

## POLICY BRIEF — NATIONAL LEVEL

FOR NATIONAL SPORT & EDUCATION POLICYMAKERS (CROATIA & SPAIN)

# Building Mental Health into National Youth Sport Systems

*MindFit — Tackle Your Thoughts · Project 101181079 — ERASMUS-SPORT-2024-SSCP (Small-scale Partnerships in the Field of Sport)*

## Key messages

- Depressive symptoms among young athletes are common and rise sharply in adolescence. National data show distinct profiles: in Croatia 7.8% of young athletes report severe symptoms (over five times the Spanish rate), while in Spain over 80% report at least mild symptoms.
- Clubs and NGOs largely lack tools, screening and referral pathways to support young athletes' mental health — and the coaches working with them receive no systematic preparation.
- A short, structured preventive programme works: MindFit raised sports professionals' stress-management capacity from 3% to 55% in one week, and equipped 30 trainers to deliver mental-health support across 6 clubs and NGOs to 90 young athletes.
- National authorities can lock in these gains by embedding mental-health training into coach education and licensing, and by funding screening and referral in clubs.

## The national picture

The MindFit Gap Analysis surveyed 501 adolescents aged 10–18 (300 in Croatia, 201 in Spain). The two countries show clearly different profiles, with direct implications for national policy.

In Croatia, 59.2% of young athletes showed no significant depressive symptoms, but 7.8% reported severe symptoms — the highest severe-symptom rate in the study, and likely understated given the stigma that discourages reporting of milder difficulties. In Spain, the burden is broader: only 17.5% were symptom-free, while 34% reported mild and 47% moderate symptoms. In both countries symptoms intensify from age 13 onward.

The clear policy implication is that each country needs a tailored response: Croatia should prioritise early detection of severe cases and stigma reduction, while Spain should prioritise broad, preventive support for the large group with mild-to-moderate symptoms.

## The gap on the ground

Sports clubs and NGOs — where young athletes spend much of their time — generally have no structured way to recognise or respond to mental-health difficulties. Coaches, the adults closest to young athletes, receive little or no preparation for this role despite facing significant stress themselves.

MindFit addressed this directly: it trained 30 trainers from Croatia and Spain through an intensive course in Split and implemented a sixteen-module programme across 6 clubs and NGOs, reaching 90 athletes aged 14–18.

## Proven results from a short intervention

Pre- and post-training measurement of 98 sports professionals showed that even a one-week programme produces large gains:

- Stress management capacity at a high level rose from 3.1% to 55.0%; the mean rose from 1.99 to 3.23 (out of 5).
- Early detection of physical anxiety signs (interoception) rose from about 1% to nearly 40%.
- Frequent use of emotional-regulation techniques rose from 3.1% to 56.1%.
- Perception of a psychologically safe team environment rose from 2% to 56%.

A practical Good Practices report gives clubs ready-to-use techniques across three phases — preparation, in-game intervention and post-game recovery — that require no specialist staff to begin applying.

## Recommendations for national authorities

1. Integrate a mental-health literacy module into national coach education and licensing, so every accredited coach can recognise warning signs and respond appropriately.
2. Fund clubs and NGOs to introduce simple screening and clear referral pathways to professional support, building on validated tools used in the Gap Analysis.
3. Prioritise the 13–18 age group, where symptoms intensify, through school–club partnerships and targeted programmes.
4. Tailor the national response: in Croatia, focus on detecting severe cases and reducing stigma; in Spain, focus on broad preventive support for mild-to-moderate symptoms.
5. Provide sustainable funding so clubs and NGOs can keep delivering the programme after the project ends, with periodic review of results.

**MindFit shows that a short, low-cost programme delivered through ordinary clubs and coaches produces large, measurable improvements. Embedding it in national coach education and club practice would give every young athlete access to the mental-health support they need.**

### Evidence base

- MindFit Gap Analysis (2025) — 501 adolescents, Croatia & Spain
- Benefits of the MindFit Training Programme — pre/post study, 98 sports professionals
- Good Practices in the Sporting World — psychologists' best-practice report

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