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BEST PRACTICES IN DISABLED FOOTBALL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PORTUGUESE  
INDUSTRY

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Abstract: This thesis aims to provide an understanding of the historical, organizational, and competitive framework of disability football, while characterizing Portugal's offering in the sport, comparing it to some of the best practices found at an international level. Reviewing these best use cases will hopefully serve as the basis for a national action plan to reinvigorate the sport. Pursuing growth in confidence, self-efficacy, and self-perceived high quality of life for disenfranchised individuals and communities, through the power of sports, proves to have extraordinary socioeconomic added-value potential.

Keywords (Business and strategy implementation, Best practices, Sports management, Disabled sports, Disabled football)

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Research question and purpose of the work**

The promotion of sports and exercise amongst disabled communities is the promotion of function, independence, and self-autonomy of marginalized individuals. Harnessing the popularity of a sport like football as a tool to encourage health, quality of life, and social integration among all divisions in disability, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, is ultimately all a sport should strive to accomplish. This thesis aims to provide an understanding of Portugal's current offering in the industry of disability football at a professional and grassroots level, and subsequently compare it to some of the best practices found at an international level.

Despite Portugal's long and storied history with football, and its importance as a cultural staple, the country has fallen short on its contribution to the development and practice of impaired football. Therefore, the efforts made in this dissertation also seek to provide several useful pointers for the Portuguese Football Federation (*Federação Portuguesa de Futebol*) and the Portuguese Federation of Sports for the Disabled (*Federação Portuguesa de Desporto para Deficientes*) for the development of the sport, since this is hopefully being written as a prelude to a much broader social action plan, carried out by these same Portuguese institutions. It should be pointed out that, although these projects frequently present large financial liabilities to these social institutions, they do hold the unprecedented potential to influence the lives of a great number of people.

To streamline the information in this thesis, it was important to first clarify: what are the different rules of the game; what are the equipment and infrastructure needs; give some historical background; and foremost explain the different international entities behind the sport. Disabled sports suffer from their complexity since it is not only categorized into different games, but also

different disabilities, and this is evident in adapted football's complex regulatory structure.

Disentangling the existing governing bodies will allow us to better understand the sport overall, and where it's headed. Only then, with the proper information, is it possible to grasp how Portugal compares itself to the best standards for the sport.

Due to insufficient information, this thesis will only be addressing 4 of the 9 recognized adaptations of disabled football: Blind football, Deaf football, intellectual impairment football, and Down syndrome football. However, many of the given recommendations can be applied more broadly; and will hopefully serve as a launchpad for any future development projects done in the country.

Although every area of disability and geographies addressed offer distinct challenges that should be tackled separately, there is still an enormous amount of international support, with many organizations, people, and athletes eager and willing to develop their passion.

## **2. Methodology**

Most of this research is substantiated by a series of informal interviews as well as resources written by different national football associations and other academic papers. For the purpose of this thesis, twelve people have been interviewed: Lia da Silva from ANDDVIS (Portuguese Sports Association for the Blind), António Pereira from ANDDI (Portuguese Sports Association for Intellectually Impaired and Down syndrome), Inês Viegas from the Portuguese Paralympic Committee, Mário Bonança from LPDS (Portuguese Sports Association for the Hearing Impaired), Hugo da Silva from FPDD (Portuguese Federation for Disability Sports), José Pedro Soares from Integrated Dreams (Non-profit company headquartered in Portugal, whose mission is "to increase representation of disabled people in the sports World" (Integrated Dreams, n.d.)),

Joana Teixeira from *Futebol Clube do Porto* (FCP), Luís Alcobia from *Fundação Benfica*, David Stirton from the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA), Márcio André from *Sport Clube Conimbricense* (SCC), Diana Pirciu from the Romanian Football Federation and James Watkins from the English Football Association (all interviews are available upon request).

Also, worth mentioning is how this best practices approach is designed to simply serve as an evaluation tool, that will allow us to assess the current level of effectiveness of the existing strategy. Not as a “copy-paste” mechanism, as many of the issues found in Portugal’s disabled football industry are country-specific.

### **3. A General Overview: Adapted football**

Before we proceed with the characterization of disabled football in Portugal and other countries, it is important to give some background on the different adaptations of the sport: how many disabilities are under consideration; a quick overview of their history; what are the different regulatory bodies; changes in rules/equipment/infrastructure/training; and which players are allowed to compete.

For the purpose of this study, disability will be defined as having any long-term illness or health problem which limits a person's day-to-day activities, as also stated by Sport England’s National Benchmarking Service (NBS) (Kung and Taylor 2014). As such, disabled football will be defined as the adaptation of the sport of football in all forms to include players that possess any given impairment: physical (motor), learning, or sensory. According to the Royal Dutch Football Association’s (KNVB) guide on disability football (Royal Dutch Football Association 2016)“People with a disability’ are generally subdivided into five categories:

1. People with a visual disability

2. People with an auditory disability
3. People with a learning disability
4. People with a physical disability
5. People with a chronic illness”

As advertised, disability football is, in fact, enormously diverse. Therefore, the information regarding each area of disability has been properly categorized for clarity. Starting with Blind football.

### **3.1 Blind football**

Perhaps the most surprising, as well as one the more popular adaptations of the sport, 5-a-side blind football benefits from being the only Paralympic sport out of all versions of disabled football. It started around the 1920s in Spain, being played at mostly a grassroots level throughout the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Brazil hosting its first national championship in the '60s; the country's long history and interest in the sport reflect its accomplishments even today. In 1996 the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) took football under its wing after years of development by individual countries (IBSA n.d.).

The IBSA, despite not working exclusively with football, does act as the sole governing body that organizes and oversees international competitions as well as all rules and regulations, while also having a stake in developing the sport, offering special training, advice, and guidance on how to start a successful blind sports program (as per David Stirton, a coordinator for IBSA in major development projects in the area of five-a-side football).

To properly play a game of blind or partially sighted football, it is recommended to have a pitch with the appropriate dimensions<sup>i</sup> and uncovered for optimum acoustics. Several sport-specific

types of equipment are also approved by the organization<sup>ii</sup>: eye patches, blindfolds, head guard (optional, but highly recommended), a sound ball with specific properties, and rebound panels.

To better understand what rules, apply to the sport it is also necessary to understand what parameters evaluate whether an athlete is suitable to play in any given adaptation of the sport. In Blind football, this classification is done in order to “define who is eligible to compete in IBSA sports (...) and group Athletes into Sport Classes” (IBSA 2021). There is, of course, a minimum criterion to participate in any of the 3 sports classes of Blind and partially-sighted football (B1, B2 or B3), (IBSA 2021) “The Athlete must have at least one (1) of the following Impairments:

- a) Impairment of the eye structure
- b) Impairment of the optical nerve/optic pathways, or
- c) Impairment of the visual cortex”

The given criteria for the different Sports Classes are stated in their “IBSA Classification Rules”<sup>iii</sup>document, which is especially important to bear in mind when working with clubs that operate at a more competitive level. For the sake of brevity, this thesis will only be addressing the necessary equipment for international competitions in B1, B2, and B3 blind football and the logic behind sports classes, for more information on the specific rules, please refer to the website in the appendix<sup>iv</sup>.

It is also worth mentioning how atypically organized blind football is as a sport internationally when compared to its counterparts’ deaf football, Down syndrome football, and all other adaptations, as described later in this report. This might be due to its inclusion as a Paralympic sport, unlike other types- its rules, necessary equipment, and general information (such as classification requirements and coaching guides) are much more streamlined and accessible to

the public. It might also be a product of having IBSA as its sole governing body and stakeholder, a role that is recognized globally.

### **3.2 Deaf football**

Both 11-a-side and 5-a-side Deaf football, despite not being considered a Paralympic sport are, of course, included in the Deaflympics, held every four years under the aegis of the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD). The ICSD acts as the main governing body responsible for the organization of the Deaflympics and other World Deaf Championships. The Deaflympics is currently sanctioned by the IPC, even though the ICSD is not on their list of recognized international organizations.

“Football is the oldest Deaf Sport; it has been included in the program of the Summer Deaflympics since 1924”(DIFA n.d.), and quadrennial World and Continental football Championships (European, Asian, Pan American) are hosted in which more than 70 world countries participate.

Ever since 1924, the sport has grown immensely, and due to the increasing institutional and geographical demands, as well as a growth in team numbers, the Deaf International Football Association (DIFA) was created, which is now a “(...) recognized international organization dedicated to the development and promotion of football and futsal for the deaf in the world.” (DIFA n.d.).

Regarding its rules and regulations, deaf 11-a-side and 5-a-side football are very similar to its non-disabled counterpart, in fact, in the DIFA website, they use the International Football Association Board’s (IFAB) “Laws of the Game”<sup>v</sup> document as their definitive rulebook for the sport, which is used worldwide in all circumstances of non-disabled football.

Of course, the only exception is the athletes that are allowed to play (DIFA n.d.) “Participants in the Games must be Deaf, defined as a hearing loss of at least 55 dB per tone average in the better ear (3-tone frequency average at 500, 1000 and 2000 Hertz, ISO 1969 Standard)”.

### **3.3 Intellectual impairment and Down syndrome football**

Much like Blind football, intellectual impairment does not seem to have a football-specific organization dedicated towards its governance and development, alternatively, they have VIRTUS: World Intellectual Impairment Sport (INAS) to serve that purpose. One of the founding members of the IPC, Virtus was created in 1986 with the purpose of “governing the eligibility of athletes with an intellectual impairment, elite competition and sport development”(Virtus- World Intellectual Impairment Sport n.d.).

Currently, their rulebook is unavailable on the website, however, according to ParaFootball<sup>vi</sup>, a Dutch non-profit foundation, both the football and futsal variations are played with the same rules as the standard sport, much like deaf football. (ParaFootball n.d.)The only alteration is the eligibility criteria a player must meet to play, which are: must have an IQ of 75 or below, must have limited ‘adaptive behavior’ which means they might need help with everyday tasks, and the learning disability must have occurred before the age of 18. They also have three eligibility groups, much like how grouping functions in Portugal, playing the same role as sports classes in Blind football, which are:

I1 – Athletes with an intellectual disability

II2 – Athletes with significant intellectual disability

III3 – Athletes with Autism (IQ>75) - Trial group

Down syndrome has the Football International Federation for Players with Down syndrome (FIFDS) that serves the purpose of growth and governance of the sport; however, they operate under a broader organization called the Sports Union for athletes with Down syndrome (SU-DS), which was created in 2012 in Portugal. Although SU-DS is quite recent, they organized the first World Trisome Games for all the registered sports in 2016, football included.

In the same vein as most sports mentioned in this thesis, Down syndrome football functions much like how a standard five-a-side football match would, with the same rules, but with some modifications, which can be found in the appendix<sup>vii</sup>. Athletes must have either “Down syndrome Trisomy 21” or “Down syndrome Mosaic” to be eligible to play the sport.

#### **4. Analysis of the Portuguese disabled football industry**

As was briefly mentioned in the introduction, according to many of the interview subjects, Portugal’s progress in disabled football is unreasonably behind the European standard, considering its position in non-impaired football. One interviewee that shared this opinion was José Pedro Soares, the Founder & Chief Association Executive of Integrated Dreams.

It is worth mentioning that this is a somewhat niche sport, practiced by and broadcasted to a small number of people, even amongst the disabled community. Bearing this information in mind, Portugal has had a somewhat rich history with the sport compared to most others:

- One of the first to set up a national Blind football team, which competed from 1997 until 2005.
- Participated in the 2015 IFCPF World Championships (International Federation of Cerebral Palsy Football) and the Summer Paralympic games four times (1984,

1992, 1996, and 2000) with a cerebral palsy football team (having stopped practicing the sport ever since 2016).

- One of the founding members of powerchair football and the Sports Union for athletes with Down syndrome.
- Hosted many disability football championships, including the European Blind Football Cup and the European Deaf Football Championships.

The Portuguese Federation of Sports for the disabled (FPDD) is a Multisport Federation, which actively pursues the development, at the national level, of various disabled sports, and is currently a member of the Portuguese Paralympic Committee. It is currently composed of four national sports associations by area of disability (*ANDD, Associação Nacional de desporto para a deficiência...*):

- ANDDI- Intellectual Disability
- ANDDVIS - Visual Disability
- LPDS- Hearing Impairment
- PCAND- Cerebral Palsy

There currently is no National Association for motor disability (ANDDEMOT) since it was extinct in 2017. Ever since then, the role of governing and developing the sports modalities that were not integrated into their respective sports federations has been FPDD's responsibility, which technically includes powerchair and amputee football, however, there is no current practice of this sport in the country.

It is worth pointing out that these individual associations serve the purpose of providing focused attention to their respective disabilities, with the same intent as FPDD- governing and developing

the sport. Coordinating the existing clubs/organizations that develop activities related to their area of disability, offering guidance, support, and even training, they likewise prepare the national teams for international competitions and organize a national and regional calendar of sports activities<sup>viii</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that the Portuguese Institute for Sports and Youth (IPDJ, *Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude*) currently adjudicates all licenses for coaching in disabled sports (there are no adapted football-specific licenses). To properly grant a coaching license, training benchmarks (called “*referenciais de formação*” (Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude 2020)) are required, these essentially summarize the entirety of the training program (for more information consult the link provided in appendix<sup>ix</sup>). However, there are currently no training benchmarks for adapted sports licenses, so there is no possibility of becoming a recognized disability sports coach. There are still, however, efforts by the FPDD and the different sports associations to provide proper training and guidance in the area.

To give a clearer picture of Portugal’s disabled football industry, it is necessary to address all relevant disabilities one by one. Starting with Blind football:

#### **4.1 Blind football in Portugal**

As alluded to before, Portugal has a somewhat accomplished history with visually-impaired football, however, according to Lia da Silva, one of our interviewees, currently working with ANDDVIS, after 2005 Blind football slowly disappeared from the country, and no clubs or associations regularly practiced the sport.

There has been, however, enormous progress in the area, thanks in part to the “*Futebol para todos*” 50.000-thousand-euro prize, awarded by the Portuguese Football Federation. This award,

created in 2018 as part of the UEFA HatTrick program<sup>x</sup>, aims to engage civil society on such pressing issues as combating discrimination and promoting social inclusion. Two projects related to Blind football have won this yearly prize:

- The ANDDVIS project “The game is coming” in 2019, which was created and developed in 2017, and involved 3 stages. The first phase involved the attendance of coaches from blind sports clubs, physical education teachers, students, and representatives from professional football clubs, among others, to a two-day workshop, which include both theory and hands-on sessions regarding Blind football training, all within FPF’s “*Cidade do Futebol*”, where they would provide the usage of equipment and space. The second stage of the project, scheduled for the first half of 2020, involved four demonstration sessions with visually impaired students and their peers from five different schools in the Lisbon district. The third phase involved two friendly matches featuring rising stars from the demonstration sessions and older players who used to or currently play Blind football (IBSA 2019). However, due to the pandemic, it was only possible to roll out the first phase of the project, nonetheless, according to our interviewee, many people showed up.
- The “*Futebol à vista de Todos*” project created and developed by *Sport Clube Conimbricense* (SCC), won the prize in 2020. To understand both the project and the club, Márcio André, the Blind football coach for the team, was interviewed for this thesis. As explained in FPF’s webpage (Federação Portuguesa do Futebol 2020), the project aimed to create a network within the community of visually impaired people, of all ages and sexes, also intending to promote various poles of development for the sport, in different regions of the country, through partnerships with clubs. The interviewee stated that he wishes to develop a team in Braga and Porto. SCC currently has two visually

impaired football, teams that do not compete at a national level, since there are no other professional Blind football teams in Portugal.

There have been many successful attempts to revitalize visually impaired football in the country, also in no small part due to the efforts made by IBSA, ANDDVIS, and SCC, who keep regular contact with each other, actively trying to develop the sport. However, there are several ways in which the sport isn't as developed as it could be, namely: the absence of more teams and a national competitive landscape, the lack of proper equipment and infrastructure (Even SCC, still has infrastructure issues, their ceiling is faulty and frequently has issues with rain, they don't have rebound panels "*bandas*" which are an important aspect of the sport for the security and dynamics of the game), the difficulty in identifying talent (due to an already low population, clubs and federations are also not capable of reaching these people more directly due to data protection laws).

It is also worth noting the conflicting accounts, on the number of clubs/associations/teams that practice visually impaired football at a grassroots level. It is possible to discern that, to our interviewee's knowledge (Lia da Silva), the only existing club that practices the sport is SCC. However, according to Joana Teixeira from *Futebol Clube do Porto* (FCP), *Sporting Clube de Portugal* (SCP) currently has a program for people with visual impairment. Likewise, according to a document shared by FPDD "*Futebol Desporto Planetário*", it states that one club *Sport Club União Torrense*, elementary schools in *Torres Vedras* Municipality and *Associação de Apoio à Pessoa Excecional do Algarve* (APEXA) are involved with FPD's, FPDD's and ANDDVI'S efforts in kick-starting blind football in the country.

## **4.2 Deaf football in Portugal**

In order to understand hearing-impaired football in Portugal, Mário Bonança, currently working with LPDS, was interviewed, where he gave various remarks about the state of the sport, and what are the necessary next steps for it to grow.

According to our interviewee, there are currently no clubs practicing deaf futsal, there are, however, various associations that practice it recreationally, with around 200 to 250 players. As stated by Mário, at the end of October, LPDS would host a national championship for the first time and are likewise planning on organizing a Portugal cup. The interview subject also mentioned that at least 4 teams would participate in their October championship, in a mostly easy-going and relaxed spirit.

To summarize the current level of engagement with the sport in Portugal: according to a document shared by FPDD “*Breve caracterização do futebo no âmbito do desporto para pessoas com deficiência*”, their calendar of competitions for 2016/2017 include 3 futsal tournaments. Furthermore, in January 2018 Sporting CP officially broadcasted their project to add deaf futsal as their 55<sup>th</sup> sport modality practiced by the club, which promptly competed in the Deaf Champions League in 2018; the project would be valid until 2021(Sporting Clube de Portugal 2018). There is also an association, the *Associação Portuguesa de Surdos* (APS), that regularly competes at an international level (European Deaf Champions League 2020) and others that aspire to follow in the same steps.

However, there are multiple issues with how the sport organizes itself at an institutional level, even though, there is no shortage of local communities that coordinate deaf football activities between themselves. Mário noted that LPDS’s annual budget does not reach 10.000 euros, so their competitions end up being mostly amateurish. And according to Mário, there is a lot of

quality training and knowledge even at a national level, however, the missing element is larger organizational oversight to put all the pieces together.

### **4.3 Intellectual impairment and Down syndrome football in Portugal**

ANDDI currently organizes sports championships, cups, tournaments, super cups, recreational championships every year throughout the country in about 22 sports, including 7-a-side soccer and futsal for both intellectual disability and Down syndrome players.

Countries typically practice and compete internationally with 11-a-side, however, António Costa, ANDDI's technical director, believes that it is too logistically complicated to find the extra players to participate in an already scarcely practiced sport, there are also additional issues with transportation and financing. "Even if we were to create a national team for 11v11 football, all players would be recruited from 7v7 teams" says the interviewee.

Fortunately, as opposed to most other disabled sports, intellectual impairment, and Down syndrome football benefit from a comprehensive national competitive framework, with the additional option of competing at both a recreational or a more elite level. For more detailed information regarding the sport's history in Portugal, how it functions operationally, its competitive framework, the obstacles it faces, etc. please refer to the document "*Futebol Deficiência Intelectual*" written by Henrique Calisto, Nuno Ferreira, and Paulo Reis.

Intellectual disability and Down syndrome football, benefit from being a somewhat widely practiced sport and having a well-functioning competitive landscape (at least when compared to its counterpart's blind, deaf, and motor disability football). However, as stated by (Calisto, Ferreira, and Reis 2020), there are still many handicaps the sport deals with today, to name a few: lack of institutional support; lackluster logistical conditions (even the largest most qualified

team (Clube Gaia), trains for only an hour and a half on a Sunday morning); significant difficulty in finding and recruiting talent; scarcity of financial support (even though a large part of the work is done through volunteering effort, institutional aid, sponsorship, and other income are still insufficient); competitive framework lacks “rigidity” (only includes one division); little and infrequent media promotion; etc.

## **5. International Best Practices**

The following section provides a series of case studies drawn from multiple sources, that will further address the research question. It is crucial to bear in mind that there are countless examples like these, that provide valuable wisdom on how to develop the sport, for examples of best use cases in disabled football, it is recommend perusing Dr. Paul Kitchin and Mr. Stephen Bloomer’s *“An investigation into the engagement of disabled people in European football.”*(2017)<sup>xi</sup>,

### **5.1 Royal Belgian Football Association’s “G Football” and the “Nobody Offside”**

#### **objective: Belgium**

The growth and trajectory of disabled football in Belgium is widely considered as one of the biggest success stories in all adapted sports. The project has developed to the point where up to 70 teams for adults and children participated in their 2016 tournament (Kitchin and Bloomer 2017), which is hosted yearly and is now in its 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary since its conception. The tournament is strongly advertised and counts with the participation of many professional football players, coaches, and professional referees, “supported by a strong communications campaign comprising a promotional movie, TV and press, VIPs, and a social media campaign, all of which is described as ‘landslide coverage’”(Kitchin and Bloomer 2017). Many of Belgium’s

professional football teams now encompass at least one disability team, and the growth of the sport rivals the fast-growing women's game and in 2017/18, the Association set the objective of, having at least one in ten football clubs in Belgium offering disability football, allowing players to play within 25km of their homes, by 2020 (UEFA 2018).

The project includes people of physical disability, cerebral palsy, and visual impairment, although created exclusively for intellectual disability. Dr. Paul Kitchin and Mr. Stephen Bloomer assert that, the key to "G Football's" success is its reliance on bottom-up strategies, and the growth of amateur clubs, all of which was in part possible due to: promotion of the notion that setting up a "G Football" team is feasible (check full list of advices, tips, and a checklist to correctly plan the establishment of a team, given by the KBVB<sup>xii</sup>). CSR projects of this kind will also be met with help from many Belgian cities, that are actively encouraging the creation of new teams. One such interviewee from Kitchin and Bloomer's final report, said that "The difficulty with international or pan-national structures [is that] many of the ideas and propositions are top-down, not fitting in with local structures, systems and ideas.". This is in keeping with the sentiment shared by many of the people interviewed for this thesis; Luís Alcobia stressed the importance of first including people in recreational activities and providing them with more "relaxed" opportunities to practice the sport.

Also, worth mentioning that it is unclear if the KBVB associated the name "G-Football" with their disabled football development project, as referenced in (Kitchin and Bloomer 2017). In the KBVB's guide for disabled football (the "Nobody Offside" project) the word was never specifically used. It was, however, applied in the Royal Dutch Football Association's (KNVB) guide to disabled football "G-Football (Disability Football) guide".

## **5.2 The Romanian Football Federation: Romania**

The Romanian Football Federation's (RFF) recent efforts in promoting and developing both blind and intellectual disability football, could serve as a guiding light for other national football associations/federations venturing to improve the sport. Diana Pirciu, currently with the RFF, was interviewed for this thesis, where she gave some remarks about the lead-up to the Federation's recent corporate social responsibility (CSR) project, and some of the struggles they still deal with.

Led by the desire to provide these disabled communities with the appropriate opportunities to practice football, they started the project in 2015/2016 with objective of establishing a national blind and intellectual impairment football team. They promptly contacted an already existing club based in Bucharest, included them under the umbrella of the Federation's national teams and provided them with the necessary resources (Clothes, ball, etc.), even going so far as to build a pitch with all the correct infrastructure (partially by using the money given by the UEFA Football and Social Responsibility).

What is especially significant is not only the Federation's guiding philosophy but also their method of approach. Contacting large NGO's (like UNICEF) and seeking their help with reaching out to disabled communities (one of the biggest issues the sport faces today, as mentioned before, is finding enough talent); soliciting the help of government officials to bring together the 20 existing minority groups through football competition; reaching out to schools for the blind as part of their scouting effort; regularly associating existing CSR programs to their national team for awareness purposes (since their national team is their biggest product); and allocating around 60 thousand euros per year for disability football.

The interviewee states that the biggest initial challenge was the buy-in from the federation, which was in part solved by showcasing the possible value-added impact of such CSR projects

(mainly a data and research-driven effort), the second challenge was the media buy-in, and the third challenge is HR management, which persists today (not enough people dedicated towards these issues)

### **5.3 The English FA**

After talking to James Watkins, current Para Talent Pathway Manager for the English FA, it was clear that at its core, the English Football Association (FA) has a “football for all” message that really pushes the envelope in further developing CSR projects to their fullest potential. With over 2000 disability-specific football teams, and plenty of grassroots provisions; these efforts started around 20 years ago, in 2001. According to FA figures, around 108,800 disabled people practice football regularly (The English FA 2015).

The interviewee believes that England’s organization and structure of the different county Football Associations may justify its incredible offer in the sport. The country is split up into 45 different county FAs, and in most of these associations an annual “England talent day” is hosted, where a recruitment network is built in the area and any potential stakeholders are sought after (i.e., club officials, representatives from local councils, potential players, etc.). And if a certain person with a disability is not mentally or physically prepared for more elite competition, he or she is referred to a more grassroots program, to possibly develop these competencies. Local FAs operate mostly independently, with the main association providing strategic leadership and financial support to community development projects (including CSR and women’s related programs). They currently have at least a dozen full-time staff and more part-time staff, dedicated towards corporate social responsibility.

Watkins also explained that the FA initially encouraged communication between special needs schools and clubs, having, for instance, local clubs and coaches go into schools and deliver a session on the topic, which proved to be very popular. At bottom, the interviewee stated their initial efforts were to develop awareness and education-based courses.

Needless to say, there are still several issues the association deals with. There is a need to have more disability-specific training in football coaching in England, which the interviewee states could be a job for the larger international federations “there should be a level II or III type [coaching license], with more disabled football-specific training; and since at a national level there aren’t enough coaches interested in this area of football, maybe organizations like IBSA could provide these types of licenses”. The FA also has the same issues with outreach and networking, and due to data protection laws, they can’t reach as many people as they would like. They’ve developed a recruitment network nationally to help with the issue. They’ve also noticed that about 70% of their player base already play for a regular team, so these people are hidden away for the most part; and some of them prefer to not disclose their disability.

## **6. Discussion and recommendations**

This thesis set out to explore the best offering of disabled football found at an international level. However, as previously explained, this has been done in the much larger context of improving and increasing the opportunities to practice and compete in the sport, found nationally. It is important to bear in mind, when doing a best practices analysis of any kind that context is king, and not at the exclusion of adapted football, “Despite a wealth of best practice existing, at this stage many of these developments have sprung up from the grassroots level. Therefore the ability to take a successful program from one National Association and Licensed Club and drop it into another context is limited”(Kitchin and Bloomer 2017). There are, nonetheless, several valuable

lessons to be learned; including an awareness of the countless number of ways an institution like the Portuguese Football Federation can influence the tide of a sport like adapted football.

If there is an interest in further developing this sport to encompass people from all walks of life, then it is crucial to communicate the potential added value of disabled football to any stakeholders, be it the Portuguese Football Federation, regional associations, or large clubs; these efforts should be mainly research and data-driven. Several studies will be annexed<sup>xiii</sup>, which will serve as a testament to the significance of physical exercise and sport for the health and social integration of otherwise marginalized communities. “During the last two decades, large emphasis has been placed on the importance of physical exercise for people with (...) severe and profound developmental disabilities” (Allen, 1980; Allison, Faith, & Franklin, 1995; Basile, Motta, & Allison, 1995; Brown, 1991; Brown & Lawton, 1986; Brown & Siegel, 1988; Cramer, Nieman, & Lee, 1991; Fernhall, Tymeson, Millar, & Burkett, 1989; MacMahon & Gross, 1987, as stated in Lancioni et al. 1998).

Admittedly, to achieve the desirable conditions in disability football and support the aforementioned benefits, there is a great deal of work to be done at a global level.

Internationally, UEFA works in a way akin to Portugal, with its Football and Social responsibility strategic approach, dealing with 11 disability football federations, while none of them being part of its core operations. With this lack of conciliation of organizations, there is an absence of a more structured organization of the sport, without a regulatory entity that formalizes all rules and oversees all competitions; limiting a given country’s progress, since there is no one institution to look towards. And in the true spirit of inclusion, our interviewee José Pedro Soares estimates that the next big step for disability football, both in Portugal and also internationally, is

for the sport to be included and treated, in FPF or FIFA, as any other adaptation of football, like beach football and futsal.

With these considerations in mind, the next few paragraphs will list several recommendations on how to improve the conditions of disability football, that will hopefully make sense given the context throughout the dissertation. These recommendations will be split between the promotion of organic and cohesive growth of the sport (from the ground up), and secondly at a larger, institutional level (where top-down strategies may not meet with local needs):

- Some of the best success stories came from countries that understood the concept of grassroots projects, like the English FA, the Royal Belgian Football Association, the Irish FA (see appendix for additional information)<sup>xiv</sup>. For large Portuguese Institutions, like the FPF, it is therefore important to encourage small-scale projects and education/awareness programs, namely:
  - Actively pursuing the demystification of the sport, through the use of social media pages and news outlets contacts; creation of a guide to disabled football (similar to the “Nobody Offside” document) where general rules, tips, and advice are listed as well as a catalog of contacts and checklist for small-scale associations to look towards; promote cooperation between clubs with disability teams, to exchange valuable info, and to organizing exhibitions matches; mediating and endorsing communication between young disabled people/people with newly acquired disabilities (in rehab) and football coaches, players, or associations to deliver seminars on the sport (improve awareness).
  - Hosting events between both potential stakeholders (companies, NGOs, organizations, and club/association officials), much like the “England Talent

Day”, with the additional effort of looking for aspiring disabled athletes.

Convince hesitant companies to either provide financial support, or even seek sponsorship deals, as a way to market their CSR efforts, or as a tax-deductible expense (Márcio André stated that, he once came up with a project in Brazil to reach out to companies and ask them to dedicate 1% of the money they spend in tax to a disabled football club, which would then be entirely deductible).

- Scaling up projects like the “*Futebol para Todos*” prize.
  - Seeking the help of municipalities and regional associations in the: organization of events and projects, scouting for disabled players, ensuring the proper facilities are put in place, etc.
  - Encourage more accessibility to stadiums and attendance of disabled fans, for regular matches.
- Although the development of grassroots programs is crucial, there is nonetheless a lot of work to be done at an institutional level, as was the case with the Romanian Football Federation (building new pitches, developing national teams, and providing the appropriate equipment) and the Sepp Herberger Foundation (in which the right infrastructure was first put in place, check appendix for additional information)<sup>xv</sup>. To name a few:
    - Extending the rehabilitation process to include a community-based sport like disabled football. The prevention of secondary conditions when treating newly acquired disabilities is an increasingly important issue, “Health promotion activities, particularly increased participation in exercise, can have an enormous positive impact on reducing secondary conditions”(Rimmer

2012), as such, there is an opportunity to capitalize on a patient's recovery from rehabilitation as a catalyst to start an exercise program (particularly a community-based sport like football). Furthermore, providing a chance for rehabilitation professionals and fitness experts (football coaches) to interact, hopefully creating a more complete understanding of disability-friendly exercise, and general exercise safety guidelines. This would additionally reduce the difficulty of finding potential players. For a more detailed description of the importance of transitioning from rehabilitation to sport, please refer to James H. Rimmer's article "Getting Beyond the Plateau: Bridging the Gap Between Rehabilitation and Community-Based Exercise" in the appendix<sup>xvi</sup>.

- Organize and streamline the licensing process for impaired sports coaches. Make sure the appropriate training benchmarks are created by consulting: the national associations (ANDDVIS, ANDDI, etc.); the international federations (refer to the international standards for coaching<sup>xvii</sup>); and the IPDJ. Currently, the course is discontinued and if coaches want to practice at an elite level, they are unable to; the last time the course was realized was in 2012 or 2013.
- Have a more structured organization of the sport with an overarching regulatory entity that formalizes rules and oversees competitions. José Pedro Soares' suggestion is to have FPF serve as the main governing body (on account of its larger financial capacity and influence) and letting each association (ANDDVIS, ANDDI, etc.) articulate the sport's necessities and rules. Fix the legal framework surrounding the game, since it lacks rigor and

clarity with regards to the regulation of competitions (Calisto, Ferreira, and Reis 2020)

- Dedicate a larger amount of workforce towards these efforts, preferably people with experience and history with the federation. Identify talented staff that is dedicated and passionate about the project.
- Increase participation in international competitions. Sanction existing teams and possibly establish them as the national team (much like the Romanian Football Federation). Provide the necessary equipment, infrastructure, and funds.

There are plenty of opportunities out there to add real value within these marginalized communities, by offering a chance at practicing football. Ensuring close cooperation with key partners (i.e., disability sports associations, non-profit organizations, football clubs, etc.); furnishing clubs with practical information and financial aid; underpinning best practices as a blueprint for avoiding past mistakes and applying smart strategies used previously, etc. These are some of the more obvious and logical suggestions that can be used by all committed stakeholders.

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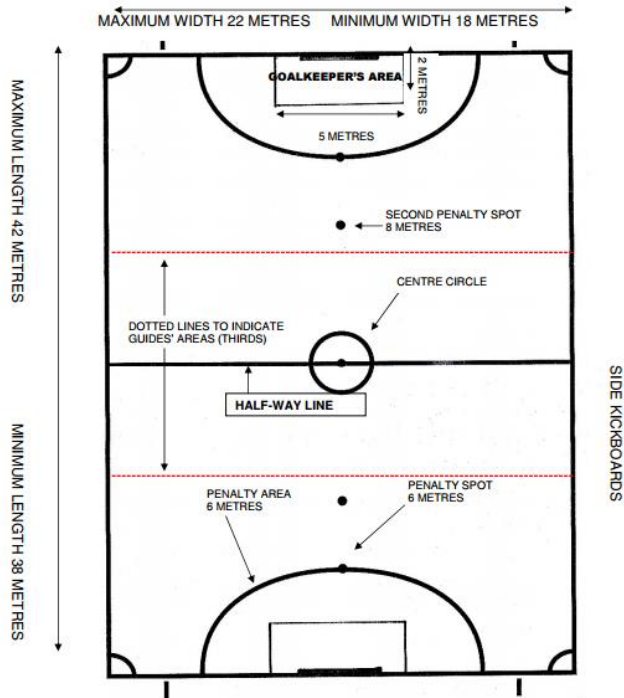
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# **Appendixes**

<sup>I</sup> Appendix 1: Pitch Diagram (Found in IBSA's



<sup>ii</sup> Appendix 2: Link to list of approved equipment

<https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/rules-and-downloads/>

<sup>iii</sup> Appendix 3: Link for IBSA's classification rules

<https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/rules-and-downloads/>

<sup>iv</sup> Appendix 4: Link for IBSA B1, B2 and B3 rulebook

<https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/rules-and-downloads/>

<sup>v</sup> Appendix 5: Link for DIFA's rulebook webpage

<https://difa.org/documents/rules/>

vi Appendix 6: Link for ParaFootball’s webpage

(<https://www.parafootball.com/>)

vii Appendix 7: Rules for Down syndrome Futsal on the SU-DS website “TRISOME GAMES FLORENCE 2016 FUTSAL RULES AND REGULATIONS”

(<https://www.su-ds.org/sports/rules-regulations/>)

viii Appendix 8: illustration with national competitions for all areas of disability, currently practiced in Portugal (Table found in “BREVE CARACTERIZAÇÃO DO FUTEBOL NO ÂMBITO DO DESPORTO PARA PESSOAS COM DEFICIÊNCIA” document provided and created by FPDD)

**Calendarização da modalidade época 2016/2017 – competições Nacionais**

Competições	Área de Deficiência		Variante
Campeonato de Portugal	ANDDI	Intelectual	Futsal
Campeonato Nacional de Iniciados			
Torneio Nacional Adaptado			
3º Encontro Nacional Actividade Adaptada			
23ª Taça de Portugal			
4º Encontro Actividade Adaptada			
Campeonato Nacional com 15 jornadas incluindo as fases Regionais Norte, Centro, Sul e Ilhas			
Fase Final Campeonato Nacional / Troféu Prof. João Pardal			
X TIFAA - TORNEIO INTERNACIONAL ADAPTADO	ANDDI	Intelectual	Futebol de 7
Campeonato Nacional			
9ª Taça de Portugal	PCAND	Paralisia Cerebral	Futebol de 7
Campeonato de Portugal			
Campeonato Nacional 6 jornadas	LPDS	Surdos	Futsal
Torneio de Futsal LPDS/APS			
Torneio de Qualificação DCL			

ix Appendix 9: Link for explanation of training benchmarks “referenciais de formação”

(<https://www.dgadr.gov.pt/formacao/o-sistema-nacional-de-qualificacoes-snj/elementos-essenciais-do-sistema-nacional-de-qualificacoes#referenciais>)

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<sup>x</sup> Appendix 10: Link for UEFA HatTrick program details

(<https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/football-development/hattrick/>)

<sup>xi</sup> Appendix 11: link to Dr. Paul Kitchin and Mr. Stephen Bloomer’s final report

([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354\\_The\\_engagement\\_of\\_disabled\\_people\\_in\\_European\\_football\\_Club\\_analysis\\_Belgium](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354_The_engagement_of_disabled_people_in_European_football_Club_analysis_Belgium))

<sup>xii</sup> Appendix 12: check the link for a document created by the Royal Belgian Football Association, with information about their “Nobody Offside” project

([https://www.ifcpf.com/static/upload/raw/a2b6e8b3-da5d-4f67-9cfa-2a01ae58f12c/Nobody\\_Offside\\_internet.pdf](https://www.ifcpf.com/static/upload/raw/a2b6e8b3-da5d-4f67-9cfa-2a01ae58f12c/Nobody_Offside_internet.pdf))

<sup>xiii</sup> Appendix 13: Giulio E. Lancioni and Mark F. O’Reilly’s “A Review of Research on Physical Exercise with People with Severe and Profound Developmental Disabilities”

(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9836319/>)

Cheri Blauwet and Stuart E. Willick’s “The Paralympic Movement: Using Sports to Promote Health, Disability Rights, and Social Integration for Athletes With Disabilities”

(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23174549/>)

<sup>xiv</sup> Appendix 14: Dr. Paul Kitchin and Mr. Stephen Bloomer’s section on “Irish Football Association: Northern Ireland” (Section 5: Phase 2)

([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354\\_The\\_engagement\\_of\\_disabled\\_people\\_in\\_European\\_football\\_Club\\_analysis\\_Belgium](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354_The_engagement_of_disabled_people_in_European_football_Club_analysis_Belgium))

<sup>xv</sup> Appendix 15: Dr. Paul Kitchin and Mr. Stephen Bloomer’s section on “Sepp Herberger Foundation: Germany” (Section 5: Phase 2)

([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354\\_The\\_engagement\\_of\\_disabled\\_people\\_in\\_European\\_football\\_Club\\_analysis\\_Belgium](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320353354_The_engagement_of_disabled_people_in_European_football_Club_analysis_Belgium))

<sup>xvi</sup> Appendix 16: James H. Rimmer’s article “Getting Beyond the Plateau: Bridging the Gap Between Rehabilitation and Community-Based Exercise”

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[\(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23174550/\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23174550/)

<sup>xvii</sup> Appendix 17: Special Olympics “Football Coaching Guide”

[\(<https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/coaching-guides/Sports-Essentials-Football-Coaching-Guide-2021.pdf>\)](https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/coaching-guides/Sports-Essentials-Football-Coaching-Guide-2021.pdf)

IBSA’s “Manual de Treino de Futebol para Cegos IBSA; Um Guia para Principiantes”

[\(<https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/rules-and-downloads/>\)](https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/rules-and-downloads/)