

# Exclusion and abandonment in a children's and youth football league in Argentina

## *Exclusión y abandono en una liga de fútbol infantil y juvenil de Argentina*

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Children's and youth football is a cultural and social phenomenon of huge importance in Argentina. **Aim:** This work aims at accounting for fundamental aspects of the organizational structure of children's and youth football in the league of Mar del Plata, one of the most important cities in the country. **Methods:** The analysis of basic quantitative data enables us to account for the fundamental aspects of the organizational structure of children's and youth football in the league of Mar del Plata. This elementary quantitative analysis is combined with an interpretation of reports based both on a discursive and an ethnographic analysis. **Results & discussion:** There is a severe process of exclusion and abandonment in the Mar del Plata football league (MFL). Not only it is the case that the number of female players is extremely low compared to the number of male players, but it is also the case that more than a thousand male players are abandoned year after year by the MFL. The complex process of abandonment and exclusion is also strongly connected with a series of diverse phenomena, like sexism, the absence of people with disabilities, the imitation of professional football practices, and the use of labels and stereotypes. **Conclusions:** Since it systematically promotes exclusion and abandonment, the MFL cannot fulfill an educational or inclusive function, and cannot even help to form high-level professional players. In its current state, the organizational structure of the MFL should apply some radical but plausible transformations.

**Keywords:** Football; Children; Adolescents; Women; Education; Organization.

**Tip:** Original - **Section:** Sports science

Author's number for correspondence: 1- Sent: /04/2022; Accepted: /05/2022

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### Resumen

**Introducción:** El fútbol infantil y juvenil es un fenómeno cultural y social de gran importancia en Argentina. **Objetivo:** Este trabajo tiene como objetivo dar cuenta de aspectos fundamentales de la estructura organizativa del fútbol infantil y juvenil en la liga de Mar del Plata, una de las ciudades más importantes del país. **Métodos:** El análisis de datos cuantitativos básicos permite dar cuenta de los aspectos fundamentales de la estructura organizativa del fútbol infantil y juvenil en esta liga. Este análisis elemental de cuantitativo se combina con una interpretación de informes basada tanto en un análisis discursivo como etnográfico. **Resultados y discusión:** Existe un severo proceso de exclusión y abandono en la liga de fútbol de Mar del Plata (LMF). No sólo ocurre que el número de jugadoras mujeres es extremadamente bajo en comparación con el número de jugadores varones, sino que también ocurre que más de mil varones son abandonados año tras año por la LMF. El complejo proceso de abandono y exclusión también está fuertemente ligado a una serie de fenómenos diversos, como el sexismo, la ausencia de personas con discapacidad, la imitación de prácticas de fútbol profesional y el uso de etiquetas y estereotipos. **Conclusiones:** Dado que promueve sistemáticamente la exclusión y el abandono, el LMF no puede cumplir una función educativa o inclusiva, y ni siquiera puede ayudar a formar jugadores profesionales de alto nivel. En su estado actual, la estructura organizativa de la LMF debería implementar algunas transformaciones radicales pero plausibles.

**Palabras clave:** Fútbol; Niños; Adolescentes; Mujeres; Educación; Organización.



(P) *Exclusão e abandono em uma liga de futebol infantil e juvenil na Argentina*

## Resumo

**Introdução:** O futebol infantil e juvenil é um fenômeno cultural e social de grande importância na Argentina. **Objetivo:** Este trabalho visa dar conta dos aspectos fundamentais da estrutura organizacional do futebol infanto-juvenil da liga de Mar del Plata, uma das cidades mais importantes do país. **Métodos:** A análise de dados quantitativos básicos permite dar conta dos aspectos fundamentais da estrutura organizacional do futebol infanto-juvenil desta liga. Esta análise quantitativa elementar é combinada com uma interpretação de relatórios com base na análise discursiva e etnográfica. **Resultados e discussão:** Há um severo processo de exclusão e abandono no campeonato de futebol de Mar del Plata (LMF). Não só o número de jogadoras femininas é extremamente baixo em comparação com o número de jogadores masculinos, mas também acontece que mais de mil jogadores masculinos são abandonados ano após ano pela LMF. O complexo processo de abandono e exclusão também está fortemente ligado a uma série de fenômenos diversos, como o sexismo, a ausência de pessoas com deficiência, a imitação de práticas profissionais do futebol e o uso de rótulos e estereótipos. **Conclusões:** Por promover sistematicamente a exclusão e o abandono, o LMF não pode cumprir uma função educativa ou inclusiva e nem mesmo pode ajudar na formação de jogadores profissionais de alto nível. Em seu estado atual, a estrutura organizacional do MFL deve aplicar algumas transformações radicais, mas plausíveis.

**Palavras-chave:** Futebol; Crianças; Adolescentes; Mulheres; Educação; Organização.

## Reference:

Gil, J. M., & Gil, G. J. (2022). Exclusion and abandonment in a children's and youth football league in Argentina. *ESHPA - Education, Sport, Health and Physical Activity*, 6(2), 119-139. doi: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7278196>



## I. Introduction

Argentinean football is both a fascinating and a highly complex phenomenon. At least since the decade of 1990, it has been the subject of varied systematic and productive studies. Just to mention some representative examples, there have been anthropological explanations about the origins of violence (Archetti, 1992; Gil 2007), accounts of the connection between “masculinity” and football (Archetti, 1994; 1997), and even studies about the roots of national identity and cultural practices (Archetti, 1995; Duke and Crolley, 2001; Gil, 2002). There are also comprehensive historical research works which deeply analyze some of these themes (Gil, 2005; Frydenberg, 2011, Frydenberg et al., 2013).

Within this context, the organizational structure of professional Argentinean football has been severely criticized because it manifestly favors the few richest clubs in the capital of the nation and excludes the vast majority of the rest of the country (Gil and Gil, 2008).

Recently, a group of engineers developed an analysis of the organizational structure of youth football in Argentina (Durán et al., 2019). On the basis of such analysis and of mathematical models, some solutions for organizational problems are provided. However, such strictly technical solutions satisfy the requirements of professional structures and do not deal with education or health issues.

In fact, youth and children’s football in Argentina has not yet caught the attention of scholars or educators. On the other hand, some relevant and promising research about children’s and youth football has been carried out in Uruguay (Díaz Mouriño, 2017) and Chile (Lobo Ramírez, 2020).

The cases corresponding to the projects of Uruguay and Chile are strongly related to the research developed here, because they explicitly assume that youth football should not be a mere factory of professional players aiming at satisfying the demands of the market and the media. In this sense, this article aims essentially at accounting for the organizational structure of the Mar del Plata children’s and youth football league, a remarkably important activity in Argentina. It will be shown that there are serious problems of attrition and exclusion which affect a large number of adolescents and that demand solutions.

Mar del Plata is a city on the coast of the South Atlantic Ocean. It is the largest city in the Province of Buenos Aires (excluding the satellite urban centers around Buenos Aires City, the capital of the country). Its name in Spanish means “sea of the Plate Region”. It is also one of the most important fishing ports in



South America and the biggest seaside beach resort of Argentina. With a population of almost 700.000, it is the sixth largest city in that country.

It hosted the 1995 Pan American Games, the most massive sporting event ever held in Argentina. Many athletes of the highest international level emerged from there, for example (and just mention a few representative cases) the tennis player Guillermo Vilas, the cyclist Juan Curutchet (winner of a gold medal in Beijing 2008, at age 43), the skater Nora Vega (several times world champion), the boxer Ubaldo Sacco (world champion in welterweight category).

The Mar del Plata football league (MFL) gathers 27 clubs from the city itself and 5 clubs from other towns in the surrounding area: Batán, Chapadmalal, Otamendi, Miramar and Balcarce. In the children's and youth football league, there are between 20 and 40 boys in every one of the 12 categories. The biggest clubs are the ones with the largest number of players and they usually also count with one reserve or "pre-league" team.

Week after week, several thousand children and adolescents engage in organized football activities with a relatively high level of physical and competitive demand. It should be also mentioned here that many high-level professional players have emerged from the lower divisions of the children's and youth Mar del Plata football league. Again, just to give a few representative examples, in mid-2021 there are three of the 25 players of the Argentinean national football team that emerged from such lower divisions: Emiliano Martínez (goalkeeper), Lucas Martínez Quarta (defender), and Emiliano Buendía (midfielder). It is also worth emphasizing that they have become professional players without having gone through the first division of the Mar del Plata league, which is essentially amateur.

### ***1.1.Aims***

This work aims at accounting for fundamental aspects of the organizational structure of children's and youth football in the league of Mar del Plata, one of the most important cities in the country. Such account will enable us not only to show a conflictive process of exclusion and abandonment, but also to begin to suggest some plausible solutions.



## II. Methods

Since it combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, this research can be considered as an instance of the “mixed methods” (Brannen, 2005; Kelle, 2006; Lund, 2011; Slevitch, 2011). The radical opposition between quantitative and qualitative methods is divisive and, hence, counterproductive for the advance of social sciences (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). In addition, such mixed methods represent a rapidly developing field of social science methodology (Blaikie, 2003). They not only serve for the mutual validation of data and findings, but also for more coherent and complete accounts.

The mixed method that has been adopted here helps to serve theoretical, methodological and practical purposes. It is not a mere tool kit or a technical replicable device, but an approach that enables researchers to analyze and to interpret relevant data (Brannen, 2005). Such combination of qualitative and quantitative methods has been proved to be very efficient in order to account for the complex and strong relationships between sports and education, for example in cases dealing with stereotypes and prejudices that constraint sport practices (Skelton, 2000; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010; Kollmayer et al., 2016; Martínez-Andrés et al. 2017; Mayeza, 2017).

Day after day, in the Mar del Plata football league (MFL), training sessions or regular matches mobilize not only thousands of children and adolescents, but also hundreds of managers, coaches, referees, parents, and relatives. In this research, basic quantitative data provide relevant information about the functioning and the structure of children’s and youth football in Mar del Plata. On the other hand, it is also necessary to consider qualitative data because children’s and youth football ends up being a decisive aspect for the education (although informal) of the children and adolescents involved.

Football practice allows children and teenagers to form their personality and to make friends, but it also imposes an often fierce competition. From a very young age, players in the MFL compete in tournaments whose information is treated in a manner analogous to that of professional tournaments. In effect, the information about games that have been played, won or lost, or about goal differences and scorers, puts pressure on clubs, coaches, players and even families. There are also several Internet pages, social profiles, TV shows, which are dedicated to broadcasting these tournaments in the same terms that the mainstream media broadcast professional football.

In summary, football practice allows children and adolescents to establish relationships, to learn about sports and about life, to have fun and to compete. However, this practice also adopts the forms of



professional competition, putting pressure even on very young children. All these processes are not only complexly interrelated, but they can also conflict. Consequently, it is necessary to count with a mixed method able to consider both quantitative and qualitative variables.

Concretely, the analysis of elementary quantitative data is combined with qualitative methods of informal interviews that enabled us to identify assumptions and beliefs of the participants. Their reports are “fundamental data” (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Praetorius & Duncan, 1986) because they make manifest “people’s assumptions” (Hatch et al., 1999; Morrow, 2001; Groleau et al., 2006).

### III. Results

Thanks to the reports of coaches and managers collected for this research, it is possible to conclude that the MFL involves more than 9,000 children and adolescents. Players are divided into 12 categories according to the age of the players. Children of 11 and 12, and teenagers (literally, from 13 to 19) play on the field of eleven players. For their part, children from 7 to 10 years old play on smaller pitches specially prepared for nine players, whereas children under 6 participate in indoors tournaments. Table 1 gives a detailed account of such information.

Table 1: Number of players according to different ages and categories in the children’s and youth football league of Mar del Plata (MFL)

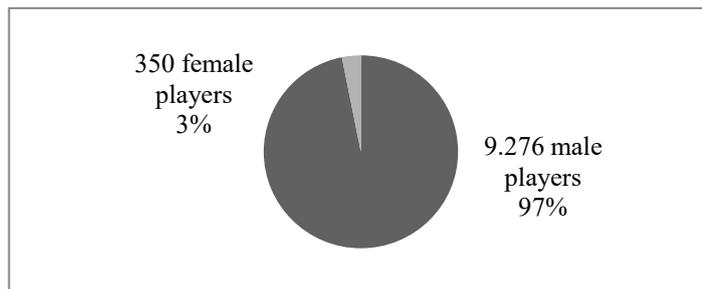
Category	Age [year of birth]	Male players	Female players	Pitch
Fifth/Under-19	18 [2002, 2001]	576	200	Even-player pitch, the same as the first division
Seventh/Under-17	16-17 [2004-2003]	640	0	
Eighth/Under-15	15 [2005]	775	0	
Ninth/Under-14	14 [2006]	775	0	
Tenth/Under-13	13 [2007]	775	0	
Under-12	12 [2008]	775	150	
Under-11	11[2009]	785	0	Nine-player pitch
Under-10	10[2010]	785	0	
Under-9	9[2011]	790	0	
Under-8	8 [2012]	790	0	
Under-7	7 [2013]	860	0	
Under-6	6 [2014]	950	0	Indoors

Total	9.276	350
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These basic quantitative data help us to begin to show that children's and youth football constitutes a social and cultural phenomenon of great importance. If we take into account that approximately three adults (coaches, managers, parents, family members, referees) are mobilized for each child or adolescent, it is possible to estimate that there are around 40,000 people mobilizing on weekdays (for training sessions) or on weekends (for formal matches). It should be noted that this significant number represents about 5% of the total population of Mar del Plata.

An elementary fact that jumps out is the huge disproportion that exists between male and female players, who, as shown in Figure 1, represent only 3% percent of the total players in the children's and youth league of Mar del Plata. In fact, organized women's tournaments are very recent and they are played only in the categories whose coaches have managed to gather enough players.

Figure 1: Number of male and female players in Mar del Plata Football League (MFL)



It is also remarkable the decrease of male players in the oldest group, namely between the ages of 16 and 19. Table 2 accounts for such dramatic decline.

Table 2. Distribution and proportions of the 9,276 players according to age groups in MFL.

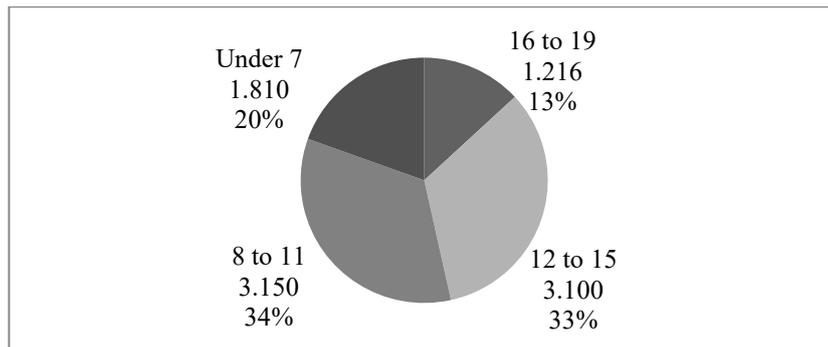
Category	Number of male players	%
16 to 19	1,216	13
12 to 15	3,100	33
8 to 11	3,150	34
4 to 7	1,810	20
Total	9,276	100

The age groupings in Table 2 are not arbitrary. Firstly, such groups recognize four different proportional sub-sets with relatively few members as extremes. Such extremes are the group of boys of 19 years old,



and the group of boys of 4 years old. Four-year old children are too young, and consequently, very few. The 19-year-olds are also very few, because in Under-19 category no more than 3 players of that age can be included in a single team. Secondly, this form of grouping allows us to begin to notice the process of exclusion and abandonment suffered by many adolescents who want to play football. The information in Table 2 is also shown in Figure 2, which depicts a visual representation of such relevant data.

Figure 2: Distribution and proportions of the 9,276 players according to age groups in MFL.



It is evident that the reasons why adolescents abandon the practice of a sport are many and varied. Here we are concerned with the reasons why even those who would like to continue playing abandon football. In this sense, there are two phenomena that can be mentioned as main causes for the dramatic decrease in players in the 16 to 19 years old group. The first cause is that, unlike the younger boys' categories, there are no preparatory matches, which are known as "pre-league matches". Such preparatory matches are often played on Saturdays, whereas league main matches are played regularly on Sundays. "Pre-league" matches group players from two subsequent categories, and constitute an excellent opportunity to include the players that have not been selected for the first team, i.e. for the league matches themselves.

The second cause is that (also unlike the younger boys' categories) the categories Under-19 and Under-17 bring together boys who were born in two different years, as can be observed in Table 1. As an obvious consequence, the places available to play are drastically and abruptly reduced.

In the interviews carried out for this research, some coaches, managers or journalists have suggested that the high demands of professional football are the cause of this process of exclusion. However, this hypothesis is disconfirmed by evidence because the first division of the Mar del Plata football league (MFL) is completely amateur. In fact, the few players emerging there that become professionals usually do not get to play in the local amateur first division. For example, and as said before, this is the case of the



three members of the Argentinean national team that were mentioned in the last paragraph of the introduction (Martínez, Martínez Quarta, Buendía).

During the field work, numerous and varied testimonies were collected. The five following examples may be representative because they help us to begin to understand some of the causes of attrition and exclusion in the Mar del Plata football league.

1. “For six years I was the coach of the club’ seventh division (Under-17). I loved the job and a couple of times we were champions. But I ended up quitting the job because I couldn’t bear to provide the list of the boys who were kicked out, even though they wanted to keep on playing! Several times I proposed to organize an intermediate division so that the boys who were not selected did not feel thrown like stray dogs, but they never paid attention to me”. Manuel, ex-coach, 37 years old.
2. “I used to play well. At least that’s what they said. When I was 17, I got to first division, and a new coach who had brought his own players never took me into account. He didn’t say anything to me, but he didn’t even allow me to play a complete period in the practices. He kicked me out without saying anything, I stopped going to the training sessions and I started spending too much time on the streets. My grandmother told me that I was in bad company. And now I am here. Sometimes I feel that my life would have been different if they had allowed me to continue playing football”. Erik, ex-player, 25 years old, imprisoned in the Batán penitentiary, convicted of armed robbery.
3. “My son had played for that club since he was 5 years old. From 5 years old! And when he was 16 years old, when he had all the illusion, some guy came and said: ‘you are free, if you want, you can go to play somewhere else’. It was very painful not only for him but for the whole family. He and his father cried for a month straight. I remember that I went to speak with the coordinator of children’s and youth football and he told me that even paying the fee, my son was not going to be allowed to go to the training sessions. When I remember that episode, I get angry again”. Marina, mother of a former player, 41 years old.
4. “The day the coach told me that he was not going to consider me to be part of the team was one of the saddest of my life because I simply stopped playing football. I was 15 years old”. Alberto, 32 years old.



5. “It is not that I left football. Football left me”. Yamil, teenager still waiting to be a football player, 15 years old.

Here we are in front of a very serious problem: Many boys are abandoned by the Mar del Plata football league. First of all, such abandonment blocks the completion of training processes of many boys who perhaps could be in a position to continue progressing and even becoming professionals.

But there is something much worse. Although the huge majority of the boys who abandon football will most likely not become professionals, they are being excluded from the systematic and formative practice of sport at an age when they are still developing their interpersonal relationships and their physical education.

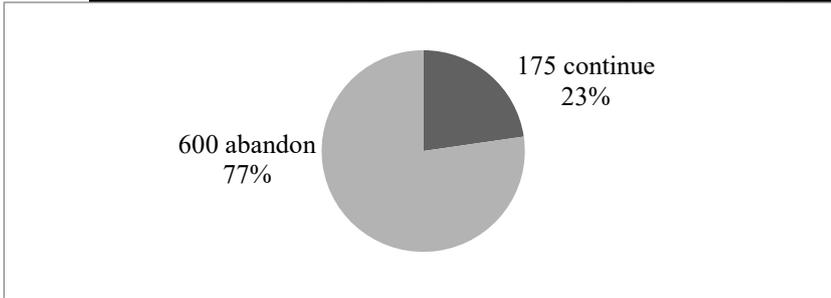
Paradoxically, journalists, club managers, politicians, and businessmen explicitly adhere to the theory according to which football clubs are institutions that fulfill a “social function”. The requirement of a social function for football clubs in Argentina is absolutely legitimate, among other things because they are free non-profit associations. They do not have an owner or investors, but are managed by their members. In fact, the topic of “social function” is updated in every context and every unexpected situation, particularly in critical moments when football clubs claim for financial aid in order to maintain their most basic operations, such as gas, water and electricity bills, both in their headquarters and in their sports fields.

However, and in spite of the proclaimed social function, the process of attrition and exclusion is devastating in the Mar del Plata football league. A slightly more detailed analysis of the elemental quantitative data will allow us to understand its magnitude.

To begin with, only a few of the 775 players in the Under-15 category will be accepted into the Under-17 category. The estimate of coaches and managers is that in most clubs only between 5 and 6 players are finally selected, because, as has been said, the number of places has been drastically reduced.

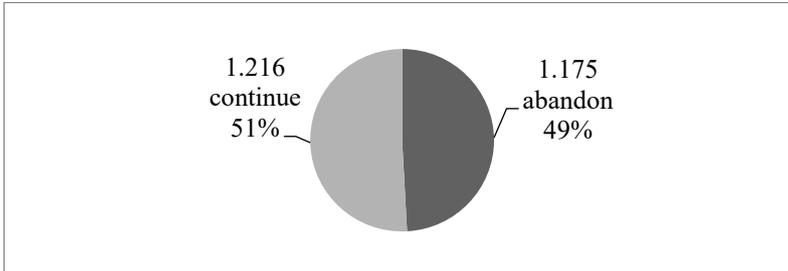
All this means that just 175 sixteen-year-old players out of a total of 775 (only 23%) will continue to play, whereas 600 (77%) will be excluded. Figure 3 represents the number of players who have to abandon football at the age of sixteen.

Figure 3: Number of players abandoned at 16 in MFL



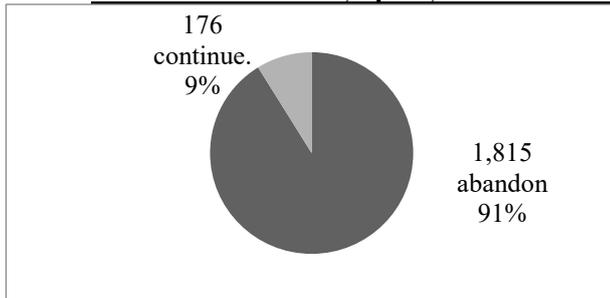
This process of attrition and exclusion does not stop here. Something similar will take place in the case of the players belonging to the Under-19 category. Again, only between 5 and 6 players will be able to access the following level, which is the local first division. This fact implies that, of the 576 players in the Under-19 category, 400 will have to leave football, that is, 70% of them. We must consider also that in the intermediate category (Under-17) there are about 175 players who have been displaced and consequently excluded (see Figure 3). The result is that, *every year*, the Mar del Plata youth and children's football league excludes about 1,175 adolescents whose ages are between 16 and 19 years old. Figure 4 represents the whole number of players who have to abandon football between 16 and 19 in a single year.

Figure 4: Number of players abandoned between 16 and 19 in a single year in MFL



The process of attrition and exclusion is somewhat attenuated in Figure 4 due to the relative stability of the Under-17 intermediate category. The global impact of such processes is shown in Figure 5, which represents the probability that a 15-year-old teenager will continue playing football at 19 in the MFL. Table 1 has shown that, year after year, the Mar del Plata football league counts with about 775 Under-15 players, 640 Under-17 players, and 576 Under-19 players. Since the average number of players who are finally selected for the following level is 5.5, and considering that there are 32 clubs, there are only about 176 teenagers of the whole group who will get to play some day in the amateur first division of the MFL. As shown in Figure 5, there are other 1,815 boys (91%) who will be excluded along the way.

Figure 5: Probability that a teenager of 15 years old will continue playing football at 19 in MFL

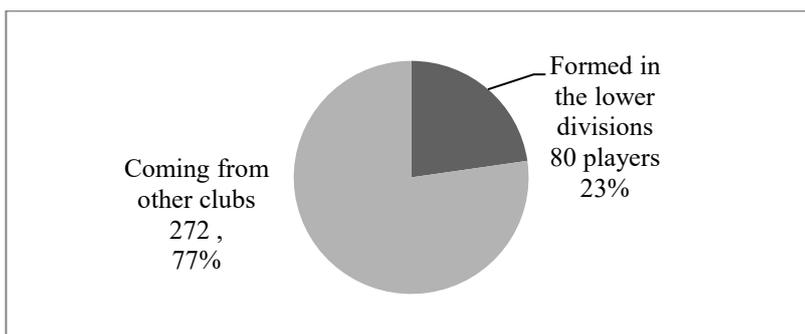


There is another relevant issue. It has been said that the average number of players who are selected from one category to another at 16 and at 19 years old is 5.5. However, this fact does not imply that it is a constant average for all the clubs in the league. Often, players from top-performing teams that find no place in their club move to another and displace players from that destination club.

It also happens that, although the MFL is amateur, there is a circulation of coaches and players which is quite similar to that of professional football. In this way, the first division coaches usually change from one year to the following. Such circulation blocks or interrupts the possibility of coordinating and integrating the first division with the lower ones and thus organizing a serious and continuous project.

Figure 6 shows how, in spite of the amateur status of the Mar del Plata football league, the first division players who represent the club in whose lower divisions they were formed are relatively a few.

Figure 6: Number of titular players of the first division formed in the lower divisions of the club they represent in MFL



It must be recognized that there is a great dispersion here, because there are teams that have a great majority of players from their inferiors, whereas other teams do not include any player formed in the club. But it is the case that less than a quarter of the first division players in the Mar del Plata football league represent the club in which they learned to play.



Not only basic quantitative data have been considered, but also numerous, largely informal interviews with representative actors have been conducted. During such interviews, coaches, managers, parents, relatives, players, former players, physical trainers, and even talent scouts have made manifest their concepts and perceptions about children's and youth football in Mar del Plata.

One of the most striking and also relevant aspects of such interviews is that many informants' judgments are "in tension" with each other. Indeed, in some passage of the interview, an informant points out that football for children or adolescents essentially fulfills an educational or formative function, and rescues values such as fun or friendship. However, in another passage that same informant says that the function of child and youth football is the most demanding competition possible or obtaining a profit, and exalts values such as tough competition and economic gain.

Sentences (1) and (2) account for the conceptual tension that is revealed in their judgments.

- (1) Children's and youth football is an educational and formative process aiming at promoting fun and friendship.
- (2) Children's and youth football is a money-oriented tough competition.

There is indeed a tension between general valuations (1) and (2), because it is in fact extremely difficult (although not impossible) to find a harmonic balance between education, friendship and fun, on the one hand, and tough competition and material gain, on the other. Here, it is the case that many informants made manifest certain judgments "in tension" about children's and youth football.

Table 3 reproduces a series of seven pairs of examples of such judgments "in tension". The first column refers to informants, whose age and function are made explicit. Names are fictitious and only reveal gender. The second column reproduces the utterances that make judgments within the general conception expressed by (1), "football as education, friendship and fun". Finally, the third column reproduces utterances that make judgments that are framed in the general conception of (2), "football as hard-competition and/or economic gain".

Table 3: Seven pairs of incompatible judgments about children's and youth football made manifest by seven different informants

**Gil, J.M. & Gil, G.J. (2022).** Exclusion and abandonment in a children's and youth football league in Argentina. *ESHPA - Education, Sport, Health and Physical Activity*. 6(2): 119-139. doi: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7278196>  
**ESHPA - Education, Sport, Health and Physical Activity - ISSN: 2603-6789**



	Prevailing concepts in the judgments “in tension”	
	Education, friendship, fun	Education, friendship, fun
Carlos [68], club manager	Football clubs play an essential social role.	Only the best can play soccer.
Javier [27], ex-player	Football made me feel like I was really good at something	Because of soccer, I didn't study and I didn't learn anything else
Toto [10], player	I love to play with my teammates, they are my friends	I'd love to move to a bigger club for player reps to see me.
Manuel [53], coach	Football is fun	Soccer is business
Ricardo [36], player's father	The most beautiful thing in football is friendship	Soccer is competition, against your rivals and against your teammates.
Vicente [79], league manager	Football clubs deserve all the help and support that the state can give them because they help poor kids.	In short, soccer clubs seek to develop good players in order to make a transfer and earn money.
Walter [36], physical trainer	You have to educate boys to be good people.	You need to train them hard because the club needs to win, that's all

Far from being a rarity that must be found with dedication and ingenuity, judgments “in tension” such as those in Table 3 are frequent. Indeed, the recurrent manifestation of such tensions enables us to suggest that actors recognize that they are involved in a complex, difficult, and often contradictory social context. After all, information from the context of the culture is represented in both the cognitive and the linguistic systems of a person who lives in that culture (Lamb, 2016).

#### IV. Discussion

The practice of football within the context of the Mar del Plata football league does not seem to constitute a means for the inclusion and improvement of the quality of life. On the contrary, the analysis of the results allows us to suggest the following critical remarks.

- i. **Abandonment and exclusion.** It has already been stated that many children and adolescents abandon organized football against their personal wishes. In this regard, one of the many players in the MFL who did not continue playing football, Yamil, once said the following:

Like this young player, many children and adolescents end up leaving football practice although they would like to continue playing. The research carried out here is based on basic but solid quantitative data. The analysis of such data enables us to understand that we are in front of a process of exclusion and abandonment.

- ii. **Sexism.** The participation of women in the Mar del Plata football league is basically peripheral, and it is certainly inexistent in most of the clubs. Although a formal women's tournament was organized in 2019, the participation of female players is very low compared to that of male players. In addition, there are still sexist prejudices circulating, according to which football is conceived as the incarnation of supposed virtues of masculinity. The research carried out here opens the way to begin to study the factors that affect the expectations of women who play football and the prejudices of which they are victims.
- iii. **Absence of people with disabilities.** There is no participation of people with mental or physical disabilities in the Mar del Plata football league. As striking as the absence of people with disabilities is the absence of projects or claims aiming at publicly exposing that such unacceptable absence. In other words, the simple possibility of including this group of relegated people is not even contemplated. This research could also serve to draw attention to the need for an inclusion project for people with disabilities in children's and youth football.
- iv. **Dubious imitation of professional football.** Both in the Mar del Plata first division, which is completely amateur, and also in children's and youth football, assumptions which are typical of high professional competition are handled. Indeed, the children's and youth tournaments of the MFL reproduce rituals and practices of professional football. Thus, from the age of six or seven, children play on pitches that must have perimeter fencing and mandatory police custody. The adults who accompany the minors pay tickets, and the referees receive regular pay. There are also leaderboards, official champions, and even broadcasts of the matches on radio, TV and social networks. Within this context, most managers, coaches and even family members consider it desirable that children and adolescents change from one club to another in order to seek greater popularity, better competitiveness or more opportunities for a supposed future projection. This dubious imitation of professional football affects seriously children and adolescents because it



undermines the sense of belonging, their identity, and their education opportunities. As we will see, it also undermines the values of “bodily democracy” (Eichberg, 2004, 2008, 2010), which establish that persons must be free to decide on their own movements and to interact with others.

- v. **Damage of bodily democracy.** The full exercise of bodily democracy does not end with the necessary proclamation of rights, because it also implies the effective inclusion of vulnerable actors. The exercise of bodily democracy involves freedom of decision about one’s own body and the possibility of interacting with the bodies of the others. The systematic exclusion suffered by children and adolescents in the Mar del Plata football league violates fundamental rights, entails abrupt interruptions of sports itineraries, and causes dissolution or conflict. Within the framework of a genuine bodily democracy, football should generate enduringly pleasant emotions, create powerful senses of belonging, and promote solidarity.
  
- vi. **Labels and stereotypes.** Labels and stereotypes are very commonly used in the practice of children’s and youth football in the Mar del Plata league. Such labels and stereotypes harm both the performance of the players and the evaluations of such performance. One of the most common stereotypes is the “childhood determinism hypothesis”, which states the belief that football essential abilities and the potential of a certain player are defined in childhood, unfailingly before adolescence. For example, Roberto, a well-known 62-year-old talent scout, points out the following: “You already know if a boy will be professional player when he is 12 years old. If he didn’t excel at 15, it will be impossible for him to be a professional football player”. Such a level of stigmatization not only restraints performances and expectations, but also nullifies the possibility that some players complete their physical education and sports development during their youth. If the “childhood determinism hypothesis” were true, Michael Jordan would have quit basketball because he was not included in his high school’s first team when he was only 15 years old. In addition, such hypothesis is incompatible with the existence of late starters. For example, the absolute World Cup scorer Miroslav Klose worked as a carpenter until he was 21, when he debuted as a professional player. Although late debuts are not the norm, they are not an absolute rarity either, and thus they are simple facts that refute the childhood determinism hypothesis and the labels and stereotypes it presupposes.
  
- vii. **Different causes of attrition.** Of course, attrition in youth sports is common, and it is possible that some teenagers move onto another sport or activity, that they put time into work or school as they



realize their economic future in football is very limited, or that they simply get tired of the highly competitive demands and no longer enjoy them. However, both quantitative and qualitative data show that the very structure of the Mar del Plata football league promotes attrition. In basic quantitative terms, it is observed that the number of players remains stable until the age of 16. However, at that age, the number of players decreases dramatically because many fewer places are offered by the clubs of the league. Thus, adolescent football players face a hard process of attrition and exclusion that will be accentuated in subsequent years. In qualitative terms, the often strongly emotional testimonies of the participants show that there are many adolescents who were forced to stop playing although they would have loved to continue playing. The football league is, then, the causal agent of abandonment and exclusion, whereas adolescents who stop playing football are the participants affected by this complex and sad process of exclusion. In summary, thousands of teenagers abandon football precisely because this children and youth's football league excludes and abandons them.

- viii. **Silencing of the claims of the participants involved.** Abandonment and exclusion are certainly paradoxical because according to their statutes and informal proclamations, Argentinean clubs are free associations of the people and they should fulfill, among others, the role of social inclusion. The individuals most affected by this exclusion process are vulnerable children and adolescents, women, and people with disabilities. In this sense, thanks to various state programs (at all levels of implementation) and even transnational programs, the possibility for sport to be a true instance of social inclusion has been widely explored (Besnier et al., 2017). Because of its character as the “most popular sport on the planet”, and because of the immense resources it generates (or because of the resources it appropriates), any progressive social transformation of football practices would benefit a very large group of the population.

## V. Conclusions

1. The structure and functioning of children's and youth football in the Mar del Plata league systematically promotes attrition and exclusion.
2. In its current state, such structure cannot fulfill an educational or inclusive function.

3. In its current state, such structure cannot help to train high-level professional players. In fact, the first division of the MFL is amateur.
4. Good developments in sports education and the sporadic emergence of professional players are consequence of the particular efforts of clubs, managers or coaches, and take place independently of the organizational structure.
5. It is shown in Table 4 that the Mar del Plata football league structure should incorporate at least two new categories, which appear on a gray background: Reservation and Under-20. This organizational change would serve fundamentally not only to avoid exclusion and abandonment, but also to favor the educational development of the players, and even the emergence of high-level players in late adolescence. In fact, the second column represents the youth football structure of the Argentinean Football Association, which is strongly oriented towards the training of professional players, and includes such equivalent categories.

Table 4. Current structure of the Mar del Plata football league (MFL), compared both to the structure of professional football in Argentina and with a desirable suggested structure.

Age of players	Argentinean Football Association (AFA)	Current organization of MFL	Suggested organization of MFL
No limit	First Division	First Division	First Division
No limit	Reservation	<i>Nothing</i>	<b>3° Reservation</b>
20 [2000]	Under-20	<i>Nothing</i>	<b>4° Fourth/Under-20</b>
19 [2001]		5° Fifth/Under-18	
18 [2002]	Under -18	(Only 3 under-19 players allowed)	5° Fifth/Under-18
17 [2003]	Under -17	7° Seventh/Under-17	7° Seventh/Under-16
16 [2004]	Under -16		
15 [2005]	Under -15	8° Eight/Under-15	8° Eight/Under-15
14 [2006]	Under -14	9° Ninth/Under-14	9° Ninth/Under-14

6. The full inclusion of women is required.
7. The inclusion of people with disabilities is required.



8. It is necessary to develop an integral plan for the use of the spaces that could be dedicated to the practice of sports. For example spaces in parks, vacant lots, little-used sports complexes, beaches, etc.
  
9. It is also necessary to develop an integral plan for the action of human resources who could implement all these changes. For example, municipal officials who could reconvert their functions.
  
10. Finally, it is necessary to include children's and youth football of the Mar del Plata league within a public health and education policy. Thus, football could not only promote the adoption of healthy lifestyles, but also the autonomy and freedom of the individual within the framework of dense networks of sociability. Freedom of movement and freedom to interact with others are two constitutive factors of democratic life. In this way, self-determination about one's own body and interaction with the bodies of others will define the concrete exercise of bodily democracy.

## **VI. Acknowledgements**

This research is part of the interdisciplinary project "Bodily democracy. Football as a means for the inclusion and improvement of the quality of life of vulnerable children and adolescents, women, and people with disabilities in the Southeast of the Province of Buenos Aires", subsidized by the National University of Mar del Plata (Code RR3502/2020).

## **VII. Conflicts of interest**

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

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