



The Role of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event in Increasing Interest in Women's Soccer in Semarang City

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Abstract

Girls' soccer in Indonesia still faces various challenges, such as gender stereotypes, limited facilities, and limited opportunities for competition. Therefore, organizing sports events specifically for girls' soccer is an important strategy in fostering interest and participation in girls from an early age. This study aims to describe the role of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event in increasing interest in girls' soccer in Semarang City. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. The research subjects consisted of participants, parents of participants, coaches, and organizers of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event, selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data collection techniques included participant observation, in depth interviews, and documentation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through data reduction, coding, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event served as a medium for introducing women's soccer, a source of motivation to play, and a means of building positive experiences and confidence in participants. Organizing factors such as an age based competition system, a variety of activities, and environmental support contributed to strengthening participants' interest in soccer. This study concluded that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event served not only as a competition but also as a strategic tool in increasing interest in women's soccer in Semarang City.

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

Football is one of the most popular team sports in the world and has become an important part of the social, cultural, and identity life of many communities in various countries (Batubara & Lubis, 2023). Football's popularity is reflected not only in the high number of participants and spectators, but also in its role as a means of fostering social values such as cooperation, sportsmanship, discipline, and solidarity (Zebari et al., 2021). In recent decades, football has also undergone a transformation in function, no longer viewed solely as a physical activity or entertainment, but rather as an instrument of social transformation capable of encouraging the empowerment and character development of children, including girls (Mainer-Pardos et al., 2025). Through involvement in football, girls have the potential to gain physical, psychological, and social benefits that contribute to their overall development (Andriyanti & Kurniawan, 2024).

Despite this, the development of girls' soccer, particularly at an early age, still faces various challenges in many developing countries, including Indonesia. Girls' participation in early age soccer tends to be lower than that of boys (Valenti et al., 2021). This is reflected in the limited number of girls' soccer teams at the elementary school level, the lack of early childhood development programs specifically aimed at girls, and the low level of female involvement in soccer competitions at the elementary level. This inequality indicates that girls' access to and opportunities to participate in soccer are not yet fully equal (Salistri et al., 2024).

These facts indicate that although soccer is essentially universal, there are specific challenges that affect girls' participation from an early age. These challenges are multidimensional and encompass social, cultural, and structural aspects (Valentino & Iskandar, 2020). Within the sociocultural framework, gender stereotypes remain a major barrier, with soccer often associated with masculinity, physical strength, and male roles (Shiakou et al., 2026). These perceptions then shape social norms that view soccer as a sport less suitable for girls, thus indirectly limiting girls' freedom of movement and sporting choices (Damanik et al., 2025). Recent research has shown that gender stereotypes and social pressure from the surrounding environment play a significant role in reducing girls' interest and continued participation in sports, particularly male dominated team sports like soccer (Guidotti et al., 2025).

In addition to socio cultural factors, structural barriers also contribute to low participation in early childhood girls' soccer (Doewes & Nuryadin, 2022). Limited female friendly training facilities, a lack of coaches competent in girls' soccer, and limited competitions or events specifically designed for girls are factors frequently encountered at the local level (Harkness-Armstrong et al., 2025). Barriers to girls' sports participation stem not only from external factors such as access to facilities and competitions, but also from internal factors, including self perception, self confidence, motivation, and fear of social stigma (Mufarichah et al., 2024). This combination of factors can have long term impacts on girls' involvement in sports and limit their opportunities to develop as athletes.

Low participation in sports by girls has broad implications, not only for athletic performance but also for physical health, motor skill development, psychological well being, and self identity formation (Vega et al., 2025). Numerous studies have shown that active participation in sports from an early age contributes to improved physical fitness, emotional control, self confidence, and social skills (Nishizawa et al., 2023). In the context of soccer, this team sport provides a space for girls to learn to work together, communicate effectively, and build positive social relationships with peers. Therefore, girls' limited access to soccer has the potential to widen gender gaps in sports and public health.

As global awareness of the importance of gender equality in sports grows, efforts are underway to encourage girls' participation, particularly at an early age. Gender equality in sports is no longer viewed solely as a normative issue, but also as a crucial strategy for human development, public health, and social empowerment (Elmas & Aşçi, 2022). Several studies emphasize that sports based interventions designed in an inclusive and gender sensitive manner can positively impact the sustainability of girls' sports participation (Ramadhana et al., 2025). One intervention deemed effective is organizing sports events specifically for girls at the elementary level.

Sporting events specifically designed for girls play a strategic role as a means of introducing them to sport, fostering positive experiences, and strengthening intrinsic motivation for continued participation (Zeng & He, 2024). These events serve not only as competitive venues but also as safe, enjoyable, and supportive social spaces

for girls to express themselves through sport. Research on sporting programs and events shows that activities that are structured, participant oriented, and involve support from social environments such as parents, schools, and coaches tend to be more successful in increasing interest and sustained sporting participation among young girls (Millah & Pratama, 2025).

In the Indonesian context, one concrete effort in line with this approach is the MilkLife Soccer Challenge. This event is a youth soccer competition designed specifically for girls and is held in a structured manner in various cities, including Semarang. The MilkLife Soccer Challenge not only features soccer matches but also integrates various supporting activities, such as skill challenges and the Seneng Soccer festival for young children. This child friendly and inclusive event design aims to create a positive, enjoyable soccer playing experience free from social pressures that often hinder girls (Akbar & Cahyani, 2022).

Semarang City is an interesting context for study because the MilkLife Soccer Challenge event in this region shows a trend of increasing participant numbers from year to year. Based on the researchers' initial observations of several series of events, there has been a consistent increase in girls' participation in this competition. This phenomenon indicates growing enthusiasm for girls' soccer at the early age level, both from the participants, schools, and parental support. This increased participation also reflects a shift in local social perceptions regarding girls' involvement in soccer (Sutresna et al., 2025). In addition to quantitative data on participant numbers, initial observations at the event location revealed a positive social dynamic throughout the event. Participants enthusiastically participated in the series of activities, both before and during the match, and actively participated in training and coaching. Support from parents and guardians was also significant, both in the form of direct attendance on the field and providing motivation to the children. From an organizational perspective, the facilities and infrastructure used were deemed adequate and met the standards for youth soccer events, thus ensuring participant comfort and safety throughout the event.

These initial observational findings indicate that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event serves not only as a competitive arena but also has the potential to be a means of fostering and stimulating girls' interest in soccer on an ongoing basis. Through positive playing experiences, social interactions with peers, and support from

the surrounding environment, this event has the potential to strengthen girls' motivation to continue participating in soccer (Rosa et al., 2024). However, despite empirical evidence of this phenomenon in the field, scientific studies specifically analyzing the role of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event in increasing interest in soccer for girls at an early age are still very limited.

Most previous research has focused on women's sports participation in general or structural and social barriers such as patriarchal norms and lack of facilities in Indonesia (Daulay et al., 2025). Therefore, specific studies on how sporting events like the MilkLife Soccer Challenge shape positive experiences, long term interest, and shift social perceptions towards women's soccer are still rare, especially in the local context of Semarang. These limitations indicate a research gap that needs to be filled for a comprehensive understanding of the role of events in the development of women's football, where the qualitative approach in this study analyzes the experiences of participants, the factors of organization, and the responses that shape the motivation to play. This study aims to describe the role of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge event in increasing interest in women's soccer, understand the experiences and responses of participants, and identify the organizing factors that influence this interest. The results are expected to contribute to the literature on women's sports and provide practical implications for organizers, coaches, schools, and policymakers in designing sustainable, inclusive programs for Indonesian girls.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the role of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event in increasing interest in women's soccer in Semarang City. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain an in depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and views of informants on the phenomenon under study (Prayogi & Kurniawan, 2024). Research informants were determined using purposive sampling, considering direct involvement in the implementation and participation of the event (Wijaya et al., 2025). The number of informants in this study was 10 people, consisting of participants, parents of participants, coaches, and organizers of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event.

Data collection was conducted through in depth interviews using a semi-structured in-

interview guide (Fadila et al., 2025). This aimed to explore experiences participating in the event, perceptions of the implementation of the activity, and the event's impact on women's interest in playing soccer. Supporting data was obtained through documentation related to the event implementation. All interview data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved coding the data, grouping the codes into subthemes, and extracting the main themes that represented the patterns of meaning across the data. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from participants, parents, coaches, and event organizers. Furthermore, researchers double checked the data and analysis results to ensure consistency and reduce potential bias in the interpretation of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results were obtained through thematic analysis of in-depth interview data with participants, parents, coaches, and organizers of the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event. Data analysis resulted in several main themes related to the role of the event, participants' experiences, and factors in event organization in increasing interest in women's soccer in Semarang City. A summary of the thematic analysis results is presented in **Table 1**, which lists the main themes, subthemes, and sources of informants that contributed to the formation of each theme. To facilitate data interpretation, this study uses informant codes, namely P (participants), PR (parents), C (coaches), and O (organizers).

Table 1. In depth Interview Results

Theme	Subtheme	Informant Source	Description
Event Role	Introduction media & motivation to play	P, PR, C, O	The event is a means of introducing girls' soccer to the world, increasing motivation to practice, and providing a space for girls to play and compete.
Participant Experience	Positive experience & confidence	P, PR, C	Participants felt joy, new experiences, increased self confidence, and courage during and after participating in the event.
Participant Response	Enthusiasm	P, C	Participants showed high enthusiasm and remained enthusiastic despite facing fatigue during the match.

Organizer Factors	Competition system, variety of activities, environmental support	PR, C, O	The age based competition system, variety of activities, and support from parents and schools strengthen the interest and sustainability of participant participation.
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Thematic analysis results indicate that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge event plays a strategic role as an initial platform for girls to learn about and become involved in soccer. The participants of the event said that ;

"when I was in third grade, my friends invited me" and "the one who invited me was directly from the coach," then they said "I was happy because I had many friends from other elementary schools." (Aruna, Shakila & Azalea, interview, January 24, 2026).

Interview data revealed that most participants first became interested in soccer through peer encouragement and introductions from coaches, which were then facilitated by the event. This demonstrates that the event serves not only as a competitive arena but also as a platform for promoting girls' soccer from an early age.

Furthermore, this event has been shown to increase participants' motivation to play and consistency in training. Coaches and parents observed behavioral changes, including increased enthusiasm for training, discipline, and a desire to continue participating in soccer after the event. These findings reinforce the belief that direct competition experience can foster long-term participation in the sport.

In terms of participant experience, research results indicate a predominance of positive experiences experienced by children during the event. Participants not only gained competitive experience but also the opportunity to interact with peers from outside their school and community. This experience contributed to increased self confidence and confidence in children demonstrating their abilities.

Based on research results, the MilkLife Soccer Challenge Event plays a significant role in increasing interest in girls' soccer in Semarang. This event serves as a medium for introducing girls' soccer through direct playing and competing experiences, providing intrinsic motivation for participants to continue developing. The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said that ;

"It's not easy to win consecutively. Actually, what I prioritize is experience, not victory. The children can play, can make many friends, can perform, that's extraordinary, the children have good potential, can

develop and can reach their current position" (Al-Thariq, interview, January 24, 2026).

Positive experiences in sports activities are known to have a strong relationship with children's ongoing sports engagement and participation (Fahdan & Pratama, 2025). Research data shows that this event not only brings participants together in formal competitions but also serves as a vehicle for girls to interact, develop technical skills, and build commitment to the sport of soccer.

The event also served as a source of motivation for participants to play. The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said that ;

"It really motivates the participants to practice diligently because without long preparation it will not give maximum results and in KU 10 the elementary school Klepu 03 team became champions consecutively so it makes them more enthusiastic about practicing" (Faqih, interview, January 24, 2026).

Interview findings indicated an increase in participants' training enthusiasm and discipline after the event, indicating that the competitive experience can foster continued engagement in sports activities. These results align with a systematic review that found positive self perception, enjoyable sports experiences, and social connections formed through sports are key factors influencing young women's motivation and commitment to sports participation (Yolanda, 2023). Therefore, inclusively structured and designed competitions can strengthen female participants' intrinsic motivation to continue training and competing.

The positive experiences and increased self confidence reported by participants indicate that sporting events have a psychological impact that supports the development of children's interest in soccer (Andrianto, 2024). Observations and interviews revealed that participants felt more confident, more confident in performing in front of peers, and were able to work effectively in teams. The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said that;

"I am very confident, I really feel it, especially as a class teacher, children who participate in soccer have increased self-confidence compared to children who do not participate in soccer, not meaning to compare but children who participate in soccer tournaments can mingle with many people, get to know new friends, maybe that is the factor that makes the level of self-confidence increase" (Ganjar, interview, January 24, 2026).

These findings are consistent with research showing that participation in team sports contributes to increased self confidence and social skills

in children and adolescents, ultimately encouraging continued sports engagement (Madaleno et al., 2022).

Organizing factors such as an age based competition system, a variety of activities, and environmental support from parents and schools contribute to strengthening participants' interest in soccer. The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said that ;

"The coaching was very good because this event was designed like a pyramid starting from KU 8, KU 10 to KU 12" (Al-Thariq, interview, January 24, 2026).

The age based competition system allows participants to compete against peers of relatively similar ability levels, creating a fair and enjoyable competitive experience (Asy'ary, 2023). Furthermore, a variety of activities, such as skill challenges and the Seneng Soccer Festival, provide relevant and engaging technical challenges, which can increase participant engagement while gradually building fundamental soccer skills.

Environmental support, particularly from parents and schools, is also a crucial factor in sustaining children's interest in soccer. The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said that ;

"Parents' support is extraordinary and it would never be like this, because the advantage of elementary school Klepu 03 is that the parents start from preparing the car to the children's equipment, which is prepared by the parents, we also have a community between parents." (Al-Thariq, interview, January 24, 2026).

The presence of parents and guardians during activities provides emotional support that increases participants' sense of security and motivation, while schools play a role in providing learning and practice spaces that support the development of sports skills. This type of social support has been identified in the sports literature as a crucial factor in strengthening children's commitment to continued physical activity and sport (Adi et al., 2025).

Thus, the MilkLife Soccer Challenge serves not only as a competition but also as a means to systematically foster interest in girls' soccer. A representative from the event organizer said,

"The event's role is excellent because currently, there are very few female soccer players in Indonesia. So, starting from the grassroots is very good and will then develop better players in the future for the benefit of our nation in the future." (Edi Mulyono, interview, January 18, 2026).

This event addresses the limited playing space and the lack of girls' soccer competitions, which have been major obstacles to the development of girls' soccer at the grassroots level.

Through a structured event, participants gain relevant competitive experience and training, both technically and psychologically, which in turn boosts their motivation and self confidence (Candra et al., 2025).

The coach of elementary school Klepu 03 said, *"First of all, even though the children were tired, they remained sportsmanlike, disciplined, and obedient to the coach's instructions. I admire the children of Klepu 03 because they truly respect the other team. Some of the students even made friends from outside this school."* (Faqih, interview, January 24, 2026).

The increased self confidence of participants after participating in the event indicates that competitive sports impact not only physical aspects but also psychological development in children, such as courage, discipline, and social skills. This finding aligns with the perspective of sport for development, which positions sport as a medium for character building and holistically developing children's potential (Smith et al., 2024). Participation in team sports, including soccer, has been shown to contribute to the emotional and social well being of children and adolescents, playing a crucial role in the formation of self identity and long term commitment to sport.

Event management factors, such as age-based competition systems and a variety of activities, contribute to a fun and stress free playing experience for participants. Designing activities that consider the developmental needs of early childhood encourages greater engagement and provides girls with the opportunity to explore their abilities without focusing solely on the outcome of the match. Environmental support, particularly from parents and schools, strengthens children's continued interest in soccer (Biahimo et al., 2025). Parents of event participants said that ;

"We always provide support in material and non-material forms" (Mei Sakdiyah, interview, January 24, 2026).

With both material and non material support from their environment, children feel more secure and are motivated to continue participating in sports activities.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge serves not only as a competition but also as a means of fostering interest and establishing an early women's soccer ecosystem in Semarang. The structured, participant focused, and positive social environment of the event has the potential to become a model for developing women's soccer at the grassroots level if implemented sustainably and involving various stakeholders.

However, there were several obstacles encountered during this research. Participants' responses to questions during the interview process tended to be brief and monotonous, so the information obtained did not fully meet the research needs. However, the answers given by parents and trainers were quite helpful. Some parents who responded appeared nervous when answering questions, which resulted in their responses being less structured and limited, and on several occasions even experiencing pauses or confusion before continuing their answers. In addition to the respondents' psychological factors, technical obstacles also affected the data collection process, namely the relatively remote interview location, which required more time and energy, and cloudy weather conditions with rain, which hampered mobility and affected comfort during the interview.

The limitations of this study's data lie in the limited number of respondents and the predominance of informants from a single school. Therefore, the findings are qualitative in nature and cannot be broadly generalized. The data obtained also primarily consist of subjective perceptions and experiences, without quantitative data on participant growth or interest growth statistics. Nevertheless, the overall findings indicate that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge plays a significant role in fostering and increasing interest in girls' soccer at the elementary school level.

CONCLUSION

The research results show that the MilkLife Soccer Challenge event played a significant role in increasing interest in girls' soccer in Semarang. Through hands on playing and competing experiences, this event effectively introduced girls' soccer, fostered intrinsic motivation for continued participation, and developed technical skills and positive social interactions. Participation also had a positive psychological impact, such as increasing self confidence, courage, discipline, and teamwork, thus supporting the physical development, character, and psychosocial well being of girls from an early age.

Aspects of the event's organization, such as the age based competition system, varied activities (skill challenges and the Seneng Soccer Festival), and adequate facilities, created a fun and low-pressure atmosphere. Support from parents and schools strengthened the early girls' soccer ecosystem. Overall, this event was not just a competition, but a model for fostering an inclusive and sustainable interest in girls' soccer develop-

ment. Therefore, similar events can be an effective strategy to facilitate girls' sports participation at the grassroots level and strengthen the foundation for inclusive girls' soccer development.

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