Empowering professional soccer players in South Africa – Evaluation of Project Ithuseng

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Project Ithuseng

- Life skills programme developed and implemented by the Sports Science Institute of South Africa in response to the recognised need for life skills amongst professional soccer players in SA
- Funded by Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Education and Training Authority (THETA) in SA
- Supported by SAFA, SAFPU and PSL
- Offered to all clubs in Premier Division and First Division, Women’s national teams, and 9 top women’s clubs
Programme implementation

• Aligned with SA National Qualifications Framework
• Unit Standard: Function in a Team
• 24 contact hours to cover topics
• Scheduling differed between clubs – weekly 2 hour sessions, or monthly 3–4 hour sessions
• Facilitated by trained individuals
• Players required to attend 80% of sessions and complete activities for a portfolio of evidence
Programme topics

Unit standard: Function in a team

• The structure and purpose of teams
  – e.g. teamwork, characteristics of teams

• The roles and responsibilities of team members
  – e.g. leadership, followership, assertiveness

• Factors affecting team function
  – e.g. communication, respecting differences, conflict management

• The individual and the team
  – e.g. goal setting, self-esteem, self-confidence

• The sport environment and team organisation
Programme topics

‘Non-aligned’ topics

- Professional skills – media training, getting a job
- Coping skills – coping, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse
- Financial skills – budgeting, banking
- Nutrition – nutrition game plan, supplements
- Self-management – time management, problem solving, stress management
- Social skills – etiquette and behaviour
Programme outcomes

Initial
- Exposure of players and administrators to benefits of life skills in their lives
- Increased understanding of concept of life skills amongst players and team managers
- Integration of life skills between individual and team levels
- Increased prioritisation of life skills amongst players, clubs (management, coaches etc) and stakeholders
- Commitment of soccer fraternity to holistic development and support of players
- Increased collaboration of stakeholders to improve life skills of professional soccer players

Intermediate
- Improvement of relationships between players, administrators and the public
- Creation of career awareness and opportunities for players, past and present
- Increased buy-in at all levels, especially at the high stakeholder level

Long-term
- Change in behaviour of players identified as a problem and improvement thereof
- Creation of supportive and positive networks for players
- Empowerment of players
- Transformation of professional soccer ‘system’ to better cater for the life skills needs of players
Evaluation objectives

• Conduct a formative evaluation with individuals targeted for participation in the programme
• Conduct a process evaluation of the programme, focusing on reach and implementation
• Conduct an outcome evaluation, including the identification of factors contributing to and/or hindering programme success
Methods

• Quantitative (all programme participants) and qualitative methods (Gauteng and Cape Town)

• Formative evaluation
  – Needs assessment questionnaire for players
  – Pre-implementation focus groups with players (3 women, 4 men, n=55)
  – Monitoring data on programme reach

• Process and outcome evaluation
  – Life skills questionnaire for players, pre and post (n=123)
  – Post-implementation focus groups with players, including some members of team management (3 women, 4 men, n=73)
  – Key informant interviews with programme stakeholders and those involved in programme implementation (n=9)
  – Facilitator questionnaire (n=6)
Findings – Formative evaluation

- Need for life skills intervention with all player groups
- Main challenge for male players – limited job security
- Priority issues –
  - Men: planning for the future, leadership, nutrition, communication, managing finances, working with agents, handling status and fame, teamwork
  - Women: respect, communication, leadership, discipline, self-confidence, self-esteem
- Need to continue to address the assumption that life skills are acquired on the field and hence do not need to be addressed intentionally off the field
### Player demographics – Needs assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>(n=408)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>62.5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>(n=400)</td>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedi</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sotho</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tswana</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>(n=408)</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed ancestry</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>24 years (n=398)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Highest qualification</td>
<td>(n=388)</td>
<td>Grade 9 / Standard 7 &amp; less</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 10 / Standard 8</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 11 / Standard 9</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Matric certificate</td>
<td>49%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary education</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Players’ understanding of life skills

Number of players

Managing relationships
Self care
Informed decisions
Coping
Conduct
Empowerment
After soccer

- Premier division
- First division
- Women
## Findings – Process and outcome evaluation

**Programme outputs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Clubs</th>
<th>% of target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Premier Division</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Division</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (men)*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s clubs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>118%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other (lower) divisions and academy teams at Premier and First Division clubs
‘Skills for Everyday Living’

- Questionnaire subsections: decision making, critical thinking, communication, goal setting, problem solving
- Significant improvement in the critical thinking subsection for First Division and Women players (p=0.046)
- Development of critical thinking in players is a necessary step towards changing their life skills behaviour
Success of the programme

• General perception was that the programme was largely successful at achieving its intended outcomes and that it benefitted players

• More successful in women’s clubs –
  – Receptiveness to the programme
  – Reported impact on players and teams

• Differences between clubs in terms of programme success were not according to Premier vs First Division
“...the women’s teams have been by far the most organised, and also the most receptive...there’s really a sense of a hunger for empowerment which doesn’t seem to be there in the men’s divisions.”

Key informant – Programme implementation
Success of the programme

• Topics identified as valuable similar for men and women
• Most valuable topics – financial planning, time management, conflict resolution and assertiveness
• Other valuable topics – communication, respect, nutrition, coping with stress and pressure, self-confidence and substance abuse
“...the topic that really stands out is conflict resolution...in townships we have a different way of dealing with conflict – by way of a fight...The other thing is...a lot of soccer players don’t know how to manage their finances...it makes a world of difference for them to realise how to work with their money.”

Player –
First Division
Factors influencing success

• Factors contributing to and/or hindering the success of the programme included programme delivery, and factors on the following levels:
  – Player, e.g. perception of personal benefit
  – Team, e.g. competing priorities
  – Club, e.g. management strengths
  – Division, e.g. input into women’s soccer
  – South African soccer, e.g. recognition of the need for life skills

• Main factor contributing to and/or hindering the success of the programme: **buy-in of team management** (club level)
“...there is no doubt that where there was support from the management structures...the players then were committed to the program...once the commitment was shown, they didn’t need to be forced at all, they really enjoyed it, they really gave of their best...”

Key informant – Programme implementation
The way forward

• Suggestions for improvement: programme content and delivery, continued implementation of the programme –
  – Follow-up of teams that completed the programme
  – Implementation of the programme for team management (especially coaches) and younger players

• Implications for changes needed within South African soccer –
  – Improved preparation of younger players for professional soccer
  – Shift from a short-term to a long-term view of soccer players and their careers
“We need to get in when they’re young... That’s why the leaders come into it... we should all be a little bit more responsible... We as clubs... we don’t do enough. We sign a player, ja, he’s very good and we just leave the player...”

Team management – Premier Division
Recommendations

• Offer the programme to academy teams, younger players and more women’s clubs

• Implement a second phase to train stakeholders in SA soccer to take over the facilitation of life skills – enhance programme sustainability

• Sustainability would be further enhanced if clubs appointed and trained mentors to offer support to players facing challenges relating to life skills
Conclusions

• *Project Ithuseng* addressed issues that emerged as important
• Also addressed life skills not mentioned frequently by players, that underlie challenges faced by players
• *Project Ithuseng* could be regarded as successful in terms of –
  – Providing necessary input on life skills for soccer players
  – Collaboration between stakeholders in implementing this programme
• Have insight into factors influencing success, which can inform future work
• Collaboration and insight gained are extremely valuable and help create a platform for future work in this area
Thank you for your attention