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Operational Plan to penetrate the United State football market.
(Internationalization of "Escolinhas do Benfica" to the United States)

Tomas Bairro Bertrand - 53080

-Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Pedro Brinca

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Abstract

SL Benfica is expanding the Escolinhas de Benfica program to capitalize on the growing popularity of football in the United States. The integrated business plan, covering marketing, technology, and innovation, is set for deployment to enhance the club's global reach. This initiative aims to attract new fans, nurture young talent, and solidify SL Benfica's identity as a sports giant. Leveraging innovative technologies, the plan focuses on player development, increased fan engagement, and heightened brand visibility. The Escolinhas de Benfica program seeks not only to develop talent but also to make a lasting positive impact on communities. Through digital platforms, the goal is to create a seamless, immersive experience for supporters in the USA and globally. SL Benfica's strategic approach positions the club as a leader in football development and fan engagement in the United States, contributing significantly to its global expansion efforts.

Keywords: Internationalization, Market Entry, Globalization, Engagement, Expansion, Partnerships, Target Demographics, Competitive Intensity, Recognition

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Introduction

We as group through the ongoing of process of this field lab had an objective of supporting S. L. Benfica by contributing to a strategic plan on future expansions to North America. We worked with our partner carried out our investigation through analysis of previous literature, internal resources, and interviews with our partner. This undertaking aims to establish the foundation for a comprehensive strategic framework that will guide future decision-making and resource allocation. We examined how European football clubs' existing academies in North America operate and how they engage their players and fans. Additionally, we investigate a possible operational plan and the offered products as part of the football academy. Furthermore, we look at the growth of football in North America and for the number of students in a football school to grow the overall base of football playing people must increase. Regarding the promotional and marketing side of football we considered monetizing international brand recognition. The brand of S.L. Benfica is linked to its youth academy as the club has a reputation for being a talent factory as some recent graduates in the last decade are Bernardo Silva, Ruben Dias and João Cancelo. The business plan incorporates S.L Benfica culture and emphasizes fan engagement as the plan for the future. Our business plan's accuracy was increased through the marketing analysis we have conducted. The marketing analysis gives us an idea on potential competitors in the context of football academies. The competitive landscape is rather vast as it includes local players who are entrenched in this industry. The cultural and social factors are both an opportunity but also a risk factor. Lastly, we have included feasibility concerns and potential recommendations.

Potential Research Questions

- What are the promising desires and strategic aims of Benfica in establishing a football academy in the United States?
- How does Benfica's growth into North America fit within the greater context of internationalization and globalization of football clubs and academies?
- What will be the sociocultural differences that Benfica will experience when bringing its football tactics, methodologies, training methods and culture to a new American context, and how are they being addressed?
- What are the future benefits of Benfica's academy on player development in the United States, and how does it compare to existing player development structures that MLS (Major League Soccer) clubs have?
- How has the proliferation of foreign academies in the United States influenced the perceptions and preferences of American youth soccer players and their families regarding club development programs?
- What are the economic and financial costs for establishment that Benfica will bear and how are other foreign clubs expanding their academies into the United States, and how does this affect the local football ecosystem?
- How might the opening of Benfica's academy in the United States serve as an ignitor for the growth of Benfica fanbase and the internationalization of the sport in the United States?
- What lessons can be drawn from previous expansions of other international football clubs looking to establishing an academy in the American soccer market

Brand Awareness and Football Alliances overseas

When contemplating an expansion of a football academy overseas; there will be many managerial decisions to be made regarding benefiting from already existing interest in foreign football academies. When building brand awareness collaborating with the professional and amateur overseas league using the existing interest will streamline the process. So, in the case of Benfica, it would mean looking for ways to collaborate with MLS teams, NCAA Division 1 college soccer. Though even clubs are looking towards Intersport collaborations. Benfica in the year 2020 made an agreement on partnership with San Francisco Giants. Benfica being the club with most Portuguese League titles and San Francisco Giants with 8 MLB titles are one of the most prestigious clubs in MLB. The partnerships exist with the objective of trading expertise, “know-how” that can transverse across baseball and football such as business, statistics, finance, and marketing matters. The clubs will join their forces on joint projects, marketing drives, developmental plans, cultural campaigns, and strategic investments. While baseball has been enthralled with data ever since the revolution brought by Oakland Athletics in the early 2000s. While Oakland Athletics focused only on the potential of sporting success that could be achieved by leveraging data science, San Francisco Giants is currently one of the frontrunners in the usage of data in all fields. San Francisco Giants utilizes big data, machine learning and data analytics in sporting matters such as recruiting new players, scouting players for the MLB draft but also non-sporting matters such as fan retention for broadcasting but also ticket sales. (Wodehouse, 2022) San Francisco Giants were one of the first clubs in the MLB to have a Chief Information Officer. (High, 2013)

Tailoring customer experience is one of the premier ways to increase revenue. What San Francisco does is to package nutritional experience, additional differing entertainment experiences. They then use the data acquired from this such as SEO and the timings of ticket purchases to make connections and predictions into future.

This could give inspiration to football clubs such as Benfica imagine when a parent a sign up their child for a year at the football academy. They could have differing levels of packages; the more premium packages could offer packages where Benfica tickets are part of the experience. When Benfica is touring North America; the premium members could have access to meeting the team and medium level members could have priority to buy. Therefore, it is considered standard practice yet in practice not all clubs are actively following the rules they preach.

The FIFA CLUB World Cup is a recent competition, yet it is with a lot of potential. MLS teams can compete in the CONCACAF CLUB tournament which can then move on to FIFA World Cup. Benfica which competes in the UEFA Champions League. The winner of CONCACAF Club and the winner of the Champions League gain the right to participate in the FIFA CLUB World Cup. The partnership could with the closest MLS club on where the academy is located. This is the only instance where these clubs could meet in a competitive environment. Therefore, these fandoms will develop in a complementary matter not in a competitive matter.

Multiple team allegiances have become a matter of interest of psychologists, sociologists, and consumer behaviouralists. Though to fully comprehend the process of why there is dual or triple team allegiances; there must be knowledge on the process of one becomes a fan.

The time zones are extremely different therefore there is no risk of schedules clashing as well.

Contemporary studies regarding consumer interest and interaction with sports suggest that fans progress through distinct phases of psychological commitment, which are determined by a variety of factors, including individual motivations and external influences. (Funk and James, 2006) Consumers of sport exhibit a bunch of range of motives, desires, principles, approaches, and memories which collectively impact their allegiance, actions, and consumption patterns. (Westerbeek and Smith, 2003) Why it is important is that if people can feel commitment towards a football club, then why cannot they feel commitment towards a sports academy.

What Elite European youth academies are now an important source of revenue

In the past there was belief that for long-term success formula were to institute a top-class youth academy, look for external talent that fits with the youth core that and fostering an overall philosophy with a conducive environment in the dressing room that aligns with the manager's vision.

Guardiola's Barcelona with a homegrown Iniesta, Xavi, Messi, Gerard Pique, and Sergio Busquets were one of the best examples of this strong youth core with a coherent footballing philosophy and club culture.

Manchester United's class of 1992 which consisted of six homegrown players "David Beckham, Nick Butt, Ryan Giggs, Gary Neville, Phil Neville and Paul Scholes" was headed by Sir Alex Ferguson.

Though the scenario of something similar happening today is extremely as football clubs are increasingly being owned billionaires and where revenue streams are critical.

Financial Fair Play has meant that youth players are increasingly being transferred at a youthful age. The reason being is that the financial legal regulations have changed the way they approach their youth players.

The two best current examples in the Premier League are Mason Mount and Cole Palmer. Mason Mount who has been a Chelsea product since the age of 6 (born 1999 and joined the Chelsea youth team in the year 2005) and Cole Palmer joined Manchester City's under-8s youth team. Nowadays Mason Mount plays for Manchester United as he was sold by Chelsea for a 55-million-pound fee. (Jackson & Romano, 2023) While Cole Palmer moved from Manchester City to Chelsea for a fee of 40 million pounds.

Yet in even more extreme cases "Manchester City have generated significant funds in monetising players with minimal first-team appearances. Last summer, Southampton paid a collective £38.5m for City's Gavin Bazunu, Juan Larios, Samuel Edozie and Roméo Lavia. The last of these was sold to Chelsea for £58m, 20% going back to City; there is serious money in the horse-trading of unvarnished talent." (Brewin, 2023) What is a recent development is that players who have not had even first team experience being sold for high figures. While there could be many explanations the reason is a legal one. The biggest change in modern European football could even be as argued to Financial Fair Play.

"The general guideline from UEFA is that clubs are allowed to spend up to €5 million more than they earn within every assessment period. Each assessment period lasts for three months. That amount can then stretch to €30 million if a club's owner is able to cover the losses. Investment in women's football, training facilities and stadiums is not included in the break-even requirements." (Auster, 2020)

The Multiple Club Approach, Affiliate Teams, and Loan Players

One feasible alternative to expansion of football academies overseas would be to look for affiliate clubs or to have multiple clubs under the same umbrella. This approach in the past also meant that stockpiling a lot of young players and sending them on loan. The hope is that out of the dozens of players one of them will become an elite player.

The best example of a successful case of outsourcing a sports academy and multi-club approach Chelsea and City Football Group. Though in Chelsea's case the relationship with Vitesse a Dutch club based in Arnhem has since faded and their loan model has been tapered down, yet it pioneered it at its' peak. "In that 2015-16 season, Chelsea loaned out 38 different players — six of them twice. That makes 44 loan deals in total." (Kay, 2021) This was the peak of the Chelsea loan model in terms of raw amount of numbers though the number of loans did not really bring as much success to Chelsea as they had hoped. Though through the Vitesse loans it is safe to say some players became top level players such as Dominic Solanke, Mason Mount and Armando Broja. Therefore, there is still some belief and validity in the affiliate club where the bigger club loans their players to the smaller club. Wolverhampton Wanderers have recently adopted the Chelsea model as Grasshopper Club Zürich has become an unofficial feeder club.

The City football Group consists of 13 clubs on 5 different continents. The purpose of the City Football Group is to have a coherent footballing and commercial strategy in place that translates across continents. If a person is a fan of one team part of the City Football Group, then they might become a fan of other City Football Teams.

The global ubiquity of the City Football Group teams suggests considerable promising commercial opportunities. Together they can pool their fanbases and use joint branding and marketing

strategies. Sponsorships and partnerships with one club can benefit the totality of the group. The similar branding strategies mean brand engagement can be used to create a sense of unity between the wide audience and a cultivating a feel of belonging. In matters of coaching strategies and training methods there can be exchange of ability between the clubs in the group. While it cannot be confirmed as this is confidential information it is more than likely that these share a player development pool where they identify talents as they develop. Financially speaking these clubs can create a synergy where they can negotiate better terms as a larger group.

Feasibility

From the previous expansion of Benfica to Washington it is quite feasible for Benfica to open another academy. The amount of capital that must be invested is low. Benfica chooses to find partners on the ground. The two fields which are used by “Benfica Soccer School Washington D.C.” are Gallaudet Athletic Fields and Wau Athletic Fields. The Gallaudet fields belongs to Gallaudet University. There is a big commercial and charitable opportunity with Gallaudet University which is being extremely underutilised. Gallaudet is the earliest example for higher education for deaf and hard of hearing. Gallaudet also competes in NCAA Division III in both men’s and women’s soccer. Benfica could partner with Gallaudet and give support in sporting matters. This support can be assistance in writing opposition scouting report, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and sports science. The use Data analytics and artificial intelligence have arrived later to the game of football than compared to Baseball, NFL, and basketball. Scouting for potential youth recruits can be sped up with the use of data analytics; it can scan attributes of previously known players in the database freeing up time. Data analytics can uncover and bring to the attention of staff previously forgotten players who possess exceptional abilities regarding specific attributes which can be used meet specific footballing strategies. For a NCAA division III

scouting for recruits for next year usually means manually watching hours upon hours of nearby local high school level competitions. Any form of data analysis is used will be rare occurrence funding at low levels are a rarity. “In 2015, 45 percent of Premier League academy players were born from September to November, suggesting that many clubs were wrongly preferring bigger and older players over younger and more skilled ones. “(Hellier, 2021)

We can see an implicit bias in English football academies where that players who have reached their ideal physical profiles earlier due to being born just a couple of months earlier being selected at a higher rate. Benfica can share their knowledge and football philosophy wit Gallaudet University. The same applies to Western Adventist University who are owners of the WAU fields.

The aim of these partnerships can be that stars from these football academies can move on to college level soccer in the United States. It is much easier to motivate future parents and pupils when there are rewards at the end of their attendance. The best talents can have a chance to have a trial with the college teams.

Data Evolution in Football Development

The academy level it is not expected to have some revolutionary techniques scouting such as what Brentford has done. This is an approach of mathematical modelling with a mixture of qualitative analysis which is something different compared to its peers. Brentford actively searched for the rejects of other Premier League clubs; they started a B team with the aim of signing 17- to 20-year-old players. (Wigmore, 2017)

Matthew Benham when he bought Brentford in 2012, he not only changed the fate of Brentford but also the fate of football. When Matthew Benham bought Brentford, they were in the third tier of English football. Ahead of the 2015-2016 season is when Brentford started the use of

mathematical modelling. Matthew Benham whose background was quantitative one as he had worked in the City of London as a derivatives trader. Then Matthew Benham worked in the gambling industry working for Premierbet and then founding his company in the year 2004. He used statistical research and sports modelling for the basis of his company Smartodds.

“At Brentford, he recruited mathematics graduates to analyse the data behind players across the world that were slipping under the radar. This helped identify talents such as Neal Maupay, Said Benrahma and Ollie Watkins, who were all sold on for big profit to Premier League clubs” (Hellier, 2021)

Brighton’s Tony Bloom has a similar story as Matthew Benham. In the football academies abroad there can be basic statistical modelling being applied.

Legal Challenges

One of the biggest changes to football heading in to 2023 was the substantial changes UEFA made regarding agents. What is critical for clubs that are focused on youth academies is that it limits transfers across nations for players under the age of 18. It does this through limiting agent powers as “an agent can only make an approach to a youth player or their legal guardian if they are within six months of the legal age at which they would be able to sign their first professional contract based upon the laws of the country in which they are playing” (Sogut & Khan, 2023).

For the overall betterment of football these are not negative changes as they are protecting the minors from unwanted transfers at an early age, yet these are still important considerations for any club with an international youth academy.

The Influence of Eusébio

Back in the days, in an era of European colonialism, “Portugal’s greatest ever player was an African,” the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once said about Eusébio. He was the first Portuguese soccer player to be distinguished with the Golden Ball in 1965, which marks an important milestone for Africans both in the soccer game and in European identity. Eusebio represents not only a phenomenal talent never seen before, but more important than that, a constant fight and resilience against the dictatorship regime. By that time, most African nations and athletes were marginalized and Eusebio put black and African players on the map. His later career would be spent in Portugal, and across the United States of America performing in the NASL.

Business Plan

Realistic timelines have been set for various milestones in the expansion plan. The first Escolinhas do Benfica academy will be established within the first year. Staff recruitment, including coaching and administrative staff, will be completed three months before the start of each academy. Training programs for enrolled students will commence within six months of the academy's establishment.

Legal and Regulatory Compliance

A detailed examination of U.S. federal, state, and local regulations governing sports academies and youth programs will be conducted. Given the nature of youth programs, Escolinhas do Benfica will implement robust child protection policies and procedures to comply with U.S. laws and regulations. This includes background checks for staff working with children, mandatory reporting

mechanisms, and the establishment of a safe and secure environment for all participants. Compliance with the U.S. Safe Sport Act and other relevant legislation will be a top priority. The selection of the most suitable legal structure for the expansion, such as a Limited Liability Company (LLC) or a non-profit entity, will be based on factors including tax implications, liability considerations, and the organization's mission. Legal counsel will be engaged to guide the entity formation process and ensure adherence to all legal requirements. As part of international business operations, Escolinhas do Benfica will assess and address visa requirements for coaching and administrative staff. To safeguard the Escolinhas do Benfica brand and curriculum, measures will be taken to protect intellectual property rights. This includes trademark registration for the brand name and logo, as well as copyright protection for educational materials and training programs.

Funding Requirements

For the successful expansion of Escolinhas do Benfica into the United States, it is crucial to outline the funding requirements comprehensively. This includes initial setup costs and ongoing operational expenses. On the facilities side, they would have to bear the cost of the acquisition or lease of suitable training infrastructure, including the construction or renovation of football fields, also the purchase of equipment and training materials. Then on the legal side, the expenses related to legal entity formation and compliance with visa requirements for staff. One of the most important costs would be the development and execution of a marketing strategy to establish a brand presence. The staff recruitment and training would have to be accounted for this. To finance all these expenses Benfica could allocate the funds from Escolinhas do Benfica's existing financial reserves or opt for external investors in youth sports development, providing equity investment opportunities for external stakeholders aligned with Escolinhas do Benfica's mission. Another

solution might be the consideration of loans from financial institutions, with a clear repayment strategy.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The success of Escolinha do Benfica's expansion into the United States, specifically in California, depends on robust monitoring and evaluation strategies. To ensure effectiveness, some KPIs could be integrated. A target of 300 students to have a 20% increase in enrollment from underrepresented communities, for diversity and inclusivity metrics. On financial performance, a goal for an ROI of 15% within the first three years. Individual player development assessments would be measured by 90% of students showing improvement in skill assessments. Community engagement would have a target of a 25% increase in positive feedback over the first two years and actively participate in at least four community events annually.

Monitoring Mechanism

A monthly and quarterly report on enrollment, financials, and community engagement would be put into practice, with immediate reporting of any significant incidents or achievements. Surveys would be conducted quarterly to assess parents', students', and staff's satisfaction, as well as implementing player assessment sessions annually to evaluate individual player progress. Finally, they would conduct bi-annual financial audits to ensure transparency, and adherence to budgetary constraints and perhaps mitigate any financial risks promptly.

Fan engagement importance

A soccer team's success is dependent on its ability to measure fan engagement, which is a key indicator of how connected its followers are to the brand. The level of involvement is demonstrated by a variety of actions, including going to games, buying team gear, and keeping up with news about the club. When it comes to a renowned team with a devoted fan base like Benfica, devotion extends beyond results. The enthusiasm of dedicated fans exceeds victories or losses, guaranteeing a constant level of engagement. (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna, 2022)

The importance of fan involvement is paramount to our ambitious effort to increase Benfica's influence in the United States. As we enter this undeveloped sector, fan devotion becomes a key factor in our success. Establishing soccer academies that emphasize quality and innovation represents not only a strategic move but also an opportunity to cultivate a passionate fan base on an international scale.

Much like the correlation between a club's performance and local fan engagement, our venture into the U.S. soccer landscape relies on connecting with fans who may not have the historical ties to Benfica. Winning over new supporters involves more than just on-field success; it demands a multifaceted approach to engagement. By providing top-notch soccer education through our academies, we not only contribute to the growth of the sport but also create a unique platform for fans to connect with the Benfica brand. Just as die-hard local fans make their voices heard, our aim is to resonate with diverse audiences across the globe. Leveraging the allure of Benfica's rich

history, coupled with our commitment to innovation and excellence in soccer development, we seek to bridge the gap between continents and forge connections that transcend borders.

The success of our expansion project hinges on fan engagement as a catalyst for building a global community of Benfica supporters. By introducing our unique approach to soccer development in the United States, we aspire to create a shared passion for the club and foster a new era of international fan commitment.

Risk Analysis and challenges

Expansion into the United States will not be without hurdles and challenges. Several risks and challenges will be encountered at every phase of the expansion. Finding solutions that allow us to progress in the long term while adapting to the American context is crucial. It is challenging to foresee the deeper and implicit risks, but some of the more explicit and obvious ones must be addressed from the outset. By dividing the types of challenges, we could clearly see which one can get our attention first. The most significant operational problems are those related to cultural adaptation and rivalry with existing programs.

The culture of Benfica differs significantly from what we can identify in the United States; the two cultures are distinctly different, including coaching styles and the overall structure around a young football player. A notable challenge will be finding common ground between the intensive football culture of Portugal and the expectations that North American culture brings to a training camp. In other words, how will young players and their parents respond to the offered program, both psychologically and physically? Will they be able to extract the maximum benefit from the Portuguese approach? Football is practiced in almost 200 countries, and its dynamics are diverse based on the cultures and societies in which it is played (Araújo and Davids, 2016). Players will

be immersed in a culture and tactical approach to the sport that is entirely different from their own. Indeed, North America does not revolve around football; it holds a minimal role in society and sports culture. Thus, there will be a cultural shock, and several measures will be in place to provide appropriate and educational services for the young athletes.

Here are a couple of solutions to ensure an optimal environment for young players. Our academies will incorporate theoretical sessions for all age groups. These sessions will focus on the learning and adaptation of young players to the physical, psychological, cultural, and tactical practices established by the existing Benfica staff and following the way Benfica works as a club and organization. This approach will sensitize young players directly to the cultural exercises necessary for adapting to the Benfica culture, providing immediate exposure to European football. This mechanism will work even more effectively in a back-and-forth manner, with certified American coaches assisting our Benfica staff and contributing insights into certain approaches or communication styles with young players. This way, the players will be exposed to the differences between both expertise while dramatically developing efficient communications to bridge the gap between both teaching approaches (Vaughan, 2021). The goal is to promote the Benfica culture while facilitating a mutually beneficial exchange. The ecosystem supporting our programs will encourage cultural exchange while fostering a positive atmosphere that promotes learning.

Benfica is not the first European club to venture into the American territory in search of promising football talents. Moreover, we have not been the most successful in our entry into North America. Giants like Barcelona and Arsenal have already established competitive academy programs across the country since 2016 (Schoenfeld, 2021). Additionally, clubs such as Juventus, Bayern Munich, Villarreal, and Liverpool have formed affiliations and partnerships with various academies or provincial teams, establishing an immediate presence. For instance, Liverpool boasts 10 official

youth affiliations in the United States. Paris Saint-Germain stands out in the U.S. with a pristine academy featuring five fields. This includes high-quality training facilities in Florida that meet professional standards, costing \$60,000 annually for entry (Schoenfeld, 2021). These programs and academies represent the highest echelon in the United States. These operational challenges must be continuously analyzed to provide the best possible service over time, as they are factors that can change with trends in the industry. Indeed, the football culture, tactics, and strategies often prove to be adaptable. However, one thing that must remain constant is the culture of SL Benfica, the pursuit of talent, and the marketing of the club's image.

One risk that has not been thoroughly investigated yet has to do with the venue and facilities we use for our "Escolinhas do Benfica" initiative. The quality of our facilities should be reflected in every facet of our offerings. Depending on the number of applicants and various schedules, it is crucial to identify a location that aligns with our values, offering sufficient space and the necessary equipment for conducting football training that befits the standards of SL Benfica. These fields and sports centers are envisioned to be our headquarters.

We are intrigued by two potential concepts. The first involves securing access to specific sports facilities through a strategic partnership with one of our associates. SL Benfica, being well-recognized in the sports world, has forged a partnership with the San Francisco Giants, a strategic alliance highlighted earlier in the text. This collaboration holds the potential to significantly bolster our presence in California.

The second concept entails strategically situating our facilities near places frequented by young athletes, such as high schools and sports centers (Powel, 2023). This approach aims to integrate our program seamlessly into the daily lives of potential participants. However, in selecting these

locations, we must consider several factors, including security, accessibility via multiple road routes, the demographics of the surrounding area, and adherence to local laws and regulations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our thesis on the strategic internationalization of Escolinhas do Benfica to the United States has uncovered different important aspects of the venture. It is driven by a global soccer fever, domestic market saturation (with 45 youth academies in Portugal), enhanced international brand image as a youth development academy, and potential liquidity increase, being the US one of the biggest and richest countries in the world. During the analysis, we focused on a deep understanding of the past and current US soccer market so that we could understand it better in cultural terms and approach it most appropriately. We also tried to evaluate its recognition abroad and decided to focus on the soccer-loving nations' public. This was followed by determining an age target – between the ages of 10 and 14 – and a state target – which would be California. Having in mind Benfica's strengths and the market opportunities in the US, we would advise the Portuguese club to partner with a school. This would be a win-win situation where the school benefits from being able to provide its kids with an academic path but also sports careers, as Benfica is a well-known soccer club around the world. For Benfica, it would have an edge over European markets in many aspects, from grasping some insight on the American way of balancing both technical/tactical skills with psychological and players' well-being outside the field, also the fees paid by the students that would play an important role on this expansion as they would be charged much higher amounts than the one practiced in Portugal territory. The traditional approach of developing a strong youth core has shifted due to financial pressures and the influence of Financial Fair Play. Elite European youth academies are now not just a source of talent but also significant revenue. However, the expansion into the U.S. is not free of challenges. Cultural

adaptation, competition with existing programs, and the presence of established European clubs (giants like Barcelona, Arsenal, and Liverpool) in the American market pose significant hurdles. The proposed solutions involve a nuanced approach, including theoretical sessions, cultural exchanges, and collaboration with local coaches to bridge the gap. Benfica's dominance in national leagues, as well as its history in European competitions, attracts many people to keep up with the club's activities. Some fans only participate as attendees but there are many kids passionate about becoming Benfica players. For those within the soccer community, Benfica's name is certainly associated with an elevated level of play and a strong tradition in player development.

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Motives and preconditions of internationalization

We must question ourselves why clubs of European football are eager to expand internationally. In fact, some of them have no choice if they want to grow the company. There are primary driving factors behind their will to reach new groups of supporters and expand their presence in new markets:

Firstly, the global popularity of Football, it is the most widely followed and watched sport worldwide with a massive and ever-growing global audience. Since fans are coming from everywhere, clubs want to tap into this vast international fan base. Also, clubs see that new communities of football supporters are being formed each year and are trying to connect and grow with those new groups. These clubs are then seeking new customer markets to access to get a share of it or fill the gap there is. Also, Football has become a sport with very inclusive measures and policies. The sport is watched by billions of people with diverse cultures and races. There is a strong push in the game against discrimination and racism. This fight helps incorporate the beautiful game for 5 billion fans across all continents with a progressive culture fair for all. Moreover, this continual surge in interest in sports is capturing the attention of the younger generations, resulting in an increase in young individuals engaging in football at a noticeably early age. According to FIFA statistics in 2023, out of all fans globally, 40% are aged 24 years and younger. This trend not only reflects the widespread popularity of football but also highlights its appeal among the youth demographic, indicating a promising future for the sport.

Secondly, many top clubs have reached a point of saturation in their domestic markets. This means that they have captured a sizable portion of the available market share in their home countries.

Benfica per example has the most football fans in Portugal and brings by average 58 000 fans per home game (Fisher, 2023). To continue their growth and make effective investments, they need to explore abroad. This expansion represents more than just a geographical reach; it signifies robust growth by unlocking doors to a realm of new players, innovative tactics, and untapped markets. By strategically establishing a footprint across multiple continents, SL Benfica not only positions itself as a truly global entity but also capitalizes on the flourishing development of football in diverse locales. Being a trailblazer in the sport's progression across various regions, SL Benfica stands poised to mold and influence the global football landscape, emerging as a pivotal force in the international football community. In doing so, Benfica has the potential to secure strategic assets, valuable resources, and establish key partnerships that may not be readily available within Portugal or have already been maximized. This strategic approach not only strengthens Benfica's global presence but also ensures a dynamic and forward-thinking position within the ever-evolving world of football.

Thirdly, going abroad allows clubs to enhance their brand, logo, and overall image. In fact, clubs with rich histories and a minimum of global recognition use international expansion as a strategy to further build their image and increase their visibility to the highest. It is perceived as efficiency seeking, Benfica may optimize its operations structure, access skill labor and supply chain efficiency by increasing its visibility internationally (Williams et al, 2013). Also, a football team transcends the conventional notion of a club; it stands as a brand within the football industry. Success on the pitch demands more than just skill and winning, it necessitates substantial financial backing, primarily derived from robust revenue streams. These revenues are intricately tied to the support of our loyal fans who drive the main revenues of the club and contribute significantly to its identity. Recognizing that our brand extends beyond our local market, we employ international

expansion as a strategic avenue to elevate our image and increase visibility among a broader spectrum of fans. By resonating with fans on a global scale, we not only enhance the reach of our brand but also lay the foundation for sustained success both on and off the pitch.

Expanding globally in football is influenced by three key aspects for Benfica. The club is driven by these motivations, and this decision is not a reactive measure to address an immediate issue. Currently, Benfica enjoys a profitable and comfortable position in its domestic context. However, in a dominant and continually growing industry, institutional leaders must strive for more and align with market trends. This expansion holds the potential to enhance performance, revenues, football growth and scouting.

The motives and preconditions outlined for internationalization provide the strategic backdrop for our operational plan. Recognizing the global popularity of football, the saturation in domestic markets, and the potential for enhancing our brand image globally, Benfica's decision to expand internationally is rooted in proactive growth and market alignment. The operational plan translates these motives into tangible actions, focusing on the establishment of football schools in the United States. By strategically positioning ourselves in a new market, we aim to tap into the vast international fan base, connect with emerging football communities, and foster the growth of young players. This operational approach is not merely a reaction to an immediate need but a deliberate step towards sustainable success, aligning with Benfica's vision to become a global football powerhouse.

OPERATIONAL PLAN

Executive Summary

In our operational plan, we aim to implement the expansion of our services in the United States through the various marketing methods identified above. Leveraging existing elements such as brand image and partnerships, we plan to chase the growing football market in the US. Our business concept involves establishing Benfica football schools in multiple locations across the United States. These schools will play a crucial role in helping young players learn the fundamentals of the sport and instilling the intrinsic values of teamwork. The primary goal is to contribute to the overall development of young athletes in the sport while fostering a strong connection with the Benfica club. In the short term, our vision is to penetrate the US market and lay a solid foundation for these football schools. However, our aspirations extend far beyond immediate goals. In the long term, we envision Benfica not merely as a giant in football but as a premier football club in the US. In fact, our ambition goes beyond the pitch; we aim to elevate the visibility of the Benfica brand and garner a dedicated fan base. This strategic move is fueled by the dynamic growth of the football fan base in North America. We seek to redefine what Benfica represents in this region, not only as a football powerhouse but as a cultural phenomenon that resonates with the emerging generation of football enthusiasts.

In this operational plan, we go into detail about the products and services offered to the American population, the marketing aspect of a project of this scale in modern market conditions. The competition already in place and the different market shares, the importance of supporter commitment and finally the different risks linked to this expansion in the United States.

Product and services

The player program has season-long developmental training sessions for boys and girls between 6 and 16. The program's gender mix is inclusive, allowing both sexes to benefit from the same services and opportunities. It is not just a summer camp, but a school that gives children the tools they need to develop with a winning methodology and a long-term commitment. This formula is based on the transmission of social and human values, enabling players to integrate actively and responsibly into a social and team environment. The youngsters also can surpass themselves, demonstrating the extent of their yet untapped potential. Finally, this camp projects a strong identification with the values of Sporting Lisbon Benfica, through surpassing oneself and perseverance in all aspects that the young person may face. In fact, Benfica tries to teach the players to act according to their values on and off the pitch. Making them work wisely and persevere to attain the goals.

These training sessions are not about perfecting skills. In fact, the youngster will not be learning to perfect his technical gestures or striking power, but rather the fundamentals of the sport. The aim is to provide the tools to build a good foundation for the youngster to become passionate about sport and continue learning.

An important aspect of our programs will be constructive feedback with the player. We are dedicated to effective communication between the staff and players. Young individuals will always be guided and informed about both their strengths and areas for improvement. This communication aims to complement the player's learning, making them aware of positive aspects and areas to enhance in terms of their performance on the field. The feedback will vary for different age groups, as not all ages comprehend the same concepts.

This feedback will be assessed through an individualized evaluation sheet for each athlete in the program. The evaluation sheet will outline strengths and weaknesses, providing ratings on a scale of 1 to 10 for various technical, physical, and mental football criteria. These ratings will be determined by the entire staff, all of whom have observed the player during the camp. The purpose of these ratings is not to compare young individuals with each other but to equip each person with the necessary tools to become the best player possible.

This monitoring process mentally prepares the young player to be conscious of their shortcomings, enabling them to focus on areas that need improvement. From the staff and youth talent scouting perspective, these evaluation sheets also assist in accurately assessing the player, quantifying their potential, and monitoring their progression

This service also enables a young person to take a step towards competitive aspirations. In fact, this is a scouting camp of sorts for the Benfica scouts, who will take the necessary steps to make sure they do not miss any out-of-the-ordinary talent. The coaches present will do their best to assess the youngster, identifying shortcomings and strong skills. Many elite athletes emerge from these schools, among the big names: Goncalo Guedes, Francisca Nazareth, and Bernardo Silva.

SL Benfica is currently taking its first steps abroad for this program. In fact, they are already out of Portugal, they operate in Luxembourg and Washington DC. The Benfica school in Washington has different programs depending on the age, level, and ambition of the young person. Programs such as “first step” and “Pequenos Craques” are designed to help children learn the basics and improve their skills, with an emphasis on fun. They are aimed at children between 3 and 9 years of age. Other programs, such as Liga Benfica and Travel soccer, enable children to develop skills, competitive drive, and some of the finer tactics.

Our aim is to expand in other parts of the United States with the proper resources and establishment. Inspire ourselves with the Washington DC Benfica soccer school program, which has been active since 2019, correcting the negatives and implementing the positives (BSSDC, 2021).

To continue to grow, Benfica are looking to international expansion as a profitable and exciting opportunity for the club's future. The club possessed the requirements and success factors to make overseas connections. SL Benfica is financially stable, owns a rich historical heritage, and internationally renowned players. In addition, they are well known in the European football world since they were dominant, winning two champions league in the early 60's, while dominating the domestic league for a long time. It is clear identity and values make the brand attractive to new fan groups in the US. The club is well equipped to establish partnerships abroad and make a direct impact. In fact, they already have one foot on the American threshold thanks to an institutional collaboration with the city of San Francisco and its sports franchises. Benfica is partnered with the San Francisco 49ers (NFL) and the Giants (MLB) which makes it easier to have direct visibility in the west coast markets. "This knowledge-sharing partnership" (Dixon, 2020) enables Benfica to have a hopeful strategy to enter California with more ease and creativity.

In addition to those sports partnerships, it is worth noting that the state of California has the largest Portuguese population among all U.S. states. With 327,558 Portuguese residents, constituting approximately 0.84% of California's population, this demographic detail adds an interesting dimension to the potential growth of our proposed services. (World Population Review, 2023) The significant presence of Portuguese individuals in California could potentially accelerate the expansion of our platform, as there is already a form of influence established within numerous families and communities inhabited by Portuguese residents. Leveraging this pre-existing

influence could result in a more rapid acceptance and adoption to our values and way of working our program, especially among those families or communities with Portuguese background. The cultural ties and shared heritage might create a sense of familiarity and trust, facilitating a quicker engagement with our offerings. Other states with a high presence of Portuguese household and culture are Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Unfortunately, those states are not as interested into football, cities like Boston are heavy into their American football and Baseball respective teams. (Massarotti, 2022)

Apart from California, there are several other American regions that demand our attention, specifically the South and the Northeast. These areas stand out as top markets in the United States in terms of the demonstrated interest in soccer. The important level of interest can be attributed to factors such as a significant percentage of Hispanic residents and the substantial investments made by many American colleges to establish elite football programs in these cities.

Those regions have shown a pronounced affinity for soccer, and this interest is often fueled by the large Hispanic communities residing in these regions. (Jewell & Molina, 2005) Soccer holds a special place in Hispanic culture, and as a result, these areas become important for the sport's popularity. The cultural connection makes these regions fertile ground for promoting and expanding our “Escolinhas de Futebol Benfica.” Furthermore, many American colleges in these regions invest substantial financial resources to create elite football programs. These programs act as magnets for talented players from surrounding areas, fostering a culture of soccer excellence. By targeting these regions, our program could tap into the existing infrastructure and enthusiasm for football, providing a valuable resource for both aspiring players and those passionate about the sport.

Marketing Strategy

So, our objective is to make a solid operational plan which would help us step by step in our mission to expand in the United States. Those steps vary between understanding how to penetrate a new market and reacting to marketing trends to help us position our services. We also want to identify new revenue streams Benfica can operate while monetizing international brand recognition in outside markets. Therefore, your company's branding will be your most useful tool towards growing popularity and engagement with those outside markets. Most companies that stand out thanks to their products/services go nowhere without good marketing campaigns and a clear brand image. In football it is the same, it is not just about players and performances, it is about a more stable and controlled integrative and unifying model - it is about the club brand, its environment, and the culture of its people.

For a company or club such as Lisbon Benfica football club, it is of paramount importance that the brand image is respected, followed, and identified by its fans and those around the world. Indeed, this is a business that requires a gifted, professional marketing team capable of conveying the club's identity and values to both loyal and new supporters in the world. This identity is already superbly present in the SLB ecosystem, thanks to the representation of the club's history through banners, statues and traditions found at the stadium during games. The basic idea is that “through consumer experience or marketing activities, brands may take on personality traits and human values and, like a person, appear to be modern, old-fashioned, lively, or exotic” (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020, p. 114). For example, before the start of every home game, the eagle on the club logo is represented by a real eagle circling the stadium. This eagle represents an old-fashioned trademark and identity for the fans. Another example is the statue of one of the club's most important players, Eusebio, outside the stadium. (Parlan, 2018)

Those elements are marketing and branding practices that allow the club to remain in the interest of followers and make them identify with it, as well as allowing the club to be loved or even just known by the public.

We need to deploy our marketing efforts in an organized and concise way for our expansion initiative in the United States. Our goal is to get integrated with the top football camps or academies in the regions of interest. In addition to providing first-rate services with great Benfica teachers. We need to do an excellent job in marketing, making our camp look enticing and, more importantly, it should be visible to potential customers. Certainly, entering a market that is already well-concentrated with European football clubs requires us to seek innovative and distinct marketing methods. This approach is essential for achieving consistent results, making a successful entry into the desired market, and, most importantly, fostering commitment from our new clients and followers towards our services and brand.

The structure of the program allows customers to get the most out of it, depending on their age. The format is intensive, practical, innovative, and elite. However, if we are to identify ourselves as an important player in the market, we need to increase the influence of our image in the chosen area. The most profitable areas are already full of competition, so it is imperative to compete at the same level. Those marketing efforts are then focused on reaching a large audience with a specific service. Here are a couple of factors that help reach new audiences and keep a strong engagement: content strategy and partnerships. Those two methods will be our bread and butter to make sure our elite program is having new quality inputs. They touch on how to grow and maintain an image for the population outside the inner social circle of local fans. Those aspects expand the reach of the brand if correctly organized with communications and skilled marketing campaign. It is similar with normal companies who sell products on shop shelves and want to be the leader in

their product industry. The objective is to be seen as a top football club with rich history and engagement across the globe. Many Companies have done a great marketing job to propel their brand towards the top of exposure in sports. Just by looking at their logo you can feel the quality and success they have conquered. The logo must have an outstanding record of accomplishment to be identified this way. However, a club with a different culture or unorthodox innovative practices will also be recognized as different and unique. As an example, Real Madrid, the giant of Spanish football who is recognized around the world or its historical success in European and local competitions. Home of the greatest football player and a winning culture across all their sports.

The content strategy allows you to plan and organize the distribution of the editorial content of a sports club or a sports identity, with the aim of providing maximum visibility. In a much more technological world, where all your fans' engagement is digitalized and demand rapid news updates, the club must be active on social networks. In fact, the heart of the sports news today is distributed online via newspapers, websites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram pages and much more. Content is daily, generating constant engagement and visibility. A good strategy would be to post posts that are both interesting and useful, such as updates on injured players, relevant stories, team updates, exclusive videos, and training videos. For example, the English club Manchester City publishes engaging content on YouTube featuring competitions between players on non-sporting topics such as quizzes. These methods maintain visibility beyond game days, allowing fans to stay engaged with the team and their favorite players. With those channels you can easily reach populations that are spread around the globe, Then the more it builds the more engagement comes your way, giving your club more visibility in the football media. (McCarthy, Rowley & Keegan, 2022)

It is also important for a club like Benfica to establish effective partnership strategies. These are strong relationships with companies, media, and even other sports organizations. This is important because these partnerships will create various avenues of visibility for the club. Depending on the partnerships, the club will be represented in other sectors, and for reasons and values beyond its sport. Like stated by Ross Tennyson in his manual of partnership: “In this way, partnership offers a new opportunity to create added value. This is achieved by recognizing the qualities and skills of each sector and finding new ways to harness them for development. of each sector and finding new ways to harness them for the common good. for the common good. “(Tennyson, 2003). In addition, these partnerships will also allow the club's supporters to access the different privileges of Benfica affiliates under different conditions. This factor should not be underestimated, because it is the one that allows the club's image to be developed through several new channels. Indeed, partnerships are crucial in the world of sports, especially in the American market. Sports in America are as revered as they are in Europe. However, fan interest is divided among the five major leagues representing five different sports. For instance, a sports enthusiast living in Boston may have four major teams to support. It is certain that a fan does not necessarily follow all major sports in America in the same way. This example simply illustrates the potential diversity a fan may have and the phenomenon of league affiliations in the major American sports markets. Thus, by creating partnerships with sports teams in the American market, the resulting engagement is substantial (Massaroti, 2022)

By addressing these considerations, and applying those marketing methods, the Benfica academies can create an environment that respects and integrates both the Portuguese football culture and the expectations of young athletes and their families in North America. This strategy will support the program's overall success and the participants' satisfying experience.