










ORIGINAL

## The invisible traits of professional footballers: a qualitative analysis of attitude and respect from a sports psychology view

### Los rasgos invisibles de los futbolistas profesionales: un análisis cualitativo de la actitud y el respeto desde la psicología del deporte

Amin Akbar<sup>1</sup>  , Zulakbal Abd karim<sup>2</sup>  , Fuccy Utamy Syafitri<sup>3</sup>  , Firunika Intan Cahyani<sup>4</sup>  , Guo Yong Hon<sup>5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Health, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sports Coaching, Faculty Sports Science and Coaching, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Orthodontics, Faculty of Dentistry, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Sports Coaching Education, Faculty of Sports Science, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia.

<sup>5</sup>Department of Sports Science, Faculty of Sports Science and Coaching, Lishui University, China.

**Cite as:** Akbar A, Abd karim Z, Utamy Syafitri F, Intan Cahyani F, Yong Hon G. The invisible traits of professional footballers: a qualitative analysis of attitude and respect from a sports psychology view. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología*. 2025; 5:2084. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20252084>

Submitted: 26-03-2025

Revised: 20-06-2025

Accepted: 06-09-2025

Published: 07-09-2025

Editor: Prof. Dr. William Castillo-González 

Corresponding author: Fuccy Utamy Syafitri 

#### ABSTRACT

Becoming a professional football player is a long and demanding journey that requires more than just physical strength, technical expertise, and tactical awareness. Psychological skills and mental resilience also play a crucial role in ensuring both progression to the professional level and the ability to sustain success over time. This study aims to explore key psychological aspects in the developmental pathway of football players, emphasizing the interplay between attitude, behavior, and overall character growth. Using a qualitative research design with a grounded theory approach, this study involved 10 youth football coaches, all holding official coaching licenses and with a minimum of five years of coaching experience. Data collection was carried out through triangulation methods, including open-ended semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, to ensure credibility and richness of data. The findings reveal that successful football players must demonstrate exemplary behavior, as their attitudes and conduct not only reflect personal character but also influence the broader football environment. Two core qualities identified are maintaining a positive attitude and showing respect for everyone—teammates, coaches, referees, opponents, and even supporters. Beyond technical and physical skills, the long-term development of a football player must integrate psychosocial growth and character building. Establishing a culture of respect towards the rules of the game, the training environment, and competition helps nurture a positive team culture. This culture reinforces the internalization of sportsmanship values, social responsibility, and emotional maturity, which are essential for both personal development and sustainable success in football.

**Keywords:** Football; Attitude; Respect; Sport; Psychology.

#### RESUMEN

Convertirse en futbolista profesional es un camino largo y exigente que requiere más que solo fuerza física, experiencia técnica y conciencia táctica. Las habilidades psicológicas y la resiliencia mental también desempeñan un papel crucial para asegurar tanto la progresión al nivel profesional como la capacidad de mantener el éxito a lo largo del tiempo. Este estudio busca explorar aspectos psicológicos clave en el desarrollo de los futbolistas, haciendo hincapié en la interacción entre la actitud, el comportamiento

y el desarrollo integral del carácter. Mediante un diseño de investigación cualitativo con un enfoque de teoría fundamentada, el estudio involucró a 10 entrenadores de fútbol juvenil, todos con licencia oficial de entrenador y un mínimo de cinco años de experiencia. La recopilación de datos se realizó mediante métodos de triangulación, que incluyeron entrevistas semiestructuradas abiertas, observaciones y análisis de documentos, para garantizar la credibilidad y la riqueza de los datos. Los hallazgos revelan que los futbolistas exitosos deben demostrar un comportamiento ejemplar, ya que sus actitudes y conducta no solo reflejan su carácter personal, sino que también influyen en el entorno futbolístico en general. Dos cualidades fundamentales identificadas son mantener una actitud positiva y mostrar respeto por todos: compañeros, entrenadores, árbitros, oponentes y aficionados. Más allá de las habilidades técnicas y físicas, el desarrollo a largo plazo de un futbolista debe integrar el crecimiento psicosocial y la formación del carácter. Establecer una cultura de respeto hacia las reglas del juego, el entorno de entrenamiento y la competición contribuye a fomentar una cultura de equipo positiva. Esta cultura refuerza la internalización de los valores de la deportividad, la responsabilidad social y la madurez emocional, esenciales tanto para el desarrollo personal como para el éxito sostenible en el fútbol.

**Palabras clave:** Fútbol; Actitud; Respeto; Deporte; Psicología.

## INTRODUCTION

Attitude is widely recognized as one of the fundamental aspects of character development and athlete performance, particularly in early childhood football players who are in the critical phase of internalizing core values in sports. The cultivation of positive attitudes, such as sportsmanship, teamwork, discipline, and respect toward coaches and opponents, serves not only as a moral foundation but also as a catalyst for the acquisition of technical and social skills essential for long-term athlete development<sup>(1)</sup>. Children who develop positive attitudes early on tend to show higher commitment in training and matches and have better mental endurance in the face of competitive pressure.<sup>(2)</sup> Therefore, assessing the need for early attitude development is important to ensure that sports education not only focuses on the physical aspects but also on character building that supports the holistic development of young athletes.

Athlete behaviour in sports is closely related to the concept of sportsmanship, a mandatory characteristic that football players must become familiar with from a young age. Various aggressive behaviours, such as deceiving the referee and provoking opponents, indicate that sportsmanship has not been effectively applied. This makes the development of training and coaching models aimed at building the character of young football players a future challenge.<sup>(3)</sup> An athlete needs emotional control to foster the desired characteristics of sportsmanship, and the development of sportsmanship can help in producing professional athletes.<sup>(4)</sup> Sportsmanship is a form of social responsibility and respect for opponents, which positively contributes to athlete happiness.<sup>(5)</sup> This means that sportsmanship is a positive action that upholds the motto of fair play, creating a positive environment that makes athletes happy.

The theoretical and philosophical conceptualization of fair play highlights that this concept can be understood in multiple ways. Studies have also identified that sociodemographic aspects of athletes, sportsmanship, and analysis of athletes' interventions reveal that the role of fair play indicates the success of athletes' behavioural coaching.<sup>(6)</sup> Sportsmanship must be instilled early so that players become accustomed to playing honestly, admitting mistakes, and accepting defeat graciously.<sup>(7,8,9)</sup> This attitude will also help them build a clean career from disgraceful actions like cheating or acting violently on the field.<sup>(10,11)</sup>

## METHOD

### Design

This study uses the *Evolved Grounded Theory* (EGT) approach as developed oleh Strauss dan Corbin (1990), which emphasizes the process of developing the theory gradually and deeply. EGT is a methodology that has high appeal across disciplines because of its ability to produce theories that are contextual, sharp, and relevant to the reality of the field. This approach demands high theoretical sensitivity, as well as openness to move dynamically between empirical data and theoretical constructs. In the context of qualitative research, three main methods are used for data collection, namely interviews, observations, and document analysis.<sup>(7)</sup>

### Procedure

This study employs several open-ended questions to gather information from various sources. All items in the interview protocol used in this study were assessed for face and content validity. There are five experts—specialists in football, qualitative research, and psychology—who evaluated this research instrument. All

experts' opinions are considered when selecting interview items to determine validity and reliability. The Cohen's Kappa index was used to assess the suitability of the units of analysis in relation to the studied theme. The validity and reliability values of the instrument were obtained using Cohen's Kappa formula.<sup>(12)</sup> The Cohen's Kappa value was 0,894, indicating that the instruments in this study were highly reliable. The Cohen's Kappa value was 0,894, indicating that the instruments in this study were highly reliable. The researchers followed the established procedures before data collection to secure approval from the primary supervisor. This approval was necessary before seeking permission from the Research Ethics Committee of the UPSI Management and Innovation Center (RMIC) to involve human study participants. The researchers complied with all administrative requirements related to data collection procedures. They obtained a certificate confirming the completion of ethical studies, referenced by the letter number UPSI/PPPI/PYK/ETIKA(M)/Vol. 15(50) - 050-2023.

### Participant

Participants in this study consisted of 10 Indonesian soccer coaches. The inclusion criteria set included coaches with a minimum of five years of coaching experience, as such experience is considered an important resource that has significant implications for the development of future soccer players. In addition, only coaches who have an official coaching license in soccer were included in this study. Formal education through licensing programs also plays an important role in maintaining and improving the quality of coaching. The number of participants in qualitative research is not determined at the beginning of the research but is based on information saturation, when no new information is provided by participants.

Table 1. Research Informant Information				
No	Age	Licence	Coaching experience	Status
Jl1	30	C	10 Years	Active
Jl2	38	C	12 Years	Active
Jl3	31	C	6 Years	Retired
Jl4	43	B	17 Years	Active
Jl5	53	B	16 Years	Active
Jl6	49	B	15 Years	Active
Jl7	45	B	18 Years	Active
Jl8	42	A	14 Years	Active
Jl9	36	A	13 Years	Active
Jl10	42	A	6 Years	Active

### Data Analysis

This study uses data triangulation, which means it is carried out to compare different methods and data sources and to confirm the findings of researchers, referring to a combination of methods or data sources in a study, which occurs when researchers confirm evidence from different sources to clarify themes or perspectives,<sup>(8)</sup> a combination of discussion, observation, and documentation which is a source of data to obtain related findings.<sup>(7)</sup> Data analysis in this study uses open coding, axial coding, and selective coding strategies.<sup>(11,13)</sup> Coding is an idea that is often reduced to words to describe data; it is also an analytical technique that analyses facts about events or experiences, line by line or paragraph by paragraph. First, researchers conduct open coding, identifying and labelling data in detail. The labels that appear are grouped into a larger category that helps researchers identify patterns and relationships between concepts. Furthermore, using the continuous comparison process, these categories are refined until the main themes emerge, a process known as selective coding.

## RESULTS

This research uses semi-structured, in-depth interviews. According to<sup>(14)</sup>, in-depth semi-structured interviews are suitable because open-ended questions and answers are recorded in more detail, and questions in semi-open interviews are determined beforehand. However, the answers to open-ended questions can be expanded upon. I provide an overview of the interview results related to this research to facilitate readers' understanding of the information provided by the coach. I provide JI codes for the coaches who participated in this study for ease of reading.

Football players must behave well because their attitudes and behaviours reflect their character and create a positive environment in football. The coach in this study stated that football players must have a good attitude towards everyone they meet, not just towards the coach, as stated by coach JI10, namely,

*"when training, remember to respect. I have a head coach, this is an assistant coach, this is a physiotherapist, you use respect, and he has an attitude, the ultimate attitude."*

J13 also stated that,

*"He has an attitude. A player is an attitude. He listens, does what the coach tells him to do, and plays his role too."*

The coach also expects them to not only be good players but also good people, as stated by J18,

*"Lastly, that is the key for a player; if a player can maintain his manners, he can play until age 45. That is manners; people say that manners are higher than knowledge".*

Information on the attitudes required for the development of under-17 football players was also provided by coach J11:

*"Attitude: Whatever the coach gives, he does it without complaining and with discipline. For example, if individual tactics are lacking, then individual training is necessary. If his attitude is not good, then he will not practice. Similarly, with the relationship between players and coaches, if the player does not have a good attitude, it will affect the team."*

Coaches are responsible for instilling this attitude in football players from an early stage, often at the grassroots level. A simple example taught by coaches is shaking hands when a foul or violation occurs, and not only to opponents but also to match officials, as coach J18 stated, namely,

*"An example of good behaviour is he can be respectful. Respect the coach, respect the opponent and his teammates. Those are the factors that allow him to reach a higher level."*

Coach J11 also added:

*"For example, I am still the guy that if there is a tackle, a fall, he falls, the opponent falls - we get up and pull. Those are the values I created. Ball out, ball out, no one uses their feet to pass because the ball is out. Passing with your hands, we respect the opponent."*

This attitude of mutual respect is an important aspect in maintaining the integrity of the sport, building positive bonds between individuals and teams, and creating positive experiences for everyone involved in the game. It is important to show a good attitude not only to teammates but also to opponents and officials, as stated by coach J14: "for us in the match it is not only for us but for the opponent and the match team". That is why we always say if there is a collision always shake hands, shake hands and help the opponent to stand up". Information obtained from this interview is associated with the results of observations and analysis of documents available from the coach in this study. This helps determine whether the statements made by the coach align with the results of observations and available documents, ensuring that the data obtained is valid and reliable.

### Observation

Researchers made observations at five football academies in Indonesia. The activities carried out aimed to examine the dynamics of training on the football field and how coaches delivered and carried out training instructions. In this observation, researchers found that the coach gave directions to greet or shake hands with researchers who showed good respect and attitude, similar to those of a soccer player. During training sessions, the researcher observed that the coach consistently instructed players to help their teammates and shake hands after physical contact. This strengthens the information generated from the interviews conducted by the coach.

### Document Analysis

During the research process, researchers collected documents to support their investigation. These documents included several training programs provided by each coach, reference books for players, and documents outlining appropriate forms of parental support for players. The documents obtained support the purpose of this research, as evidenced by the documents provided by the coach. The researcher also found a program that discussed respecting one another and provided examples of attitudes that football players should

exhibit. Analysis of these documents was not conducted as a separate part of the research process. However, it serves as validation that strengthens the results of this research, confirming that the information obtained through interviews and observations is also reflected in the documents collected from the research participants.

## DISCUSSION

One of the key themes emerging from this research is the importance of attitude for youth football players, as a positive and professional attitude can significantly impact their skill development and career. For this reason, it is important for football players to develop positive attitudes. Attitudes related to "fair play," respect for others, and the rules conveyed through the example of coaches are important when young people construct their own identity.<sup>(15)</sup> One of the attitudes that players need to develop is mutual respect. Respect is a vital component of football, extending to all aspects of the game. For football players, respect is not only shown to teammates and coaches, but it must also be extended to opposing players, spectators, and referees.<sup>(16)</sup> Players who respect opponents and referees will be more likely to accept defeat gracefully and victory with humility.<sup>(17)</sup>

Respect for referees and peers reflects integrity and maturity, contributing to positive personal and social development.<sup>(18)</sup> The sportsmanship of football players is related to their self-confidence.<sup>(19)</sup> In addition, respect does not only occur on the field, but trust, intimacy, relationships, and good reciprocity from fans should also be a priority in sports management through communication channels or media.<sup>(20)</sup> Developing respect in a sporting context will create a more inclusive and supportive environment where every player feels valued and understood. Ultimately, this will have a positive impact not only on individual players but also on teams and the sporting community as a whole.

Football also applies important values, namely sportsmanship, respect and honesty.<sup>(21)</sup> Sportsmanship is a fundamental value in sports, including for football players under 17 years old. Sportsmanship includes fair play, respect for opponents, referees and game rules.<sup>(22)</sup> Players who behave in a sportsmanlike manner tend to cooperate more easily with their teammates, thereby improving overall team performance.<sup>(23)</sup> According to<sup>(6)</sup>, the role of fair play extends beyond a playing field to also serve as an opportunity to teach positive values through sports. It does not mean only obeying the rules but also respecting and believing in them. By showing them to the coach, athletes can internalize and make them their own rules.<sup>(24)</sup>

The results of this study also indicate that the assistance of sports physiotherapists who work with young athletes has a strategic role that exceeds merely physical recovery. Through empathic communication and supportive interactions, physiotherapists can strengthen prosocial behaviour and team cohesion during the rehabilitation process.<sup>(25)</sup> Their close relationship with athletes also enables early detection of signs of mental health issues or burnout, which can then be addressed through collaborative psychological interventions.<sup>(26,27,28)</sup> Fostering attitudes and respect for young athletes is not only an ethical aspect, but it can also be a key element in an interdisciplinary approach to training and rehabilitation. When values such as empathy, responsibility, and appreciation for each role are instilled early on, the training process becomes more collaborative, and the rehabilitation environment becomes more supportive of psychosocial needs. Involving coaches, physiotherapists, psychologists, and other supporting staff in a joint value framework enhances the integration of the approach, allowing athletes not only to recover physically but also to develop healthy character and social relationships. This approach directly contributes to athlete resilience, enhances team communication effectiveness, and prevents the emergence of conflict or resistance during the training process or recovery.

## Limitation and Practical Implication

This study has several limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, the number of participants holding A Pro licenses was not involved in this study, thus preventing a more complex perspective from being obtained. Second, this study focused on the coaches' perspective, thus failing to capture the direct experiences of the young players themselves, who are the primary subjects in the character-building process. Despite these limitations, the results of this study provide important practical implications for the development of young soccer players. First, soccer training programs should incorporate aspects of psychological and character development, rather than focusing solely on technical and physical skills. This can be achieved through a pedagogical approach that emphasises the values of sportsmanship, social responsibility, and emotional maturity. Second, coaches are expected to act not only as technical instructors but also as role models who instil positive attitudes and a culture of mutual respect within the team. Third, soccer academies and organisations need to establish a training ecosystem that fosters the internalisation of the values of fair play, discipline, and respect for all parties involved in the game. Fourth, the results of this study can also form the basis for the development of more holistic youth development policies, so that a player's long-term success is measured not only by technical achievements but also by the quality of their character and mental readiness to face the demands of a professional career.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underline that attitude and respect play a fundamental role in supporting the



long-term development of football players. Strengthening the value of respect towards the rules of the game, opponents, and the training environment can encourage the formation of a healthy team culture and accelerate the process of internalizing the values of sportsmanship and social responsibility. Systematic efforts to build an ecosystem that consistently instills attitude and respect can improve the quality of individual players while creating a generation of football players with more integrity and high competitiveness. Coaches should create training programs that focus on technical and physical skills while promoting positive values in football. Collaborating with sports psychologists is crucial for developing players who are strong, intelligent, skilled, and psychologically resilient.

## REFERENCES

1. Weinberg RS, Gould D. Foundations of sport and exercise psychology. 7th ed. Champaign (IL): Human Kinetics; 2019.
2. Light R, Harvey S. Positive pedagogy for sports coaching: athlete-centred coaching for individual sports. Routledge; 2017.
3. Sulistiyono; Sugiyanto; Kristiyanto A; Kunto S. The sportsmanship of young football players: challenge in developing character of young football players. In: Proceedings of the 3rd Yogyakarta International Seminar on Health, Physical Education, and Sport Science in conjunction with the 2nd Conference on Interdisciplinary Approach in Sports; 2020. p. 640-645.
4. Sombatthavee P. The effect of training formalities on sportsmanship development: a case study of Kasem Bundit University futsal club professional players. Kasem Bundit J. 2018.
5. Shkembi F, Treska V. The relationship between gratitude and happiness. PJMHS. 2021;15(4):1555-1559.
6. Serrano-Durá J, Molina P, Martínez-Baena A. Systematic review of research on fair play and sporting competition. Sport Educ Soc. 2020;0(0):1-15.
7. Lebar O. Penyelidikan kualitatif: pengenalan kepada teori dan metode. 2nd ed. Tanjung Malim: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris; 2021.
8. Creswell JW. Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage; 2014.
9. Holt NL. Doing grounded theory in sport and exercise. In: Smith B, Sparkes AC, editors. Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise. Routledge; 2016.
10. Glaser BG. Theoretical sensitivity. San Francisco (CA): The Sociology Press; 1978.
11. Strauss A, Corbin J. Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. 2nd ed. London: Sage; 1998.
12. Ghazali D, Sufean H. Metodologi penyelidikan dalam pendidikan. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Universiti Malaya; 2016.
13. Boddy CR. Sample size for qualitative interviews. Qual Mark Res. 2015;19(2003):426-432.
14. Patton MQ. Qualitative research and evaluation methods. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage; 2002.
15. Ximenes MD, Rodrigues AJA, Silva JJ, Prudente J. The importance of attitudes and values in sport and competition: the opinion of a group of coaches of volleyball. J Hum Sport Exerc. 2019;14(Suppl 1):S1270-S1272.
16. Sezen-Balcikanli G, Yildiran I. Sportspersonship orientation and empathy: a study of professional football players. J Phys Educ Sport. 2012;12(1):18-24.
17. Park N. The role of subjective well-being in positive youth development. Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci. 2004;591:25-39.

18. Vierimaa M, Bruner MW, Cote J. Positive youth development and observed athlete behavior in recreational sport. *PLoS One*. 2018;13(1):1-14.
19. Pekel A, Çimen K. Relationship between “self-efficiency” competence levels and constant sportive self-respect levels of football players (sample of Istanbul European side). *Phys Educ Students*. 2017;21(5):200-204.
20. Marques T, Nobre H, Gordon D. Sports fan relationships with soccer teams. *Int J Digit Cult Electron Tour*. 2018;2(3):213-223.
21. Barnet W, Jastrzebski Z, Konieczna A, Radziminski L, Jaskulska E, Bichowska M. Social, educational and sports character of football academy in Malbork. *Balt J Health Phys Act*. 2012;3(4):325-332.
22. Downward P, Webb T, Dawson P. Referee abuse, intention to quit, and well-being. *Res Q Exerc Sport*. 2024;95(1):207-217.
23. Samur S. The professional management of football in sports clubs. *Eur J Phys Educ Sport Sci*. 2017;3(11):294-304.
24. Sampol PP, Díaz JMB, Rotger PAB, Verdaguer FJP. Effects of an educational intervention regarding fair play on sports team coaches. *J Hum Sport Exerc*. 2020;15(2):419-431.
25. Henriksen K, et al. Consensus statement on improving the mental health of high-performance athletes. *Int J Sport Exerc Psychol*. 2019;17(6):615-623.
26. Gustafsoon H, Madigan DJ, Lundkvist E. Burnout in athletes: a theoretical and empirical review. *Int Rev Sport Exerc Psychol*. 2017;10(1):4-24.
27. Patton MQ. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage; 2002.
28. Bolter ND, Petranek LJ, Dorsch TE. Coach, parent, and administrator perspectives on required coaching education in organized youth sport. *Int J Sports Sci Coach*. 2018;13(3):362-372.

## FINANCING

The authors would like to thank Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Masyarakat Universitas Negeri Padang for funding this work with contract number: 1989/UN35.15/LT/2025.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors mention that there is no Conflict of Interest in this study.

## AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

*Conceptualization:* Amin Akbar, Zulakbal Abd karim.  
*Data curation:* Amin Akbar, Zulakbal Abd karim.  
*Formal analysis:* Firunika Intan Cahyani.  
*Research:* Amin Akbar.  
*Methodology:* Amin Akbar, Guo Yong Hon.  
*Project management:* Amin Akbar.  
*Resources:* Firunika Intan Cahyani, Guo Yong Hon.  
*Software:* Firunika Intan Cahyani.  
*Supervision:* Zulakbal Abd karim.  
*Validation:* Zulakbal Abd karim, Guo Yong Hon.  
*Display:* Amin Akbar.  
*Drafting - original draft:* Amin Akbar.  
*Writing - proofreading and editing:* Amin Akbar, Firunika Intan Cahyani.