



# Football for life

## WHITE PAPER

This paper outlines the connections between three problems which are deeply interlinked, growing in influence, and shaping many aspects of social and cultural life, including football:

- The overly-competitive and anxiety evoking cultures of modern work & educational settings – shaping football club structures and traditional coaching practice
- Social and environmental challenges – from structural racism to climate change football is part of these challenges and may offer solutions
- Deteriorating mental health is on the rise among football players and in wider society – something that has become particularly serious in youth football.

The paper argues that these problems are each made worse by the commodification of young football players within an overly competitive and individualistic football culture. It points to opportunities to change club structures and coaching practice, highlighting these as important steps in changing wider football culture, and it argues that changing football culture would, in turn, create widespread social benefits.

The paper culminates in an invitation for you to help us develop this conversation.

### **Three interlinked problems**

Football can play a significant role overcoming the three problems listed above because football makes a profoundly important contribution to shaping cultural values.

Cultural values predict levels of public concern about social and environmental injustice. Cultures which foreground values of financial success, public image and

social status show lower levels of public support for action on social and environmental challenges. For example, countries in which these values are prioritised are found to have higher *per capita* ecological footprints.

Cultural values are important factors in determining mental health. People who attach greater importance to financial success, public image and social status report lower wellbeing. This is true at a populational level, but it is also seen among football players. At all levels, sport has become increasingly entangled with the agendas of media industries, advertising agencies, and multinational corporations, exposing young athletes to intense forms of individual competition and commodification.

The impacts of this culture are particularly conspicuous in the mental health of footballers who are released from their clubs. As prospects of pursuing financial success, public image and social status recede, these players risk being plunged into a mental health crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Football clubs frequently exert huge cultural influence. They also frequently foreground values of financial success, public image and social status in their interactions with others – whether players, fans or the wider community. These values are displayed in many aspects of a club’s activities, but at the heart of this culture lies the club’s approach to promoting psychological wellbeing and developing the athletic skills of its players.

Training culture is a litmus test for a club’s commitment to foregrounding care for its players, staff, and the wider community in which it is embedded. But training culture is also of critical importance in setting the ethos of the club, the values that it reflects through its other activities, and the contribution that it makes to shaping wider culture.

## **The cultural impact of football**

Football, played in two hundred countries, has huge cultural influence. Football culture is a product of dominant cultural values. But football also contributes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: <https://www.itv.com/news/2021-02-04/exclusive-disturbing-findings-of-itv-news-survey-of-released-young-footballers>

importantly to shaping these values – foregrounding and celebrating some, while diminishing the importance of others.

Unfortunately, research shows that today football clubs disproportionately engage values associated with interpersonal competition, wealth and status, relative to the importance that is accorded these values in society at large.<sup>2</sup>

Prominent footballers' income and lifestyles are an issue of intense public fascination, fuelled by mainstream media stories that engage and strengthen values of financial success, public image and social status. This scrutiny has intensified under COVID-19, and areas of disagreement have become apparent.

In the UK, for example, disputes have arisen about clubs furloughing non-playing staff (at public expense) while retaining players on full pay (arguing that tax receipts mean that high salaries are in the public interest). This debate has led supporters' clubs to ask how the values of a club are being upheld, particularly at a time when many people are facing financial hardship.<sup>3</sup> Responses from club executives have varied, with some defending this policy while others have accepted very significant cuts to their own salaries.<sup>4</sup>

More recently still, plans for a European Super League raised searching questions about the trajectory upon which football finds itself: clubs seem ever more dislocated from the communities in which they were once embedded, and increasingly serve the financial interests of a global elite.

These debates matter: such is the cultural importance of football that they likely prefigure and rehearse our collective responses to analogous issues when these arise in other areas of public debate.

The social responsibility of football begins, but does not end, with clubs addressing problems of institutional racism or reducing their carbon footprint. Social responsibility is also to be pursued through close reflection on the cultural values

---

<sup>2</sup> Vaughan, J. (2020). [Creativity in football: Conceptual frameworks and cultural case studies to inform coaching praxis](#) [The University of Queensland].

<sup>3</sup> [Liverpool challenged by Spirit of Shankly fan group over staff furlough](#)

<sup>4</sup> [West Brom chief executive takes 100% salary cut for entire UK coronavirus lockdown](#)

that a club foregrounds and normalises in all its interactions and communications with the wider community.

## **Skill development**

Football embodies aspects of the wider national culture in which it is embedded. The skill development of footballers is influenced by social, cultural and historic aspects of life.<sup>2</sup> Think of the deceptive dribbling skills of renowned Brazilian football players – with “the way they play” embodying celebrated aspects of Brazil’s cultural identity; resonating with the cultural significance of samba, capoeira and malandragem (a deceptive street smart), collectively characterised as playing with ‘ginga’.<sup>5</sup>

Embedded in a particular culture, context or situation, a player’s intentions may vary between “showing off, orchestrating the game, or competing against peers and teammates”<sup>6</sup>. These intentions mirror cultural impulses: respectively, the cultural celebration of competitive individualism; the rise of the [doctrine of meritocracy](#); and controlling parenting practices<sup>7</sup>. But, as well as mirroring these cultural influences, to the extent that the player’s intentions are apparent to others – even implicitly – they also serve to reinforce these influences in wider culture.

The values that players can express through his or her play are constrained by the social, cultural and historical character of the social institutions in which that player is embedded (for example a commodified football club or academy), but also in the wider social context (for example, a popular culture that celebrates competitive individualism)<sup>2</sup>.

The insight that footballing skills develop in communication with wider cultural influences has profound implications for coaching practice. It reminds coaches, clubs and governing bodies that training sessions are not blank slates devoid of social, historical or cultural influence. It leads to a recognition that the majority of football

---

<sup>5</sup> Rasmussen, L. J. T., Østergaard, L. D., & Glăveanu, V. P. (2017). [Creativity as a developmental resource in sport training activities](#). *Sport, Education and Society*, 3322, 1–16.

<sup>6</sup> Uehara, L., Button, C., Saunders, J., Araújo, D., Falcous, M., & Davids, K. (n.d.). Malandragem and Ginga: [Socio-Cultural Constraints on the Development of Expertise and Skills in Brazilian Football](#). *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching*.

<sup>7</sup> Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). [Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 145(4), 410–429.

training is too focused on decontextualised tactics and techniques, and too unresponsive to the wider context in which these skills are acquired and practiced. It also emphasises the need for coaching practice to become more responsive to the wider context in which football is played. For example, if coaches appreciate that an emphasis on individual competitiveness can crowd out opportunities for collaborative play, training sessions can be designed to counterbalance this cultural significance, shining a light on opportunities to collaborate in adaptable, potentially creative ways.

## **Stepping up**

Football could step up to meeting these interrelated challenges.

Appreciating that the skills football players develop embody cultural values, creates a renewed focus on the wider social context.

Shifting cultural values and social contexts away from an emphasis on commodification and individual competition would help to safeguard young and aspiring players from the mental health impacts of working within – or being dropped from – a club. It would represent a signal change in club culture, away from one that valorises individual success, towards one that foregrounds collaboration and community and broader social/environmental issues.

Finally, these cultural changes within a club – pioneered in changes in coaching practice but spilling over to other aspects of the club's interaction with its various stakeholders – would contribute to wider social changes. Rather than foreground values of competitive individualism, which are found to erode public support for action on social and environmental issues, these changes in club culture would help to foreground and strengthen cultural values of community, social justice, creativity and care.

## **An invitation**

We believe that football has a crucial, and hitherto largely unrecognised, role to play in strengthening public commitment to social and environmental justice. We believe

that this role is to be discovered in careful reflection on the values that a club models and promulgates in wider society, and we are convinced that working in awareness of this would also make for more effective coaching practice while helping to reduce the mental health risks imposed on players, aspiring players, and the wider community who are impacted by the culture of the clubs they support.

We will be hosting a conversation at **1100UTC** (1200 BST, 1300CET) on **Wednesday 9 June**, between people working in football who feel there is more that the sport can do to help the communities that support us at this time of social and environmental crisis. If you would like to join this conversation, please do get in touch.

### **For further information**

**James Vaughan**, Head of Football and Coaching Psychology, AIK Fotboll:  
**[james.vaughan@aikfotboll.se](mailto:james.vaughan@aikfotboll.se)**

**Tom Crompton**, Common Cause Foundation:  
**[tcrompton@commoncausefoundation.org](mailto:tcrompton@commoncausefoundation.org)**

### **About AIK and CCF**

#### ***AIK***

A top tier Swedish football club, AIK has the most widespread supporter base in Sweden and repeatedly attracts the highest attendances in Swedish football. In 2017 the Club adopted a “holistic ecological approach” to player development. This view of player development places the child’s wellbeing at its core and views human development as a continuous interaction with the surrounding environment at macro and micro levels. As such, a major focus of the club’s research and development department has been understanding the values that are amplified and dampened in and around the club. This is work that has been spearheaded by AIK’s R&D and values departments who have extensive experience of working with an understanding

of the social contexts and cultural values. AIK bring an extensive network of connections in the football sector. James Vaughan will on lead this project for AIK.

### ***Common Cause Foundation (CCF)***

CCF is the leading organisation creating momentum for systemic and durable environmental change by building on the psychology of shared cultural values. CCF works with organisations that have no formal environmental remit in order to strengthen social norms around the expression of self-transcendence values that energise sustained public commitment to ambitious environmental action. CCF was founded with a grant from WWF-UK in 2015 as a Company Limited by Guarantee with an asset lock.