

# THE DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES IN FOOTBALL: GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

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**ABSTRACT.** By drawing on primary scholarly literature on the dual career in sport, this article aims to identify the key features and problems concerning the development and implementation of programs promoting school and university education for young footballers. The paper highlights the importance of bridging the gap between professional sport and learning in young footballers by promoting dissemination actions within dual-career programs. To implement these actions, the authors have investigated and examined by comparative, historical, and hermeneutical methodology the role that team manager may play to support programs that, in the context of Italian legislation and regulations, encourage the development of specific skills in young footballers. These skills deal mainly with coping with transitions affecting athlete-students and student-athletes' sports experience and post-career years. The paper will conclude with a list of educational principles to be developed as practical actions to implement dual-career programs for young footballers attending high school or university.

**Keywords:** *dual-career, football, education, team manager*

## 1. Introduction

All main changes that mark the sporting experience of an athlete, such as, for instance, joining a new division, level, club, role, or suffering any injury, can take on a critical connotation, especially in the post-career of athletes. According to some authors, such criticality is to be found in the poor integration between the formal educational system and the sports one (Ibex, 2000; Bellantonio, 2016).

This highlights the importance for the educational system to design, develop and support dual-career programs aiming to provide guidance, advice, and educational models to help athletes develop skills needed to meet the

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challenges they face in their everyday life. These problems emerging in the transition phases of athletes' sports careers, and their lives are mutually dependent. They concern academic, educational, and family life (Stambulova, 2012; Wylleman, Rosier, De Knop, 2016; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, Cummings, 2000; Wylleman, Lavallee & Alfermann, 1999).

The sporting experience requires a sincere dedication by the athlete, who tends to focus their interest and efforts on building a strong personal identity (Bellantonio, 2016). This could be a risk for the balanced development of their personality (Maulini, 2018). One-dimensional identity development does not allow the athlete to face unexpected events, such it could be an accident, the inability to participate in high-level competitions, or the expected experience of the inevitable end of the sports career. This event usually causes a real upheaval in the athlete, and the need for reconstructing the personal self, the relations with others and the world around them. The process of identity reconstruction is only possible if the person has had the opportunity to explore and cultivate other dimensions of their life, and to experience the personal self in different roles by harmonically developing its potential. This implies having acquired skills that make the person able to cope with the shocks of life and to trigger, therefore, resilience processes.

In 2012, the European Union, by publishing the Guidelines on recommendations for policy actions in support of athletes' education (EC, 2012), urged governments, sports bodies, education, and labor market institutions to implement policies to promote actions to develop the dual-career of athletes. This call is in line with the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy for Growth (EC, 2010), and for the prevention of early school leaving and the strengthening of employment opportunities for workers.

The same text highlights the need to build relations between the sports system, the training sector, and the labor market, to open paths to ensure the balance between sports training and employment. Recently, the law of 13 July 2015 no. 107 has identified, among the priority educational objectives for schools, the protection of the right to study for students engaged in competitive sports (art. 1, paragraph 7).

Moreover, the Decree no. 935 of the Minister of Education, University and Research of 11 December 2015, promoted initiatives to innovative teaching and learning projects for the three school years 2015-2018, «intending to identify actions addressed to providing educational support to educational institutions that have pupils engaged in competitive sports activities».

By signing the Memorandum of Understanding between MIUR and CONI (Italian National Olympic Committee) on 28 November 2016, the parties agreed, in line with the most recent European guidelines, to undertake joint

actions to recognize the value of sport through the testing of innovative teaching methods and experiences.

The most recent Ministerial Decree no. 279 of 10 April 2018 has confirmed the need for innovative teaching in the next five school years. This training – is said in the document – must be supported by the usage of digital technologies addressed to high-level student-athletes, which have been identified upon specific criteria. The criteria have been established in agreement with the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) and the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP). They regard students enrolled in secondary education institutions of second-degree level in all the country.

The objective is to implement and support the schools in planning practical actions aimed at concretely promoting the right to study and the educational success of students engaged in high-level competitive sports. These projects open the way to agreements between schools and sports clubs to safeguard the growth of young athletes and promote the balance between sports training and education.

Also, in recent years, Italian Universities have put into place support programs for students playing the sports at the highest level (ASAG-Unicatt, 2017; Sánchez Pato, Isidori, Calderón, Brunton, 2017; Lupo et al. 2015; Guidotti, Cortis, Capranica, 2015; Migliorati, Maulini, Isidori, 2018a). The support actions aimed at this target group of students are part of the commitment by Italian universities to fight against the high rate of abandonment. This relegates Italy to the lowest places among European countries for the number of graduates in the youth population (ISTAT, 2018). Within this context of dropping out, athletes who decide to undertake a university course are more at risk than others or so-called worker-students, because of the complexity that characterizes their profession.

Coupling traditional study (in-presence lessons, classroom work, and a planned schedule of examinations) with the needs concerning competitive sports (training, competitions, sports training sessions, medical tests) requires a mental and physical commitment by the athlete. This commitment is often faced without athletes being able to count on stable relationships with fellow students developed and maintained constant only through attendance (Isidori, 2016).

Most professional and high-level athletes have difficulty in entering the job market after their sports career because of the lack of specific skills.

Sporting organizations and clubs should promote training in a way that enables athletes to retrain their professional careers, which are generally of short duration.

Usually, the student-athlete has developed leadership skills thanks to their sports experience. These skills can be the starting point for the development

of new skills, which academic studies could help to increase. In this regard, some studies (Wylleman, Lavallee, 2004) have underlined the importance of enhancing the value embodied by the student-athlete as a whole overcoming the fragmentation of identity, the briefness, and the alternation of phases that characterizes professional development.

The results of some studies on athletes' education at the university have underlined the relevance of guidance and tutoring as crucial elements to promote the dual career of student-athletes. These studies have also stressed the importance of offering them the opportunity of experiences capable of combining sport and education, career and life (ASAG-Unicatt, 2017; Sánchez Pato, Isidori, Calderón, Brunton, 2017; Lupo et al., 2015; Guidotti, Cortis, Capranica, 2015; Migliorati, Maulini, Isidori, 2018a).

Being this the scenario of the dual career of student-athletes in Italy, in light of the need for implementing actions to support and guide them in schools and universities, this work will analyze the guidelines more effective to develop educational interventions useful to help the training of student-athletes playing football at the high level.

## **2. The case of football**

In Italy, Football is not only a sport but also a cultural phenomenon with an incidence of about 25% of the total members, in the amateur and youth sector, of the 45 sports federations affiliated to CONI (Report Calcio, 2018).

The number of players working in the youth division is 838,430; affiliated male football players aged between 5 and 16 years old represent 20% of the Italian population. In 2016/2017, 1,044,505 players were counted, affiliated to 12,693 clubs, while the total number of teams amounted to 82,616. Activities in the youth and school divisions account for 64.5% of registered players and 82.8% of the number of teams. FIGC (Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio, in English: Italian Football Federation) registered members amount to almost 1.4 million (of which 78% are players); an amount that has increased in the last eight seasons. The increase in managers (+12%), technical staff (+1.5%), and registered personnel in the youth and school divisions (+12%) was offset by the decrease in players involved in professional and amateur activities (-3.5%). More importantly, only 6.4% of players between 15 and 21 years old who were members of professional clubs in 2007-2008 were still active in Italian professional football in 2016-2017. This highlights the difficulty for a football player to move from the youth division to the first team one. Moreover, when this happens, it emerges the difficulty to remain in this division for a long time (Ibid.).

The conference organized by AIC (Italian Association of Players) in Udine on October 30, 2017, entitled “Extra time-traumatic and psychological aspects of post-career” (Ghiretti, AIC, 2015) highlighted the difficulties of the post-career for footballers. Problems confirmed by the research “End of the first half, Analysis of players' post-career,” conducted by Aic Onlus, which found a discrepancy between players' expectations for their post-career and the possibilities that the environment offers.

Our study has extracted by data mining, confronted, and summed up the results of three surveys using different methodologies. The first survey, entitled “What happened to them” (Ibidem), has analyzed the post-career path of 2,611 professional players included in the first team roster of the 128 professional clubs of Italian Division A (18 teams), Division B (20 teams), Division C1 (36 teams) and Division C2 (54 teams) of the 1992-93 football season. The survey has revealed that 44.1% of active players imagine their future only in professional football. Moreover, the same study has shown that 61.4% of former professional footballers of 1992/93 season, even having the qualification of “professional footballer” for working as a coach, sports director, football agent, athletic trainer and health care professional, did not operate at any level in the football labor market in the 2014/2015 season. Moreover, only 10% of them have worked at a professional level consistently in the last three football seasons.

The second survey, entitled “What am I going to do when I grow up?” (Ibidem) was carried out by analyzing the questionnaires of 499 professional players in the 2014-2015 season, with an average age of 25.5 years. The research shows that 69.8% of them have declared to have a high school diploma, while 3.8% say to have earned a bachelor's degree. This is a higher result than that of the previous research (Ibidem), which reported 48.1% of players having a middle school certificate, and 48.1% of them have earned a secondary one. This result is more in line with the average of the Italian population, according to which just over 75% of young people usually earn a higher education degree (Istat, 2015).

Of the 499 professional players, 51.8% said they had already begun to think about a future post-career. Specifically, 46.3% of Division A and 44.8% of Division B players said they were thinking about the end of their career as well as 58.2% of Lega Pro. This shows how the opinion of footballers is influenced by the category to which they belong. If only 16.9% of Division A players are worried about their future, the percentage rises to 22.1% in Division B and 43.9% in Lega Pro. Compared to a post-football career, the higher the number of players thinking about their future only in football, the higher the category: from 43% of Lega Pro to 45.9% of Division B and 46.3% of Division A.

A worrying fact is that 55.1% of those who are convinced that, in the future, they will be engaged in football have not thought of any alternative. An encouraging fact is, however, the interest in training: 83.5% of the players surveyed and as many as 85% of those who imagine a post-career only football, consider career guidance courses useful. This result is hugely positive as it calls for new training courses to be designed and planned with a view to retraining former athletes for their relocation outside the football labor market.

The third survey we have used for our review study has analyzed the stories of footballers after the end of their careers (Ghiretti, 2015). It has highlighted, through the voices of players who have been able to reinvent themselves in work activities far removed from football, how this sport develops communication and management skills and competencies along with a social capital that can be transferred to other areas of human development and work.

In light of this analysis, it is necessary to question the future of thousands of young people who begin to play football at a high level and are imagining a future as champions that will not always become true. Indeed, the majority of them will have to develop competencies to rethink their future and take alternative paths by cultivating education and lifelong learning.

### **3. Education and training of athletes in European and national football regulations**

The data presented leads to an inevitable analysis of the educational role played by football clubs in young people's education. Also, this leads to a reflection on the actions that ought to be taken to promote dual career paths, i.e., the possibility for athletes to finalize a high-level sports course, in combination with training or professional tracks (EC, 2012).

Regarding the education of young football players, UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), has fixed specific criteria and requirements for the granting of the license. These criteria focus on the importance of education and on the duty (of the license applicant sports club and society) to promote and support the education of young players, guaranteeing them the possibility of completing compulsory schooling and continuing their studies (FIGC-UEFA, 2018, p.21). Among the documents necessary for the granting of the license, the UEFA manual indicates the statement certifying the commitment of the license applicant to promote and support the education of young players» (Ibidem, p.21).

The relevance of education is reported and identified among the tasks of the coach of youth Division. He/she is responsible for «the promotion of

educational programs aimed at encouraging the completion of school education and the gradual integration into the world of work of young players» (p.39).

The National Licensing System of Lega Italiana Calcio (Italian Football League), among the requirements for Italian football clubs to obtain a license to participate in A, B and C Divisions championships for the year 2019/2020, indicates «the commitment to promote and support the education of young players» (FIGC, 2019a,b,c).

The documents mentioned above, therefore, reaffirm the importance of education and integration into the world of work of young players. However, as emerged from the results of Ghiretti's research (2015), they show concern for their future, and most of them do not operate in the world of football in the post-career despite the achievement of specific qualifications.

#### **4. The dual career in football**

The UEFA Licensing System and the National Licensing System, as described above, require that sports clubs encourage young players to complete compulsory education and gradually enter the labor market.

To make clubs do not merely fulfill their obligations by carrying out the administrative acts necessary for enrolment in school, they should promote «the idea of dual careers in contracts and codes of conduct for coaches and other members of the team. National sports organizations and international federations [...] should include the concept of dual careers in their training programs [...] as part of a lifelong learning strategy». (EC, 2012a p.14-15). The implementation and dissemination of interventions aimed at accompanying athletes in their education and training should also include individualized orientation actions and monitoring systems of these latter ones.

#### **5. Strategies to be implemented for an effective dual-career in football**

The pedagogical premise of any educational intervention in sport is to develop all dimensions of athletes' lives. In this sense, sports clubs should structure spaces, times, and put into place processes to build learning opportunities by aiming not only at the overall training of the person but also encouraging athletes to transfer and develop the skills acquired through the sports in other contexts.

To this end, the sports clubs should provide themselves with a staff of experts in the pedagogical field of guidance and training. These can accompany and monitor the young player in choosing their trucks, be they academic or

professional. The figures who will be part of the staff may be freelancers or «employees of a sports organization, institution or a private body and must be competent and qualified to work with high-level athletes» (Ibidem, p. 14). An important role, in this perspective, could be played by the team manager.

## **6. The educational role of the team manager**

The team manager could play a key role not only in designing and implementing these courses but also in coordinating the pedagogical staff within the football club. As indicated in UEFA Manual (FIGC-UEFA, 2018), the main tasks of the team manager include «managing relations and contractual relations between clubs and players or technical staff; conducting negotiations with other sports clubs, which concern the transfer of players and the stipulation of contracts; supervising the activities of observers; supervising sporting activities of the teams» (p. 35).

About the latter function, it is clear that the team manager is responsible for coordinating the coaches themselves. According to the UEFA manual, coaches are required to «promote educational programs aimed at encouraging the completion of school education and the gradual integration of young footballers into the job market» (Ibid., p. 39). The implementation of these programs must necessarily be shared and built by a collaboration between coaches and the team managers. Therefore, the latter ones play a fundamental educational role. They have the responsibility to promote, within the sports club, the educational process within the lifelong learning framework of athletes.

The team manager has relevant educational responsibilities, especially in football, which on the one hand, is considered a sport with high educational potential, but on the other hand, risks generating expectations that far exceed reality. This makes it essential for the team manager to acquire all the skills necessary to enhance their educational and training functions. This requires the inclusion in the training courses for team managers promoted by the Federal Technical Centre of Coverciano (Florence) of spaces for reflection and the practice of instructional design to improve critical and reflective thinking in football players.

These actions ought to be reinforced through the constant dialogue between educational agencies and sports clubs in a way that students-athletes or athletes-students can perceive the educational aspect of their training as an integral part of their development and the school/training/university institution as the context in which to give space to their human and professional growth (Migliorati, Maulini, Isidori, 2018b).

The following sections present the objectives and main actions needed to implement an effective dual-career intervention in football.



## 7. Designing dual-career interventions in football

The analysis of the scenario we have conducted till now shows how schools and Universities are trying to respond to the educational and training needs of high-level athletes. At the same time, it shows that there are indications in the regulations regarding the education and training of young players.

Taking for granted the acceptance and development of these indications, these are the general and specific objectives and actions that sports clubs should adapt to their context to plan dual-career interventions.

1) Promoting networking between the different actors acting within the life contexts of the athletes by:

- raising and taking awareness among the agencies (training agents, sports clubs and families) of the need to support student-athletes through specific training courses;
- building and fostering the dialogue aimed at sharing objectives and actions with the other agencies involved in the development of the dual-career of the student-athlete or athlete-student.

2) Guiding and accompanying athletes in their training in the sporting context by:

- building personalized and flexible accompanying paths through support figures with counseling and tutoring skills;
- collaborating with educational and academic institutions to foster the development of skills and the achievement of specific learning objectives;
- implementing digital technologies and organizational strategies to accommodate and support the educational experiences that are spreading in schools and universities. This with the view of overcoming the critical issues of the training of student-athletes and athlete-students.

3) Developing in sports agents (coaches, athletic trainers, managers, and further) the educational skills necessary for the implementation of dual career paths by:

- raising awareness of the value of sport as a human practice and of the educational responsibility that comes with it;
- implementing practices that allow their pedagogical function to be acted upon;
- favoring the development of intercultural competencies to facilitate the process of inclusion of foreign athletes.

4) Making families of student-athletes aware of their function of linking agents between sport, school, and life by:

- encouraging an active collaboration of youngest students-athletes' families with schools and sports clubs in order to implement all actions regarding the dual career.

In order to achieve the objectives outlined above, the team manager should be responsible for the following actions:

- to raise awareness and promote awareness within the sports clubs of the educational value of specific training courses for student-athletes;
- to propose the establishment of experts' staff in pedagogy within the club (tutors, counselors, and people specialized in guidance and training), in order to plan dual-career actions;
- to propose training interventions aimed at the acquisition and expansion of educational skills of the sports club's community;
- to analyze the context and plan activities;
- to work in collaboration with educational agencies and the family;
- to establish partnerships with schools, universities and training institutions through the signing of agreements and agreements;
- to ensure adequate space within the sports club for the implementation of learning activities (multimedia study, meeting, and plenary meeting rooms, and so on);
- to coordinate and monitor the actions implemented by the pedagogical staff within the sports club;
- to promote measures to enhance and publicize the dual-career programs.

Moreover, the educational staff, coordinated by the team manager, will be called:

- to map training opportunities in order to guide the choice of players;
- to develop and implement a dual career training models shared with sports club agents (coaches, athletic trainers) and families;
- to design training courses for the club's sports agents;
- to schedule dual career program information meetings for student-athletes and their families;
- to conduct interviews and orientation counseling activities with student-athletes to accompany them in the choice of the school and university track or professional training;
- to build along with the student-athlete or athlete-student a personalized dual-career project;
- to identify a sports tutor to support the athlete in their way of study

and practice in collaboration with the tutors of the education context (university or school tutor);

- to schedule meetings to coordinate actions with educational agencies (university or school tutors) and the family;
- to build and implement tools for monitoring the intervention (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires).

The implementation of this project hypothesis requires attention and care by sports clubs. That is to say, on the one hand, attention and care for the education of athlete-students. On the other hand, awareness of the relevance of sport for society.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the need for implementing effective dual-career programs in football for athletes. These programs should promote the development of all footballers as persons, be they professional or post-career athletes.

The data presented in the previous paragraphs show considerable participation in football, which calls for a strong sense of responsibility on the part of sports clubs. The data reveals concern on the part of footballers for their future, which is growing in the lower-level divisions. In addition to this, there is a positive fact, namely the interest of players in training.

As explained above, the UEFA Licensing System and the National Licensing System invite sports clubs to promote education and the gradual integration of players into the labor market. The educational, school, and academic fields are experimenting with new teaching methods to facilitate the reconciliation of study and sport. The actions implemented regard projects with high-level student-athletes attending Italian secondary schools (D.M. 279 of 2018) and universities (ASAG-Unicatt, 2017; Sánchez Pato, Isidori, Calderón, Brunton, 2017; Lupo et al. 2015; Guidotti, Cortis, Capranica, 2015; Migliorati, Maulini, Isidori, 2018a).

It would be desirable for the football community to be ready to rethink its regulations in light of the provisions of the Guidelines by EC, 2012, by developing specific interventions to promote the dual career of footballers and providing monitoring actions for lifelong learning of football players.

In parallel with the educational and training agencies, the sports clubs should also work to promote the general preparation of the athlete and implement dual career programs in collaboration with the school, the university, and the labor market. They should start a new reorganization of the timescales, spaces, and human resources to be committed to their implementation.

In conclusion, this study proposes a methodological hypothesis aimed at supporting the football players in their learning and education experiences by stressing the role of the team manager as the promoter, within his own club, of dual-career interventions, being they responsible for the educational growth of young players and their future both as athletes and persons. The team manager has to ensure that the club is not for young people a “factory of illusions” but an educational space in which to develop all their potential harmoniously. This is the determining element for the construction of a full and satisfying life for the athletes.

The proposed hypothesis is part of the educational policies of the European Union, and it aims to implement what the Guidelines on the dual career of athletes continuously wishes (EC, 2012), namely the promotion of actions aimed at the exchange and dissemination of good practices.

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