

Module 4. Psychosocial Environment of Women's Football

Sociological Context

On April 19, 1967, Katherine Switzer began a new chapter in the history of sports: she successfully challenged the prohibition on women running marathons. In the city of Boston, United States, she completed the race in 4 hours and 20 minutes. She achieved this despite the obstacles and boycotts she faced during the race.

In the last 50 years, participation of women in sports and the interest surrounding it have increased. The change in consumption trends and its growth were promoted by the creation of laws that support and encourage it. Additionally, the visibility of global female role models (such as Alexia Putellas, Serena Williams, Ona Carbonell, among others) has contributed to this shift. The media and the Internet also play an important role in this change

The inclusion of women in sports has generated discrepancies and rejections. Myths emerged regarding the masculinisation of women due to sports participation. On the one hand, concerns were raised about health risks, specifically related to motherhood. On the other hand, it was argued that it was aesthetically unappealing to see women attending stadiums. In 1994, the first International Conference on Women and Sports was organised in Brighton. The objective was to remove barriers to women's participation in sports activities.

In recent years, significant progress has been made, although there is still much work to be done. An important fact to note is the increasing presence of women in the Olympic Games. In the 2012 London Olympics, female representation achieved a balanced participation for the first time in history: all countries were represented by female athletes. Female representation reached 45% in the 2016 Rio Olympics. This is important because female role models become visible to younger generations, and it also demonstrates that all countries value equality (regardless of their culture or religion). Moreover, female athletes have the opportunity to participate in competitions where they can improve their records and win medals.

Specifically, "women's football is widespread at all levels, from school to recreational and competitive, despite the dominance in reproducing traditional stereotypes" (Torrebadella-Flix, 2016, p. 314). Women's image is associated with attributes such as femininity, care, and delicacy, which are considered opposite to those associated with male sports: strength, greatness, and decisiveness. Despite this perception, female participation in sports has increased. There is a notable growth in football participation, which leads to a change in the stereotypes created regarding women and sports.



The FIFA Women's World Cup in France 2019 achieved a record audience: 1.12 billion viewers across different platforms. This represented a 30% increase in viewership compared to the 2015 Canada Cup. These figures demonstrate the interest that women's football holds for fans and the media. However, the exposure and impact of women's football still fall short of the viewership numbers of men's football. It is important to consider that the visibility of women's sports can contribute to the elimination of gender inequality in society.

Image 1: Advertisement of the Champions League's Match, Barcelona vs. Wolfsburg



Source: [Image without heading of the women's Champion league match], 2022, <https://n9.cl/oiwp8>.

Image 2: April 22, 2022: Barcelona vs. Wolfsburg



Source: Ramírez, 2022, <https://www.radiohrn.hn/barcelona-femenino-asistencia-record-futbol-espana>.

The previous images show unique and unforgettable moments for women's football, especially, for Barcelona FC. On the one hand, there was a sold-out crowd for a

Champions League match, and on the other hand, a world record attendance for a women's football match. It is important to maintain the intention that these phenomena cease to be isolated incidents and become normalised in weekend fixtures.

According to existing literature, some recommendations to reduce the gender gap between men's and women's football focus on the need for the growth of women's football. These proposals suggest developing programs to promote women's football, strategic development plans for the sport, and increased representation of women within the governing bodies. Some studies show that the women's national teams that achieve better results in international tournaments belong to countries with policies designed to promote women's football.

"The access of women in the world of sports has not been reflected in the governing bodies of institutions" (Marugán Pintos, 2019, p. 58). There is limited participation in these bodies, despite the significant increase in female sports participation (especially in high-level competitions) and the important successes achieved in the last decade. The gender gap remains wide not only among male and female athletes but also in managerial, administrative, coaching, and refereeing positions.

A study conducted by Adesp, with the support of LaLiga, shows that only 3% of Spanish national federations are led by women.

This figure is slightly higher for autonomous federations, where the percentage rises to 7%.

However, female representation in decision-making bodies of federations increases as the level of responsibility decreases. Women hold 32% of general secretariat and management positions in national entities. Similarly, 25% of judges, referees, and coaches are currently women. Again, this percentage increases in autonomous bodies. (2Playbook, 2022, https://www.2playbook.com/mas-deporte/solo-3-federaciones-deportivas-nacionales-estan-presididas-por-mujer_8007_102.html)

This shows that there are few female management models in sports to drive new measures and perspectives from a gender equality standpoint and to inspire other women.

Another difficulty within the realm of women's football is the lack of regulation regarding professional dedication contracts. This hinders retirement after a lifetime dedicated to sports. There is an absence of quotations or difficulties in accessing the job market. It cannot be guaranteed that contracts have discriminatory clauses regarding maternity. However, it should be noted that there is a possibility of pushing a player not to stop

playing and "lose" a season due to pregnancy. Players may forgo contracts or access "scholarships," but in most cases, these arrangements do not guarantee access to social security. This aspect is crucial, for example, in cases of injury recovery.

In recent years, in Spain and other countries, efforts have been made to establish collective agreements that set minimum labour conditions and include aspects of work-life balance and maternity. Although there is still much work to be done, solid foundations are being built to support gender equality in the sports field.

Psychosocial Environment

Interest in women encompasses all areas, not just sports. All areas relevant to their development will be addressed from both practical and theoretical approaches.

It is important to consider the athlete as a whole person to ensure their well-being and emotional balance with the highest possible guarantees. For this approach, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development is taken as a reference. This model proposes the study of the progressive mutual adaptation between a developing human being and the changing qualities of the environments in which the person lives. This model allows for a holistic view of female football players and makes it possible to identify the different systems in which they participate: sports, family, personal, etc. It is important to consider the relationship between these complex systems, how they interact, and how they determine a player's performance.

Each player, according to her age, goes through a personal moment in her development; all areas of her life are affected by events and circumstances. In addition to being in a continuous learning and transitional process, they have sports responsibilities that involve challenges, pressures, rewards, and disappointments.

The individual is considered a growing and dynamic entity in relation to the environments in which they develop. This relationship is bidirectional and reciprocal, not limited to the immediate environment but also including external influences from broader contexts. In other words, the influence is not exclusive to the athlete's immediate environment (family, school, club) but also includes relationships with broader systems: politics, social, cultural context.

"The basic postulate of Bronfenbrenner is that natural environments constitute the primary source of influence on human behaviour and, therefore, on the psychological development of individuals" (Gratacós, 2020, <https://www.lifeder.com/modelo-ecologico-bronfenbrenner/>).

The athlete will adapt to the environments that surround her and are part of her daily life (family, friends, club, school, work), and vice versa: the immediate environments will transform based on the athlete's personal circumstances as she becomes more involved. Bronfenbrenner's model is one of the models that allows for the development of support



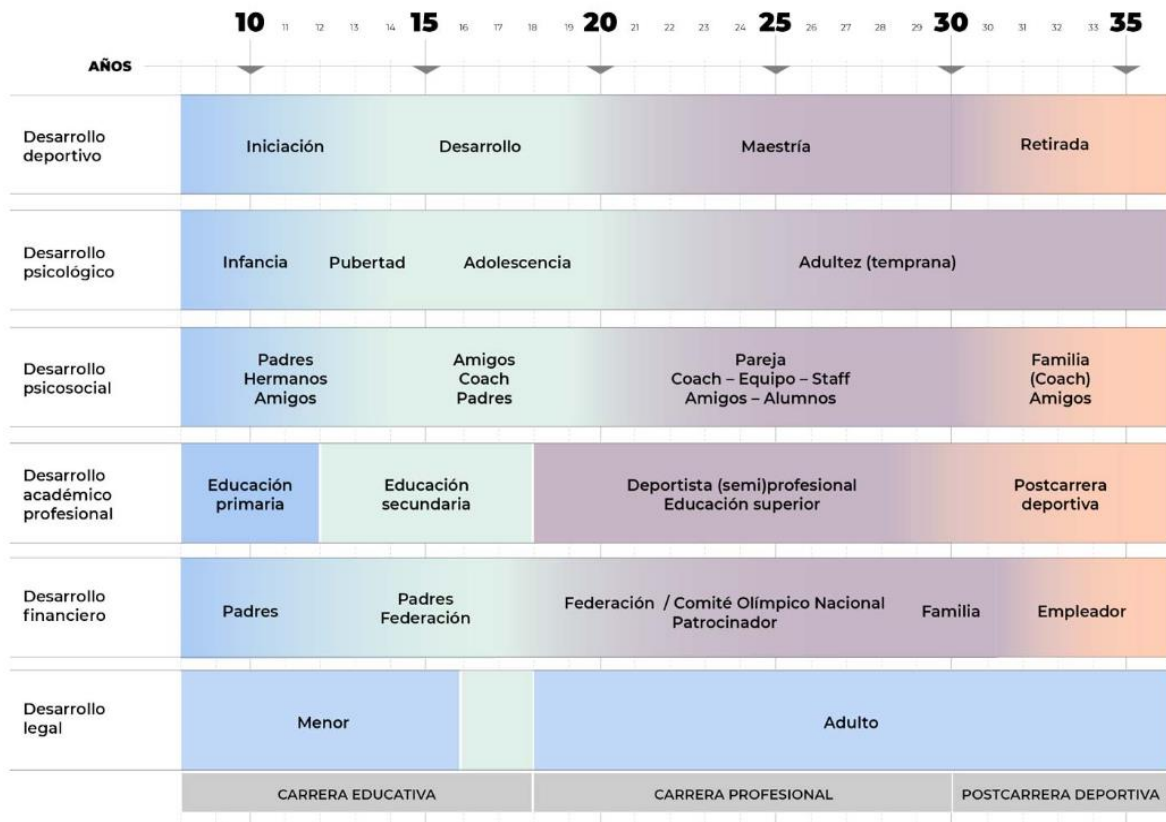
for each player. For example, if there is a difficulty in the family system, other systems may be affected: academic, sports, or social (lack of concentration, lack of interest in socialising, isolation, etc.).

Another useful model for supporting athletes is the Wylleman model: the holistic athletic career development. This author proposes a view of the athlete from holistic perspective. In addition to considering the sports domain, other domains that interact together are taken into account: psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, economic, and legal. Each of these domains is described below:

- The sports domain is divided into four stages. Three of these stages are included during the athlete's active career: initiation, development, and mastery; the last stage is related to sports retirement.
- The psychological domain encompasses the different stages of psychological maturation: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
- The psychosocial domain includes the most relevant social agents throughout the athlete's life: parents, siblings, peers, coaches, partners.
- The academic-vocational domain reflects changes in the academic-vocational sphere during different stages of education: primary, secondary, higher education, and career placement.
- The economic domain refers to financial development and the source of income. In this domain, it is considered that in the early stages, family economic support is provided until achieving independence in the professional stage of sports.
- The legal domain takes into account primarily the athlete's minority status. Legal guardianship by an adult is no longer necessary once the athlete reaches the legal age.

In the following graph, you can observe the arrangement of the areas that form the model.

Image 3: Holistic Athletic Career Development Model



Source: Johan Cruffy Institute, 2021, <https://acortar.link/fDXaAg>

Años	Age
Desarrollo deportivo	Sports development
Desarrollo psicológico	Psychological development
Desarrollo psicosocial	Psychosocial development
Desarrollo académico profesional	Academic-professional development
Desarrollo financiero	Economic development
Desarrollo legal	Legal development



Iniciación	Initiation
Desarrollo	Development
Maestría	Mastery
Retirada	Retirement
Infancia	Childhood
Pubertad	Puberty
Adolescencia	Adolescence
Adultez (temprana)	Adulthood (early)
Padres, hermanos, amigos	Parents, siblings, friends
Amigos, coach, padres	Friends, coach, parents
Pareja. Coach-equipo-staff. Amigos-alumnos	Partner. Coach-team-staff. Friends-students
Familia (Coach). Amigos	Family (Coach). Friends
Educación primaria	Primary education
Educación secundaria	Secondary education
Deportista (semi)profesional. Educación superior	(Semi) professional athlete. Higher education
Postcarrera deportiva	Post-sports career
Padres	Parents

Padres federación	Federation parents
Federación/Comité Olímpico Nacional. Patrocinador	Federation/national Olympic Committee Sponsor
Familia	Family
Empleador	Employer
Menor	Minor
Adulto	Adult
Carrera educativa	Education career
Carrera profesional	Professional career
Postcarrera deportiva	Post-sports career

It is necessary to get to know the players we work with and also for them to develop self-awareness. These two aspects allow for a customised approach to each player and their specific situation, enabling them to self-regulate their development and navigate the different areas of their lives. It is even possible to address unexpected changes that may arise during their sports career, such as abandoning studies to focus exclusively on sports, a long-term injury, gradually resuming studies, etc.

The main objective of the club is to work on the dual career of the players. It is an important and necessary endeavour at all stages. For this reason, the work begins in formative football, so that each player can balance their sports career with their educational or professional career.

This is called "dual call" and continues up to professional football. The reference model for working on the dual career is the Stambulova and Wylleman model.

The club supports the dual career. This will improve the players' chances of adapting to professional life after retiring from sports for elite football players, and they will have better prospects for employment and greater psychological well-being. In the case of players who do not reach the elite level but dedicate many hours to their training, having

an academic education will provide an alternative: a Plan B that is part of their Plan A for sports and personal career.

The dual career involves learning and putting into practice a series of competencies related to the players' mental strengths and the management of the dual career itself. The main strengths include assertiveness, stress management, resilience, self-improvement, and fear control. Additionally, having tools for effective time management, study techniques, etc., are essential for successfully managing a dual career in both education and sports.

Development of Competencies for the Dual Career:

Competencies related to mental strength:

- Assertiveness: having security and self-confidence.
- Ability to cope with stress in sports and studies.
- Belief in one's own ability to overcome challenges in sports and studies.

Competencies related to the dual management of the career:

- Ability to manage time efficiently.
- Willingness to make sacrifices for success in both sports and studies.
- Dedication to achieving success in both sports and studies.

It is important for the players to learn to know themselves, to identify their weaknesses and strengths in order to self-regulate and focus on important demands, without losing sight of their goals. To achieve self-awareness and understanding of themselves and their abilities, they can use the goal setting SWOT analysis, Ofman's quadrants and life projects (Regüela Sáez, 2011) either on their own or with the help of professionals.

Well-being and emotional balance are fundamental to the health of any athlete. They contribute to optimising athletic performance. In 2018, the United Kingdom developed the first action plan to improve the mental health of elite athletes.

The action plan has been developed in collaboration with British mental health and sports organisations, based on the belief that the sports sector can enhance its support for mental health among elite athletes by incorporating good practices and promoting mental health training in the field of sports. (Infocop, 2018, https://www.infocop.es/view_article.asp?id=7392)

The dual career and empowerment of the athlete are of special importance and allow them to be involved in their own learning and growth process at all times.

The person as a whole must be studied and considered in order to provide support and ensure, with the best possible guarantees, the well-being and emotional balance of the athlete, providing them with resources, tools, and techniques to assist them in their daily lives and also to build their future in all areas of their life (personal, family, social, academic, and sports). (La Masia, 2021, <https://www.fcbarcelona.com/fcbarcelona/document/2021/02/15/1abdf154-efe3-42e4-9000-ef11bc9209fe/Butllet-La-Masia-febrer-2021.pdf>)

According to the above, attending to and supporting the personal needs of each player is part of the objectives of the club's service. It is important for the entire coaching staff to be aware of and consider the necessary aspects for good support and optimal interdisciplinary work in the athletes' careers.

In order to achieve this understanding of the players, their environment, well-being, and dual careers, Barcelona FC has professionals available (tutors and psychoanalysis) with two fundamental objectives: to **accompany** and **support** the athletes and the families that are part of Barcelona FC. These professionals carry out coordination in order to improve support for the athletes and provide tools that enhance their performance. This coordination includes other areas of the club: coaches, staff, academic field, doctors, physiotherapists, etc. The premise is to maintain a holistic view of the player.

The following are the lines of work of the comprehensive support service for the athletes of the Barcelona FC.

Different professionals and areas of work collaborate in this support, aiming to get to know, provide support, accompany, and provide tools for the players to become autonomous and fill their "backpacks" with learning. The new knowledge should contribute to their growth and achieve maximum performance in all areas of their lives (athletic, family, academic). The goal is to promote transfers from sports to life and from life to sports.

Not all institutions have the possibility to create a holistic structure, either due to economic difficulties or strategic plans. However, some of the work outlined here can be put into practice with the resources that each club has available. Even with minimal costs, it is possible to work in favour of women in sports and their athletic performance (which is the primary goal).

Next, the methodology of comprehensive care is explained. This service is offered to each of the players who are part of the women's football team.

Formative Women's Football

Comprehensive Athlete Care Service

The reception of the athlete begins with contact with the family. The first action is a phone call inviting the player and their family to attend an interview. It is crucial as it signifies the first meeting between the club members, the tutor and a psychologist. The purpose of the interview is to establish a collaborative and mutually trusting context.

The objectives of the interview are:

- Explaining the services offered by the club, both in terms of tutoring and psychological support.
- Fostering the connection between the family and the club professionals.
- Conducting an initial systematic assessment of the player, including relational, academic, autonomy habits, family, adaptation to the club, clinical data, and personality aspects. This initial assessment is repeated two more times throughout the season to observe the player's progress.
- Based on this initial assessment, a personalised work plan is created. It includes aspects that the psychologist and tutor have agreed upon as representing some form of difficulty.

In general terms, the psychosocial interview that is conducted follows a systemic model. This approach seeks to understand the individual as a system within a system. For this reason, it is important to include the entire family in the interview.

The **psychological care service** addresses basic and sensitive aspects to be explored in a generic way through open-ended questions. These aspects are included in the following areas:

- Family relationships and dynamics: structured or non-structured family, number of family members, relationships among them, relationships with extended family, observation of family dynamics and attitude during the interview, interaction style, congruence or discrepancies in messages, expectations regarding studies and sports, and so on.
- Player's abilities and personality characteristics: how she describes herself, how her family describes her, main traits, goals in different areas, and so on.
- Lifestyle habits: sleep quality, nutrition, autonomy habits, time management, order, and cleanliness.
- Adaptability to new situations: adaptive behaviour in a new school or club and course changes, coping with adverse situations, injuries, death of close individuals.

- Clinical information: psychological history of the player and her family.

The **clinical psychology service** works together with the tutor. During the season, specific situations may arise in which the athlete or her family requires more specific psychological support (injury, family situation, mourning, etc.). This support can be requested through the tutor, who will arrange for psychological follow-up.

Based on the initial interview and considering the registered risk and protective factors, priorities are established to begin working through **tutorial support**. These priorities are categorised using the colours of a traffic light: red, yellow, or green. If necessary, psychological support is provided simultaneously. Each of the areas involved in tutorial support addresses different topics.

The distinction between yellow and red lies in the quantity and severity of the risk factors presented by a player and her specific circumstances. A careful assessment is conducted for each player to differentiate between these categories. The risk factors explored and recorded during the interview are related to the following areas:

- Important events.
- Family environment.
- Academic context.
- Sports environment.
- Emotional management.

The information obtained during the psychosocial interview serves to guide the tutorial action. A specific work plan is developed for each player based on the information gathered in the interview. The aim of tutorial work is to enhance protective factors and minimise or eliminate risk factors. The tutor serves as the point of reference for the athlete and her family, accompanying and assisting her in integrating into the club and providing support to improve her performance. To achieve this, the tutor conducts individual and personalised monitoring of different aspects of the player's life, including academics, family, social relationships, vocational guidance, monitoring of the athletic domain, and support in overcoming any difficulties that may arise. The structure ensures that there is one tutor for the entire team. This allows for individualised information and specific work while maintaining a group perspective.

The support provided should take into account the adaptability to changes and life situations of each player. The initial interview or individual sessions capture a specific moment, like a “snapshot”. That's why it is necessary to have regular tutorials where all areas that can be worked on are recorded and priorities are established.

In some cases, after the initial interview, a player's “snapshot” may show a balanced combination of protective and risk factors. The action plan focuses on self-awareness and enhancing protective factors (tools for dual career, time management, strengthening

emotional management, etc.). However, within a few weeks, a new situation may arise that increases the risk factors (death of a family member, romantic breakup, parents' divorce, an injury, consecutive matches without being called up, playing fewer minutes than expected, etc.). Any situation that increases the risk factors is a good moment to assess its impact on the player's life, what personal tools she has at her disposal, how she utilises that learning moment to apply new strategies and start implementing what has been learned.

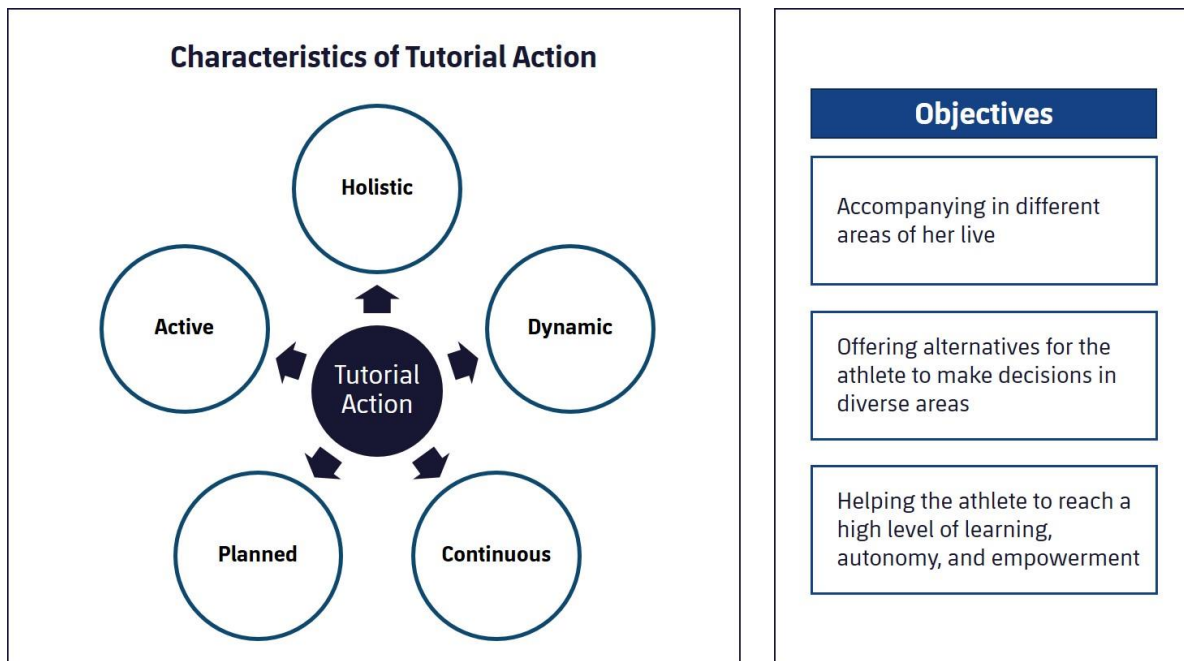
Tutorial Support

The role of the tutor provides support to the athletes and also assists the family in clarifying any doubts that may arise during their stay in the club. This role is complemented by coordination with different professionals who are part of the athlete's daily life, such as coaches, medical services, teammates, and facility staff. The aim is to gather all relevant information to achieve a balance across all vital areas of the athlete's life.

Therefore, tutorial action is characterised by:

- Holistic approach: addressing all areas of the athlete's life.
- Active service: the tutor takes the initiative to engage with the athlete in coordination and does not wait for her to request assistance in case of need.
- Planning: tutorials and coordination with different agents in the player's environment, following standardised timeframes.
- Dynamism: information regarding the athlete is managed through coordination with the individuals involved in her development. Flexibility: it is required since unforeseen circumstances may arise during the season.
- Continuity: tutorial support is provided throughout the season and for one year after the athlete leaves the club.

Image 4: Characteristics of Tutorial Action



Source: own creation.

Características de la acción tutorial	Characteristics of Tutorial Action
Activa	Active
Holística	Holistic
Dinámica	Dynamic
Planificada	Planned
Continuada	Continuous
Acción tutorial	Tutorial Action
Acompañar en las diferentes áreas de su vida	Accompanying in different areas of her life



Ofrecer propuestas alternativas para que el deportista tome decisiones en las diversas áreas	Offering alternatives for the athlete to make decisions in diverse areas
Ayudar al dep a tener un alto nivel de aprendizaje, autonomía y empoderamiento	Helping the athlete to reach a high level of learning, autonomy, and empowerment
Objetivos	Objectives

Throughout the season, individual and group tutorials are conducted to monitor the player's personal progress and the team's dynamics. At an individual level, specific demands expressed by the player or their parents can be addressed (communication, study habits, time management, autonomy, etc.).

Regarding individual topics, self-awareness is the starting point for players to become aware of their dreams, the resources they have, and how to use them in their lives. The following table shows the most relevant aspects to optimise performance in all areas of the athletes' lives:

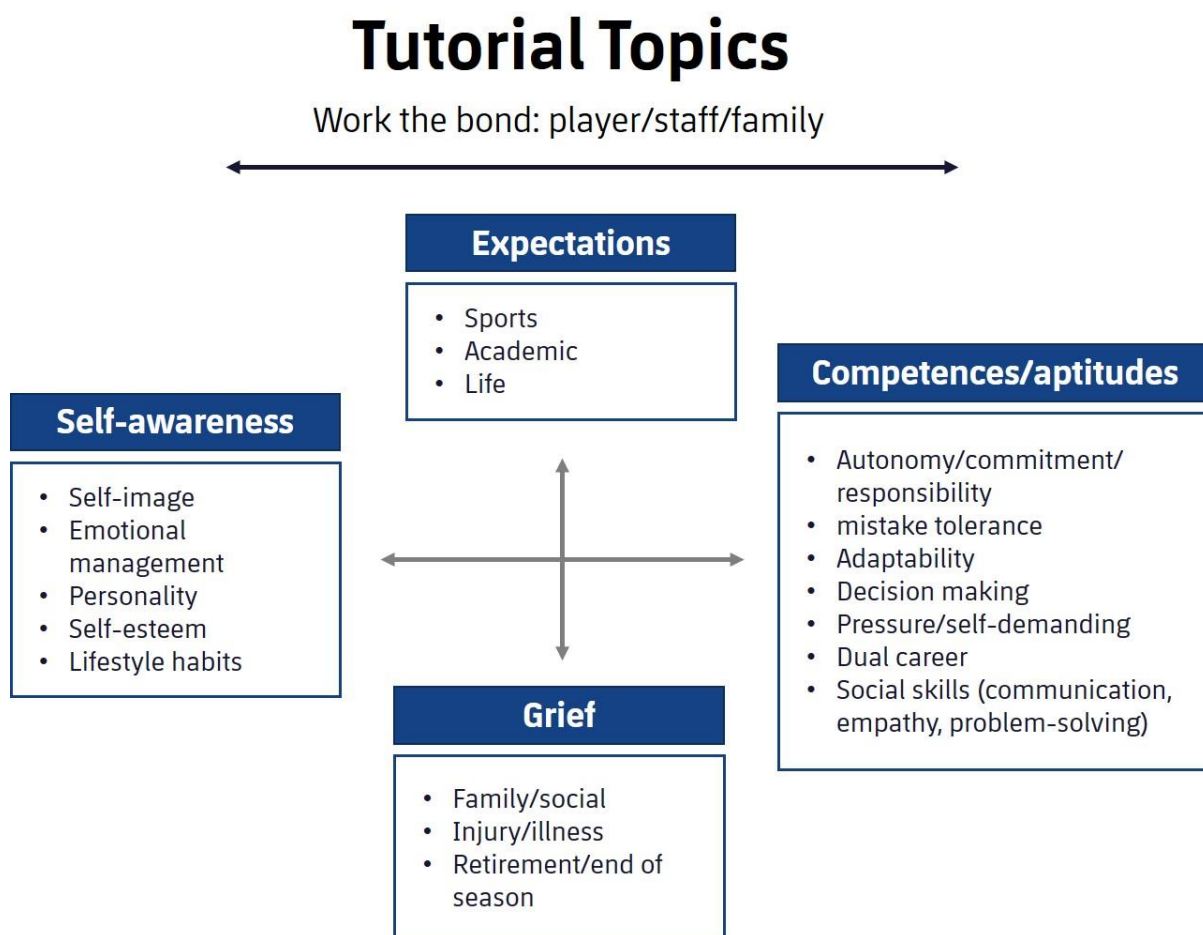
Table 1: Individual topics

Individual topics	
Habits	Sleep quality, hygiene, nutrition, autonomy, and time management.
Emotional and psychosocial management	Fears, mistake tolerance, frustration tolerance, self-esteem, etc.
Social behaviour	Disruptive behaviour, respect to professionals and mates, communication skills, assertiveness, etc.
Academic development	Dual career, time management, vocational guidance and comprehensive education, academic performance and result monitoring, school effort management.
Family dynamics	Follow up of daily life, grief, illnesses, pressure excess, etc.
Health.	Injuries.
Adaptation to the team	Welcome to the club, integration with mates and the staff, acceptance of technical decisions, etc.
Preparing the athlete for a possible release of the club	It is worked continuously throughout the year.

Source: own creation.

The club has a common road map for every athlete. However, individual, and particular aspects depending on the developmental stage, the sports career and concrete events that can happen to each person their environment are given importance.

Image 5: Tutorial Topics



Source: own creation.

Temáticas tutoriales	Tutorial Topics
Trabajo del vínculo: jugador/staff/familia	Work the bond: player/staff/family
Expectativas	Expectations



Deportivas	Sports
Académicas	Academic
De vida	Life
Autoconimiento	Self-awareness
Autoimagen	Self-image
Gestión emocional	Emotional management
Personalidad	Personality
Autoestima	Self-esteem
Habitos de vida	Lifestyle habits
Duelo	Grief
Familiar/social	Family/social
Lesión/enfermedad	Injury/illness
Baja/final de temporada	Retirement/end of season
Competencias/aptitudes	Competences/aptitudes
Autonomía/compromiso/responsabilidad	Autonomy/commitment/responsibility
Tolerancia error	mistake tolerance
Adaptabilidad	Adaptability
Toma de decisiones	Decision making
Presión/autoexigencia	Pressure/self-demanding
Carrera dual	Dual career
Habilidades sociales (comunicación, empatía, resolución conflictos)	Social skills (communication, empathy, problem-solving)



At a group level, the topics worked on are the ones that the coach can propose depending on the needs of the team, and also topics that the accompanying area regards appropriate according to age or category (assertiveness, communication, cohesion, responsibilities, etc.).

Table 2: Group Topics

Group Topics	
Habits	Autonomy (in younger players), hygiene, nutrition, sleep, order, and other habits are worked on.
Emotional and psychosocial management	Self-awareness.
Social behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertive communication. • Empathy. • Use of social media.
Academic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic orientation. • Study habits and time management. • Academic encouragement and orientation.
Health.	Education about risks practices and its consequences.
Adaptation to the team	Knowing and integrating with the teammates.

Source: own creation.

This monitoring is complemented by coordination with coaches and families.

Meetings with coaches are held to assess the players' sports performance. Coordination with families is done to provide feedback on the tutorial contents and gather relevant information.



Regular coordination takes place between the **support department** (psychologists and tutors) and the club's **healthcare professionals** (medical staff, physiotherapists, and nutritionists). This allows for a more precise follow-up based on relevant information about the athlete.

In parallel, throughout the season, the club offers the athletes various extracurricular activities to contribute to their personal growth, affiliation, and everyday emotional management. These activities have the following objectives: practicing values such as solidarity and empathy, fostering a sense of belonging to the club, etc.

The athletes' dual career (combining academic and sports domains) is supported through reinforcement classes and study rooms at the sports facility. Barcelona FC provides these spaces where teachers and tutors are available to assist with academic tasks. The club has established agreements with universities and educational centres to facilitate the players' access to education and adaptability to their needs (postponement of exams due to travel, shift changes, flexible study paths, etc.). Lastly, given the club's diverse areas, when an athlete needs to complete professional internships, efforts are made to provide them within the club itself.

Transition to the Professional Stage

During their sports career, players go through different stages: initiation (early years in the sport), development (increased training hours and greater emphasis on competition), mastery (elite level), and discontinuation (retirement).

The transition to the professional stage (elite or mastery) is one of the most challenging moments for many players. Many of them experience failure, which represents a significant milestone in their sports career. There is no standard time for adapting to the transitions of the sports cycle, and each player will have their own timing. Not all athletes have the same characteristics or circumstances. At times, players may need between one and two years to adjust to the new demands and requirements.

The increased physical, tactical, strategic, pace, and speed demands of the game can lead players to question their own competence. When athletes do not feel adequately prepared for the level of competition required, feelings of uncertainty and a sense of diminished control may arise. The pressure to reach the elite level and prove oneself can translate into self-imposed expectations. These situations create stress, which can generate negative feelings and thoughts during training and competition, such as tension, insecurity, concern about making mistakes, and anxiety (López Chamorro, n.d.).

It is important to consider that most of players will need to develop resources they do not possess upon entering this stage. Therefore, they will need time to successfully face the demands at the sports level, including increased demands, higher athletic performance, competing against more experienced players, and dealing with uncertainty, among others. This stage coincides with significant changes in other areas of their lives, such as

entering university (academic area), starting to live independently (psychosocial area), managing their own finances (economic area), and so on.

Here are some useful recommendations for this transition:

- Pay attention to the players' perceptions of competitions to prevent them from negatively influencing their development and performance.
- Set specific improvement goals so that players can focus and track their progress as they acquire new skills.
- Be patient with each player's evolution and differentiate between learning mistakes and attitude-related errors. Managing both aspects require different approaches, and it is important to avoid reinforcing fear of making mistakes.

During this stage, it is important to initiate specific work from the field of sports psychology, addressing the variables involved in sports performance. However, holistic aspects of the individual should not be neglected. Although players are in a period of transition and adaptation to the sports world, they are often very young.

Professional Football

Women's football has experienced growing demand in terms of performance and results. This is due to the increasing popularity of the sport among young girls, leading to a higher number of registered players and increased support from clubs, media, and fans. This can create significant pressure for players, with expectations to win titles and perform well, such as playing more minutes, securing sponsorships, and negotiating better contracts.

The role of psychology in player's support in the professional stage is to enhance their performance. This discipline can contribute its knowledge to support and achieve the team's desired outcomes. However, this work should always prioritise the well-being of the player. The professional stage is when all resources are prepared to achieve maximum performance in every training session, match, competition, and concentration. This should not be influenced by individual players' sports circumstances (contract renewals, playing time, personal situations, etc.), the characteristics of the situation (beginning of the season, end of the competition, important tournaments), or the characteristics of the immediate environment (family, social group, partner).

In general, there are no significant differences in terms of psychological aspects among high-performance athletes who practice different sports, nor between male athletes. If the psychological profile shows optimal mental health, sports performance will be maximised. These athletes demonstrate a high level of motivation and confidence in their abilities, physiological activation, high concentration, effective emotional regulation, and the use of mental imagery and self-dialogue.

Advice to the Coaching Staff and Staff

Providing guidance to the coaching staff (coaches) and other members of the professional team (fitness coaches, analysts, doctors, physiotherapists, etc.) is essential. They are the main agents of change and facilitators of the players' sports performance. The work focuses on the following areas:

- Psychological skills related to the sports domain.
 - Motivation:
 - Establishing individual and group goals.
 - Managing and using individual and group effort.
 - Regulation of activation levels: designing activation tasks on the field and in pre-match sessions. This is done in coordination with the fitness coach.
 - Communication skills on the field, in relation to the players and other staff members.
 - Observation and adjustment of competition plans and routines.
 - Mental load in training sessions and matches.

- Internal regulation and cohesion techniques.
 - Motivation.
 - Setting internal regulations and guidelines.
 - Selection process and definition of captain roles.
 - Integration, cohesion, and mutual understanding between the team and the team professionals.
 - Club values and identity.

- Organisational level.
 - Systematic programming and planning: at the beginning of the season, a work schedule is established. This is carried out in periodic sessions that are reviewed, evaluated, and readjusted as necessary.
 - Coordination and guidance in various daily situations and demands.

Individual work with players and group work with the team

A. Individual counselling

It is important to explain to the players the purpose of psychology and what aspects can be addressed through mental training to enhance their sports and personal performance.

Individual psychological counselling begins during the season through a semi-structured interview with each player on the roster. This interview aims to:

- Introduce the professional and explain what sports psychology is and the roles of a professional in this field.
- Gather information about the player's history, including sports, injuries, academics, etc.
- Explore the player's knowledge about sports psychology. Inquire about any past or current experiences working with a psychologist and their assessment of that experience.

Next, an individual assessment is conducted for each player. Various tests are used to understand how players evaluate their mental competencies and the extent to which they employ different psychological strategies to enhance their sports performance in training and competition.

It is important to hold a follow-up meeting with the player to share the assessment results and propose an action plan to work on throughout the season.

In addition to the individual interview and initial assessment, ongoing counselling and individual work on psychological aspects related to sports practice are conducted throughout the season. Some of the areas and psychological variables addressed are listed below.

Table 3: Psychological Variables Related to Sports Practice

Psychological Variables Related to Sports Practice
Motivation
Attention and concentration
Level of activation
Communication
Leadership
Self-confidence
Management and coping with difficulties
Orientation and counselling to balance dual career

Source: own creation.



Each season, new additions join the teams, leading to a process of adaptation and significant cultural transitions. This is another important aspect to consider in professional football.

It is crucial to understand the adaptation situations of new additions to the club, team, and residence. Both the technical and personal aspects of the players are involved in the adaptations that entail overall team management and specifically the integration of new members. This approach is necessary to prevent adaptation difficulties, mitigate suffering, and ensure a successful process that increases the chances of achieving maximum performance.

In the case of foreign players, the existence of welcome protocols is essential. These protocols may include explanations about the sports complex and services, assistance in finding accommodation, language classes in the destination country, and familiarisation with the customs of the country or region.

Facilitating adaptation also entails working on team cohesion. Therefore, it is necessary to promote mutual acquaintance among the players from the first day of pre-season. To achieve this, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Self-awareness dynamics** for the team players and staff. This initial self-exploration will enable them to understand others. It involves presentation dynamics to get to know the culture and beliefs of players from different countries and cities.
- **Dynamics to facilitate communication** when different languages coexist: football dictionary game, mentoring program among players on the team.
- **Spending time together off the field:** engaging in activities outside the sports context to promote team cohesion. These activities can include visiting local sites, having a barbecue, going to the theatre, and so on.

It is recommended that both professionals and players pay closer attention to new additions during the first few months. This accelerates the player's adaptation and adjustment to the new lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, adaptation is a protective factor that allows the player to perform optimally as soon as possible.

B. Group Psychological Counselling

Group psychological counselling is conducted through group sessions and dynamics aimed at both players and coaches.

These sessions have a direct methodology (guided by the sports psychology department) and an indirect methodology (led by a coach with prior coordination and counselling to define the session's programming and development). The group sessions or dynamics aim to work on and enhance various psychological variables related to the sports domain. These include:

- Group cohesion: sense of belonging, camaraderie, cooperation, group knowledge, etc.
- Communication.
- Attention and concentration.
- Motivation.
- Conflict resolution.
- Others.

Many actions are planned for the season. However, it is important to have the ability to adapt and be flexible in the course of action based on unforeseen circumstances and situations that may arise during each phase of the season.

Working with players from a young age allows them to acquire techniques and tools, as well as promoting self-awareness from an early age. This provides protective factors for the players, as it facilitates **prevention**, establishes a solid foundation for promoting **well-being** and **balance**. It helps to take care of the athletes' mental health and ensures that transitions are not too abrupt.

Professionalisation increases stress and pressure situations: a greater need for results, contract negotiations, involvement in national teams, increased exposure on social media, etc. For this reason, providing athletes with protective mechanisms and problem-solving skills from the moment they enter the sports world will facilitate their ability to navigate the stages and moments experienced by high-level players.

Lastly, it is essential to mention the confidentiality guarantees that a psychologist must adhere to regarding the player. These guarantees are outlined in the psychologist's code of ethics and can be consulted at the Official College of Psychologists (COP for its name in Spanish). This principle of confidentiality is subjected to a duty and a right to professional secrecy. Not only does it preserve the player's right to privacy but also that of the coaches and staff. To communicate information to third parties, the signed consent of the individual involved and their legal guardians, in the case of minors, is needed.

Multidisciplinary Work

Multidisciplinary work is of great importance in the process of supporting athletes to promote personal and sports well-being. Several agents are involved in this common goal, so it is necessary for everyone to coordinate their efforts to achieve it. This work is crucial both in the formative stage and in the professional stage. The following are the multidisciplinary actions carried out in the women's football section of Barcelona FC:

- Ecosystem meetings: These meetings are held every two weeks. Professionals from the health departments (physicians, physiotherapists, rehabilitation specialists) and the coaching staff come together to supervise cases that require special attention. For

example, athletes with long-term injuries or athletes who have been affected by changes in their environment (habits, family dynamics, academics, etc.). General team dynamics are also monitored. During these meetings, professionals share information to have a holistic view of the player and the team. The focus is on establishing actions in different areas. Those areas will be periodically supervised and evaluated to observe the athlete's progress.

- Injuries: Both at the initial moment of the injury (long-term injuries, i.e., those lasting more than a month of absence from the field) and when returning to sports practice, the player may experience different emotions. These emotions may include frustration for not being in the same physical state or form as before the injury, fear or mistrust of re-injury, or excessive euphoria upon returning. A better experience of the return can be achieved by setting appropriate goals to manage and channel these emotions and adjust expectations. It is necessary to accompany the players during their reintegration after suffering an injury in terms of the psychological aspect, social support is emphasised, which can be categorised into three types: support from the medical team, support from the sports team, and support from family and close social environment.

Not only does an injury prevent regular sports practice but also separate the player from the team's dynamics and routine, as they need to dedicate training hours to their physical recovery. This leads to not only sports isolation but also social and emotional isolation. This highlights the importance of attention and support for the player from all the professionals around them.

The **psychology service** carries out its job taking into account the emotional impact of an injury. It addresses the different psychological needs involved in the injury process, as well as the organisation of daily routines and the restructuring of goals based on the duration of the injury.

Regarding the post-injury period, it is important to accompany the athlete when they return to sports practice. Difficult situations may arise when restarting training, with feelings of fear and distress that should be identified and channelled in a way that facilitates the athlete's reintegration.

The management of fears and expectations upon returning to sports practice also depends on how the different stages have been managed, from the moment of the injury to recovery. The information received from different professionals, social support, and contact with the team are key components during this process.

Coordination among professionals allows for the sharing of useful information to constantly review the progress of each injured player's recovery plans. An example of a protocol could be as follows: in a multidisciplinary meeting, coordinated actions are planned in response to a long-term injury. The actions that professionals can carry out are listed below:

- Physiotherapist: treats the player's physical recovery.
- Coach or fitness coach: includes the player in team dynamics on the field, as long as it does not jeopardise their physical well-being. If the player is unable to perform any exercises, tasks that can promote technical and tactical aspects are worked on.
- Nutritionist: if deemed necessary.
- Psychologist or counsellor: conducts a session to assess the emotional impact of the injury. Offers the possibility of undergoing a therapeutic process for the time the injury lasts. Reviews the player's time management and habits, as their routine has been modified due to the injury. Before sports medical release, there is a new interview to assess the player's condition. Coordination between the sports psychology and the fitness coach or coach allows the creation of tasks sheets that could favour the technical and tactical aspects. Work can also be done with players who require techniques to enhance psychological variables involved in sports practice (visualisation, thought detection, etc.)."

Formative Program

The formative program is designed for female football players. It is a comprehensive formative program that encompasses various educational actions related to the sports field. It aims to respond to educational needs identified in each developmental stage of the athletes. This assessment is carried out by professionals from different areas who work with the athlete. The objectives of the formative programme are the following:

- Promote the comprehensive development of the athletes in each team, according to their developmental stage, by identifying needs in different areas of the sports environment.
- Enhance the sense of belonging to the club and the section.

The program consists of four main blocks that cover different areas. These are:

1. **Health Block:** It includes the needs of the medical and nutrition areas. The medical department carries out educational activities aimed at dissemination. The goal is to provide athletes with accessible and simple information about female physiology. The aim is for the athlete to understand the stages of changes their bodies go through, and to be able to voice their doubts (menstrual cycle, nutrition, hydration, sleep and rest education, what to eat on match days, how to better recover, etc.).

2. **Communication Block:** It involves the communication department. The main educational action in the communication area is to teach players how to use social media safely and appropriately. It is expected that they understand the benefits and drawbacks of the Internet and social media.

3. Academic Guidance Block: It addresses the needs in the academic field. Some of the actions for players in formative teams involve meetings where players from the first team and the Barça B team they share their experiences in dual careers with players from the youth, cadet, and junior teams.

4. Club and Section Identity Block: It focuses on fostering the sense of belonging. It includes formative sessions aimed at promoting and nurturing the sense of identity of the club and the section. For example, getting to know sporting role models, reinforcing values of sports practice, instilling, and conveying positive values and attitudes, promoting knowledge among the teams that are part of the formative women's football.

The presented methodology can serve as a guide for implementation in any institution or club that aims to provide comprehensive care to the players. Some institutions may only be able to include certain guidelines, while others may use this information to define new lines of work or simply resume specific activities at certain times of the season. In some cases, there may not be a budget to hire professionals who carry out these actions. However, it is important for institutions to invest in **mental health prevention** and avoid intervening only when the difficulties described arise.

A better understanding of the world of women in sports is achieved through actions that foster an atmosphere of learning and knowledge. This is accomplished by training sports professionals, promoting self-awareness among the players, and providing information and education to families about lifestyle habits and other essential topics for supporting the athletes.

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