

FOCUS ON WOMEN'S SOCCER: THE FIRST RESEARCH RESULTS OF THE PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DISNEY PLAYMAKERS PROGRAM IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

As the popularity of women's soccer grows, so too does the focus on developing youth players. The present research examines the implementation of the Disney Playmakers program in Hungary, launched by UEFA to engage 5–8-year-old girls in football and to make them love the sport. Data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed that although the program is popular among children and parents, sport-specific objectives, such as the expansion of the female youth base, are only partially achieved. The research highlighted the positive impacts of the program, such as the development of life skills in children, but institutional and infrastructural difficulties and disciplinary challenges hinder its effectiveness. Future research will aim to further develop the program and compare it internationally with other football cultures.

1 Introduction

Women's soccer is becoming increasingly popular today, with a growing number of female players and a growing range of opportunities [1]. This growth has brought with it an increase in the quality of the game, which is reflected in, among other things, the number of spectators [2]; [3]. From amateur football to professional top-level sport and world football events, it appeals to a wide range of people, providing entertainment and recreation [4].

Football can therefore also play a very important role in events outside sport and can be a catalyst for social change in a way that few sports can, whether it is promoting gender equality, encouraging physical activity or promoting important social causes. Excellent examples are the action of international organisations and national federations against racism [5] or bullying [6] or events such as the World Cup for the homeless [7].

Numerous studies and statistics show that the Hungarian population typically leads a sedentary lifestyle [8]; [9], which combined with sedentary work and daily stress, leads to serious health problems [10]. According to the KSH [11], 59% of adults do not exercise at all in their leisure time and 41% of the population spend at least 7 hours sitting or lying down (in addition to hours spent sleeping), a situation that has been steadily worsening in recent years. One aspect of football as a recreational sport, can play a particularly important role in reducing the harm caused by a sedentary lifestyle, promoting physical activity and making people want to exercise. One of the cornerstones of counteracting sedentary lifestyles can be to develop a desire for physical activity and to maintain it throughout life. Childhood is one of the best times to develop, and football can also

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play a key role in this. Children and young people spend a large part of their time at school, so public education is a particularly suitable segment for promoting physical activity [12]; [13].

In addition to adult football, there is also a growing emphasis on the development of women's soccer [14]; [15]. The development of youth is a key priority for all sports, but in addition to the development of future elite athletes, the promotion of recreational sport and physical activity is also an important goal of youth sport [16].

One of the youngest programs in the women's soccer youth development sector, the Disney Playmakers program, was launched by the UEFA in 2021. One of the main aims of the Disney Playmakers programme is to get girls aged 5-8 involved in football through a specially designed programme, but beyond that, the main objectives are also to get young girls interested in sport, exercise and empowerment. Prior to the final version of the programme, a series of research studies and surveys were carried out, the results of which were taken into account in the development of the Playmakers training principles and methodology. The programme creates a safe environment through Disney stories to experience the joy of playing sport, learn the basics of football and experience a sense of belonging to a community, based on the idea that cooperation and friendship are of paramount importance for girls of this age [17]. However, the program not only puts football at the center, but also focuses on physical activity, learning the basics of movement and developing life skills. In relation to childhood sport, it is important to note that there are big differences between boys and girls. International statistics show that 84% of girls under 17 do not reach the WHO minimum physical activity level [17] and boys aged 15-24 play twice as much sport as girls of the same age [18], despite the fact that physical activity in childhood should be a priority [19].

However, despite its growing recognition and popularity, women's football is still a little-studied area from a scientific point of view. Our research aims to investigate the practical implementation of the Disney Playmakers program in Hungary through semi-structured interviews.

2 Method

The research is based on the Grounded Theory principle, which is a method suitable for investigating social phenomena that are more difficult to grasp, using semi-structured interviews from the perspective of different actors [20]; [21]. When applying grounded theory, the researcher develops a theory that describes and explains the interrelationships of the phenomena explored. Sampling is defined and shaped by the research question, analysis and data collection proceed simultaneously [22]; [23].

In addition to background questions on the coaching and athlete experience, the questionnaire includes questions on thoughts and insights on the theoretical part of the program, and a part of the questions focus on the practical implementation of Playmakers, covering both positive and negative experiences. One of the basic methods of grounded theory is the semi-structured interview. That means that the interview is basically based on predefined interview questions and the most important questions about the practical operation of the program, but during the interview subjects are given the opportunity to provide other additional ideas and insights. These may be included in the next interview, as a basic question. In the case of the present research, after the first interviews, two questions were added to the questionnaire about the coaches' attitudes.

The sample consists of coaches working with the Disney Playmakers method in Hungary, and I contacted them through online platforms and by phone (based on the 2023/373 KEB permit), using the online database of the Hungarian Football Association [24] and the official Playmakers group.

The interviews were conducted in person or in the online (e.g. TEAMS) space and lasted 25-40 minutes, depending on the interviewee. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in written form. Neither the name of the interviewee nor his/her club is used, each participant is identified by the sign of his/her choice, while only the type of location (capital city/province) is used for the clubs. Respondents' demographic and background data are recorded and processed in an Excel spreadsheet.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Basic characteristics

By September 2024, eleven coaches from ten clubs (eight from the countryside, two from the capital) have been interviewed, which, based on the association's database, represents roughly one third of PM clubs. Of the ten clubs, eight have implemented the Disney Playmakers program, two have not. In one rural club, the program could not be launched due to restrictions following COVID. In the other rural association, it failed partly due to lack of funding and partly due to the criteria of the Playmakers program. One of the program's requirements is to involve girls who are not yet registered and have not played football. This criterion could not be met by the club in question. In the other associations, the PM was implemented in some form, either at association level or in cooperation with public schools.

Of the eleven coaches who responded, nine are men, two are women and all eleven have experience as players, some of them currently active. The age distribution is quite wide, with the youngest coach being twenty-five and the oldest fifty-four. All but one of them hold some form of soccer coaching qualification, the highest of which is a UEFA B licence. The only one who does not have a football coaching qualification has athletics coaching qualification but has been working in soccer for several years. As with age, coaching experience varies from 2 to 26 years, and in terms of age groups, practically all age groups from U7 to adult are represented at both boys' and girls' level. The exception is adult, where only female teams were coached by the coaches in the survey.

3.2 The program

All of them completed the Disney Playmakers course in 2022, but one trainer also attended the latest training in 2024. The two-day training consisted of a theoretical and practical part based on two fairy tales (Frozen 2, The Incredibles 2). During the training, it was emphasised that the Playmakers "coach" is not a coach but a playmaker, as the aim of the program itself goes beyond football. The PM Playmaker is not a soccer coach, but a character in the story. The feedback on the course is generally positive, with participants considering it to be well organised and to provide useful knowledge. However, several felt that the training itself could be differentiated, as some of the knowledge imparted here is already available to those who come with a coaching qualification, while for those who do not come from a soccer background, it is new knowledge.

They are also generally positive about the Playmakers method, but there are questions about both the method itself and its practical implementation, with less positive aspects. All the trainers interviewed agree that the basic idea itself is good, useful and sells well. One positive point mentioned was that stereotypes about football in parents' minds are easier to overcome through Playmakers and easier to grasp. This latter fact is an important one for the Playmakers age group (5-8 years old), as at this age it is very much up to the parent to decide how much the child stays involved in the sport. In addition, the strength of the program is that the colourful balls and equipment are attractive to young girls. However, it is important to mention here that this mainly applies to girls who do not play football or have played football before, because those who are already involved in football at some level, do not enjoy the Playmakers sessions, according to the feedback. However, this is actually in line with the aim of the program, which is to attract as many new girls as possible to the sport of football through the program.

3.3 Gender differences

Differences between boys and girls

During the interviews, we were also curious to know whether the coaches interviewed saw any differences when working with boys and girls, as the Disney Playmakers method emphasises that it takes into account differences between boys and girls. Several coaches responded that, in general, off-field factors (moon position, front, "what happened at school, kindergarten) have a big influence on children's behaviour. The majority also agree that differences are less noticeable in younger age groups, but more so in older age groups. Two coaches gave a similar answer: in their opinion, boys are more involved in football, while girls are more involved in mass sports. Some

coaches believe that girls are more attentive and understand the drills more quickly, but that it is more difficult to maintain the momentum and pace of the training sessions compared to boys.

They also mentioned as a typical difference that girls often focus more on friendship and cooperation, which is also emphasised in the Disney Playmakers method. One of the coaches interviewed gave the example of deciding that if a boy can decode four, he thinks of himself as Messi and expresses this to the others, whereas this is not the case with girls. However, friendship and cooperation can also have a negative effect, because in many cases, if one of the three friends doesn't like football and stops, the other two will stop too. Several respondents also agreed that it is more difficult with girls than boys when it comes to adolescent phase. One of the reasons given for this was that boys are more embedded in the 'football culture'. For example, in the case of truancy from training, coach communication can be more intense than with girls, where more attention needs to be paid to the style of communication. One of the coaches interviewed reported back that he believes it all depends on the individual, because there can be a more sensitive spirit among boys, while there can be someone among girls who can easily hold their own with boys.

Differences between female and male playmakers

We also asked the coaches if they thought there was any difference between male and female playmakers. The majority of the feedback we received was that there is no gender difference between PM coaches, it is more relevant to have coaching experience and a coaching licence. Coaches who manage adult or serious level youth teams and have advanced degrees have a harder time identifying with the Playmakers philosophy. Some differences were reported by the interviewees, but these apply to coaches in general, not just those working in the Disney program. Responses indicated that male coaches are more disciplined and have a more charismatic appearance, while female coaches are more empathetic and young girls at Playmakers are perceived to identify with them more and feel less inadequate. Overall, however, the feedback was that there are individual differences rather than general gender differences. A good example is one club where we interviewed a male-female coaching pair. Here, the female member of the pair said that she was unable to watch *The Ice Magic 2* because she was so far away from it, while the male member of the pair, as a father of several children, was familiar with the entire repertoire of Disney princesses.

3.4 Efficiency

There was a lot of negative feedback from interviewees about the effectiveness of the program, claiming that the program is not achieving its core objective because they are not able to transfer girls from Disney to the clubs (*Figure 1.*).

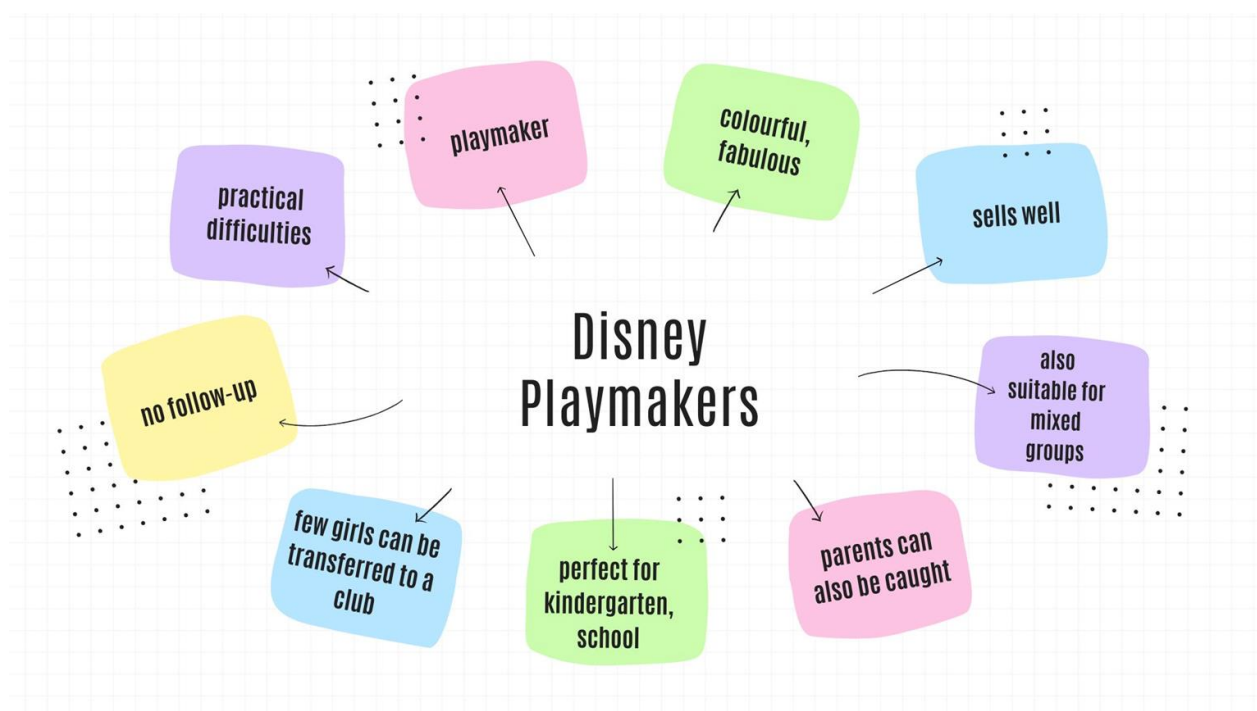


Figure 1. Keywords most mentioned by interviewees

As long as the Playmakers training sessions, which in many cases are not at the club but in cooperation with the associations in public schools, are being carried out, they are loved, they are being done, parents are positive, but after the program there is no progress, they are not getting into the soccer bloodstream. There are associations in the countryside where the Playmakers sessions in the institutions were attended by 60 children, of which six were transferred to the club, but this was also mainly due to the fact that the coach started a mixed age group, an all-girls group, because the girls did not want to play with boys. Linked to this is the feedback that the program works less well in the smaller towns, as there are not always enough people to draw on. Overall, the feedback from the interviewees suggests that the program works very well and is popular in kindergartens and schools.

The core target group of the Playmakers program is girls aged 5-8, but we have received conflicting feedback on this. Several interviewees found that Playmakers works very well with slightly older children (up to about fourth grade) and that it is not only suitable for girls' groups but also for mixed groups, because everyone likes to play and all children like stories, regardless of gender. There is also contrasting feedback that Playmakers works well until the end of first grade at the most, when children are more imaginative and the school does not "overwhelm them".

Another problem with the program was the lack of discipline. Since the basic purpose of the program is fun and free play, discipline is not explicitly promoted. However, this can also lead to accident-prone situations and can be counterproductive if children are not given limits. This latter finding is one of the much-debated issues in parenting today. Another problem identified is the lack of infrastructure, which is present in more than half of the associations. In principle, the sessions are planned for thirty people, but in many places, there is only a small gym room available, which makes practical implementation difficult. In relation to public education, six out of ten of the ten session leaders interviewed mentioned the attitude of teachers in nurseries and schools as a problem. It is a basic experience that they are not willing to help or participate in the organisation of the sessions or in their preparation (changing children's clothes, escorting them, etc.), but rather take advantage of the fact that they do not have to organise the sessions and that the responsibility for the sessions is taken over by others.

4 Conclusion, Future Directions

Based on interviews with Playmakers “coaches”, the program itself is a good initiative because all children love stories, all children love to play and through stories they can learn the basics of movement and football in a safe environment. The activities also help to develop life skills such as conflict management and cooperation. So, the general aspect of the program, beyond football, is fully realised. However, the sport-specific objective of broadening the youth base for women's football is not achieved in practice, as only a small percentage of girls participating in the program are successfully transferred to club sport after the 10-10 sessions. However, it should also be noted that the program works very well in public education (kindergarten, elementary school) and can be a useful complement to the general educational program. It is effective not only with girls, but also with mixed groups, as each story has characters that boys can identify with and play and story-telling play an important role for children regardless of gender. Feedback suggests that Playmakers can even be used with children slightly older than the original (5-8 years) (up to fourth grade), and that they can enjoy the sessions.

As for the future directions of the research, we are currently in the process of contacting more clubs in the country to get as much feedback as possible on how the program is working in practice. Based on the results, a study is planned to be prepared for the Hungarian Football Association to help the program work more effectively. In the longer term, we also plan to conduct interviews in Italy, which will provide an opportunity to examine the practical implementation of the program in a foreign country with a different soccer culture from our own, and to learn from possible good practices. In addition, using the results of this and other research, we would like to develop a soccer-based program that could be implemented in a public education setting, with the central aim of developing a desire for physical activity, encouraging a love of physical activity, and developing life-long skills. Positive experiences in childhood can play a key role in ensuring that children continue to lead physically active lifestyles in adulthood, preventing the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle [25]; [26].

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