

## OPEN ACCESS

*Submitted:* 26 July 2021  
*Revised:* 4 February 2022  
*Accepted:* 15 February 2022

# MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAINING FOOTBALL CAMPS IN BULGARIA FOR THE PERIOD 2015-2019

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*Cite this article as:*  
 Angelov, G. (2022).

Main characteristics of training  
 football camps in Bulgaria  
 for the period 2015-2019.  
*Journal of Applied Sports Sciences*,  
 Vol.1, pp. 73-81.  
 DOI: 10.37393/JASS.2022.01.6



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**ABSTRACT**

*For the period 2015 - 2019 in Bulgaria a significant number of children's football camps were organized in partnership with some of the biggest football clubs in Europe. These events aroused great interest among children, adults, and media, because for the Bulgarian audience clubs such as AC Milan, FC Inter, FC Barcelona and Juventus FC are the embodiment of world football. This article aims to review, describe, and analyse football camps in Bulgaria in terms of their history, management, and organization, which in turn will contribute to increasing the number and quality of football grassroots projects. This type of event is increasingly finding its place in the field of sport, which suggests a more in-depth study.*

**Keywords:** *football, training camps, management*

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the world of football has been perceived more and more as an independent industry. Its characteristics are close to those of the services or entertainment business, as people around the world can choose whether to go to the cinema, amusement park or stadium to watch a game. The ranking of football as a business activity has increased in the economies of those countries where the game is advertised as a national sport. In many of these countries, it now accounts for a large percentage of national GDP, as football events help a significant number of other sectors, such as media, various services, catering, and transport. The globalization of football industry has caused a concentration of resources in the hands of several large European and South American clubs, which have the ability and the economic resources to face increased competition from foreign clubs and other companies in the entertainment industry. (Dolles & Söderman, 2005)

The development of football worldwide, the growing popularity, globalization and

commercialization of the sport have led to the emergence of various products and services that major football clubs have begun to offer. One of these products is children football camps.

In this manuscript, the term “camps” is used to denote football camps organized by a certain club, in a certain location, different from the main training grounds of the club in which children, who are not part of the club, participate and who are given the opportunity to get acquainted with the methodology, ideology and philosophy of the club.

This study *aims* at presenting a relatively new product of the football industry, through which various benefits can be achieved and creating a basis to help organize and implement football camps in Bulgaria. The study will show the main characteristics and features of training football camps, as well as the development of camps in Bulgaria and in particular those organized in partnership with foreign football clubs for the period 2015 - 2019.

We will research the history and specifics of the product “football camps” and we assu-

me that the results will reveal some of the main factors of implementing football camps in Bulgaria which can be used in order to support the process of organization of such events in the future.

### METHODOLOGY

Various methods were used in the study, including:

- Observation - including personal presence and research of fifteen camps.
- Semi-structured interview with representatives of “Future Through Sport” association - covers topics related to the history and organization of the camps, the main processes, ideology and capabilities of the product.
- Content analysis
  - Analysis of documentary sources - proprietary documents of the host organizations, concerning the implementation of football camps under their supervision.
  - Analysis of media publications - articles and information that have been published in the media about the organization and implementation of football camps in Bulgaria and abroad.
- Synthesis and comparative analysis of data - analysing the logical connections between the considered factors and the separate aspects of the football camps.
- Graphic presentation of the information

### *Product history*

The idea of this type of product arises naturally. Most big clubs from Western Europe hold annual events, castings, trials with a selection character, the purpose of which is to gather children playing football from the region in one place (Fulham, n.d.) (Wolverhampton Wanderers, n.d.).

The most talented are selected and invited to join the club’s youth academy. We can positively assume that the castings or trials that

the clubs carry out annually in their academies are the primary source for the creation of the camps as a product. It is likely that the initial goal of football camps is to select players - a casting that takes place outside the club’s training ground.

With the growing popularity of football around the world, globalization and the emergence of social networks, big clubs are beginning to look for ways to establish their brands in strategic locations outside the country and the region they represent. All this contributes to turning camps into sports events that have sports and technical purposes, as well as purely commercial ones. Clubs such as Real Madrid and Manchester United were pioneers in entering other key markets such as Asia and North America. This example, of course, was quickly followed by other major European clubs (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010.) .

### *Significance of the camps*

Positioning a football club in a new market often means opening an academy where local children can train. The goals are again players selection, brand promotion of the respective club, as well as financial income. This type of academies is often opened in partnership with a local organization that aims to develop the brand on the local market (Jie, 2018) .

Starting an academy is a complex process that requires finding a reliable partner, large investment, and good management - factors that are not always present in the beginning. In this regard, some clubs often make a preliminary study of the market in which they want to open an academy by implementing a smaller project – a training camp. The public interest in the camps provides the club with information on whether the market has the potential for an academy. European clubs such as Barcelona, Liverpool and Arsenal have long history in sending coaches to work in their summer

camps in the US, and over time some have opened year-round US academies aimed at finding new talents while expanding the number of their fans and revenue opportunities in the United States. (USA Today, 2014)

### ***Development of the camps***

As already noted, globalization, commercialization and social networks are contributing to the growing popularity of football and clubs worldwide. This leads to more and more fans (children and adults) wanting to interact with their favourite teams in some way. Based on the interview with the representatives of “Future Through Sport” association, we can conclude that camps are a product that provides this opportunity. Participants receive club equipment, which contributes to the association with the club and the brand (Inter Academy Camp Bulgaria, 2021). For most participants, the opportunity to get in touch with big club employees and to practice with their coaches is an experience that leaves an emotional mark over the years and some of them become club fans, especially children aged between 10 and 12 who have not established any club affiliation yet.

All major European clubs hold events of this type throughout the year in different parts of Europe and the rest of the world. There are platforms such as Soccer Camps International, in which some of the leading clubs from England, Spain, Italy and France announce their upcoming camps for the year (Soccer Camps International, 2021).

### ***Main characteristics***

#### ***1. Goals***

##### ***1) Players' selection***

The initial goal of football camps is probably to select players. Camps are a relatively new product and with its specifics it is becoming more and more attractive for young football players. Due to the good organization

camps can gather a lot of talented youth footballers in one place.

##### ***2) Promotion of the brand***

Camps are a tool which clubs use to present their philosophy and working methods in different parts of the world without investing as much money and efforts as they would in case they open an academy (USA Today, 2014).

At the same time, such a product may not be associated with a particular football club, but on the contrary - different coaches from different academies may be included in different editions of a project of this kind, created by a private organization (Stages Football Bosquier, 2021).

##### ***3) Financial profit***

Camps are also a means to generate income. This can be achieved in several ways. From the interview with the representatives of “Future Through Sport” association we found out that the most common option for big clubs in Europe is finding a local partner who buys the rights for the organization of the event including the presence of clubs coaches responsible for the training process. The local partner generates revenue from participation fees, advertising, sponsors and partners. This option would be more appropriate when organizing a camp in a foreign country, where the club does not have sufficient knowledge of the local market, its regulations and specifics, and where the help of a local partner would prevent some difficulties and would save time.

Another option for the club is to organize the event independently, thus being able to fully control the revenues and costs, i.e., to determine the participation price itself on the basis of the costs it deems necessary. This option is probably more appropriate when organizing a camp locally, where market conditions are well known.

When it comes to organizing a private camp, that is not a product of a football club, revenue can be generated from participation fees, advertisements, sponsors, and partners. Some income can be also generated by charging other football academies directors, football agents and scouts an entrance fee for the opportunity to observe, evaluate and select a large number of players in a short period of time.

## **2. Subjects**

### *1) Promoters*

The promoters of the camps are usually two entities - the club providing the product and the local partner, which take over the organization of the event. In case the event is a private project, which is not carried out under the brand of a big football club, then the subject is only the company that implements the project (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021) (Inter Academy Camp Bulgaria, 2021).

### *2) Partners*

Training centre - the first and main partner of the event is the organization that provides the training centre where the camp will be held.

Each edition of the Inter Academy Camp event is held at the sports centre of the town of Byala, Byala municipality, Varna district. (Inter Academy Camp Bulgaria, 2021) From this fact we can conclude about the well-established partnership between the two sides. At the same time, many of the editions of Milan Junior Camp have been realized in different locations - Sofia, Dryanovo, Byala (Varna region), Panagyurishte, Nessebar. (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021) This strategy in turn helps to promote the event in more places.

Without the training centre providing the training grounds, the event cannot take place. Of course, the centre can be owned by the event organizer, which would facilitate the organization.

Accommodation - on the basis of the collected information it becomes clear that the camps gather participants from different areas and regions at one place, therefore some organization of their accommodation is needed. Good hotel accommodation and nutrition stand out as some of the main factors for participants' satisfaction. This element of the organization is essential for the parents, who are the main sources of income for the event because of the participation fee they pay.

Other partners - all other organizations that in some way contribute to the better organization and image of the event.

- i. Companies that are official sponsors of the club.
- ii. Companies that want to connect with the main brand of the event.
- iii. Municipalities, local companies and organizations.

## **3. Objects**

1) Participants – they are the main target group. The more participants, the higher revenue - a foundation for the development and faster project validation. Participants' satisfaction will almost certainly generate the interest of other children.

2) Parents – parents' attitude also influences organizers. A study shows that they are the main source of income, as they pay the participation fee for their children (Inter Academy Camp Bulgaria, 2021). Their satisfaction and impressions of the camp, through personal observation and feedback from the child is very likely to be connected to the retention rate in the event.

## **4. Key elements**

According to "Future Through Sport" association representatives, organizers of four events of this format, in order to satisfy the participants and the parents, the camp needs to

meet several requirements:

- Good and adequate training program. The football part, which in this case is expressed in the training program, is one of the main elements of the event. It is a leading reason for the participation for most of the children and in this regard, it is necessary to be at a high level and adequately placed, according to the age and football level of the participants. Parents are very likely to expect a high level of practice which will improve their children's football skills.
- Organizational elements - good organization in terms of logistics, equipment, tools and consumables are important for the satisfaction of participants and parents.
- Cultural and entertainment program - this program is part of the event organization. Due to the fact that the participants are children, various entertaining elements should be added to create additional positive emotions, which are supposed to be appreciated by parents.
- Location - In case the location is different from the club training centre, then its importance becomes essential for the success of the camp. The choice of location should be well considered and the decision made after the necessary research and analysis. Key factors in choosing a location turn out to be:
  - Available training ground covering the sports and technical needs of the camp. The study shows that the camp should be large enough so that 75-80 children can train there. This number can vary, depending largely on the age of the participants. Younger children need less training space compared to older ones.
  - Sufficient and well-arranged accommodation - the camp nature of the event

determines the need for decent hotel accommodation.

- Resort conditions and environment - given the age of the participants and the camp nature of the event, there is a preference for a resort-type location. The participants should be provided with a suitable atmosphere throughout their stay.
- Location near a big city - the proximity of a big city provides prerequisites for reaching the required number of participants. Larger cities have more children and usually more and bigger football academies who are potential users of the service.

### *Camps in Bulgaria*

The first camp with a large foreign football club, Milan Junior Camp was organized in Bulgaria in 2011. The organizers were Dominant Sport Group Ltd., which is a partner of the Italian football club AC Milan in organizing the event. The camp was held in Sofia, from August 29 to September 3 and brought together nearly 130 children. Every participant received club equipment, which consisted of two sets of T-shirts, pants and socks, a ball and a backpack. The whole event consisted of 10 training sessions led by coaches from Italy. (Mechikyan, 2011) (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021)

The event provided an opportunity for three children, selected by the Italian coaching staff, to go for 2 days to the AC Milan training centre in Italy, where they trained on an equal footing with all selected children from the club's camps outside Italy. This opportunity was also one of the main marketing points in positioning the event in front of the target audience.

Despite the successful implementation, four years passed before the next event was

held. In 2015 Dominant Sport Group organized the second edition of Milan Junior Camp in Bulgaria. (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021)

From the beginning of June 2015 to the end of August 2019, there was a clear expansion of football camps in Bulgaria. During this period, 15 football camps were held in the country, in which 1583 children took part. Fundamentally,

these camps were a franchise product of famous football clubs from Western Europe, i.e., there is always a contract between a club and an organization in the country that implements the event. In Bulgaria, those of the biggest Italian clubs predominate. For the period under review, besides AC Milan camps, events were held with the football clubs FC Barcelona, Juventus FC and FC Inter.

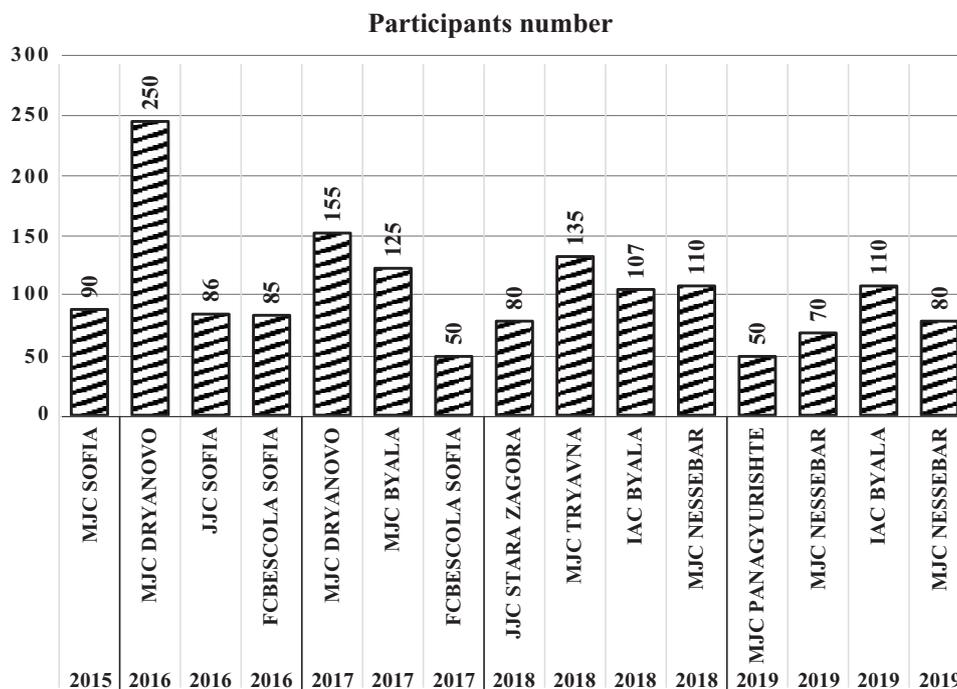


Figure 1. Camps organized in partnership with European clubs in Bulgaria 2015 - 2019

In analysing Figure 1, we can conclude the following:

There was an increase in the average number of events per year - in 2015 there was only one camp, in 2016 and 2017 three, and in 2018 and 2019 four.

The most developed project was the one in partnership with AC Milan with nine events in the period 2015-2019 and 1065 children participated (an average of 118 participants per event) (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021) Figure 2.

The second most successful project was the one in partnership with FC Inter, which brought together over 105 children in two consecutive years. (Gong.bg, 2019) (Topsport.bg, 2018)

Juventus Junior Camp had two editions, which were organized in 2016 and 2018. The first edition took place in Sofia and brought together 86 children. (Sportal.bg, 2016) The second edition was held in Stara Zagora and 80 children participated in it. (Tenev, 2018).

The weakest project was the one in partnership with FC Barcelona, with only two realized camps, a total of 135 children, an average of 67.5 children and no events for the last two years of the period under review. (blitz.bg/, 2016)

On an annual basis, the number of realized events grew, but the number of participants declined.

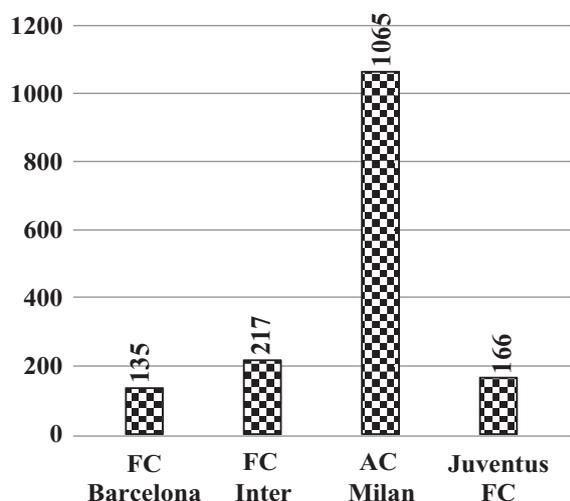


Figure 2. Number of participants per club

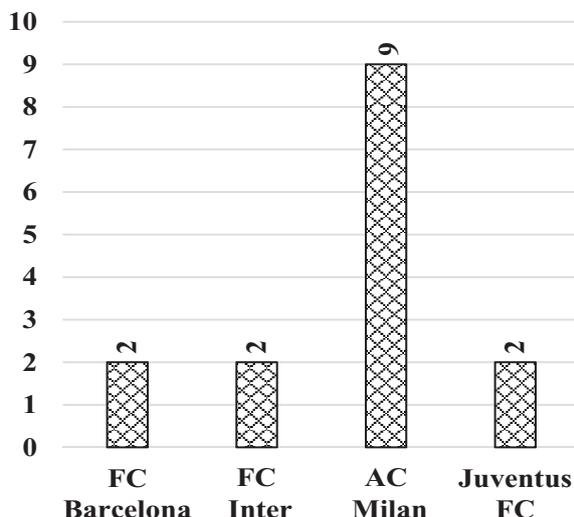


Figure 3. Number of events for the period 2015-2019

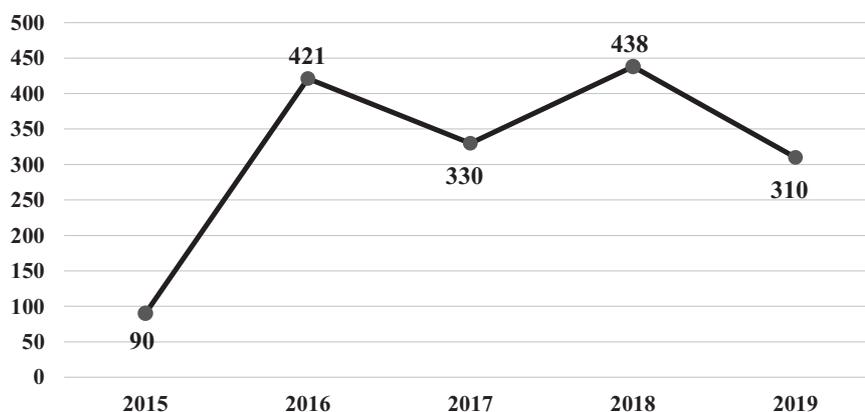


Figure 4. Participants per year

**POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SIDES**

One of the positive sides we can point out is the strong brands of the clubs, which attract the interest of the media and their audience. All clubs that have realized this type of event in Bulgaria are some of the world’s biggest clubs that have a large number of fans in the country. As noted above, parents also have the opportunity to get in touch with their favourite club in some way, show their club affiliation, and at the same time experience positive emotions through the participation of their child.

Another good aspect of the camps is the positive emotion they leave in the participants. Foreign coaches aim to convey an extremely positive spirit to the children by creating positive emotions and memories which in turn is

a means of creating new fans. The lack of tension also contributes to this, as the event has no competitive element. The short duration of the camp does not leave much time for negative emotions. Participants have the opportunity to feel the atmosphere and magic of some of the most successful clubs in the world, meet many of their peers and make new friends.

To all this, it can be added that there are no football and technical requirements for the participants. All boys and girls aged, in most cases, between 5 and 17 years old can take part in the event. This condition expands the range of the target group of potential participants.

As already mentioned, the main goals of the camps are selection of players, promotion of the brand, as well as financial gain. And

while the camps that are realized in the region of the club are of a selective nature, the camps in other countries definitely have the task of promoting and establishing the brand of the respective club. FIFA and UEFA regulations banning transfers of foreign players under the age of 16 also contribute to this. (FIFA, 2021)

This of course is a disadvantage for the organizers in Bulgaria, as some parents and participants expect the participation in the camp to be a step towards their child's transfer to the respective club. This could hardly be done due to the aforementioned regulations of the football headquarters. According to FIFA regulations, a player has an option for such a transfer providing he/she moves to the respective country and city, together with one of his/her parents, if he/she is over the age of 12, or with both parents, if he/she is under the age of 12. (FIFA, 2021)

This is one of the reasons when it comes to the selection of players under 16 years of age, football clubs focus almost entirely on players from the region and country due to the lower costs, as well as the lack of a language barrier that they would have with foreigners.

Participation fee is another debatable topic. It is often between BGN 700.00 and BGN 800.00 with accommodation and nutrition included, which is more than the minimum monthly salary in the country. (Milan Academy Junior Camp, 2021) (Inter Academy Camp Bulgaria, 2021)

### PROSPECTS IN DEVELOPMENT

The camps have a rather uncertain future in Bulgaria. The high price for the Bulgarian standard implies high expectations from the parents. At the same time, one of the main problems of the camps is that they do not undergo change and development over time, and each year the service and program provided is very similar. These are also some of the smallest projects of European grands and they are re-

luctant to invest huge resources, especially on small markets like Bulgaria. All this predetermines at some point the creation of a discrepancy between the service offered and the expectations of users (parents). Parents will expect more involvement from the clubs, both in terms of football and technical part - a higher quality of the training process will be expected and further development of some of the participants. However, higher engagement will be difficult to achieve given the reasons already mentioned - FIFA regulations for young players transfers, the small Bulgarian market, the lack of football and technical criteria for participation, which predetermines large differences in the level of participants leading to a lower level of training. Another factor is that the camps, compared to the other activities of the big clubs, are one of the smallest areas, which predetermines the not so high commitment of the club.

Another alternative could be considered, where the camps get the status of a grassroots event, aimed at promoting and engaging the younger ones into the game. In this case, the audience and consumers will change from those with high football and technical expectations to those with expectations for more positive emotions. In this case, the average age of the participants should also decrease, as for older children the high football and technical level is of primary importance.

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