

PROFILE OF GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL COACHES OF SPANISH PROFESSIONAL CLUBS

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Original scientific paper

DOI 10.26582/k.54.2.14

Abstract:

The aim of the study was to identify the profile and education of grassroots football coaches (working with 8-12-year olds) of Spanish professional clubs (first and second male division, and first female division), as well as the qualities and characteristics they should have. For this purpose, an *ad hoc* questionnaire of 57 questions was used, grouped into seven dimensions, and administered to 153 coaches. This research focuses on the socio-demographic variables as well as on the dimensions of the coach's qualities and coach's education. The results showed that the profile of the coach corresponded to the following: male between 20 and 30 years of age, with experience in football initiation of 4-7 years, but with a 2-year experience in coaching boys and girls aged 8-12 years, with the specific football qualification level II or Union of European Football Associations A. The coaches considered it very important to have pedagogical skills and to use coaching methods that focus on learning rather than on results in order to be a coach in these age categories. Moreover, the participants considered that the training received in the official coaching courses did not adequately qualify them to carry out the sporting and human education of boys and girls in the *benjamin* (under 10) and *alevin* (under 12) age categories. The coaches also felt that the contents of the coaching course should be adjusted to the requirements of these age groups. These considerations can help sports federations and training centres to establish strategies to improve the official training programmes for football coaches.

Key words: coach education, football academy, U-12 football

Introduction

The athletic training process has been discussed in the scientific literature (Pazo, Sáenz-López, Fradua, Barata, & Coelho, 2011; Robles, Abad, Robles, & Giménez, 2019), in which multiple variables influencing this process has been pointed out and analysed. Out of it, the figure of the coach emerges as one of the most important factors in the process of sports education (Abad, Giménez, Robles, & Rodríguez, 2011a; Paixão, et al., 2021; Vickers & Schoenstedt, 2011). The need to improve the profile of the coach in sports education has led numerous researchers to analyse different variables (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Urbano-Arévalo, Mancha-Triguero, Gómez-Carmona, & Gamonales, 2020). The elements usually characterising the coaches of educational sports are their youth (Abad, et al., 2011a; Lledó & Huertas, 2012; Lledó, Martínez, & Huertas, 2014; Maestre, Garcés, Ortín, & Hidalgo, 2019) and their male gender (Paixão, et al., 2021). Other aspects which have been researched regarding the profile of coaches

in grassroots football are the experience they accumulate as coaches in educational categories (Côté, Erickson, & Duffy, 2013) or their experience as a player (Abad, et al., 2011a). Furthermore, the profile of the coach working in educational categories is usually characterised by being very heterogeneous and not very specialised (Feu, García, Parejo, Cañadas, & Sáez, 2009; López-Muñiz, Vázquez-Cano, Jaenes-Sánchez, & López-Meneses, 2018), i.e., he/she has not acquired all the necessary skills to train a group of players at an early age.

According to Paixão et al. (2021), the figure of the coach can clearly and effectively influence the sporting and personal environment of children and young athletes. Consequently, the sports coach becomes a key figure in ensuring that school-age children have an adequate sports education (Ballaster, Fernández, & Parra-Camacho, 2021). In fact, a very important aspect to keep in mind regarding the figure of the coach is the term used to refer to him or her in educational sport, since, when it comes to contextualising this figure in sport literacy, special-

ists recommend using the term educator or sports trainer (Abad, et al., 2011a; Wein, 2005). Additionally, among their areas of influence are the knowledge of the sport they teach, the psychological level to awaken and maintain the motivation of the athlete to practice sport (Pulido, Sánchez-Oliva, Sánchez-Miguel, Leo, & García-Calvo, 2016) or the contents and design of the training (González-Villora, García-López, Gutiérrez-Díaz, & Pastor-Vicedo, 2013; Light & Harvey, 2017; Martín-Barrero, 2019), being essential for them to have undergone a good professional education.

In this sense, some studies highlight the need for more specific or specialised education for grassroots coaches (Abad, et al., 2011a; Rodríguez-Palacio, 2016). Accordingly, specific coaching qualifications are classified into four levels, with level 0 or Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) C, to coaching initiation. Level I or UEFA B is the qualification which enables coaches to train at the grassroots level up to youth level (U19), level II or UEFA A for amateur categories and level III or UEFA PRO for professional football. Nevertheless, many authors recommend a greater teaching load in pedagogical, psychological and methodological content (Abad, et al., 2011a; Lledó, et al., 2014; Paixão, et al., 2021), especially at the levels qualifying coaches to train at the beginners' level. Furthermore, the global and integrative conception of grassroots sport requires coaches to be educated from a multidisciplinary perspective (Bennie & O'Connor, 2010; Ortega, Jiménez, Palao, & Sainz, 2008), while the study of the pedagogical variables influencing the education process can facilitate its evaluation, modification and improvement (Cañadas, Gómez, García-Rubio, & Ibáñez, 2018).

On the basis of scientific literature, it is understood that the coach is one of the most influential figures in the training process of the football player. Do the coaches of the grassroots of professional clubs have the appropriate training and profile for the development of the players' talent? For this reason, the aim of this study was to identify the profile and education of grassroots football coaches (working with 8-12-year olds) of Spanish profes-

sional clubs (first and second male division, and first female division), as well as the qualities and characteristics they should have.

Materials and method

Participants

This research included the coaches of the *benjamín* (U10) and *alevin* (U12) categories of the Spanish professional clubs of LaLiga Santander, LaLiga SmartBank (males) and LaLiga Iberdrola (females). A total of 153 coaches participated, male (n=140) and female (n=13), distributed in both educational categories (Table 1).

In order to ensure that the sample was representative of the target population, the sample size needed was calculated (Otzen & Manterola, 2017). In this process, a confidence level of 99% was used, with a margin of error of 0.04 (4%) for a sample size of 153 subjects (Table 2).

Instrument

The instrument used was the questionnaire made *ad hoc* and validated by Martín-Barrero, Abad and Giménez (2020), which consisted of 57 questions, grouped into seven dimensions (socio-demographic variables, talent development, training methodology, competitive context, coach's qualities, coach's education and social context). For reasons of space, the study presented in this paper focused on three dimensions (25 questions): i) socio-demographic variables, which sought to obtain information on gender, age, level of training/education and experience both as a coach and as a player; ii) the coach's qualities, which analysed the characteristics considered most important by the coaches for training these age categories players; and iii) the coach's education, in which the aim was to find out what was the perception of the education the coaches who trained at the initiation stage received. The respondents answered on a Likert-type scale with values from 1 to 10, with the value 10 corresponding to totally agree and the value 1 not at all agree (Figure 1).

Table 1. Participants in the research

	Alevines – U12 (10-12 years old)	Benjamines – U10 (8-10 years old)	Total
Male coaches	81	59	140
Female coaches	4	9	13
Total coaches per category	85	68	153

Table 2. Sample data of participants

Study population	Sample error	Percentage of the sample	Confidence level	Sample size
186	4%	82.25%	99%	153



Figure 1. QR code measuring instrument

Procedure

Firstly, a list was drawn up with the total number of clubs belonging to the research context. Subsequently, in order to find out more accurately the number of teams which had in their grassroots football the categories of *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10), the club coordinators were contacted, and the register was consulted on the websites of the territorial and official federations of the clubs. Once this had been accomplished, a definitive list was drawn up in order to identify the teams to be studied. Finally, a summary was made of the total number of coaches to be surveyed and of the clubs according to competitive category and type of football.

In the second phase, the coaches of each of the teams were contacted (in person, by telephone and/or online) to subsequently pass the questionnaire on to them. Once the data were obtained through the questionnaire, they were entered into an *ad hoc* recording tool in an Excel sheet in Microsoft Office® version 14.7.7 for Mac. The data were then transferred to SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Program of Social Sciences) for analysis.

Before starting data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and it was guaranteed that the information collected would remain confidential, complying with ethical standards and the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all the coaches. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in Andalusia, Spain (Code 2138-N-20).

Statistical analysis

For the statistical analysis, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each dimension studied: i) socio-demographic variables (0.624); ii) coach's qualities (0.871); and iii) coach's education (0.714). Secondly, a descriptive analysis of the data was conducted, where the frequencies, means and standard deviations of the items of the different dimensions analysed were attained. Thirdly, an inferential analysis was performed comparing the variables of the socio-demographic dimension with the variables of the other dimensions studied, in which the level of relationship and association among different variables was reflected. For the analysis with variables from more than two groups, the Kruskal

Wallis test was applied with a significance level of 95% ($p=.05$) with Bonferroni adjustment (0.05/ $n-1$). Subsequently, the U-Mann Whitney test was applied for pairwise comparisons.

Results

We will first present the results corresponding to the coach profile through the socio-demographic variables, followed by those related to the coach's qualities and, finally, those referring to the coach's perception of received education.

Socio-demographic variables

The intention of this dimension was to identify the profile of the football coaches who trained the age categories of *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10) of the Spanish professional clubs, considering his/her gender, age, total experience in grassroots football, work experience in the age groups of *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10), the specific coach's training, academic education and experience as a player (see Table 1). In this regard, the percentage of males corresponded to 91.56% ($n=140$) of the total, while the percentage of females was 8.44% ($n=13$). The mean age was 30.99 ± 7.26 years. It was observed that most of the coaches were in the age range between 20 and 30 years (53.59%), although the presence of coaches between 31 and 40 years of age was also important, with 35.71%, so it can be stated that most of the respondents were between 20 and 40 years of age ($n=136$).

In terms of work experience coaching in grassroots football, it was found that most of the coaches were in the range of four to seven years ($n=61$). A similar proportion of coaches had between seven and 10 years of experience ($n=44$) and more than 10 years of experience ($n=14$). The majority of the coaches surveyed had between zero and four years of experience in the *alevin* (U12) category (77.1%), with a predominance of two years of experience ($n=37$). Concerning the *benjamin* (U10) category, the data were very similar to those shown in the *alevin* (U12) category, with two years of experience being the most selected value ($n=42$).

As regards the specific coaching qualification, the results showed that level II or UEFA A qualifications were the most frequent ($n=71$). Coaches with level 3 qualifications also were highly represented ($n=60$). In terms of the educational profile of the coach, it was observed that the highest percentage had completed university studies related to sports (41.83%). Those who had completed secondary education, vocational training or upper secondary (23.53%) were in a lower range. On the other hand, the vast majority of coaches had been former players of non-professional grassroots football clubs or amateur categories ($n=116$), with only 7.2% being former professional football players (see Table 3).

Dimension of the coach's qualities

With this dimension, the aim was to determine, according to the respondents' perceptions, the qualities coaches working at the initiation stage should have, and their opinions on some specific issues regarding coaching these educational categories (Table 4). Firstly, the respondents (61.4%; $M=6.23 \pm 2.16$) considered the adaptations of the coaches to the psycho-evolutionary characteristics of the children at this stage to be insufficient. Moreover, coaches showed a high degree of agreement regarding the fact that the coach should have pedagogical skills (90.2%; $M=7.91 \pm 1.89$) and should use teaching methods favouring learning of the game over the result in competition (94.1%; $M=8.97 \pm 1.54$). On the other hand, respondents thought that coaches tended to use methods which encouraged player autonomy (68.6%; $M=7.03 \pm 2.60$) (see Table 4). Nonetheless, they considered that coaches prioritised the promotion of themselves over the progression and development of the player (74.5%; $M=7.05 \pm 2.38$). Significant differences ($p=.026$) were found in this regard between the group of coaches with less experience in the *benjamin* (U10) category ($M=6.66 \pm 5.05$) and those with more experience

in this same category ($M=8.26 \pm 2.31$), with large effect size ($d=0.59$) (see Table 6).

As for the good use of social networks (73.9%; $M=7.37 \pm 2.93$), significant differences ($p=0.035$) were found between those who had never played football ($M=5.33 \pm 2.33$) and former semi-professional players ($M=8.47 \pm 5.26$), with a large effect size ($d=0.69$) (see Table 6). Finally, coaches considered it important to have specialist coaches at the initiation stage of football (94.8%; $M=8.94 \pm 1.57$), with significant differences ($p=0.043$) between the coaches under 20 years of age ($M=4.00 \pm 0.00$) and those between 41 and 50 years ($M=9.61 \pm 0.75$), with a large effect size ($d=0.79$) (see Table 6). In this last aspect, significant differences were also detected ($p=.013$) between those with more experience (more than 10 years) in grassroots football ($M=9.37 \pm 1.16$) and those with less experience (0-3 years) ($M=6.57 \pm 3.92$), with a large effect size ($d=0.87$) (see Table 6). In this way, it can be concluded that those with more experience and those who are older considered that in these categories it was necessary to have coaches who were specialists in the said categories.

Table 3. Main results of the dimension of the socio-demographic variables

Variable	Outstanding answer	%	n
Gender	Male	91.56	140
Age	20-30 years old	53.59	81
Grassroots football experience	4-7 years of experience	40.3	61
Experience with <i>alevines</i> (U12)	2 years	24.2	37
Experience with <i>benjamins</i> (U10)	2 years	27.5	42
Coaching qualification	Level II	46.6	71
Academic education	Sport-related university studies	41.8	64
Experience as a player	Former player of a non-professional club at grassroots or amateur level	75.8	116

Table 4. Main results of the dimension of the coach's qualities

Variable	Outstanding value	%	n
I consider the adaptations made by the coaches to be insufficient in relation to the capacities	5	20.9	32
I think the pedagogical skills of the coach are the most important in this age group	8	26.8	41
In these categories, coaches should use methodologies which enable the learning of the game above the result of the competition	10	52.3	80
I think that at this age, coaches tend to use strategies which allow the player to be autonomous and to have initiative in decision making during the game	10	24.8	38
I believe coaches at this stage have the ability to manage competition as a means within the training process and not as the sole end	10	28.8	44
I think coaches in these categories prioritise their promotion as coaches over the player development	8	22.9	35
I consider necessary for the coach to know how to make good use of social networks at this stage	10	36.6	56
I think it is important for clubs and schools to have specialist coaches for this stage	10	52.9	81

Dimension of the coach's perception of education

In the dimension of the coach's education, the aim was to obtain information on the opinions coaches had in relation to their education for coaching this age group (Table 5). In this sense, on the question of whether the coaches at this stage were usually well trained, they showed a medium degree of agreement (M= 4.99±2.38). They disagreed with the education received through football coaching qualifications, as they considered that it was not sufficient to be able to carry out a correct sporting and human education of the players in these categories (67.3%; M= 4.39±2.39), finding significant differences (p= 0.020) between the coaches with university studies related to sport (M=4.09±2.52) and the coaches with secondary education, vocational training or upper secondary

studies (M=5.70±3.70), with a very large effect size (d=0.99) (see Table 6). Furthermore, respondents agreed with the need to change the contents offered by coaching courses so that they would be more in line with the requirements of this stage of sports training (87.6%; M=7.84±1.83). They also considered that the period of practical training carried out in coaching qualifications, which should enable them to coach in the categories *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10) (56.9%; M=6.13±2.43), should be extended. Finally, the respondents indicated that they agreed with modifying the academic criteria to access coaching courses so that they would have higher qualifications and higher education for the initiation stage of football (71.9%; M=7.18±2.35).

Regarding continuing education, coaches expressed strong agreement with the statement that those training these age categories should receive

Table 5. Main results of the dimension of the coach's education and training

Variable	Outstanding value	%	n
I think coaches of this stage are usually well trained	3	15.0	23
I think that the education coaches receive through football coaching qualifications is sufficient to be able to carry out the correct sporting and human education in a group of players in these categories	3	24.8	38
I would modify the contents offered by the coaching courses to be more in line with the requirements of this stage	8	27.5	42
I would modify the academic criteria to access coaching courses in order to get more qualified and educated coaches for this stage	10	20.3	31
I consider insufficient the training period established in the coaching qualifications required to qualify to coach in the <i>Alevin</i> (U12) and <i>Benjamin</i> (U10) categories	5	19.0	29
I believe coaches of these categories should receive training throughout the year on extra-sporting aspects (use of social networks, education in values, communication skills, etc.)	10	34.0	52
I consider it fundamental that there be official conferences and forums where the different coaches of schools and clubs of these categories can share experiences and knowledge	10	35.9	55
I think it is important that, during the official courses to acquire the coaching qualification, the coaches of these categories can exchange training experiences with clubs and football schools from other cultures, territories and countries	10	41.2	63

Table 6. Inferential statistics results

Question	Variable	M	DT	p	Effect size
They considered that coaches prioritised the promotion of themselves over the progression and development of the player	Benjamin (U10) coaches between 0-3 years' experience	6.66	5.05	0.026	0.59
	Benjamin (U10) coaches between most 10 years' experience	8.26	2.31		
Good use of social networks	Players who had never played football	5.55	2.33	0.035	0.69
	Former semi-professional players	8.47	5.26		
Coaches considered it was important to have specialist coaches at the initiation stage of football	Coaches under 20 years old	4.00	0.00	0.043	0.79
	Coaches between 41 and 50 years old	9.61	0.75		
Coaches considered it important to have specialist coaches at the initiation stage of football	With less experience (0-3 years) in grassroots football	6.57	3.92	0.013	0.87
	More than 10 years in grassroots football	9.37	1.16		
Education received by coaches through football coaching qualifications	Coaches with university studies related to sport	4.09	2.52	0.020	0.99
	Coaches with Secondary Education, Vocational Training or Upper Secondary studies	5.70	3.70		

education throughout the year on extra-sporting aspects (use of social networks, values education, communication skills, etc.) (91.5%; $M=8.23\pm 1.87$). They also considered it fundamental to have official conferences and forums where coaches from various schools and clubs could share their experience and knowledge (93.5%; $M= 8.35 \pm 1.70$). Finally, respondents considered it important that, during the official courses leading to coaching qualifications, coaches at these levels could exchange training experiences with clubs and football schools from other cultures, territories and countries (97.4%; $M=8.73\pm 1.38$) (see Table 5).

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the study was to find out the profile and education of grassroots football coaches (working with 8-12-year olds) of Spanish professional clubs (first and second male division, and first female division), as well as the qualities and characteristics they should have. Bearing in mind the socio-demographic variables analysed, the results showed that most of the coaches belonged to the male gender. However, these data were reduced in the female teams, where 40% of the coaches were female, against the 60% of them who were male. These data coincide with those obtained in other studies (Abad, et al., 2011a; Paixão, et al., 2021), which highlighted the predominance of male coaches in the initiation football categories.

In terms of age, there was a significant number of coaches aged between 20 and 30 years, with an average age of 31 years, data which are in line with other similar studies (Abad, et al., 2011a; Lledó & Huertas, 2012). In terms of work experience as a grassroots football coach, the highest percentage was found to be between four and seven years of experience in coaching the mentioned educational categories. Furthermore, most of the coaches had around two years of experience coaching in the *alevin* (U12) category, the result that matched the number of years coaching in the *benjamin* (U10) category. These data are similar to the results obtained by Abad, Benito, Giménez, and Robles (2011b), who indicated in their study on grassroots football coaches in the province of Huelva that the vast majority had little experience training as coaches in these age categories (three and five years). These data are also reflected in the research by Álamo, Amador, and Pintor (2002) who also reported that in Gran Canaria and Tenerife, football coaches working at the grassroots level were mostly inexperienced. Paixão et al. (2021) also showed that most of the coaches in the educational categories in Beja (Portugal) had less than two years of experience.

As for specific training as a coach, most of the coaches had obtained level II or UEFA A coaching qualifications, with level III or UEFA PRO coaches

being the second most represented. These findings do not coincide with the study by Feu, Ibáñez, and Gozalo (2007), where the majority of coaches had a level I (UEFA A license) or even just a Leisure and free time counsellor qualification. However, it seems that professional clubs want to avoid the lack of training of their coaches, considering that those with specific qualifications had a greater capacity to develop an adequate education of the player (Camiré, Forneris, & Trudel, 2012).

The data on the academic education of the coaches reveal that the vast majority had university studies related to sports. These results confirm what was indicated by Lledó and Huertas (2012) in their research on coaches in the initiation stage of professional clubs in the Community of Valencia, in which they obtained very similar findings to those of this research. Professional clubs seem to be aware of the importance of grouping their technical staff with professionals who have a sport-related university education. On the contrary, these results are not in line with those achieved by Feu et al. (2007) and Abad et al. (2011b), who suggested that the majority of grassroots coaches had a low or medium-low academic profile, with a predominance of non-university studies.

As for the sporting experience, it was revealed that the highest percentage of the coaches analysed had been former amateur or grassroots football players in non-professional clubs. On the other hand, very few ex-professional players were found to coach in these categories; it may be due to the fact that they do not show great interest in coaching at the initiation level, their priorities as coaches being elsewhere. Studies conducted by Abad et al. (2011a) also pointed out that the majority of the coaches surveyed had experience as football players. Furthermore, Paixão et al. (2021) deemed that the influence of the coach's playing experience on the development of their trainees seemed not to have been addressed yet by the scientific community.

Respondents reported that they agreed with the fact that the adaptations they made in relation to children's abilities were insufficient. The coach must understand that the main focus should be on the child and, therefore, the sport must be adapted to the child from all points of view. On the other hand, the study by Lledó and Huertas (2012) concluded that the initiation coaches did not carry out sufficient adaptations in relation to the competition and the training methods used. On the contrary, Abad et al. (2011a) and Paixão et al. (2021) showed that coaches claimed to have carried out adaptations appropriate to the child's abilities, which coincides with the results obtained in this study. Conversely, the coaches of these categories, when asked about some qualities they observed in themselves, highlighted the use of teaching methods enabling autonomy and initiative in decision-

making in their players and the ability to manage the competition as a part of the training process and not as the sole purpose of the game. The foregoing can be questioned because respondents also felt that coaches prioritised their promotion as a coach over the development of the player. Respondents also strongly agreed that coaches should have pedagogical skills and master the use of methods favouring learning over performance and the use of social networks. Regarding teaching methods, Cecchini, Contreras, and Méndez (2005) considered it fundamental to use methods influencing not only the preparation of the player but also the adherence to the sports practice among youngsters, being able to have a considerable level of pedagogical skill (Light & Harvey, 2017).

Finally, as for the availability of specialist coaches at the initiation stage of football, the respondents showed a high degree of agreement in relation to this issue. No studies have been found in this regard, so it might be an interesting aspect to investigate whether clubs do take into account when hiring coaches the fact that they are specialists in this initiation stage. Moreover, coaches at the initiation stage should not be understood from a generic perspective as sports coaches, but the use of the term educator or sports trainer is recommended (Wein, 2005). This idea may suggest, as the results obtained have shown, that it is important to have specialists who know the needs of children at this age, who know how to adapt the sport to children's characteristics and who are capable of putting into practice the integral education of the sports person, trying to teach through sport in order to shape good athletes and better people.

On the issue of the coach's education for working at this stage, when asked if they considered that coaches were well educated, it was observed that many coaches disagreed with this statement. Along these lines, Abad et al. (2011a) found in their study that coaches who did not hold a football qualification and who had basic-level studies predominated. On the other hand, regarding the preparation to be a coach, the respondents showed a low degree of agreement on the question of whether the training they had received through football coaching qualifications was sufficient to be able to carry out the correct sporting and human education in a group of players of these age categories. These data were consistent with those of Abad et al. (2011b). The research studies mentioned above, and the high degree of agreement obtained when coaches were asked if they would modify the contents offered by coaching courses so that they would be more in line with the requirements of this stage, showed that coaches considered that they did not find a programme in official qualifications that would truly be adjusted to offer the knowledge necessary to produce good coaches for football initia-

tion stage. The coaches' perceptions of coaching courses were not aligned with the recommendations by McCullick, Belcher, and Schempp (2005), who believed it was very important for courses to be of good quality and with a clear practical application to coaching. Finally, as far as the contents of the coaching courses are concerned, the respondents agreed that the practical training period within these qualifications for coaching in the categories of *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10) was insufficient. It should be noted that this period becomes a fundamental part of the training of coaches since during this time coaches gain experience in training and competition, being, moreover, highly valued by the trainees (Lledó & Huertas, 2012). In this way, the figure of the mentor is necessary to increase the quality of the internship period (Cushion, 2006), as well as the education of the coaches.

On the issue of continuing and complementary education, they considered it essential to have official conferences and forums where coaches in these age categories of different schools and clubs could share their experiences and knowledge. The data compiled by Abad et al. (2011a) suggested it was very important that continuing education should exist and be promoted, as many coaches showed a lack of education. In this line, Nash and Collins (2006) and Côté et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of continuing education for football coaches. Furthermore, coaches are interested in and predisposed to this type of education and tend to demand learning of contents related to the training process, didactics and teaching methodology (Paixão, et al., 2021).

In light of the foregoing, in order to overcome the educational problems of grassroots football coaches, it would be advisable for football federations and other training bodies to encourage and facilitate courses and workshops of a practical nature (Abad, et al., 2011a). Along these lines, Werthner and Trudel (2006) stated that sports federations should stimulate training strategies with a non-formal character. Nonetheless, Lledó and Huertas (2012) highlighted the precarious employment situation of many grassroots football coaches, who work without an employment contract and receive very low or no financial compensation. This situation means that the weekly time dedication of grassroots football coaches is insufficient to provide some continuity in continuing education programmes since they have to combine their work as a coach with another job.

In conclusion, the profile of the football coach of professional clubs of Spanish male and female leagues in the educational categories of *benjamin* (U10) and *alevin* (U12) is as follows: male between 20 and 30 years of age, with work experience in grassroots football from four to seven years, but with little experience in the educational stage of initia-

tion (two years) in the *alevin* (U12) and *benjamin* (U10) categories, with a specific football qualification of level II or UEFA A license, having a degree from university studies related to the sport who has been a former player in grassroots or amateur football. Furthermore, for the respondents, it is very important that coaches have pedagogical skills, that they use methods prioritising learning over performance and that they use social networks appropriately. In addition, coaches consider it essential to be specialists in coaching the educational stage of players.

Concerning the perception of coach-specific education received, the respondents consider that the training received in the official football coaching courses is not sufficient to be able to carry out the correct sporting and human education of the players in these specific educational categories. They also believe that it is advisable to modify the contents of the football coaching courses in order to adjust them to the training needs necessary to coach children at the initiation stage. Additionally, they consider the academic requirements to access the coaching courses to be insufficient and demand more training and qualification to be able to coach players at the initiation stage. They also deem that the practical training period proposed in the coaching courses' practical training block is insufficient to perform their work with the categories of *benjamin* (U10) and *alevin* (U12).

With regard to continuing education, they express their support for exchanging training experiences with clubs and football schools from other cultures, territories and countries during their training in coaching courses and they also express that it is very important that the coaches of players at the initiation stage receive education throughout

the year on extra-sporting aspects, indicating that training courses, conferences and official forums are a good opportunity for continuing education to share their experiences and knowledge. As to the limitations of this study, it can be pointed out that there are few similar studies, due to the particularity of the context investigated. In addition, the instrument used, the questionnaire, is always subject to the honesty and interest of the individuals surveyed, which means that the results should be considered cautiously and that further research is needed in this respect. It would therefore be interesting to perform the same study with coaches working in non-professional clubs (both male and female) and compare the data collected with the findings of this study.

Practical implications

The data collected in this research, on the one hand, can help professionals who manage football clubs to establish criteria in the selection processes that facilitate the identification of coaches with the right profile, training and qualities to give stability to the projects in the initiation stage, being interesting that those responsible for the methodology of the clubs can establish criteria to evaluate both new coaches and those who already belong to the club. On the other hand, knowledge about the skills and training that coaches have provides information that can be used by the training entities (federations and training centres) to establish new strategies in the official training programmes, as well as to develop new programmes that promote the continuous training of coaches.

Finally, it is considered that this work can help coaches to know about and reflect on skills and abilities they have in the light of the presented criteria, thus being a way of self-evaluation.

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Submitted: June 4, 2021

Accepted: November 7, 2022

Published Online First: December 19, 2022

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