positions in their youth academies to players with a refugee background, whose potential is difficult to assess.<sup>8</sup> Players could be awarded a ‘UEFA Football Scholarship for Refugees’, in line with the famous IOC’s good practice (IOC, 2024). Providing resources to enable professional training would allow them to train under professional conditions and develop and demonstrate their footballing skills. Such funding could be extended to semi-professional clubs, where financial and bureaucratic struggle may limit their capacity to sign a refugee footballer.

**2. Establish an office for refugee affairs:** The existing partnership between UEFA and UNHCR could be a strategic asset in creating a specialised office within the football system.

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<sup>8</sup> Bottom up initiatives, meaning created by footballing communities instead of football clubs, may sacrifice safeguarding over the purpose of showcasing football skills. Financially supporting these initiatives to hire secure football grounds and partner with professional dedicated staff could be a high-benefit-low-cost activity to promote safeguarding, and activate ripple effects for both potential players and clubs.

In the interviews, clubs repeatedly emphasised how refugee issues are rare and complex and how gaps often influence such issues in knowledge. Such an office could optimise the processes and the resource allocation by assisting the clubs and players with legal problems, facilitating coordination and interaction between refugee players and interested clubs, and providing coaching services. Even if the legal aspects are manageable for professional clubs, they can be a deterrent for newly arrived refugee players and semi-professional clubs with limited availability of human resources and scarce specific experience. Refugees have little access to the law in general and sports so that the office could provide them with legal assistance. In this respect, such an office could advise and assist on legal matters, contracts and bureaucratic procedures. It is also clear that the initial contact between players and clubs is sub-optimal, and the office could help both sides and thus bring together demand and supply within the football market. For example, clubs often face problems processing players' requests, and refugees' attempts to contact them are sub-optimal. The office could, therefore, facilitate this interaction. The office would also be a repository of information about campaigns and programmes, problems, successes and experiences that could be used to benefit the more comprehensive network. Finally, providing coaching for clubs and staff would be a welcome measure to promote sensitivity and knowledge in dealing with refugee players and to break down cultural barriers. Due to the knowledge gap, language problems, and cultural differences, exceptional attention to communication can counteract misunderstandings and, thus, problems in dealing with the players.

**3. Promote women's football among refugees:** The literature and the intersectional view of data on different aspects of women, football and refugees show that the characteristics and smaller numbers of refugee women explain why it is much more difficult to find case studies of female footballers with a history of forced migration in Germany and Italy. Nevertheless, the integration potential of women's football can be increased as the movement continues to develop and professionalise and as specific programmes are offered for refugee players. UEFA can enhance women's football by increasing investment in grassroots programmes, providing equal resources and visibility, and fostering partnerships with clubs and associations. At the elite level, high-profile events in competitive leagues may be the best way to raise the profile of women's football. The inclusion of refugee female athletes is highly dependent on this in general and specifically on promoting refugee role models, working on the social acceptance of women's football in refugee communities, involving the extended network of players (especially families) and enabling a professional or vocational career in football. Germany and Italy would benefit from exposure to famous refugee footballers who have achieved their

dreams elsewhere (such as Nadia Nadim’s success story across the US and Denmark) and social programmes for women refugee integration in grassroots football.

### **8.1.2 Recommendations for Football Clubs**

The goal of sports clubs, especially at the highest level, is performance. Therefore, the resources allocated to integrating migrants and other complementary goals are limited. Clubs that are exceptionally committed to refugee work are characterised by the persistent initiatives of an individual or a small group of people within the organisation’s staff, which is the most relevant push factor. Moreover, setting clear goals and transparency for all the stakeholders are also essential factors in gaining broad support within the club and, in turn, for the organisation to include refugees successfully. Also, sports clubs that voluntarily open up to refugees have blocking mechanisms (Burrmann et al., 2019; Seiberth et al., 2013), motivated mainly by diffuse fears of losing the club’s traditions, facing backlash and losing power. Social engagement with refugees seems to stimulate the social engagement of sports clubs, which can inclusively engage refugees through targeted programs addressing social, cultural, and logistical challenges. Implementing language support, cultural awareness training, and mentoring initiatives facilitates integration. The involvement of migrants at the staff level is a crucial indicator of the cultural openness of clubs. Clubs can work with local organisations to provide legal and logistical support to foster a supportive environment.

The following are specific recommendations for professional clubs:

**1. Allow for time in decision-making:** Recruiting a player with a refugee background could be a win-win situation, so it makes sense to accept exceptional risks. Precisely because players with a refugee background may be outside the football market, it could be a low-cost investment for a club to support a refugee footballer. Players with a refugee background have an extraordinary past. A particular openness and support in establishing contact and the exceptional offer of a trial training session is minimal compensation rather than preferential treatment. The trial period should be set up over a more extended period, as refugee footballers may present themselves for trial training with an inadequate fitness level. By training for several weeks, the trial players can gradually catch up on their training backlog, defuse the pressure situation, and establish social contacts within the team. That would mean giving the player a chance and creating positive social spillover effects.

**2. Include beyond football performance:** The performance areas of professional football clubs are ideally equipped to support footballers. If the opportunity arises, this potential should be used for charitable purposes, even if the players’ level does not immediately appear adequate.

However, such actions should be regulated and decided transparently to avoid accusations of favouritism and tokenism. Even if a player does not fit into the club's performance area, synergies can be created in other ways. Clubs have an extensive network that refugee footballers do not have, and that is important not only for their football career but also for finding a job, among other things. High expectations are placed on the social function of football, which are challenging to fulfil, especially in the performance area. However, if this is done, it should be communicated to the outside world and be shared as good practice. The interviews show that the inclusion of people with a refugee background is mainly well-received and is rarely criticised, even in clubs with right-wing fan scenes.

**3. Develop support systems for integration:** Educational departments are a signifying characteristic of the German system, which emerges as a good practice in our analyses. Compared to amateur and social-based activities, they are better equipped to provide support and assistance with social inclusion. However, these departments are usually understaffed and managed by people without a migrant background. Despite the multicultural features of football clubs, it is repeatedly pointed out that interculturality is an ongoing issue and that awareness-raising and coaching are not enough. Access to psychosocial support for refugee players should be ensured to promote their well-being and overcome possible challenges in the social integration process. Providing long-term support for refugee players is essential to ensure the development of their sporting skills, inclusion in the team, and sustainable social integration into the broader society.

## **8.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

Regardless of the difficulties encountered, this project widens the academic and practical knowledge of refugee football players and the clubs they play for. More broadly, it expands knowledge on related areas of scholarship such as the labour market, talent development and organisation management. Notably, it demonstrates how valuable talents for a given industry, such as the ones that refugee players bring, can be lost after a forced migration. Therefore, the benefits of catering to refugee talent go beyond social responsibility; it is about a general dimension of livelihood for the refugee talent and human resources for the organisation. Our project has explored this process within the football industry, but such processes of talent integration warrant exploration in other dimensions within sports and general employment.

This project aimed to explore what aspects of the refugee-club interaction, as well as which actors, were the most relevant for the successful inclusion of refugee players in the elite system. The strength of the ecological model used allowed for this exploration to be conducted flexibly

while precisely exploring key interactions. There are many ways that future research can build upon our work.

First, the report identifies many thematic areas that have warranted attention during our exploration (See Annex 3). While analysed in depth, each thematic area may benefit from an *ad hoc* approach. Semi-structured interviews have allowed for the flexibility of co-constructing critical themes with the study participants. However, targeted approaches could add even more nuance. Moreover, while we have looked at the European dimension, the same thematic areas may be experienced differently in other European contexts. Thus, we hope this report can help conduct thematic explorations across European sites.

Second, the report gives a snapshot of the current situation regarding the integration of refugees within elite football. Against an ever-changing European scenario and evolving patterns of forced migration around the World, the knowledge we are currently presenting should be followed up by longitudinal studies. As we have given an ideal integration process from the footballer's perspective, these processes may change over time and need re-evaluation. A longitudinal approach would ensure that these changes are taken into account. We believe an ethnographical approach would be best suited to capture these processes.

Third, as we have presented in the methodological section of the report, the topic could be tackled with innovative and differing research methods from the interview approach, particularly about direct interviews with refugee footballers. As a highly heterogeneous group, some would like to make their contribution but simply cannot get themselves to speak about the topic. Strength-based attitudes are therefore needed in the study of refugee footballers, but most importantly, trauma-informed approaches. Combining these elements with creativity can give birth to methodological innovations that will further our understanding of the topic. There is currently strong advocacy for using action research and participatory methods. Although some practical difficulties arise in using such methodologies in an elite setting, the philosophical paradigms underpinning these approaches would be fundamental for generating such new methods.

Fourth and finally, we recommend disaggregating refugee data based on sex and gender when talking about refugee footballers. This research has tried to speak to both men and women, but the results lean heavily towards men's experiences due to their more significant numbers. The thematic results concerning women suggest that, given the difference in industry development, there is too little professional advancement to conduct a full exploration of the study, and perhaps it would be best to study the professional aspirations of women who want to become footballers. Aggregating data between men and women in this study doesn't work

because of a clear difference in necessities and experiences that is well documented in existing literature. Therefore, future studies should look at women purposefully.

Overall, the results lead to nuanced knowledge that leads to concrete and reflective recommendations for practice for UEFA members, clubs, and players. We hope that this contribution will help all actors involved to create contexts, synergies and strategies that contribute to helping boys and girls with a forced migration background who are pursuing the dream of playing football to live this dream to the fullest and to have the best conditions for it to be fulfilled. And above all, for football to positively impact their lives even if the dream does not come true.

## Annexes

### A-Interview Protocol (Football Club Members, 15 Questions)

#### **Microsystem**

Who are the individuals that shape the club's operations concerning refugee players?

1. Can you tell me about your role in the club? What are your main responsibilities? How does your role support players?
2. Can you tell me specifically how you have or would like to support refugee players in your club?
3. In your opinion, what is special about refugees playing competitive football?
4. What difficulty would a female refugee face in being included in professional football, compared to a male footballer? What factors can facilitate their inclusion in professional/competitive football? Do these factors differ from men and how?

#### **Mesosystem**

How do interactions between close connections of individuals shape the club's operations concerning refugee players?

5. Other than the club, what other key figures you believe are important to include refugee players in the game?
6. What is the most important thing that people supporting refugees can do to include players in the game?
7. If faced with the question of having to support a refugee to play football, who would be the first five people that you would contact?

#### **Exosystem**

How does the club and other organisations shape the operations concerning refugee players?

8. Does your club take specific measures to support refugee players? If not, do you think it should? If yes, how does your football club support them?
9. What are the biggest challenges that your club faces in including refugee players? Has the club ever passed up a refugee player it would have liked to have in the team? If so, why?
10. Can you think of a success story that the club experienced in terms of refugee access to professional football? Focus on the notorious case(s): the club's perspective; Special projects, contacts, cooperation?
11. Are there any other refugee players outside the first team who are considered to have footballing potential - for example, in the youth or women's teams? Who many are they? At what level do they play?

#### **Macrosystem**

How does the context shape the club's operations concerning refugee players?

12. Impact of macro phenomena: The refugee crises? Legal issues (status, sporting justice, identification)? Politics?
13. In your opinion, what is particular about Italy/Germany and refugee footballers?
14. What are the structural constraints that prevent from supporting refugee players?
15. In terms of women specifically, what factors can facilitate their inclusion in professional/competitive football? Do these factors differ from men and how?

**Figure 3: Interview Protocol (Football Club Members, 15 Questions)**

**B-List of Actors within the Socioecological Systems of Refugee Footballers**

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Elements of the Individual Influencing Social Interactions</b>	<b>Category</b>
Identity	Aspects such as age, nationality, sociocultural background	Non-Football
Experience	Experiential elements such as the nature of forced migration or the level of training received	Hybrid
Attitude	Attitudinal and skill-related elements, such as football talent and resilience	Hybrid
Biological Sex	While an element of identity is here separated due to the differences in the men’s and women’s football systems	Hybrid
<b>Microsystem</b>	<b>Human actors directly in contact with the individual</b>	<b>Category</b>
(Adoptive) Family	Family members are a) either biologically related to the individual, b) adoptive family of the individual, or c) emotionally referred to as family by the individual	Non-Football
Friends	People are considered friends by the individual	Non-Football
Schoolmates	People that the individual shares educational activities with	Non-Football
Teammates	Teammates of the individual that share a connection beyond the pitch with the individual	Hybrid
Agent	In matters related to a football career, the player’s agent or general advisor is sometimes also (perceived as) taking care of the individual’s well-being beyond the football dimension.	Hybrid
Psychologist	Resource of the football club for the well-being and performance of the individual	Hybrid
Pedagogue	Resource of the football club catering for the education of the player. Education is also football-oriented but generally impacts the player’s literacy development	Hybrid
Coach	Resource of the football club for the performance of the individual	Football
Press Officer	Resource of the football club curating the communication with and for the football player. It has a sport-related focus, not a psychosocial one	Football
Team Manager	Resource of the football club to cater for the specific needs of players. Helps the individual to ease things and perform on the pitch	Football
<b>Mesosystem</b>	<b>Human actors working with the microsystem for the individual’s objective</b>	<b>Category</b>
Activist	Activists help refugees because they are intrinsically interested in refugee crises and political issues. While their help spans the macrosystem, they connect the individual to their intended football pathway	Non-Football
Journalist	Journalists can tell the stories of individuals to give them visibility, leading to awareness of the player and initial interest from clubs	Non-Football
Gate Keeper	Someone in or outside of the football system, who is somehow able to facilitate inclusion in one club through their network	Hybrid
Head Coach	Decision-maker for the acquisition of the individual	Football
Scout	Decision-maker for the acquisition of the individual	Football
Technical Collaborator	Decision-maker for the acquisition of the individual	Football

Sporting Director	Decision-maker for the acquisition of the individual	Football
Club Chair	Decision-maker for the acquisition of the individual	Football
<b>Exosystem</b>	<b>Organisational and physical entities influencing the individual</b>	<b>Category</b>
Location	The area where the individual is resettled and how accessible (football) facilities are in the area	Non-Football
School	The place where the individual receives their education	Non-Football
Reception Centre	The physical location is where individuals are temporally located and sleep, and their amount of freedom (to train and play football) results	Non-Football
Integrative Programs	Social programs aimed at the integration of the individual within the host society	Non-Football
Social Football Sessions	Football sessions without any particular aims, where football is played for fun	Football
Local Clubs	Semi-professional clubs have structured training and are enrolled in a competition. Players are not necessarily paid, and the league the teams play in is not recognised as a professional league.	Football
Football Clubs	Professional football clubs, ultimately, the institution that the individual wants to play for	Football
Football Federation	The organisation that regulates football clubs and their leagues	Football
<b>Macrosystem</b>	<b>Macroenvironmental aspects influencing the individual</b>	<b>Category</b>
Socio-Political Situation	The global socio-political situation that has led the individual to flee their country of origin, as well as the specific socio-political situation of the resettlement country	Non-Football
Refugee Legislation	Global, European, and context-specific legislation that protects and affects the freedom of refugees	Non-Football
Refugee Stereotype	The commonly understood and portrayed stereotyping of refugees, both with perceived good and bad characteristics of refugees. The media plays a crucial role in fostering the stereotype	Non-Football
Charitable Objectives of Sport	The social responsibility of football entities to have a positive impact on society	Hybrid
Semi-Pro Football	The nature and dynamics of semi-professional football influencing the football career of individuals with either positive or negative connotations	Football
Player Info Gaps	The lack of information available on the performance of the individual as a result of the marginalised condition and forced migration	Football
Elite Football	The nature and dynamics of elite (professional) football are a system where the individual wants to be included through their association with a football club	Football
Football Legislation	Football-related legislations that affect the inclusion of the individual in the elite football system	Football

## **C-Mapping the Social Environment and Processes of the Refugee Footballers**

This annexed section highlights the different themes identified within the exploration of refugee footballers. Given the dearth of knowledge on the topic, we believe that including all the different elements we have observed could inspire future research to examine what we have identified more in-depth.

### **C-1 Microsystem**

*Men and Women footballers: where to aggregate and where to disaggregate*

*Because I had big brothers who believed in me and pushed me. I didn't realise back then that women could play football professionally. That it could be a path for me. If I had been alone, I would never have tried it.*

Interview material from the project

A vital premise and consideration discussed with interviewees is the need for alternate aggregation and disaggregation of data on men and women refugee footballers. For example, the professionalisation of women's football, while ongoing and in steady development, is still distant from the monetary power of men's football. Therefore, the experiences of refugee women footballers enmesh with aspects of play and leisure more frequently than men, as their profession resides beyond the footballer dimension. Consequently, it would be too early of a stage to consider including refugee women *exclusively* in the professional dimension today. However, the current situation provides a further consideration on the overall gendered dimension of professional football participation. The current situation presents a necessity to aggregate intersectional data on different aspect of being a woman, including a refugee woman, to maximize equity and integration while the movement continues to develop and professionalize. Furthermore, and a limitation of this study, is that data on refugee women pursuing competitive football should be disaggregated, explored ad hoc, and locally. A finding of this study is that refugee women need to work to sustain themselves while playing football, as well as dealing with common gendered role given by patriarchal standards, such as childcare and house maintenance.

*The 'wolves' on the side of the pitch*

*That's why this network of counsellors was really incredible and I really think it had a bad aftertaste. The war is two weeks old and everyone is already calling and wanting to place their children, because this has opened a window somewhere. Normally it wouldn't have been possible to train only Ukrainian children with us and we were offered them like sand on the beach. We then realised what an emergency situation, a crisis situation is, or are they trying to exploit a business and a window somewhere? That's also a reality of football.*

Interview material from the project

A theme of interest concerns first and foremost the safeguard of players as they attempt climb the ladder of professional football. Interviewees have reported the presence of individuals, often ‘masked’ as football agents, offering money to potential players so that they can become their agents. While interviewees recognize that this practice isn’t new, they emphasize how a refugee player is more susceptible to such promises, given their situation of need. These ‘wolves’, as an interviewed sporting director has called them, offer them money knowingly of the fragility of the player, hindering the player career due to their lack of expertise and often illegal practices. This situation occurs particularly at the entry stage, where a prospective player is looking for their first contract in professional football.

### *Staff Activism? Going beyond the role for refugee integration*

*Um, we have a social responsibility as an association. Both in the city but also when help is needed from us. And that wasn't primarily about maybe getting a good player. First and foremost, it was about offering humanitarian aid to the family, the wife and then the player. That was the only thing that mattered and we simply said to ourselves, that's what we're going to do. So, we also collected as a club. Um, we also travelled to the border and dropped off relief supplies. We simply said as an organisation: we want to provide this humanitarian aid as far as we can and have freed up the resources to do so. Quite simply. So that's why it's an extraordinary thing and if there's another war near us, we'll probably react in the same way again.*

Interview material from the project

Most of the experiences of integration that have helped refugees in their careers have come from members of staff of a club going the extra mile to help them in their careers, not necessary because they were instructed to do so by a higher club strategy. In what can be defined as proper staff activism, they have provided extra resources in attempts to level the playing field. These attempts have involved either an increase in social networking for the player (introductions to key actors), through the provision of dedicated training sessions, and general care within the host country.

## **C-2 Mesosystem**

### *Network and the lack thereof*

*I never had that many contacts in Germany as far as players are concerned. Apart from those who have played with me, I hardly know any players and as a coach, I think you have to put together a great team, I always say. And if you don't have any contacts, then you can't.*

Interview material from the project

A social network can be defined as ‘a specific set of linkages among a defined set of actors, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the actors involved’ (Seufert et al., 1999, p. 182). Social relationships are extremely relevant for a career in any profession, including that of football player (Parnell et al., 2023). The radically changed social environment consequent of a forced

migration causes the dissolution of social and football specific networks. Our data show that even a trial training at a club at a high amateur level is extremely difficult to obtain without internal contacts. Refugee footballers without a specific football network have to trust less known brokers (professional or not) that can mediate for them or approached the football clubs on their own, making contact, asking for a trial training and accepting numerous refusals.

### *The importance of synergy between football and non-football actors in the local community*

*The fact of committing to something is already important, even if you commit yourself and then you may not be able to achieve a certain result. But you end up with a group of friends behind you. Mental and physical well-being is something worth talking about. In my opinion it's a lot of gain. And what matters is, in my opinion, giving an opportunity. From this point of view there is a beautiful network.*

Interview material from the project

Clubs have an immense network, which can be used to support players with refugee background, for example for helping in finding a school, a flat and even employment for their relatives. Also bureaucracy issues seem to be better manageable because of previous relationship with the bureaucrats.

### *Giving visibility: the role of local news*

*I interviewed the father for another reason, to ask him about the war (in Ukraine). Then he told me his son's story and I said, hell, then we'll do an article about his son too, that is, he deserves an article anyway. And lo and behold, I did an article on the son who played football, I interviewed him. Oh, very little time passed and having read this article this guy was contacted by the (semi-professional football team in Italy). They called him and he actually went to play there.*

Interview material from the project

Connected to the data availability on refugee players, we have identified a key role on local news particularly for the Italian case. When conceptualizing the study, the role of news and media in general has been relegated to the macrosystem, thus contributing to the sociocultural shaping of the football and refugee issues. While this remains to be true, the research has found an important mesosystemic role for news and journalists at a local level. Indeed, journalists themselves have been found to be important actors connecting refugees with football opportunity at local levels. A journalist that publishes the story of a refugee who is training with a given team (or in a given refugee camp) enhances the visibility of that player, who eventually gets called by (other) teams to play football. A journalist interviewed, heavily involved in the local domain with refugee issues, has reported how this practice has led not only to success in football, but also towards employment in general. However, and in relation to the 'wolves' presented earlier, refugees who decide to share their story in the newspaper, open themselves to risks of fraud and safeguarding issues. The issue of performance data and visibility is

therefore a complex double-edged sword: the more a player is visible, the more they are likely to succeed, and the more they are open to be contacted by malevolent individuals.

### **C-3 Exosystem**

#### *Inclusive and exclusive features of elite football*

*What I'm trying to say is that there are many people with African names and few 'Müller', 'Meier' or 'Schmitz'. And now your last question, I've noticed that people get very annoyed. Because then the players or other people ask me, um, yeah, uh, it's nice with Mohamed and stuff like that, but when is a real [German] one coming back, like blonde and blue-eyed? I've heard that a lot.*

Interview material from the project

The meritocratic principle ensures that talent is the decisive criterion for the integration of a football player. If his/her performances are at or above the level of the team, and there is a legal possibility (see section below), any professional football club would sign the player regardless of their biographical background. Yet, a professional football career is extremely unlikely, and a forced migration increases the odds on the path. Therefore, the talent of refugee players may remain unexpressed and may require extraordinary training and support to reach its full potential. Through the availability of financial, structural and human resources, professional football clubs integrate and support refugee players in specific ways when it is in the club's interest to do so. Interestingly, charitable exceptions have also been made, for example by offering a place in the club's facilities to help in a difficult situation, despite the player's insufficient skills. However, there is evidence that, regardless of talent and performance, local players are preferred to refugee players for reasons that have more to do with apathy, path-dependency and the cultural closure of clubs.

#### *We need you and you need us, for now: the semi-professional dimension*

*A boy I saw just last week went to Serie B to play today, after having wandered between C and D. At first we gave him to (semi-professional team). He had the problem of accommodation, but precisely because we had valued him, trained him, and shown him, the team decided to give him accommodation. Well, this is one of those wonderful things, that is, when you really network.*

Interview material from the project

To understand how communities can help each other and, above all, those in need, it is necessary to take a step back and analyse the semi-professional dimension of European football as a key initiator of some of the refugee footballers' careers. Semi-professional clubs have a higher reliance on and higher willingness to 'risk' playing a refugee player when given the chance. This willingness is given due to the time that players with a refugee background are willing to give to football, often presented as 'hungrier' for football than their local counterparts. Therefore, semi-pro clubs are willing to help because they see their efforts repaid in the pitch. On the other hand, players find in the semi-pro experience a way to start their

careers. Due to the transactional nature of their involvement with the club, they quickly jump to a better team when given the opportunity. Club officials are generally understanding of this dynamic, however they are also bothered by how sudden these club changes are, and how they may see their physical, emotional, and sometimes financial, investments quickly evaporate.

Generally, this shows an important finding at the exosystemic level: at an elite level, refugee players are treated neutrally against players with more privileged careers, thus hindering the possibility of refugee inclusion. At a semi-professional level, clubs reserve a special treatment to facilitate the inclusion of the refugee player, both inside and outside the pitch, but their special efforts often result in a sudden loss of sportive capital that abruptly hinders the club.

*Not about resettlement, but about reception: the key importance of the location of the reception centre*

*We played football in a small village club at the lowest level, and at the same time the village was a great benefit to our family because we had social contacts with people. It also gave us economic benefits, we had the opportunity to get jobs through the people who were also in the football club. Mostly for my father. Sometimes for my mum too. Because for us it was the bridge to society. Because you can play good sport even with little language.*

Interview material from the project

Another important finding lies on the fact that mass football involvement from the refugee population starts in proximity of reception centres, rather than upon resettlement to a further area from the reception centre. This theme is important because it shows a precise point of intervention and a precise location where the involvement in football may start. Participants have reported different examples of football teams led or made for refugees, and their role in kickstarting the careers of talented footballers. Therefore, clubs close to reception centres are important nodes of entry into the football system for refugees.

*Football beyond football: developing the athlete and the person through sport for development conformations.*

*[...] the holistic education of people is very important for us, so that we can ensure that the more than 90% of players who will not end up in professional football have enjoyed the best possible education and make them members of society, so to speak, who can simply get along in this society and perhaps even be leaders [...].*

Interview material from the project

Professional football clubs offer a wide range of resources and support beyond the focus on player performance. This holistic approach often includes services such as mental health support, education and career development programmes, and community outreach initiatives. These resources aim to support the overall development of players, both on and off the field.

For refugee players who have experienced significant challenges and limitations in accessing elite support systems throughout their lives, the opportunities provided by professional football clubs can be particularly impactful. These players may have unique talents and potential that have not been fully realised due to their circumstances. In addition, being part of a supportive team environment can provide them with a sense of belonging and empowerment.

#### **C-4 Macrosystem**

##### *The simple but tricky sport law*

*I can only speak for the youth training centre and there it's a case of first and foremost only the sporting value and quality and if a player, because you mentioned Ukraine, we actually have an acute case, if someone comes forward via whatever corner and he is training with us and proves his sporting value and quality and we want to work with the player from a sporting point of view, then all the necessary organisational administrative work is done.*

Interview material from the project

When a football club decides to sign a refugee player, there are several legal issues that they may need to consider. While the specific legal landscape can vary by country, refugee players normally need to obtain the necessary work authorization and or a visa to legally play for a football club. In Germany, the procedure for obtaining a player's pass for an official football league is very straightforward up to the age of 9. Between the ages of 10 and 17, and after the 18th birthday, players require progressively more extensive documentation (DFB, 2015, 2020a). Special regulations are currently being applied, which in principle make it possible to quickly grant the right to play to Ukrainian players. This takes around seven days from the time the DFB applies for clearance from the Ukrainian national association. While these actions are well documented and trivial to take, they can still discourage amateur and middle leagues club, which lack the personal resources and the experiences to deal with these specific bureaucracy issues. In some cases, is crucial for football clubs to work closely with legal professionals, who specialize in sports law and immigration to navigate these issues successfully.

##### *A brief career, to start at the right time*

*However, there are some obstacles that do not allow you to go professional straight away, which also waste a lot of time, because then, as we well know, a footballer's career is not eternal, that is, relatively short.*

Interview material from the project

Connected to the legislative aspect, there is also the concrete aspect of the length of a footballer career, usually consisting of around 10 years (Carapinheira et al., 2019). The length of the career is a macrosystemic limit that is imposed by the general physiology of the athlete, who is able to sustain only a certain amount of years of competitive performance. For this reason, legislative concerns, paired with the possible length of a forced migration, can be highly affective of the

career of refugee footballers. Moreover, the age of entry is another important element to consider, as those who are more likely to have a successful career will be included into football academies since at least their teenage years.

*‘Let’s sign the migrant to do a quality jump’*

*They have qualities, as I told you before, the speed of learning, the physical strength, that hunger necessary to emerge, the desire to be able to walk even 10 km just to go and play a match.*

Interview material from the project

Unlike expectations and in strong-contrast with the deficit-based approach to refugees, the data shows that refugees are generally associated with greater football performance than their local counterpart. This stereotype is generally connected to the club official’s perception of the refugee’s past, and their ‘hunger’ for the game. Therefore, clubs with limited resources see a strength in a player with a forced migration background, guided by the ‘hunger’ narrative that accompanies those who have gone through a perilous journey with the objective to play football. Nonetheless, once the players are signed, they become mindful and aware of the potential extra support that a refugee player may need.

*Regional divides and the lottery of reception*

*Let’s say, if there is a problem, then in Southern Italy in my opinion it is also a structural problem that concerns all young people, that is, whether they are migrants or not, that is, migrants have an opportunity here like all young people, like all kids who in any case have an opportunity that is ultimately minimal and restricted compared to those you can find in the North, both because here there is an objective fact, that is, there is less money.*

Interview Material from the project

Much of both the club and the player possibility of interaction and therefore of mutual cooperation lies on structural factors that depend on the location where refugees are received and where they spend the most time. Locations vary in opportunity at international, national, regional, and local level, and therefore interactions may be limited when the place of reception is isolated from urban centres where more sporting opportunities are available.

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