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## **Football manager is not just a video game**

You have probably heard a word about Football Manager. Yes, this is a world-renowned video game. It is unlike FIFA – Football Manager helps you to dive into the managerial dimension of football: money, contacts, negotiations and constant headaches.

In the game, you are the engine, the key figure, the star – in real life, however, the situation differs.

Summer 2020 transfer window. The case is: Borussia Dortmund youngster Jadon Sancho is being linked to a Manchester United move. United wants to sign Sancho and is reported to be ready to offer whopping €98 million. Dortmund has its demands – €120 million and the deal to be done by the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, the day Borussia's side start the pre-season preparation.

It is that simple. €120 million and the deal to be done by the 10<sup>th</sup> of August. Nothing happens though.

He stays at the club, plays well and is the team's leader. In spite of everything, the press is buzzing till the very end of the transfer window in October, but no one in the club is under pressure.

So many Dortmund fans all around the world thank Sancho for staying for another term, but the truth is: first of all, they have to thank someone else – the sporting director of BVB Michael Zorc.

Initially it was his decision to impose the crystal clear demands, though the dilemma has been dizzy indeed. On one hand, you are about to gain a pot of gold and buy some new highly qualified, more experienced and ready-to-make-difference players. On the other hand, he is the team's chief, assist-king and you can earn even more money if he stays.

Headaches, dilemmas, alternatives, plan B – this is what football managers face every single day.

Like every other job, football management is not easy. Today you watch a film in your bedroom with your wife & kids, tomorrow you fly to Indonesia to find new talents for the youth teams, the day after you have a press-conference back in your city. The heavy schedule requires maximum concentration and efficiency.

But why do clubs need to have managers that occupy various positions?

Imagine you are a supporter of the Ukrainian third-tier Podillya Khmelnytskyi. The team's performance is not bad, they fight for promotion. At the very end of the season, however, they stay at the same league, half of the players go, the budget is cut and "Shit, here we go again!"

When everything seems to be good on the pitch, when the blue collars battle to win, white collars **must** develop a strategy on how to earn money from each 3 points they earn. Football players are allowed to relax after the match, to have a bottle of beer and go to the sauna – managers aren't. All the fame goes to the one who scored the winning goal, to the goalkeeper that saved a penalty or even to the coach who made a crucial substitution. They do not know you, you do not figure as the club's key individual, but they just do not understand that the one who scored the winning goal, the goalkeeper that saved a penalty and even the coach who made that crucial substitution – they were all chosen by you, you invited them to the club.

Have you heard something about Podillya Khmelnytskyi?

Probably, not.

Although this tiny club has never played in the Ukrainian Premier League and its budget is always limited, the fan-base of Podillya is uncustomary big. The question is: why?

First and foremost, the players of the club are the local young prospects, the boys that started playing football there and chasing the dream, trying to grab the chance to play professionally for their home club. The philosophy of the club appeals to the locals, so they grab a couple of buddies, buy a bottle of Pepsi and a packet of sunflower seeds and support their family member or a friend. This is, probably, the common story for many towns & cities all around the world, but Khmelnytskyi is being special on that occasion.

The population of Khmelnytskyi is about 270.000 citizens, it is definitely not a "football capital" and the residents of the city have not witnessed the top-club football live for many-many years. The club was comparatively good at the beginning of the XXI century, but then all of a sudden disappeared from the football map of Ukraine. Then some officials decided to reorganize it - even a couple of times, but these attempts were just in order to get more votes at the election. In 2016, the club was finally back with new management and coaching stuff.

July, 2016. The club is about to play its first home match in many years under the name "Podillya" in front of the home audience. No "stars" in the line-up, just with young players, whose average age is 18,5 years. What would you expect to see at the stands? 4700 supporters were there that day - I repeat, 4700. Due to the war, that was and is being held in Donetsk and Luhansk region, people stopped attending stadiums in the

whole country, because there were things more important than football, but in Khmelnytskyi almost five thousand locals were shouting as loud as they could after the 2:0 win. The team made the city shine, it helped to forget about the war "for a minute" and to experience the sweet sense of victory, everybody was waiting for a couple of years.

Can you guess what happened at the next home match? 6300 supporters. 6300! Only one match had more in the whole country - match of the most popular Ukrainian team and Champions League participant Dynamo Kyiv. Although Podillya lost the second home game and finished its first season almost at the bottom of the league, club's fans helped those young players feel they are professionals, feel that they were massively supported.

Podillya Khmelnytskyi is not a bad club. I used to play for it professionally. When the new coach came, he didn't see me in a squad, so we terminated the contract. Lots of my friends play there, I know the coaching staff, the president. They are all good people. But I feel sorry for them.

Never have I ever imagined I would say this words.

After my "eventful" 8-month football career I started learning journalism and football management. The knowledge I gained does not give me an opportunity to sleep calmly. Every time I see my friends I barely hold back to say, that they have not lived through the genuine emotions of a real professional football player.

Khmelnytskyi is a city with one of the best fan-bases in the Ukrainian West. There we have passionate supporters that love their local team, they deliver breathtaking performances, know each and every player of the team and are always ready to pay for the show – unfortunately, they pay just to watch football. Nowadays it is not enough.

Such fans do deserve a well-organized matchday with dozen of activities, food courts, children zones, etc. Although it is a brilliant opportunity both for the supporters to feel they are a part of something big – a club full of love and respect to its fans, and for the club itself to earn money, the so-called football "doers" just do not want to give their own fans some warm emotions, they deprive them of an opportunity to be a part of the united society and **it hurts**.

It is not a cry from the heart. It is simply what football turned into nowadays. The managers of big clubs often stay behind the scenes because of many reasons, but they definitely know what they are responsible for – not just earning money for their families, but also helping the people, the community they live in, to unite. What unites better than sport?

Probably, nothing.

I have been waiting for this part to write. Football managers are, above all, responsible for their football players. From inviting them to the team to giving them all the needed facilities and conditions. If a footballer has a problem with his girlfriend the day before the crucial match, you definitely have to send a bouquet of flowers with a love letter on his behalf. And that is not heroism. That is just the correct decision to help a football player to concentrate on football exclusively.

You even help them to become famous, to become stars – you organize interviews, photo-sessions, you put them on the billboards, press, social media – everywhere. And that is not sacrifice. That is just the correct decision to develop the club's attitude to the city, to the journalists and to the fans.

Being a football manager is not easy. It seems you do everything for everyone, but you are still behind the scenes. So is the football. Football is not about players on the pitch and coaches somewhere on the left. Football is a manager, football is that guy who is responsible for laundry, football is gardener, the cute woman making a breakfast for you. Football is you.

And now you have probably heard a word about football manager. No, this is not just a world-renowned video game.