ACADEMY

UEFA RGP: 15 years of game-changing research

Celebrating a landmark anniversary of the UEFA Research Grant Programme

INTRODUCTION

In 2026, we are marking 15 years of the UEFA Research Grant Programme (UEFA RGP), a landmark initiative that brings the worlds of academia and football closer together and helps drive the game forward, in Europe and beyond.

The UEFA RGP supports visionary research that delivers game-changing insight and action. It provides European football with the latest knowledge and understanding, helping organisations to improve their strategic decision-making and develop their own projects, and offers authors international recognition.

The initiative is open to doctoral, post-doctoral and established researchers from around the world, with studies linked directly to UEFA national associations. The selection process is overseen by a jury of leading academics and senior representatives of European football.

The scope of the UEFA RGP is as diverse as the sport itself. Research projects cover economics, history, law, management, political science, psychology and sociology. As part of the evolution of the programme, a sister initiative, the UEFA Medical and Anti-Doping Research Grant Programme (UEFA MRGP), is dedicated to research on health, well-being and anti-doping.

To celebrate the UEFA RGP and its participants, and what we have achieved together over the past decade and a half, we are showcasing one project per year, highlighting key findings and practical takeaways for the game. The lineup features a range of topics from the professionalisation of women's football and how football can combat childhood obesity to preventing groin injuries in male players and what clubs can do to promote sustainability.

We also, importantly, asked our authors to consider how they would extend their research if they could. Why? Because the strongest research does not end with conclusions: it opens new lines of enquiry. This commitment to exploring beyond the current practices and boundaries is intrinsic to the UEFA RGP and the mission of the UEFA Academy.

We are very proud to mark 15 years of the UEFA RGP and we look forward to many more milestones as we continue to foster the innovation that helps power the future of the beautiful game.

UEFA RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAMME

WHO
Researchers holding a research position at a university or equivalent institution. Candidates must have a letter of support from a UEFA member association

HOW LONG
Nine months of research

WHERE
Research is carried out at the participant's institution

WHEN
Once a year
Application deadline in March

GRANT
Individual grant of up to €15,000 or joint grant of up to €20,000

NUMBER OF GRANTS
Usually four to five grants per year (total allocation: €75,000)

LANGUAGE
English, French and German

UEFA RGP IN NUMBERS 2010–2025

81 PROJECTS FUNDED

PROJECTS LED BY **94** DIFFERENT RESEARCHERS

RESEARCHERS FROM **23** DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES

INVOLVEMENT OF **77** DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES

RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN **ENGLISH, FRENCH, AND GERMAN**

OVER **€1.2 MILLION INVESTED IN RESEARCH GRANTS**

24 DIFFERENT NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS SUPPORTING PROJECTS*

(*counting from season 2015/16, when the requirement was introduced)


COMMUNICATIONS
ANTHROPOLOGY
SPORT SCIENCES
ECONOMICS
SOCIOLOGY
HISTORY
Projects published in various disciplines
PSYCHOLOGY
LAW
POLITICAL SCIENCES
MANAGEMENT
MARKETING
MEDICAL SCIENCES

FOREWORD

I have been fortunate to be part of the jury of the UEFA Research Grant Programme since its beginning. Since UEFA set the direction and ambition for the programme, our role as jurors has been to safeguard its standards, listening carefully, challenging assumptions, and selecting the projects most likely to strengthen the game through evidence. Over the years, I have seen how good research, when connected to the realities of football, can quietly but meaningfully change what we do.

An important part of chairing the jury has also been to help the programme evolve and adapt over the years, strengthening the link between academic excellence and real-world application, and ensuring that each new cycle remains aligned with the needs of European football. Two major evolutions reflect this commitment: in 2015, we introduced the obligation for research projects to be formally supported by a UEFA member association to reinforce relevance and maximise practical impact. In 2023, we supported the creation of a sister programme dedicated specifically to medical, health and anti-doping topics: the UEFA Medical and Anti-Doping Research Grant Programme (UEFA MRGP).

Over fifteen years, I have read many proposals and met many researchers. What has stayed with me is their shared determination to better understand football and its impact, and ultimately to make it better – not in abstract terms, but in practical, measurable ways. Their work reminds us that progress is rarely dramatic. It is often quiet: a better habit, a clearer guideline, a smarter way of organising, a safer environment. Yet these small steps, repeated across countries and levels of the game, change culture. And culture is what lasts.

This publication is special because it does not speak only in the language of reports. Its content comes from interviews conducted in 2025, where we invited researchers to look back – sometimes long after their studies were published – and to reflect with honesty. With time, they see not only what their research proved, but what it started: new questions, unexpected challenges, and lessons learned once ideas met the real world.

If these pages do one thing, I hope they reinforce a belief I have held throughout my life: football should never stop learning. When the game listens to evidence, it protects people better, and it honours the trust they place in it.

Michel D'Hooghe, Chairman of the Jury, UEFA Research Grant Programme

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15 YEARS OF GAME-CHANGING RESEARCH

PLAYING THE LONG GAME: THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Williams' study is a key text for understanding the history of women's football. She examines the development, integration and professionalisation of women's football across Europe, focusing on the 40-year period following the lifting of various bans that had marginalised the sport for almost half a century. The research takes in the rise of the European women's club football and the UEFA Women's Champions League.

AUTHOR
Jean Williams

TITLE
Women's football, Europe and professionalisation, 1971 to 2011

YEAR
2011

UNIVERSITY
De Monfort University, Leicester, England

The story of women's football is one of a century-long struggle against structural neglect and gendered governance – this is the narrative of Jean Williams' 2011 study. In her work, covering 1971 to 2011, she charts a course for the game from the fringes of the sport to the verge of true professionalisation, revealing a landscape where progress was often hampered by the very institutions designed to protect the game.

Professionalisation and still trying to break the glass ceiling

The journey towards professionalisation in Europe for women's football has had many twists and turns and looking back at her study in 2026, Williams argues that a fundamental hurdle still remains: "*Football as an industry is perceived as a male domain," she notes, pointing out that women have been "largely excluded from leadership, coaching and playing roles until relatively recently."*

Even as the number of women playing the game has surged, Williams is quick to temper the narrative of total success. She suggests that the term "*professional*" is often used too loosely in the current European context. "*Most elite women are better described as semi-professional players,*" she argues, highlighting a lack of medical, psychological, nutritional and physiological support, and a lack of detailed clauses in contracts regarding maternity rights.

Institutional neglect and the vulnerability of sub-branding

A central thread of Williams' research is the timeline of institutional involvement. While FIFA was established in 1904, it did not take over women's football until 1971. UEFA had taken the same step a year earlier and the English Football Association did not assume full control of the game until 1993. This "*institutional neglect*", as Williams calls it, forced women to become entrepreneurs of their own sport.

"*This neglect has been overcome by women forming their own leagues and competitions*", Williams explains. However, as these leagues grew in popularity, they were gradually taken over by the established, male-dominated governing bodies. This has led to a model of "*sub-branding*", Williams asserts, where storied male clubs, such as Barcelona, Real Madrid, Chelsea, Arsenal and Paris Saint-Germain, operate women's teams as part of a male-orientated infrastructure.

While this brings prestige, it is also a source of vulnerability. Williams points to the recent case of English club Wolverhampton Wanderers, where the women's side found that the parent club had no intention of funding them to be promoted to the Women's Super League. This reliance on the whims of male-team-focused boards remains a precarious foundation for the sport.

Copa 71 at the Azteca and a revolution in the women's game

For Williams, a pivotal moment for the women's game, both in terms of the recognition of its potential and its movement out of the shadows, was the unofficial 1971 Women's World Cup in Mexico. The final was held at the iconic Azteca Stadium, with the match drawing a crowd of 110,000 – a record that would remain for decades.

What did Williams see in this groundbreaking, financially successful event? "*Sell it big and aspirational*", she urges.

"Do not assume that women's football needs to be "shrinked and pinked" to make it attractive to spectators."

While this tournament didn't share the same profile as the men's competition hosted just a year earlier, it was still a masterclass, not least in defiance. The Mexican FA attempted to stop the event from taking place, but because the Azteca was a privately owned stadium, the organisers were able bypass the traditional gatekeepers. For Williams, this serves as a historical blueprint: when women's sport is treated as a premier product rather than a charitable add-on, the audience responds in kind.

Diversity in the boardroom: a business case for women's football

Looking forward, Williams argues that contemporary sports organisations must move beyond tokenism. She believes that diversifying boardrooms isn't just a moral imperative, but a commercial one.

"*Greater diversity brings with it greater opportunity for links with the broader population, including socially aware and progressive consumers who tend to have higher income and social standing, and with commercial partners who understand women have the influence in terms of setting standards that all-male groups do not,*" she says.

For Williams, the governance of the sport remains conservative and outdated. Compared to the music or film industries, Williams argues, football is dragging its heels.

A new age of feminist clubs and female entrepreneurs

If the European "*sub-brand*" model is flawed, what is the alternative for women's football in the next decade? Looking at the game today, Williams points to the United States and the "*feminist club*" model exemplified by Angel City FC in the National Women's Super League. Predominantly owned by high-profile women from areas such as entertainment and sport, including Natalie Portman and Billie Jean King, the club is a stand-alone entity with strong links to its community, rather than being an add-on to a men's team.

"*I would also look at the Michelle Kang model of multi-club ownership,*" Williams adds, referencing the businesswoman who has become a powerhouse in women's football, with ownership stakes in OL Lyonnes, London City Lionesses and Washington Spirit. For Williams, this shift towards independent, female-led ownership structures represents a break from the male-club dependency that has defined the European game for decades.

The ACL injury crisis: the cost of progress?

If female-owned ownership models would be Williams' preferred choice for further study, she is also keen for more research to be carried out in relation to the prevalence of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries among female players.

This trend, she argues, is direct result of the lag in professional standards – there is a "*lack of care for players as elite professionals in women's clubs*", she argues. Williams' points to the physical toll that a dramatic increase in the scheduling of matches is having on the small pool of players currently capable of playing at the international level.

A seminal study and an unchanged message

Williams' research serves, in part, as a celebration of the resilience of women's football. For her, revisiting the work, the increasing professionalisation of the game is a positive, but challenges remain, not least with much catching up still to do in the boardroom. As such, her message is unchanged: if football wants to thrive, it must stop treating the women's game as a secondary concern.

BREAKING POINT: FATIGUE AND KNEE INJURIES IN FEMALE YOUTH FOOTBALL

This groundbreaking study from Mark de Ste Croix explores how football-specific fatigue negatively affects dynamic knee stability in female youth players, with a particular focus on anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury risk. The research has led to the foundation of international safeguarding programmes that are changing the way the sport is addressing an increasingly critical issue at the heart of women's game.

AUTHOR
Mark de Ste Croix

TITLE
Protect her knee: Exploring the role of football-specific fatigue on dynamic knee stability in female youth football players

YEAR
2012

UNIVERSITY
University of Gloucestershire,
Cheltenham, England

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE
at Cheltenham and Gloucester

The recent rise of the women's football has been nothing short of meteoric, but it has come at a cost. Greater professionalisation, more matches and increased intensity are taking a significant physical toll. At the forefront of research in this area is Mark de Ste Croix, whose work is fundamentally changing how the game approaches the "*dynamic knee stability*" and health of female youth players.

Through a series of studies funded by UEFA and FIFA, de Ste Croix has moved beyond observations and analysis to create actionable, career-preserving, life-changing interventions. His work, culminating in the Reducing Injury in Female Football (RIFF) programme and the Move Well, Be Strong initiative, has helped shift the focus from reactive treatment to a proactive culture of resilience.

Developing robust, ready and resilient young players

The journey began with a UEFA-backed focus on how the immediate fatigue of a single match affects injury risk. Then de Ste Croix widened the lens to look at "*weekly accumulated fatigue*". This holistic view led directly to the creation of the RIFF programme, an injury risk reduction framework implemented in partnership with
the English Football Association.

The results were a definitive victory for sports science. By focusing on core stability,

anti-rotation and bracing, and the mechanics of jumping and landing, the RIFF programme led to a significant reduction in injury rates. However, for de Ste Croix, the success wasn't just in the biomechanics, but in the simplicity and inclusivity of the approach.

"We still take a pragmatic approach to all of our conditioning work with youth players in that doing something that wasn't being done before is better than doing nothing at all." de Ste Croix asserts.

This philosophy of accessibility is a hallmark of his work. The programme even includes a home-based element, recognising that for a young athlete to succeed, "*parent understanding and buy-in*" is just as crucial as the input and training from coaches.

A focus on maturation and the link between fatigue and physiology

A key aspect of de Ste Croix's work is its focus on maturation. His hypothesised that those in the circumpubertal group – those going through the peak of puberty – might be at the highest risk because of rapid growth and hormonal shifts. The data confirmed a precarious intersection of fatigue and physiology.

The research highlighted that fatigue significantly impairs "*neuromuscular capability*", which is the body's ability to keep joints stable under pressure. The danger is highest when the knee is in an extended position, specifically when a player lands from a jump without bending their knees.

"*The effects combined demonstrate that when fatigue is present towards the end of matches, youth female players are at higher risk of injury*", de Ste Croix notes. This finding has reinforced the absolute necessity of integrating landing mechanics into every training session, ensuring that young players develop the muscle memory to protect themselves even when most of their energy is spent.

Beyond football – research with global implications

While the initial focus of the research was women's football, its implications are universal. Since the publication of the study, the Move Well, Be Strong initiative has been expanded beyond football to other sports such as handball, netball, rugby and cricket, and rolled out across Europe, New Zealand and Saudi Arabia.

The reach of the work is impressive. To date, over 5,000 coaches and physical education teachers have been trained to implement these movement competency standards. This cross-sport application addresses a fundamental truth: any athlete in a "*dynamic and chaotic*" environment needs the same foundational strength and movement skills to survive and thrive.

By establishing these patterns early, de Ste Croix believes that the long-term health problems often associated with youth injuries, such as early onset osteoarthritis, can be prevented. "*As we try and develop robust, ready and resilient young players through our programme, the hope is that the longer-term health problems often associated with serious injuries at a young age are diminished over time*",
he says.

Combining technology with the human factor

de Ste Croix is clear that the burgeoning role of technology, with machine learning and AI now being used to analyse "*big data*" and predict "*injury risks, is integral to improving our understanding of both the physiological and biomechanical demands of training and match-play*". However, when it comes to the use of wearable technology, he makes the point that the playing field isn't yet level, stating that "*the amount of technology available in the women's game, especially at youth level, is still relatively limited and greater investment is needed.*"

At the same time, de Ste Croix is adamant that the human element is just as important. He identifies a gap between coach "*attitude*" and coach "*confidence*": while most coaches understand that injury prevention is important, many feel underequipped to teach it. To bridge it, de Ste Croix has spent the last decade developing education programmes that use the "*right language for grassroots coaches*".

The goal is to move away from clinical jargon and towards "simple movement competency" that is straightforward to explain and can be integrated into fun, engaging sessions. For de Ste Croix, coaches aren't simply tacticians, but role models for physical literacy.

"It doesn't matter how effective a programme may be, if players don't start using it, don't do the exercises correctly and don't continue to follow the programme, then the programme is ineffective."

A safeguarding mission critical to today's game

As the women's football continues its ascent, de Ste Croix's work serves as a vital framework for the game's sustainable, safe growth. In the female football environment, which has historically lacked the same sports science resources as the men's game, his research is providing a way to upskill non-sports science staff, empowering every club, manager and parent to be a guardian of a player's future.

It has been over a decade since the publication of the "*Protect her knee*" report, but the importance of its safeguarding mission – ensuring that the stars of tomorrow aren't sidelined by the preventable injuries of today – has become no less important; in fact, with the incidence of ACL injuries among female elite players continuing to rise, it is more so.

ALL TOGETHER NOW: UNITING FANS AND FOOTBALL ASSOCIATIONS IN EUROPE

In his 2013 study, Guillaume Bodet examines the relationship between national football association and fans. The report, based on case studies from Armenia, England and Lithuania, encompasses the type of relationships that exist, what factors define these relationships and how associations should approach enhancing these relationships with a view to strengthening engagement and increasing loyalty with fans.

AUTHOR
Guillaume Bodet

TITLE
Fan relationships and national football associations in Europe: Better understanding for better management

YEAR
2013

UNIVERSITY
Loughborough University, Loughborough, England*

Loughborough University

*Guillaume Bodet is currently employed at Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1 (Lyon, France)

As club football's glitz and glamour grows ever brighter, Bodet's study, on fan relationships and national football associations in Europe, offers a roadmap for how these bodies can secure their share of the spotlight. He emphasises the need for better management to help associations better compete for fan attention and build lasting legacy relationships in the modern football era.

Context and understanding fan expectations and connections

Critical to Bodet's work and its ongoing application across football in Europe is the realisation that differences exist in terms of national football association setups and operations, and fan expectations of these bodies. In short, context is everything.

There is no "*one-size-fits-all*" manual, no universal guide for fan engagement. The expectations of fans in Yerevan are vastly different from those in London. For example, Bodet notes that while in some places there is the expectation that national associations conduct themselves with the commercial efficiency of top-tier clubs, others view such "*marketisation*", in terms of communication and merchandising, with scepticism. "*In Armenia and Lithuania, there was an appetite for more marketisation, although in the England it was quite neutral*", he notes.

As such, for Bodet, an analysis of the local context is integral to building a strategy to strengthen fan engagement with a national football association. That said, at the same time, there is a common theme that runs through his research and fan relationships with national associations throughout Europe: "*a focus on the identity and values of the organisation*". Linking this sentiment strongly to governance, he makes the point that "*on many occasions, fans are not aware and do not perceive what associations are standing for.*"

Avoiding strategy imitation and broadening the scope of relationships

The domestic element of this research is particularly important for Bodet, with a shift towards "*research based on data*" rather than mere imitation. He observes that many organisations simply replicate what others are doing without understanding their own unique DNA and what makes them different.

Moving along the fan engagement pathway, Bodet highlights the importance of "*regular interactions – through games, communication and events*", which he finds is an area in which many associations are lacking. He offers a critique of the "*sporadic*" nature of current engagement and articulation based around senior men's teams home games. By evolving from this 90-minute focus, national associations can create a year-round community.

Why the approach to using technology and social media is critical

Looking ahead, in an age where social media dominates the cultural conversation and AI is reframing many societal norms, Bodet is a pragmatist, although he is clear on the role such technology should have in strengthening engagement with fans.

While he acknowledges that digital platforms are "*unavoidable*", he warns against letting the medium dictate the message. The risk, he argues, is becoming "*tool-driven*" rather than "*strategy-driven*". He revisits a seminal concept in sport management to drive this point home: "*I often refer to a study from Adamson and colleagues who discussed fan relationship management and concluded that sport organisations should 'walk the walk and not only talk the talk'.*"

Social media in particular, for Bodet, has a singular power in allowing national associations to transcend physical boundaries, making it a vital tool for reaching fans in rural areas or supporters living abroad, in particular in relation to younger fans.

However, he believes that these digital interactions are a double-edged sword. While they offer breadth, they often lack depth. "*They also shape a different kind of relationship, possibly less meaningful, less deep and therefore not necessarily creating long-lasting relationships*", he notes. The challenge for modern national associations is to use these tools to facilitate genuine connection, rather than just adding to the "*noise*" of a congested digital world.

Being heard and valued in an era of communication congestion

Another challenge Bodet identifies for national associations in managing fan relationships in today's communication environment is cutting through the noise. The modern fan is bombarded with content. Between local and foreign clubs and regional and international competitions, not to mention other sports, the competition for attention is fierce. Bodet identifies this "*congestion*" as one of the primary hurdles for national associations. To survive, an association cannot simply communicate for the sake of it: the dialogue must be meaningful.

"In this profusion of communication, standing out from the crowd and being able to qualitatively relate with members and fans is key."

For Bodet, this qualitative relationship is built on transparency and professionalism. His research found that the level of human and economic resources within an association has a direct impact on how fans perceive the body. An association that is member-oriented and professionally run naturally commands more loyalty and respect than one that feels distant or disorganised.

Nationals associations, fan relationships and navigating the modern game

As for developing his research, at a moment when football is becoming increasing globalised and digital, and national associations are coming under pressure to create a defined identity and forge stronger bonds with fans, without losing their souls and falling into the over-commericalisation trap, Bodet envisions broadening the scope of his work.

For him, such progress would be two-fold: firstly, taking a continent-wide approach to understanding how fans engage with their national associations, and secondly, further exploring the diversity of fans and how different types of supporter view the role of national associations. "*Let's dream big*".

SHOWING OBESITY THE RED CARD: HOW FOOTBALL CAN TRANSFORM CHILD HEALTH

André Seabra's study examines how the world's most popular sport can help society combat two major pandemics of the twenty-first century: physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour among children. Moving the conversation from the touchline to the pitch, Seabra's findings are proving how the simple act of kicking a ball can yield profound physiological and psychological benefits for children.

AUTHOR
André Seabra

TITLE
Soccer as a novel therapeutic approach to paediatric obesity. A randomised controlled trial and its effects on fitness, body composition, cardiometabolic and oxidative markers

YEAR
2014

UNIVERSITY
University of Porto,
Porto, Portugal

U.PORTO
UNIVERSIDADE
DO PORTO

The motivation behind Seabra's work was a developing crisis in children's health. With obesity rates climbing and children spending more time looking at screens than on playgrounds, there was an urgent need for an inclusive and adaptable means of tackling this problem.

"I was motivated to explore football as a strategy to address paediatric obesity after observing the alarming increase in physical inactivity," Seabra explains. "Faced with this scenario, it became essential to identify accessible, engaging and scalable strategies to help reverse these trends."

What makes football uniquely qualified for this task? For Seabra, it is combination of factors. Firstly, it is the most popular sport in the world, transcending socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities and religions. Secondly, it is a low-cost activity. Unlike many modern health treatments, it requires no expensive equipment or specialised facilities, and doesn't come with a big bill. And thirdly, the cut and thrust of recreational football corresponds directly to WHO recommendations for physical activity in children and adolescents.

"Football has a unique ability to bring children together, engage them joyfully and meaningfully, and inspire lifelong habits of movement, connection and health."

Football as a novel therapeutic approach – why it works

Seabra's research delves into the specific physiological markers that make football a "*novel therapeutic approach*". He argues that the sport is essentially a form of high-intensity interval training disguised as play. It combines aerobic endurance with explosive, dynamic movements such as sprinting, jumping and quick changes in direction.

"Football is primarily an aerobic activity, performed at moderate to vigorous intensity. These characteristics align closely with the type, duration and intensity of physical activity recommended by health authorities for young people to promote overall health."

According to the study, the results of the trial were comprehensive. Children participating in the programme lost weight and saw measurable improvements in cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and metabolic function. Perhaps most importantly, the research observed positive shifts in oxidative markers, suggesting that the sport helps the body combat the internal stresses associated with obesity.

Super Quinas Hour: academic research to everyday reality

A common observation of academic research is that it stays confined to journals. Seabra, however, has bridged the gap between the page and the community, with the help of the Portuguese Football Federation. "*Super Quinas Hour*" is a national initiative designed to fill the critical "gap" in children's daily schedules in Portugal – the hours between 3pm and 7pm after school when sedentary behaviour is at its peak.

Translating the findings of his research, and of projects at the Federation, into the initiative, its scale is a testament to its achievements. The programme has involved 302 municipalities and 1,354 schools, with over 2,000 teachers receiving training on how to use football to promote fitness and improve health. As a result, over 75,000 children have benefited across the country.

The success of the initiative has relied on a huge collaborative effort, which meant coordinating the involvement of an array of diverse stakeholders, from government departments to local parents. Achieving this alignment was one of the initiative's largest challenges, along with ensuring the programme's sustainability and adjusting to the geographical and cultural diversity of schools.

As Seabra notes, collaboration, training and tailored support as well as clear communication and joint commitment were integral to overcoming these challenges and to realising the ambition behind his research.

Walking football and applying "soccer science" beyond childhood

While the initial focus was on children, Seabra point outs that the application of football as a "*medicine*" is not age-restricted. The principles of musculoskeletal engagement and cardiovascular demand apply across the human lifespan.

As such, Seabra's work has been extended into "*walking football*", a version of the beautiful game adapted for older adults or those with mobility limitations. The preliminary findings are just as encouraging as those for the paediatric studies, showing benefits for individuals managing type-2 diabetes and even those recovering from prostate cancer.

"By capitalising on football's widespread popularity, simplicity and accessibility, we can tackle critical health issues like physical inactivity, chronic disease prevention and overall well-being across diverse populations."

Seabra argues that the principles that apply to football for childretn are equally effective in these adult populations, with walking football offering similar health benefits, improving cardiovascular health, metabolic function and social well-being.

Football as a lifelong prescription: preschool to post-retirement

Looking to the future, Seabra, steadfast in his belief that *"football is undoubtedly a medicine and a non-pharmacological strategy with enormous benefits for people of all ages"*, is planning to continue his research, expanding it in two key directions.

Developing the Super Quinas Hour programme, Seabra believes sports participation habits should be introduced to children as early as possible, which is why he intends to widen the scope of his research to include preschool-age children.

He is also focused on further developing the application of his research in walking football. *"We will explore the health benefits of walking football, such as disease prevention, quality of life improvement and social inclusion, while examining its impact on physical health, mental well-being, cognitive function and chronic disease management."* For Seabra, the message is clear:

"In a world facing rising levels of inactivity and childhood obesity, football can be more than just a game – it can be a medicine."

KEEPING THEM IN THE GAME: WHY COACHING MATTERS FOR GIRLS' FOOTBALL

Why do so many girls drop out of football? This is the issue that Paul Appleton explores in his landmark European study. Bringing a fresh perspective to the subject, he shifts the focus from poor pitches and unsuitable changing rooms to the voice of the coach. He examines how the behaviour of trainers and the motivational environment influences the engagement of young women with the sport and their continued participation in it.

AUTHOR
Paul Appleton

TITLE
Intentions to drop out in adolescent female footballers from five European countries: The role of the coach-created motivational climate

YEAR
2015

UNIVERSITY
University of Birmingham,
Birmingham, England*

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

*Paul Appleton is currently employed at Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester, England)

Where does the blame lie for the "*dropout crisis*" in adolescent female football? The game has struggled to pinpoint a clear cause, with a clutch of factors put forward, including substandard changing rooms and the poor condition of pitches. Paul Appleton shifts the spotlight away from the infrastructure and on to the person overseeing the drills.

According to Appleton's and colleagues' work, including the "*Intentions to drop out*" study funded by UEFA, the secret to keeping young women in the game lies in the "*motivational climate*" created by the coach. It is a finding that simplifies a complex problem: while other factors matter, such as pitches and equipment, the psychological environment has the greatest influence on continued engagement and participation.

Understanding the importance of the coach-created motivational climate

When it comes to female adolescent football dropout rates, there are usually a range of physical, social and economic factors at play – players rarely lose interest because of a single bad day. However, Appleton's research highlights that psychological engagement is the primary driver of whether a girl stays on the team or hangs up her boots, and that at the centre of this engagement environment is the coach.

Appleton puts coaching styles into two categories: empowering and disempowering. *"The coach-created motivational climate captures the behaviour and communication style of a coach,"* he explains. *"In our work, we have proposed that a coach's motivational climate can be more or less empowering and/or disempowering."*

According to Appleton, the impact of this climate is profound. When comparing various factors, such as the gender of the coach, the number of training hours and even the quality of the match pitches, he found that the motivational climate emerged as the "*most important predictor*" of a player's future in the sport. In fact, once coaching style was factored in, many of the other factors ceased to be significant at all.

What do empowering and disempowering climates look like?

Appleton defines empowering coaching through three main behaviours: task-involving (coaches who value hard work and collective effort), autonomy-supportive (coaches who listen to their players, offer meaningful choices and acknowledge their preferences and perspectives) and socially-supportive (coaches who care for the player as a person, not just as a tactics chip on a board). For Appleton, this approach represents a shift from "*winning at all costs*" to "*growing together*", creating a safety net that encourages long-term participation.

The study also identifies "*disempowering*" behaviours that drive players away from the game. These environments are often ego-involving, characterised by favouritism based on ability, differences and rivalry, and a strong focus on out-performing teammates and competitors. This style is frequently combined with a controlling interpersonal style, with coaches using pressure, coercion or intimidation when dealing with players.

The message from Appleton's work is clear: empowering environments are the bedrock of "*sustained participation*", while disempowering climates lead to "*compromised player engagement and well-being*".

A universality that transcends national and cultural boundaries

Another notable finding of the UEFA-funded study is the consistency of results across borders. The research examined adolescent female football in five European countries (France, Greece, Norway, Spain and the UK) and found that the impact of the coach transcends national borders and cultural boundaries. *"The results suggested that female footballers' experiences of the motivational climate and their intentions to drop out were very similar across the five countries."*

This commonality suggests a universal psychological truth: whether a girl is playing in an inner city cage in London or on a coastal pitch in Greece, she needs to feel valued and heard to stay motivated. Furthermore, these findings aren't limited to football. More recent research from Appleton has confirmed the same patterns in swimming, basketball, handball and gymnastics.

Empowering Coaching™: turning research into reality

Returning to the "*dropout crisis*" in adolescent female football, Appleton isn't just identifying the problem, he is also providing the solution. Through training programmes such as Empowering Coaching™, hundreds of coaches worldwide are being taught how to pivot their styles towards empowerment.

The positive impact of the programme has been validated through projects such as Promoting Adolescents Physical Activity. Results have shown that young people are less likely to drop out of grassroots football if their coaches have undergone this specific training. This demonstrates that coaching is a skill that can be refined and when coaches learn to support autonomy and social connection, everyone wins.

"The aim is to help coaches understand the empowering principles and then develop their own strategies for creating a more empowering climate in training and during competition."

Expanding the scope of the coach-created motivational climate study

Looking ahead, while the coach is a central figure, Appleton believes that the development of his work lies a more granular consideration of the motivational climate. He is interested in extending the scope of his research to include others who are responsible for influencing the psychological environment, such as parents, peers and teammates.

Furthermore, Appleton is delving into the darker corners of the sporting world, investigating the relationship between motivational climates and interpersonal violence from coaches and other athletes. By understanding how such behaviour affects athletes, including in terms of mental health, and how it links with empowering and disempowering coach-created motivational climates, he believes that sports organisations can better protect the well-being of their participants.

Appleton's work shows that the "*dropout crisis*" in girls' football isn't an unsolvable mystery or an inevitable byproduct of adolescence. Rather, it is a challenge that can be met with better communication, more empathy and a commitment to the psychological health of players.

A NEW GAME PLAN FOR ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH IN SCOTTISH FOOTBALL

In her 2016 study, Katy Stewart investigates the prevalence of mental health problems among professional footballers in Scotland, as well as the need for a structured welfare plan and the role of clubs in supporting players. The research focuses on mental health concerns among players, including their preferred sources of support, and the incidence of mental health issues and the provision of professional assistance.

AUTHOR
Katy Stewart

TITLE
Mental health in Scottish football: Incidence and role for intervention

YEAR
2016

UNIVERSITY
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland

University of Glasgow

In her work, Katy Stewart got to grips with the changing landscape of mental health engagement in professional football in Scotland. Positioning football as a powerful tool for change, she helped shine a light on the problem, and drive progress, while acknowledging that even though attitudes towards the subject, both in society and the sport, have become more inclusive, there is still some stigma attached to the issue.

Integral to Stewart's research was recognition that professional footballers are vulnerable to two distinct sets of mental health demands – a double whammy of stress. *"Football players are susceptible to the same mental health issues as the general public, but they also have additional pressures from management, fans and the media"*, she notes.

Beyond issues relating to relationships, loss and finances, and the commonplace anxieties that everyone faces, players have to navigate a pressure-cooker world of coaching behaviours, media scrutiny and fan expectation. Stewart's research also identified when these stresses are at their most acute: the "*danger zones*" for player well-being are periods of injury, career transitions such as contract negotiations and retirement, and when they feel isolated from their families.

A break from the past: raising awareness of mental health issues

At the same as exploring the types of mental health issues that footballers face and when these stresses can have the greatest impact, Stewart's work also revealed the extent to which mental health issues are affecting the sport and how transparency around the subject is increasing as attitudes change.

The research carried out by Stewart and her team for the UEFA-funded study showed that almost 25% of Scottish footballers required medical intervention for mental health issues, a figure that mirrored the "*1 in 4*" statistic often cited by the UK government for the general public.

With regard to the greater openness about the issue, and a definitive move away from the "*hush-hush*" culture of the past, the study found that nearly two thirds of players were aware of themselves or a teammate suffering from mental health issues.

Changing dressing room culture and ending mental health stigma

Perhaps the most encouraging takeaway from Stewart's research was the shifting dynamic between players and club leadership. Traditionally, a manager was seen solely as a figure of authority, often to be feared or at the very least not troubled with matters relating to mental health; today, the picture is looking markedly different, with coaches increasingly seen as pillars of support.

A finding from the study, which contradicted common perceptions about footballers and mental health, was that nearly 40% of players surveyed said that they would be happy discussing their mental health with their manager or coach, while just over half identified club medical staff as key contacts for mental health support. This shift suggested that the dressing room culture is evolving from one of stoic silence to one of greater openness.

> ***"This reflects the increased awareness of coaches to identify potential issues and the culture of a dressing room becoming more inclusive."***

This change isn't accidental and it seems likely that these numbers have improved further since the 2016 study. In Scotland, mental health education is now woven into the fabric of the sport. Mental health e-learning modules are a mandatory part of the coaching pathway, with more in-depth coverage of the subject included in UEFA licences. This is ensuring that those in charge see their players as people first and athletes second. By "*knowing players as individuals*", coaches are now better equipped to spot "*small issues before they develop into something more serious.*"

Support Within Sport and protecting players in high-pressure environments

Stewart's work was critical to mental health becoming part of the footballing conversation and a defined element of the football framework in Scotland. This research led directly to the creation of Support Within Sport, a pioneering joint venture between the Scottish Football Association and the Professional Footballers' Association Scotland.

Run independently by the Hampden Sports Clinic, this service provided a confidential, multi-disciplinary approach to mental health. Crucially, this was at no cost to players (male and female), backroom staff and referees. It is a model of proactive care that Stewart believes is "*transferable across European football*" to protect players and staff working in high-pressure environments. In 2026, the programme now looks after backroom staff, referees and players within the Club Academy Scotland structure as well as those representing the country for the National Team.

Where research on mental health in Scottish football goes next

While the progress made with regard to mental health in Scottish football has been significant, for which Stewart deserves much credit, she is alert to where her research around the issue needs to go next.

For her, women's football should be a priority. As the game continues its rapid professionalisation, she makes the point that the mental health problems in the women's game are often different to those in men's football, highlighting the need for tailored interventions and programmes. Another area that requires greater investigation, according to Stewart, is the relationship between head injuries and subsequent mental health issues.

Thanks in part to this funded work, mental health education is firmly established as part of the care infrastructure in Scottish football, an achievement that is helping the country position itself as a leader in player welfare. Through education, mandatory coaching standards and dedicated support services, the sport is proving that while winning on the pitch matters, the well-being of the people on it matters more.

LESS PAIN, MORE GAME: REDUCING GROIN INJURIES IN FOOTBALL

In his 2017 report, Thor Einar Andersen addresses the increasing incidence of a persistent "occupational hazard" in professional football: the groin injury. Proposing a strengthening programme as the solution, he oversaw a series of trials involving semi-professional male football players in Norway. Definitive test results presented a simple yet highly effective prevention strategy against one of the sport's most common ailments.

AUTHOR
Thor Einar Andersen

TITLE
The preventive effect of an Adductor Strengthening Programme on groin problems in Norwegian male football players: A cluster randomised controlled trial

YEAR
2017

UNIVERSITY
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

NIH
NORWEGIAN SCHOOL OF SPORT SCIENCES

Stepping straight into the science of sports injury prevention at the beginning of his career, Thor Einar Andersen soon realised that the groin would be the area in which he would specialise.

The groin injury had long been an almost literal thorn in side of professional footballers – a nagging, niggling ailment that could sideline a player for weeks or longer – but the changing demands of the modern game, in particular its hyper professionalisation, had led to a marked rise in its occurrence. The evolution of the sport, with more explosive sprints, sharper pivots and frequent changes of direction, was taking a physical cost on its participants.

Driven by the need to better protect players from this injury in today's high-intensity game, Andersen set out to find a solution. The project and the ambition were clear: to test the effectiveness of a specific Adductor Strengthening Programme among semi-professional Norwegian male footballers and to move beyond treating injuries after they occur and start preventing them.

A straightforward solution and a massive shift

At the heart of Andersen's research is an inherent simplicity. While many fitness regimes require a complex array of equipment and countless hours of dedication, the Adductor Strengthening Programme is focused on just one core exercise with three progression levels.

During the study, the intervention group performed the specific routine three times per week during the players' six-to-eight-week preseason, reducing the frequency to once per week during the 28-week competitive season. The results were transformative.

"We found that the risk of reporting groin problems was 41% lower in the intervention group."

In a sport where even the slimmest of marginal gains can be the difference between a crucial win and a deflating loss, such a reduction in injury risk is a massive shift. It represents not just healthier players, but more consistent team lineups and significant financial savings for clubs, with fewer players on the treatment table.

A universal foundation and a chance for all players to build resilience

While the study focused on semi-professional men's football, Andersen argues that the benefits are universal, in terms of age and gender as well as playing level. He envisions a sport where this training programme is as fundamental as a standard warm-up. "*The Adductor Strengthening Programme should be implemented as a part of normal football training in youth and adult players at all levels for both sexes*", he says.

For the next generation of stars, Andersen proposes a seamless integration: "*In youth football, we suggest including the three progression levels in the FIFA 11+ programme to specifically target the adductor muscles*". By building such a "*bulletproof*" foundation early, players and their bodies can develop the resilience needed to survive the demands of the professional game.

Overcoming real-world challenges and framing perceptions

The scientific benefits are clear, but Andersen acknowledges that one of the greatest challenges isn't the mechanics of the exercise itself, but the human element and ensuring engagement and commitment. "*Implementing a specific intervention in a study setting is always challenging", he admits, citing barriers such as time constraints, lack of motivation and "study fatigue*".

To combat this, Andersen advocates for a balance between scientific "*fidelity*" and the reality of the training pitch. It requires "*thoughtful planning to maintain the core elements of the intervention while adapting to practical constraints and specific team environments.*" For him, the goal is to make the programme so efficient that coaches see it not as an extra burden, but as an essential prevention strategy for their squad.

A legacy beyond the football pitch and footballers?

While designed for the football pitch, Andersen's findings have the implications for the wider sporting world. The adductor muscles are the unsung heroes of lateral movement, meaning his programme could be a game-changer for athletes in sports such as ice hockey, rugby and Australian rules football.

"*The fundamental principles of targeted adductor strengthening can be transferred across sports", Andersen explains. By addressing low hip adduction strength, a recognised risk factor across multiple disciplines, this "one-exercise*" revolution is set to redefine the approach to athletic longevity.

As football continues to push the limits of human speed and agility, Andersen's work offers a vital pathway to dramatically reducing the damaging impact of one of its most persistent injuries. His straightforward exercise regime can help keep players where they belong: on the field and in the game.

PRESSURE, POTENTIAL AND PROTECTING THE GAME: BEING A REFEREE IN EUROPE

In his 2018 study, Tom Webb shines a light on the working environment for football referees in Europe. Analysing training and development opportunities, the challenges referees face in their job (notably verbal and physical abuse) and the support structures in place to help them, he considers the impact of these factors on recruitment and retention, and proposes reform to safeguard the future of the game.

AUTHOR
Tom Webb

TITLE
The working practices and operational environments of referees from a transnational comparative perspective

YEAR
2018

UNIVERSITY
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, England*

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

*Tom Webb is currently employed at Coventry University (Coventry, England)

The importance of the insight that Tom Webb offers into the operational environments of referees in his report cannot be understated, not least in the context of what current conditions mean for the future of the profession and the game. Critically, his research highlights both common trends and key differences across countries, including in fundamental areas such as training and development and working conditions.

France and the Netherlands were Webb's testing grounds and while he found that referees were satisfied with some aspects of training and development in both countries, pointing to positive input from the national football associations, the findings weren't completely linear, in particular concerning personal development.

He notes that while in the Netherlands referees expressed contentment with their career progression, viewing a clear ladder to the top, their French counterparts remained more circumspect about the availability of such opportunities. The implication is that more needs to be done to link training to development opportunities.

Understanding what fewer referees means for the game and society

Another significant insight from Webb's research is the link between refereeing and public health. He argues that referees are not just umpires, but also "*facilitators of physical activity*", making the point that if referee numbers decline, fewer matches can be played, which would place a greater strain on healthcare systems in Europe.

To safeguard this dual role, and counter such a trend, Webb advocates for an increase in mentorship, suggesting that growing the number of tutors for young referees is a vital next step. He also puts forward the idea of more reform and collaboration, both domestically and internationally, as a means of improving conditions and better managing the referee talent pipeline.

"*There is the potential for growth and development of the referee workforce by ensuring that the training opportunities lead into development opportunities*", Webb explains. This proactive approach would ensure that the next generation of international referees is not only found but nurtured.

Abuse of referees, its impact and plotting a way forward

The elephant in the room remains the issue of verbal and physical abuse. Webb's research shows that such behaviour has a wide-ranging impact, both directly and indirectly, on recruitment, retention and standards in the profession.

> ***"If verbal and physical abuse continues to be a significant issue, it means that there are potentially fewer referees coming through the development system, and therefore, it is more difficult to identify talented referees."***

In France and the Netherlands, Webb's study shows that referees experience high levels of verbal abuse and physical abuse, with the widely held belief that abuse is "*considerably more likely at lower levels of the game*", including issues with spectators. Such behaviour is a clear threat to recruitment and retention.

While Webb notes that the incidence rates in France and the Netherlands compare favourably with those in England (45% and 30% of referees in the former countries have never experienced abuse, compared to just 6% in the latter), he acknowledges that his findings were contradicted by the scale and volume of incidents reported in the open responses to his surveys. This suggests an underlying issue with the normalisation of abuse by referees.

Despite these challenges, Webb sees the current situation as an opportunity for transformative intervention, involving players, coaches and spectators. *"We have a much better understanding of the challenges that referees now face," he says. "The next step is to intervene in the most impactful way possible to increase referee recruitment and retention across Europe."*

How technology can help improve conditions and standards

What shape this intervention takes remains to be seen, but Webb believes technology will play a significant role. Since the publication of his 2018 report, Webb has extended his research to include the impact of technology on refereeing conditions and standards, at both the professional and grassroots levels.

He is positive about what the likes of VAR and body cameras can achieve for in-game refereeing, arguing that "*undoubtedly these technological developments and advancements can help referees, and in the case of VAR, can assist in standardising performance across different countries, leagues and competitions.*"

He also points out that technology is changing the profession beyond the pitch, by revolutionising the way that referees learn. Remote training and online platforms are allowing officials to collaborate across vast geographical distances. This digital "*harmonisation*" means a referee in a rural Dutch village can access the same high-level insights as an official in Paris, ensuring a consistent application of the game's laws.

Harmonisation, collaboration and protecting the talent pipeline

Transnational collaboration and digital and human harmonisation are key takeaways from Webb's work. There is a clear message that by sharing best practices between countries, the refereeing community can create a unified front that elevates the standard of the game globally.

Webb has already got the ball rolling in this regard. His subsequent research, funded by the 2023 UEFA Grant Programme, has expanded the scope of his work to include English, Spanish and Italian football associations. He is also including a greater focus on the recruitment and retention of officials and the online abuse they receive.

Another area of development for Webb is studying the interaction between young referees and parents of young players (i.e. spectators of youth football), and how this interaction affects young referees. As with the 2018 report, this research is likely to both serve as a reminder of the difficult job that referees do and provide a roadmap for improving behaviours and standards for the benefit of the game as a whole.

WHY PROFESSIONAL MEN'S CLUBS ARE INVESTING IN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Against a backdrop of fast-paced change in the women's game, Maurizio Valenti's 2019 study looks at how traditionally male-orientated football clubs are adapting to the new landscape. He examines the reasons why men's clubs are investing in women's football, what is framing how they spend and the sustainability of the current business model, as well as how best to take the women's game forward.

AUTHOR
Maurizio Valenti

TITLE
Exploring club organisation structures in European women's football

YEAR
2019

UNIVERSITY
University of Stirling,
Stirling, Scotland*

UNIVERSITY of STIRLING

*Maurizio Valenti is currently employed at Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester, England)

In an era when modern football clubs are no longer merely sports teams, but multifaceted, complex entities with a diverse family of stakeholders, Valenti's study of the motivations behind male-club investment in women's football has revealed a range of intersecting factors at play.

"*Clubs can face institutional and regulatory demands from various groups, including local municipalities, national governments and sport governing bodies*", he notes. For example, these entities can mandate the allocation of resources to women's teams as part of a broader effort to promote women's empowerment.

Moving away from a top-down perspective, another key motivation is the desire from a club to improve its public image and appeal to investors. As Valenti explains, "By supporting women's teams, clubs can demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and diversity, which can attract a broader audience and enhance their brand reputation."

On a similar theme, investing in a women's team is a chance to contribute to societal change by promoting gender equality, by encouraging female participation in sports. It also allows a club to strengthen its connection with the local community. Then there is the prospect of new commercial opportunities: "*Clubs see potential in sponsorships, broadcast rights and merchandise sales related to women's teams*", Valenti outlines.

What investing in women's team means for club brands and finances

For Valenti, from a brand perspective, the attraction of investing in a women's team under the "*one club*" model strategy is clear: by introducing women's teams as brand extensions of pre-existing men's teams, clubs have the potential to leverage decades of established brand equity.

According to the study, this unified brand portfolio approach allows clubs to target and capture new consumer demographics – "*incorporating a women's team offers the potential to attract a wider audience, including those who might not be interested in men's football.*" By sharing names, colours and logos, the women's side gains instant visibility, while the men's side benefits from a potential return on image associated with inclusivity and progressive values.

Financially, according to Valenti, the numbers are beginning to back up the sentiment. With UEFA introducing new continental competitions and reformatting existing ones, and broadcasting rights on the rise, the commercial viability of the women's game is being increasingly recognised.

However, at the same time, Valenti is aware of the need to temper the notion that it is "*a job done*", pointing out that growth is uneven across countries and that sustained investment remains important in order to bridge the gap between potential and profit.

Understanding the barriers to men's club investment in women's football

Focusing on the need for ongoing substantial investment in women's football, Valenti's study is clear that despite all the progress, a number of barriers exist for clubs. He identifies a trio of obstacles: a lack of commercial revenues, doubts about business sustainability and inconsistent spectator interest.

Valenti notes that these points are outlined in the UEFA strategy document on the development of women's football to 2030, observing that it emphasises that costs still outweigh returns. As such, it is easy to see why some clubs find it difficult to justify large-scale expansion without a clear, long-term roadmap to viability.

That said, when it comes to finances, Valenti identifies a complex position taken by some clubs, which he describes as "*somewhat controversial*". He notes that often "*clubs do not seek to generate an immediate surplus from investing in women's football, but also identify the lack of financial returns as the greatest risk to continuing their initiatives in the women's game.*"

Another duality his work reveals is that "*many clubs refer to community building and social benefits related to their investment in women's football, however, they acknowledge the absence or vague presence of objective metrics to track the success of these.*"

Notably, in a rapidly evolving consumer media landscape, with growth potential significant, Valenti recommends that clubs establish clearer, objective metrics to track success, moving beyond imprecise notions of community building and towards data-driven assessments of social and economic impact.

Making a case for women's football to follow its own path?

Looking forward, one of the most significant questions raised by Valenti's research is whether the women's game should be a carbon copy of the men's. There is an ongoing debate about whether tying the development of women's football so closely to the men's game is a help or a hindrance.

Valenti argues that by relying on the men's club for resources, the women's game often finds itself in a position of "*catching up*". He cautions that this can lead to women's teams being viewed as "subordinate" to men's sides. Furthermore, there is the risk of "*hyper-commodification*" and replicating the excesses and pitfalls of the men's game.

Such questions feel timely at such an important juncture for the women's game. The rapid expansion of the direct-to-consumer media landscape is offering greater coverage opportunities and rights holders are unbundling women's football from men's football in recognition of the emergence of the game's own distinct identity and commercial value. As Valenti suggests:

"It is critical to consider whether women's football should follow a business model that features and protects a different set of values."

As Valenti's research highlights, the next steps in the development of the women's game are critical. For men's clubs, leading women's football through this period of commercialisation- and financial-related transition won't be straightforward. For him, to ensure sustainable growth and development, it is vital that "*clubs balance commercial interests with the preservation of the unique aspects of women's football.*"

A GAME BEYOND BORDERS: FOOTBALL ALONG THE BALKAN REFUGEE ROUTE

Conducted following the 2015-2016 European refugees crisis and focused on the Balkan corridor, Rahela Jurković's study explores the role of football as a force for social inclusion, solidarity and personal development for refugees. It examines how football creates social bonds with local communities and facilitates integration, and the benefits that better official approaches to the sport and refugees would bring.

AUTHOR
Rahela Jurković

TITLE
Football and refugees: Cultural anthropology of the Balkan corridor (2015-2019)

YEAR
2020

UNIVERSITY
Independent researcher, Croatia

Between 2015 and 2019, the Balkan corridor was the primary artery for refugees seeking safety in Europe. Amid the chaos of migration, football emerged as a constant, as a sanctuary. Rahela Jurković's research, across five countries, revealed a universal desire to play, whether it was kick-arounds in refugee camps, pick-up games on nearby pitches or getting involved at local clubs.

However, it wasn't always easy for refugees to play. "*There was a need to support such refugee-and-football initiatives by supplying them equipment, ensuring adequate locations to play and organising training sessions*", Jurković notes. Her research highlighted that the appetite and willingness of refugees were often checked by red tape and a lack of infrastructure.

This was particularly frustrating for talented footballers in the refugee communities, who often found the pathway to registering with local clubs highly complicated and very frustrating, in particular in face of clear demand for players. As one refugee put it:

> ***"You're allowed to work, with our papers, but you cannot play football. How is it? How do you give the right to work and you do not give us the right to play?"***

Changing minds one game at a time

A critical finding from Jurković's work is the identification of football as a potent form of "*social capital*". In a region where media narratives often encourage refugees to be treated with fear and suspicion, football provides a rare opportunity for humanisation.

An anecdote from a refugee in Greece is a powerful reminder of how a simple game of football can counter such prejudices. After playing against a local team, the post-game chat soon shifted from discussing the match to sharing personal stories.

"*They changed their mind. First they were afraid and then they were asking to go for a coffee*", the player told Jurković. "*Imagine, we are 20 refugees in one team, we play against Greek people, each of one has family. They will talk: "The refugees, they are not what we hear in the TV, they are more, they are good."*

This breaking down of barriers also extends to gender and the lives of women in refugee camps. A young Afghan woman in Athens told Jurković that football was more than a sport: it was a way of being heard. "*With football you can raise a voice*", she said. "*I think everybody can do these things in a different way and my way is with football.*"

This is how football integrates and this "*social bridging*" extends beyond friendship. For many of the refugees that Jurković spoke to, football became an indirect route to economic survival. While turning professional was out of reach, the social connections made on the pitch led to other jobs. In the world of the Balkan corridor, a teammate or an opponent one day could be a lead on a job the next.

Blocking connections: barriers to bringing people together on the pitch

While Jurković's research highlights the power of football to bring people together, both men and women, and offer a sense of normality to refugees, it also uncovered barriers to achieving such ambitions, including within the international aid sector.

In one instance, Jurković discovered that an international migration organisation was forbidding local citizens from playing football with refugees inside a camp. "*Local citizens were willing to play with them on a pitch in the camp, but the well-known organisation in charge of protecting refugees was against it*", she reveals. "*That was completely opposite to what the mainstream media of the time had quoted: that the local people were afraid of asylum seekers.*"

Furthermore, she found that many local projects funded by international organisations intended to help refugees took an ill-fitting top-down approach rather than being designed from a refugee perspective. Instead of asking refugees what they needed, often basic equipment and the ability to register for local leagues, organisations implemented programmes that didn't align with the needs of these communities.

Red tape and making it easier to register with football clubs

Continuing with the theme of registering with local clubs, for skilled players who aspire to move beyond kickabouts and pick-ups games, Jurković's research reveals that in many countries registering and competing in an official league is a bureaucratic nightmare.

To tackle this problem, she argues that international football associations must do more to encourage national bodies to simplify procedures. The cost of exclusion is high: it can rob players of their peak years and deprive local clubs of much-needed talent.

A refugee interviewed by Jurković sums it up well: "*If you only train football, who can see your performance? Nobody. We do not play any competitive league. If other clubs can see us, maybe they would say: 'this guy is very good'. If you really want to play, you are supposed to play in a league.*"

Looking back and forwards: where Jurković's research could go next

Jurković's work stands as a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the role that football can play in forging this resilience. On the subject of extending her research, she would be keen to go back and track the individuals she met the first time round and see if the "*social bridges*" built on the pitch stood the test of time. In particular, she would expand the scope of her work to include France and Sweden, where many refugees from the Balkan corridor ended up.

Talking about the future, she would also like to see international football associations getting more involved in refugee policies, including by encouraging clubs to participate in refugee integration projects. She believes using independent experts is critical to ensuring that such initiatives are successful.

Overall, Jurković's research is as a reminder that for refugees, a football is not just merely a ball, but a tool for dignity, a catalyst for conversation and, even if for a few hours, a way to feel at home in a land that is not theirs.

MORE THAN A HELPING HAND: THE IMPACT OF GRASSROOTS VOLUNTEERING

How valuable is grassroots volunteering to football? In their Europe-wide 2021 study, Pamela Wicker and Larissa Davies examine what volunteers get out of giving up their time and what clubs gain from this altruism, putting a price tag on both. The pair investigate what powers this invisible engine and what is threatening to stall it, and what steps clubs can take to strengthen relationships and safeguard an invaluable ecosystem.

AUTHORS
Pamela Wicker and Larissa Davies

TITLE
The value of volunteering in grassroots football

YEAR
2021

UNIVERSITIES
Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany
Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, England*

UNIVERSITÄT BIELEFELD

Sheffield Hallam University
Knowledge Applied

*Larissa Davis is currently employed at Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester, England)

Wicker and Davies' research takes a crucial approach to volunteering in grassroots football by considering both the value of this "free" labour to clubs and what those that give up their time, to take training sessions, referee matches, do the team admin and more, get out of the deal. The study looks at volunteering at clubs across Europe, from Germany, Poland and Switzerland in the heart of region, to France, England and Norway to the north, Italy to the south and Georgia and Russia in the east.

According to Wicker and Davies, those who volunteer at grassroots clubs receive three distinct types of benefit in return: social capital, human capital and subjective well-being. "*Our research suggests that in general, volunteers in grassroots football derive benefits*", the researchers note. "*As hours increase, volunteers experience an increase in these outcomes.*"

Social capital comes from the trust placed in volunteers as well as from the relationships and networks they forge, while human capital is the tangible skills, abilities and knowledge gained on the job, which the study links to higher earnings in the professional world. Subjective well-being is related to the direct impact on mental health, covering greater happiness and life satisfaction.

Understanding the economic value of volunteering

As for clubs, and the communities beyond them, getting a clearer picture of the economic value of volunteering was another key aspect of Wicker and Davies' work, not least given the degree to which clubs rely on this altruism and the need for these clubs to better recruit and retain volunteers.

To calculate this value at club level, the pair used the "*replacement cost approach*", which essentially estimates what clubs would have to pay if they hired professionals to do volunteers' jobs.

The results, while varied by country, provided important hard data on the economic impact of volunteering in grassroots football. For example, in Georgia, one hour of volunteering per month was valued at €1.25, while the same hour in Switzerland was worth €41.60.

These figures, and those relating to value on an individual level, are now available to be used in the UEFA Activity Impact Model, a tool designed to show governments and other stakeholders that football is not just a game, but a major contributor to national economies.

Volunteer frustrations and the importance of addressing them

One of the most significant findings of Wicker and Davies' research was the volunteer frustrations that it revealed, with these insights integral to how volunteering can be improved to increase the value for both volunteers and clubs.

The study identified two primary types of friction: task frustration and social frustration. Task frustration relates to the feeling of being unable to perform an assigned job, often due to a lack of clear instructions or training. This was a near-universal experience across the countries covered. Social frustration is the sense that the work is not relevant, important or valued by the club.

Notably, Wicker and Davies warn that "*increased hours can yield task and social frustration*". While more time spent at the club usually leads to more "*capital*", it also increases the risk of these negative feelings. This creates a delicate balancing act for club management: how do you keep your most dedicated and talented people giving their time while stopping them from becoming disillusioned and disinterested?

For the researchers, the solution lies in moving away from informal "*helping out*" and towards a more professionalised volunteer management structure. "*Task frustration might be reduced by clubs making sure that volunteer roles are clearly described and defined*", they suggest, while social frustration can be mitigated through "clear communication and recognition".

How volunteering is experienced across Europe

The research also found that the impact of volunteering varies markedly depending on a country's culture and the specific role an individual plays. Interestingly, administrative roles, such as doing the paperwork, were found to be a driver of social capital in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy. However, elsewhere, these jobs were associated with task frustration, linked to the stress people felt in doing them.

Notably, in Germany, the study found a "*causal link*" between operational roles (those involving matchday activities) and enhanced personal well-being, a connection not seen in the other countries included in the research.

Where next for sports volunteering research?

As for where to take the research next, Wicker and Davies see three main areas for development. For the pair, it is vital that more is done to distinguish between volunteer roles, from coaching and refereeing to fundraising and bookkeeping. They believe that such exploration, linked closely with further investigating volunteer frustrations, is essential to helping reduce the churn of volunteers and making the system more productive.

Another area that Wicker and Davies believe warrants greater exploration is gender differences.

"Men and women volunteer for different reasons and experience different utcomes."

they note, suggesting that recruitment and retention would be helped by gender-specific approaches to volunteering. There is also a desire to see more research into the monetary value of volunteering for individuals.

Wicker and Davies' comments offer a clear pathway to building on the results of their 2021 report, both in terms of how a better understanding of grassroots volunteering can benefit football and, as they suggest, other sports. Volunteers are an essential pillar of amateur sport and it is critical that this foundation is kept strong and stable for the next generation and those that follow.

LOCAL CLUB CULTURE: HOW IT SHAPES YOUNG LIVES AND MAKES FUTURE PLAYERS

This study from Laura Finnegan, spanning clubs in seven UEFA member federations, investigates how football club environments, focusing on their organisational capacity, resources and philosophies, affect the learning and development of children aged 6 to 12, and how, as a result, they impact the ability of clubs to promote the positive outcomes of youth football, namely participation, performance and personal development.

AUTHOR
Laura Finnegan

TITLE
An analysis of football club environments and their impact on participation, performance and personal development (age 6-12)

YEAR
2022

UNIVERSITY
South East Technological University, Waterford, Ireland

The age range on which Finnegan's research focuses is a critical one – this "*middle childhood*" phase (6 to 12 years) is, as she describes it, "*a crucial yet underappreciated phase of human development*". It is also the time when many kids get the first taste of kicking a ball around on a proper football pitch.

As Finnegan notes, these years are vital in that they witness important shifts in motivation, cognition and social behaviour among children, potentially laying the groundwork for a lifelong involvement in football and, more specifically, for what researchers call the three Ps: participation (staying active for life), performance (developing expertise) and personal development (growing as a human being).

In this sense, according to the study, football clubs act as a "*third pedagogical environment*", alongside family and school as primary sites for learning. The involvement of almost 309,000 children across the 2,136 clubs participating from seven UEFA member federations underscores the significant reach and impact of football club environments.

And this influence is even stronger for some – according to the research, for 30% of communities, the local club is the only choice. If that environment is substandard, a child's window to football, and sport in general, may close before it truly opens.

A resource gap and what it means for child development

In terms of resources, the study paints a picture of inequality. "*Clubs based in communities of higher affluence had less of a problem sourcing volunteers*", notes Finnegan, linking economic stability directly to the quality of the sporting experience.

For less affluent communities, the opposite was true. This deficiency was particularly pronounced in countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Italy.

Nearly 85% of Irish clubs reported that recruiting volunteer coaches is a major problem. This lack of "*human infrastructure*" has a domino effect: as organisational capacity drops, so do the scores for the three Ps. When a club lacks coaches or proper pitches, the focus shifts from development to survival.

The physical environment is another area analysed in the report. While 75% of the total sample of clubs felt their facilities met children's needs, the national breakdown tells a more nuanced story. In Malta, Wales and Ireland, around a quarter of clubs disagreed with this sentiment, voicing concern over the physical environment.

"As organisational capacity problems increased for clubs, their scores on the 3 P scale decreased, indicating reduced effectiveness to fulfil their mandate."

How coaching behaviour at clubs is affecting child development

One of the most revealing aspects of Finnegan's research is the influence of coaching behaviour. While 92% of clubs reported "*prosocial behaviours*", such as teaching respect and empathy, a contrasting trend was evident.

Sixteen percent of clubs indicated that "*controlling behaviours*", including intimidation, punishments and guilt-inducing criticisms, are still used with children as young as six. This style of coaching is often linked to a win-at-all-costs mentality. The study also found that coaches who prioritise winning to bolster their own career prospects are less likely to encourage children to play other sports, a development that is known to reduce dropout and improve long-term athleticism.

The most successful club environments are those that focus on the 4 Cs: competence, confidence, connection and character. As Finnegan puts it, these short-term wins are the bridge to the long-term 3 Ps. The research suggests that when clubs provide "*informal play*" and allow children to contribute to their own learning, they foster a sense of autonomy that keeps kids coming back to the pitch.

Linking football club environment to player dropout

Another trend that Finnegan's research highlights is the "*retention challenge*". While 40% of clubs see dropout as a problem in the 6 to 12 age group, that figure leaps to 66% once kids reach the 13 to 16 bracket.

Finnegan's analysis suggests this isn't accidental. She believes that it is tied to the self-determination theory, which posits that humans have three basic needs: autonomy (choice), relatedness (connection) and perceived competence (feeling capable). In line with this thinking, in countries where clubs rated these factors the lowest, the spike in dropout rates was the most severe.

"*Clubs with higher scores on participation had less of a problem with dropout*", she notes. Simply put: if a child feels they have a say in their learning and a strong bond with their peers, they are far more likely to keep pulling on their boots season after season.

Continuing the research – broadening the scope and tackling inequality

As for the next steps in investigating the impact of football club environments, Finnegan believes further analysis of what lies behind player dropout across age groups would be a good focus, as would expanding the scope in terms of considering the impact of the organisational culture, resources and philosophy of clubs in relation to older players, parents and communities.

With regard to parents, there is a clear link with Finnegan's finding that clubs need to do more to educate parents on how to support their child's football journey. While, according to the study, on average almost two thirds of clubs provide guidance, this rate is uneven, with provision falling to almost a quarter in one country.

Zooming out, addressing the inequalities identified in the study, Finnegan also believes that national associations and governments have a greater role to play in supporting clubs – one that goes beyond providing balls and bibs, and encompasses building "*human resources*" in less affluent communities.

She is also keen to expand the geographical scope of the research and return to her original test subjects and track how their involvement with the game has progressed, as well as to take a more in-depth look at the "*multiplicity of players journeys through their clubs*", with a view to helping clubs move away from "*talent identification*" traps that often discard late-developing children.

Finnegan's work is an important reminder that for 6 to 12 year olds the local football club isn't just a place to play a game, but a vital laboratory for life. Ensuring that this laboratory is well-resourced, properly structured and inclusive is the only way to ensure the "*beautiful game*" remains beautiful year after year and for generation after generation.

SPARKING GENIUS: A NEW LOOK AT HOW ELITE FOOTBALLERS ARE CREATED

How do Lamine Yamal and Aitana Bonmatí do the things they do? What makes a player creative? This is the question at the heart of Stephan Zahno's 2022 study on developing creativity in football. Challenging the prevailing wisdom that creativity is a cognitive gift, he argues that it is motor skills, and learned behaviours, that fundamentally enable footballers to perform creative actions, and be playmakers, on the pitch.

AUTHOR
Stephan Zahno

TITLE
Developing creativity in football: The role of motor skills and idea generation in top-level players

YEAR
2022

UNIVERSITY
University of Bern,
Bern, Switzerland

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UNIVERSITÄT
BERN

Chatting about football can lead to all sorts of places. For Stephan Zahno, it was talking about what actually makes players creative with coaches at the Swiss Football Association and Swiss Super League club BSC Young Boys. In an environment where creativity is highly prized, what could be more important that finding out where this flair comes from?

Diving into the subject from movement science perspective, Zahno began to question the "brain first" model of creativity. "*We hypothesised that motor skills fundamentally enable players to perform creative actions.*"

This led to a clear goal: to move beyond the romanticised "*it-factor*" of cognitive ability and to provide a solid theoretical foundation for how on-field creativity is actually enabled and to create effective training programmes to put it into practice.

Analysing player creativity: motor skills vs cognitive ability

One of the most striking findings of Zahno's UEFA-funded research is the weight it places on motor skills and physical dexterity over cognitive idea generation. In traditional models, a player's "game intelligence" or their ability to brainstorm multiple solutions to a problem (divergent thinking) was seen as the primary engine of creativity. Zahno's work suggests otherwise.

"Our results show that creative actions in football depend heavily on players' motor skills. They indicated stronger relationships between players' on-field creativity and their motor skills than their cognitive ability to generate creative ideas."

This shift in thinking that the research points at is profound. It suggests that a player doesn't necessarily fail to be creative because they lack "*vision*", but they fail because their physical "*vocabulary*" is too limited to allow that vision to manifest. For example, if a player only knows how to pass with the inside of their right foot, their creative "*options*" are physically locked. Conversely, a player with a diverse motor repertoire (e.g. they are comfortable using both feet, various surfaces of the boot and unconventional body orientations) will find that creativity comes more easily based on their ability to interact with the ball in more ways.

Challenging the classroom "brain games" approach

Zahno's research has significant implications for youth academies. For years, some elite clubs have experimented with "*creativity training*" – isolated cognitive drills or "*brain games*" designed to improve a player's ability to think of novel solutions. Zahno is sceptical about the effectiveness of these methods.

"*My proposition challenges the idea of creating isolated 'creativity trainings' which are targeted at improving players' divergent idea generation*", he says. Drawing on his broader body of work, Zahno argues that these mental exercises rarely translate to the pitch. "*Only limited transfer to actual creative on-field actions can be expected from such creativity trainings.*"

Instead of trying to teach a child to "*think*" creatively in a vacuum, Zahno suggests that the most effective way to foster creativity in a player is to broaden their physical capabilities. In short, if you give a child more tools, they will naturally find more ways to use them.

"When players expand their repertoire of actions, creative actions will follow naturally."

Creativity: a high-speed dialogue between player and pitch

While Zahno is clear on how creativity should be reframed in connection with motor skills, he is careful not to dismiss the mind entirely. He isn't arguing that football is a thoughtless sport, to be played by robots, but rather that the mind and body are inextricably linked. As he sees it, testing a player's cognitive capacity in isolation, such as by using a computerised-reaction or a pattern-recognition test, is a "*weak predictor*" of how they will actually perform under the pressure of actual match play.

"*While our research shows that these sensorimotor skills are fundamental, motor and cognitive capabilities are deeply intertwined,*" he explains. For him, the creativity we see on the pitch is actually a high-speed dialogue between the environment and the player's physical capabilities.

Coaching creativity and the importance of safe spaces

If creativity cannot be taught in a classroom, as Zahno argues, then how should coaches cultivate it on the pitch? He points toward two specific design principles for training sessions: real game conditions, with exercises mirroring the chaotic, unpredictable demands of a real match, and exploration-based environments, with coaches creating safe spaces where players can "*explore and extend a rich repertoire of solutions*".

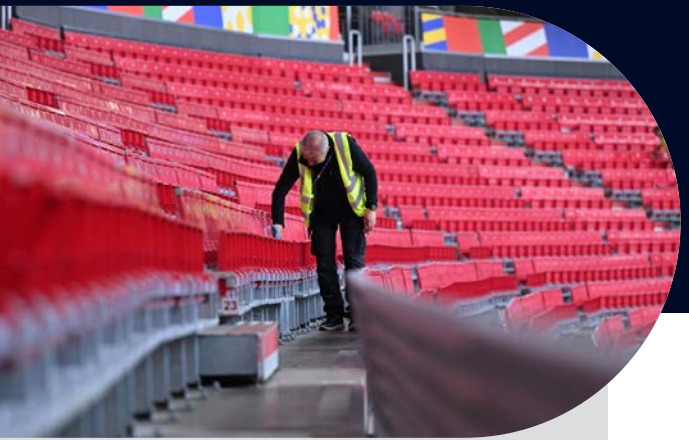
For Zahno, the "*safe*" aspect is crucial. If a player is punished for losing the ball while trying an unconventional flick or a difficult pass, they will revert to a safe, limited motor repertoire. To foster creativity, the environment must allow for the supposed "*errors*" that inevitably accompany the expansion of a skill set.

From academic theory to the training ground

Looking ahead, Zahno is not finished rewriting the coaching manual. In collaboration with the Swiss Football Association, he is currently working on a practical framework that translates these scientific insights into daily coaching drills. He also hopes to extend his research to further bridge the gap between sensorimotor science and the hectic, charged reality of the training ground.

Creativity in football has always been lauded, but perhaps never more so than now, and as such the importance of Zahno's research is clear. If coaches and clubs want players to be more creative, to become the next Jude Bellingham or Alexia Putellas, his point is that they have to give them the skills to do more.

CLEANING UP THE GAME: HOW FANS CAN HELP FOOTBALL GET GREENER



On the west coast of Norway in 2023, SK Brann supporters, in their 17,500-seater stadium, were part of an important footballing experiment. But this milestone wasn't marked on the pitch. It happened in the stands. Siv E. Rosendahl Skard wanted to find out if the club and its fans could rise to a very specific challenge: recycling their matchday waste, as she investigated if and how football could adapt to sustainable and circular practices.

AUTHOR
Siv E. Rosendahl Skard

TITLE
Circular and sustainable football events: Experimental studies in the field

YEAR
2024

UNIVERSITY
Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway

NHH

If the idea of setting up an experimental study into encouraging sustainable and circular practices at football matches came easily to a researcher of sustainability-related behaviours who is also a football fan, the prospect of getting a stadium full of emotionally charged supporters to think about recycling looked like far more difficult.

Not that Rosendahl Skard was put off. In fact, she was excited. When the opportunity to collaborate with SK Brann came up, she grabbed it with both hands. Football is perhaps the most influential social phenomenon on the planet, with billions of fans going to watch their teams every year, but with such massive attendance comes an equally large environmental headache. Rosendahl Skard saw the chance to make a difference.

Changing fan behaviours: 4 winning tactics

A single matchday generates tons of waste, much of it ending up in landfills due to poor sorting. As such, testing whether football fans could be encouraged to display "*pro-environmental behaviours*" was an opportunity to make big impact on a big problem.

However, it was clear from the start that this would be no easy undertaking. Recycling can feel like a chore at the best of times, then there's the reality that recycling is one of the last thing fans think about at a game. Add in poor bin availability, the weather (notoriously wet in Bergen) and how being in large crowds affects people's actions, not to mention the impact of a last-minute winner or a heartbreaking defeat, and the size of task ahead was plain to see.

To scale this summit, Rosendahl Skard chose not to lecture fans, but to "*nudge*" them towards the right behaviours. By viewing circularity through the lens of input, throughput and output, she focused on ensuring waste was sorted into recognisable recyclable categories such as paper, plastic and food waste.

So, Rosendahl Skard turned Brann Stadion into a living experiment, putting in place different "*nudges*" across various stands to compare results. These nudges were increased availability, social visibility, gamification and ingroup identity priming.

"*Increased availability*" meant putting out more bins (if it's easy, people do it), while "*social visibility*" was using transparent bins – this creates "*behavioural traces*" Skard explains. When fans see others recycling, they feel a subtle social pressure to follow suit. "*Gamification*" proved to be a fan favourite. By asking questions such as, "*Vote with your coffee cup: For or against drums in the stands*?", she turned a mundane task into a participatory fan action, and a method of collecting hard data. "*Ingroup identity priming*" linked recycling to club loyalty and proving that being a "*good Brann fan*" could include being a green one.

The results were varied but definitive: when the act of recycling was made easier and clearer, framed to resonate with fan and social identity or made into a game, sorting rates improved significantly. The odds had been battled, tactics had been adeptly applied and a victory had been won.

A business case for football event sustainability

While Rosendahl Skard can point to a notable success, there is still the issue of affordability for clubs, with the upfront costs of sustainable infrastructure a valid concern and a potential barrier.

For Rosendahl Skard, the economic implications of sustainability are a "*win-win*" situation for clubs, arguing that beyond the moral imperative, there is a hard-nosed business logic at play. "*Improved sorting reduces the steadily increasing waste disposal costs*", she notes, while failing to adapt to tightening regulations on corporate sustainability reporting and practices means clubs are likely to find themselves facing legal hurdles and shrinking sponsorship pools. Flipping this point, a visible commitment to the planet can attract high-value sponsors that are looking to meet environmental, social and governance goals.

Beyond football: Bergen today, tomorrow the world

Another encouraging takeaway from Rosendahl Skard's research is its scalability. The principles that underpin the study's strategies are not unique to Norway or football – they are highly transferable.

Whether it's a cricket match in London, a rugby game in Paris or even a concert in Madrid, the "*SK Brann model*" offers a blueprint for managing human behaviour at scale.

"Any large-scale event involving crowds, emotional engagement and public waste generation can benefit from these approaches."

However, Rosendahl Skard acknowledges that her work is far from over. An important outlier in her research results was the club's performance: SK Brann were having a very successful season during the study. "*One might question whether the club's emphasis on sustainability would have been perceived differently by supporters in more trying times*", she muses.

Targeting long-term sustainability for football

What next for research on sustainable and circular practices at football matches and events? There is plenty to target.

One area that needs to be investigated, according to Rosendahl Skard, is how to facilitate long-term behavioural change and habit formation, moving beyond one-off nudges on matchdays. Another is how physical and digital channels can be used to strengthen supporter engagement with sustainability, while the issue of how clubs are developing their sustainability management and reporting practices in order to comply with regulatory requirements and drive operational performance should also be explored.

Broadening the focus, she thinks it's important to examine how clubs, associations and sponsors can collaborate to attain sustainability goals that go beyond a single organisation, such as the EU Fit for 55 policy and UEFA objectives, with a particular focus on reducing direct and in-direct carbon emissions, including in relation to fan travel to games.

For Rosendahl Skard, football is more than a game – it is a platform for change. If a sodden, hoarse, emotional fan in Bergen can sort their plastic cup into the right bin, then anyone, anywhere can be convinced to do their part for the planet.

SAME GOALS, DIFFERENT SYSTEMS: INSIDE GERMAN AND ENGLISH YOUTH FOOTBALL

England vs Germany is a rivalry for the ages, but who comes out on top when the countries' youth development programmes go head to head? Or is it more complicated than that? The 2025 report from Jacqueline Mueller, Anselm Küchle and Tim Kübel compares the two systems, highlighting the fundamental philosophies that underpin them and their primary differences, and what they could learn from each other.

AUTHORS
Jacqueline Mueller, Anselm Küchle and Tim Kübel

TITLE
Developing elite footballers across Europe: A comparative study of German and English youth development philosophies

YEAR
2025

UNIVERSITIES
Loughborough University, Loughborough, England
International Football Institute, Ismaning, Germany

Loughborough University

IFI INTERNATIONALES FUSSBALL INSTITUT

English and German football can both look at their youth development programmes and be happy with what they are achieving, across national teams and the domestic game. But the foundations on which this performance and progress are based are notably different. This is the finding at the heart of Mueller, Küchle and Kübel's study, which examines the divergent philosophies behind the setups, what shapes them and the results they are producing.

One of the most key differences between the approaches in England and Germany to identifying and nurturing talent is structure. Since 2012, England has operated the Elite Player Performance Plan, a four-cornered (technical, physical, psychological and social), three-phase (foundation, youth development and professional development) model that categorises academies into four tiers. Notably, it is run in collaboration with the Premier League. Meanwhile, German football adheres to a four-level pyramid, progressing from base development (Basisförderung) to professional level (Profibereich). Every club in the top two Bundesliga divisions is required to operate a youth academy.

Another marked difference between the two setups is the age at which in-club development kicks off. According to the study, English clubs prioritise "*early, internal access*", often inducting children into professional structures at the U9 level. German clubs take a more patient route, starting structured development later and leaning heavily on partnerships with grassroots clubs. Then there is the differing focuses of the national associations – the Elite Player Performance Plan in England is described as concentrating funding and efforts primarily at the elite level, while Germany's Projekt Zukunft, launched in 2018, is aimed at a broader playing field.

Mueller, Küchle and Kübel also point to the superior wealth of the Premier League and what this means for youth player development, particularly in terms of the ability to employ senior-level staff with higher qualifications.

"Development of football across all levels is a strength of the German system, whereas financial strength and centralised control led by the Premier League are advantages on the English side."

Minutes vs market value – what price transition?

Shifting the focus to performance, in terms of the ability of academies to produce professional players, the study throws up a fascinating paradox. Since the inception of the Elite Player Performance Plan, the market value of English U21 players has soared and the national team has reaped the rewards. However, the research shows a persistent "*inefficiency*" in the English youth-to-senior transition. In contrast, the system in Germany is recognised for successfully enabling young players to make the leap to senior football.

The numbers tell a clear story: The Bundesliga sees 61% more minutes played by players under the age of 21 than the Premier League, suggesting that in Germany the bridge between the youth academy and the first team is easier to access and busier. In England, despite the high "*volume and value*" of talent, the path to the senior squad is often blocked by expensive global imports. This trend is now bleeding into the women's game as well. While England boasts 21 Professional Girls' Academies to Germany's six elite centres, the Frauen Bundesliga remains dominated by domestic talent, whereas the Women's Super League has seen a "*steep increase of overseas talent*", potentially stifling the next generation of Lionesses.

Socio-cultural DNA: different approaches and common paths

The study makes the point that youth player development systems do not exist in a vacuum: they are products of their cultures. In Germany, there is a cultural emphasis on "*multi-sport participation*" and flexibility, allowing children time for other sports outside the academy. In England, the approach is more immersive: multi-sport opportunities are often structured within the club, or independent play is encouraged as a supplement to formal training.

A significant challenge related to the development of young players in both countries identified by the researchers is external pressure from parents and agents. Driven by the significant financial rewards of playing in the Premier League and Bundesliga, this pressure can turn a developmental journey into a high-stakes gamble.

To address this issue, and others involved with elite player development, academy directors in both countries are increasingly focusing on the "*person behind the player*". The goal is to provide life-enriching experiences that prepare a young athlete for life after football, whenever and wherever this may happen.

"*A person-centered approach, adaptable to individual needs is crucial for maximising potential*", note the researchers, warning against "player overload" and "*over-professionalisation*" where rigid structures and excessive training and playing loads can "*compromise creativity, autonomy and physical health*."

What can the English and German systems learn from each other?

As for what a combined Anglo-German programme might comprise, Mueller, Küchle and Kübel both identify the best elements from the two setups and point out where improvements could be made.

For the researchers, Germany could benefit from England's speed of innovation and the financial incentives that allow English clubs to hire more highly qualified senior staff for youth roles, while England should look to the German model to improve youth-to-senior transitions and increase investment in the "*wider youth environment*", such as schools and grassroots.

Technology, gender and a constantly evolving story

If Mueller, Küchle and Kübel's study has revealed some core differences between the youth development setups in England and Germany, they are clear that technology will have an increasingly influential role to play in the future of both, with the use of artificial intelligence and other digital tools identified as an important area of further research.

The trio also see a deeper dive into the women's game as a critical step, in particular female academies and elite female football player development. Greater insight into these environments, including comparing male and female academy philosophies, would help provide a better understanding of the development of female athletes in a team sport such as football.

Beyond technology and gender, there are others avenues of research to explore and, according to the researchers, this scope will continue to grow, because, as they acknowledge, just as with one of the game's oldest rivalries and football in general, the youth development story is one that is always evolving.

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Our Vision

We aspire to remain at the forefront of executive education in sport for professionals and organisations

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We are explorative

We thrive on perpetual improvement

We build communities

Overview in numbers

2005
Expertise in executive education since 2005

4,000
Over 4,000 graduates since 2010

20+
Executive programmes and learning initiatives

170
Nationalities amongst our graduates

2,000+
Over 2,000 documents available on UEFA Academy Online Library

60
Countries visited by our programmes

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Specialist programmes	UEFA Football Law Programme **(UEFA FLP)**	Fight the Fix: an anti-match-fixing education programme **(UEFA FTF)**	UEFA Strategic Communications compact course **(UEFA SCCC)**	Sustainability in Football compact course **(SFC)**	UEFA SLO Education Programme **(UEFA SLO)**	
Team and player management programmes	Sporting Director Programme **(SDP)**	UEFA Team Management Programme **(UEFA TMP)**	UEFA Elite Scout Programme **(UEFA ESP)**	UEFA Player Agent Programme **(UEFA PAP)**		
Player programmes	UEFA Career Management Training **(UEFA CMT)**	UEFA Certificate in Football Management – Players' edition **(UEFA CFM)**	UEFA Executive Master for International Players **(UEFA MIP)**			
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