

REPORT

Online focus groups

Young Players as Inclusion Role Models

General information

Online Focus groups – Young Players as Inclusion Role Models

Dates: both sessions on May 22nd 2026

SJPF Staff – João Oliveira and Carlota Viveiros

Male number of participants: 3

Female number of participants: 5

Members of sports clubs working with young people with diverse backgrounds:

- Xico Andebol (2 representatives)
- Valadares Gaia (1 representative)
- SF Damaiense (1 representative)

NGOS and initiatives working with young people with diverse backgrounds:

- Associação Nacional de Futebol de Rua (1 representative)
- Conselho Português para os Refugiados (1 representative)

Attendance list:

João Oliveira – Sindicato dos Jogadores Profissionais de Futebol

Carlota Viveiros – Sindicato dos Jogadores Profissionais de Futebol

Ana Paulos – Associação Nacional de Futebol de Rua

Mariana Gonçalves – Conselho Português para os Refugiados

Mauro Fernandes – Xico Andebol

José Fernandes – Xico Andebol

Mónica Joady – Valadares Gaia Futebol Clube

Inês Silva – Sport Futebol Damaiense

Participants background

ANFR

The Associação Nacional de Futebol de Rua is a private social solidarity organization that uses sport, particularly street football, as a social innovation strategy, promoting social change, human development, and social inclusion. They promote street football as a creative way to encourage healthy lifestyles and address social issues like poverty, exclusion, and discrimination.

CPR – Casa de acolhimento para as Crianças Refugiadas

The Casa de Acolhimento para as Crianças Refugiadas (refugee children's shelter) is a social response aimed at providing specialized care for children and young people under 18 who are going through the asylum process. They offer children a stable environment where they can develop a critical voice and responsible behavior.

Xico Andebol

O Clube Desportivo Xico Andebol is a portuguese handball club with a strong tradition in training and national recognition for its management practices and sports projects. The club's main goal is to train children and young people, promoting social, educational, and sports values. Besides the traditional handball, it also has projects with adapted handball and walking handball, reinforcing its commitment to inclusion and the community.

Valadares Gaia Futebol Clube

In the municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia, they were the pioneers with a women's football team, leading the way for others to follow their example. They provide all their athletes with a quality civic and sports education.

The club's goal is to help improve the academic success of its athletes.

Sport Futebol Damaiense

Damaiense is a project that aims to promote and spread sports practice among young people. Besides the actual sports learning, they also want kids to pick up habits of education, hygiene, and studying, which could be useful in the future as active members of society.

Context

The *SPIN Youth project – Empowering young people with diverse backgrounds* aims mainly to empower young people and contribute to their active participation in clubs and organizations that use sports as a tool for social inclusion.

The aim is to increase young people's participation not just in the sports aspect itself, that is, playing on the field, but also in non-playing positions. This includes getting young people involved in the club's and organizations' structure and even as volunteers, for example, at games.

At this final stage of the project, it is the responsibility of the Portuguese Players' Union to prepare a guide on young players as inclusion role models.

Young people always tend to follow their role models. So, we aim to develop a network of young football players from diverse backgrounds acting as this network of role models, promoting values like social inclusion, integration, gender equality, non-discrimination, and respect, which will impact the target group: “young people with diverse backgrounds (YPWDB).”

So, we aim to open football players' minds to society and social responsibility, getting them involved in issues beyond performance and sporting competition. This program intends to strengthen participants' activism and make them more socially active, not only defending their rights as players but also supporting important social causes both now and especially when they mature as individuals.

There is also an urgency to create a new model of communication with younger generations, tackling the lack of interest in the union movement and defining new areas that can bring players together.

So, this network will aim to show YPWDB that it is possible to continue studying, educating, and promoting good values while being involved in sports.

So, together with organizations that are connected to sports and work daily with young athletes from diverse backgrounds, we organized two online sessions to understand a bit about what they see as these young role models of inclusion, their essential characteristics, and how we can help and train the young people who play this role.

Discussion points

1. Why is it so important for young people to have role models and what characteristics are essential in one?
2. Young people with diverse backgrounds usually have more difficulties in having access to organized sports. Can this disadvantage turn into a strength?
3. Should these young athletes be chosen for being “naturally” that way or should they be chosen by the impact they have on the team and then receive training so they can take the role model’s role?
4. These young role models can influence positive and negative conducts. What kind of behaviors should and shouldn’t they have in and out of the pitch?
5. How can the clubs/organizations help young athletes who want to take that role?
6. The exposure these young athletes have can also bring a negative side. Nowadays, with social media (Instagram, TikTok,...) there can be more pressure and sometimes they can quit having this role, due to the negative comments they receive. How can we react in this kind of situation?

Topics 1, 2 and 3

For XICO, this young person needs to have communication, leadership, and social integration skills. They have to be able to establish a good connection both with teammates and with the club's staff. He notes that the inclusion carried out in the club by these young people often ends up being an 'extra-club' inclusion, where the young people bring in others from diverse backgrounds, newcomers to the team, into their personal friend groups, also making it easier for them to integrate into society. This is only possible if the young person has the right qualities, and in this case, there is always support from the management to carry out this mission.

When starting to participate in this project, XICO created an ethics and inclusion department in the club, a department that will always have an athlete taking the position. Athletes with leadership skills in the club are identified and efforts are made early on to include them in the club itself, in club roles, or even as coaches.

They feel that many times the opportunity is only given to the “team stars” and we forget about those who don’t make it to star level, but who can still make a great contribution in other ways and can be excellent examples.

In a different context, and we believe the context they are in plays a part in this, for the young people at ANFR, a “cool” player is a wealthy player, someone with great style, tattoos, a luxurious car, but the association always tries to unpack that idea, that preconception of a “cool player”. They might even admire players who, besides being great athletes, are also good role models, and they’re huge fans of them, but if their social life isn’t what these young people idealize, they don’t admire them as much.

The main mission of the association is to work on social cohesion, human rights, and social inclusion for everyone who practices this sport and participates in the activities. A good role model, besides being a good player and athlete, is a good human being who contributes to the group and has good practices. They should be demanding and focused, have good human values, and, also, contribute to their community.

For the kids in this association, hearing a player talk about their life story can serve as inspiration. When they see that these stories are even similar to their own, coming from the same backgrounds, the same family breakdowns, situations of poverty, they end up relating to them and it becomes a source of hope for these kids.

Regarding the type of role model and the characteristics they consider essential, the CPR is aligned with the ANFR. At CPR, they deal daily with refugee children, who look for models they can identify with. In the case of these children, an athlete's life story is the best starting point to create an emotional connection.

We often create the idea of almost perfect people or perfect role models, but we should, indeed, find a balance. For CPR, even the best player, who can be a great example, also makes mistakes and needs to be given space to learn and reflect on that learning. It should be a characteristic of a role model to have the ability and sensitivity to admit their mistakes, and it's extremely important to know how to act when facing those mistakes. It's impossible for someone not to make mistakes.

Valadares mentions an athlete herself as an excellent example of a good role model, has a work plan that allows her to keep growing every day, and is a great example for the other teammates and younger players.

She points out that, besides the idols their athletes have, they end up seeing each other as examples, as equals, and that they are all fighting for the same thing. Here, the Damaiense says exactly the same, the athletes end up looking at each other as role models and inspirations. The way we deal with the team, the example they end up setting for others, ends up being a mirror for other aspects of life.

Just like CPR and ANFR mentioned, Damaiense also highlights how important life stories are. Knowing what people went through to get to where they are ends up being really inspiring. For young people, it's important to see someone who came from the same place, the same reality as them, reaching certain levels and gaining visibility. They even have on the team a Ukrainian player who fled the war and came to Portugal. It's also noted that, because they have many foreign players of different nationalities, all of them were great role models for inclusion with their teammates, trying to break the language barrier that separated them and always finding ways to communicate and understand each other.

One last point is the topic of religion. Both CPR and Damaiense brought up this topic. They mention that there's a great lack of sensitivity when it comes to understanding religious issues. It ends up being extra pressure because then the athlete thinks that if they fail, they're failing God, they're failing their family, and that they won't be proud of them. We need to normalize and try to understand everyone's religion so that they don't feel misunderstood or unwanted in the club.

Topics 4, 5 and 6

To Xico, an attitude that can have a positive influence and that stands out is the issue of education. They promote education a lot and how important it is within the club. In fact, in Xico's senior team, all the athletes have a degree or are currently pursuing one. On the other hand, they also warn about the problem of consumerism. On social media, many players post photos showing off big cars, jewelry, clothes, and the younger ones who admire these players on the field end up following them and seeing them as their idols, ultimately just wanting to have what these players show on their social media profiles.

They also leave us with the reflection that social media is a dangerous game. Every word you put out will be stored forever. Social media has unlimited reach, and unfortunately that can be for better or worse.

ANFR gives us two examples of athletes who are admired, but who later end up having contradictory stances and behaviors.

On one hand, we have an athlete with their social media presence, showing off money, cars, clothes, but who is later involved in cases of domestic violence, and we also have an athlete who is an example of overcoming obstacles, had a complicated life story, but publicly associates with a person considered the main destabilizer of the world.

For ANFR, a role model can't be a player with bad behavior, can't be constantly swearing, can't disrespect the referee, and can't be involved in fights. Also, they should pay attention to their presence on social media. They believe it's best to avoid getting involved in more divisive issues that will inevitably draw opinions and political stances.

CPR warns that Role Models should be aware of the risks they may face with the exposure they have on social media. Cristiano Ronaldo, despite being an example of overcoming challenges, we also need to pay attention to how he positions himself in the public sphere on certain issues and the impact that could have.

This impact can always be positive or negative and can also depend on how each person interprets the situation. Clubs could also, starting from the youth levels, warn and inform young athletes about the impact their actions will have, whether on the field or on social media.

The fact that we have more and more girls playing football has been a key factor in positively influencing the younger ones. In the case of Valadares, they held an open day at the club, which was attended by 79 primary school children, all girls. Something that, unfortunately, a few years ago would have been unthinkable, but with good examples, more girls have been wanting to play and be present in a world that is predominantly male.

Still on behaviors that have a positive influence, another point they mention is education. In Valadares' main team, there are athletes pursuing higher education and others taking additional training courses.

Regarding the negative effects of social media, besides being involved in the club's politics, the players don't pay attention and aren't interested in replying to negative comments directed at them or the team. When the comments are excessive, the club itself deletes them to protect the athletes and, if necessary, provides full support to the players who feel they need it. If they want to communicate about and support certain issues, the club gives full support to help them with communication.

In Damaiense's case, they end up having a similar attitude. They always try to downplay the comments that are made, but we have to keep in mind that not everyone reacts the same way; some people are more sensitive, and we need to be more careful in these cases.

Finally, mentioning an attitude that has a positive influence. In Damaiense, the players end up being role models for each other, through the way they welcomed those who came from outside, and how inclusion was carried out. This work also starts with the club itself that welcomes newcomers. As an example, there is special attention to dietary needs. There were times when an athlete needed to change her diet on the very same day, and someone from the staff would swap with her. The teammates themselves saw and acknowledged this gesture, which ended up having such a positive impact on them that the athletes themselves started paying attention to each other and making the swaps themselves.

Final remarks

Nowadays, we feel a lack of presence of young people in organizations and little involvement of them in social issues. Is it due to a lack of interest, or is it just that they don't have the knowledge to know how to communicate and take a stand?

Since they have a different mindset, it's harder to reach these young people, which is why there's a need to train young people who can connect with these younger players and lead by example.

There are some values that we consider fundamental for these young people to defend and promote: fighting against discrimination, combating racism, social integration of minorities, and gender equality.

Respect, the ability to communicate and lead are some of the traits these young people should also have.

It's not just about values, behaviors matter too.

It's important to prepare young people from an early age to be leaders and good examples for others.

Some young people are born with a natural talent for leadership, for being role models, and are great communicators, but there's always a need to train them and provide some guidance.

Another factor we've noticed that makes a big difference is life story. Not that it defines the person, but we consider it a key factor in connecting with young people. Because they've had a tougher life, gone through many difficulties, many young people find inspiration and form a connection when they meet players who, despite having gone through the same or other challenges, manage to make it.

We wanted to point out that there isn't just one profile of a young inclusion role model. There are many factors that will shape this kind of profile. There are values and behaviors that are essential, but there can be other influences, and an inclusion role model can also vary greatly depending on the context the young people are in.

For example, we might have a young migrant, refugee, or someone from an ethnic minority who has become an excellent example for younger kids because of everything they've overcome and become. Just as we should admire a young person who, even though they've never faced any hardship, is the first to welcome and include young people from different backgrounds.