



BFU BEST PRACTICES OF YOUTH SPORT DROPOUT PREVENTION

About BFU

The Bulgarian Football Union is national football association responsible for the governance, development and promotion of football in Bulgaria. The BFU is a member of FIFA and UEFA and is licensed under the Bulgarian Ministry of Youth and Sport. The federation currently has approximately 160 paid employees. The football clubs-members of the Bulgarian Football Union are 546, 30 of which are professional clubs and the rest with amateur status.

One of the main problems that the BFU has identified in its *Vision for the future 2018-2022* is the lack of interest in sports practice among the young people *and* the high dropout rate in ages 15-18.

Problem identification

In order to tackle the dropout phenomenon, the BFU's expert team has requested feedback from both youth academy players and the administrative personnel in search for the main reasons for the YSD. Although various factors have come to our attention, the ones that stand out are as follows:

- Burnout due to high parental/trainer expectations
- Inability to balance between education and sports practice
- Abundance of other entertainment more attractive than sports practice
- Lack of self esteem due to low playing time/coming to terms with the difficulty of making it as a professional.

Best practices proposal

Before we present our best practices proposal, it is necessary to state that a significant proportion of the young athletes under BFU's radar are involved in sports with the main goal to make it as a professional rather than to participate in recreational activities. We believe this should be stressed as it makes the case of these young people slightly different than the situation with the rest of the partners in the PYSD project. Nevertheless, the goal of the BFU is not only to work for the development and success of professional football in the country but also to make football as accessible to the general public as possible and to promote the practice of sports for its many benefits apart from the professional career.

Regarding reason number 1 – the burnout problem – the BFU suggests the implementation of sports psychologists within youth academies. The long-standing philosophy in Bulgarian sports education insists that the coaches are responsible for the development, the physical and the emotional well-being of the pupils; however, we have found this to be inefficient. What is more, sports psychologists have been contracted to work with professional football teams as well as the men's national team, proving that the model of using expert help is indeed something extremely valuable. Since we are aware that the use of sports psychologists would be an extra cost that schools and academies could not afford, we suggest the implementation of a 'guidance book' for academy personnel to be used whenever a young athlete shows symptoms of burnout. Having in mind that the coaches or parents might be a reason for this burnout, the suggestion is that this guidance book be distributed to the higher-level administration in order to identify a pillar which the athletes can go to for consultation with no fear.

Regarding reason number 2 – the lack of balance between education and sports practice – we strongly believe that a direct connection between the school and the academy should be established in which

Developed with the **best partners**





potential problems (low grades, skipping classes, etc.) should be presented to the coaches/administrators. In this way they themselves would have the necessary information to sit down and discuss the situation with the athlete and to work out the best possible balance with regard to his personal goals (parents could be involved as well). This is all a matter of communication tools between sports clubs/academies and schools which have not been used in Bulgaria so far.

Regarding reason number 3 – entertainment that is more attractive than sports – we believe it is again a matter of proper communication of the benefits of sports and their advantages versus other activities. We believe this to be the toughest challenge for sports federations and academies not only because it is a worldwide problem but because we feel the spotlight is erroneously tilted in order to promote the health benefits of sports and the professional potential rather than its emotional benefits. We feel that step one should be for the coaches to emphasize the team spirit/togetherness/socializing over the individual prospects for the athletes. This could be done through team meetings, various activities and attractions, field trips, etc. This way the value of football in our particular case will be shifted from a potential career move to recreational activity.

Regarding reason number 4 – lack of self esteem – we believe this problem could be tackled by a mix of practices 1 and 3, i.e. working with sports psychology guidelines and the establishment of a recreational feel for the sport in order to make the athletes feel that making it as a professional is not the main priority for sports practice and that there are other mainly social benefits behind it.

Developed with the **best partners**

