

Northwest University

Sports for Development:

Promoting community health and integration.

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Integrative Project II

Thesis project

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**Abstract**

The following thesis paper, and its subsequent project in Appendix A, are centered around the importance of breaking down barriers to sport participation with the objective of helping children and adults achieve holistic physical and mental health development, as well as promote social cohesion for individuals and communities.

This paper will explore the social aspects of sports participation, its benefits to micro and macro levels of peacebuilding and reconciliation, as well as offer an analysis of some of the challenges and opportunities in community football in the greater Seattle area.

**Thesis paragraph**

Sports participation has many social and health benefits for individuals and communities alike (Light 16; Gorry 622; Schüttoff et al. 695). Unfortunately, In the and adults from low social economic families face different barriers when attempting to participate in organized sports (Kroshus 2; by Bowers and Ozyurtcu 34). Sports for Development initiatives are highly effective vehicles for positive social change in the greater Seattle area, however - as contact theory dictates - individuals and communities can only benefit from it if the right conditions for positive experiences are created.

**Introduction**

In a global context, sport activities have been historically present within each culture. While some sports may be more, or less, popular than others within different contexts, every sport ultimately plays an important role in community building. Studies show that the multiple benefits of sports participation include enhancement of social capital, personal and collective development, as well as physical and mental health improvement.

By drawing on lessons and data learned from qualitative research conducted over the summer of 2021 in the context of community-based football clubs in the Seattle Metropolitan area, this thesis project will identify some of the challenges and opportunities in using sports in community development, including health promotion and social benefits. It will also offer a practical solution to help mend some local social issues through a football training project that is designed to promote health and social capital enhancement for individuals and communities, as well as help reduce some of the existing barriers of sports participation. Such barriers are enforced by systemic economic and racial injustices, which result in unequal opportunities for participation. Leach and Yetes note that “Environmental, economic, cultural, parental, and psychological factors determine whether children participate in vigorous activities after school, including youth sports and, in particular, youth soccer” (435). In other words, even those athletes who are highly motivated and perhaps naturally gifted enough to pursue a possible collegiate or professional career in sports may not get the opportunity to develop their abilities because of systemic roadblocks that are beyond their control.

Throughout this paper, the term “football” will be used in reference to the sport also known as soccer in North America. The term is used throughout the paper, except when citing works from authors who use different terminology.

Football, often referred to as the world’s most popular sport, transcends cultural and social barriers worldwide. According to Andrei Markovits, “The game penetrated the world’s most distant peripheries and is played literally everywhere on earth” (504). This almost inexplicable powerful social nature of football, including its incredible cross-cultural and transnational reach, makes it a great platform for social change.

I can only speak or write for myself - although I believe other members of cohort 13 might attest to it within their own areas of interest - that the International Community Development program and the context of its courses came in the right moment for me. Each course that we had opened a new window or perspective that helped me improve my understanding of the vast and multidimensional nature of social justice issues.

### **Football as a Global Reconciling agent**

A word with many definitions, reconciliation, in my understanding, refers to the process of coming together in unity to mend relationships. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil defines reconciliation as a “dynamic process and an objective” (120), and she also emphasizes that it is “less about the destination and more about the journey” (127). However one defines it, the importance of reconciliation for better communities and a better world cannot be overlooked in development programs. Sports-for-development (SFD) initiatives can play a vital role in assisting with peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.

At a global stage, there have been many instances when football has led the way and served as a platform for peace treaties and reconciliation efforts between individuals, communities, and countries. In October 2005, after the Ivory Coast national football team secured qualification for the 2006 FIFA World Cup that was to be staged in Germany, Didier Drogba, the Ivorian team captain, took the opportunity to address his fellow countrymen, government, and the rebel leaders alike, to come together in peace for the common good. That call was promptly answered by both sides, and a relative level of peace was restored in the country soon after. Considering the political tension and conflict-ridden elections environment that was leading their country towards a civil war, football was the platform that allowed for peacemaking take place and for reconciliation to begin. According to Andreas Mehler, “In Côte

d'Ivoire all sides of the political game claim patriotism for themselves and deny it to others. However, the national soccer team, by its very composition, is a symbol of national unity and somehow untouchable" (105). A similar fact of unity through football was witnessed in my home country, Angola, in the same year, after the national football team's 1-0 victory over Rwanda in Kigali secured qualification for the 2006 FIFA world cup, the country's first and only participation to date. The nation united behind its national football team, and the moment helped the Angolan people and its reconciliation process after the country's civil war that ended just 3 years prior.

In both examples mentioned above, we see examples of football's influence in Macro level conflict resolutions and reconciliation processes. It is, however, at community level where football can really make the biggest difference in people's lives. In a personal interview, YMCA Youth Sports Coordinator Josten Garalde defines his adult football community as "a place of respect, trust, and friendship", he also describes its environment as "healthy, positive and stress free" (Garalde). Stress free environments can foster community building because people are more likely to have positive experiences, which can lead to continued participation.

### **Benefits of Community-based Sports**

Research indicates that key social aspects of our development as people begin at early childhood. According to writer Richard Light, "participation in age-appropriate sports clubs can make an important positive contribution to the wellbeing of children and make positive contributions towards their physical, emotional, social, and personal development" (16).

The benefit of playing sports extend beyond an individual's early stages of development, and studies indicate that there's a correlation between sports participation and improved outcomes in education and employments. Devon Gorry makes use of present and past data from

the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and he says that “middle and high school students who participate in sports earn higher grades, are more likely to graduate high school, are more likely to be employed, are less likely to be on welfare, and earn higher wages” (622).

Swedish professor David Ekholm In his journal article *Sport as a Means of Governing Social Integration: Discourses on Bridging and Bonding Social Relations*, also talks about the importance of relationships built through sports, and says that “participation in sport and involvement in community and civil society establishes social networks, social relations and ultimately bridging or bonding social capital, which, in turn, constitutes a social glue holding people and society together” (Ekholm 3). In an interview for NBC, through its affiliate for Houston, Texas, exercise psychologist Dr. John Higgins, notes that amongst other health benefits of playing association football, it “teaches kids and adults how to coordinate between eye and foot, eye and hand” (KPRC). This also means that even at the lowest level in terms of competition, sports participation should not be denied to any children.

Sports for development provide important platforms that can assist community development programs in different levels. As noted by Ramos and Young in their article *Youth Enrichment through Sport: The YES Ghana Model*, “The sports activity itself is the mechanism, or ‘hook’, that allows organizers to draw youth in through a love of play, and to then achieve desired outcomes” (104). Capitalizing on people’s love of play can help development practitioners find solutions to some pressing social issues, especially those involving the youth. The local culture’s love for sports plays an integral part of its effectiveness in youth development. Whitley et al. refer to sport participation as “an important rite of passage for American youth” (7). Given the cultural value that sports has for the youth in this country, it is imperative that no child, willing and able to participate, should be left behind.

One of the most talked about benefits of sports participation is the promotion of good health. Whether physical or mental, health is an important everyday aspect for people and communities. Mental health is a topic that has long been stigmatized, especially among African and/or communities of African descent. The reasons for this are multifaced and range from generational trauma to cultural differences. Keating and Robertson looked at the relationship between the mental health services and the black communities in the UK, and found that “Black people are disadvantaged in society, and there is a perception that MH services reinforce some of these disadvantages... Establishing dialogue and partnerships with community groups and building capacity in these communities can break this cycle of deprivation” (446). The authors purposely made use of the term “Black” throughout the paper in reference of people of African origins, or as the author put it, “people who may be commonly referred to as African or African Caribbean” (Keating and Robertson 439). This study was conducted in the context of African communities in the United Kingdom, which although maybe contextually different from other communities of African descent, there are still some key similarities in the nature of the social justice issues that they face.

Apart from health benefits, sports also help individuals and communities enhance their social capital. Social Capital, as defined by Forsell et al. is “the ability of individuals and groups to gain access to resources and the benefits accrued from these resources through their involvement and membership in club social networks” (107). Schüttoff et al. examined the causal effects of sports participation on the formation of social capital and found that “regular sports participation during adolescence has positive effects on different indicators of social capital when controlling for socioeconomic variables, family, and household characteristics” (695). Studies also indicate that there’s a correlation between sports participation throughout



childhood and improved outcomes in education and employment. Using present and past data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Devon Gorry found that “middle and high school students who participate in sports earn higher grades, are more likely to graduate high school, are more likely to be employed, are less likely to be on welfare, and earn higher wages” (622). According to, Kim et al. “sport participation and both cognitive social capital and structural social capital significantly predict one’s general happiness” (1636). In other words, sports can play a major role in building an individual’s connection with others, which can lead to the development of general feelings of happiness, belonging, social safety, as well as personal and professional connections within one’s neighborhood or community.

There is great value for individuals and communities in sports participation. According to Pepe Campuzano, a personal trainer by profession who plays as a defender for Kirkland FC, his local community means a lot to him because of the social impact that it has. Born in Mexico and raised in the United States, Pepe reflected on the influence of football in his community and his personal upbringing with a smile on his face. “It brings people from different cultures together to play and enjoy the game” he said, “most people treat each other like family, which makes a big impact for the younger generations” (Campuzano).

Sports are also known to help families and communities deal with issues related to childhood obesity. Leach and Yetes assert that “African Americans, Hispanics, females, and lower socioeconomic status represent the highest at-risk demographics for childhood overweight” (435). One of the core objectives of the project in Appendix A is to provide more opportunities for sports participation to people of all ages, ideally mostly from minority groups, which can help reduce the risk of childhood obesity.

### **Justice in community sports participation**

The word justice can be understood and defined in different ways. It can be hard to identify where the concept of justice begins and where it ends within sports contexts. According to Julie Clawson “Justice, as its very core, deals with relationships – our relationship with God, to each other, and to the world” (19). In sports contexts, justice is associated mostly with fair play, and the match referees are the people responsible to ensure that players compete according to the rules of the game.

In many cases, the role of the referee can be compared to that of a peacekeeper or mediator in community development. During my fieldwork, I interviewed Northwest University women’s soccer team head coach Bryan Chud, who is also a member of a team that plays in an adult football league for players over the age of thirty. While talking about the importance of refereeing in their community league, Chud mentioned that “Sometimes, there are days when some teams get on the field to just play for fun while others can be quite serious. This makes for intense situations sometimes, and with a lack of referees in attendance things can occasionally get out of hand”.

Sports are effective community building platforms, however, bringing people together is only positive for development in the right environment. Negative experiences in sports for development programs can sometimes keep people away from playing the sport all together.

During my fieldwork, Kirkland Football Club had a match against Seattle Umoja FC, a football club based in Seattle with Kenyan roots. The two teams were competing for a spot in the second round of the Washington State Super Cup, a competition organized by the Washington State Adult Soccer Association, also referred to by its acronym, WSASA. The tournament brings together clubs from different member leagues of the association. As noted in the event page of the organization’s social media, “The Super Cup is an exciting new tournament modeled after

the traditional cup competitions such as the Copa Del Rey or FA Cup. Single elimination competition” (WSASA). The phrase “single elimination competition” essentially means that matches cannot end in a draw, and if at the end of regular time the score is still tied, then the winner is decided by each team taking turns at shooting at goal from twelve yards. This individual battle between kicker and goalkeeper is what is known in football as a penalty shootout.

From a coaching perspective, both teams played well and the match itself was very competitive. Two players were ejected from the match for getting into a physical altercation. There were incidents during the match where both teams felt that the referee’s judgment and decisions on what constitutes a foul were, at the very least, questionable. One decision from the referee possibly changed the outcome of the game when Seattle Umoja was leading by three goals to one heading towards the end of the game. When there were twelve minutes left in the game, Kirkland FC scored after a controversial penalty, and used the momentum to go on and win the game on penalty shootout after the match ended 3-3 on regulation time. The referees were accused of being racially biased.

There is a potential that sports can create more division than unity within communities. Contact hypothesis suggests that under the wrong conditions, bringing people together, as sport events usually do, can have negative effects on social cohesion. According to Jim Everett, “contact situations are likely to be effective at improving intergroup relations as they induce positive affect, and ineffective as they induce negative affect such as anxiety or threat”. In other words, when bringing people together as proposed by the nature of the project in Appendix A, it is important to create an environment where people feel comfortable and can have positive experiences together.

## Racial Justice

Sports is a very useful social platform for change makers and a great equalizer of social differences amongst individuals and communities. However, it is still a social platform, and as a result, it is not immune to social injustices such as racism and discrimination. Jaenes et al. say that “Racism and violence, discrimination, match fixing, and any other kinds of abuse challenge not only affect the fundamental values of human political and cultural integration but also sports, even young football players, coaches and referees are confronted with a number of threats” (2). Racial injustice is an unfortunate reality that creates different systemic barriers to sport participation.

In most parts of the world, football is a relatively cheap sport that is made available with very little to no barriers of participation. However, in north America, and in the United States in particular, football is a sport that carries a high price tag and can be said to be segregated in some levels. According to a National Public Radio (npr) report, “most kids join youth club teams before they hit their teens but playing on these clubs can add up to more than \$4,000 a year” (Corwin). This is echoed by Bowers and Ozyurtcu who argue that youth sports in the United States has essentially been “professionalized” by private organizations that provide “expensive year-round pay-for-play travel clubs, and sport-specific training “(34). Additionally, the authors also note that “In doing so, it has also led to a number of undesirable system-level outcomes, from pricing out many families to a scourge of psychological burnout and overuse injuries” (34). In other words, albeit differently, the ramifications of barriers to sports participation affect both the rich and the poor. The racial demographic of youth sports in the Seattle metropolitan area does not reflect the diversity in the area. The sad reality is that the current systemic barrier to participation essentially takes away the opportunity for holistic development from all children.

The concept of justice extends far beyond our intrapersonal relationships. Environmental justice is a dormant problem in sports. Living justly is not an easy thing to do in a world where almost everything is interconnected. From the food and drinks that we consume, to the equipment that we use in our work, we are all co-contributors to social and environmental injustice, both in our communities and in the world. In sports for development initiatives, such as the one presented in Appendix A, most of the equipment used (for example the cones, balls, small goals, etc.) have a very high environmental footprint as they consist of variations of plastics and fabric material that are produced and manufactured in different countries. Yet that is what is available because the alternatives which might be environmentally friendly, violence and cruelty-free equipment, are much more expensive and difficult to find.

### **Overview of the field research**

Over the summer of 2021, I conducted my fieldwork research through Kirkland Football Club, a community-based sports organization located in the city of Kirkland, WA. My objective was to observe and try to understand how football can be used to help build and solidify communities, as well as identify what challenges and opportunities exist in the creation and running of community-based sports organizations in the Seattle metropolitan area.

Some of the challenges that local community football organizers face includes the ever-present combination of shortage of funds and time constraints, availability of fields, low commitment levels from players and/or coaches, as well as systemic barriers for growth. Money is an important factor to consider when conducting any social enterprise activity. “It is expensive and time consuming to run a community soccer club, but it is very much doable and worth it”, said the ever-enthusiastic Trent Siedenbug, owner, and co-founder of Kirkland FC. Culturally,

there is also a big sense of competition that sometimes takes away part of the essence of the sport, which is centered in the spirit of fun, unity, and cooperation.

Researchers are advised to, when possible, choose to conduct their observations in a context in which they “can make a contribution, either through research or general volunteer work” (7). Given my qualifications and experience working in football at different levels, as well as a genuine desire to help the organization in its community work, I volunteered to coach the team. This was an area and position that gave me closer access to the club’s activities during season, and it was also a role in which I confident that I could make an impact and help the organization and its players develop. One of the challenges was to figure out where I stood within the research itself. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, note that “Detachment and involvement, subjectivity and objectivity, insider and outsider stances are equally coupled in fieldworking” (8). I began the observations as an insider, but I ended up taking different stances throughout the fieldwork.

Kirkland FC is a member of the Cascadia Premier League, an all-inclusive adult amateur soccer league that “began as an idea to bring new soccer clubs from the west side of Washington together in competition” (Cascadia). The biggest value in sport lies in the coming together of people that work united for a common goal through a shared passion. The coming together of new clubs also means the coming together of different communities.

During my time with Kirkland FC, I had the opportunity to observe different adult football clubs in the region, as well as connect with other coaches and administrators within the football community in the Seattle metropolitan area. I noticed that most players, or participants, were current or former collegiate level footballers. Given the level of expertise needed to play competitive football at a collegiate level and beyond, extensive and costly formative years at youth soccer clubs are often necessary. This also means that those who are currently growing up

in an economically inopportune environment will most likely remain alienated from the game and all its individual and social benefits.

### **Extended explanation of the challenge/problem**

The complexity of organized community-oriented football can, at times, make it financially challenging for those involved. Coaches and administrators for example, often need to be certified through different qualification levels in order to work in different levels and/or age groups. In other words, being knowledgeable of the game through playing experience or other similar empirical knowledge processes, although vitally important for coaches, is not a deciding factor in the hiring process of club coaches and administrators. The higher the level of competition, the more expensive the licensing courses are. This creates two problems: First, similar to pay-to-play, coaching license certification requirements act as barriers to employment in sports and alienates those that may have a vast interest and passion for the game but cannot afford to pay to participate. The second problem with the certification requirements for coaches is that it inevitably creates a culture where people are more likely to feel the need to be remunerated for their work, given the time and financial investment that is needed to acquire the knowledge and experience to coach effectively.

The local culture also influences the way sports structures are set up. According to Gerard Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, the United States has a high score in the masculinity versus femininity index, which indicates that most of its society is "driven by competition, achievement and success" (Hofstede). These characteristics alone are not necessarily problematic, especially in sports settings. However, when combined with other aspects such as a high score in the individual versus collectivism index, the result is expressed in different areas of society through shared values, such as a "winner takes all" attitude. Legg et al.

note that “traditional North American sport structures have been criticized for focusing heavily on winning and adult goals, rather than having the goals of youth participants in mind, such as fun and skill improvement” (369). In its purest form, football is a collective game played for the collective good, and it is precisely the fun and the skills improvement that makes people worldwide fall in love with the sport.

The existing pay-to-play system in sports presents is a major barrier to sports participation across the United States. When it comes to soccer in particular, the differences are more commonly witnessed at the youth level where the system in place inadvertently excludes a large segment of the population from participating in a sport that is globally known to transcend social and racial differences amongst people. Research indicates that “immigrant families who played soccer in their old countries can't always pay” (Corwin). In a study that looked at the costs and benefits analysis of sports participation made by parents across the socio-economic spectrum, Kroshus found that “Income-based residential stratification is prevalent in the United States, heightened among families with children, and among Black as compared to non-Hispanic white households due to structural racism” (2). Kroshus also notes that “In communities characterized by low-income residents, there tend to be fewer options for sport participation as compared to higher resource communities, and the built environment is often less conducive to out- door exercise or free-play” (2). In the current system, talent comes second to financial power when it comes to guaranteeing a child’s participation in high level youth soccer programs.

Lastly, at the time of writing the Covid-19 pandemic was still a factor to consider and to be taken seriously in the implementation of sports activities. Given that the framework used for projects of this nature involve bringing people together, Sport activities have to follow the health and safety guidelines set by local state authorities and the Center for Disease Control (CDC)



regarding outfield sports participation. As masks mandates are lifted across different regions, the risk of infections increases, especially amongst the younger children. There is still some degree of uncertainty regarding the pandemic, but all the signs show that society in general seem to be adapting well enough to the reality of living with a new virus in our environment.

### **Background of the Project/Solution**

The project in Appendix A and the motivation for this thesis work are primarily inspired from my own positive and life changing experiences with football in different community contexts, as well as from ethnographic observations conducted during fieldwork.

My first memory of kicking a soccer ball was at around age eight. At the time, my family and I lived in a very small rural community in what felt like the middle of nowhere, after my family and countless others had to leave the city of Huambo during the Angolan civil war. It wasn't until I reached adulthood when I realized how difficult and challenging those times must have been for all of us, especially for my parents. In their article about parenting and raising children un conflict zones, Murphy et al. mention that "In conflict-affected settings, as in other situations of chronic stress, caregiver resilience, family cohesion, and consistent, nurturing, and responsive care can serve as protective factors buffering children from distress, building their resiliency, and supporting their health and development" (47). For us, football acted as a protective buffer from distress and helped us develop physically and mentally. Running around barefoot while kicking a ball- which was made of tied rags and plastics- allowed me and the other children to have glimpses of happiness, freedom, and hope, which was essential for us during our earlier childhood.

In the context of my fieldwork observations and the implementation of project in Appendix A, parents are not necessarily raising children in a conflict-affected area. However,

they do face considerable stress caused by a variety of economic, social, and environmental justice factors. Sports can still play an important role in helping children develop holistically in these settings. Empirical observations indicate that lack of commitment from players over the course of the season can be an issue in amateur adult football. The opposite often tends to happen in youth football, where the commitment is often made and maintained by both the young athlete and the parents.

### **ICD Values in Sports for Development Initiatives**

Sports for development programs, similar to other community development initiatives, primarily look to make positive contributions to finding contextual solutions to social justice issues. The shared love for sports connects people in ways that facilitates the work of community developers. Boan, et al. define the work of international community development as “knowing how to work with communities, engage with local people, and approach problems in a culturally sensitive way that balances community needs and cultural values” (443). This simple definition of the expansive work of international community development highlights the need for contextualization, engagement, and collaboration. Values that are observed in healthy communities, as well as in sports.

### **Contextualization**

Community building is about establishing strong and trusting relationships through contextually sensitive development practices. Contextualization allows developers to gain an understanding of each community’s circumstantial needs, and it requires that they provide real and relevant solutions to the identified problems. The importance of trust in the effectivity of development values such as contextualization, collaboration and copowerment is highlighted by Salter McNeil when she mentions that “Trust is built, and credibility earned when people see that

we are sincerely invested in the community and the we are affected by the same problems that concern them “(104). Earning the community trust in my project is key to its effectiveness, and I believe that it is something that will certainly happen over time.

Contextual development work is about meeting people where they are, mainly because systemic injustices can sometimes go unnoticed by those who are not directly effected by them. Immigrant children are often more effected by the exclusive pay-to-pay system than their local peers because apart from preventing them benefiting from the fun of playing, it also robs them of an opportunity to connect and form relationships with their peers, which in turn could help them with adaption in the new culture. In the greater Seattle area, the rising cost of living makes it very difficult for the average working family to afford to pay for extra-curricular activities that are beneficial for their children development, especially when it comes to activities that involve individual or group coaching. In a personal interview, Abubakar Djalo says that he has had so many difficulties finding an affordable sports club for his two daughters to play basketball, that he opted to training them himself: “I prefer to train my kids, because the costs at the local athletic club is too high”. And as I was nodding my head in agreement before asking a follow-up question, he quickly leaned forward smiling and said, “I may not know exactly what I am doing, but it is still better than having the children doing nothing at home”.

Contextualization in my project also comes in the shape of play dates for children. Play date are an interesting concept and it’s something that is culturally knew to me. I had heard the term play date before, but I had not really considered its meaning until one day during my fieldwork observations when a parent approached me asking if I would be interested in setting up a play date for our children, after he observed how well our children played together. This gave me the idea of making the project cater primarily to children that do not get enough exposure to

their peers, in a more informal manner. The project in Appendix A is essentially a place that allows children to play and connect with other children in a sport-like environment that is fun and age appropriate.

There are other sports that are more accessible than football, but cultural factors and the influence of familiarity with the sport makes immigrants parents more likely to choose football as the ideal sport for their young children. As a result of this observation, and the realization that children are always the most vulnerable members of society, and the most affected by systemic oppression, systemic violence, and other social injustices, I felt guided to work with children that are potentially being left out of the football system. As a contribution to a large list of possible solutions, I will create a social enterprise that provides a range of football related services, including free technical training sessions to children of all ages, with priority given to children from immigrant families. Activities and parental participation will vary, from fun free play to rigorous drills and structure, depending upon the age group of the attendees.

### **Copowerment**

In sports for social justice, opportunities for copowerment are presented in different forms, both on and off the field of play. In soccer training environments that allow for individual differences to be freely expressed and used to achieve common goals, athletes not only help each other develop their technical abilities by providing a level of competition, but they can also positively influence one another's emotional growth.

Football as a social activity transcends cultural barriers and promotes diversity. It also provides a pathway for people to make valuable contact with their peers from different cultures, races, nationalities, socio-economic status, etc. It helps promote cultural sensitivity as well as cultural adaptation.

Participation in sports programs for social justice and community development can be equally beneficial for players and coaches. Training players of different age groups and skillsets presents unique challenges that can nurture professional and personal development.

In development work, it is very important to meet people where they are. Given the wide variety in abilities and skillsets of the different young athletes that are expected to come through the program, one of the challenges for coaches is to find a balance between the recreational aspect of the project and the competitiveness required to help each attendee develop at their own pace. The need to find solutions for each player's development can be an incentive for coaches to work outside of their comfort zone, which increases the potential for them to develop their craft. Copowerment is also found in the positive relationships that can be fostered through football during challenging times, with a world dealing with conflicts during a pandemic. Although mental health issues in the United States were already on an increase before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies show that the problems are much bigger now. According to Laurier et al. "Within the first few months of the pandemic, researchers noticed that individuals were presenting higher levels of stress than usual, which could even lead to posttraumatic symptoms" (354). This is echoed by other research studies on the subject mental health in today's reality. Jalalizadeh notes that "The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have created an ever-changing psychological landscape, one to which we must readily adapt" (91). Adaptation is a necessary first step for community integration in ever changing social and cultural landscapes. Sports have proven to be a fertile ground for mutually empowering relationships in such environments.

### **Collaboration**

The game of football is universal and adaptable. This makes it ideal for many collaborative opportunities in the field of development. Julie Clawson asks her readers to resist the temptation of taking on every social issue alone and “seek everyday justice in community” (188). The technical training aspect is only a small part of the project. Sports training programs such as the one proposed in Appendix A, can only really be successfully implemented through collaborations with other organizations/institutions and community members.

Teamwork and collaboration are important social skills that athletes can develop over time. The two words can be used interchangeably as they are rooted on the idea of coming together to achieve common goals. Collaboration also comes in the form of interaction with other coaches of various age groups to exchange information and knowledge, including inviting some of them to participate in guest roles.

Collaboration between parents and coaches is vital in youth sports. Given the complexity of childhood experiences and development, there is a need to create good communication channels in the player-parent-coach interaction. When coaches connect with parents, they can be more effective in their job. The same happens when parents understand their role and are supportive of their child’s development.

Collaboration in the project in Appendix A also takes form of cooperation. The ability to cooperate and help others are essential skills that can be learned from a young age. “At least one format through which cooperation may occur for young children is within games and sports” (Wayne 201). Cooperation, whether in the form of helping others or shared goals, is considered “central to human life” (Liebal et al. 224; Misch et al. 2037).

One way to help solve the imbalance between the underprivileged and the privileged young athletes is to provide high quality technical football training sessions free of charge. Given

the multicultural and multinational communities I will serve, cooperation and collaboration with parents and educators is vital to the project's success. The most natural way to win the trust of both players and parents is to provide quality contextual work. The objective is to positively influence the lives of young children and promote community building.

### **Conclusion**

Our work as development agents cannot wait for tomorrow, or for the right conditions when we feel ready to help, especially when working with the youth. The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty highlights the need for and importance of the implementation of long-term projects, and at the same time, stresses the fact that "childhood does not wait for the long term" (7). I created Joga Comigo (see Appendix A) with the belief that in order for us as a society to get a step closer to the reconciled and integrated peaceful communities of tomorrow, we need to positively and holistically affect the development of children of today.

In its purest form, given its multiple benefits, football has the power to positively influence the lives of individuals and communities. While it's not possible for most youth football clubs in the greater Seattle area to remove every barrier to participation, there is a need for more all-inclusive and no-cost football programs to include those that cannot afford the participation fees.

## Appendix A

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Integrative Project I – GLST 5963

### Introduction

Considering the health benefits of sports participation, as well as the interpersonal and social relationships that are built for individuals and families involved in sport activities, it is imperative that equal opportunities for participation in sports are provided for everyone, especially for the youth.

The existing *pay-to-play* system in sports presents is a major barrier to sports participation across different populations in the United States. When it comes to football in particular, the differences are more commonly witnessed at youth level where the structural pay-to-play systems inadvertently excludes a large segment of the population from participating in a sport that is globally known to transcend social and racial differences amongst people.

Research on barriers to sports participation is still somewhat limited. However, current studies indicates that financial constrains are the main reason most people do not participate in sports, especially football. In his study on youth sports participation, Pandya found that “As youth sports participation continues to increase, particularly with skill-based club sports, multiple barriers to participation exist for pediatric and adolescent athletes based on race, socio-economic status, and insurance” (444). This is echoed by National Public Radio reporter Emily Corwin, whom in an interview of immigrant families found that “immigrant families who played soccer in their old countries can't always pay”. In addition, barriers to participation include, and are not limited to a combination of “income, time, and human capital” (Griffiths et al. 344). This



results in an environment where natural talent is put second, behind financial ability to pay to participate.

Even at the amateur level, sport events are a good platform to bring people together. This can provide vital assistance to other existing community development programs. By drawing on lessons learned from qualitative research that I conducted over the summer on community-based soccer clubs in the Seattle Metropolitan area, this project identifies some of the challenges and opportunities of using sports in community development, as well as offer a practical solution that can help reduce the existing barriers of participation.

This project is specifically designed to provide soccer coaching to young athletes from all socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly for children from families that cannot afford to pay to support their children's athletics aspirations, which often begin at a very young age. The objective is to reduce some of the financial barriers to sports participation and promote community health by making the football activities free of charge, with exercises suitable and engaging for children and adults.

The long-term goal of the project is to open a non-profit sport for development enterprise that will provide football coaching and mentoring services for the youth through different programs free of charge, working in collaboration with other social organizations working with low social economic status families and at-risk children. In the meantime, however, I will work within my limitations and run the program as independent volunteering community events.

## **Project Details**

### **About us:**

Joga Comigo is an all-inclusive football training program that promotes health and community building through the beautiful game of football. It is designed primarily for children

aged between two to ten years old, but suitable for people of all ages. The words “joga comigo” (see fig 1), which translates as “play with me” from Portuguese, represents an important part that most children really want and need, which is to play with other children.



Fig 1. Joga Comigo official Logo

At Joga Comigo, we believe that the beautiful game is better when played together, in the spirit of unity, copowerment and peace. Without participation barriers. In footballing terms, Joga Comigo is a grassroots program with a mission to promote community health, peacebuilding, and unity through the creation of FUNdamentals football training environments suitable for children and their caregivers, should they choose to participate.

At its core, Joga Comigo is a space where children can be children, and adults can connect both with their children and their own inner child. It is made available to the community and partnering organizations free of charge, with an option for donations.

Monetary donations made to the program will be mainly used in following two ways:

- To buy newer and more effective training equipment such as different size balls, mini goals, sticks and training dummies for local use here in the United States.

- To help support DOMILEX FC (see fig 2), a youth sport organization based in my home community in Viana, which is one of the most populous municipalities in the outskirts of the city of Luanda, Angola. Most of the children that train at Domilex FC are either orphans or come from extremely impoverished homes. The favorable exchange rates between the stronger U.S Dollar and the weaker Angolan Kwanza means that even small amounts of monetary contribution from here will make a big impact for the local community club in efforts to buy food for the daily soups served at the club, or to acquire more needed training material such as balls, cones, and uniforms.



Figure 2 – Domilex FC under 14 football team.

## **Project Timeline**

December 2021 – Planning phase of the project. The initial objective was to train athletes that are interested in getting ready for their respective high school season tryouts. I organized a test practice to get an idea of how I will be approaching the project once it gets fully implemented.

January – February 2022 – No activities. Weather and time constrain halted the project.

March 2022 – Creation of program logo and start of program Joga Comigo

April 2022 – Continuation of the program. Social Media Presence

May – July 2022 – Joga Comigo summer trainings – 2 morning sessions per week.

August – November 2022 – Reduced activities during collegiate season

January 2023 – Planned program expansion

## **About Me**

Amid the numerous social injustices around us, one question that has stuck in my mind is whether my ideas can make a difference in the real world. My personal experience is that participation in sports provide a sense of normality for children growing up in abnormal social situations. As a minority soccer coach, it is my great interest to understand the impact that limited access to sports participation has on children of low-income minority families, but most importantly, I see it as my responsibility to do something about it despite my limitations.

Football and community development is a special topic for me for different reasons. Growing up in war-torn Angola, my family had to move and relocate around the country many times whenever we needed to escape from conflict zones to safer areas. As a child, most of the memories that I have from that period in my life involve playing soccer with my friends. The beautiful game, as its commonly referred to around the world, has always helped me find a place

in society, make friends, and find some level of comfort even under very difficult circumstances. I believe that my program can have a similar effect in those that will benefit from it, especially the immigrant community. Stodolska et al. argue that participation in sport spectatorship can help immigrants in the “construction and display of identities”, and it can also act as catalyst in “the process of immigrant community formation” (143). Being an immigrant parent myself, I have an idea of the different challenges that many others in similar situation may face, therefore being able to help others through a game that has greatly influenced my life is something that gives me great pleasure.

We are blessed with beautiful parks around the Seattle Metropolitan area. For this initial phase of this project, most activities will be located around the cities of Lynnwood, Shoreline, and Seattle. From a coaching perspective, one of the challenges of the program is to create training sessions that are fun, productive, and inclusive for all participants, young and old. It’s a challenge that I look forward to, not only because I enjoy the challenge, but also because it leaves a lot more room for creativity and innovation within the program.

My vision is to provide more than just athletic training opportunities for all. Joga Comigo is designed primarily to be a space where children are allowed to be children, and adults can come together to connect and network, while participating in the exercise drills of their choices.

### **Starting Equipment:**

The initial training material that the program has consists of: Thirteen size five footballs, twenty Mini footballs, fifty cones in assorted colors, and ten used Toca Balls.

The mini red footballs are a big success with the kids. The size allows for the little children to be able to kick it, throw it, bounce it in a way that is proportional to their body size.

Most of the initial consignment of material is old. The balls were more likely on their way to a landfill somewhere, most likely in the poorest communities. It was convenient for me to try and extend its usage and value. TOCA Football are suitable for repeated usage for all ages with reduced the risk of muscle injury. It prevents muscle injuries and challenges athletes' technical abilities due to its smaller size.

The inclusion of upbeat music to be played in the background during the sessions, for example, is a small detail that I believe will make a big difference in its effectiveness. As the project begins to take shape, it becomes clearer to me that I should not be worrying about doing things the way others do it, and the most important thing is to keep a vision for the project while allowing it to be open to changes, iterations, and adaptation to ever changing social environments.

### **Conclusion**

I have wrestled with different ideas to tackle essentially the same issue of social justice in sports participation in the United States. As my understanding and knowledge of the subject matter increased, so did my desire to pair my passion for sports and social justice initiatives. As I embark on a journey to take on this project, I am reminded that it is vital to guard against blood equity in the efforts to make the project succeed because of the intrinsic reward of social enterprise work (Lynch and Walls 157).

Social work is a very a challenging field, I am only getting started. Working on this is teaching me that the process is ongoing, and that obstacles often present a different opportunity. Collaboration between different sectors is needed in order for us to reduce some of the social issue of sports participation in the United States. Apart from the health benefits of sports participation, amateur sport organizations can provide vital assistance in community

development by serving as a vehicle to bring people together and tackle pressing issues within its local community.

Social justice starts at the individual level, and as a qualified soccer coaches I have a responsibility to my community. I am unsure of the direction that the project will take once it takes off, but I do know that it has strong potential to positively impact people's lives.

The challenges facing community developers and agents of change are immense. Sports is an available tool or framework that transcends cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences. In a world full of uncertainty and challenges, the least that can be done for the children is to give them an opportunity to be children with other children. Joga Comigo is one of many sports for development initiatives that is designed to supplement other more urgent development programs.

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