

**BALTIC FOOTBALL COACH EDUCATION
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

Nordplus Adult project

“Baltic coach education strategy today – successful goals tomorrow”

Project number: NPAD-2021/10128

**Project partner institutions:
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Abstract

Football (soccer) is the most popular sport in Eastern Europe. It's played in several leagues and tournaments, the most famous of which are the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europe League. National teams from Eastern Europe are also often quite successful in international competitions, however only Latvia has gained a chance to play in UEFA Europe League once, nor Estonia, nor Lithuania.

Like many in other countries, our – Baltic state children spend the majority of their waking hours thinking about sports, playing sports, talking about sports, spending time with the friends who they made while playing sports. There are so many positive activities in which young people can engage — theatre, music, part-time jobs, student government, and after-school clubs, just to name a few. Sports are just one of them. But for our children, football occupy a central place in their personal identity.

The project “Baltic coach education strategy today – successful goals tomorrow” (project number NPAD- 2021/10128) partner countries Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have worked and came to conclusion about the necessary steps to improve the Baltic region football development, particularly based in coach education.

Must be admitted that project have been carried out through the time of pandemic, when restrictions influenced not only the travelling but also the abilities of project partners.

Coach Education plays an integral part in the development structure of football. No matter how many matches one has played at the highest level, coach education adds experience and gives the finer details in coaching. Coach education ensures the future quality of football, which lies to a large extent in

the hands of qualified coaches, who play a vital role in the development of players and the game. It provides a coach with the appropriate tools and knowledge for development to become a professional in the World of Football.

Language usage issue

A specified terminology helps the coach to give their game model meaning for their players and a tool in the everyday coaching process. Language, and consequently the language of football coaching, can be referred to as a connection between a sender and a receiver who communicate with each other through specified codes that carry meaning in form of speech, writing or other means.

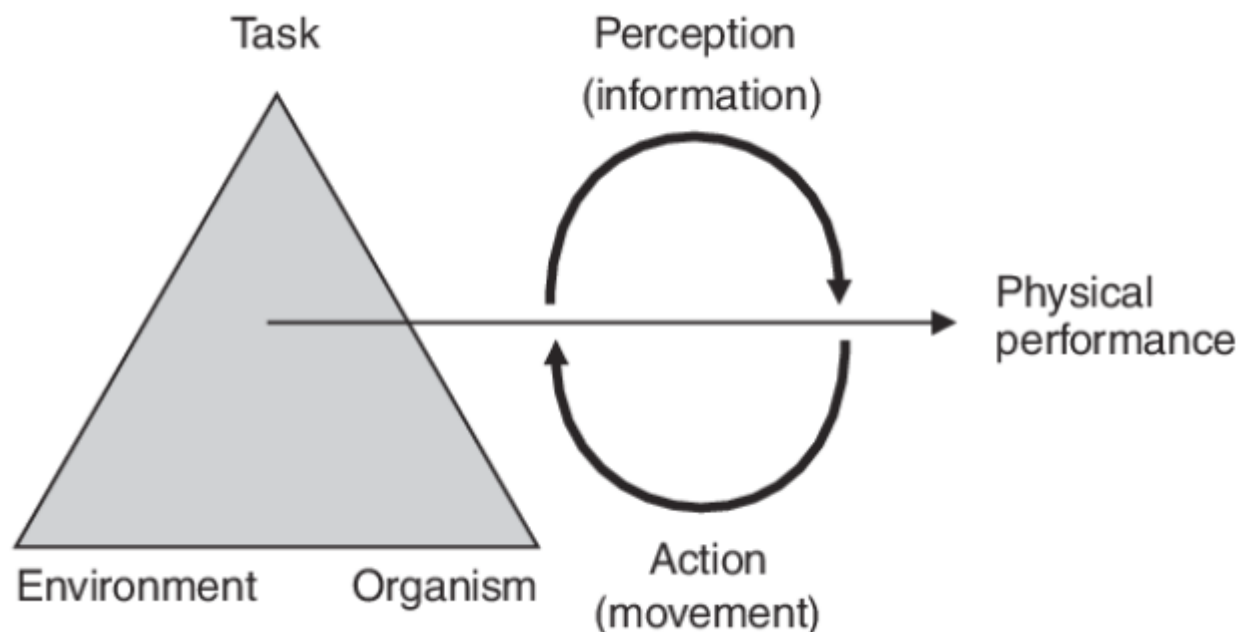
In football and, especially in football coaching, language is very important to convey relevant information for the purpose of the game and of leading a group. Language is a very important tool to either improve or entertain the players. Coaches, but also clubs/academies often purposefully create a parallel language to utilize a different meaning or different codes in order to enhance this effect. The specificity of this language is also affected by such factors as actions related to training and competition, outcomes of such actions, prior understanding, cultural context and interpersonal relations.

On the other hand, football tends to sit in its own lexical circle of language because of this, a fundamental objective language is not clearly defined within football. Having a clear and defined language inside a football club leads to better communication and understanding, thus making everything simpler – in an ideal world. At times, especially in the public discourse, the lack of an objective football language underneath this introduced terminology can be harmful. Yet, this terminology and changed description of football actions can be very beneficial and is the norm, not the exception.

Coaching is about the transfer of knowledge. With more clarity in terms of understanding the coach and / or the game, the player should be able to transfer knowledge easier to his performance. Considering that communication

is not just verbal, but – especially within the context of football – is derived from the interaction between the laws of the game and the means of the game (ball, player and opponent), is always contextual.

Also it shares a lot of relational information due to its physical nature and owns a non-verbal language of itself, so to say. Whereas non-verbal communication in everyday life can differ in detail from culture to culture, football has a non-verbal communication that stems from the laws of the game and the possibilities of the means of the game themselves. So, the laws of the game create the context of our language, the physical nature of the game will make it always relational to the motorical output and the means of the game will always be the ones communicating and, thus, interacting, very often reciprocally.



Comparing this to the graphic above, we can change the task with the game, the perception/information as the one-way-equivalent of the two-way-process of communication/interaction (of information) and the action/movement is the

relation to the physical performance or reality of the game. A very simple example could be the following: if a player lifts his head, looks far into a direction and then starts to extend his leg backwards a lot, he will probably hit a long ball towards this direction. In doing so, he transfers information non-verbally to every observer speaking this language, mainly the Opponents and Team Mates. In order to exclude the opponents from this language, a different language can be created within the team.

It is easy to do so if the information receiver and information sender speaks the same language, but in Baltic states often the football language is bilingual or even multilingual. And difficulties appears even in verbal daily training process as there are Russian language users who does not speak states language, ones who speaks only states official language and foreign players which communication language is English, all this of course makes the training process quite hard.

For example, in Latvia the training events of coaches in regions are organised very rare, hardly never. Trainings a few years ago mostly were organised in Russian language not Latvian, but now most of the time in English – elder coaches do not speak English at all. As acknowledged all three Baltic state coaches training process often is carried out bilingually - in certain states language or in Russian, education and training process in state language still is a problem in all three Baltic states. As all process also the football is related with political situation in a country. Those gaining education after the collapse of Soviet Union have learned English language as 3rd foreign language, but those coaches who gained education in Soviet Union most of the time lacks the English language knowledge, what forbids to perceive professional communication in English, impacting not only educational process but also effective daily work with foreign English speaking, main coach, instructor, player or sponsor. The problem is reveal also in research about the quality of

communication in professional (sport) foreign language study course in Latvian Academy of Sport Education.

The study aimed at evaluating the quality of professional (Sport) Foreign Language courses. The object of the research was to study process and results, subject: quality management in assuring and improving the quality of the course, respondents: 210 students. The model, developed, consisted of 7 quality blocks (aims, language learning activities, microclimate, student learning activities, lecturer pedagogic activities, assessment and results) and 6 quality criteria (clarity, adequacy, individual work, cooperation, deep approach, variety). The results showed: the quality of the course is adequate, because mean quality indicators of all quality blocks and according to all criteria was above 50%, yet deeper analysis of quality indicators revealed that quality could be improved by paying greater helping students to take greater responsibility about their learning and promoting deep learning. The conclusions of the research: lecturers should learn to be student learning managers, not only good pedagogues and foreign language and Sports specialists. Also professional sphere, involving Federations of different Sports, could help to raise the quality of the course by outlining main requirements for and evaluating the quality of young specialists in the sphere of communication in foreign language.

However, we do not know will the English language knowledge develops through the studying period and how many of students remain in their profession (related to sports field) and what is the percentag of those who spoke English among them, as well as if the students was full time or part time students, the age of the students would also be meaningful factor. Nevertheless 50 % indicator is not sufficient result. The hihger education institutions must pay more attention to the meaning of professional development by language learning.

Lack of coaches

In all three Baltic countries, there is a lack of professional coaches/instructors of training – the number of games played is not adequate to available number of coaches. For instance, at the moment there are 255 coaches having LFF C licence, 150 –UEFA B licence, 119-UEFA A, 46 – UEFA Pro, 26-LFF GK C, 11 –UEFA GK B, 11-UEFA GK A, 24 –UEFA Elite Youth, 15-UEFA Futsal B, 18 – UEFA Futsal C, but the number of games played – countable in thousands.

Must be admitted that statistics regarding UEFA coach licences is inaccessible, for instance regarding Estonia, statistics shows the data about year 2013, but current number of coaches about 840. Lithuania according to available information stands among Latvia and Estonia. That testifies the lack of activity of sport science.

However, questioned coaches, sport managers, municipality leaders acknowledged many factors affecting the prestigious of coach profession.

The reason is that sports are demanding too much of their time and more effort than they're willing to give and the other is unqualified coaches. Those are the two things that really stood out in the survey.

The other factor is the number of hours. Many coaches, as they've gotten older and perhaps wiser, just don't want to put in those kinds of hours. They don't want to give up their evenings and weekends, and the salaries in coaching are very poor. However, is that many of these individuals, although familiar with a sport, may have little experience or training in the fundamentals of coaching.

Survey respondents acknowledge, that utilizing teachers who may lack coaching skills is not the solution, however highlighting that there's almost as good a probability of getting a good coach by selecting a non-teacher coach as selecting a teacher-coach, most of them acknowledging that's all based on a false assumption that because a coach is licensed as a teacher he is going to be qualified as a coach. It's pretty obvious to people that training as a good math teacher does not necessarily qualify you to be a good coach.

In that situation, there are two ways you Baltic football can get the walk-on coaches to meet (coaching) requirements. First, pay them more for coaching. Coaching wages are tremendously low on a per-hour basis. The other way is to provide scholarships for walk-on coaches (to attend certification programs). In other words, paying the registration fee.

The No. 1 reason for the precipitous decline in sports officials around the Baltic can be summarized in a single word — meanness. The reason that finding good, qualified coaches has been the No. 1 challenge facing athletic administrators around the nation for six of the past seven years can also be summarized in a single word — meanness.

The meanness to which sports officials are being subjected is illogical. The meanness with which coaches are being treated might make even less sense. We provide plenty of lip-service to wanting our young people to be involved in positive activities and be mentored by caring adults, but then we harass and torment — we're mean — the very people who are trying to provide them with those opportunities.

Corona virus is not the only pandemic afflicting our nation in nowadays. We are plagued by meanness, too. Too many parents are hateful, not helpful. Too many fans are fanatical, not friendly. The behaviour of too many involved

in youth and interscholastic sports is silly, not supportive. Good people who genuinely care about young men and women are choosing not to coach. The adverse impacts on their mental health, their sanity and their emotional well-being are not worth it.

Why? They are being subjected to too much meanness. Good people who sincerely enjoy the chance to spend a few hours after work providing young people with the same opportunities that they had to play games, are hanging up their whistles as referees, or never picking one up.

Different approaches after the collapse of the Soviet Union

The football in Baltic countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have developed unevenly, nevertheless applying several approaches among a state.

Let's take Lithuanian as an example. Feyenoord and Dutch Connections FC, known as a youth football development program in the Greater Toronto Area, coaches travels to Lithuania to provide around 60 Lithuanian children with professional training sessions according to the Feyenoord football vision, which is being used at the Feyenoord Academy, providing opportunity for local coaches to learn from the training method used by Feyenoord coaches. In this way contributing not only the technical development of players, but also to the personal skills of the local coaches involved.

At the same time, Lithuanian Sports University (LSU) has acquired the modern coach training methodology "Auri – Dohm" developed by the long-term captain of the Lithuanian national football team Mr. Aurelijus Skarbalius. From now on, LSU football students will be able to rely on the training system

for children and youth developed in Denmark and adapted to Lithuanian football. Mr. Skarbalius, who played in Denmark for many years and now works as a coach, developed the “Auri – Dohm” methodology together with the famous Danish specialist Carsten Dohm, willing to train future coaches in Lithuania according to modern programs created in the countries where football is extremely popular, striving for football specialization students to be fully prepared to start a coaching career in children’s and youth academies and professional clubs.

Must be admitted, that there are few big footballing heroes in Lithuania like Edgaras Jankauskas, who currently is the manager of the country’s national team. The powerful striker made a name for himself in Europe for being able to bully opposing defenders. He spent his career moving around some of the biggest teams in Europe, which included stints in Spain with Real Sociedad and France with Nice. However, his most successful stay in football came between 2002 and 2005 with Portuguese giants FC Porto. Jose Mourinho brought in the striker, and while he was often coming from the bench, he played a big part in one of the biggest stories in European football history. He was part of the famous Porto team that won the Champions League in 2003-04, and also picked up a UEFA Cup winners medal in the previous season. Jankauskas also is part of a restrict group of players who have played for the two most successful Portuguese clubs, Benfica and Porto. During his career, Jankauskas won a wide selection of titles, including the Primeira Liga on two occasions, the Scottish Cup and Baltic Cup. He was named Lithuanian Player of the Year on five occasions and is now the man leading his home nation into the next generation as manager.

As some nations have already achieved success with player development and coaching education program, the Latvian Football Federation is undertaking a development in football progression. Although Latvia are not known as a

footballing powerhouse, and to many no players of Latvian origin are well-known to football fans across the world, the English Premier League still fondly remembers the Southampton FC striker Marian Pahars. After a fantastic playing career spanning 16 years, Mr. Pahars became a pioneer within the Latvian game moving to play in the Premier League, and more importantly, is known as one of his nation's greatest footballers to light the fire in young Latvian players. Now working as Technical Director in the Latvian Football Federation, Mr. Pahars knows exactly what it takes to assist the next crop of talents within the country to progress in their careers both in the National Team and abroad, and as a result, the importance placed on coaching education and performance staff within the country has grown. As part of this progression within the Football Federation of Latvia football coaches, fitness coaches, sport scientists, physios or physical therapists aspiring to work at the cutting edge of game developing the next generation of players need to be familiar with nutrition, psychology, injury prevention, strength, training methodology and conditioning development.

Interesting fact about the reason why football, the most popular sport in Estonia between the two world wars became marginalized in the conditions of Soviet annexation is that, the Soviet sport system set winning medals at the Olympic Games as its priority. Estonia with its population of more than one million could not be successful in football which despite official priorities was the most popular sport in the Soviet Union and that is why Estonia used its resources elsewhere. The changes in the status of football were also affected by the Soviet terror and genocide as well as a considerable immigration wave from the East threatening to leave Estonians a minority in their own land. To make a difference between themselves and the immigrants Estonians identified themselves as a nation that doesn't play football. Of course it has changed and Estonians do play football, but the key word still is "small population".

Probably due to the states locations, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia have tried to approach Nordic states playing manner, coaching education methods ,the way of thinking – sharing it's experience to other Baltic countries, for example, Lithuanian coaches overtakes the good experience of Latvians goal - keeper training methods, which Latvians overtake from Estonians in coach training events. But it does not mean that Lithuanians are weaker than Latvians in football training, as for instance the Lithuania is represented in UEF, where nor Latvia, Estonia is.

Such a variety of techniques and approaches applied by Baltic state coaches might make think that it is the reason why the Baltic does not have common football development level, however it is not the case. That would be the sign of communism, as was in the Soviet Union. The unique of each country, many-sidedness and its football traditions as well as possibility to choose what approach to apply to train one's players is a positive factor, justifying the Baltic coach opportunities to choose the best education model for their players, and a chance to prove oneself as a professional.

The unity among the Baltic states, regarding football development, could be reached with the raising of number of coaches, which have gained UEFA A category licence. What conversely, relates the need of common sport politic financing model, which would declare the amount of salary depending from the coach category licence level.

The Coach recruitment

Motivation is the integral part of every work. First of all, the main thing about successful team, club or a project is team management. The staff selection is the most important thing – the staff must be selected from persons who care

about football, who likes what they do and have enough quality and knowledge. Recruiting is very important. Most of the clubs administrations acknowledged that thing that they evaluate the most about coaches is inspiration. They must be inspired about what they are doing. Person needs to be happy to work well. Coaches need to single out the possible future talents. Every coach has to have confirmed plan for every season. The success of this plan is main performance measurement of the coach.

The best motivation is always a salary bonus. Second thing about working along with coaches is the motivation to get a chance to play at high level tournaments. For example, If coach is able to bring the team to win national youth championship, he is granted to participate in good European tournament. Sometimes this is even bigger motivation than the salary. Coaches are desperately waiting for a chance to play against best teams in Europe and not the local ones. But for a pity such bonus system also cripples the football, as it is affordable only in rich municipalities and regions, and therefore the poorest regions and municipalities are not competitive able, remaining without talented coaches and players, concentrating talents to big cities, and prohibiting weaker regions to develop and remain the existing number of people living in certain area.

National interes es are clearly revealed in the development of infrastructure, among three Baltic states only Latvia does not have National league field, which effects not only psychological perception, but also the quality of internationally appropriate coach training process, player training quality, attendance of games, popularization of football etc.

Lobby of other sport games must be interrupted in the national level.

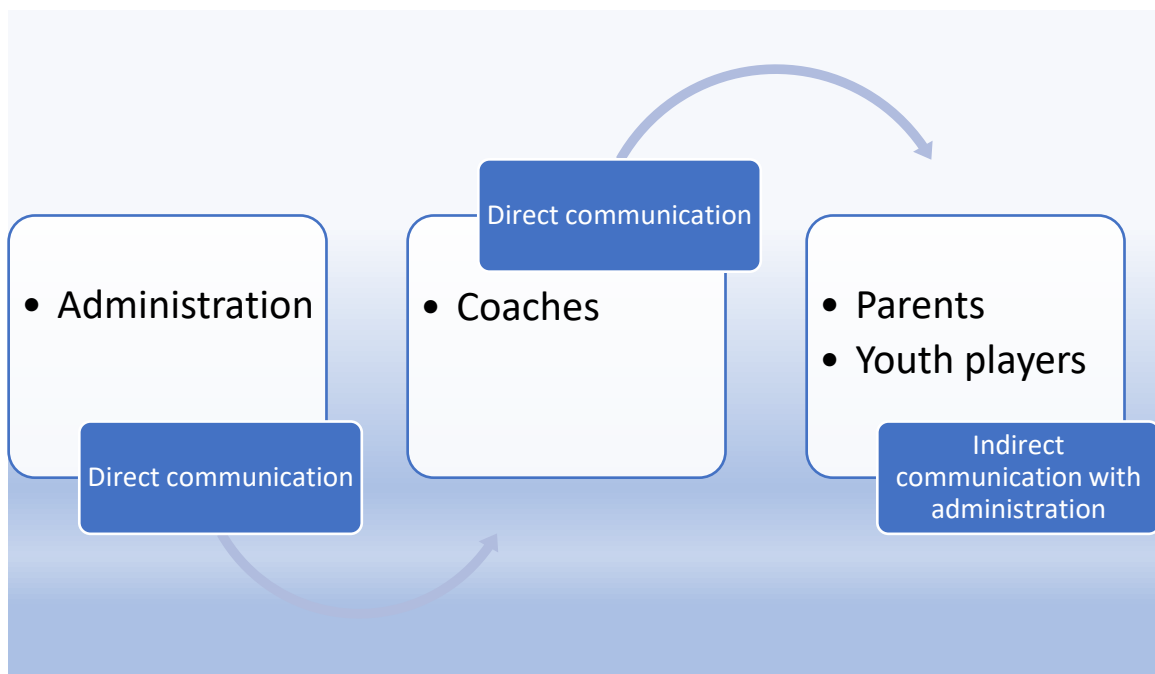
As the Federation of Football from similar organisations in Latvia is being considered to be the most financed organisation, the state leaves all

football related inquires to be carried out by the LFF (Latvian Federation of Football). Of course regions with better financial situation supports local football clubs, even ensure abroad tournaments, but if the municipality is poor – the coaches and players remains not only without the abroad tournaments, but local ones, because of the participation fees and transport expenses. There are even places where municipality rejects to provide coaches and players with new uniforms due to the lack of money. Municipalities and sport departments should take into account that:

- 1) Football is mainly about health. People want to do sports because of their health. They want to be active, don't want to become sick or overfat. During the training process coaches teach not only football, but they explain, how to do things correctly (warm up, eating, sleep, etc.) in different situations. It is not normal, that after finishing playing career people are more often seen at drugstore and not at gym or some running festivals.
- 2) High quality football education is vital. Football player needs to be prepared for rest of his life. He studies discipline, behaviour at different situations, needs to be civilized. Graduates must be smart at all aspects, which demands high professionalism from the coaches - not only football skill related.
- 3) Grassroots programme is very important. During the last couple of years, significantly increased the number of girls willing to play football. It is important to keep senior teams, amateur football groups (they train less than other groups, but at least they are involved in healthy life style action through the football).

4) To prepare players for national teams. This is very important, too. We can talk about many other things, but the result is vital. Only regular tournaments in Baltic Football league can maintain the common development of Baltic coach education.

Communication skills



Most of Baltic football clubs acknowledged to have quite a small organization. Consisting of administration (Board, director and executive director), coaches, parents and children. The hierarchy does not look difficult, but actually, it is very important to do not forget about anyone in this hierarchy. Administration has a direct communication with coaches, coaches has direct communication with parents and their children as shown above. The internal communication is very effective. It is easy to pass the necessary information to

each other. The biggest weakness is the “communication line”. If somebody has misunderstood something, then information received may be wrong. It is important to communicate as understandable as possible. Integration of the information is very important. The information given to parents and players must be clear and consistent from everyone involved in this. Sometimes they are expecting too much from the coaches and the club. Sometimes they may not understand the strategy of the club (or coach) and why things are done in the way they are. To avoid misunderstandings, coaches must try to meet with parent’s committee as much as possible. This is the reason why coaches plays a huge role in providing the appropriate, correct information to parents and wise versa. It is obligatory for administration to have meeting with coaches every week, sometimes even more often. Parents should be able to reach the administration when necessary. **Therefore, the coach pedagogical and communication skills must be viewed as a high importance issue to pay attention at and to maintain regular education events regarding skill improvement.**

Must be admitted that similar picture could be referred to the communication with Football Federations of Baltic states. As Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are quite a small countries, it is quite easy to communicate with Football Federations and contacts with Federations are very good, but sometimes coaches lack communication. As acknowledged one of coaches - Federation tries to help as much as possible, but maybe the biggest minus is distance between our city and capital, where the office of Federation is. Clubs near capital sometimes know much more about projects in association than those in a quite a big distance from capital. Satisfaction of the Federation is very important. Every project has to be approved and submitted with them. Without accept from Federation it is almost impossible to work. Satisfaction of municipalities usually consists of results. Municipalities wants to be first

everywhere. They want results now and not in the future. A lot of time with deputies must be spent to explain every loss and strategy process. The success of this section actually depends on the masterpiece of communication. Satisfaction of the government more depends on overall popularity of football in country.

Qualification/Education

Coaches have a substantial effect on the development of young athletes. The coaches' reactions and responses to performance can affect children's perception and evaluation of their competencies and general self-worth. Quality of social environment created by significant others is probably a determinant of whether sports engagement is long-term and leads to enhanced physical and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, coaches do not always use positive, empowering coaching strategies, especially under the pressure of competitions. Interventions aimed at improving the coach-athlete relationship are, therefore, worth investigating in Baltic states.

Football club managers, sport school managers, parents, players and coaches themselves have acknowledged the need of coach education courses to increase positive developmental experiences perceived by athletes and coaches.

The coaches and players positive opinion is decisive in implementing a successful sport psychological service in practice. Successful sport psychological service in practice in the future will be based on the development new and innovative ways to help athletes improve their individual and team performance.

Project partners observed that in Baltic states there is a division on age groups. Each age group has a headcoach and assistants (in bigger clubs). But it

often happens that one coach conducts training in a large number of students, while for a very long time, up to several years, which can lead to stagnation in the players. In Lithuania and Latvia, especially border areas with Russia, coaches still does not think about the development of each individual player, and the teams a whole, the result in a particular match, which does not allow some players to reveal all his talent. The coach should want to bring the player to the main roster of the first team, and not just seek to get the result with the youth (duplicate) team in a particular match or competition. Cups and medals – this is the main task of the main team, and the task of sports schools and academies should be focused on the education of players who will play in the main team and bring results to the club did not have to buy expensive foreign players. Many coaches work with children, but they are not educated enough to set goals and objectives for individual age groups. Baby coach too rigidly behave with young players, they shout foul language for the mistakes of players, which may lead to negative psychological consequences .The most capable young players are selected to sports schools, mainly on their physical indicators at the moment, but not on their technical potential .

Survey results on the needs of coaches

The purpose of the survey was to gain insight in current football coaches needs among professional football coaches. A questionary survey was carried out among professional football coaches. Answering options were: check boxes, open fields, and 5-point Likert scales. 75 football coaches (age: 50 ± 15 years) completed the survey. Coaches had 24.3 ± 7 years of experience as a player and 25.5 ± 13.7 years as a coach, and five had a university degree. The coaches evaluated their technical and tactical knowledge as good. Knowledge on physical skills was rated slightly lower and knowledge on mental skills lowest, but still fair. Top five of domains that the coaches wanted to know more about

were mental skills, physical skills, group dynamics, monitoring load and capacity, and talent development.

Football coaches are directly responsible for the team and have the major objective of enhancing both, individual and team performance, football coaches are therefore involved with players on a daily basis, where a major part of the job is to conduct training sessions to get the most out of the team. Out of the 75 coaches, two coaches had a bachelor's degree and three a master's degree in addition to their UEFA Pro license. Coaches rated their knowledge about technical and tactical skills as highest, and physical and mental as lower (Figure 1).

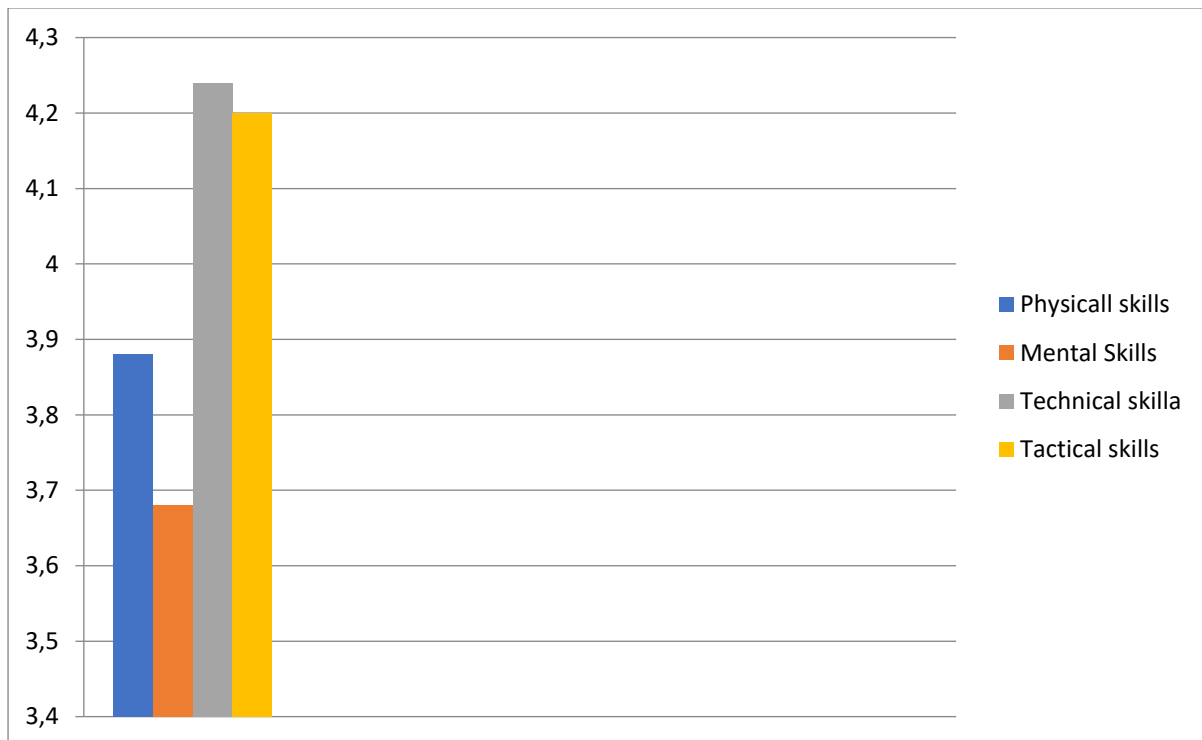


Figure 1. Coaches' knowledge of physical, mental, technical and tactical skills. (1: very poor – 5: very good)

The five most often mentioned activities that coaches undertook to gain knowledge were:

- 1) conversation with players;
- 2) observation of players;

- 3) conversation with other coaches;
- 4) self-reflection;
- 5) observation of other coaches.

The five most used resources of information were:

- 1) applied journals;
- 2) books;
- 3) television;
- 4) online social networks;
- 5) YouTube.

The areas of interest of coaches that were mentioned most often are presented in Table 2.

1. Mental skills -	32
2. Physical skills -	27
3. Group dynamics -	24
4. Monitoring load and players' capacity -	23
5. Talent development -	17

Areas of interest (mentioned with a maximum of 3 per coach)

Coaches indicated that they had reasonable knowledge about developments within sport science and they mentioned most often perceived reasons for not applying sport science, five coaches reported no barriers (Table 3).

1. Conservatism in clubs – 21;
2. Lack of money- 17;
3. Scientists' lack of specific football knowledge - 13;
4. Poor applicability of science in practice- 10

5. Lack of time – 9

Table 3. Perceived reasons

The results indicate that professional football coaches have a rich playing and coaching experience, but a minimal academic background. Technical and tactical skills were perceived as coaches' expert domains. Coaches felt that they had less knowledge about mental and physical skills. These were also the domains that they wanted to know more about.

As indicated before, coaches predominantly gain information during informal activities with their peers, at coaching clinics and seminars. Only five coaches in this study had any academic background. Lack of academic background could hinder coaches in understanding methods and terms commonly used in methodological articles. A solution to this can come from different angles. One is to better integrate sport science into coach education. Federations could select academic staff based on the topics of interest (provided before) and integrate them in the formal coach education. The purpose of this should not be to develop academic skills that would enable coaches to become independent researchers, but to provide coaches with sport science knowledge that is relevant for and accessible to coach-

ing practice. This can include literature search and review, i.e., finding relevant journals and articles, and understanding limitations and practical implications of results. An alternative approach would be to “translate” scientific research and disseminate findings via outlets preferred by coaches. This could be done by independent academics that are hired to review and translate new findings, and who are paid by both federations or clubs and universities. Finally, clubs and federations could embed staff or consultants with a specific research focus within their organisations to develop collaboration between football practice and research institutions. Together, these approaches should lead to a mixture of experience-based and evidence-based education. The coaches in the present study perceived technical and tactical skills as their expert domains. Coaches felt that they had less knowledge about mental and physical skills. These were also the domains that they wanted to know more about. It should be noted that only two coaches were interested in injury prevention. This is remarkable because injuries are known to be related to team success. Barriers between practice and sport science reported in above mentioned research were time and interest in reading academic publications, but also practical application, relevance, integration, access and language. The cur-

rent study confirmed these and added several barriers that were relevant to deal with successful narrowing of the gap between sport science and practice, such as conservatism, lack of money and lack of football-specific knowledge in sport scientists. Working more closely together could improve scientists' understanding of practice, which may lead them to better connect with coaching staff and work on more relevant questions that exist in the field. This is also in line with the personal contact that most coaches prefer to gain scientific knowledge through. A short-term benefit for coaches would be a direct access to scientific knowledge via a personal contact in an informal way. A long-term benefit may be that the collaboration may lead to scientific research that is better tailored to the real-world situation and, as such, easier to apply in practice. Since the scientific publication process is slow, coaches would have a first-hand access to new insights which may give them a winning edge. The latter is in accordance with previous results stating that coaches are motivated to find and implement new ideas in their sports programs. The fact that we included professional coaches in the survey contributed to quality of the study because these coaches were expected to know what types of knowledge and skills were needed to successfully do their job.

Because the coaches that participated in the survey were likely to be at different stages in their career, this could have influenced their preferred way of gaining knowledge. This study focused on professional knowledge of coaches. In conclusion, the results suggest that this sample of professional football coaches is interested in applying sport science knowledge into football practice. The topics and domains they want to know more about and removal of the perceived barriers could improve integrating sport science in football work environments.

Future emphases of coach education

- Developing MORE and BETTER players with a particular emphasis on INDIVIDUAL SKILL.

- Leading to: SKILFUL CONNECTING and COMBINING

All invasion games have “Principles of Play” - penetration, create space, support, movement, creativity, pressing, delay, cover and balance, compactness, control and restraint, and these are important, but it is important to add to this investigation of the invasion game. Baltic states, especially Lithuania and Latvia should look more at Nordic state experience, take over concepts “WITHIN” the game of football, learn at how controlling the “MOMENT” (the individual) can help control the “GAME” (the collective) - the game within the game. Coaches

should focus on developing each player's **INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITY** and **CONFIDENCE** when on the ball. Coaches must focus and educate players that

Staying on the ball is:

in no priority order

Keeping possession for your team
More individual time with/on the ball
Knowing when to share it
Looking for a more attacking option, playing forwards rather than back or sideways
Turning away from pressure
Taking someone on 1v1

Staying on the ball is not:

in no priority order

Being ball greedy
Dribbling until you lose the ball
Frustrating your teammates
Always playing the "easy" ball
Ignoring your teammates whilst satisfying your own needs

These individual “Techniques” then lead to: individual “Tactics” when in possession enticing opponent. Coaches are the key players to teach and convince:

Commit your opponent to a course of action that gives YOU the advantage
Changing direction and speed when on the ball
Being able to stop and start effectively when on the ball
Dictating the rhythm and flow of the game
Creating overloads to give you the advantage
Using your body as barrier

Developing MORE and BETTER players with a particular emphasis on INDIVIDUAL SKILL. Leading to: SKILFUL CONNECTING and COMBINING.

What should the Baltic coaches get better at?

- Help players fall in love (and stay in love) with the game;
- Recognise that all players will bring something different, have different strengths, be in different places developmentally;
- Have a better understanding about how to help players become more skilful;
- Know the game and its demands in more detail in order to help the players in an age-appropriate way.

Help players fall in love (and stay in love) with the game.

Create an environment that prioritises enjoyment, exploration, trial and error and lots of small number games, practices and activities. This will present OPPORTUNITIES for players to become more skilful. The coach needs to know the returns from each one.

Recognise that all players will bring something different, have different strengths, be in different places developmentally.

Get to know each individual player's strengths and areas for development and create a really positive and lasting emotional connection between the game and the player. Push strengths and help to hide weaknesses. The coach needs to know the returns from each OPPORTUNITY for each player.

Have a better understanding about how to help players become more skilful.

This is the slow progression from delivering practices to really helping young players to improve as a result of better observational skills and ways to intervene and support players. Developing coaching craft in order for players to develop their playing craft.

Know the game and its demands in more detail in order to help the players in an age-appropriate way.

What are the demands of the game, what does this mean for the development of our youngest players and what elements of skill need to be improved or prioritized?

What will coach be looking to develop, players who can "control" the critical moments in a game?

Coaches are constantly finding ways to help players become more skilful so that they can contribute positively towards team performance. One crucial skill that Baltic state coaches should focus on to help this is challenging for the ball. However, working on challenging, especially when out of possession, is often overlooked. So, how much focus should coaches place on developing this skill and its associated psychological aspects?

With reference to the psychological aspects, we have highlighted the Baltic coach education week points:

- What the decision-making process looks when skilfully challenging for the ball.
- The need to consider individual psychological strengths and areas for development.
- How we can design our coaching sessions to improve psychological aspects of challenging for the ball.

Let's start with decision-making. In understanding that skill acquisition and development starts in the head, *scanning* is vital here as what an individual player 'sees' is the basis for everything that follows. This is why it is important for coach to young players the following questions:

- Why should we play like meerkats?
- What do you see?

When deciding whether to challenge for the ball, a player will need to process a whole host of information. This informs their perception of the situation, which might include: the opponent on the ball, their distance from the opponent, which foot he/she is using (normally their strongest one), which

direction he/she is moving in and perhaps other players around the ball. This ‘picture’ created will inform what to do next. Decisions to be made might be whether to try and intercept a pass or nip in and win the ball if the opponent has had a poor touch. Or it could be any of the individual techniques featured in the often-used mantra: close down-slow-down-sit down-show down i.e make a challenge with *positioning* (bent knees, angled body) being crucial. Whatever the outcome, the thought process highlighted here is fundamental to helping players become more skilful when challenging for the ball.

Important is to follow a ‘person before player’ philosophy. This enables to develop a deeper understanding of a youngster’s current super-strengths and areas for development.

Linking back to challenging with a psychological lens, there are several things that Baltic coaches should get all players to focus on:

- Positive and enthusiastic mentality in 1v1 defending situations.
- Intelligent decision-making when challenging for the ball e.g. stop turning rather than trying to tackle.
- Linked to the last point, the importance of patience and *timing* when looking to challenge for the ball.
- Building confidence through successful decision making and challenging.

When designing sessions, coaches can increase young players self-confidence and resilience to challenge, by giving them lots of different opportunities to practice.

By adopting a ‘learning through games’ approach, coaches should create plenty of ‘repetition without repetition’. This enhances motivation and

enjoyment through playing well designed games linked to a clear focus, in this case challenging for the ball.

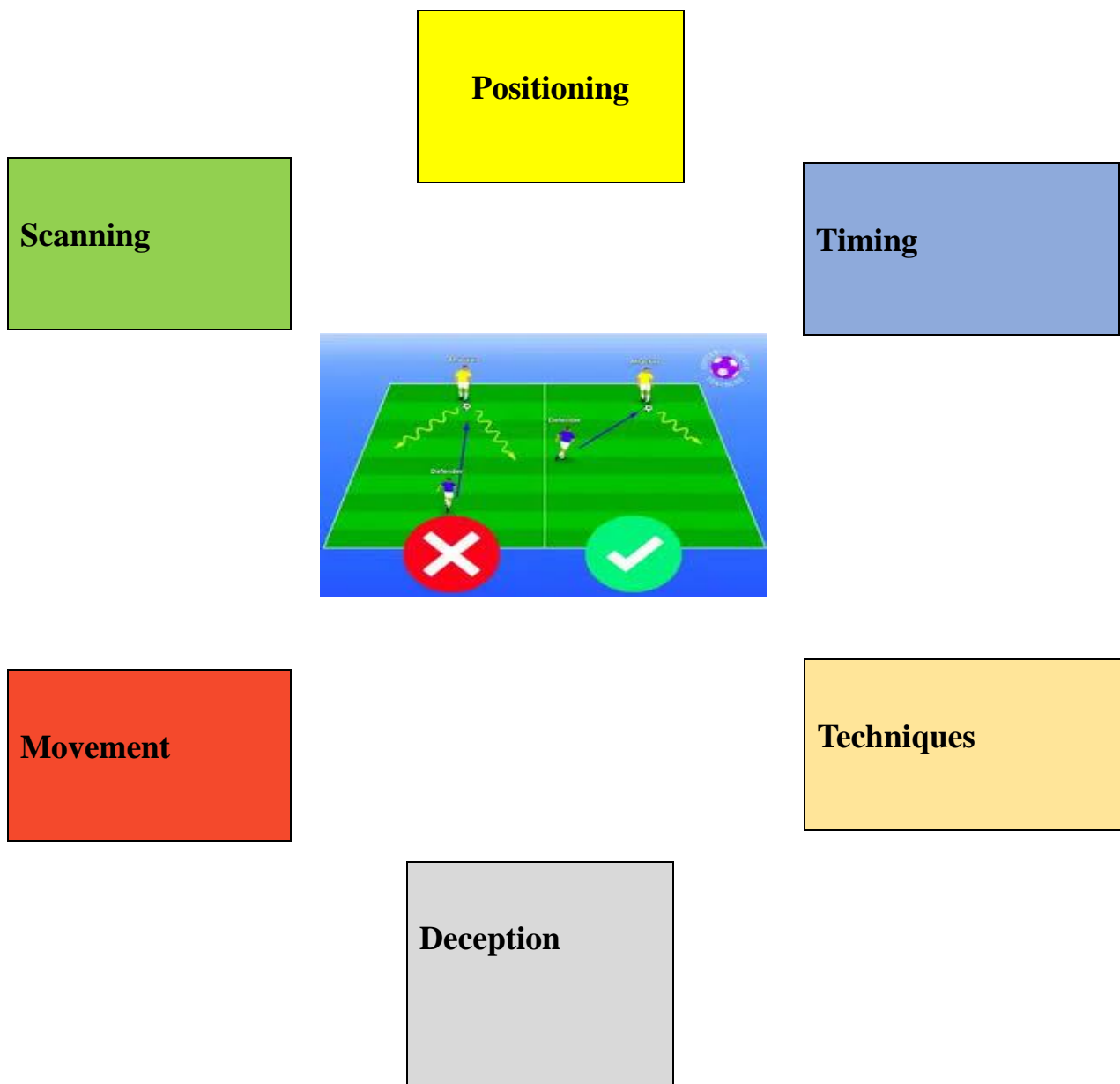
Here are a couple of examples of how to do this:

1. *2v1/2v2 arrival/part activity:* You can see that positive, enthusiastic, and intelligent defending is integral to enabling this practice to be realistic and relevant. Therefore, this could be used to develop many facets of challenging as much as it can receiving skills.
2. *Individual player challenges:* This is a great way of focusing their performance on a specific aspect of play. The challenge cards below feature a number of elements relating to individual, unit and team defending. There are specific ones which shine a light on challenging and its associated psychological/cognitive elements e.g. can player make three good tackles in the next seven minutes? Whilst this might appear to be a technical or individual tactics challenge, the task of self- evaluating why the tackles are ‘good’ is a psychological one for sure.

Can you close down (press) and slow down within 3 seconds?	Can you get low (sit down) when defending 1v1?	Can you be strong in a 'block' tackle and win the ball?
Can you provide cover for a team-mate when he is defending?	Can you communicate clearly to a team-mate when he is defending 1v1?	Can you help your team to be compact when opposition have the ball?
Can you see when the right time is to drop rather than press?	Can you tell your team-mates when to drop rather than press?	Can you make 3 good tackles in the next 7 minutes?

Activ

When using these challenge cards, distributing them randomly and then tasking oneself with identifying what individual players are focusing on, which is an observational and cognitive challenge in itself. Alternatively, a coach can give specific cards to individuals to boost confidence in achieving one of their super strengths or build resilience with a card that focuses on an area for development.



Coaches should be aware of the many psychological and cognitive aspects that relate to skilful challenging for the ball, when planning for individual player and whole squad development, what an eight-year-old sees is very different to that of an 18 year-old, as indeed it is for a 28 year-old. Therefore, coaches need to get into the psychological worlds of their players in terms of their age and stage of development, it is a case of ‘mind over matter’.

Well prepared young players in Football Academies

A summary of all 54 European top leagues shows that the youngest team by a 0.8-year margin is FK Metta (Latvia).

From the very start of Metta movement in Latvian football, it has always been associated with academy development, giving chances to young footballers and thoughts about the future.

Since 2014, the first team’s average age has become lower with every year and last seasons it has fallen below 20 years old. That’s truly remarkable and has aroused interest to see where Metta ranks in Europe.

Recently with the average age of 19.8 years old (it’s 19.69 if taking all players that have been in the teamsheet) Metta has been the youngest team in all European top leagues. It’s the youngest team over the last three years.

The closest club to this season’s Metta is JK Tallinn Kalev (Estonia), which played with 20.3 years old team last season. They are also the only European top-flight team in the last three years to be younger than FK Metta’s team, which was 20.5 years old on average.

In these three years, only six different European clubs have recorded a team under the age of 21 over at least one of the seasons. Only Metta in this period has done it more than once, in fact, they did it every season.

Latvian Higher League on overall has been immensely young league as well. It's the youngest top division in the whole of Europe with an average age of only 23.9 years. In the last three seasons only 2018 Estonian Premium League was younger with 23.4 average age.

Taking Metta 2020 team as the reference point – it's the youngest team in Higher Leagues since 2011 when JFK Olimps sent on an average a 19 years old team.

Interesting fact, this season Metta has sent 12 different academy graduates on to the pitch, nine of them were under 20. That's by far the best number in Latvian Higher League.

Clearly, the young age of Baltic state players, is an advantage facing older players, however each appearance in international tournament is a possibility to get picked up in some other European club. Baltic states is a good place where to start once carrier, as there is no much of competition among clubs, like in Northern countries and "old" Europe.

During the last 10 years the Football club Academy system has developed in Baltic States. Such academies gain finances from UEFA and FIFA. In order to maintain the appropriate coach education, according Academy status, the "big" clubs are forced to raise the level of coach education, as money "follows" the category of licence. Such Academies of course, promotes the coach education development as more coaches are interested to gain higher category and receive better paid salary, as well as through the professional coaches youth gets high level sustainable investment education. However,

those clubs having Academy status also do not comply with the football situation in rest of the region. While Academies financed from FIFA and UEFA can provide 3 coaches on 20 players, out of Academy status clubs, Sport schools –only 1 coach, and the salary difference having the same category varies from 30%. Due to the above mentioned such Football Academy system, also wider the gap among coaches, dividing “in” and “out” Academy coaches.

Common features in Baltic football

- All three Baltic state Football Federations have created and confirmed national Football development strategy, main idea of it is to make football the most popular kind of sport accordingly, in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.
- Football already is the most popular kind of sport between Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian kids.
- Only factor not enough football infrastructure - doesn't let football to be the most popular kind of sport compare to basketball.
- Baltic Football Federations strategically have decided to concentrate UEFA and FIFA incomes support for ones states football clubs, what has full – structure and preferably, strong relation with local municipalities.
- As far as women's football is concerned, the LFF is striving to bring more players into the game, and ensure a sustainable competition environment for each girl to fit into and play, while simultaneously investing in the development of local clubs.

What must be done?

1. Continue to develop the Baltic Youth football league;
2. Start development of Baltic Adult football league;
3. Interrupt lobby of certain team sport;
4. Solve the language barrier issue;
5. Invest in coach education;
5. Solve the financing issue of coaches;
6. Availability of FIFA level football infrastructure among Baltic region;
7. Material base availability equality among the region;
8. Shift of thinking from Soviet to Northern.

Attractive football market for investors

- 1. Low competition compare to Western Europe, if, an investor wants to get a chance to get a right to play in Europe Cups. Clubs with from around 0,5 mln. Euro annual budget are winning right to play in Europe Cups during last 3 years.
- 2. Quite low investment in youth football talents development might be effective. In private football business sector we have numbers, what show's it's enough to invest only till 500 Euro per year in one football player development.

- 3. Low competition between football academies in majority part of Baltic states , a good possibility to attract the most talented youth football talents to own club structure, by offering right service quality.

Post soviet heritage

In its relations with the Baltic States, Russia tries to use sport to strengthen its position and improve its image internationally. It also attempts to implement a historical policy at sporting events as well as use sporting rivalry as a demonstration of its power.

The Baltic states still haven't had a long enough time to bring the young girls up through competition where they just thrive on it like boys do. That's probably happening a little bit more every year, but not at a steady enough pace to make former women athletes more interested in coaching careers.

The belief that football is a "men's sport" is deeply ingrained in Baltic state society as a heritage from post - Soviet thinking. This stereotype is, unfortunately, often shared by football coaches, especially those who are in older age, even at grassroots level.

Also, kids' football coaching in often is still based on harsh principles — "objective" results are favoured over individual development, kids experience a lot of pressure, only the strongest survive. Coach education courses should aim to challenge the prevailing stereotypes in football coaching and to contribute to raising a new generation of kids' football coaches who will share the values of gender equality and respect for children.

Education courses for coaches as a main objective should highlight to teach future coaches and current ones, how to implement these principles in practice:

- Respect for children;
- Individual approach to all kids irrespective of their physical abilities and skills; Focus on individual motivation and not on achievement or result;
- Gender equality / girls training together with boys;
- Inclusion of kids with special developmental needs.

Ofcourse, not aiming at replacing the mandatory course that future coaches should take before they are eligible to take a licence exam. There, coaches obtain fundamental knowledge about physiology, training techniques, performance evaluation etc. Above mentioned, coach courses should focus on creating the right mindset and teaching coaches about gender equality, kids' motivation, conflict resolution, and other related skills.

Must be admitted that, Estonian Football Association (EFA) and UEFA have worked closely together to build a strong, long-term legacy programme, bringing a focus on increased participation and qualified workforce to the forefront of the Estonian football scene. The objective is to challenge the perception of women's football in the country and promote it to a wider audience. Estonia has come to staging their first-ever UEFA women's football final tournament and the hopes are high. But as Anne Rei, Chair of the UEFA Women's Football Committee and secretary general of the Estonian Football Association have said: a shift in mentality doesn't happen overnight.

The gap between big and small clubs/leagues in football

UEFA's existing model has been sustainable to certain degrees. Obviously, many issues need to be fixed, especially narrowing the gap between big vs. small leagues/clubs or even the gap between clubs within the same

league. There are many strategies to deal with it, but not all are applicable. For example, the American salary cap has been hotly debated for quite some time, but apparently, it would not work in the European Sports system. Winning the legal case and keeping the current model for medium and small leagues is the first crucial step because all the leagues are getting money from UEFA for the youth system development and infrastructure projects.

Why multinational leagues?

The answer is in resources. In order to compete, leagues and clubs need resources. Still, small and medium leagues with limited resources can hardly keep up with bigger leagues. It is the same in business, where bigger companies will have more opportunities and instruments to grow. Let's take Latvia as an example; having a small market with just only 2 million people with an economy is still in the development stage. Latvia needs more resources to develop the whole football system and club members. Learning of Scandinavian or Benelux leagues, to first increase the market size and create a favourable investment climate to bring more revenues. The idea is simple. When we talk about the idea of the Baltic League, we talk about forming a bigger market, a 6-million-people market, to attract interest from broadcasting companies, sponsors, and even governments.

Why is a multinational League perfect for the Baltic region?

Within the UEFA, only the Baltic countries are in the best situation for a pilot project. First, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania share many economic, historical, social, and cultural similarities. These countries share the same

history and have no borders as European Union countries. They also have many economic similarities, such as purchasing power and market sizes. Hence, it's less challenging to integrate and avoid many conflicting points. Second, all three leagues have the same competition levels; in other words, the top sides from each country have an equal chance and increase the competitiveness balance. There is also synergy in the competition format, especially the balance of competition fairness and element of luck.

Common challenges when organizing a multinational league

The most common challenges:

Access to UEFA competition – the multinational league might affect the available slots for the UEFA competitions. For example, 3 Champion League spots and nine Conference League spots may go down to 1 Champion League spot and three Conference League spots. Most teams want to compete in UEFA tournaments for pride and TV rights money, so this is the big question.

Infrastructure quality – To ensure consistent infrastructure quality, the common league needs to gain bigger interest from municipalities and the government to develop facilities such as stadiums.

Competition Calendar – Although all three countries have summer leagues, some differences still need to be negotiated because it affects each team's pre-season preparation.

Harmonization of regulations – each country's tournament has different rules, such as foreign player policy, so the negotiation between all stakeholders requires much more work and patience.

Operational and Management system – the question is how to combine the boards from three leagues/federations and how to create the management

structure for the common league. The Baltic League has agreed on the league competition and cup tournament formats.

Loss of national football traditions – The multinational league, might take away some local values like historic rivalries or derbies. Still, the multinational league is a great opportunity to create new regional rivalries or traditions.

Can a multinational league be the future of football in Baltic states?

It is definitely possible and the Baltic region is the only place within UEFA that can deploy this pilot project. A multinational league is an impactful approach to reducing the gap between small and big leagues. Furthermore, this concept will attract more investment interest from governments and private organizations to create football nations. If we don't do this (multinational league), all three Baltic countries will remain at the same pace and will probably never play at World Cup, and Latvia will remain the only Baltic state which took part in European Cup.

Conclusion

The Baltics have long been heralded as the bridge between eastern and western cultures. This can be seen in various places, but especially in the world of sports. Long years under the occupation of USSR, have left the footprints to the Baltic state sport. Football is not exception, nor either coaches and coach education. Developments in post-Soviet football have to be seen against the cataclysmic socio-political changes that have occurred since the demise of communism and the USSR in 1991.

Baltic states' have heritaged not only the Russian language usage, as 30% of Baltic state' inhabitants are Russian descendants, but also the sport coaching methods and stereotypes from the Soviet coach education methods.

As acknowledged all three Baltic state coaches training process often is carried out bilingually - in certain states language and in Russian, education and training process only in state language still is a problem in all three Baltic states, but especially in border areas with Russia.

The football in Baltic countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union has developed unevenly- Estonia have tried to approach Nordic states playing manner, the way of thinking and coach mind shift, but Latvia and Lithuanian kind of kept the inherited from the Soviet times the most.

Nevertheless, coaches do not always use positive, empowering coaching strategies, especially under the pressure of competitions. Interventions aimed at improving the coach-athlete relationship are, therefore, worth investigating in Baltic states. That is due to the still applicable USSR "cups and medals" method, not the development of each player.

The coach pedagogical and communication skills must be viewed as a high importance issue to pay attention at and to maintain regular education events regarding skill improvement.

The Baltic states still haven't had a long enough time to bring the young girls up through competition. The belief that football is a "men's sport" is deeply ingrained in Baltic state society as a heritage from post Soviete thinking. This stereotype is, unfortunately, often shared by football coaches, especially those who are in older age, even at grassroots level.

Coach education courses should aim to challenge the prevailing stereotypes in football coaching and to contribute to raising a new generation of kids' football coaches who will share the values of gender equality and respect for children.

Education courses for coaches as a main objective should highlight to teach future coaches and current ones, how to implement these principles in practice:

- Respect for children;
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- Gender equality / girls training together with boys;
- Inclusion of kids with special developmental needs.

To do list:

1. Continue to develop the Baltic Youth football league;
2. Start development of Baltic Adult football league;
3. Interrupt lobby of certain team sport;
4. Solve the language barrier problem during coach training;

5. Solve the financing issue of coaches;
6. Invest in coach education.
7. Availability of FIFA level football infrastructure among Baltic region;
8. Material base availability equality among the region;
9. Shift of thinking from Soviet to Northern;

A multinational Baltic league is an impactful approach to reducing the gap between small and big leagues. Furthermore, this concept will attract more investment interest from governments and private organizations to create football nations. If we don't do this (multinational league), all three Baltic countries will remain at the same pace and will probably never play at World Cup.

The unity among the Baltic states, regarding football development, could reach with the raising of number of coaches, which have gained UEFA A category licence. What conversely, relates the need of common sport politic financing model, which would declare the amount of salary depending from the coach category licence level.

From February, 2023 up to the third physical project educational mobility in Estonia the 30th of August until 4th September,2023, the project partners have been working on course development, regularly organising Zoom meetings. Interesting is the fact that similar experience project partners gained in all three Baltic states regarding the usage of Russian language in borderland areas, however it must be acknowledged, that the Russian language usage has been limited during the project research time, comparing to as it was until the Russia invade the Ukraine. Project activities in Estonian demonstrated that Estonian thinking approach is closer to Nordic, which was reflected during the

training process observation. Project partners were grateful to be introduced with „Brazilian path” in coach education process, which the club „Tartu Santos” have chosen to follow. Nevertheless the club have shared their method overtaken from partner club „Norway Songal IL Football club”, which effects Estonian football in a whole, as the success of the Tartu Santos is being analysed and overtaken by other Estonian football clubs and football society.

NGO "FC Ziemelastrumi"