

[IN]VISIBLE
YOUTH WITH DIVERSE
BACKGROUNDS IN SPORT

SPIN Youth

EMPOWER DIVERSE YOUTH

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VIDE



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Content

- About exhibition 4
- About the project 5
- Portraits
 - Afonso Calé Marques..... 7
 - Fletcher Lowe 8
 - Fabício Garcia..... 9
 - Diana Meriva 10
 - Arnas Voitinovicius 11
 - Jelani Trevisan 12
 - Carol Alves..... 13
 - Lidiane Antunes 14
 - Doly Wabeua 15
 - Lou Martinet..... 16
- Acknowledgment..... 17

Youth Expansion of SPIN Exhibition

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

“Talent can open doors, but it’s the values that keep us standing when everything else fails”, tells us Afonso Marques, a 19-year-old player and ambassador of the National Plan for Ethics in Sport. For Afonso, *“A true role model is not the one who speaks better — it is the one who lives by what they defend, even when no one is watching.”*

A role model cannot be someone who only stands out in the sporting aspect. We should also admire those who promote good values such as social inclusion, integration, equality, non-discrimination, and respect.

In this EXHIBITION, we go through the stories of several young people who tell us about the hardships they encountered when coming to Portugal, how they overcame them, the importance of football in their integration, and how to motivate and make this sport accessible to everyone.

The sport that unites them may be the same, but each person’s experiences are very different.

In Arnas’s and Diana’s case, at first there was some difficulty in integration due to the language barrier. It was complicated for them to express themselves and understand their teammates, but it was precisely these same teammates who helped them integrate. They report that they

always found ways to communicate, even if by gestures, they were patient and always included them. Football ends up having a universal language, and even if they don’t speak the same language, everyone understands each other in the field. As Diane tells us, *“Football brings people together because we share the same passion and, sometimes, goals.”*

For Doly, a young Cameroonian girl who grew up in a region with a strong Muslim culture, it was difficult to accept that a girl played football. She felt that *“I had to assert myself to get a place, especially when the boys arrived on the field.”*

It is also because of the inequality that exists between women’s and men’s football that many young girls end up giving up and abandoning sports practice. Either due to a lack of opportunities or because of the discrimination that exists for being just a girl who wants to play football. In order to motivate the younger ones, Carol advises *“don’t let anyone define what you can or cannot do.”* She also highlights that, fortunately, we have more women involved in the world of football and that *“each one who enters this world helps clear the path for the next ones.”*

Since sport, in this case football, act as a driver for social inclusion, Fabrício and Fletcher point out the importance of football in their own integration. Fabrício mentions that his teammates welcomed him as “part of the family”, while Fletcher admits he rediscovered the spirit of teamwork.

One of the aims of the entire project is to create a positive impact on motivation for sports practice, in addition to promoting good

values. But, often, not everyone has the same conditions and accessibility to this sport. Jelani states that *“there should be more clubs and football schools with free access for children, especially in areas with more disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions. Football should be accessible to all children and families.”* In Lou’s case, she points out that as a woman, there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of equal opportunities and investing more in training young female players. *“Visibility and equal investment are key to showing the next generation that there is a place for them at the top”* is Lou’s wish for future generations.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Young refugees, migrants, and those from ethnic minorities are often discriminated against either because of their origin or their gender, and they are not given the same opportunity as others.

The SPIN Youth project was developed with the aim of increasing sports participation among young people from different backgrounds, in particular young refugees and migrants, and creating inclusive and non-discriminatory sports environments that actively promote diversity and equality.



PORTRAITS

AFONSO CALÉ MARQUES

Portugal, 19 years old, Naval 1893



TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

I'm 19 years old, and my story in football began before I even stepped onto the field—it began with a promise. It started at age 9 at Olhanense to fulfill what, even without words, I had promised my great-grandfather. More than playing, it was a way to honor him, to continue something that was bigger than me. At 15, I left Olhão and moved alone to Coimbra to play for Académica de Coimbra OAF. I traded the comfort of home for an uncertain path, driven by something bigger: to grow as a player, as a student, and above all, as a person.

That's when I realized that talent can open doors, but it's values that keeps us standing when everything else fails.

WHAT VALUES DO YOU CONSIDER IMPORTANT IN A "ROLE MODEL"?

Coherence, above all.

A true role model is not the one who speaks best — it is the one who lives by what they stand for, even when no one is watching. Respect, responsibility and humility are essential, but there is one value above all: example. Because in sport, and in life, people don't follow words... they follow behaviors.

Being a reference means understanding that someone is always watching — and copying.

WHICH PLAYER/REFEREE/COACH DO YOU ADMIRE AND WHY?

I admire all those who reach the top without losing their essence — like, for example, Eusébio, who I was taught to admire from an early age not only for what he did on the field, but for the values he represented.

In a world where it is easy to succumb to pressure, ego or the need to win at any cost, some choose a harder path: staying true to themselves. And that's what truly stands out to me.

I admire players who respect opponents even in defeat, referees who have the courage to make fair decisions under pressure, and coaches who shape people before shaping athletes. Because in the end, what remains are not just the titles or the statistics. It is how you play, how you decide and how you treat others.

And to me, that is the true legacy in sport.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO CHANGE IN FOOTBALL TO MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE?

Above all, we need to rescue the soul of football and deconstruct the hypocrisy of those in charge. It hurts to see that we have transformed sport into a school where students are frequently punished for making mistakes, while the "teachers" fail every day in what they should be teaching. What we see at the top always trickles down to the bottom, contaminating and robbing our children of their purity.

For football to be a space where everyone fits in, we must end the profound disappointment of false meritocracies and decisions that are explained by interests and not by the work of each individual. A child enters the field with the pure belief that effort and kindness will come, and I refuse to accept that the world they encounter will destroy that innocence for them. It is urgent to invert the pyramid, because the change we all demand will not begin at the top, but at the bottom. It begins the moment we ensure that a boy learns to respect before learning to compete.

FLETCHER LOWE

South Africa, 19 years old, GD Estoril Praia

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

My name is Fletcher Smythe Lowe. I was born in South Africa and moved to Portugal in 2020 for reasons unrelated to football. Before leaving South Africa, I played for the Ubuntu Football Academy. After arriving in Portugal, it was difficult, due to the pandemic, to find any kind of football activity, but I ended up finding AD Oeiras, where I stayed for two seasons before transferring to FC Alverca for one season. After that, I spent a year at SL Benfica before moving to Estoril Praia the following season, to the under-19 team, and moving up to the SAD the following year, which is going extremely well and I'm really enjoying it.

HOW WAS YOUR INTEGRATION INTO THE TEAM WHEN YOU ARRIVED IN PORTUGAL? DO YOU THINK FOOTBALL FACILITATED YOUR INTEGRATION?

When I moved to Portugal, it was difficult to have any kind of social interaction due to the pandemic. Football helped me rediscover team spirit and made me very happy. Without a doubt, it greatly facilitated my integration into the country and reduced stress, in addition to allowing me to gain valuable experience regarding the language and culture.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS AFRAID TO START PLAYING, IN ORDER TO ENCOURAGE THEM?

At first, it might seem intimidating, but once you join a football team, it's like having a second family, and they support you unconditionally, no matter what. As soon as you step onto the field, you'll realize how it has an extremely positive effect on your morale and gives you a greater sense of purpose.



FABRÍCIO GARCIA

Cape Verde, 24 years old, FC Alverca



TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

My name is Fabrício, I'm 24 years old, I started here in Portugal playing for Fabril do Barreiro, at the time the coach was João Nuno, I played two seasons and then I went to the Estoril Praia U23 team and in the same season that I went to the U23 team I moved up to the first team.

HOW WAS YOUR ADAPTATION TO PORTUGAL AND HOW IMPORTANT WAS FOOTBALL IN YOUR SOCIAL INCLUSION?

My adaptation here in Portugal wasn't easy, because I arrived during a difficult time, during the Covid pandemic, and then I had to deal with all the bureaucracies related with the resident permit process, but, in the end, everything worked out.

IF YOU WERE ALLOWED TO GO BACK AND CHANGE SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR SOCIAL INCLUSION/TEAM, WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE AND WHY?

I wouldn't change anything about my inclusion in the team, even socially. Even though it's not easy, when players come from outside the area, adaptation is never easy, but in my case, they welcomed me like family when I arrived at my first team, Fabril do Barreiro, and that's why at that time we managed to achieve great things, good things, the club's objectives.

DIANA MERIVA

Equatorial-Guiné, 24 years old, FC Famalicão

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

Hello, I'm Diana Meriva, and since I was very young, football has been a very important part of my life. I started playing as a child and, little by little, I grew both personally and professionally. I went through different stages and teams, and today I'm playing abroad, far from home, something I've always dreamed of. This experience has helped me step out of my comfort zone, meet other people, other cultures, and continue to grow as a person and a player.

DID THE LANGUAGE BARRIER HINDER YOUR INCLUSION IN THE GROUP? HOW DID THE TEAM HELP YOU IN THIS PROCESS?

At first, the language barrier made integration difficult. Sometimes it was hard to understand certain things and communicate with my colleagues the way I wanted. However, the team helped me a lot, my colleagues were patient and included me in everything. They tried to explain things to me in different ways, making me feel part of the group. Gradually, I gained confidence and adapted.

DO YOU THINK THAT, EVEN WITHOUT SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE, FOOTBALL HAS THE POWER TO UNITE PEOPLE?

Absolutely, completely. I think football has a universal language. Although we don't speak the same language, on the field we understand each other in other ways: with gestures, glances. Football unites people because we share the same passion and sometimes the same goals.

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS BECAUSE OF THE LANGUAGE BARRIER. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A YOUNG PERSON TO MOTIVATE THEM?

My advice to any young person is not to be afraid to try. Sometimes we think that language is a barrier, but sport helps a lot in overcoming it. When you do something you enjoy, you will always find a way to communicate. The important thing is to take advantage of it, trust yourself, and not let an opportunity pass you by because of fear.



ARNAS VOITINOVICIUS

Lithuania, 19 years old, SL Benfica



TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

Before coming to SL Benfica, my entire sporting career was spent at FK Riteriai in Lithuania, from the youth levels to the B and A teams. I played five games with the first team in the Lithuanian first division, and it was during that time that Benfica contacted me for trials. Fortunately, it worked out, and I signed up. Since then, I have played for the Junior team, Under-23s, and B team of SL Benfica.

HAVE YOU OR ANY OF YOUR COLLEAGUES EVER BEEN VICTIMS OF DISCRIMINATION? HOW DID THEY OVERCOME THAT EXPERIENCE?

Fortunately, during my career, and up to now, I haven't witnessed any instances of discrimination. I have seen some less-than-correct behavior on the field. In any case, when it happens, I consider it unacceptable, especially in sports, which should be a space for positive examples for society. In the end, we are all human.

WHAT VALUES HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM FOOTBALL THAT ARE PART OF YOUR LIFE?

The values we learn in football are applicable to everything in life, just as our way of being influences who we are as players. Therefore, everything I learned in football I adapted to different situations in life, and vice versa. Willpower, hard work, courage, humility, passion, and love for everything I do are values that will always help me in football, or in life in general.

YOU COME FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE. HOW WAS YOUR ADAPTATION TO THE CLUB?

At first, it was more difficult, due to the language barrier. I had some difficulty understanding people. Here, people are more open, emotional, and talkative than in Lithuania. It took some time, but I had many good people around me helping me, and it wasn't exactly a problem.

THE SPIN YOUTH PROJECT AIMS TO TRAIN YOUNG ATHLETES TO BE "ROLE MODELS" OF SOCIAL INCLUSION. WHAT VALUES DO YOU CONSIDER IMPORTANT FOR A PLAYER TO HAVE TO BE AN EXAMPLE IN THIS AREA?

I think the values I mentioned—discipline, willpower, courage, humility, and love for everything you do—are the core values for an athlete, or a person in general, to become the best version of themselves.

JELANI TREVISAN

Belgium, 21 years old, SL Benfica

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

My name is Jelani Dumas Trevisan and I'm from Brussels, where I started playing football at the age of five, at White Star Woluwe. At the age of 9, I went to KV Mechelen and stayed there for two years, before arriving at Standard Liège. I played five years in Liège and then a season at KAA Gent. I came to SL Benfica five years ago and currently play for the B team.

WHAT VALUES HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM FOOTBALL THAT ARE PART OF YOUR LIFE?

The main values I take from football are dedication and perseverance, the ability to never give up on our dreams and goals, regardless of the difficulties.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO CHANGE IN FOOTBALL TO MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE?

I think there should be more clubs and football schools with free access for children, especially in areas with more disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions. Football should be accessible to all children and families.

DO YOU THINK THAT YOUNGER PLAYERS CURRENTLY HAVE A VOICE AND ARE RESPECTED? WHAT DO THE NEW GENERATIONS NEED TO BE MORE RESPECTED?

I would say that young people are respected and have a voice, but obviously, they must start by respecting the older players. In a team, this is very important. But, in general, from my personal experience, I think everyone has the same right and opportunity to express themselves.



CAROL ALVES

Portugal, 20 years old, Valadares Gaia FC



TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

From a very young age, football has been a part of my life. I've been playing for about 14 years, starting at age 6. Throughout my career, I've grown not only as a player but also as a person, with football being a part of that growth. Currently, I play for Valadares Gaia Futebol Clube, a first division women's club in Portugal.

THE SPIN YOUTH PROJECT AIMS TO TRAIN YOUNG ATHLETES TO BE "ROLE MODELS" OF SOCIAL INCLUSION. WHAT VALUES DO YOU CONSIDER IMPORTANT FOR A PLAYER TO HAVE TO BE AN EXAMPLE IN THIS AREA?

I think above all, a player must have respect for others, for differences, and for the realities of each individual. Empathy is also fundamental, as is the ability to include and support those around us. An athlete must realize that they have a voice and influence, and use it positively, thus promoting equality, unity, and team spirit on and off the field.

HAVE YOU EVER FELT INEQUALITY FOR BEING A GIRL PLAYING SOCCER? HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH IT?

Yes, I have felt some differences throughout my career, especially when I was younger and played against boys. Comments or attitudes that often come from prejudice or lack of knowledge. Over time, I learned to deal with it by focusing on what really matters, my work and my evolution. I used these situations as motivation to continue and prove that soccer is for everyone.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A GIRL WHO WANTS TO PLAY SOCCER BUT THEN HEARS "THAT'S FOR BOYS"?

I would tell her not to let anyone define what she can or cannot do. If you like soccer, you should play, have fun and believe. Soccer is for anyone who has passion, regardless of whether they are a boy or a girl. Nowadays there are more and more women in football, and each one who enters this world helps pave the way for the next ones.

LIDIANE ANTUNES

Brasil, 21 years old, SF Damaiense

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

From a very young age, I always played on the small field right in front of my house, always with my brothers, cousins, and neighbors. As I grew up, I started playing for teams near my neighborhood, until I discovered the Karanba project. It was there that I received all the training to become who I am today. All the opportunities arose through this project, and above all, I greatly improved my discipline. And, three years ago, God blessed me with the opportunity to play for Damaiense.

HOW WAS YOUR ADAPTATION TO PORTUGAL, AND WHAT IMPORTANCE DID FOOTBALL HAVE IN YOUR SOCIAL INCLUSION?

Every beginning of a cycle is always complicated, even more so in football. Many times, you go to places you've never been, you interact with people you never imagined interacting with, you don't know anyone, and you need to be mentally strong. I also missed my family, since I had never gone far away to be away for so long. The importance of sport in my inclusion was essential. I learned to live with people from different countries and cities. Teamwork, combating inequality, mental and physical health—all these topics were and have been important for my inclusion day after day.

HAVE YOU OR ANY OF YOUR COLLEAGUES EVER BEEN VICTIMS OF DISCRIMINATION? HOW DID THEY OVERCOME THAT EXPERIENCE?

Unfortunately, I've lost count of how many times I've suffered it, and how many times female teammates and teammates from other teams have also suffered. Currently, there is some improvement, but we still suffer a lot from discrimination. As I always say and think, put God first in everything, ask for guidance and wisdom to deal with these situations, and keep working.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO CHANGE IN FOOTBALL IN ORDER TO BE ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE?

To begin with, if everyone had the same respect they have for men's football, a lot would improve. Women's football needs to be at the level it deserves; several structural, cultural, and economic changes are urgently needed!



DOLY WABEUA

Cameroon, 22 years old, SF Damaiense



TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

My name is Wabeua Djiatio Doly Diane, I am 23 years old and I am from Cameroon. I grew up in a small town in the far north of Cameroon, Maroua, a Sahelian region with a strong Muslim culture.

My journey was not easy. In my region, it was still difficult, at the time, to accept that a girl played football. So, I had to assert myself to get a place, especially when other guys came to the field. But my passion and determination were always stronger than the obstacles. Thanks to my work and perseverance, I have already represented my national team for various occasions.

YOU COME FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE. HOW WAS YOUR ADAPTATION TO PORTUGAL AND PORTUGUESE FOOTBALL?

Regarding integration, it wasn't really difficult. I've already spent more than four years in Portugal, so I have a good foundation in Portuguese. Damaiense made me want to stay in Portugal even more. That's why this year I'm taking Portuguese classes to further deepen my understanding of the language and culture. I also speak English quite well, which makes communication with the other foreign players easier.

Today I see this cultural difference as an asset that helps me adapt, learn, and assert myself wherever I am.

MANY FEMALE PLAYERS ARRIVE AT CLUBS AND FACE SOME INCLUSION PROBLEMS, OFTEN DUE TO LANGUAGE BARRIERS, DIFFERENT CULTURES, INEQUALITY, LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES, WHICH CAN OFTEN RESULT IN ABANDONING THE SPORT. HOW CAN WE FACILITATE THE INCLUSION OF FEMALE PLAYERS AND MOTIVATE THEM TO PRACTICE SPORTS?

To facilitate the integration of players and motivate them to continue, in my opinion, it is necessary to act simultaneously at the human, sporting and social levels. Good integration involves comprehensive, humane, and structured support. Mental support and psychological guidance play a key role. Feeling accepted, despite cultural differences or skin color, heard, supported, and encouraged, allows one to maintain motivation, even in difficult times.

Also, I would advise our portuguese colleagues in each club to help and welcome us on a daily basis, because sometimes there are small groups of local girls and another of foreign girls... I think it's due to a communication barrier. This could create a climate of trust, a much more united group.

LOU MARTINET

Venezuela/France, 23 years old, SF Damaiense

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR JOURNEY AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.

I'm a 23-year-old French Venezuelan. I was born in Caracas but spent 15 years growing up in Asia due to my parents' work, and that's actually where my football journey began. From there, I moved to France and then to the United States, where I played NCAA Division 1 college soccer while completing my studies. Now, I'm here in Portugal with SF Damaiense. Becoming a professional has been my dream since I was very little, and I've chased that dream across every continent I've lived on.

WHAT VALUES HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM FOOTBALL THAT ARE PART OF YOUR LIFE?

First, definitely adaptability. Moving from Caracas to Asia, then France, the US, and now Portugal, I've had to learn how to fit into new teams and styles of play very quickly. It's made me comfortable with change. Second is resilience. Football is full of highs and lows (injuries, losses, or being far from home) so you learn how to bounce back. And finally, mental toughness. Playing D1 college and now pro, you realize that your head must be as strong as your feet if you want to be at your best.

YOU COME FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE. HOW WAS YOUR ADAPTATION TO THE CLUB?

Adapting to SF Damaiense was actually quite smooth! Because I've spent my life moving between different cultures and countries, I've learned how to integrate quickly into new environments. I absolutely love Portugal, and the transition was made even easier by the staff and my teammates. The girls were incredibly welcoming from day one, which made me feel at home immediately.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO CHANGE IN FOOTBALL TO MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE?

As a woman in this sport, I see that we still have work to do regarding equal opportunities. To make football truly accessible, we need to invest more in grassroots programs for young girls globally. It's about ensuring that a girl no matter where she is from, America, Asia, África or Europe, has the same access to quality coaching, facilities, and a clear professional pathway. Visibility and equal investment are key to showing the next generation that there is a place for them at the top.



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