

****Grassroots Belgium junior football and racism****

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Aim and Method. The paper examines the paradoxical perceived coexistence of social benefits, on the one hand, and racism, on the other, in Belgian club-organised junior football. Researchers interviewed players, coaches, referees, parents, and administrators to understand how race impacts experiences in Belgian football, from the pitch to leadership positions.

Key findings. Despite Belgium's efforts to use football as a force for social inclusion, the research reveals that racism and discrimination remain deeply embedded within the sport, particularly at the youth level. Racist language and behaviors are common, ranging from overt slurs to subtle forms of exclusion. Participants described a normalization of racism in some contexts, leading players to leave clubs or even quit the sport. Crucially, the research points to a persistent 'White colonial frame' – a set of attitudes rooted in Belgium's colonial past – that shapes perceptions and opportunities. This manifests as racial stereotypes about players' abilities: those of African descent are often pigeonholed into attacking roles based on assumptions about speed and agility, while players with Moroccan or Turkish backgrounds may be unfairly labeled as aggressive. These stereotypes lead to unequal treatment from referees, limited skill development, and fewer chances for advancement.

The research shows that racism isn't simply about individual prejudice, but is woven into the history and structure of Belgian football. Minoritized ethnic groups are underrepresented in coaching and leadership roles, and ingrained biases hinder fair play and equal access to opportunities. While the Belgian football association has expressed support for addressing these issues, the study emphasizes that simply promoting inclusivity isn't enough. True progress requires actively challenging and dismantling these deeply held beliefs and norms, and decolonizing the way race is understood within the sport.

Limitations. The research focuses on Belgium, meaning the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries. Additionally, while the study includes diverse perspectives, the experiences of individuals within specific ethnic groups may vary. Nevertheless, this research provides a critical look at the challenges facing young players from minoritized backgrounds in Belgian football and underscores the urgent need for systemic change.