



Sociological Briefing

Why becoming a football star can be a mirage in El Valle del Chota (Ecuador)

Research on sport includes the analysis of social problems related to its professional practice and the social meaning of physical activity, among other topics. The sociological studies in this field incorporate the role of cultural minorities and vulnerable groups in sports. This sociological briefing focuses on the case of the over-representation of Afro-descendant soccer players in Ecuador researched by Escobar-Jiménez and Palacios-Ocles. This case illustrates that the practice of sport is related to professionalization and social mobility, but also shows that the real chances of becoming a soccer star can be a mirage for vulnerable or discriminated cultural groups in regions such as El Valle del Chota in Ecuador.

The authors of “Sobrerrepresentación de afrodescendientes del Chota en el fútbol profesional ecuatoriano” published in *Estudios Sociológicos* highlight that the promise of soccer leads to contradictions of seeing as the average the exceptions of successful players. This situation implies a mirage that, added to structural problems in the region of El Valle del Chota, can contribute to making decisions without considering all the factors influencing the potential success in soccer.

Race and racism behind the problem

The authors briefly explain the underlying concepts of race and racism that are useful to understand and analyze the social reality of the region “El Valle del Chota”. They explain the situation after the European expansion in Ecuador and the colonial period, in which the African slaves arrived at El Valle del Chota. After the arrival, different historical moments were affecting this population, all of them featuring discrimination and exclusion. The abolition of slavery was declared in 1964, although the lack of rights affecting this community continued. Later, the role of women contributed to transforming some aspects of the region and soccer emerged as an economic possibility for people from cultural minorities.

Sociological perspectives to understand the sport and social mobility

The contributions of the Sociology of Sport allow the comprehension and analysis of the social dimensions imbricated in the practice of sport, both at the professional and non-professional levels. In the case presented in the article, the authors pay special attention to the intersection between race, class, and soccer. In this vein, the Afro-descendant soccer players in the analyzed region are influenced by upward social

mobility. The potential of social mobility becomes a crucial aspect affecting the life experiences of young people belonging to this community. The authors raise the question of how migrants and minoritized people are integrated into the national representation and soccer selections.

Evolution of soccer in Ecuador, related social aspects, and the situation in El Valle del Chota

The authors contextualize the evolution of soccer in Ecuador, including the concept of “biotipo” which is linked to the velocity, strength resistance, and flexibility of black people. Moreover, the authors approached aspects such as professionalism and working conditions of minoritized people. One of the important dimensions to be considered in the case of Ecuador is the evolution of Afro-descendant soccer players, which has been increasing in recent years. The authors have implemented interviews to include the voices of football players in the research results, going in-depth into aspects such as the discourses and soccer representations, or soccer as a problem in El Valle del Chota. In this region, it is relevant to mention that

soccer becomes social and economic mobility only on very few occasions. However, the authors include results showing the expectations of young people in the region to become successful soccer players.

The authors finalize their contribution by explaining that soccer is an opportunity for social mobility in El Valle del Chota but it reproduces the body stigma of young Afro-Ecuadorian men. The “biotipo”, the institutional factors of soccer, and the internationalization cannot be ignored in the analysis of the situation in the region. It is crucial to remind that there are several factors influencing the successful cases of soccer players. Most professionals have low salaries and the reality is that there are very low chances to achieve success. Sociologists can contribute to the comprehension of why becoming a soccer star is still perceived as a real possibility for minoritized people when the data shows that the most probably is to fail in this attempt.