

## A MAIEUTIC SOCCER

## UN CALCIO MAIEUTICO

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### Abstract

This paper aims to present a good practice created through a collaboration between a Roman soccer school and the University of Tor Vergata. This collaborative research has led to the shaping of a new model of soccer coach, influenced and inspired by a Socratic pedagogical approach. Along time, this educational proposal has found the right approach in the so-called funiño, a technical and football methodology, which was rich in pedagogical insights that have unfolded in practice on the field and in the creation of a second soccer club. This ethical ‘vision’ of both the coach and the soccer school aims to further contribute to develop a soccer school of thought, the Wellness Football Academy.

L’articolo ha come finalità quella di presentare una buona prassi costituita grazie a un lavoro sinergico tra una scuola calcio romana e l’Università degli Studi di Roma “Tor Vergata”. Questo percorso di ricerca azione ha dato vita a un modello di allenatore che si basa su una proposta pedagogica socratica. Nel tempo la riflessione educativa ha poi trovato un connubio vincente con una metodologia tecnico-calcistica, il funiño, ricca di intuizioni pedagogiche che si sono dispiegate nella prassi sul campo e nella creazione di una seconda società calcistica. Oggigiorno la visione etica dell’allenatore e della società di calcio vogliono essere un ulteriore tassello per la strutturazione di una scuola di pensiero calcistico, la Wellness Football Academy.

### Keywords

Maieutic, Coach, Funiño, Sports Values, Wellbeing

Maieutica, Allenatore, valori sportivi, funiño, benessere

### Introduction

Academic research can either meet social reality from the top of its paradigms or through an approach in which civil society offers its educational contribution and the university gives its scientific support to what social praxis considers proper to do. This contribution aims to discuss such an encounter between a Roman soccer school, AFSD Annunziatella, and the chair of social pedagogy of the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, which happened four years ago. Although relatively recent, this path may already offer its own educative-sport model, reasoned and contextualized, and open to meet with other football and social realities. A model that, as we shall see, has not only supported the birth of a new club, the “Roma 7.0 Academy”, but that is now aiming to build a true “school of thought of soccer” (Wellness Football Academy), structured around the “Roma 7.0 Academy”. (Wellness Football Academy), and on a model of a sporting character social enterprise.

Although referring to other key aspects of this sports project, this contribution shall primarily focus on the pedagogical framework of such enterprise and on the model of the Socratic coach, chosen to train coaches of those clubs that are part of the Wellness Football Academy. The article shall be concluded by describing, as of today, what the lines of development of the Wellness Football Academy might be,

the main container for both what will be the avenues of research, as well as its more applicative aims such as training and action on the field.

### **1. Preliminary analysis and pedagogic framework**

Often, when we hear about boys' soccer schools, we might sense a feeling of frustration, due to the ambivalence of loving the sport, yet either by personal experience, or in light of the news, being fully aware of its dark side as well. Such dark side becomes an obstacle when phenomena such as competitive stress, careerism, violence or similar are shown on the playing fields, from the youngest categories. To face this, there are four possible ways forward: a) pick a big companies' soccer school which would certainly be formative, yet aimed at selection (according to an almost Darwinian approach to sport); b) "risk" with the neighborhood soccer school glorying in affiliations and partnerships aimed to impress families, emphasizing even more the vision of sport as exclusively winning and therefore unethical; c) "protect" one's own child from excessive stimuli, choosing a sport other than soccer; d) opt for a parochial or popular soccer, almost rather denigrated by field experts as usually deemed of being too playful, little technical and not at all ambitious.

After choosing the last way, many families have approached, over time, the AFSD Annunziatella soccer school. Even the parents themselves, who are now coaches at Annunziatella and Roma 7.0 Academy, shared this idea from the beginning, that is to say that soccer always bears with itself an education value if played in a quiet environment. The relationship between sport and education is not, however, straightforward. Those involved in sports pedagogy must debunk this way of thinking, resulting more from clichés than scientific evidence (Carraro-Marino, 2016; Costantini, 2008). Although likely and necessary, the link between sport and education does not for this reason follow: "it too, in fact, can only be the result of a formative intention, a realization project and a critical awareness, for which some conditions of finalized and specific 'control' are indispensable" (Scurati, 2009, p. 122). It is from this idea that we created a two-fold path inside the soccer school (divided on the logical level, but certainly not on the applicative one): 1) building a soccer school that trains players and does not only have recreational purposes (at most for children to promote subjectively playful experiences (Huizinga, 2002, p.17) and 2) promoting an educational path that supports the growth of player both as an athlete and as a person. In 2017, thus, a training path connected to the chair of social pedagogy at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" was initiated, in which we acted as a bridge between the operational part and the pedagogical reflection.

Starting from the pedagogic definition of sport as "a science of the theory and educational praxis of motor and sports action, thus as "a critical-reflexive reflection of such action"(Isidori & Fraile, 2008, p. 24), we decided to devise our strategy by keeping two grounds in mind: internal and external training. The former consisted in educational meetings, during which the pedagogical and technical-football side partnered together to create a constant circularity between classroom and field. Over the years, this first approach gave impetus to other spontaneous and internal educational experiences. Even before the covid-19 emergency, for example, we offered weekly short online meetings, during which, taking clues from actual cases, we proceeded to analyze events, whether sport or pedagogy related, looking to find possible solutions. Alternatively, we offered to carry out self-managed workshops [by coaches] to freely discuss training and exercises strategies for the following week, in line with the programs of the soccer school's head. The latter, that is to say external training, on the other hand, consisted of attending courses organized by the CSI and the FIGC so that all coaches would have the minimum qualifications to become *de facto* coaches and not just parish operators or animators. In addition, all the coaches attended a first level course of the funiño (soccer school that we will resume later) and many also attended the second one. Finally, some

coaches, individually, attended other training courses or participated in European sports projects. The training idea was to integrate the two, in order to evaluate what was offered in the different training courses and contextualize, within their own project, the key concepts, to turn sports proposal into a real educational path.

At the end of this first training period, which in fact can be considered concluded with the birth of the Wellness Football Academy group (which we will look into later), four educational principles were considered fundamental:

### ***The person's centrality***

If the single individual is not put at the core of the educational-physical paths, then the sport becomes a mere technique, most of the time dehumanizing its players and aiming to reach instrumental, utilitarian and immoral goals. On a theoretical and pedagogic level, our soccer school is modelled on the maritainian concept of individual (Maritain, 2000, p.55); on the operational ground, on the other hand, it refers to the personality development as described by clinical pedagogy (Pesci & Mani, 2013, p. 171). These two concepts, which will not be discussed here, share the idea of global and psychophysical individual unity to promote both athletes and coaches.

The great challenge is to be able to work simultaneously on body dynamics, kinetics, psychomotor and personality according to their cognitive and metacognitive dimension, giving strong emphasis to the character aspect. The soccer school greatest challenge is to not downgrade the sport to a mere "moral gym", as totalitarianism did in the past. Young athletes should be educated, not "trained". This is why in our soccer school we do not have instructors, but trainers, re-evoking an expression dear to some Salesian pedagogues, that of "all-educators" (PGS, 1993).

Following this, as for inclusiveness, a model based on a global pedagogical approach has been chosen (Cantadori & Rolli, 2011), which also considers those children with particular difficulties linked to cognitive problems or motor disorders. The idea, in fact, is to overcome a merely functional approach, and to reflect instead on the person's value and ground the educational-sporting process anthropologically.

### ***Promoting wellbeing between life and the field***

Positive psychology, a school of thought developed at the beginning of the XXI century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), plays a key part in developing educative goals in each of the categories. Building up from such psychology applied to sport (Salaman-Younes, 2011; Amanendra & Bani, 2017; Brady & Grenville-Cleave, 2018), we assumed it was essential to use the definitions of *skill of wellbeing* and *skill of achievement* in our sportive teaching paths, considering both of them as means belonging to the wider category of life skills, conceived as abilities favoring positive and adaptable behaviors, which would be helpful to deal with the complex challenge contemporary society pose.

More specifically, starting from the acronym PERMA (Seligman, 2011), which defines positive psychology peculiarities, we began to train on the first three elements, positive emotion, engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2014) and positive relations between athletes, in the relationships between them and their families, and more broadly in their relationship with the outside world. In addition, across the board, deliberations on character education (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), aimed at coaches and athletes, have been initiated.

### ***Integration and inclusivity***

A soccer school should be a welcoming place in which diversity is rather seen as a resource than an issue. Being a trustworthy mirror of our society, multiculturalism should not

be feared. The job of every executive, coach and parent, is to promote intercultural relationships both inside and outside the field (Zoletto, 2012, pp. 102-105). The previous virtue model has not been randomly chosen, but it rather stems from two reasons: the transcultural origin of this study, which is also supported by cultural anthropology (Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005) and the adoption of the word 'virtue' rather than 'values', a rather more complex term that might be inherent to either an aspect of absolutism or, on the other hand, of exceptional relativism (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 28).

The aspect of interculturality and, consequently, of the soccer school as a means for dealing with a culturally heterogeneous context such as the one presented in the Rome 8 Municipality (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2021, p. 351), is strongly linked to the theme of plurality. The latter is synonymous with difference, and the educational challenge is in common with the fragility linked to problems of a psycho-physical nature. Only by recognizing and appreciating the differences and diversities, and working pedagogically on them, is it possible to organize a soccer school open to the territory that can improve its own and others' quality of life. In this sense, an idea of an organizational resilience (Malaguti, 2020, pp. 124-125) has been hypothesized to support educational and sporting paths.

While remaining 'on the field', this two-year experience has brought important results in terms of integration and inclusiveness: we started integrated paths with elementary school teachers for children going through difficult times; we chose a line of openness to cultural and religious pluralism considering the field as a meeting place; we offered free places in the soccer school to the social services of the territory; we collaborated with other realities to support children in recovery paths.

The model, thus, of an inclusive soccer school requires the participation of different actors, first of all the families, and the schools, but also all the other territorial associations with which educational strategies common to several educational contexts have been shared. According to an educational network perspective, different professional figures connected to inclusive pedagogy, such as social workers, psychologists and teachers, have found in the soccer school a possible point of continuity with the work done in the care centers, schools or families.

The coaches did not just carry out the general training, but as things developed and difficulties arose, they offered information and educational tools to also support the child on the educational path offered within the soccer school. The original idea was that of a situational training and not of an encyclopedic one, which would have had the risk of not transmitting sufficient educational skills to face critical situations. Once the situation was defined and an *ad hoc* educational process was undertaken, this practice was shared with the entire group of coaches as to reflect on it together as a community.

### ***Talents' growth***

While 'doing good', over time, we also realized that we were "doing well". On that very parish field, quality coaches and valid players were being formed. When the first athletes, according to the soccer regimentation, had to switch from 5 people soccer to 7, the coaches wondered if it was right to send their athletes to other soccer clubs, therefore reneging on the deal made with their families, and letting their children approach the competitive side of the sport by themselves.

Thus, aware of the dangers inherent to competition, we decided to take a step forward, remaining anchored to an ethical and educational reflection of sport, as summarized by Grion:

Stating that victory cannot be the only value of sport does not mean, however, espousing the thesis of those who see agonism as the root of all evil; on the contrary, agonism is a fundamental ingredient in sport. When you play, you play to win and it is precisely the way in which victory is certified that organizes the rules of the game. The problems begin, however, when one confuses the purpose of a game with its meaning for humans (Grion, 2016, p. 759).

It is in light of this that the ASD Roma 7.0 was founded. In continuity with the sporting and educational values of Annunziatella, this club created another path in a more equipped sporting context, which is ready to ethically accept the challenges competitive spirit poses. The continuity between these two realities is not only ensured by the interchange of players, but also by coaches following the same training path.

Since competition assumes a negative connotation only 'when it welcomes in itself hysterical and inhuman traits, which lead the subject towards a destructive and fierce aggression that preludes to a sense of frustration' (Bellantonio, 2018, p. 79), Roma 7.0 aims to do the opposite. The continuity between the two soccer schools, though self-evident, is not forced or imposed, and still partly *in itinere*. If an educational philosophy has been well theorized and contextualized, it would never fear new challenges and new contexts. In this sense, as we will see, the Wellness Football Academy acts as a trade-union between these two soccer schools and other emerging sports schools that want to be part of this project.

## **2. Building a model: the socratic coach**

In light of the path taken and in line with the recent pedagogical reflection on the formative role of the coach (Farnè, 2008), we are therefore convinced that the latter, in addition to the aspect centered on physical preparation (coach means etymologically "to give lena") and in addition to his function as a technical instructor as a soccer expert (etymologically "to build in layers", therefore providing skills according to a principle of gradualness), is also and above all an educator. As Magnanini (2020, p. 288) states:

From an educational point of view, the coach has a crucial role. He establishes asymmetrical relationships, intentional, through the transmission of content (motor, technical and values), becoming a guide for those involved in the sport itself. The coach with educational purposes must take into account a variety of factors that develop the person in its entirety, using observation grids, evaluation and monitoring tools, mixing educational and technical skills. His approach must include all aspects of the person and not only those related to sports performance. His attention focuses both on gestures and relationships in order to generate meaningful contexts for everyone. The coach, in short, plays an educational role where whenever he organizes systematic interventions aimed at the growth of the person, with intentionality of objectives and procedures.

The focus of this proposal of ours intends to embrace the ethical dimension that drives a coach to also consider the philosophy of sport as the underlying knowledge of the educational action generating educational values that give meaning to the practice of football. (Isidori, 2015). Hence the idea of a juxtaposition between philosophy and sport, an ancient link that in recent scholarship finds its proponent in Weiss with the volume "Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry". A knowledge that has been widely successful in the English-speaking world and that sees in Isidori one of the Italian advocates (Isidori, 2012), not yet considering, however, the idea of a



professional as a sport philosophical consultant (Mareš, 2019). In particular, the reference to Socrates is inspired by two main reasons: the ever-present idea of educational maieutics (Macale, 2019) and the vision of sport as a tool for moral growth, starting from the praxis on the field and not based on metaphysical theories eradicated from the context (Reid, 2009, p. 45-46).

Regarding the first point, educational maieutics is understood as the possibility given to a person to give birth to practical solutions and ethical reflections. Bringing, in fact, the Socratic pedagogy to the soccer field, means to support a critical and virtuous reflection of one's action in (and beyond) the field. On the field, as in life, it is better perhaps to start by asking the right questions rather than from the idea of finding a tout-court solution.

With regard to the educational and holistic value of sport, as well as paideutics, it should be noted that Isidori (2011, p. 11), reporting some Platonic reflections, highlights how for Socrates physical exercise was more useful to the *psychè* than the body, as the sport competitive spirit and athletic techniques had the educational purpose to cultivate the *areté*, which was in fact wisdom. Even Socrates' visits to the gyms had as their purpose to turn young people's love for winning (*philonikia*) in love for wisdom (*philosophia*). All this was done not in a professorial way, but in the constant encounter with his interlocutors, just as a coach can do with his team.

It is therefore necessary to specify how even the educational environment, consisting of people and tools, must have its own planning. Since 2000, thus, several sport studies are focusing on the educational function of training. Human sciences, in particular, including pedagogy, are regaining their former role in sports debates, after many years of only biophysiological perspectives, motor learning and more recently neuroscience being the main focus of research.

An interesting contribution in this sense is offered by Isidori-Benetton (2014), who argue, starting from a personalist framework, how training, since it takes place within a community, should aim to promote an ethically lived sport. Interestingly, the authors state that:

Training pedagogy is a science that addresses primarily the coach and aims to help him conceive and implement training as a "good practice", that is, based on principles that allow the understanding and the concrete implementation of ethical and pedagogical values that are proper to the dynamic and complex nature of sport. In this way, a training reading as a relational practice is offered, which in itself implies a responsibility towards the athletes' learning and a specific care and attention to their improvement as persons through the acquisition of the values of sport (Isidori & Benetton, 2014, p. 85).

In this direction moves the idea of the Socratic coach, who stops to reflect, to quote Tinning (2010), on the discourse that directs training to participation (as a personal and community moment), without ever neglecting the necessary and fundamental dialectic with the second purpose of training, that is to say, sport performance. An example of the interconnection between the two orientations shall be discussed later in the brief pedagogical considerations on the method of funiño.

Now, answering in some way to one of the research lines proposed by Isidori-Benetton, we proceed to discuss what are the three theoretical and practical perspectives defining a Socratic coach. These three perspectives have been elaborated within a theoretical-philosophical method aimed at demonstrating what are the needs and the conditions of a legitimate educational conception of training.

### ***The thinking coaches***

A main feature of Socratic reflection is dialectics, understood as objective research and confirmation of general knowledge of the participants. Behind the classic question: "what is"? (*ti ésti*), is hidden not a Hamletic doubt, but rather one that stimulates truth seeking. Leaving aside the metaphysical complexities that this question has posed to the history of philosophy, let us try to understand how the search for knowledge can form a coach.

Let us start by saying that a thinking coach is someone who studies and questions, who knows how to apply on the field sports literature's information, and at the same time knows how to free himself from the trap of his own beliefs, by creating new situations of both personal growth and the athlete's. In continuity with what has been put forward by character education, this knowledge, while presenting itself as a cognitive element, cannot be limited. The attitude towards knowledge should be that of "learned ignorance", that is, the coach, like the philosopher "knows nothing, but is aware of his non-knowledge" (Hadot, 2010, p.27). It is this awareness that pushes the coach to train himself, that puts him in a constant condition of research, of development of those potentials related to the virtue of knowledge that are: curiosity/interest in the world, love for knowledge, discernment/critical skills, open-mindedness, ingenuity/originality/practical intelligence, social intelligence, personal intelligence, emotional intelligence, foresight (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Now, however, the distinctiveness of Socratic recovery within a company's coaches should not be to create individual self-referential thinking coaches. It is desirable, in fact, to encourage what Socrates called *dialeghestài*, that is, a knowledge deriving from one's own training paths, but also and above all from reasoning together. Socratic pedagogy is a pedagogy of dialogue, where knowledge is in the process of becoming and where "problematicity" should not be avoided, as it is the original root of philosophizing (Nanni, 2013, p. 21) and consequently of good acting (moral pedagogical aspect).

Each coach can enrich another one, and this richness is ensured by the shared and ethical vision of knowledge that does not have individualistic purposes, but of service. Coaches consider their actions on the field a "sacred" educational mandate, as Socrates "felt the sacred character of his mission as educator of his people" (Garin, 1993, p. 19). A sacredness that has little to do with faith, but that, as will happen more than two thousand years later for Dewey (1950, p. 18), will make the educator feel invested with a "divine" task in his art of teaching.

One studies, thinks, compares, and goes into the field not to excel, but to grow as a person within a group and all in the service of young individuals. When one invests a large part of one's working time as well as personal time, or when one commits one's resources to training, coaching may also reveal a professional aspect. The important thing is to never forget that coaching is a personal care profession and that thus presupposes a continuous updating and an inclination to let oneself be continually questioned by the field, by sports literature, and by the community.

### ***The maieutic coach***

After irony and learned ignorance, maieutics is the greatest pillar not only of Greek paideutic education, but also and above all of that pedagogical strand called "active education" that has been rediscovered several times in recent centuries (Pesci, 2000). Placing the student at the center of the educational process is now an essential element for an integral, participatory, conscious and responsible growth. In the three-year process of study and reflection with the group of coaches, this pedagogical cornerstone has found a fundamental matching with Horst Wein's school of football, which is inspired by similar ideas, namely "soccer on a young person's scale" (Wein, 2011, 2017) and the idea of the "thinking footballer" who, like the "thinking" coach, asks the right question to find the most appropriate solution.

The meeting with Marcello Nardini, founder of this school, thus, confirmed what was already being discussed in the meetings and tried to be applied on the field. In addition to technical indications, the training according to the FUNiño method provides many interdisciplinary educational ideas supported by scientific evidence, especially in the field of neuroscience, and was the container in which to pour the football philosophy then brought onto the playing field and into the relationships with the families. The educational manifesto to be shared with parents, in some way, has also been outlined in football practice: "Dear families, our educational soccer is such because it engages, entertains, makes a team and forms responsible people. There is no room for anything else polluting the game of soccer".

But let us try to explain which are the elements of continuity between the path taken in the three-year course and the school of funiño. Maritain, an education philosopher, argued that the person "owns himself by means of intelligence and will" and - he continued - "is a universe in itself, a microcosm, in which the great universe itself can be enclosed through knowledge" (Maritain, 1979, p. 67). While this definition may seem "exaggerated", we believe that whenever 'big' ideas are not reflected in 'small' things they remain just ideal content and certainly do not become material for educational contexts.

A fairly new concept in the football scene, the idea of the thinking player is certainly a translation of the "microcosm of intelligence" into the soccer world. In soccer's history, in fact, the educational focus has always been on technique (until the 1960s), physical preparation (1960-80), and tactics (since 1990), and only at the beginning of the 2000s did we begin to think about game intelligence.

This concept has revolutionized the way we approach soccer and the way we coach, especially in regard to young players. The definition given by Marcello Nardini is that "soccer starts from the head and ends with the feet and not the other way around". There is a prompt practical matching example to this definition. In the traditional training method, there are mechanical and exhausting repetitions which tend to overshadow the value of the players themselves. The training proposed by Horst Wein, however, does not consider the player a main character, with his ability to choose which gesture to use and when to use it.

We are talking about a "cognitive" and "metacognitive" soccer that rejects a technical vision, as the young player is not an animal who must learn a technical gesture, but a person who must contextualize such gesture, through thought and creativity. It should be remarked that intelligence is not only a means to acquire knowledge, as it would not exist without the determination and engagement to achieve a goal. And it is precisely on the basis of this stubbornness, motivation and desire to play, that any player, depending on his starting point, could become a thinking player.

The execution phase, in Horst Wein's methodology, is the last of the action phases that a soccer player must approach. First there must be perception of the game situation; then the analysis of the different factors that intervene or can intervene in the game action; once the game situation is calibrated, then it is time to decide. If this is the process, the dialoguing action of the trainer cannot and should not be limited to a prescriptive communication, but rather to a descriptive, inductive and experiential one.

In this new football learning process, there is a particular attention to the motor skills that "do not constitute a direct result of motor learning" (i.e., they are not directly assimilated to motor skills), but are structured through a process rich (by quantity and variability of practice) in opportunities and experiences and are expressed in a well-defined context" (Colella, 2016, p. 21). Once again, communication plays a key role. Trainer/athlete communication is not direct and pre-packaged, but it rather develops in a discovery guided mode. For example, when faced with a possible technical mistake, there are no corrections, but rather continuous "feedback on demand" by the coach to allow the young players to reach a



personal and unduplicable solution. This process is a way to concretize Socratic Maieutics on the soccer field.

It will be through experience that each youngster will obtain their own answers and will discover their own way of expressing themselves in the football field. As a result of a personal journey, the latter will show the uniqueness of the person. A necessary condition for this to happen is for the boys to be in the right conditions and in the right environment to express themselves. This approach is also fundamental for inclusiveness: the pedagogical aim is to allow the young athlete to take up, in the most humanly rich way, his own experience (in this case football), to make his "doing" significant (Montuschi, 1997, p. 161).

Hence the relevance of the educational environment, both in terms of equipment and, above all, of the relational context. A mechanical soccer is unlikely to produce positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), which are the first pillar of the PERMA acronym which positive psychology is built on. Experiencing positive emotions brings people towards well-being and establishes a positive relationship between learning and mental health. Consider how important this is in regards to young children, as they still possess a concrete and non-abstract way of thinking/learning, with emotions thus being the value which to ground education on.

This methodology does not only bring cognitive advantages, and the definition of "thinking player" should not make us fall into "Cartesian" traps. Research by the sports psychologist Fabio Ciuffini, conducted during the International Funiño Festival (Monza, September 20, 2014), highlighted several interesting aspects of the experience made by children of different nationalities. Through participatory observation and the administration of a self-assessment questionnaire, it was possible to make some general comments not only of a cognitive nature, but also in reference to the emotional sphere and moral growth. In particular, Ciuffini (2014) observed that on the emotional-relational and moral level

- there were continuous acts of emotional support between peers;
- there was average jubilation after a goal, while the frequency of acts of discouragement was low;
- There was a high level of positive aggression and a modest constancy of negative aggression, among other things related to moments of physical fatigue;
- There was a low presence of self-victimization and a constant presence of fair-play.

These data lead us to think that working on cognitive aspects developing attention, reflexivity, creativity and problem solving, in fact, is like acting on the globality of the person. Here the reference to the pedagogical-clinical reflection, which concludes the theoretical triad aforementioned, is self-evident. If, in fact, soccer is practiced in accordance with the athlete's developmental time and is managed according to certain forms of communication that capture the gradualness of learning processes, this sport allows a complete evolution of the player and a full promotion of his personal, but also social, well-being.

This last fact translates the practice of sports as an actualization of the principles of integration and inclusiveness. An important aspect of funiño (and corrective exercises) is that everyone is needed on the field, not just the best players. The motor experiences are so designed that the commitment of the individual is maximum (Engagement-flow), but at the same time it is possible to find the right relational balance that considers the strengths and difficulties within the group (Positive relationship).

Promoting football skills (Skills achievement) and promoting well-being (Positive emotions, Positive engagement, Positive relationship) is thus made possible through the model of a coach who "makes people think", who communicates inductively and who educates a player to read game situations, then taking responsibility for the decision to be made. The pedagogical perspective can go beyond the psychophysical well-being and support a critical formation of the player and an ethical reflection on sport. In fact, through character education

as proposed by Peterson and Seligman, the last two pillars of PERMA can be achieved: Meaning and Accomplishment.

Especially from the age of ten years, a moment in which first moral reflections emerge, it is believed that a particular attention to an education virtue-based can act as a buffer to difficult situations or can allow to find new resources from the difficulties encountered (resilience). Maieutic school reminds us that virtue can be discovered and acquired. Aristotle, starting from Socratic assumptions, dedicated several pages to this topic. In the second book of Nicomachean Ethics (Mazzarelli, 2000), he reminds us that though virtues are not "natural", yet each of us has their own predisposition, more or less pronounced, to receive certain ethical virtues. These virtues are then possessed only in "power", and are developed with experiences, that is translated into "act". In fact, is not enough having good intentions to become valuable men is, but it is necessary to put them into practice.

The concept of virtue in sports is well expressed by the Olympic motto: "*Citius Altius Fortius*" (Faster! Higher! Stronger!). The Olympic motto is not only for athletes competing in the Olympic Games, but for everyone, as "the human being in his vital impulse has the need to draw on ever higher goals [we all compete] to improve our lives and the lives of others while respecting the rules of sport and its values" (Freccero, 2016, p.11).

It is therefore necessary, on an educational level, to give field action a meaningful dimension, so that in addition to technical skills, soft skills that will be useful in life can also be developed. As Csikszentmihalyi notes, in fact, people who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to "engage" all their energy to give it meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 215-216). Soccer often means everything to the players, and the coaches' task is to guide the athlete towards giving the training efforts the right meaning. Only then can a sports education linked to virtues have an impact on the person, even on an interior level.

This critical and reflective way of training, which is fully in line with the inductive method proposed by funiño, insofar as it is based on a metacognitive analysis of the football experience, leads to the last pillar of well-being: accomplishment, that is to say, personal fulfillment.

Csikszentmihalyi also uses the term 'self-actualization' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, pp. 121-122), which is achieved when one's basic needs are met and when one views life as unique and valuable, without getting caught up in the needs of the world. Independence from context does not mean isolation, but it does mean not being carried away by the message addressed to us as "consumers" of an existence, as we feel we are the sole protagonists of life. Let us transfer this idea to the world of soccer: it means forming a thinking player who is committed to motor, technical and reflective skills and who gives his best on the field, forgetting the social and falsely competitive pressures of soccer. In other words, a free player is formed.

This last step is an educational goal that may encounter different cultural and/or social obstacles, different relational issues and bio-psychic difficulties. This is where the support of a character education can help according to a resilience perspective:

awareness of one's own bodily-structural and psychological-emotional limits is the first step towards an adequate relationship with oneself and with others, in the construction of a mature self capable of facing difficulties. In this sense, sporting activity is a process of informal lifelong education, which guides the person in the acquisition of useful skills to face the emergencies of life with a resilient spirit (Boerchi et al. 2013, p. 16).

The whole process of educational accompaniment the Socratic coach can carry out with the young player, not to hide the difficulties, but to face them in order to make them become a

reason for growth on and off the field, is an "effective strategy to lead some states of "disorder" with high entropy (failures, frustrations, adversity) towards the organization of inner states of greater "order" (self-esteem, self-determination, motivation)" (Falaschi, 2020, p. 242).

This educational support can only come through an educational maieutics that begins by putting the athlete in front of the problem, similarly to when Socrates left his interlocutors in their turmoil and only later assumed the role problem solving in the dialogue (Hadot, 1988, p. 90). To pose the question of difficulty on the cognitive and character level is to make clear that in sport (and more so in life), "for performance, attitudes count at least as much as (and I emphasize "at least") muscles" (Trabucchi, 2019, p. 17). The Socratic coach, thus, as an educator, "is able to make independent, self-possessed, capable of standing alone the other, through a help that leaves no trace, a help that gives something in such a way that the gift seems to be the property of the one who receives it, a help that consists in doing everything for the other without him owing anything" (Regni, 2006, p. 101).

This thinking process does not always have immediate solutions and is not thus always useful in winning a youth category championship. However, it will be useful for the individual's training and for building a player who, tomorrow, will be more aware of his potentialities and his criticalities and who will be able to face them not only technically, but also character-wise. Also in this case, this reasoning that may seem exclusively psycho-pedagogical, is not so far from the philosophy of Horst Wein, founder of the *funiño*; in fact, he used to say that a coach who has won everything in the youth sector, has not worked for the future of his children, but for his own.

### ***The coach's ethics***

Socrates is a dialogue's advocate and a word's value lover, but he is also an authentic educator, who warns about the danger of language in relation to virtues, especially if they are not reflected and grounded in the testimony of life. Educating people to soccer, according to a contextual and well-defined ethos, does not allow the educator to separate the figure of the coach from that of the person, since "whoever is content to be good as a professional, but not as a man, cannot be happy" (Faro, 2007, p. 309) and happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the Greek translation of well-being.

Deciding not to follow respectability, but rather an ethical growth path, together with the coaching staff and athletes, not to make false moralism by choosing virtues in public and vice in private, means giving credibility to the sports education project that is being carried out. Hence the last feature of the Socratic coach: the ethical coach. This element is the other side of the coin of the pedagogical goals students are being provided with. In fact, while the latter starts from the field to educate in life, the educator educates on the field because he is a witness in life.

After a period in which pedagogy had distanced itself from ethical positions in the name of a scientific pedagogy heir, better to say victim, of neo-positivism, we found ourselves coming to terms with the two great musts of educational action: *deon* and *telos*. In parallel to the need of educating according to a goal, there is "the conjecture in which the moral and educational decision is determined, deployed on the future, necessarily includes an inescapable deontological instance and the recovery of the *dover-being*" (Criscenti, 2018, p. 154).

On this "moral option" ground, it is possible to develop a trust relationship with parental figures (Tafari & Priore, 2020) and be a supportive presence in local institutions services' network, to be educators within a community, or as Socrates would say, a *polis*. In this sense, even a soccer school can pedagogically inhabit a territory. A territory that from a geographic space becomes a multiplicity of "emotional spaces that change, according to the moods and experiences, the quality of relationships. The lived space is full or empty just as the existence

of those who inhabit it is full or empty" (Iori, 2019, p.2). An encounter that awakens the athlete, parent, or anyone who enters this sporting world, from "existential somnambulism" or "letting live" (Bellingreri, 2015, p.8). Through a kind of soccer that awakens the soul and promotes values, one can convey an idea of life that is not only healthy, but also passionate, active, participatory and responsible; yet such a communication is based on a personal authenticity, in which the coaches, in their own interiority, experience firsthand the original gift of the life they lead with clear ethical references. This is the only way to retrace the Greek ideal that the first sporting success is the ethical one (Harmandar Demirel & Yıldıran, 2013).

### **3. WFA: the beginnings of a school of football thought**

Designing soccer and designing sports aimed at the well-being of their players has become increasingly necessary (Maulini, 2014). The challenge that the theoretical-practical model of the maieutic soccer brings is to do all this on a soccer field, a sport that has such a social particular value, so much so as to be compared to a religion (Augè, 2016), and that culturally, at least in Italy, in addition to many positive aspects, also manifests many dark sides that put it at risk of losing sight of the history and values of this sport.

If, however, we look at soccer from the point of view of the playing fields where hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents are engaged, then this sport becomes a reason for hope. In fact, as a sport, besides being a product of our culture, soccer can also produce new culture. This means that the task of those who are called to roles of responsibility in the governance of sport - coaches, managers, doctors - cannot be limited to the transmission of technical skills, but must aim at the human growth of the athlete.

Following Mandela's motto: "Sport has the power to change the world", the WFA aims to create a real school of soccer thought, in which everyone, athletes, coaches, managers, families, are committed to promoting a soccer engaging with the concept of citizenship, bringing their own contribution according to the peculiarities that are its own according to the three levels of action that are: research-action, training-action, management.

In this project, which is rather broad and touches on the educational, sporting and entrepreneurial aspects, the Socratic coach is a fundamental pawn. The challenges he brings with him reflect the previous points.

A "reflecting" coach is also a researching coach. Sports pedagogy, as a theoretical-practical science, aims to develop more and more skills in the practice of sports. Therefore, those who believe in soccer as an educational tool, can only adhere to a training action aimed at seeking a better practice. As an educator, the practice of the coach is certainly connected to the ability to do research (Premoli, 2017, p. 440) to the extent that he engages in knowledge (even scientific) of the player, tries to identify the best strategies to solve issues and difficulties he is struggling with; he knows how to observe and evaluate the situation (assessment), making choices and taking the "pedagogical" risk and continuously questions his own actions, the modalities of his interventions and the consequences of his decisions. In addition to these aspects related to the field and the action played on it, the Socratic coach must also join in research projects promoted internally to the WFA or proposed by third parties, without fearing the evaluation or verification of what he has done and is doing and the results of his work (evaluation).

The maieutic coach is a coach who educates, in its etymological meaning, that is, leads out the criticalities and potentialities of the person and knows how to turn them into integral growth. Therefore, the Socratic coach can never give up his educational role or think, as emerged in other studies reported by Magnanini (2020), that since there are other educational agencies, he can also give up his educational mission. As a pedagogical approach to sport overcomes the reductionist limits of other approaches, not only those exclusively technical, but

also those referable to other human sciences such as the psychological perspective, this should not happen. The educational action, in fact, is not limited to the descriptive aspect (very important to know), but it is summoned to give an answer to football needs such as may be "the problem of drop out in sport activity [...] (and the) thinking adequate interventions in view of an "education to talent" in function of professional sport" (Isidori, 2015c, p. 162).

Finally, the ethical coach is called, within the limits of his skills and his role, to actively participate in the management of his football club. This does not mean that he should also be a manager, but rather that his own training and his educational field work, with families and in the community, should be placed at the center of the company management. The Socratic coach should be the "Jiminy cricket" of administrating, he should always remember that it is educational-sport driving the business management and not *vice versa*, and that the latter does not determine, a priori, investments and profit splits (Tafuri & Cardinali, 2018, p. 115). Therefore, the Socratic coach, on the economic side, should not only be concerned about his or her own sporting reimbursement, but should think that business economy must also be managed ethically (Isidori & Reid, 2011, pp. 49-50), with particular reference to the recent great soccer plague, namely the excessive economic liberalism in the industry and the commodification of athletes.

## Conclusions

In his maieutic dream, Socrates considered the position of learned ignorance as a stimulus for a more careful and less prejudiced reflection. The philosopher did not want to be recognized as an intellectual who had enlightened people's minds with the truth, but he wanted the same reward that was due to the Olympic winners: "the Olympic winner makes you think you are happy, and I make you happy". Even this short contribution has no encyclopedic pretensions, it just wanted to tell the story of a group of soccer lovers who, supported by an articulated pedagogical reflection, have created a model of Socratic coach that can be a highly qualified profile both from a sporting and an educational point of view.

Parallel to this reflection and daily experience on and off the soccer fields, has born the idea of not just being a soccer school, but a soccer school of thought that, socratically, relates sport and polis, not disjoining sports education from education to citizenship (Lopez Frias & Isidori, 2014) and democratization (Bellantonio & Tafuri, 2018) as both bearers of socially desirable virtues and humanly shared values. A pedagogical insight that perhaps arose in ancient Greece, but was also reflected in works of other more recent pedagogists, first of all John Dewey, who stressed its importance in terms of values, norms and respect (Dewey, 1967, p.22).

This idea took the name of Wellness Football Academy and is part of that line of research that sees sport as a promoter of well-being (Isidori, 2015b) in which the coach, as a synthesis between coach and trainer, has the first form-active responsibility according to a technical and educational-permanent perspective that places the value of the person at the center (Cereda, 2018). If within the article the terms of Wellness (Wellbeing) and the interpretation of soccer have been clarified, in this conclusion we want to specify that the word Academy is understood both as an educational-sport model based on research-action and therefore anchored to a scientific model of doing soccer; and academy as a connection to the surrounding reality, from what can be economic partners, to other educational agencies, to the different territorial services.

This is why it is believed that the pedagogy underlying the WFA project can be declined as a specific social pedagogy of sport, that is, "a pedagogical-structural science that aims to develop strategies for the promotion of human values through sport in all contexts of existence" (Isidori, 2014, pp. 17-18). In this pedagogical framework, all those involved in a reflection of



an educational-sporting nature, in addition to aiming for results to be obtained on the field, hold in high regard the integral maturation of the person (Grion, 2015, p. 46), values (Valentini, 2019) and community well-being.

In this sense, sports education, in its football form, becomes a laboratory of inclusive sports, not only because it is a welcoming activity, but mostly because it manages to make the territory participate in its educational activities. The social aspect, thus, not only lies in the attention given to those who are struggling, but also in turning these problematic situations into resilience, to be used in contexts in which improvement is being aimed at, not only for fragile subjects or those in difficulties, but for all those involved in the educational work and network.

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