



Guide on Young Players as Inclusion Role Models

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The Erasmus+ sport project "Empower Diverse Youth – Build-up Youth Participation and Inclusion in Sport Organizations" (SPIN Youth) aims to increase the sport participation of young people from diverse backgrounds – in particular, young refugees and migrants – and to create inclusive, non-discriminatory sport environments that actively promote diversity and equality. Project duration: January 2024 – June 2026
For detailed information on the project and the SPIN network, visit www.sportinclusion.net

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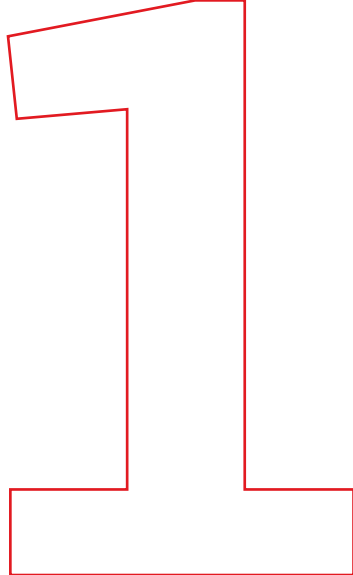
SPIN Youth

EMPOWER DIVERSE YOUTH



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INTRODUCTION

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.

Sports, especially football, are the biggest drivers for social inclusion and, because of their prominence, are also areas where many young people find their role models.

With this in mind and considering the importance of this area, we intend to develop a guide that allows us to identify young football players from diverse backgrounds who act as role models, promoting values such as social inclusion, integration, gender equality, non-discrimination, and respect, which will impact the target group: 'young people with diverse backgrounds (YPWDB)', on a broader level, to ensure the implementation of these values in the society or communities they are part of, and on a specific level within the context of federated football, in the context of developing their own personalities as elite athletes.

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.

The Portuguese Players' Union, a partner of SPIN and a member of FIFPRO, World Players Union, is also committed to developing the concept of a 'Player Activist,' giving voice, empowering, and supporting players in developing personal projects that are related to defending a socially relevant cause. Humanizing the player is part of an integrated strategy by the organization aimed at combating hate speech and misinformation. Every day we work on the concept of Players as workers. In this project, we add the concept of the Player as a human being.

By creating this guide, we aim to support the identification of these young people and their training so that they can perform this role.

The goal is to have representation, so that both male and female athletes can take on this role, that they come from diverse backgrounds, develop a dual career as much as possible, and find their path in sports, thus showing YPWDB that it's possible to continue studying, educating, and promoting good values while being involved in sports.

More than highlighting young players for their sports performance, we want to emphasize the positive impact they can have on their teams and community, reinforcing that they too can and should be examples through their values and behaviors, as well as share life stories that are truly inspiring.



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WHAT IS A ROLE MODEL?

A role model is someone who, based on their traits, values, behaviors, and words, can influence and inspire others.

A role model could be someone we admire for who they are and want to be like when we grow up, or it could also be someone we admire for everything they've achieved and who motivates us to pursue our own goals.

A role model can be someone from our own family, a friend, a teacher, a coach, or even an athlete.

Highlighting the athletes, in this case football players, for the incredible reach this sport can have, it's not only those who stand out in the team for their sports performance who are admired, but also those who become social and cultural role models, because they promote good values like social inclusion, integration, equality, non-discrimination, and respect.

The role models that today's youth admire and look up to will shape many of the social skills of the next generation.



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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE ROLE MODELS?

All of us, at different stages of our lives, have people we admire and look up to as role models.

It's true that these same role models can change depending on the stage of life we're in, which can come from us, or from the person we considered a role model, for having behaviors we consider inappropriate and that don't align with our values.

We can find these role models in various people and professional fields, but for younger people, considering the wide-reaching impact football has today, it's common for them to have football players as their role models. Sometimes it's just for the purely sporting aspect, for being players and having reached a high level, and other times for the values they show both on and off the field.

In fact, in a survey carried out by Reach Out (www.reachoutuk.org/role-models/) – a strategic school partner that runs extracurricular programs where they develop skills such as empathy, responsibility, problem-solving, initiative, teamwork, and emotional management – they interviewed young people aged between 8 and 16 in the greater Manchester, Liverpool and London area, and Marcus Rashford, a young football player, was the role model most mentioned by the kids. In that same top 10, names like Cristiano Ronaldo and Messi were also included.

More than two-thirds of the young people who responded to the survey said they had several adult role models they could look up to. When asked in which areas they could find good role models, one of the top choices was actually “athletes” with 65% of the votes, tying with “doctors and nurses,” while “teachers and assistants” came in third with 64%.

For a young person, it's important to have a role model they can look up to and who shows them that it's possi-

ble to reach certain goals that we might once have thought were unattainable.

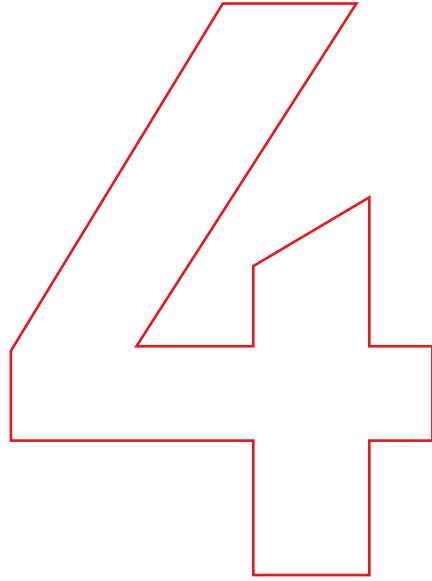
From this perspective, what steps did the Portuguese Players' Union take?

We got out into the field and conducted two focus groups involving clubs and organizations from different backgrounds to identify a profile – the essential characteristics – that a role model should have, so that this profile could guide the search for candidates for the program on the ground.

From these reflections, we concluded that sharing life stories, even if it's not the only thing that defines someone as a person, ends up being a point of connection between young people. It makes a difference because they feel represented, giving them hope to know that someone who came from the same background as them, or the same life situation, managed to overcome challenges and succeed. We realize that if we identify with a person's story, their origin, or their whole journey, the importance to us will potentially be greater. In other words, it's important to have role models who, even if they've faced difficulties along the way, represent positive examples, because that journey influences who we want to be, how we want to be, and how we'll achieve those goals.

Positive examples shape the development of young people both in how they think and how they act, and in many cases, role models end up giving purpose to many young people.

Still, the ability to integrate into the prevailing culture, that is, athletes who may not come from a background where their life story is an example of overcoming challenges, but are good examples of leadership and the ability to integrate those coming from outside, or even athletes who have fallen from grace but use their life story to raise awareness among young people, should not be immediately excluded as potential role models, especially in communities with less diversity.



PROFILE OF A ROLE MODEL

Should role models be chosen for their sports prominence in the team and trained for the role, or should we pick someone who has natural skills to fulfill this role and positively influence others through their example, or their life story?

With proper guidance and tools, there's room for all three options.

For example, in the same club we have an athlete who was born and raised in the same country, middle class, who didn't go through any difficulties, and we have an athlete who lived in poverty, faced various adversities, immigrated, and managed to overcome all the obstacles he faced. The first one is a good role model because he did everything to provide good social inclusion for the second one, making the whole adaptation process easier. The second one is also a good example because he shows that, despite all the challenges, with hard work and dedication it's possible to achieve goals and overcome obstacles.

After the focus groups with organizations that work with young people and sports clubs, where various topics around the profile of a role model were discussed, it was unanimously concluded that there isn't a perfect type of role model in football, this profile should be developed within the specific context of the club or sports organization.

We have young people who prefer to admire players who stand out only on the sporting side, or who show off luxuries on social media, while on the other hand we have young people who admire players for the values they show or for their life story and everything they've overcome.

The type of role model can depend a lot on the context in which these young people are involved or on their background.

A role model will never be perfect, but we need people who are "human" and who, even when they make mistakes, know how to convey the right values and serve as inspiration for others.



4.2 KEY ACTIONS

In creating a role model program, there are key actions that are expected to convey a message with social impact and ensure that the organizations running such a program guarantee proper execution.

BEING INCLUSIVE Especially in a team, being inclusive with newcomers can be a determining factor for success. We even have personal accounts from young players who said that adjusting when they arrived wasn't that difficult because they had great teammates who included them from the very first minute. In some cases, inclusion even happened beyond the field.

SOCIAL MEDIA Knowing the reach that football players can have, social media can and should be used to share positive messages and promote good practices and social causes, rather than using it negatively, spreading messages of hate and misinformation.

FAIR-PLAY AND RESPECT Inside and outside the field, fair play should be a must, as well as respecting teammates, opponents, and referees equally and without discrimination, regardless of origin, gender, or religion. You should also step in when you see bullying or discrimination happening, asking an adult for help if needed.

BEING RESPONSIBLE AND WITH WORK ETHICS Take responsibility for your mistakes and their consequences, always ensuring that you stick to schedules, commitments, and tasks, while also being an example of discipline both in and out of training, showing continuous effort and not just chasing results, valuing preparation, recovery, consistency, and dedication.

BEING A LEADER In the way they are seen and impact the team, acting as a unifying element, able to give feedback respectfully, listen to others before responding, and build a relationship of trust rather than fear with colleagues. They look for an impact beyond the field, fostering a sense of togetherness, cooperation, respect, and contribution to the community.

EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT We won't always be the target of only positive comments, and we won't only have victories. We need to be able to manage how we react to negative comments and to defeats, controlling frustration, impulsiveness, and aggressive reactions. Staying true to your principles even in adverse situations shows that emotions are part of sports but don't justify disrespectful behavior, and being consistent between your values and your actions.

HUMILITY Able to act with humility in the gracious way they win and responsibly in how they handle losses without blaming others, recognizing that there is room to learn and grow, taking responsibility for themselves and embracing constructive criticism.

4.1 PERSONAL SKILLS

Although we believe there isn't a single profile that fits as a role model, we think there are key traits that should be part of whoever takes on that role.

RESPECT Has to be someone who's capable of showing respect for themselves and for others.

TRUST It's not possible to build a relationship, whether it's friendship or admiration, without trust, because it's the foundation of everything, and if someone who speaks to us gives us trust, it strengthens the connection and level of influence.

ABILITY TO LEAD Dealing with different people and personalities isn't easy. You need to be able to bring the group together so that everyone is focused on the same goal.

ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE The way we communicate, whether it's our body language, our tone, or the way we say things, will always influence how people hear us. It's important to have this ability to know what we're talking about and who we're talking to.

ALTRUISM Knowing how to do good not just for your own benefit, but considering those around you, working for the common good, helping the team without expecting recognition, encouraging other young people to think, decide, act, and take the lead. You should try to promote responsibility instead of creating dependence and value the individual growth process of your colleagues.

ACCOUNTABILITY We aren't perfect and we all make mistakes throughout our lives. But here, what matters is how we react to that mistake. We must be able to admit our mistakes and grow from them.

INTEGRITY Always act based on your values and principles, even when you think no one is watching. This should be carried out both on and off the field. It's not just about what we manage to achieve, but also about how we were able to do it.



PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The proposed methodology for the program to be developed by the Portuguese Players' Union, after gathering input from focus groups, is based on two main areas: (1) communication management training – preparing the player to use the communication platform available to them, and (2) emotional management – helping them understand the mission and potential impact their role model status will have on the target audience, learning to handle both positive feedback and followers as well as negative comments.

So, we envision a training program with two main sessions:

The first session will be taught by a specialist in the field of psychology, and the second session by one in the field of communication. We want to provide conditions for young players to understand the why? and the how?

In the first session, which will be more theoretical, the goal will be to help them understand why it is so important for young people to have role models, what characteristics and behaviors should be part of a role model's profile, and why they should be active in supporting social causes.

In the second session, which will be more practical, they will learn how to position themselves, how to communicate, and how to adapt depending on the audience they are in front of. Besides gaining tools for communicating with the public, they will also understand how they can and should use social media to their advantage.

Besides the sessions with the specialists, we want the young people to answer a pre-session questionnaire and then again post-session, so we can determine how important the sessions were and the effect they had on the young people.

With that in mind, here's a suggested questionnaire.



QUESTIONNAIRE PRE-SESSION: ANSWER FROM 1 TO 5, WHERE 1 = TOTALLY DISAGREE AND 5 = TOTALLY AGREE.

- 1

I understand what it means to be a young role model and I recognize its importance.
- 2

A role model can have both a positive and negative influence on the team and on those who look up to them.
- 3

I feel capable of expressing my opinion in public.
- 4

I have the ability to support social causes I identify with.
- 5

If I receive criticism or an opinion different from mine, I know how to handle it.
- 6

I believe that young people can have an active voice in society.
- 7

I can recognize and distinguish ethical behavior from unacceptable behavior.
- 8

I am aware of the impact social media can have on shaping young people's awareness and understanding.
- OPEN QUESTION:

What do you think are the essential characteristics that a young role model should have?

QUESTIONNAIRE POS-SESSION: ANSWER FROM 1 TO 5, WHERE 1 = TOTALLY DISAGREE AND 5 = TOTALLY AGREE.

- 1

I understand what it means to be a young role model and I recognize its importance.
- 2

A role model can have both a positive and negative influence on the team and on those who look up to them.
- 3

I feel capable of expressing my opinion in public.
- 4

I have the ability to support social causes I identify with.
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If I receive criticism or an opinion different from mine, I know how to handle it.
- 6

I believe that young people can have an active voice in society.
- 7

I can recognize and distinguish ethical behavior from unacceptable behavior.
- 8

I am aware of the impact social media can have on shaping young people's awareness and understanding.
- OPEN QUESTION:

Do you feel that, after this session, you would be able to express your opinion publicly? What is the biggest takeaway you get from this session?

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FINAL REMARKS

After online focus groups with sports clubs and organizations that work with young people and use sports as a tool for inclusion, as well as brief interviews with ten young football players, we concluded that there isn't a perfect profile for a role model, but rather that there are traits and behaviors that make someone a good example to follow.

In the preliminary document developed by the Portuguese Players' Union – Youth Expansion of SPIN Exhibition, [In]visible: Youth with diverse backgrounds – we reached out to nine football clubs in Portugal where we asked if they could help us identify young players in their teams whom they considered good examples for others.

This group of 10 young players ended up being very representative, with each one having qualities that made them great role models. From the player who, despite never having faced any adversity, promotes the inclusion of everyone who joins the team, to a female player from a Muslim country who, as a child, wasn't allowed to play football simply because she was a girl and has had a life full of overcoming challenges.

Some are examples because of their great ability to communicate, lead, include, and respect others, while others are examples because of the story of resilience that follows them.

A small detail that everyone mentioned was that adapting to Portugal wasn't that hard, because within the team they had real young inclusion role models who made them feel at home and who were part of the team from the very first minute, which positively influenced their adaptation.

The younger ones are also good examples, not just the adults. We need more youth representation in organizations, and we especially need them to have an active voice, especially in football, which has a much wider audience.

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

Although the choice of role models is often made naturally, since young people with certain talents end up showing them naturally, we believe there are more young players with potential that sometimes goes to waste due to shyness, lack of confidence, or interest.

In this sense, besides identifying young people who show characteristics consistent with being designated role models, it's important to encourage them to be able to use these same qualities. Therefore, it will be up to clubs and projects like this to pass on a sense of responsibility to young people who show exemplary behavior, as well as to provide them with social and intellectual tools to be able to interact and make an impact on those around them. For example, a young person with a very strong work ethic but who struggles with communication should be helped to gain skills in communication, so they can increase their impact on their peers in terms of work ethic and discipline.

EXPLANATORY NOTE REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION: As of the completion date of this report and having identified the profile of 5 athletes to develop the training program, we were faced with their unavailability during the off-season due to planned trips to their home countries or other commitments beyond the scheduled holidays. We, therefore, plan to resume the program after the start of the 2026-2027 sports season and launch the first SJPF Youth Role Models campaign, to be published together with the partners of the SPIN network.





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to thank the organizations that participated in the focus groups held by the Portuguese Players' Union for sharing your knowledge and experiences about the profile and role of young people as role models, as you played a crucial part in creating this guide.

Thank you Ana Paulos – Associação Nacional de Futebol de Rua; Mariana Gonçalves – Conselho Português

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Also thanking the young people who participated in the Youth Expansion of SPIN Exhibition project, [In]visible: Youth with diverse backgrounds, who were willing and kind enough to share with us their life stories, experiences, thoughts, and perspectives.

Thank you Afonso, Fletcher, Fabrício, Diana, Arnas, Jelani, Carol, Lidiane, Doly, Lou. We extend our thanks to the clubs that the young players mentioned represented during the interviews, for their support, for identifying these young players as role models within their organizations, and for allowing the Players' Union to get in touch with them.

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We thank all the partners of the SPIN Youth project for your commitment to developing and promoting strategies to make sports an increasingly inclusive space.

Finally, we thank the Youth Coordinators who represented the Portuguese Players' Union in the SPIN Youth project for all the work you have done and for all your dedication to the project and the activities carried out in your respective organizations. Thank you Daniela and José.

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