A PSYCHO-SOCIAL EXAMINATION OF THE DEVELOPING MASTERY PHASE WITHIN ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE FOOTBALL

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Declaration

Some of the work conducted has been published and / or presented at national and international conferences as listed below:

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Abstract

In recent years, the youth to senior transition in football has been considered something of a hot topic (Finn & Mckenna, 2010), particularly in England due to the lack of home-grown players becoming established first team football players in the English Premier League (EPL) clubs (Green, 200). However, the work of Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) suggested there is a longer, potentially more complex phase that exists beyond this transitional phase, labelled the 'developing mastery phase' due to it being a prolonged period in-between the developing phase and mastery phase of development (Bloom, 1985; van Rossum, 2001). The current applied thesis examines the development mastery phase within EPL football through a psycho-social perspective with a focus on talent development, transitions and identity (Erikson, 1968).

The use of a qualitative research design (semi-structured interviews, ethnography and longitudinal research) allowed the opportunity to capture perspectives, feelings, emotions and thoughts of coaches, players and other support staff over a more protracted period of time. Patton (2002) argues by carrying out qualitative enquiry, researches are better able to understand other people's points of view, experiences and perspectives without being constrained by the fixed focus of many quantitative methods.

Study One utilised semi-structured interviews with six Under21 English Premier League development coaches to explore the structures, roles, responsibilities and practices of coaches working within this phase of development. Results suggested that under21 development coaches were situated, culturally and sometimes physically, in-between the academy and first team environments, trapped between two distinct cultures. Under21 development coaches also have contrasting views and approaches with regards to the development of under21 players. Study Two adopted an ethnographic approach to explore the day-to-day practices and working environment for both coaches and players alike at the developing mastery phase, with a specific focus on identity (Eriskon, 1968). Results from Study Two highlighted a range of social and psychological issues relating to meaning, purpose, self-motivation and identity. The results specifically demonstrated that as time progresses and players are still in this phase of development, they begin to lose meaning and struggle with motivation at this phase of development. Study Three utilised a longitudinal qualitative approach to interview four players over the course of two seasons with a total of sixteen interviews. The study took a narrative approach to tell the story of two players journey's as they progressed through this phase of development with a focus on identity development and narrative identity (McAdams, 1985). The results showed the impact of culture and cultural narratives within football on the development of identity in young players and how this can impact how players are perceived within their respective clubs. The results further demonstrate why players may either live, or resist the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

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Chapter 1. Introduction & Aims of Research

1.1 Introduction

Football is without doubt one of the most popular sports worldwide. As early as 2006, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) Big Count (2006) recorded as many as 265 million people play football around the world. In addition, the FIFA (2014) World Cup had an overall global audience of 3.2 billion (FIFA, 2015). The globalization of football as a product has had significant sporting, cultural and economic impact throughout the world. It is argued the most visible manifestation of globalization within football has been within Europe (Flores, Forrest & Tena, 2010). European football is often considered the 'core' of football both from a spectator and economic perspective, with approximately 80% of the brand of football's revenue coming from Europe (Littlewood, Mullen & Richardson, 2011). The development of European football has attracted substantial interest and investment from a range of business stakeholders, where European football clubs operate more as service enterprises that are focused on performance, entertainment and financial profit (Bourke, 2003; Relvas et al., 2010). In addition, finances stemming from sponsorship and media, alongside big prize money from European competitions, has developed the entertainment and business aspects of elite level football. For example, the English Premier League (EPL), arguably the most attractive and competitive league in the world (Littlewood et al., 2011), sold its broadcasting rights for the 2016-19 seasons for a record breaking £5.14 billion deal, a 71% increase from the previous auction for seasons 2013-16 which was worth £3.2bn (BBC, 2016). Deloitte (2016) suggested with the 2016-19 broadcasting deals, alongside sponsors and other revenue streams, EPL clubs could see operating profits rise to as high as

£1bn, stating the financial growth of the Premier League as ‘staggering’ (Annual Review of Football Finance, 2016).

The immense commercialization and globalization of the football industry has undoubtedly impacted the organizational structure, operations, culture and philosophy of elite European football clubs (Gammelsaeter and Jakobsen, 2008). In this regard, increased revenues available to football clubs playing in the upper echelons of professional football, alongside the bi-weekly performance lens, has created a ‘win at all costs’ mentality and a ‘results orientated’ business across elite level football in what is considered a highly intense environment (Nesti, Littlewood, O’Hallaran, Eubank, Richardson, 2012). Roderick (2006) also suggested football, at the top level, is intensely embroiled within a result and performance oriented environment. Furthermore, Nesti et al. (2012) suggest excellent performances, player welfare and other similar matters become irrelevant if results are not achieved. It has also been argued the combination of financial profit available, alongside the ‘win at all costs’ mentality, has influenced the recruitment of players to elite level European football club first teams, who now appear to favour purchasing high profile, ‘ready’ first team players [from other clubs] to obtain immediate results and success (Richardson et al., 2005).

The strategy from elite level football clubs to purchase high profile, established first team players was also boosted by the European Union (EU) legislation and it’s freedom of movement between EU states, and the iconic Bosman ruling of 1995 which allows players to freely move to another club at the end of their contract with their current respective team (Giulianotti, 1999). The Bosman ruling allowed players to

move to another club within the European Union (EU) once their contract had expired, without any burden of a transfer fee (Richardson et al., 2013). This ruling blocked both the EU and the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) members from enforcing foreign player quotas (Maguire & Stead, 1998) and subsequently, allows EU players to pursue their trade in other countries within EU without restriction (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). Subsequently, this change in strategy has had a direct impact on the development of indigenous homegrown talent within professional football across the top European leagues (Richardson et al., 2005) with research suggesting these changes have hindered development and opportunities for young youth players within elite European football clubs (Littlewood et al., 2011).

This lack of emerging talent across Europe has become an increasing concern to national and international governing bodies, with UEFA championing *"a level playing field"* campaign in July 2004. The idea of the campaign was to promote the development of home grown talent in football (Richardson et al., 2013). The new legislation created was a 25-man squad for any UEFA competition, (i.e. UEFA Cup or the Champions League). Within this 25 man squad, two players must be trained by the club's own football academy (i.e., any player registered for a minimum of 3 seasons with the club between the ages of 15-21 years) and a further two players trained by other clubs from the same association (i.e., any player who has been registered for at least 3 seasons by the club or by other clubs affiliated to the same association between the ages of 15-21 years), furthermore, the following two years saw one additional place per season added to these stipulations (Richardson et al., 2005). In this regard, by the 2008/09 season, a club entering a UEFA competition must have a minimum of 4 club/academy trained and 4 association trained players (Richardson et al., 2013).

The English Premier League followed UEFA's lead with the introduction of its own 'home grown' rule starting at the 2010-2011 season, where each club would have to have a minimum of eight home grown players. A home grown player in the English Premier League is a player, under the age of 21 who has been registered with an English or Welsh club for at least three seasons. However, UEFA's "a level playing field" legislation appeared to make professional football clubs start the recruitment of promising youngsters at much younger ages than ever before through talent identification and development systems (Reilly et al., 2003). Finn and Mckenna (2010) have also stated how the increase of over-seas players into the English domestic leagues is making it increasingly difficult for young English players to successfully break through the academy. Furthermore, Richardson et al. (2005) suggested that due to the ever increasing influx of foreign talent in the 'host' country, young, local talented football players will often struggle to hold down an academy place, let alone make a first team appearance.

Richardson et al. (2013) have suggested only a handful of these young, home-grown talented football players' will progress from the academy into the first team squad due to a range of social, psychological and cultural tensions faced during the development pathway (Richardson et al., 2013). In fact, in 2015, Greg Dyke, ex – Chairmen of the Football Association (FA) stated, with regards to the Premier League home grown player quotas*, "since those rules were introduced in 2010, the average number of home grown players in Premier League squad has stayed largely the same and has actually decreased significantly at the 12 clubs who have been ever present in the League during that period"* (FA statement, 2015). These concerns, recognized by the

FA, have also been recognized by the English Premier League (EPL), which has led to the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) (EPPP, 2011) by the EPL.

The EPPP (2011) aims to increase the number and quality of home-grown players *"playing first team football at the highest level"* (EPPP, 2011, p.12). The EPPP's final strategy happened through consultation with the EPL and its clubs, and the representatives of the Football League, The FA and other key football stakeholders (Premier League, 2011). The EPPP has been active since the beginning of the 2012/13 football league season. The EPPP is a long-term strategy implemented by the English Premier League to promote the development of a world leading academy system. Within the EPPP's strategy, there are six fundamental principles. These include increasing the number and quality of home-grown players gaining professional contracts and playing first team football at the highest level.

Part of the English Premier League's EPPP includes proposals for the development of the 18-21year development phase [now 18-23]. Within this plan was the implementation of the new Professional Development League. The Professional Development League covers the under 21s age group, which was labelled 'The Barclays U-21 Premier League' (now Barclays Premier League Two). With regards to the Barclays U-21 Premier League, all players must be 21 or under, however teams are allowed one overaged goalkeeper and three overaged outfield players on a team sheet at any one time. The aim of the Professional Development League, in particular for the Under 21 years category, is to allow these young talented players to face *"an environment where they can learn to win"* and should *"replicate the professional*

game" (EPPP, 2011, p.59) whilst still allowing time for these young players to develop before becoming fully-fledged first team members. It would appear that such rhetoric aligns with the views of researchers and practitioners Nesti, Richardson and Littlewood. Whilst the academy to first team transition within professional football has often been considered a hot topic within recent years (Finn and Mckenna, 2010), the recent work by Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) suggested a longer, potentially more complex phase exists beyond the transitional phase, labelled by Richardson et al. (2013) as the *'developing mastery phase'* due to it being a prolonged period in-between the developing phase and mastery phase (see Bloom, 1985; van Rossum, 2001). Furthermore, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) reported that first team managers had proposed the creation of a more supportive environment for young professional players during this 18-21year period, enabling them to develop their character, step away from the 'comfort zone' of the youth academy and forge new 'identities' as first team players.

To date, from our knowledge at least, no empirical research has examined this 'developing mastery phase' were young players may have a professional contract, and within the 'first team environment' but not play for, train for or belong to the actual first team (Richardson et al. 2013). The aims of this present research is to contribute to the understanding and knowledge of developing and managing elite football talent within EPL clubs at the developing mastery phase (Richardson et al., 2013). The research aims to examine EPL clubs organizational structure, culture and philosophies with regards to the development and management of elite footballing talent (18-23), alongside a further understanding of the day-to-day experiences, challenges and support mechanisms in place for young elite football players within EPL clubs. This

developing mastery phase, or termed by the EPPP the Under21 and subsequently the following season Under23 Premier League, appears to be a critical area of research which has been neglected once young players have transitioned to the 'first team environment' (Finn & Mckenna, 2010; Relvas et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2013).

1.2 Aims of the Research

The overall aim of this research is to explore developing mastery players', coaches' and other key stakeholders' perspectives on this critical phase of development within elite level football. The research will examine the organizational structures and culture related to the developing mastery phase of development, and the philosophy, working mechanisms and roles of developing mastery phase coaches' and relevant staff at this phase of development. Moreover, it will explore developing mastery player's day-to-day experiences and challenges they face, and the psychosocial support they receive as they work towards a career in EPL first team football. To achieve the overall research aim, a number of evolving studies and complimentary aims were defined.

Study One: An Examination of the Structures, Roles, Responsibilities and Practices of Developing Mastery Phase Coaches within the English Premier League

Study One aims to explore the organisational structure, philosophies and working practices in relation to the developing mastery phase of development within EPL clubs through the perspectives of EPL developing mastery phase coaches. The study will specifically explore the roles, responsibilities and approaches to coaching for developing mastery phase coaches working at this age of development within EPL clubs. Study One incorporates the following specific aim:

Aim 1 - To explore how the developing mastery coach fits into the organisational structure and culture of the club and the subsequent impact this has on the coach's approach to coaching within the club.

Study Two: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Developing Mastery Phase of Development within the English Premier League

Whilst Study One of this thesis has focused on the 18-23 phase of development through the perspectives of the Under21 coaches, with the use of semi-structured interviews, this study looks to move beyond semi-structured interviews to 'real life' ethnographic engagement with an EPL club and it's 18-23 phase of development. This study attempts to extend the findings of Study One, but through the perspectives of the researcher, exploring the day-to-day experiences of Under23 coaches, players and support staff alike and the social, psychological an cultural challenges they face working within elite level football at the 18-23 phase of development. As such, Study Two utilizes participant observation, informal conversations and unstructured interviews and adopts a more protracted period of engagement with the EPL club. Study Two incorporates the following specific aim:

Aim 2 - To examine the day-to-day working practices of the 18-23 phase of development and the associated psycho-social and cultural tensions that may exist during this critical phase of development for players, coaches and other support staff.

Study Three: Longitudinal Exploration of Developing Mastery Players Experiences and Identity Development within the English Premier League

The results from Study One and Study Two will be able to provide an insight, both from through the lens of the Under21 development coach and the researcher, into the role, responsibilities and approaches to coaching the developing mastery players. Furthermore, the results of Study One and Study Two will also highlight the challenges and issues developing mastery phase players face during their development. However, Study Three will go beyond the developing mastery phase coaches' perspectives and the researchers interpretations of the developing mastery phase environment, and explore the lived experiences of the developing mastery phase players and the impact of these experiences on their identity through a narrative theory and narrative identity framework (McAdams, 1985). Study Three includes the following specific aim:

Aim 3 - To examine the players evolving identity (Erikson, 1968) throughout this phase of development and the impact of the 18-23 phase of development on the players' identity through a narrative identity framework (McAdams, 1985).

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 The Development of European Football

Football is considered the world's most popular sport (Matheson, 2003) and, as stated previously, European football is at its core (Littlewood et al., 2011). Following the formation of the Football Association (FA) in England in 1863, football in Europe has grown at quite a remarkable pace, and has been regarded as Britain's most durable export (Walvin, 1994). The first market British football exported to was that of North West Europe through mainly English and Scotsmen travelling as students, workers and migrants (Wagg, 1995). Subsequently the game spread in its own style to Southern Europe (mainly Italy and Spain) before UEFA was founded in 1954 with the aim of representing the different football associations across Europe through one union (UEFA, 2005). Shortly after this, and with the help of 3 French sport journalists, UEFA formed the European Cup (now the Champions League) in 1955 (UEFA, 2004). From the forming of UEFA and the European Cup, football as a brand, and in particular European football, has continued to grow, with sociologist Giulianotti (1999) dividing the evolution of football into three specific phases; 'traditional', 'modern' and 'post-modern'.

Giulianotto (1999) highlighted the 'traditional' period of the evolution of football lasted until shortly after the First World War, and it was within this period that the rules of football were established alongside the creation of national associations to administer the sport (Giulianotti, 1999). The 'modern' era of football (to which Giulianotti broke down further into three parts) lasted from the 1920's through until the early 1980's, and it was during this period were football became the national sport in both Europe and South America, and were continental confederations (such as

UEFA) emerged as further governance for the sport (Giulianotti, 1999). Furthermore, Giulianotti (1999) stated during this era, televisions became more prevalent within family homes, were families could watch the best football players worldwide (Giulianotti, 1999). Furthermore, from the late 1960's until the end of this 'modern' era (1980's), consumer and youth culture impacted the game tremendously, with top football players becoming global stars, and revenues from sponsorship and merchandising replaced gate-receipts as the main source of income for football clubs (Giulianotti, 1999). However, according to Giulianotti (1999) it was not until the late 1980's in the 'post-modern' era were the game evolved on a colossal scale, and has been evolving ever since. Within the 'post modern' era for football, football clubs embarked on creating brand new, bigger stadiums to maximise clubs income, alongside increasing television revenues, in particular for the biggest clubs within Europe (Giulianotti, 1999). Furthermore, within this era the European Cup rebranded to the Champions League, were the elite clubs from Europe's domestic competitions competed against each other to be crowned Champions of Europe. The immense popularity of tournaments such as the Champions League meant further attraction from major companies looking to advertise through sponsorship deals with the top football clubs, with significant increases in revenues from the selling of the game's broadcasting rights (Giulianotti, 1999). However, perhaps few academics, economists or businesses could have predicted the unprecedented scale of growth of European football over the last 20 years, and in particular the elite football clubs of Europe (Szymanksi, 2013).

According to Jones (2016), the collective revenues of the 'big five' (England, Germany, Spain, Italy and France) European leagues surpassed €15 billion in the

2016/17 season due to the number of new broadcasting deals that have come into effect in the 2015/16 season and will continue through the 2016/17 season. Whilst the economy of the European Union (EU) has ran at a negative-to-stagnant growth rate, European football has continued its extraordinary revenue growth in what has been challenging economic times for Europe (Jones, 2010). Furthermore, Kennedy & Kennedy (2012) argue due to its worldwide audience of four billion viewers per season, the UEFA Champions League is the ultimate global club competition and surpasses the National Football League's (NFL) Superbowl.

Association football bears witness to many of the socio-economic and political trends of the last century, with technological advances, increasing commercialisation and globalisation ultimately cementing Europe as the economic powerhouse of football (Holt, 2009). With almost all professional football clubs from the major European leagues being limited companies (and not a non-profit making association which was typically the case during the 'traditional period' (Giulianotti, 1999), club owners are (predominantly) concerned with financial return. However, this increase in profit and return on investment for professional football clubs, with the realignment of professional football clubs strategic aims has caused major concern for football governing bodies, such as UEFA (2005) stating: *"…gradually, sporting and ethical values are being eroded under increasing commercial/financial pressures…"* (p.18). Nevertheless, this unprecedented growth, in terms of popularity, economic success and globalisation of elite level football (and general sport) across Europe (and beyond) has resulted in a growing interest from academics across universities, who have attempted to examine the complexity and growth of professional football organisations in more recent years.

2.2 Organisational Structure of Professional Football Organisations

Gammelsæter (2006) stated mainstream management research has often failed to truly explore organisational structures of professional sport organisations, with this claim also being supported by Gilmore and Gilson (2007). However, as Parker (1996) and many other researchers have highlighted previously, gaining access to professional sport organisations, and in particular football is notoriously difficult due to the 'closed off' nature of football clubs, which will be discussed in further detail later on. Nevertheless, Gammaelsaeter (2006), Gammaelsaeter and Jakobsen (2008) and more recently Relvas et al. (2010) have successfully given an insight into the business orientated structures of top professional football clubs. Furthermore, these researchers' also align their work with Mintzberg's (1979) synthesis of the structuring of organisations.

Mintzberg (1979) suggests there are 5 basic parts of a contemporary organisation which are, the strategic apex, the middle line, operating core, the technostructure and the support staff. The *strategic apex* is typically the full time, top managers of an organisation. The strategic apex can be related to the *board of directors*, in particular the *chairmen* and *chief executive* (Relvas et al., 2010). The *operating core* is the basis of the organisation and business; this relates to the *football players* within the club. Finally, the *technostructure* and *support staff* consists of all the components that operationalise within the club to support the operating core, i.e. strength and conditioning coach, player welfare officer or physiotherapists.

Further exploring Mintzberg's (1979) work, Mintzberg suggests there are 5 clear, different types of organisational structures which are; the entrepreneurial organisation,

the machine organisation, the professional organisation, the divisional organisation and the innovative organisation. Interestingly, when exploring Mintzberg's (1979) different types of organisational structures, a typical elite level football club organisation appeared to align with numerous of Mintzberg's types of organisations, perhaps highlighting the uniqueness of the business and management of elite level football club. For example, the 'professional organisation' relies on heavily trained professionals who demand control of own work with a high degree of specialization. In this regard, this seems to align with the many different specialized departments within an elite level football club, such as Sports Science Department, Medical Department, and Coaching Department. However, an elite level football organisation could also align with the 'machine organisation', this type of organisation can lead to specialization where functional unities (i.e academy and first team departments) may have conflicting goals (Relvas et al., 2010). Lastly, Mintzberg (1979) reports the 'innovative organisation' as a fact pasted organisation with rapid change, which often results in stress for workers (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). This would also appear to relate to an elite level football organisation as they are also considered fast paced environments (Nesti et al., 2012) with rapid change that can impact staff, performance and the culture of football clubs (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Relvas et al., 2010). The following sections will further examine organisational stress and its relation to football and explore the link between business and football, before highlighting and discussing the specific challenges elite football clubs face in this highly competitive, rapidly changing culture (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007).

2.3 Organisational Stress in Football

Stress is the reaction of an individual to an external demand (stressor) which triggers the adaptive responses (Selye, 1975). Stress can be associated with both positive

(eustress) and negative (distress) reactions to the demand depending on the perception of the demand by the individual (Faulker & Partiar, 1997). These stressors can manifest from a range of different areas such as personal relationships, financial issues and significantly the work-place defined in the literature organisational stress. Organisational stress can be defined as an emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological response to the work environment and organisational climate (Bucurean & Costin, 2011). Organisational stress is conceptualised as an interaction between the employee and the work environment to which he or she is exposed (Shirom, 1982). Woodman and Hardy (2001) stated that organisational stress resides neither in the work environment or the individual, but instead the individual's cognitive appraisal of the demand, following on from the key theoretical work of Lazarus (1966) which identified the perception of the demand as key to the stress process. Within an organisation, there are a number of sources of stress including workload, performance evaluation, organisational structure and culture, role ambiguity and role conflict (Nesti et al., 2012). The work of Woodman and Hardy (2001) further stated organisational stress as *"the stress that is associated primarily and directly with an individual's appraisal of the structure and functioning of the organisational that he/she is operating"* (p208).

Whilst the research was not in professional football, Woodman and Hardy (2001) identified the predominant organisational stressors in sport related to basic communication failures, a lack of role clarity and ambiguity concerning direction of the organisation. Whilst in 2005 (UEFA, 2005) suggested clubs need to develop and improve management strategies to operate more successfully as professional football clubs, Relvas (2010) doctoral thesis evidenced there was limited formal, clear coherent

strategic and philosophical practices within top level football across Europe. The work of Relvas (2010), which explored a number of top European football clubs' organisational structures and practices with regards to youth development, highlighted a lack of formal and informal communication channels between the academy and first team environment, alongside 'cultural' distances and distinct operational philosophies (Relvas, 2010). These issues presented a range of difficulties for coaches regarding role clarity, responsibility and purpose of their respective positions within the organisation (Relvas et al., 2010).

Woodman and Hardy (2001) stated that unlike other business, professional sport organisations may appoint managers and top-level coaches based upon their career within the game as opposed to their managerial skills. This can create difficult working relationships between members of executive board, managing directors, coaches and support staff (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). As the sport of football, in particularly European football, has globalised and grown dramatically over the previous twenty years, there has been an increase in operational, strategic and football roles within professional clubs (Gammelsaeter & Jakobsen, 2008). The increase in roles and responsibility across professional football clubs will undoubtably present a range of organisational stressors and issues for clubs and its employees. The following section will discuss the growth of football and the pertinent issues of the globalisation of European football.

2.4 Business & Football Organisations

As highlighted in the opening section, football has gone through rapid changes in recent years (Flores et al., 2010) and continues to grow at an extortionate rate. The

summer transfer window of 16/17 in the English Premier League again surpassed its previous spending record by 23%, with a total spending of £1.4 billion according to Deloitte (2017). Furthermore, as recent as January 2018, Philippe Coutinho transferred to FC Barcelona from Liverpool FC for £142 million, an English Premier League record (Liverpool FC, 2018). Whilst football clubs in the Premier League continue to spend record amounts on football players year on year. Paradoxically, Deloitte (2017) reported even the top Premier League clubs have posted pre-tax losses in three of the last five seasons (Deloitte, 2017). In fact, before the year 2013, Szymanksi (2015) highlighted that Premier League clubs made a combined pre-tax loss for fourteen consecutive seasons. The question indeed may be, why are Premier League clubs such an attractive proposition for businesses around the world? As Ferran Soriano, ex FC Barcelona General Manager and now CEO of Manchester City FC, suggested in an interview with The Guardian, *"in cold business terms, Premiership football is one of the best entertainment products in the world"* (Tremlett, 2017).

Birkhäuser, Kaserer and Urban (2017) suggest The English Premier League (EPL) is the market leader in terms of revenue its' clubs generate in comparison with any other football league in the world. Whilst total sales for France, Germany, Italy and Spain amounted to €1,250 to €2,000m during the 2012/13 season, the EPL reached almost €3,000m (Soriano, 2014). Birkhäuser et al. (2017) further suggested this dominance (from a financial perspective at least) is likely to continue, due to the mass sponsorship and television deals available to English Premier League clubs, in comparison with other teams from 'the big 5' European leagues (Spain, France, Italy, Germany). Furthermore, alongside sponsorship and television deals (Teichmann, 2007), a successful UEFA Champions League campaign (and to a lesser extent the Europa

League) has also became an essential factor for professional football clubs, not only for the prize money attained by winning the competition (or getting into the latter stages) but also the increased revenue achieved through merchandise sales, increased sponsorship and higher overall value of the club itself. To further highlight the financial dominance of EPL clubs, Deloitte (2018) reported that within the top 20 clubs with the highest revenue, 10 came from the EPL for the 2017 year – the highest ever from one country. However, the wealth and ever-changing face of professional football and its relation to business and profit, has raised concerns from National and International governing bodies of football.

2.4.1 Professional Football Clubs & Youth Development

As the game has evolved and grown globally, there have been major concerns raised by UEFA (2005), as highlighted in a 2005 report "*gradually, sporting and ethical values are being eroded under increasing commercial and financial pressures."* This has particularly been prevalent in the EPL due to the vast sums of money currently available to successful, EPL clubs (Deloitte, 2018). This new economic reality of elite level football has increased the pressure for football clubs (across Europe, but mainly in the EPL) to win (at all costs) and has appeared to impact the strategic goals of professional clubs and their philosophy of practice (Gammelsaeter & Jakobsen, 2008) with EPL clubs spending more money on transfers and players wages than ever before in the history of the game (Birkhäuser et al., 2017). Relvas (2010) suggests the importance of, and investment in club's first team has increased, with EPL clubs preferring to search for global, recognized talent, at the expensive of indigenous youth development (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). A major catalyst for this 'change' in approach and philosophy by professional football clubs, was the European Court of

Justice's Bosman ruling in 1995. The Bosman ruling allowed players to move to another club within the European Union (EU) once their contract had expired, without any burden of a transfer fee (Richardson et al., 2012). This ruling blocked EU Union of European Football Association (UEFA) members from enforcing foreign player quotas (Maguire & Stead, 1998) and subsequently, allowed EU players to pursue their trade in other countries within the EU without restriction (Maguire & Pearton, 2000).

The Bosman ruling of 1995, combined with the globalisation of football highlighted previously, (Taylor, 2006) has heavily impacted the recruitment of elite level football players by elite level clubs within the EPL. Richardson et al. (2013) suggested that, at the highest level, football exists within a "frenzied" environment more commonly held in the entertainment business. In order to survive at the highest level, elite professional football clubs have to ensure the continuance of high financial rewards, brought in by success at the higher levels of European competitions. Football, at the top level, is intensely embroiled within a result and performance oriented environment (Roderick, 2006). This, combined with the high financial profit available to clubs has appeared to affect and influence the recruitment of football players (Gammelsaeter & Jakonsen, 2008).

Nesti et al. (2012) suggest excellent performances, player welfare and other similar matters become irrelevant if results are not achieved. As a result of this, there is a '*win at all costs*' mentality installed at professional football clubs, where first team managers are preferring to invest in experienced, recognized football players to increase their chances of instant success (Maguire & Pearton, 2000). Furthermore, European football clubs have reshaped recruitment strategies in order to recruit more

complete and finished players from across Europe in the hope of obtaining immediate results (Richardson el al., 2005). With the ever-increasing instant success culture embedded into elite level football, there has been a perceived lack of investment into youth development programmes by some clubs (Richardson *et al*., 2005). This lack of investment into the youth players has been further compounded by the lack of readiness or willingness to prepare indigenous youth academy players for the elite level (Richardson et al., 2013).

2.4.2 Youth Academies in Professional Football (Europe & UK)

The attempts by National (such as The FA) and International Governing Bodies (such as UEFA) to improve indigenous youth development has resulted in academies having to professionalize, and follow certain stipulations and directives put in place by governing bodies. In general, the research (and applied documents available) suggest academies, typically, have two 'fundamental' objectives overall (Richardson et al., 2004; Relvas, 2010). Firstly, to develop young talented players capable of playing professional football for their respective club. For example, The European Club Association (ECA, 2012) report on Youth Academies in Europe highlighted Ajax FC's main goal as *"to have three players [from the academy] make it to the first team every two seasons"* p20. The second main objective of football academies, as highlighted in recent research, is to generate income through the sale of talented youngsters (that have been developed by the club) to other professional football clubs. Furthermore, football clubs may also have other, fundamental aims, such as the winning of youth football competitions (Relvas et al., 2010).

Within a UK context, the establishment of professional football academies through the FA Technical Department's Charter for Quality (1997) proved to be the catalyst for the transformation of elite youth football in England. Within the Charter for Quality report, it stated that clubs would be responsible for developing and producing players from the ages of eight, with more training going towards developing youth coaches, more money invested into improving facilities and structures for youth development in football within England. Furthermore, the 'Charter for Quality' also related to sustaining and improving football participation rates and improving football both on and off the field, alongside the gradual acceptance of the use of Sports Science as a mechanism to improve performance in UK football academies (The FA, 1997; Littlewood, 2005). This allowed clubs to consider more objectives measures to assessing development and performance, as opposed to be solely relying on subjective measures (Williams & Reilly, 2000). However as Pain and Harwood (2007) highlighted, early Sports Science support was predominantly from the physiological discipline, and only recently has implemented the use of Sport Psychology as a discipline to improve performance and development at some clubs (Nesti, 2010).

The work of Richardson et al. (2004) examined the academy structures and roles of staff (with a specific emphasis on Education & Welfare) within a 'typical' professional academy structure (see Figure 1). Within this work, they produced a 'typical' academy structure at an English professional football club after the implementation of the 'Charter for Quality' (FA, 1994; Richardson et al., 2004) and was evidenced in academies throughout the 2000's.

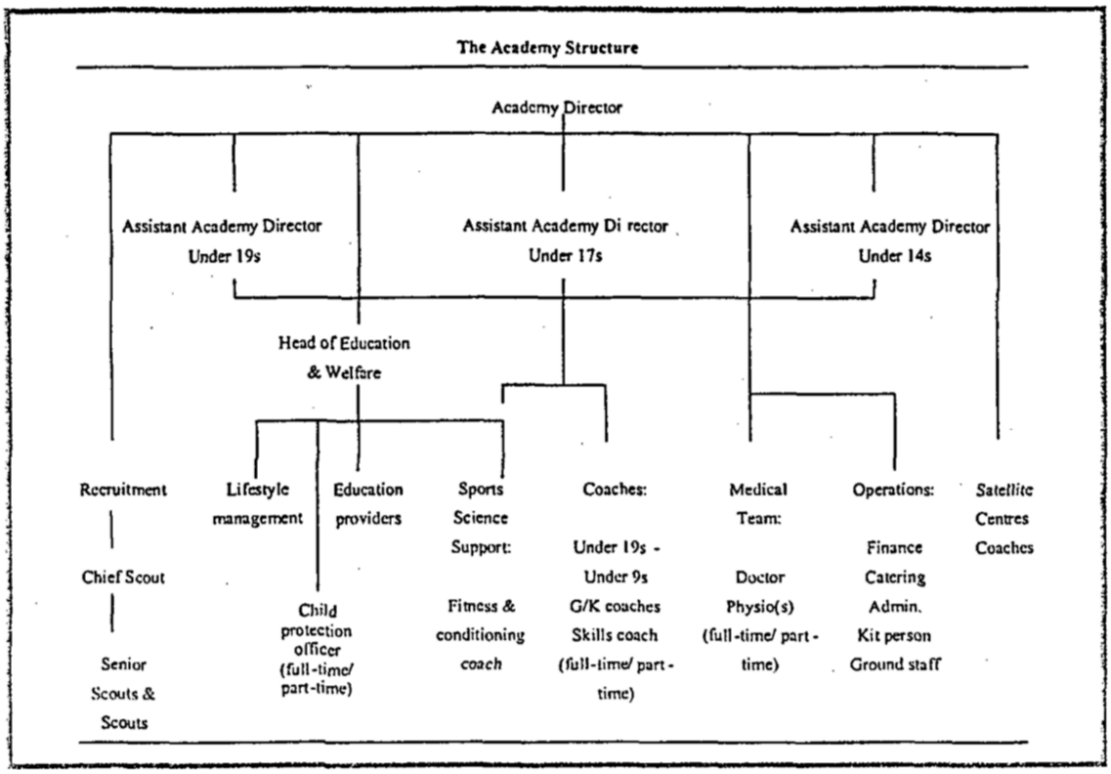

Figure 1: Representation of a typical organizational structure in a football academy (Richardson et al., 2004, p.197).

However, despite the efforts of the FA's (2007) 'Charter for Quality' to improve talent development of youth football and the professionalization of football academies, there has been continuous criticisms of talent development within England. Whitehouse (2013) suggested that football academies were not monitored appropriately, and the elite standards set by the FA had not been met. Furthermore, the lack of success of the England senior international team in international tournaments, such as failing to quality in 2008 for the UEFA International European Championship, and with the dominance (as highlighted in the opening section) of overseas players in the EPL, prompted criticisms from the media, public figures and academics (Finn & McKenna, 2010). With regards to this, in 2010, a formal meeting between Premier League Academy Managers discussed the requirements to improve youth development in

England resulted in the process of what is termed The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).

2.4.3 The Elite Player Performance Plan

The Elite Player Performance Plan is a long-term development model centred on the ambition of English football to create the world's leading academy football development system (The Premier League, 2011) and was accepted by Premier League stakeholders in 2011 for the implementation in the 2012/13 Premier League season (EPPP, 2011).

The EPPP is based on the 6 following principles; 1) increase the number and quality of home grown players gaining professional contracts and playing first team football, 2) create more time for players to play and be coached, 3) improve the coaching provision across England, 4) implement a system of effective measurement and quality assurance, 5) positively influence strategic investment into the academy system, 6) seek to implement significant gains in every aspect of player development (The Premier League, p12). The EPPP used previous research from talent development in sport (see Cote, 1999) and other areas of talent development such as the work of Gladwell (2008) examining reaching high-level expertise in certain fields to create the Long Term Player Development (LTPD) model (EPPP, 2011). Furthermore, the EPPP, based on the work of Gladwell (2008), make numerous references to the *"10,000 rule" – the estimated number of hours of deliberate practice needed to become elite in a particular area* (although the accuracy of the usage of the 10,000 rule in Gladwell's work has been disputed by the original authors Ericsson, Krampe, Tesch-Rome, 1993).

Within the EPPP, there is a category system, where professional football academies are placed into a category from 1-4, depending on a range of factors (EPPP, 2011). The category classification system is as followed; Category 1 clubs are highlighted as *"the optimum development model"*, demonstrate regular graduation of players into the Premier League and the wider professional game. Category 2 clubs are highlighted as *"the development model"* and will demonstrate the ability to graduate players into the Premier League from time to time and regularly graduate players into the wider professional game. Category 3 clubs are highlighted as the *"entry level development model"* and will demonstrate regular graduation of players into the professional game and develop players capable of progression into Category 1 and 2 academies. Category 4 is highlighted as *"the late development model"* and will demonstrate the ability to graduate players into the professional game (EPPP, p31). With regards to this, category 4 clubs will only recruit players from U17 – U21 (now U23), whereas category 1, 2 and 3 clubs can begin recruitment at U5 (EPPP, 2011).

The EPPP (2011) states that any young academy football player who wishes to play EPL football will not only have to be the best in England, but potentially the world. Therefore, the EPPP (2011) suggests the successful implementation of the EPPP, and therefore creating an *"uncompromising elite training environment"* (p13) will enable EPL and EFL clubs to consistently outperform international competition in the production of homegrown players (EPPP, 2011). To achieve this vision, the EPPP (2011) suggest the 'leading' Academies must demonstrate a number of common characteristics which include; an elite environment were players have the necessary time and space to develop, an environment where all aspects of the Academy

programme are challenging, developmental and inspirational and an environment supported by outstanding coaches in every phase of the Performance Pathway.

To achieve the vision and fundamental aims set out by the EPPP (2011), it has introduced new regulations alongside a change in the structure of the 'Performance Pathway'. Now, under the EPPP regulations, clubs (who are within categories 1, 2 and 3 of the classification system) are allowed to recruit players to join their training programme from the age of 4, however are not allowed to sign their first contract with the club until the age of 9. Therefore, an academy player may be at an academy club from the age of 4 until the age of 23. Within this long-term development model, the EPPP has introduced 3 stages of development that a young player will transition through within an English football academy. These are labelled as the Foundation Phase, the Youth Development Phase, and the Professional Development Phase.

The Foundation Phase spans from the U5 to the U11 age group (EPPP, 2011), with players exposed to up to 8 hours of coaching per week (with a focus on the fundamental technical work, such as ball mastery and will play in small sided games). Within this phase, the EPPP states clubs that are Category 1 and 2 should have specialist full time coaches working within the Foundation Phase. Furthermore, the EPPP states whilst acknowledging differences may exist in the maturation and skill development of players; there is already a 'relatively natural transition' that takes place for most young players via the national education system, and therefore the transition to the Foundation Phase may also be relatively natural (EPPP, 2011).

The Youth Development Phase spans from the U12 to the U16 age group. Within this

phase coaching significantly increases, with category 1 clubs coaching up to 16 hours per week. Within this, the games programme should become 11 v 11 and played on appropriate sized pitches. The focus on this phase of development is a player learning to play in a team (EPPP, 2011), however, the EPPP state clearly coaches are required to manage competition to ensure that development is not stifled to pursue winning at all costs. Following this phase, if players are successful and sign a 'scholarship' with the academy, the players will 'transition' to the Professional Development Phase (The Premier League, 2011).

The Professional Development Phase spans from the U17 to the U21 age group. Firstly, the EPPP state this phase is characterised as 'Learning to Win', and as such, there may initially be an increase in the volume and intensity of training, compared with the Youth Development Phase. Furthermore, the EPPP (2011) states the games programme will have a critical role to play and will be key to the players future achievement during this phase of development. The EPPP (2011) states during this phase of development, it is *"imperative that players learn how to win and develop strategies for coping with pressure"* (p42). All clubs are required to appoint a Senior Professional Development Coach and two Professional Development Coaches as full time members of staff within this phase of development. However, the role of the Senior Professional Development Coach (often labeled as the U23 Coach), is to manage a group of players typically aged between 19 and 21, recently extended to 23 (EPPP, 2011). This section discusses the EPPP and the implemented changes to the academy system. It further briefly discusses each phase of development at academy football. Between each phase, the EPPP (2011) highlights a 'transition' will take place. Transitions and the transition literature are fundamental to this thesis and research,

and therefore the following section will provide an overview of the transition literature in relation to sport.

2.5 Transitions

Schlossberg (1981) defined a career transition as *"an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships"* (p5). Traditionally, there has been a focus on retirement from sport for athletes and the negative experiences of this transition athletes face (Haerle, 1975). To understand career transitions, two main sociological theories were used as frameworks. Firstly, 'social gerontology', which is the study of the ageing process, and compares the transition out of sport to retirement from the general workforce (Gordon & Lavalle, 2012). However, the work of Mitchell (2015) suggested there has been little supporting evidence to apply the models of social gerontology to athletic retirement from competitive sport for numerous reasons, such as the difficulty of applying it to the culture of competitive sport (and how this differs substantially from general day-to-day jobs), and also where typically athletic retirement often occurs much earlier as retirement from the general workforce.

Thanatology is the study of death and dying (Kubler-Ross, 1969) and has been used as an alternative theoretical framework to study career transitions. Previous research has likened 'forced retirement' from competitive sport (such as through injury, de-selection) as a form of 'social death' and as an inherently negative event leading to isolation (Grove, Lavallee & Gordan, 1997). However, more recent research has offered a more balanced perspective on career termination, an opportunity for athletes for 'social rebirth' and provide new opportunities beyond being 'an athlete' (Coakley,

1985). Nevertheless, the previous research, through the framework of thanatology, has focused on career termination, whereas the aims of this thesis is more closely aligned to a specific development phase within elite football (and the transitions that may take place), and therefore more aligned to general transition models.

The work of Schlossberg (1981) extended previous models of sporting transitions as the work focused on change as a process as opposed to a one, singular event. Schlossberg's (1981) model of human adaptation to transition considered 3 main transition factors, which are as followed 1) the characteristics of the individual, 2) the individual's perception and 3) environment characteristics pre and post transition. Developing the 'general transition theory', Wyllemand and Lavallee (2004) utilized Bloom's (1985) research on the stages of talent development. Talent development literature has offered a framework for the development of talented athletes from childhood through to late adolescence (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Van Rossum, 2001). Nevertheless until recently, research has failed to present in-depth, contextually rich accounts of the transitions that athletes often have to make within these development frameworks (Richardson et al., 2012).

2.5.1 Within Career Transitions

Wylleman et al. (2004) highlighted the shift from a focus on career termination to a life-span perspective on transitions within sport. Wylleman & Lavallee (2004) offered a more holistic, whole person approach to create a development model on transitions faced by athletes. Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) development model was organised across four levels (athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/vocational development). When an athlete makes a transition during the athletic career, it is

labelled a 'within career transition' (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Stambulova (2000) highlighted two types of within career transitions; normative and non normative. A normative within career transition is an expected transition, such as moving up a level that is usually determined by the age of the athlete and/or the organisational structure of the sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). A non-normative within career transition is generally an unexpected, unpredictable and involuntary transition. For example an injury or de-selection from the team (Wylleman et al., 2004). Pummel et al. (2008) explained how "within career transitions create particular challenges, expectations, and pressures along with the need to balance demands from other life domains" (p.445).

The work of Pummel et al. (2008) explores the within career transition experiences of adolescent event riders when making a transition to a higher level within their sport. Pummel et al. (2008) discussed how *"...athletes driven to make the transition to a higher competitive level may also be at a greater risk for transitional related stress since individuals highly identified with their sport have shown to show greater sport related stress"* (p443). It is suggested that developing an athletic identity ties the sport more closely to the individual (i.e., the self), so poor performance, training or de-selection will increase stress, anxiety, lower self-esteem and confidence (Pummel et al., 2008; Brown & Potrac, 2009). Furthermore, studies highlight that within most sports, a transition to a higher level brings pressures to sacrifice social activities, in addition to an increase in training and levels of commitment (Jorlén, 2007; Bruner *et al.*, 2008; Van Rossum, 2001). The work of Pummell et al. (2008) presented a model of career transition concerning the youth to senior transition within young event riders. Whilst the model highlighted five categories as determining the successfulness of the

transition, (1) motivation for the transition, 2) perceptions of the transition, 3) sources of stress, 4) support for athletic development, 5) post transition changes, Morris (2013) critiqued the model, and suggested the model does explain in detail the transition process (Morris et al., 2015; 2016; 2017). To further examine the youth to senior transition, Jorlen (2008) identified a number of demands of the youth to senior transition in sport, such as the lack of control over the transition for the athlete, heightened expectation and pressure to perform at a higher level than previous (Jorlen, 2008). The work of Finn and McKenna (2010) across different sports examining the youth to senior transition through perspectives of the coach highlighted numerous demands placed on the athlete making this transition, such as proving themselves to the first team, handling responsibility and managing free time, and building relationships with new coaches.

Furthermore, utilizing grounded theory, Holt and Dunn (2004) studied, through a psychosocial perspective, competencies associated with success (and therefore making successful transitions) in football. Aligning with the work of Pummell et al. (2008), Holt and Dunn (2006) highlighted successful players had high levels of motivation for the transition, and were also likely to make significant sacrifices to be successful, such as spending less time with friends and family, and more time dedicated to football. Nevertheless, whilst Holt and Dunn (2006) highlighted successful players were more likely to spend less time with friends and family, numerous studies highlight the importance of socials support from friends, family and coaches (Pummell et al., 2008; Morris, 2013).

Pummell et al. (2008) suggested the main source of social support came from the parents of athletes making a transition to the senior level, with parents offering tangible, financial and emotional support. However, Côté (1999) suggested the type of support offered by parents over time changed, from a more leading and enthusiastic role, to a more supporting role with Wylleman and Lavalle (2004) highlighting this shift potentially down to the increasing importance the coach plays in the athletes development, and how the athlete seeks out athletic development advice and feedback more from the coach, as the athlete progresses through into the senior sport (Wylleman and Lavalle, 2004). Furthermore, Bruner et al. (2008) stated athletes thought of coaches as helpful during the transition into the senior, elite game, and provided a range of support, often technical. The recent research of within career transitions (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Morris, 2013) alongside talent development research (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; van Rossum, 2001) has highlighted the importance of coaches in the technical, tactical, psychological and social development of young, competitive athletes training for a career in their chosen sport.

2.5.2 Critical Moments

In recent years it has been argued that due to the sudden, impactful and unpredictable nature of transitions that the term is not suitable to describe what is being experienced (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). A critical moment is defined as an event which is "large or small, intended or unintended, and may have positive or negative effect on a person's sense of self" (Nesti et al., 2012, p.3). This meaning of the term 'critical moment' is grounded in existential psychology and philosophy and derives from the concept of 'boundary situations' (Nesti, 2004), which is an event, or urgent experience that propels a person into a confrontation with their existential situation within the

world. In sport psychology, the term critical moment is used to describe the existential concept of boundary situations. These critical moments involve the subjective lived experience of the athlete and creates an emotional response (Nesti et al., 2012). These critical moments can be 'big' such as an injury or deselection however can also be seen as 'small' such as conversations with the first team manager. A critical moment is rarely non-present in the dynamic world of high-performance sport and may occur regularly in the life of an elite football player (Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Despite the challenges that critical moments may present, facing up to these challenges allow powerful opportunities for personal growth (Nesti, 2010). With this regard, critical moments can be a step taken for players to find a deeper sense of self-understanding and purpose (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). For example, Nesti (2007) highlighted that by successfully confronting the anxiety associated with a 'critical moment; players may be able to develop courage, self-belief and self-knowledge, allowing them to continue their journey through the unpredictable, high pressure environment they operate within (Nesti, 2010).

2.6 Coaching Culture of Youth and Professional Football

Typically, a Premier League football club can be identified as a system categorized by a series of power relations, where positions are viewed as more or less dominant, which reflects an individual's access to capital (Jenkins, 1992, as cited in Cushion & Jones, 2006). In turn, capital is the capacity to implement control over one's own future and the future of others, therefore constituting a type of power (Ritzer, 1996). In this regard, for these young elite level footballers, coaches often are the ones exercising their capital through aggressive, confrontational but 'effective' customs.

Further highlighting the volatile, male dominant environment of professional football, Roderick (2006) examined the injury process for professional football players in the UK. Roderick's (2006) work highlighted the pressures injured players consistently have to face from managers and coaches to play, often disregarding their injury and at times, suggesting it 'was all in their head'. In addition to this, injured players were also often ridiculed by team-mates for 'not being up for it' and 'faking injury'. Subsequently, some of these injured players played against medical advice to try and appear 'genuine' to coaches and players alike (Roderick, 2006). Although the academy and youth team tend to have more 'softer' cultures (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), work by Cushion and Jones (2006), at a Premier League youth academy, revealed how often professional youth coaches display "symbolic violence" towards players. Symbolic violence refers to the order and restraint that are established and maintained through indirect cultural mechanisms, as opposed to direct, forceful control (Jenkins, 1992, as cited in Cushion & Jones, 2006). This domination and control over players was often directed through way of speech by the coaches. Cushion and Jones (2006) highlighted how the general context of conversation was exclusively coach led, with such language shaping the coaches and players relationships, behaviours and interactions amongst one another. Although coaches are seen to be recognized as aggressive, such methods often *"reflect traditional institutional discourse within the sport and hence have been accepted as a king of occupational hallmark"* (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p148). This harsh and often confrontational coaching behaviour appears to be deeply rooted in the culture of professional and elite level football, viewed as an almost essential feature in the preparation of young talented players for a life within the game (Parker, 1996; Cushion & Jones, 2006).

Exploring further into the coaching context within youth and professional football, Potrac and Jones (2009a; 2009b; 2012) work captures the constant, never ending battle coaches' face against players, managers and fellow coaches within the professional football environment. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2004) highlighted how elite level coaches carefully contrived circumstances and other peoples' perceptions to their advantage, such as telling *"white lies"* and having a constant *"face work"* to make athletes trust them and the actions they take. Potrac et al. (2012) suggest whilst research within the culture of professional football has mostly came from the players perspective (Roderick, 2006), it highlights the uncertainty, vulnerability and constant scrutiny employees of the professional game face within their day-to-day work existences, whilst having to engage in coping strategies protect and advance their own personal causes (Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac et al., 2012).

Typically, traditional coaching research has failed to address the 'micro-political' tensions a coach faces throughout their career. In this regard, Potrac and Jones (2009a) suggest *"much of traditional coaching research has adopted a functional interpretation to coaching, where conflict or disagreement are viewed as being a deviation from the main task"* (p.573). However, key researchers exploring the 'murky waters' of sports coaching (see Cushion, Jones, Potrac), identify coaching as largely an everyday, power ridden environment where coaches attempt a variety of strategies to manipulate situations to reach their own, personal desired goals (Potrac & Jones, 2009a).

2.7 Identity

The concept of 'self' and 'identity' has been central to the human and social sciences

since the 19th century. It was the work of William James (1890) who stated 'the self' should be conceptualized as the main determinant of human thoughts, feelings and actions (James, 1890). However, the concept of identity, and the definition of identity, perhaps depends upon from which domain the individual discussing the concept originates. Marcia (1980) defined identity as *"an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs and individual history"* (p109). With respect to this thesis, the term identity is used in relation to individuality or the 'self' (Kroger, 1993; Archer, 1994). With regards to this, Adams and Marshall (1996) highlighted the five most 'common' identity functions as; 1) providing the structure for an individual to understand who they are, 2) providing an individual with meaning through commitments, values and goals 3) providing an individual with free will, 4) allowing for consistency, coherence and harmony between values, beliefs and commitments and 5) enabling the recognition of potential which gives the individual a sense of future, possibilities and choices (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

Within the wide field of psychology, the first strand has been positioned within development psychology and emerged from Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, which focuses on specific development tasks associated with different stages of a person's lifespan (from birth through to old age). The other area of identity within psychology was from a social psychological perspective as a way to understand identity as a social role and how people may negotiate belonging to different social groups (Côté & Levine, 2002).

Erikson (1968) theory of identity development drew from the psychoanalytical approach and, in Erikson's opinion, identity was a largely unconscious and developing

sense of who one is, with identity mainly developing in adolescence (although this would still change over a persons' lifespan). Erikson believed identity was a specific developmental task of the teenage years, when young people pursued meaningful life projects, values and goals to commit to. However, he also believed that during this phase of development, individuals may experience the term 'identity crisis' if they failed to find meaningful projects, specific goals and a clear sense of self. This crisis would result in the avoidance of personal responsibility and the inability to make decisions (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, Erikson (1968) thought personal identity included both the individual aspects of a person (core beliefs and values), and social aspects (group belongings with regards to family and profession). Lastly, Erikson (1968) believed that identity did not reside only in the individual, but was entwined within the culture, which provided young people with certain beliefs and values (such as the values of Christianity in the Western world).

2.7.1 Athletic Identity

The work of Brewer, Van Raalte and Linder (1993) conceptualized [athletic] identity in sport as the degree of identification a person (who is an athlete) has within their athletic role. Furthermore, they developed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). The AIMS measures 3 factors. Firstly, it measures social identity (the strength of identification with the athlete role); secondly it measures exclusivity (the potential nonexistence of other social roles, such as friend, brother, sister) and thirdly it measures the negative effect (the emotional response from an athlete to achieve the desired role due to reasons such as poor performance, injury or de-selection (Brewer et al., 1993). However, Martin, Mushett and Eklund (1994) added a further fourth factor to the AIMS, called self-identity which refers to self-

referenced perceptions of the athlete (such has how the athlete perceives himself, as opposed to social identity which is concerned with how others view the person).

Whilst originally, quantitative research was the dominant methodology to examine athletic identity, in more recent years a more qualitative orientated approach has been deemed suitable alongside the AIMS to explore athletic identity within sport. For example, the work of Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kenttå and Johansson (2008) utilised both the AIMS and qualitative methods to assess the impact of athletic identity on burnout in sport. Other research has used the AIMS alongside qualitative methods to study athletic retirement (Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012) and dual career development (Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner & Lindahl, 2015).

2.7.2 Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

Nevertheless, until recently, the majority of identity research within sport has focused solely on athletic identity, and minimal research has used the theoretical framework of Erikson's theory of identity and psychosocial development (1968) in their empirical research. However, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) suggested that intensive engagement within elite youth sport, prevented young athletes from exploring different roles, which as Erikson's suggests, is a crucial task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) further stated that the commitment to the sport led the athletes into 'identity foreclosure' where they struggled to find 'their own identity' (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). However, within the sport of football, even less research has utilised the theoretical framework of Erikson (1968) (and identity in general) with the exception of a few scholars (Nesti and Littlewood, 2011, Nesti et al., 2012).

Nesti and Littlewood (2011) highlight how the work of Erikson (1968) that focuses on the stages of identity in young people could help to better understand identity and transition within young footballers. According to Erikson (1968) a persons' identity constantly changes due to the new experiences and information acquired in daily interactions with others. In a sporting context, these *'changes'* and *'new experiences'* identified by Erikson (1968) could be applied to the athletic transition in sport (Wylleman and Levalle, 2004). To expand on the previously discussed work of Erikson (1968), Erikson offered a lifelong perspective, characterized by a series of crises and resolutions that an individual may experience, and will have positive and negative influences on our sense of self. Each of the 8 stages of Erikson's (1968) model are briefly described below:

Stage 1: Infancy (birth to 18 months). Conflict: Trust vs Mistrust. This stage relates to feeding, with the outcome of this crisis is for children to develop a sense of trust coming from caregivers [typically parents] who provide care, affection and dependability. However, Erikson reported a lack of support from caregivers to the infant at this stage would lead to a crisis of mistrust.

Stage 2: Early Childhood (2 to 3 years). Conflict: Autonomy vs Shame. Within this stage, children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills (such as toilet training). Success at this stage leads to feelings of autonomy for the children, whilst failure may result in shame or doubt.

Stage 3: Preschool (3 to 5 years). Conflict: Initiative vs Guilt. During this stage, children should begin to assert control and power over their environment. At this stage,

it's possible for a child to develop a sense of purpose, and these are rapid developments for a child at this stage. However when children are over dominant, they may experience feelings of disapproval or aggression from parents, often resulting in guilt.

Stage 4: School age (6 to 11 years). Conflict: Industry vs Inferiority. Within this stage, children need to cope with new, significant persons in their life, such as peers and teachers and further cope with new social and academic demands. At this stage, Erikson suggests success will lead to feelings of competence, whereas failure leads to feelings of inferiority.

Stage 5: Adolescence (12 to 18 years). Conflict: Identity vs Role Confusion. Within this stage, adolescents need to develop a sense of self and their own personal identity. It is here, where adolescents search for beliefs, values and goals to follow in life (Erikson, 1968). Success at this stage will lead to feelings of authenticity whereas failure may lead to a weak sense of self and confusion in how they perceive themselves.

Stage 6: Young adulthood (19 to 40 years). Conflict: Intimacy vs Isolation. Erikson (1953, 1968) stated it's crucial at this stage of development for young adults to form intimate relationships with other people leading to long-term commitments. Success at this stage leads to a sense of commitment, safety and care, and leads to strong future relationships. Failure at this stage may result in loneliness and isolation.

Stage 7: Middle adulthood (40 to 65 years). Conflict: Generativity vs Stagnation. This stage typically regards work and parenthood. It's at this stage humans have typically

established careers, are settled down in a relationship and develop a sense of nurture and care beyond their own life. For success at this stage, adults need to create or nurture things that may outlast them, and success will lead to feelings of accomplishment and usefulness in the world. However, failure may result in stagnancy and feelings of unproductiveness.

Stage 8: Maturity (65 to death). Conflict: Ego Integrity vs Despair. This stage involves reflection on one's life, and Erikson (1968) states here, older adults will look back on their life and feel a sense of fulfilment if a person has achieved their goals and ambitions through life. However, persons may feel unproductive and feelings of regret if they have not achieved their life goals. Success at this stage leads to feelings or wisdom, whereas failure may result in feelings of regret, bitterness and despair.

Nesti (2004, 2007) has suggested the concept and framework of Erikson's identity has received relatively little attention in sport psychology due to research and practice mainly deriving from a cognitive behavioural approach. However, more recently, researchers such as Nesti & Littlewood (2011) and Mitchell et al. (2014) have supported the connection between the experiences of football players and the work of Erikson (1963). Furthermore, Mitchell et al. (2014) suggested the fourth and fifth stages of Erikson's framework can be related to the experiences of young talented football players within academy systems, such as when young player's perceive themselves as a football player due to their environment, parental support and relationship with coaches. Furthermore, Kroger (1996) suggested it's at this stage where young people begin to develop a sense of self, based on their life experiences and social expectations. However, due to the complex demands of training for

academy players (The FA, 2010; The EPPP, 2012), young football players may not have had the opportunity to experience a range of life experiences to build a more solid, broader identity (Nesti et al., 2012). This concept has been highlighted as a 'foreclosed identity' (Marcia, 1966; 1985). Marcia (1966) suggested that this may occur when individuals make a premature commitment to an occupation or ideology, and whilst it may have some short term benefits such as psychological concepts of dedication, commitment and motivation, individuals may struggle to cope with certain challenges such as injury or de-selection for a football player (Marcia, 1966).

Nesti and Littlewood (2011) have highlighted the challenges young professional elite level footballers faced daily during within-career transitions. Nesti and Littlewood (2011) explain, from a practitioner point of view, the constant challenges young football players face within an elite level club. The challenges faced are not only football issues but also personal issues, as many professional athletes cannot separate what they do in sport from who they are as people (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Furthermore, Nesti et al., (2012) highlighted the importance of young elite level football players developing a strong, flexible and clear sense of self to enable them to perform in such a volatile environment.

It becomes apparent through the work of Nesti and Littlewood (Littlewood & Nesti, 2009; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Nesti et al., 2012) of the complex psychological, cultural and social issues young elite level football players have to face when 'making their way in the game'. Their work, supported by other leading researchers in this field (Richardson et al., 2005; Richardson et al., 2012; Richardson et al., 2013) highlight

the difficulties of transitioning from the supportive nature of the academy, to the volatile, brutal first team environment.

2.8 The Developing Mastery Phase

This thesis so far has discussed in detail areas of research (theoretical and applied), related to the complex, difficult journeys young elite football players' experience on their way to becoming an elite level football player. It has explored transitions, development, culture, relationships, identity, and how realistically only one percent of players who will actually play football for a living (Green, 2009). It has been suggested that the most complex phase of development is the final 'transitional' stage, labelled by the EPPP (2012) as the 'Professional Development Stage' or in theoretical terms, by Richardson et al. (2013) as the 'Developing Mastery Phase':

Athletic Level	*Academy (16-19s) Development*	*Post Academy Developing Mastery*	*First Team Mastery*
Psychological Level	Adolescence	Social insecurity and comparison	(young) Adulthood. Limelight stardom
Psycho-social level	Peers, parents, coach, Ed & Welfare	Partner New coach(es) Family	Manager New coach(es)
Environmental and cultural level	Process orientated Nurturing Caring Empathetic	Uncompetitive Lonely Isolated Uncertain Stagnant	Outcome orientated Ruthless Masculine macho Heightened competition Team
Nature of support	Highly supportive	Bereft of social support	(Typically) crisis management, sophist

Figure 2: Sociocultural model of elite player development in professional football at Academy (Development), Post Academy (Developing Mastery) and First Team (Mastery) level. Adapted from Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013), p149.

The phase is a critical phase of development when a player receives a one or two year professional contract after making the transition from the youth academy. However, the player may not necessarily play for, or even belong to the first team (Richardson et al., 2013). This stage of an elite young player's career appears to be an often difficult and lonely period for players who often struggle to come to turns with the brutal, macho culture that exists within the first team world (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013).

Relvas et al., (2010) reported the need to recognize this developing mastery phase for elite young football players. Moreover, Richardson et al. (2013) suggest that this, developing mastery phase, is perhaps the most critical period of development a player will face. Richardson et al. (2013) further highlights that (typically), these young players are not ready for the first team, yet they are expected to survive in this mastery environment. Moreover, Richardson et al. (2013) suggest that a significant number of young players are ill prepared and/or ill equipped to make this transition and then survive in the harsh, brutal first team world. Ultimately, this lack of preparation may explain why young talented players, often labelled as future stars, do not perform or achieve to the level expected when they progress to the professional environment (Richardson et al., 2013).

The complex issues that appear to surround young players at the post academy phase have been highlighted within the new Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). As mentioned previously, part of the English Premier League's EPPP includes proposals for the development of the 18-21year development phase. Within this plan was the implementation of the new Professional Development League. The Professional

Development League covers the under 21s age group, which was labelled 'The Barclays U-21 Premier League' before the change to the Barclays U-23 Premier League and finally Barclays Premier League 2 which it is now called.

The aim of the Professional Development League, in particular for the Under 23 years category, is to allow these young talented players to face "an environment where they can learn to win" and should "replicate the professional game" (EPPP, 2012, p.59) while still allowing time for these young players to develop before becoming fully-fledged first team members. It would appear that such rhetoric aligns with the views of Nesti, Richardson etc. Furthermore, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) reported that first team managers had proposed the creation of a more supportive environment for young professional players during this 18-21year period, enabling them to develop their character, step away from the 'comfort zone' of the youth academy and forge new 'identities' as first team players. The supportive environment mentioned by the first team manager is often more associated within an academy setting. The academy environment tends more to be a process oriented and caring culture, allowing more time for development to occur (Richardson et al., 2013). Players within the academy usually have a range of supportive practitioners, such as development coaches and Heads of Education and Welfare, something strongly contrasting to the ruthless, macho culture embedded into the first team environment, where players receive little support and are expected to survive on their own (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Whilst the *'academy to first team'* transition has been considered something of a hot topic, due to the increasing need for home-grown players in first team squads across elite level football (Finn & Mckenna, 2010), previous research has failed to explore

the potentially longer, more complex phase that exists beyond the initial transitions, which has been highlighted both through the work of Richardson et al. (2013) and through the EPPP (2012). With regards to this, this thesis attempts to examine this *'developing mastery phase'*, through a psycho-social lens, through the perspectives of the coach, the player, practitioners and ultimately the researcher.

2.9 Clarifying Research Aims

The research aims to explore the structure, culture, working practices and psycho-social issues faced by both coaches and players within the developing mastery phase of development, through their perspectives and through the perspectives of the researcher. Secondly, the research attempts to examine young players development and journey over a protracted period of time, with a specific focus on identity and identity development. The overall aims of the thesis are again displayed below.

Aim 1 - To explore how the developing mastery coach fits into the organisational structure and culture of the club and the subsequent impact this has on the coach's approach to coaching within the club.

Aim 2 - To examine the day-to-day working practices of the 18-23 phase of development and the associated psycho-social and cultural tensions that may exist during this critical phase of development for players, coaches and other support staff.

Aim 3 - To examine the players evolving identity (Erikson, 1968) throughout this phase of development and the impact of the 18-23 phase of development on the players' identity through a narrative identity framework (McAdams, 1985).

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Methodology

Hoeplf (1997) stated qualitative research is the most suitable methodology to gain a more context specific understanding of a particular setting. In addition, qualitative research can be rich in data and provide depth and detail of a particular phenomenon, to help further understand the reality of a particular field (Pummel et al., 2008). Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to utilize a qualitative research design for the thesis, allowing the opportunity to examine the developing mastery phase through the coaches, players and ultimately the researchers own perspectives (Patton, 2002). Whilst there is a methodology section in each of the three studies, which discusses the methods utilized in each respective study, the following sections discuss the qualitative approach and philosophical positioning of the researcher.

3.2 Qualitative Approach

Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined qualitative research, as *"any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification."* However, qualitative research is empirical research and is a strategy for answering questions and seeking further understanding of people within social contexts (Locke, 1989). According to Jones et al. (2002) one of the main advantages of adopting a qualitative method is that it allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon and a participant's constructs and experiences, to characterise the surrounding environment. Furthermore, Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) argue that with qualitative research, it's possible to understand and capture other people's perspectives without predetermining their thoughts, or being constrained by a hypothesis-driven question of many quantitative research

methodologies. With regards to this, Berg (2004) highlighted the benefit of qualitative enquiry, by allowing participants to respond and discuss questions without being constrained completely by the questions being asked, such as in a questionnaire. In addition, the flexible nature of qualitative research further allows the researcher an opportunity to probe into answers or observations as needed to obtain more detail surrounding descriptive, experiences or behaviours (Patton, 2002). Whilst quantitative enquiry will gain an understanding with regards to prevalence and differentiation in a certain population, it does not allow in depth exploration and probing developing a deeper, meaningful knowledge of a topic (Guest et al., 2013), in this case the developing mastery phase of English Premier League football.

3.3 Philosophical Positioning

I have decided to write this section in the first person, due to the importance of the researcher within this thesis, and my philosophical positioning with regards to qualitative enquiry and how it has impacted this thesis. It's important to note, whilst I attempt to reduce biases, and produce credible, trustworthy qualitative research – I understand that my own personal biases, experiences and beliefs will still have an influence on the way I collect, analyse and present the data (Patton, 2002).

Within the broad method of qualitative enquiry, there are a number of epistemological school of thoughts which include; traditional scientific research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), social construction and constructivist (Glense, 1999), critical change (Harding, 1991; Thomas, 1993) and critical realism (Campbell, 1974; 1988). Patton (2002) stated that different schools of thoughts will have different data collection and analytical techniques, which can be utilized, and the philosophical positioning of the

researcher, in this case myself, will influence the way in which I work within this thesis.

At the basic level, my philosophical positioning could be described as a 'critical realist' position, as articulated by Maxwell (2012). Maxwell (2012) stated that critical realists retain an ontological realism as they acknowledge there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories and constructions, whilst understanding and accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our understanding of this world and how we construct it from our own perspectives, experiences and standpoints). Maxwell (2012) further stated it is possible to hold an assumption of a reality independent of our constructions of it, however acknowledge that all our knowledge of the assumption is positional and theory-laden. To add my own perspectives on this, I too also believe a real world exists independently of my thoughts, perspectives, constructions and understanding of this world, yet I construct my thoughts, beliefs and theories from my own standpoint (Maxwell, 2012).

Critical realists agree that there is no possibility of having a single, one correct way of understanding the world, and many critical realists argue the only way to gain a greater understanding of the world, is to listen and further develop our knowledge from informed individuals with expert knowledge within that specific area, which has been assessed through personal experiences (Maxwell, 2012).

3.3.1 The Person

At this point, I think it's important to give an overview of who I am, so you, the reader can understand my positioning, how this may impact the research (more so in study

two and three) and why, perhaps, my beliefs, thoughts, perspectives and experiences may ultimately impact this research in some way. Littlewood (2005) stated that as social researchers, we are part of the research and are affected by the research also. Furthermore, Foley (2002) suggested within ethnographic research and often other forms of social research, the researcher should explore the relationship between 'self' and the 'other' and indicate their biographical positioning and how this may impact the research process.

Football and sport in general has [mostly] always been a big part of my life, and fortunately I was always a [fairly] good football player, which was an important characteristic for a lad from Liverpool. To be honest, I was always good at most sports, and would compete for the school in most other competitions alongside football including cricket, rugby, badminton and athletics and boxed at a local amateur boxing club. However, whilst I was very good at most sports, I was never good enough to play professionally, even though as a child it was my dream to play for Liverpool FC. This carried on through college, were I played for the college football team and also for the youth team of a 'semi-professional' club in Wales for a short period. This introduction would suggest I love sport, and love competition, however, this is only half true.

I remember my first grass roots football team; I played a total of one game. I was 7, and the coach was roaring at me to defend goal side. He then substituted me. My dad never asked me did I want to go back, and I never asked to go back either. Things then on improved when I found teams with supportive coaches, I actually remember at the age of 13, an Everton scout telling me if I grew a little bit more, he'd take me up for a

trial. I nodded to him, but even as a child thought it was a ridiculous comment. I'm going to grow in the future, aren't I, I thought? How does he know what I'm going to be like in 2, 3 years? Even at this age, the idea of talent development in football was of interest to me.

At times, I hated competition, because I was so competitive, I feared failure. Sometimes, I would be happy when games were called off due to bad weather. I remember a time when my team signed a new player in my position; I didn't turn up that weekend due to 'being sick'. Really, I was so afraid I'd start on the bench, something I hated, to be seen as 'not good enough'. Whilst now I like to think I confront these issues more, this feeling has always stayed with me, and I don't know why. I was never pressured from my family, it's just a feeling that has been, and I think always will be, there.

When I went to university, I stopped playing football for a while, but my interest in talent development from those years ago remained, and began to grow and grow. At university, it is here were I learnt the importance of the 'wider' issues in talent development, and I excelled in psychological and sociological subjects. I loved my qualitative dissertation work, which led me to pursuit an MPhil (Study One of this PhD) at the same time the introduction of the EPPP was made, in then which I was fortunate to seek fee-funding to turn this into a part-time PhD. Alongside this PhD and part time teaching contracts; over the past four years, I have been fortunate to work for two professional football club academies (not included within this research) in Technical Analyst roles. I think it's fair to say I have at least a basic understanding of the tactical, technical, social and psychological aspects of football and talent

development in football. I have seen the sacrifices many of these young football players make, in pursuit of their dream of becoming a professional football player. I have also seen first hand, the ultra competitive environment that surrounds professional football, and just how difficult it is for even the players gifted with elite technical ability, to make it to the top of elite level football. Ultimately, I acknowledge these experiences, both personal and professional, have undoubtedly shaped in some way this thesis (Littlewood, 2005).

3.3.2 The Academic

In addition to discussing my personal background, experiences and interests I think it's important to also spend some time highlighting and establishing my development as an academic and researcher, and how this has impacted my epistemological position and also the methodology utilized within this research. As highlighted, my first real experience of conducting research was as a third year Sports Science student at Liverpool John Moores University. It was a 'traditional' qualitative research study utilizing semi-structures interviews with thematic analysis. I loved the designing, collecting, analyzing and representing the data that I had captured and analyzed, helping to contribute to knowledge in supporting athletes and young persons involved within sport. Following this, I successfully applied to continue studying with an MPhil and after reading (both theory and applied work) I decided I wanted to pursue my main interest, talent development in football, in particularly due to the significant changes in structure with regards to the EPPP (2012). It was perhaps an indicator of the level of my knowledge with regards to research, methodologies and epistemological positioning at the time that the first study I chose is deemed a 'traditional' qualitative study (Biddle et al., 2001). Upon choosing the methods for Study One, I underwent

qualitative technical training, alongside reading ‘help guides to analyzing qualitative research’ focusing specifically on the collection, analysis and representation of qualitative data from semi-structures interviews. At this stage of my academic career, it would be perhaps fair to say I still viewed research through a ‘very scientific paradigm’ and viewed the research of Study One to be evaluated through a certain set of criteria perhaps different to Studies Two and Three. Reflecting on this journey, whilst I understood that my research was post-positivistic, I still was influenced by the positivistic paradigm that I had engaged in during my BSc (Hons) Sports Science degree, and therefore followed more traditional, early qualitative guidelines such as establishing trustworthiness which aligns to positivistic notions of validity and reliability (Biddle et al., 2001).

As I developed as a researcher and academic, through meetings and discussions with my Director of Studies, engaging in qualitative research group meetings and expanding my reading beyond published articles surrounding the more technical aspects of qualitative research and towards the philosophy of science and knowledge, I began to understand further the paradigms of critical realism (Bhaskar) and constructivism (Foucault) and how they help myself understand the world, and how I viewed it. Reading these influential works shifted my fundamental beliefs with regards to research, understanding the true meanings of post-positivism and moving towards (and perhaps beyond) a critical realism paradigm. The reason I say perhaps beyond, is that I was further influenced by work surrounding interpretivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and the commonalities this framework shares with critical realism, such as both critical realism and interpretivism agree on the situated nature of knowledge, and the assumption that observation is value-laden (Dobson, 2003).

After I was successful in gaining fee funding to continue and transfer my MPhil into a part-time PhD, I had substantially developed my knowledge of research and the different philosophies, approaches and paradigms within qualitative research. I now understood the freedom and creative license that was afforded to qualitative researchers, and how the research *"cannot simply transcribe or support, but it must also persuade…"* (Atikinson, 1990, p.15). Furthermore, Biddle et al. (2001) suggested a number of issues of previous qualitative research that attempt to 'validate' the research by excluding the researcher from the research, even when the researcher is instrumental in the data collection and analysis process. You can perhaps see my development and growing confidence as a qualitative researcher throughout this thesis. Within the first study, influenced by my previous degree in a very scientific area, I too excluded myself from the text. Whilst this is justified due to the nature of Study One, you can see the creative license I afford myself (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), the importance of the researcher understanding his role within the research, and the different evaluation criteria I establish for Studies Two and Three - such as authenticity, resonance and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010).

3.4 – Positioning of the Current Thesis

As I have stated, my philosophical positioning is a critical realist. However, philosophers have argued on what critical realism means, with many definitions being highlighted across different pieces of work (Groff, 2007). Nevertheless, at the most basic assumption, a critical realist retains an ontological realism perspective (there is a real world that exists, which is independent of our perceptions, theories and constructions) however also accepting a form of epistemologically constructivism and

relativism (that our understanding of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint). Overall, the different forms of realism agree that there is no single, correct *understanding* of the world, independent of any particular viewpoint (Putnam, 1999). This philosophical positioning within social research has become a popular position, in contrast to the radical constructivism that states there is no reality, only our constructions of it. Furthermore, the critical realism view has often been presented as a 'common sense' framework for social qualitative research as Barth (1997) argues, *"like most of us, I assume that there is a real world out there, but that our representations of that world are constructions. People create and apply these constructions in a struggle to grasp the world, relate to it, and manipulate it through concepts, knowledge and acts"* (p87).

In recent years, the growing interest in critical realism as a philosophical paradigm has been, mainly, due to the works of Bhaskar (1975, 1998). It was these early works that explained the essential foundations of the critical realism paradigm, related to examining causal explanations of social phenomenon without the added complexities of his later work. Critical realism generally assumes that the theories generated through scientific research must revolve in someway around the independent reality of the world, although humans are unable to fully understand or observe this reality (Bhasker, 1998). Wynn and Williams (2012), building on from the work of Bhasker (1975), stated the aim of research adopting a critical realist position is to explain the mechanisms that generate a certain event, as opposed to the ability to make predictions about future events (Wynn & Williams, 2012). With regards to this, critical realism seeks to identify the causes of phenomenon and the meanings behind it, as opposed to making precise predictions, which require we are able to control or determine specific

conditions, which affect the mechanisms we are aiming to study. This also holds true for this thesis and its aims. I will seek to explore, through qualitative research, the developing mastery phase within EPL football and the organisational, psychosocial issues related to this phase of development, the causes of these issues and the meaning behind them. I will not attempt to generalize the results of this research, although the research will help us further understand the psychosocial issues within this phase of EPL football and young football players development in general. Furthermore, I will not seek to make exact predictions based on this research, although I acknowledge this research can act as a guide for further research within this area and as a result I can make recommendations and suggestions (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

Due to this research utilising semi-structured interviews, ethnographic research and longitude unstructured interviews in the three respective studies, I have chosen to give an overview of my philosophical positioning and the previous research I have read with respect to research paradigms here, as opposed to detailing why I chose the each particular method and the following procedures. With regards to this, I will give a detailed explanation of each methodological procedure, data collection and analysis within each study (chapters 4, 5 and 6) of each respective study.

Chapter 4. Study One

4. 1 Introduction

As highlighted in the opening sections of this thesis, the developing mastery phase is a critical phase of development when a player receives a one or two year professional contract after making the transition from the youth academy. However, the player may not necessarily play for, or even belong to the first team (Richardson et al., 2013). This stage of an elite young player's career appears to be an often difficult, lonely period for players who often struggle to come to turns with the brutal, macho culture that exists within the first team world (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013).

The EPPP discusses the responsibilities of academy managers and coaches. These responsibilities include; a curriculum that reflects the clubs footballing philosophy, the specific content of each clubs coaching programme, maintaining the coach to player ratios and also the overall management of player progression. At the *"professional development stage",* which covers ages 16-21years, the EPPP recommends there should be at least two full time development coaches, in addition to part time coaches who will have coaching access of at least sixteen hours per week. In addition to this, the EPPP further suggests at this stage of a player's career they should be *"learning to win, in highly competitive professional rehearsal games"* (EPPP, 2011, p43).

With the increasing importance of the coach within player development (EPPP, 2012), and the previous research highlighting the influence of the coach within the culture of elite and professional football (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac & Jones 2009a; 2009b; 2012; Roderick, 2006) it would appear essential to explore the structure, role,

responsibilities and purpose of the under21 development coach at this crucial stage of a young players career.

Aim 1 - To explore how the developing mastery coach fits into the organisational structure and culture of the club and the subsequent impact this has on the coach's approach to coaching within the club.

4.2 Methodology

4.2.1 Qualitative Approach

In order to truly explore the perspectives and experiences of under21 development coaches within professional football clubs, it was deemed appropriate to adopt a qualitative position for the study. Hoepfl (1997) states by using a naturalistic approach within qualitative research, a more context, specific understanding of a particular phenomenon can be gained for the study. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2002) suggests a main advantage of adopting a qualitative approach is to allow the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding about the participant's personal paradigms, perspectives and experiences, therefore characterising the surrounding environment (Relvas, 2010).

4.2.1.1 Qualitative Approach - Interviewing

Fontana and Frey (1994) suggest interviewing is one of the most powerful ways researchers can try to understand fellow human beings. The aim of the research interview is to *"gain an insight into an individual's perspective and experiences of a particular issue"* (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p315).

Patton (1990) identifies the three types of interviews used in qualitative research, which are; informal conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews and standardized open-ended interviews. Biddle et al. (2001) suggests a combined procedure of semi-structured interviews and content analysis is the leading form of qualitative research used within sport and exercise psychology. Furthermore, Hoepfl (1997) states an interview guide is a list of questions or areas the researcher wants to explore and although it is to ensure the same area of information is obtained from each participants, researchers must remember there are no predetermined responses. In addition to this, within semi-structured interviews the researcher is free to explore any probes within the predetermined areas (Hoepfl, 1997).

4.2.2 Constructing the Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was carefully designed in an attempt to explore the cultural, social and psychological issues players face at the 18-21 phase of development, whilst further exploring cultural and environmental issues for the under21 development coaches of each professional club. In order to truly explore this particular context, it was essential to allow each under21 development coach to freely express their perspectives, experiences and beliefs (Patton, 1990).

Hoepfl (1997) suggests interview guides make interviewing multiple participants more systematic and comprehensive, whilst helping keep interactions focused. In this regard, an interview schedule was developed in order to support the interviewer throughout the interview process. Due to the nature of the research, the interview guide was created using both relevant theoretical literature as advocated by (Patton, 1990)

such as the work of Wylleman & Lavalle (2004), Bloom (1985), and Potrac et a., (2012) alongside craft knowledge from the researcher's personal experiences and further utilising the supervisory team's extensive knowledge and experiences within the area of 'psychology and development' within professional and elite football.

The interview guide was pilot tested with a development coach (not under21) at an English Premier League club. The pilot interview was audio recorded which allowed the supervisory team to listen back and give advice on the researcher's interviewing style and techniques, and how to further develop the interview guide. Through peer triangulation (Biddle et al., 2001) and pilot work, the interview guide was continually developed and refined until a final version was achieved (see interview schedule below.)

4.2.3 Summation of Interview Schedule

Phase 1 – Introduction

Explaining the structure of the interview (expected time, interview schedule and aims) and to reinforce confidentiality for the participant.

Once again thank you for allowing myself to conduct this interview with you today. The aim of the interview is to explore your roles and responsibilities as U21 Development Coach at your club. The interview will further seek to examine from your perspective, of the issues and difficulties players have to face at the 'post academy phase' and your role in developing these players for the first team. Finally I just wanted to reinforce complete confidentiality of your name when it is mentioned within the interview process. If I do say your name whilst the interview is taking place I can assure you it will be changed to another name in my write up.

Phase 2 – Coach's Previous Background

The aim of this phase of the interview is to find about how you got to where you are today. This will explore your career playing the game, if any, and the journey you took to become an U21 development coach for an elite level club.

- Previous playing history, if any.
- Previous club – level of club, history, style of play.
- Routeway into coaching – why did you want to coach?

Phase 3 – Organisational Culture & Structure of Club & The EPPP

The aim of this phase of the interview is to explore the structure of your club and where the under21 development phase fits into this organization.

- Current club structure in relation to the under21 phase of development
- Proximity in relation to academy / first team – what do you feel part of?
- Relationships with other key staff – first team manager / academy manager?
- Introduction of the EPPP – your views and the U21/Post Academy Phase (EPPP, 2011).

Phase 4 The Role, Responsibilities and Purposes of Under21 Development Coaches

The aim of this phase is to, from your perspective; gain a greater understanding of the issues and young challenges young players face at the post academy/U21 phase within an elite level club.

- Your role at the club – Development V Winning (Cushion & Jones, 2006).
- How are you judged? Your experiences?
- Relationship with U21 players/first team manager/under 18 coach etc (Bloom, 1985; Richardson et al., 2012)
- Your coaching philosophy – how this fits in with clubs philosophy.

Thank participant for interview and time taken out and once more reinforce complete confidentiality

Phase 1 of the interview schedule attempted to build a rapport with the participant whilst also allowing the researcher to illuminate any doubts the participant had about the study (Hoepfl, 1997). Although each participant was previously informed of the aims of the interview, it seemed appropriate to reinforce such information, this also acted as a successful 'ice breaker' with each participant. Furthermore, each participant was reminded of the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview, with the researcher stating the participant's name *"will not be attached to the study in any way, shape or form"*.

Phase 2 continued as an 'ice breaker', however was also used to explore the background of each coach. The aim of this phase was to eliminate any nervousness that may exist for the participant and allow the participant to feel relaxed and comfortable with the interview, this was achieved by asking generic, easy to answer questions. Phase 2 focused on the coaches' previous experiences within professional

football, allowing the participant to chronologically map each coach's pathway through coaching, up until their current job as under21 development coach.

Phase 3 examined the structures of the coaches' respective clubs and the situation of the developing mastery phase within the structure of the club and the coaches relationships with key stakeholders across the club such as first team managers and academy managers.

Phase 4 explored the role and responsibilities of each under21 development coach at their respective clubs. This phase further explored the coaches' approaches with regards to 'development' and 'winning' and how that fits with the football clubs philosophy and any issues coaches' face working with players at this phase of development.

Lastly, the researcher thanked each participant for the time taken out to allow the interview to take place, and reinforced anonymity and confidentiality of the study.

4.2.4 Sample & Procedure

Letters were sent out to a number of under21 development coaches at professional football clubs across the UK. All of the coaches that replied to the original letter and agreed to the interview were from professional and elite football clubs. The sample for the study consisted of six under21 development coaches from elite level clubs across the UK. All coaches were Under21 coaches at English Premier League football clubs. Participants had at least one season at their respective clubs as an under21 development coach. After each participant agreed to the interview, consent forms (see

appendix) and information sheets (see appendix) were sent out to each participant. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. They were also assured the study was completely anonymous and confidential.

It has been argued that in order to gather rich, meaningful, contextual data, the researcher should first build a relationship of trust and confidence with research participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994). However, this is often difficult when researching within the elite sporting environment, in particular football which is a closed off environment (Parker, 1996). To address this, the researcher attempted to build rapport with participants through the use of social networking sites and emails. Six individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Biddle et al., 2001; Hoepfl, 1997) were undertaken with under21 development coaches' over a period of eight months, between April 2013 and November 2013. Each interview took place at the under21 development coach's respective club. All interviews were recorded with a dictaphone.

4.2.5 Data Analysis and Representation

To ensure and enhance the credibility, Biddle et al. (2001) suggests it's of significance importance to provide a detailed set of procedural descriptions for both the interview and analysis process. With regards to this, the analysis procedure implemented for the research is detailed chronologically below:

Firstly, all interviews were listened to by the primary researcher. Following that, interviews were transcribed verbatim and produced in A4 double spaced text by the researcher, yielding approximately 50,000 words. Transcripts were read over and over to enable the researcher to become familiar with the data (Maykut & Morehouse,

1994). The transcribing, reading and rereading of the transcripts were essential in order to provide an authentic representation of the interview and avoid any assumptions or non-contextualised perspectives that may underpin the research (Relvas, 2010).

Once all transcripts had been read and reread for familiarisation, transcripts were analysed using content analysis procedures (Biddle et al., 2001; Côté et al,. 1993). Côté et al. (1993) identified content analysis as a procedure that manages transcribed material by coding large quantities of data into categories that represent a common theme. A combination of both deductive and inductive analysis has been recommended as an effective approach in analysing qualitative data (see Patton, 1980 1990; 2002). In this regards, early analysis was deductively grounded, using previous related literature, followed by an inductive approach with emerging quotes from the transcripts.

The content analysis process began by identifying an undeveloped unit of analysis, such as a single quote stating a subjective experience. This undeveloped unit of analysis is labelled as a 'raw data theme'. Subsequently, first order themes were then identified by clustering quotes with a common thread, which then became the emergent themes (Biddle et al., 2001). The same clustering process used for the first order themes was also used to identify new higher-level themes, such as a second order theme. This process was continued until it was impossible to create any higher-level themes (Biddle et al., 2001). Furthermore, during the clustering process, a tagging system was adopted in order to retain the confidentiality of the participants. The researcher decided on alternative names for each coach and their respective club for

anonymity. Relevant verbatim quotes were tagged and aligned to the alternative names.

Once the clustering process was carried out by the researcher, it was further discussed with the researcher's three supervisors to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Biddle et al., 2001), providing a triangulation process within the analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The supervisory team contained experienced sociological and psychological qualitative researchers, with a wealth of knowledge and experience within the field of professional football. The researcher presented the 'final' themes from the analysis to the supervisory (triangulation) team. Furthermore, the researcher also presented associated literature aligning with the emerging themes (Côté et al,. 1999). If any disagreement occurred throughout the triangulation process, transcripts would be reviewed, with contextual verbatim quotes possibly being re-positioned or themes being reworded until an agreement was reached by each member of the triangulation team. Decrop (1999) suggests by engaging in the triangulation process, qualitative findings are strengthened due to allowing more than one view of the data, reducing the potential bias of the researcher. Therefore, the contextual quotes highlighted and themes created in the following 'Results and Discussion' section are considered to be clear representations of each participant's experience and perspective on the 18-21 phase of development within elite and professional football.

4.3 Results and Discussion

To enable the reader to become familiar with each participant, the next section briefly introduces each development coach and their background. The coaches' biographies

are then followed by an 'Organisational Structure' section, highlighting the differing organisational structures in place at these professional clubs within the study. Following that, data reflecting the relevant themes are presented alongside contextual verbatim quotes from each respective participant to truly capture the role, responsibilities, purpose and issues for under21 development coaches.

4.3.1 Coach Biographies

Marc Williams – Allerton City

Marc had a successful playing career for various clubs within League 1 and the Championship. Marc also gained promotion to the Premier League within one of his former clubs as a player. Towards the end of his career Marc was asked by his current first team manager to become the assistant manager. Marc already had his UEFA B Licence which he had secured through his playing years. Marc then worked at two different football league clubs in assistant manager roles before coming to Allerton City as a scout. Mark then began to *"help out"* in academy games whilst scouting. Mark was then appointed under 18's development coach, which he worked as for two years before making the move up to under 21 development coach at Alllerton City. Allerton City are a well-established Premier League side, having over 10 years' experience within the Premiership.

Jordan Ager – Bowring FC

Jordan had a less *"conventional route"* into elite level coaching compared to the other coaches within the study. Jordan played professional football from the age of 18 through to late 20s. However, throughout that time Jordan *"had a team"* that he coached whether it was a youth team or a local football team. Jordan took his badges

whilst playing and at the age of 29 left professional football to pursue a career in *"football coaching and management"*. Jordan coached and managed at various youth and first team roles at clubs within the football league before joining a top English Premier League club as a development coach. Jordan was there for over 5 years before making the switch to Bowring FC as under21 development coach. Bowring FC are one of the top Premier League sides in England, having had a vast amount of experience playing in the UEFA Champions League.

Adam Fairclough – Crosby Town

Adam came to England for numerous trials as a player within the English Premier League. Adam was signed by a League Two club, where he had a successful career spanning 4 years before moving on to another League Two club. Adam was never *"100% convinced"* about coaching due to his desire to return to his home country. Adam enrolled on the UEFA B Licence whilst still a player and *"quite enjoyed it"*. The first team manager at Crosby Town, who previously had worked with Adam at another club, offered Adam a job at Crosby Town under the role of development coach. Crosby Town are one of the smaller Premier League clubs, however have had maintained their Premier League status for over 7 years.

Shane Whelan – Brentwood FC

Shane started his career as a player, however Shane only ever played at youth and reserve team level before switching to coaching, where he gained his A Licence at 21. Shane has *"been in coaching for nearly 30 years"*. Within that time, Shane has had various youth and reserve team coaching roles at a number of clubs and has also had a spell as a first team manager for a *"short period of time"*. Furthermore, Shane has

also coached nationally at under21 level. It is now Shane's third year as Development Coach at Brentwood FC. Brentwood FC have had numerous years' experience within the English Premier League.

Rob Lynn – Netherly FC

Rob retired from professional football in 2008 due to an injury. Rob had a successful footballing career, playing for many Premiership and Championship sides. On one of Rob's visits to his former club, the first team manager asked if he'd like to come and do some coaching sessions. Rob agreed *"and it really just snowballed from there"*. Rob started out as an assistant under21 coach and over months Rob began to take more and more sessions and in 2009 was appointed Reserve Team Manager of Netherly FC. Netherly FC are a well-established Premier League side who have maintained their Premier League status since its change from the old First Division in 1992.

Kieran Campbell – Huyton Athletic

Kieran started his playing career at one of the top Premier League clubs, playing a handful of games before being released. Kieran played for numerous lower league English football clubs. Whilst being a player Kieran also began to take his coaching badges and now has the Pro Licence Coaching Badge. Kieran has been at Huyton Athletic for 4 years, after starting out coaching on an exchange programme. Kieran was lead coach for the 12-16 age groups before being asked to be the Assistant Under21 Development Coach. Huyton Athletic are one of the top Premiership clubs in the league. Huyton Athletic are regulars in the Champions League and are regular challenges for the English Premier League.

As highlighted above, all coaches had previous playing experience within professional football, whether that be within a youth or first team context. Furthermore, all clubs were considered an elite level football club due to their significant experience within the English Premier League. As the coaches and clubs background has now been briefly introduced, it seems pertinent to highlight the typical general structures of the football clubs within this study.

4.4 General Club Structure

Within the research, each football club had a Board of Directors. A Board of Directors within a professional football club typically has a number of positions, including; Owner, Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer(s). After the Board of Directors, there appeared to be two distinct, general organisational structures within the 6 clubs. Structure A (N=5) was used by the majority of clubs, whilst Structure B (N=1) was in the minority.

Within Structure A, the First Team Manager of football clubs had control over all footballing matters within the club, with some coaches (n=3) suggesting First Team Managers 'always have the final say'. Nevertheless, each club within this structure had an Academy Manager who generally took charge of the academy on a day-to-day basis, yet still reported to the First Team Manager over issues such as signings, contracts, loans and player development:

"I think the manager has to always have the final say because at the end of the day it's my opinion, you know the manager obviously is the one and fundamentally the main man at the club" [Rob – Netherly FC]

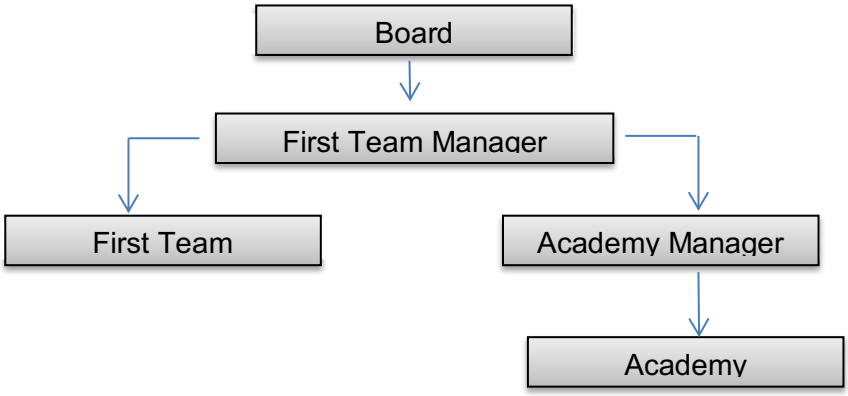

Figure 3: Representation of Structure A evidenced at 5 clubs within the research

Structure B although similar, had one significant extra role within the setup, labelled as 'Director of Football'. Within this structure, the Director of Football operated as a link between the Board of Directors and the two football departments within each club (academy and first team). The Director of Football appeared to situate as a direct link between the academy, the first team and the board. The Director of Football was also responsible for ensuring the philosophy of the football club was being carried out through the academy and the first team (EPPP, 2011):

"We all know how we want to play, the new manager has come in with ideas, which he discussed with the Director of Football, who then speaks with the academy managers and directors and the philosophy travels down right into the academy" [Kieran – Huyton Athletic]

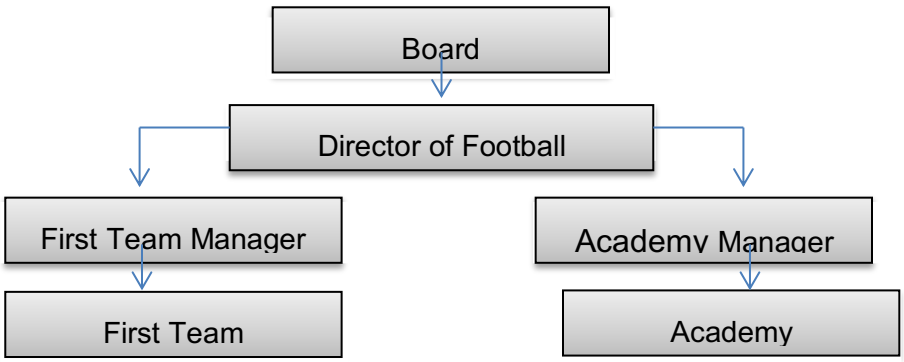

Figure 4: Representation of Structure B evidenced at 1 club within the research

Overall, mainstream management research has often failed to truly explore organisational management within elite level sport (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007). However, the work of Gammelsæter (2006), Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) and Relvas et al. (2010), has successfully given an insight into the business orientated structures of top professional football clubs. Furthermore, these researchers' also align their work with Mintzberg's (1979) synthesis of the structuring of organisations. In this regard, it seems appropriate to align the current organisational structures within this research to similar theoretical context.

The five basic parts of Mintzberg (1979) research within contemporary organisation's which are: the strategic apex, the middle line, operating core, the technostructure and the support staff. It appears possible to align Mintzberg's (1979) basic parts of an organisation within the clubs. The *strategic apex* is typically the full time, top managers of an organisation. The strategic apex can be related to the *board of directors*, in particular the *chairmen* and *chief executive*. Typically, the middle line is a hierarchy of personnel between the strategix apex and the core, within the football club organisation this can be aligned to the *director of football* (Structure B), *first team manager* and *academy manager*. The *operating core* is the basis of the organisation and business; this relates to the *football players* within the club. Finally, the *technostructure* and *support staff* consists of all the components that operationalise within the club to support the operating core, for example the strength and conditioning coach, player welfare officer or physiotherapists.

In both Structure A and Structure B, the strategic apex of the club, which is the board of directors, appeared to be the main, overall decision-makers within their respective clubs. Although, typically chairmen and chief executives are from a non-footballing background, they would have the final decision on budgets, contracts and transfers within both the academy and first team. The middle line within the clubs differed depending on the structure but essentially appeared to be the Director of Football, First Team Manager and Academy Manager respectively. Interestingly, only a small number of clubs within this research (N=1) had a Director of Football role, in comparison to Relvas et al. (2010) research were a Director of Football, commonly known as a Sports Director was common practise within organisational structures in European football. In this regard, elite and professional English football teams within this study appear to still favour the more traditional approach of one person, usually the First Team Manager taking full responsibility of all footballing matters within the club as opposed to a Sports Director/Director of Football.

Further exploring Mintzberg's (1979) work, Mintzberg suggests there are 5 clear, different types of organisational structures which are; the entrepreneurial organisation, the machine organisation, the professional organisation, the divisional organisation and the innovative organisation. Interestingly, when exploring Mintzberg's (1979) different types of organisational structures, a typical elite level football club's organisation appeared to align with Mintzberg's types of organisations, perhaps highlighting the uniqueness of the business and management of elite level football club. For example, the 'professional organisation' relies on heavily trained professionals who demand control of their own work with a high degree of specialization. This seems to align with the many different specialized departments

within an elite level football club, such as Sports Science Department, Medical Department, and Coaching Department. However, an elite level football organisation could also align with the 'machine organisation', this type of organisation can lead to specialization where functional unities (i.e academy and first team departments) may have conflicting goals (Relvas et al., 2010). Lastly, Mintzberg (1979) reports the 'innovative organisation' as a fast paced organisation with rapid change, which often results in stress for workers. This would also appear to relate to an elite level football organisation as they are also considered fast paced environments with rapid change (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Relvas et al., 2010).

4.4.1 Club Structures in relation to The Developing Mastery Phase

As the preceding section presented a perspective and critique of the typical general club structures within elite and professional football clubs across the UK, it would now seem essential to further elaborate on the club structure in relation to the academy and first team day-to-day operations, specifically in relation to the under21s phase of development and the introduction of the EPPP (EPPP, 2011). As highlighted in the introduction, Richardson et al. (2012b) and Relvas et al. (2010) identified the post academy phase as a critical development for young, elite level players. In this regard, the EPPP also appeared to recognize the need for a competitive development phase for these 18-21 year old players. The 'post academy phase', '18-21 phase of development' and 'developing mastery phase' have all been used to identify this phase of development within this and other literature. However, throughout the rest of the thesis this stage of development will be labelled as the 'developing mastery phase'.

Although all football clubs within the research had similar general organizational structures, each respective football club differed (slightly) in their organisational structure with regards to the day-to-day operations and training environment, both from a physical and cultural perspective (Relvas et al., 2010). Aligning with Relvas et al. (2010) work, there appeared to be a 'distance' that existed between the academy and first team environments. The distance could have been physical, such as separate training facilities for the academy and first team, or cultural, where the two environments and distinct operational practises differ. Two of the clubs within the study appeared to have both physical and cultural distances separating the academy and first team environments (Relvas et al., 2010).

Out of the 6 football clubs within the research, 3 of the clubs (Netherly FC, Brentwood FC and Aldham City) where situated on one training site incorporating both the academy and the first team environments. Nevertheless, it was apparent that even when physical structures combined both academies and first team environments, there was a distance separating the two, whether that be 'official' or 'unofficial' distances:

"It's completely split down the middle, so one half is the first team / reserves. On the other half is the academy which runs from 7-18. The academy side you've got all the academy coaches from age 7-18, some part time, majority full time. From the first team point of view the manager's office, assistant, coaches room, managers PA, medical departments, reserve team manager, first team analysts, player liaison" [Rob – Netherly FC]

"It's all on one site… and you know on a normal training day you've got the under 18s, the under 21s and the first team group all within a stone throw of each other, which is a good thing. Sometimes it can be a little bit of a distraction…I've got to be careful where I am and where I stand because if I am standing my back to the players of the first team then they are looking over… but sometimes I quite like the fact they're looking over because at times I actively encourage it and you know I am like "you

[players] are all looking over there, that's where I want you to go, you've got to work hard to get there" [Marc – Allerton City]

Within the quote above, Marc appears to be suggesting that although the Under18s, the Under21s and the First Team are in close proximity of each other, there appeared to be a possible cultural distance separating the Under21s and First Team, evidenced in Marc's *"you are looking over there, that's where I want you to go, you've got to work hard to get there"* quote. This highlights that although the teams are *"within a stone throw away"* from each other, there is an almost 'unofficial line' that separates the two environments (Relvas et al., 2010).

The other 3 clubs within the research (Bowring FC, Colby Town, Roby Athletic) had a 'split site' physical structural layout. This meant the academy and first team where situated at different training facilities, all miles apart. Jordan, under21 coach at Bowring FC stated having a split site *"is harder, I'd imagine, this way"* as the academy is a *"bubble existing outside the first team"*:

> *"There is not the interaction with the first team players and the first team staff on a daily basis. If you look into model behaviour, that's what you'd want the kids to be surrounded by, that's what you'd want the staff to be surrounded by, but you don't have that. So it's very much a bubble existing outside of the first team." [Jordan – Bowring FC]*

Additionally, Kieran identifies future plans for Roby Athletic to move to a larger training site that will incorporate both the academy and first team, further stating the advantages this will bring:

"The manager and Freddie they're so busy with different things going on its actually harder than what that sounds, you know if it was on the same site and they can walk around and it takes them 5 minutes to go and watch, coz I know they've both got an eagerness to see young players coming through." [Kieran – Huyton Athletic]

To give the issue some theoretical context, the distinct environments of the academy and first team can perhaps be related to a form of 'bad practise' which is deeply rooted within the culture of professional football (Richardson et al., 2013). Richardson et al. (2013) suggest football suffers from an entrenched and robust culture which has been carried through generations. With regards to this statement, Wilson (2001) identifies two main types of culture; the visible level which refers to observed behaviours and the physical or social environment and also the deeper level which is typically related to features that cannot be observed, these may include the norms, values and goals of the organisation (Richardson et al., 2013). Furthermore, Wilson (2001) also suggests often, organisations are held hostage to the formation of distinct sub-cultures which can co-exist in harmony, conflict or indifference to each other. The distinct sub-cultures between the academy and first team environments were also highlighted in Relvas et al. (2010). Furthermore, Relvas et al. (2010) reported the academy and first team environments often operated in conflict of each other, due to the differing roles, responsibilities and overall philosophies of each environment. It is possible to suggest the reasoning behind the distinct, dissimilar environments of the academy and first team is the 'this is how we do things around here' culture that permeates professional football and has most likely been passed down through the generations (Richardson et al., 2013).

Perhaps, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP, 2011), and more specifically the creation of the Professional Development League, has been established in an attempt to develop a more fluid connection between the academy and first team environments. A number of coaches' highlighted a positive aspect of the implementation of the EPPP was, as Shane suggested improving *"the link between the academy and first team":*

> *"It's all changed with the EPPP, like academies are now 21s down, so [before] it's always been really tight for the academy for 18s down… the support structure we've got for the boys is brilliant but then the reserve team was always a different age and came under the first team, but because of the new structure now it's sort of like a little bit between the two now." [Marc – Allerton City]*

> *"To be fair, credit to the EPPP, that has come in and recognized the issue, created a league for the players during this development, you know basically the under21 players and we've gone from strength to strength." [Shane – Brentwood FC]*

Although coaches' seemed to approve the creating of a developing mastery phase and specifically an under21 league for the players, clubs appeared to differentiate with regards to the location of the *"21s"* within the organisational structure of each club. In this regard, Bowring FC was the only club whose developing mastery players appeared to be situated, both physically and also culturally within the academy structure. Contrary to this, Huyton Athletic, Crosby Town and Netherly FC developing mastery phase players where situated within the first team environment:

> *"We've got the under18s, the under 21s and the first team [located within the same building]. It is all a chain reaction, this season with the under21s we've had one or two that has moved up into the first team and they train with the first team a lot but this then has a knock on effect because when that happens then they get pushed up, the better ones we think who seem more involved with the*

under21s then they will step up into the under21s which is a chain reaction to it all." [Adam – Crosby Town]

"The 21s are located on the first team side of the building, we're located next to the first team because we have to sometimes be close to them when we train because they might need us to train with them, or they might need a couple of our lads to join in to make their numbers up, and that from the 21s the next step for them is, or the next progression for them is the first team. So it's important that there in and around that first team group." [Rob – Netherly FC]

However, although Netherly FC were located *"in and around that first team group"*, Rob identified the developing mastery phase is a *"link to the first team and the academy stroke 18s mainly".* It could be suggested that, although the *"21s"* of Netherly FC are situated within the *"first team side of the building"*, perhaps culturally, Rob's coaching and players is more so aligned, to an extent, with the academy environment. Similarly, Brentwood FC's development mastery phase were situated, physically at least, between the academy and first team environments:

"I see it as different coaches and different clubs will do it a different way but I'd like to think that we are in between the academy and the first team… I think it's too big a gap to from under18s as an 18s player unless you're really exceptional physically, tactically and the rest and I think that is the basis of the under21s that it gives the players an extra 2 years." [Shane – Brentwood FC]

However, although Marc reported Allerton City's Under21s as *"little bit between"* the academy and first team environments with regards to the training environment, Marc suggested although now *"academies are 21s down",* and Marc is *"very, very close"* with the academy staff, Marc's office is located within the first team environment, whilst the *"under18s and so on is all based in another section, now I'm 21s I'm over here with the first team offices."*

Whilst the coaches' within this research highlighted the need for the introduction of an 'extra' phase of development and an Under21 league, the football clubs within the research appeared to differentiate in their approach to managing the Under21s with regards to the organisational structure. Accordingly, perhaps the EPPP can be criticised for its vagueness and ambiguity with regards to the 18-21 phase of development. In relation to this, the following section will attempt to highlight the issues and difficulties the under21 development coaches' encountered with concerns surrounding role clarity, responsibilities and staff communication issues associated with the EPPP.

4.5 Environmental Issues Relating to the Developing Mastery Phase of Development

Table 1: Under21 Coaches' Perspectives on Environmental Issues within the Development Mastery Phase

First-Order Category	Second-Order Category	General Dimension
To provide a link between the academy and first team environments (RL, SW, MW). To oversee the development of the Under21s (JA, MW). To develop players for the first team (JA, MW, AF). Negotiate fees for Under21 players (SW) Discussions regarding the loaning and releasing of players (MW, JA, SW, RL, KC) Lack of 'developing mastery' structure for players (JA, MW, KC, SW, RL) Holistic support to players (MW, AF, JA, RL, KC) Having to manage first team players (MW, SW, JA, KC) Preparing sessions and connecting to Sports Science department (KC)	The Role of the Under21 Development Coach	
Positive relationships with first team manager (JA, AF, RL, SW) Non-existent relationship with first team manager (MW) Split site difficult for relationship between academy and first team (JA)	Communication Channels Between Academy, 21s and First Team Staff	

Informal communication with first team staff & manager (JA, SW, AF) Formal communication with first team staff & manager (RL, SW, AF) Relationship due to first team manager background in youth (JA) First team manager attends all/some Under21 games (AF, KC) Discussions regarding the loaning and releasing of players (MW, JA, SW, RL, KC) First team manager always has the final say (JA, SW, RL, MW, AF)		Environmental issues Related to Developing Mastery Phase and Under21 Development Coach
External pressures over winning (MW) Winning Under21 games (KC, SW) Playing style within clubs philosophy (KC, SW) Quality of coaching sessions (SW, KC) Judged on the quality of player that transitions to the first team (JA, SW, RL) Creating the right environment for players to develop (JA, SW, RL, KC, MW) Improvement in players all-round ability (RL, JA, SW)	Evaluation of the Under21 Coach	

4.5.1 The Role of the Under21 Development Coach

Woodman and Hardy (2001) suggest that a 'lack of role structure' and 'lack of awareness of peoples roles' within sport organisations is one of the leading causes of organisational stress. Within this research, under21 development coaches' had a range of different roles within their respective clubs, however, the actual reported role of some of the coaches appeared rather vague with a lack of structure to the role. Rob, of Netherly FC, suggested his role was as broad as *"making them better, that is the best we can do."* Furthermore, Jordan identified his role was predominately to *"oversee the development and pathways for I suppose the under21s".* Rob also highlighted how his role was to link the academy and first team environments:

> *"My role is to erm, basically link, I'm the link to the first team and the academy stroke 18s mainly. I have players, I've got my own group of 21s. I will, I will*

basically hand pick players from the 18s who I think are ready to step up to the 21s." [Rob – Netherly FC]

Furthermore, within the role of an under21 development coach, four out of the six coaches' specifically identified the importance of giving 'holistic' support to players at this stage of development. Jordan suggested within this role he helps players at this stage *"in developing them as human beings, which is a bit flowery but it is true and also realising the skills you will need beyond your first professional contract*." Marc in particular, highlighted the challenges of working with players at this stage of development:

"There is a lot of issues, as much as you coach them to be good footballers you have to deal with all their problems and issues and that as well. That's probably the biggest part of it I think. I believe we've got an excellent programme at my development group, but the most important thing, that is like a generic programme… but the most important thing is treating them as individuals, they've all got their own problems and for me to deal with that and help them and help get the best out of themselves."

Knowles et al. (2005) suggests elite sport coaches are increasingly expected to *"be aware of the performer's overall social and psychological development which extends beyond the coaching environment"* (p1712). In this regard, it appears essential for coaches to take a holistic approach, which goes beyond the 'performance' of the player. Strandberg et al. (2007) identify, from a medical perspective, a holistic approach refers to seeing the person as a 'whole', considering the physical, psychological and social aspects of the person. The quote above from Marc, identifies how within his role, it appears critical to not only understand the *"problems and issues"* these players face during this phase of development, but also *"help them deal"*

with a range of social and psychological issues that typically occurs throughout a young athletes development, in particular during transitional periods (Pummel et al., 2008). Pummel et al. (2008) highlighted how athletes after social support, more so from coaches as the athlete developed and transitioned to higher levels within their sport.

Research into social support experiences of high-level performers (Rees and Hardy, 2000), identified four main types of social support; Emotional support, esteem support, informational support and tangible support. Emotional support relates to when a person turns to others for comfort during times of stress, which can lead a person to feel they are cared for by others (Cutrona & Russel, 2009). Esteem support is the 'bolstering' of a person's self-esteem and sense of competence, such as giving positive feedback to an individual on their skills and abilities (Cutrona & Russel, (2009). Informational support is providing advice or guidance to an individual, whereas tangible support is the physical support to an individual, such as financial assistance (Cutrona & Russel, 2009). In this regard, Rob of Netherly FC, identifies the informational and possible emotional support he can offer to the players:

> *"We know there are a lot of pitfalls out there, are phones are on 24 hours a day, if there in trouble, they know where to contact us, even though it's a very difficult phone call for them. They've got to be open and if they have done something wrong they have to face up to it and learn from it."*

Often athletes within high performance sport and in particular professional football (Richardson et al., 2012), are reluctant to seek social support from coaches due to the tough, macho culture that typically persists within the football environment

(Richardson et al., 2013). This is further highlighted in the above quote by Rob, where he states it may be a *"very difficult phone call"* for a player to make when looking for support. Moreover, Rees and Hardy (2000) recognised this across sports, and stated "*the oft-hailed toughness ideal that sports people should feel they must "go it alone" in their pursuit of success and not seek social support in times of need is outmoded and potentially very limiting." (p344)*. Nevertheless, although the importance of social support has been noted (Rees & Hardy, 2000), it appeared one coach (Shane) from within this research attempted to create a *"tough, demanding environment*" which may possibly lead to a lack of social support for players from Shane, or players feeling reluctant to use Shane as a social support mechanism within this phase of development.

Whilst the coaches broadly specified their roles within their respective clubs (perhaps due to the lack of job description), as providing support to players and overseeing the development programme. However, at this phase of development it appeared there were numerous aspects of their role which could be perceived as negative for both the under21 development and the developing mastery players. In relation to this, Marc of Allerton City highlighted how his role as under21 development coach was still predominantly viewed as a 'reserve team coach':

> *"I was actually talking to my immediate boss this morning my sort of like appraisal, and it's still development coach, you know under21 coach, it's still reserves. It's quite a difficult job, because quite often you'll get disgruntled first team players as they're coming down into the group and can change the dynamic of the whole group and it can be quite difficult." [Marc – Allerton City]*

Within the above quote, Marc highlights how his role within the club as under21 development coach can often be difficult due to the need to manage *"disgruntled"* first team players. However, whereas Marc found this as a difficult challenge managing first team players within the developing mastery phase; Shane of Brentwood FC highlighted this as a positive aspect within the implementation of the EPPP:

> *"We are also allowed to play players down, you can play 3 overage players… the managers very good he'll use that to play players who will probably need games or are coming back from injury so it's an in-between role, a link between the academy and the first team, the youth team coach, the director and the manager." [Shane – Brentwood FC]*

As identified within the above quotes by Marc and Shane respectively, there appeared to be different perspectives, negatively and positively, with regards to managing first team players within the developing mastery phase. Shane also stated how often first team players *"out of favour"* at the club often "drop down" to the under21 level. Jones et al. (2004) suggested elite level coaches often have to carefully manipulate circumstances and other peoples' perceptions to their advantage, such as having a constant "face work" to make athletes trust them and the actions they take. Perhaps cynically, Shane's positive perspectives of coaching and managing first team players within under21 sessions and games could be due to Shane's, like many other coaches', personal career ambitions to coach first team elite level football. By working and coaching first team level players, whilst also building a relationship with players of this standard, Shane may improve his coaching reputation within his respective football club. Nevertheless, Kieran also highlights his thoughts with regards to using

first team players at the developing mastery phase, suggesting it would be a positive thing for the development of the younger players:

> *"The EPPP allows you to use 3 overage players for the under21s, but it's a bit of a shame our manager doesn't utilize that, I'm unsure why. You know, I see it as a win-win, because the first team player will be getting minutes when playing for us, and it will always be a great experience for our 21s because that's a great learner for them, playing with first team players and understanding what it's about." [Kieran – Huyton Athletic]*

The quote above identifies the communication, or lack of communication experienced between the under21 coach and the first team manager. Additionally, whereas Huyton Athletics under21 team were mostly players from the 18-21 age group and perhaps more solid in its structure, Jordan highlighted the difficulties he faces when attempting to manage the players at this stage of development:

> *"It is a real transient group so out of all the groups within the football, the under21s are the ones which is least like a group or least like a team because right, think about my week. So, we've just played Childwall United, and coming up from the youth team to help us for that fixture was James Lyod, Daniel Campbell, Francis Volante, Sean Riley were all there. Shaun Sheedy is a first year but has been playing in that group all along. Coming down from the first team, who you never have access to is Jack Jones, Michael Foster, Luke Murphy. Then in between them all you've got your Close's and your Smiths' who are with you on a daily basis. So you've probably got three groups coming together to play a game on one day, so it's not a team." [Jordan]*

Here, Jordan states how the developing mastery phase *"is a real transient group"*. Jordan also highlights how he often has to coach and manage players from the first

team environment who he never has *"access to"*. This would appear to be a difficult task for the under21 development coach, where they would have to manage players who are at different stages within their development (Bloom, 1985; Van Rossum, 2001). Furthermore, Rob of Netherely FC, also identifies the transient group he has at this stage of development:

> *"I have players, I've got my own group of 21s. I will basically hand pick players from the 18s who I think are ready to step up to the 21s, at this moment in time to give you an idea of what are group consists of, we have 2 16 year olds training with us, we've got 3 17 year olds, we've got 4 or 5 19 year olds and a few 18 year olds involved in that so that gives you an idea of the setup of the under21s. If we feel they are good enough they will be moved up quite quickly [from 18s to 21s]." [Rob – Netherly FC]*

However, Jordan also highlighted, from his perspective, the difficulties of having a strict structure within his role of working with developing mastery phase players:

> *"There is no structure that can be put in place to say you've now reached your 22nd birthday and you will now be a first team player. So I think there will be a lose structure in there in terms of how we see a player develop but my view of development is that each player will come through in a completely different way."*

Jordan highlights the complexity associated with developing talent in high performance sport (Mills et al., 2012). Jordan suggests whilst a loose structure is in place with regards to the development of elite level football players, ultimately the development pathway and progression for these young football players are entirely individual, where players must take responsibility for their own development (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Overall, it appears there is a lack of structure and role clarity

with regards to the developing mastery phase within elite level football, in particular for under21 coaches. This, depending on the coaches' perspectives and philosophies, can be viewed as a positive or negative position. This theme has highlighted how the role of an under21 coach expands much further than a typical football coach. Here, these coaches have the difficult task of managing a wide range of players who are typically at different stages within their development, in terms of age, development and ability (Bloom, 1985). In addition to this, players may also be entering a transitional phase (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004), or indeed experiencing critical moments throughout this critical phase of development (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Furthermore, these under21 development coaches also have many 'other' responsibilities within their roles as under21 development coaches as Shane highlights:

> *"Coaching the players, organising the players, taking care of them, monitoring them and their progress and also feedback to the manager I'm quite active in terms of getting players out on loan that's part of my role and getting feedback to the manager about how they're doing." [Shane – Brentwood FC]*

Nevertheless, Rob highlighted how crucial the implementation of the EPPP has been to giving him and the developing mastery phase a lot more structure, in particular with regards to organisation and staffing:

> *"It's give the club and the academy and the 21s a lot more structure. The manager has been positive in giving us it, if you compare last season to this season okay, so last season I had an assistant which was David Glass, I had a goalkeeping coach which did the academy, the 18s and the 21s, so you've got someone doing two jobs. Then I had a physio who helped mainly do the reserves but also help do the first team lads so you can see the overlapping, I also had a*

sports scientist whose main job was to do the first team but helped do the reserves and all. Whereas this year now I've obviously got myself, I've just brought David Foster in to assist me, I've got a goalkeeping coach who is just for the reserves, I have a fitness coach/sport scientist purely for the reserves, so I've got a structure, I've got a team now behind and it's all just seem to have come together today actually. I had two starting today, so now I think going forward it's really positive and now I've got probably where I am able to put a structure in place, which before today was a little bit not just off the cuff, but working around the first team, whereas now I can do my own structure which suits the needs of the 21s."

Further discussing the EPPP, under21 development coaches perceptions of the EPPP were mixed, with a range of adverse and constructive perceptions highlighted by the coaches. Shane takes a retrospective look at his years as a coach within this stage of development, and highlights the crucial impact of the EPPP on his role at his respective football club:

"That was a difficult time, as I was just a development coach without no real group or team, well it was a small group. There were no league games, only friendlies, which I thought was a bit pointless, my group was only small so there was no real togetherness, it was like what are we doing? Why are we here? To be fair, credit to the EPPP, that has come in and recognized the issue, created a league for the players during this development, you know basically the under21 players and we've gone from strength to strength from there, we've got a league, at the time that was category 2, we all worked hard together, and it's paid off, credit to everyone, we're now a category one club, and whereas in my first year as development coach it was difficult, I now have a proper role as an under21 development coach, which I'm enjoying very much so."

However, whilst Shane and Rob stated the importance of the EPPP with regards to organisational issues, i.e. role clarity and structure, Jordan suggested he has seen little change from the implementation of the EPPP:

> *"Good intentions, not sure it's fit for purpose, a huge amount of investment and as yet I've seen little change… Only that we travel a lot further to play our fixtures, and the quality of fixture is no different, so until we start adding an international element or a European element into our programme, you're always going to get what you've got."*

In addition to Jordan's comments surrounding the EPPP, Mark, identified whilst the implementation of the EPPP is a positive one which has *"sharpened"* the academy and developing mastery staff up, the EPPP can only affect under21s and down, which perhaps may nullify the positive effects the EPPP can have through the club:

> *"The difficulty is what the EPPP says is that it should be through the whole club. We can certainly effect 21s down, but then the first teams always going to be the first team and the first team manager will come and go. Problem is most first team managers will bring their own philosophy rather than a manager being employed to fit into the clubs philosophy. I think they probably do that more on the continent, but certainly in this country I think it's different. You know one manager will bring something different to what another manager had because it's very much the manager's philosophy now, that will have to fit within the club structure but it'll be very different with the type of training there going to do now and there style of play will be very different."*

The quote above aligns with the complex issues under21 development coaches faced of maintaining and developing relationships with other key stakeholders within their respective football club, in particular with first team managers due to the short term stints first team managers often have at clubs in the EPL (LMA, 2010). The following

section attempts to highlight the concerns with regards to the communication channels across the academy, developing mastery and first team environments for these under21 development coaches.

4.5.2 Communication Channels between Academy, 21s and First Team Staff

All coaches highlighted the importance of having strong communication channels throughout the club, from the academy environments right through to the first team environment. However, some coaches, in particular Mark, stated dissatisfaction with the communication levels between the academy/developing mastery staff and the first team staff:

> *"I don't really [get to discuss players with the first team manager] no. Although my office is there, and the under18s and so on is all based in another section, now I'm 21s I'm over here with the first team offices. But I don't really…a lot of first team managers are the same, they just worry short term first team and that's the be all and end all. The discussions coming up to me are certainly a lot more than the discussions coming down to me, my discussions going down, we talk and work and are very close together and are a much tighter relationship rather than my one with the first team."*

Here, Marc suggests there is a range of communication issues between the academy and first team staff within his respective club (Relvas, 2010). Relvas et al. (2010) highlighted the complex physical and cultural distances that often exist between the youth set up and first team squad of professional football, however, Marc's quote suggests it is perhaps much more than a 'physical distance' separating the academy and first team environments as Marc, under21 development coach, is located within the first team staff offices. Furthermore, Marc goes on to express his frustrations with

the lack of communication between the '21s' and the first team staff, in particular the first team manager:

"It's more if the first team manager wants someone he'll just take him, rather than discussing it with me whether he's ready yeah. And quite often for training I get it, it's quite often for specific training rather than saying to me "whose ready for it" he just goes "I want him, him and him". I think that side of it could work quite a bit better yeah."

This would appear to align with Relvas (2010) research surrounding the youth to first team transition within professional football. Within his research, Relvas (2010) highlighted a 'major communication problem' between the youth team staff and first team staff. Further aligning with findings of this study, Relvas (2010) suggested the level of communication between the academy/youth set up and the first team will always be dependent on the first team coach/manager. With regards to this, under21 development coaches also highlighted the power of the first team manager within an elite level football club:

"I think the manager has to always have the final say because at the end of the day it's my opinion, you know the manager obviously is the one and fundamentally the main man at the club so I might think that he's ready, and the manager might just think he's just not ready yet, but that is dialogue that we have all the time." [Rob – Netherely FC]

"The manager will obviously say some days I want a specific player, or might ask a specific player for a specific position or we will put forward ones we think that is capable of going or deserves to go up with the first team, and hopefully then they stay there." [Adam – Crosby Town]

Whilst it is important to highlight the communication issues with regards to the first team manager and other staff from the academy and development squads, it is also pertinent to highlight the difficult challenges first team managers' face at elite level football clubs. However unfortunately, due to perhaps a lack of access, or perhaps too much concentration on coaching theory and coaching practice within professional sport (Potrac et al., 2012), there appears to be a lack of academic research exploring the pressures, stresses and challenges faced by elite level first team football managers. Within the English game, LMA (2010) state professional football managers tend to last little longer than 1.4 years within the role. This can be related to the work of Nesti et al. (2012) which suggests all other matters become irrelevant if first team results are not achieved. Furthermore, Cruickshank et al. (2013) discuss how first team managers are regular *"victims of the results based short-termism"* culture of elite level football (p320). Cruickshank et al. (2013) further highlight a range of stressors first team managers within elite level football routinely face such as the media scrutiny and heightened accountability. However, although Marc highlighted his *"frustration"* at the lack of communication between himself and the first team manager, the quote below suggests an understanding of the pressures faced by first team managers:

> *"I do understand how tough it is being a first team manager, do you get the time to watch and discuss young players with academy staff? You know you've probably got your own problems with players and first team staff, you need to deal with that, whilst knowing everything is geared to get that result on a Saturday afternoon. Nothing else matters if you want to stay in your job."*

Whilst under21 development coaches' recognised the huge stress first team managers are often under, some coaches reported healthy relationships with the first team managers, in particular Rob:

"If they're doing really well with the 21s, I'll have a meeting with the manager, which is known as the "Technical Board Meeting". That consists of myself, the first team manager, assistant manager, possibly first team coach, academy manager. We will talk about issues between the groups, one of them issues would be whose doing really well, who I think is ready to step up with the first team, who I think is ready to go out on loan, and we will discuss all various topics, whether the club who has come in for players is at the right club."

Furthermore, it appears the first team manager's attitude and philosophies with regards to youth development are of significant importance for the communication between first team and the academy environments, this is reflected in Jordan's quote discussing his relationship with the first team manager:

"Yeah, we get to discuss players and you know I'm very fortunate that the first team manager here has a huge background in youth development and understanding of what he wants and what it'll take. So that I think is very, very healthy."

Due to the lack of research focusing on the management aspects for coaches, head coaches and first team managers within elite sport, it seems necessary to explore mainstream management and leadership literature. Hargie et al. (1999) highlights the vital importance of communication and the pivotal communicator role of managers, who are essential in maintaining informational flow, communication and promoting harmonious relationships across the workplace. Furthermore, Hargie et al. (1999) discuss the characteristics of successful 'teams' within businesses. They suggest that a successful team is committed to the group's goals, are fully involved in decision-making, have the ability to manage inevitable conflicts and also feel complete ownership of the tasks at hand. With regards to this, it is essentially the first team

manager's role within an elite level football club to build this successful team, not only including first team players and staff, but also the academy environment. However, as Marc highlights, the reality of the academy and first team environment working together to create a successful overall team is much more difficult:

> *"It is massively frustrating for me. In an ideal world we would talk all the time, discuss young players who we think are ready, not ready. As I said before maybe let me do some bits with players who have made the transition but still aren't proper first team players, that's what would happen in an ideal world, the academy and the first team as one big machine, all working for the same thing."*

Within the quote above, Marc suggests in an ideal world, the academy and first team would act as 'one big machine'. Hargie et al. (1999) suggests all successful teams require both informal and formal communication channels across all employees, further suggesting the most successful teams promote informal and formal communication, whilst spending time together engaging in both task and non-task activities. With regards to developing communication levels and relationships through 'non-task' activities, Nesti (2010) also suggests the importance of developing communication and relationships through the use of non-task activities. Here, Nesti (2010) discusses his experiences of delivering broad psychological support to players and staff within elite level football clubs, and his use of 'staff away days' to help create a culture where ideas and information are shared across the club. However, Nesti's (2010) book of delivering psychological support in elite football typically surrounds first team level football, and therefore it may be even more of a challenge when attempting to create communication levels across two distinct cultures such as the academy and first team.

It seems pertinent to state, whilst it is understood communication channels across organisations are crucial, it is also crucial for the first team manager to give the under21 coach a strong level of trust, as Shane and Rob both highlight here:

> *"He lets you get on with what's going on but he watches, he listens, he walks about, he's intelligent, he's aware of what is going on but he's not one of these managers that keeps coming saying "I want you to do this"... you know I've not seen him come down to the dressing room yet and get involved which is great from our point of view as it suggests that he trusts you to do the job." [Shane]*

> *"I've got to say since the manager has come in he's let me get on with me job 100%, I think I have to have some sort of relationship with him as the manager because of the young players and our history of bringing young players through and them playing in the first team, and you know part of that is having regular meetings where we speak... To be fair at this moment in time he's trusted my word in everything I've said, so moving forward that's a positive thing." [Rob]*

However, contrary to Shane's previous quote, Shane also stated how the first team manager often "*gives you the [first team] players, sometimes he might say "I want such and such player in a particular position" or he might well say "he needs minutes bring him off after 75"*. With regards to this, while Shane views his role as one of an independent nature, there appears to still be an involvement from the first team manager with regards to the use of first team players within the developing mastery phase, in particular during Under21 league games.

This notion of "*trust*" between first team manager and under21 development coach can be related to the concept of autonomy. The word 'autonomy' derives from the Greek words 'autos' and 'nomos' meaning 'self-rule'. Over the last 40 years,

philosophers such as Kuplfer (1987) and Meyer (1987) have often discussed the concept of autonomy. Meyer (1987) suggests there are two types of autonomy, negative and positive autonomy. Meyer (1987) stated that "*an autonomous person is not directed by another*" (p.267) as negative autonomy. Meyer (1987) further goes on to note that *"negative autonomy is a social conception"* whereas positive autonomy is where *"an autonomous person is actively self-directed."* In addition to this, Kupfer (1987) states it *"is not enough simply to be free from others' interference; autonomy requires awareness of control over one's relation to others."* With regards to this, and relating this back to the communication channels between under21 development coaches and first team managers, these philosophers suggest that being *"autonomous"*, or perhaps being in a role that requires autonomy, goes beyond simply not being advised or told what to do, but to actively take responsibility for their roles, choices and decisions they make. It would appear all the under21 development coaches enjoyed the autonomous nature of their roles, and actively sought to be a part of the decision making process with regards to the under21 players making that 'step up' to the first team. Furthermore, all under21 development coaches highlighted it essential they were involved in delivering feedback to the first team manager regarding the progress, loaning and overall personal development of the under21 players, as Shane and Adam highlights within the quote below:

> *"Feedback to the manager if he's ready to move them up, that's important. I'm quite active in terms of getting players out on loan that's part of my role and getting feedback to the manager about how they're doing."*

> *"The first team manager likes to hear our view on them because we've got the contact time with the players and we work with them and we get to see things*

that he doesn't see, where it is more knowing them as a person and what they're like."

Whilst this section has mostly critiqued the relationship issues between the first team manager and under21 coach, it would seem important to also highlight the relationship between the under21 coaches and academy coaches. All under21 coaches identified strong relationships with the academy coaches and academy directors, as highlighted by Rob and Mark:

"Yeah, we'll always have meetings. I will speak to Joe and Kevin [both Under18s coaches] on a regular basis about which players in the 18s have been doing well, that's if I haven't seen them myself, I tend to get to see quite a lot of 18s games so I can judge for myself on you know how they're doing, but on a day to day basis as in training, I go with what Kevin and Joe say on how the players are training and their attitudes." [Rob]

"I think we're very lucky as our sort of pathway for the players to come through is a lad called John, who does the under15s who used to play at Allerton City and then Mark does the 16s who also used to play for Allerton City, and I played for Ireland with for years. Johnny then does the under18s, obviously very experienced, as it happened I used to play at Childwall with Johnny years ago, then up to me for the 21s, so there is that pathway and we get on really well as a group, and yeah we all get on and all sort of discuss the players. You know we've all got our own opinions on it." [Mark]

These quotes, in particular Mark's, highlight the importance of strong relationships with other coaches from each coach's respective academy. Mark identifies how the strong connections between the coaches within Allerton City's academy allows open discussions and debates with each other with regards to players within the academy.

This open communication and dialogue between staff is reported by Nesti (2010) as essential to the development of the football club as a whole.

It could be suggested that a solid core of coaches, with open communication channels within the academy is essential to ensure the constant monitoring of the development pathway and players throughout the academy. This is also identified within Mills et al. (2012) study into the factors perceived to influence talent development within elite youth football. This study suggests the frequent turnover of coaches within elite youth football is a hindrance to the development of academy players, due to the lack of consistency between coaches and at times the academy left in *"a state of flux"* (p1600). Therefore, it would seem essential for coaches across age groups within the academy to be in constant dialogue with each other, keeping a strong *"core"* of coaches within the academy which benefits the players within their respective academies and also, the clubs as a whole.

This section discusses the communication channels across elite football clubs, including both the academy and first team, through the perceptions of an under21 development coach working within this environment. It appears that whilst all under21 development coaches' reported positive relationships with academy coaches from their respective clubs, one coach [Mark] highlighted a non-existent relationship with the first team manager, whilst other coaches, such as Jordan and Kieran, highlighted the difficulty in developing and maintaining a relationship with first team managers. The question is perhaps, where does the club strategy align this critical phase of development; academy or first team environment? If the club aligns the developing mastery phase to the first team environment within the club strategy, then perhaps it

should be suggested clearer, formal and informal communication channels are needed between under21 coaches and staff and the first team manager, coaches and support staff. Furthermore, it should be noted that the EPPP (EPPP, 2011) states:

> *"There should be no specific requirements for clubs to place the Senior Professional Development Coach [Under21 Development Coach], however it is essential that the post holder works closely with the first team coach and/or manager of the club."*

However, with coaches reporting mixed relationships with first team managers and other first team support staff, and a lack of communication channels between the academy/under21s and the first team environment (Relvas et al., 2010), how the role of an under21 development coach is assessed, evaluated and reviewed would seem an essential exploration, as the following section discusses.

4.5.3 How is the Role of an Under21 Development Coach Evaluated?

Lyle (2002) suggested that high performance coaching requires high levels of commitment, development of coach-athlete relationships and greater focus on the medium to long term planning, monitoring and decision making. However, Mallet and Cote (2006) suggested a high-performance coaches' role is assessed by their respective athletes or teams win and loss records. Lyle (2002) inquired as to what extent a high-performance coach could be held accountable for results? However, with regards to elite level youth football and possibly all youth team sports, should the question not be as to what extent a high-performance coach can be held accountable, but actually how important are results within high performance youth team sports? This section will attempt to highlight the issues with regards to assessing the role of

an under21 development coach within elite level football, through the perspectives of these under21 development coaches.

Firstly, before discussing the coaches philosophies and perspectives with regards to 'performance outcomes' within elite level academy football, the EPPP suggested philosophy for this critical phase of development must be highlighted. The EPPP (EPPP, 2011) identifies at the 'Professional Development Phase' (U17-U21), the philosophy and culture created should be a "learning to win" culture, with a "*competitive*, *challenging* and *hostile*" environment.

The 'development versus winning' topic has been discussed and debated over the years within the sports coaching literature (Smith & Smoll, 1997). Cumming, Smoll, Smith and Grossbard (2007) stated that athletes' attitudes towards coaches were more positive with coaches who appeared to take a developmental approach as opposed to an obsession with winning. Conversely, Cumming et al. (2007) reported that athletes often evaluated the coaches ability based on win-lose percentages. Ultimately, a coach within a youth team sports seems to be in an almost impossible situation. To elaborate, it appears a sports coach's role within a youth team is to develop the individual, to which young athletes have a more positive attitude to this particular coaching approach. However, whilst these young athletes may 'prefer' a coach whose focus is on the development of the individual, athletes still assess a coaches ability based on the games they win or lose (see Cumming et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the participants of Cumming and colleagues' study were young athletes typically between the ages of 10 and 15, playing at an amateur level. To date, little research has explored the phenomena of 'development

versus winning' within high performance youth sport, particularly with older age groups close to 'professional status'. With regards to this, within the six coaches who were interviewed, Kieran, Shane, Adam and to an extent Rob, highlighted the importance of the under 21s winning games within their approach, and also the importance of tournaments, as Shane suggests here:

> *"Winning matters massively to me. That's what I like to do as a youth team coach, I like to win and we were the best once. That was a great achievement for our sides when we've got to finals and such, winning has always been high up on the agenda for me, rightly or wrongly"*

Furthermore, Adam suggests *"that losing is not an option, well I wouldn't say it's not acceptable, but losing is not... losing is not what we're trying to achieve."* Aligning with this, Kieran, coach of Huyton Athletic, a top club within the English Premier League, also highlights the importance of winning at this stage of development:

> *"I think winning is very important, especially at the under21s age group. When it's with the younger groups it matters less as its developing techniques and stuff. But at the under21s, I think it's very important. You know, football is about winning, we look to go into every game to win, and we take winning at this level very seriously."*

Kieran appears to highlight how, as young talented football players develop and progress through the age groups within academies, winning games becomes a priority, in particular for the post academy phase. Shane also highlights that, as you progress through the academy and nearer the first team environment, *"winning becomes paramount"*. Nevertheless, Marc, and in particular Jordan's approaches and philosophies are focused towards the individual development of players:

"I'm a firm believer in getting them to do the right thing, get your work done through the week and doing the right thing in games and the winning is a by-product of doing the right things, now the fact we've won is great, use it for whatever but in reality that's not that important."[Marc]

Here, Marc highlights how the most important contact time he has with his players is actually during training sessions throughout the week. Furthermore, whilst Marc suggests its *"great"* to win the game, he suggests the game in itself isn't *that* important. Marc's rhetoric seems to align with Richardson et al. (2013) calls for creating a more supportive environment for players to develop. In addition, Jordan appeared to hold strong values with regards to his coaching philosophy and the improvement of individuals rather than the whole team at this development phase:

"My job is to improve individuals. I don't care about the team. The team isn't going to make a debut. The individual is going to make a debut. So the team needs to carry the individual and it's got to be healthy and if you do it right for the individuals, the team will come together." [Jordan]

However, the EPPP (2011) suggests the under21 league should replicate the professional game where winning has to matter. With regards to this, it appears the EPPP (2011) values winning at this stage of development, aligning with Kieran, Shane and Adams philosophies. Nevertheless, Burgess and Naughton (2010) suggested many coaches within the applied world focus on results within adolescent team sports, often demonstrating a '*win at all costs*' mentality. This *'win at all costs'* mentality can often be counterproductive, detrimental to the individual development of the athlete and even negatively impact future team performance. Furthermore, there has been a vast amount of research within coach education and sport psychology that could be perhaps

be aligned to the current "*developing versus winning*" data which has emerged from this study. For example, Cumming, Smoll, Smith and Grossbard (2007) examined motivational climate and win-loss percentages within youth sport. The results suggested that a *"mastery-involving motivational climate"* was positively associated with athletes and the evaluations of their coach, whereas an *"ego-involving climate"* was negatively related to athletes' evaluations of their coaches' (p330). With regards to this, a 'mastery', or 'task motivational climate' is focused on developing athlete's skills, personal development and reward for effort, contrary to an 'ego motivational climate' which is focused on competition, reward for ability, and competition between teammates (Ames, 1992).

Winning within youth sport and the debate surrounding the importance of it has been discussed for many years (Smith & Smoll, 1997). An early study within the area by Smith, Smoll and Curtis (1978) suggested winning is not an essential factor for the enjoyment of the sport or liking the coach in question. Since the findings of Smith et al. (1978), coach education research has attempted to reduce the value and importance of winning within youth sport (Smith & Smoll, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 2006). However, the Burgess and Naughton (2010) review of talent development is often associated with young adolescent team sports and the complexity of the birth date effect (Sherar, Baxter-Jones, Faulkner & Russell 2007), rather than discussing the later phases of development within high performance sports (Bloom 1985, van Rossum, 2001). The question may indeed be, at what age and what level does winning really matter, and to whom?

Helsen, Winckel and Williams (2005) examined the relative age effect from under15 to under18 years within elite football. Whilst the research highlighted the relative age effect decreases as years go on, Helsen et al. (2005) identified that too many youth coaches' philosophies within elite football are still grounded within winning. However, it must be noted that this study is not an attempt to further suggest youth and development football should be focused on development, the aim is to rather give an insight into the role of the under21 development coach and the challenges they may face working at this stage of development within an elite football organisation. Whilst Shane, Kieran and Adam stated the importance of winning at this stage of development, five of the six coaches' highlighted winning was not a factor of how their role was evaluated and assessed:

> *"Do I give the players what they require? Are the sessions the right tempo, the right quality? Do I understand where the players are, in terms of their technical ability but also their social side? We work strongly with the 4 corners what are they like socially, what are they like psychologically, what are they like physically and so I've got to be aware of those factors." [Shane]*

Only Kieran identified winning and the results of under21 games as a factor of how his role is evaluated and judged:

> *"I think the result of the game is certainly one of them. But I also think it's winning with style. You know we have a philosophy and a methodology of playing, so we are judged also on how well we are playing and how our play fits the clubs philosophy."*

However, whilst Marc suggests his role is strictly a development role and that the *"result isn't important"*, he highlights the cultural obsession with results within professional football in the UK:

> *"Well, that's the thing. The problem is everyone says, the first thing they say is "what was the score?" that's the question everyone asks you, that's football! People do ask that's it. You know, it sort of shouldn't be but that's the way the game is in this country. Not like "how did you play?" the first thing is "what was the score?"*

Stratton, Reilly, Williams and Richardson (2004) suggested that *"academies aspire to develop players for the first team"* (p201). Furthermore, Relvas et al. (2010) highlighted professional football clubs *"made it abundantly clear the predominant aim of the youth development programme was to develop players for the first team"* (p179). If, as the previous research has suggested, that the overall aims and values of a professional football academy is to develop players for the first team, it must be questioned *how* important results of youth and development football league and cup games are? As Jordan, coach of Bowring FC states *"the team isn't going to make a debut"*. However, it must be noted that Jordan also stated *"it's about working with the best players and their needs, and I stress that, it's the best players. You need to concentrate on the development of the players who have a realistic chance of the first team."* Still, this could be aligned to an *'ego orientated'* environment (Ames, 1992), which suggests that whilst coaches' philosophies may be focused on the development and improvement of the individual, they still appear to in fact create an ego orientated environment, where under 21 coaches focus on the best players to heighten competition between team-mates (Ames, 1992). Moreover, the EPPP (2011) in fact

states within this phase of development *"winning has to matter"* within the professional development phase (p42).

Overall, whilst the EPPP (2011) suggests the result is of significant importance at this stage of development, and winning 'matters', perhaps the environment created by the under21 development coach is the ultimate issue that 'matters', with 'winning' potentially a positive *"by-product"* of creating the right environment, as Marc suggested previously. Nevertheless, Kieran and Shane, who both value the importance of winning and results, identify and justify their coaching philosophy at this stage of development and it's relating their role being assessed:

> *"I think it's important to play well, and play in the right way of how the club wants to play, but I think winning the game is even more important, for the thing winning brings, such as confidence, a winning mentality, the feeling of winning and grinding out results as a team." [Kieran – Huyton Athletic]"*

> *"I make it a very demanding environment for the under21s. It can be seen as tough, or harsh but believe me, they need to be used to that if they want any chance of making it within professional football. I demand a 100% from them at all times. I do raise my voice at times, I do swear, I do get heated… I try and create the environment they're going to face when they go up to the first team, because my job is to get them to that place. There is no time for development within the first team. The Saturday afternoon result is everything." [Shane – Brentwood FC]*

All under21 development coaches stated that *"creating the right environment"* was critical, and an essential feature for the development of young players at this stage of development and one of the biggest issues. To align this to a theoretical framework, the work of Henrikson, Stambulova & Roessler (2010) presented a conceptual model

of an Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE). The research proposes a shift in focus from the individual athletes' development to the broader environment of which a talented athlete develops. Within the ATDE model, Henrikson et al. (2010) suggested that a key feature to the success of the environment was to directly surround the *'prospective elite athletes'* (post academy phase of development) to the *'current elite athletes'* (first team), and *'experts'* and *'managers'* (from the first team environment). The study highlighted how successful teams (although the research was not football focused) created an environment where the coach helps to establish close relationships between the prospective elite athletes and the elite athlete themselves. However, as reported previously and similar to Relvas et al. (2010), this may prove a difficult task for an under21 development coach due to the typical physical and/or cultural barriers between the under21 development squad and first team. Furthermore, Henrikson et al. (2010) reported that within one top level sports club, coaches attempted to create an environment that was *"demanding yet supportive, and providing enough personal space and freedom for the [elite] prospects"* (p220). With regards to this, Shane and Kieran in particular appeared to favour creating a *"demanding environment"* however reported little support in place for the post academy phase players. In addition, Henrikson et al. (2010) suggested a focus on performance and 'appropriate development' as opposed to a focus on results and early success of these talented athletes was key to a successful environment. This would seem to align to Jordan's and Marc's philosophies with regards to developing talent at the post academy phase of development, nevertheless in contrast to Shane's and Kieran's views. However, it seems essential to note, whilst it is valuable to explore other sporting environments and cultures to improve talent development within elite level football, Nesti et al. (2012) highlighted how elite football is a unique culture, and

to attempt to introduce certain *'key features'* from other successful, non-football sporting environments may prove difficult.

The contrasting views and philosophies of the under21 coaches may in fact be due to the culture they operate within. With regards to this, Jordan's philosophy was very much the individual development of players, aligning with an academy culture where Bowring FC's 18-21 phase of development is based. Kieran, who was based at the first team complex, appeared to create a culture that resembled a typical first team environment within elite level football, such as the players need to know *"winning is everything",* and how Kieran is *"very tough on them in terms of demanding a 100%."* However, whilst Kieran and other coaches operated within the culture they try to create, Marc highlights his difficulties in managing and coaching this critical phase of development within the EPPP, perhaps *'trapped'* between two distinct cultures:

> *"The way it's gone is that at times we're the 'neither here nor their group'; so we're not with the academy but then not with the first team so it was a bit weird. At the start of the season we didn't start particularly well, we did feel alienated and on our own."[Marc]*

However, Marc further stated how he and the other under21 staff overcome these issues:

> *"The best way of how we found to cope was we almost created like a siege mentality. As staff we got really, really tight and around the players and just drove the programme for them. We changed the programme, we improved the programme, with the players I think they got loads of attention to the group and*

loads of attention individually…and they need to understand that it's going to be bloody hard for them you know and if the application is not right we don't accept it."[Marc]

Marc highlights how he created an almost siege mentality for the 18-21 phase of development. Christie (2011) suggested a siege mentality is a collective state of mind whereby a group feels isolated or oppressed, often used to develop social cohesion among a group. Whilst a 'siege mentality' may not be suitable for the post academy phase of development at all elite level football clubs, it may be essential for under21 development coaches to attempt to create a further sub-culture within their respective organisations (Wilson, 2001). With regards to this possible sub-culture, Kieran and Adam highlight how they take elements of the academy and first team cultures to create the *"right environment"* for developing mastery players to develop for the first team:

"We accept nothing but the best; me and Freddie agree on this and we'll make sure the environment is a demanding environment… but this is essential to the development of the players. Although I've said winning is the most important thing, we also know how important it is to develop individual attributes."[Kieran]

"The under21s standard is a good stepping pathway for the under21s where they can progress to try and get into the first team, so it's all about now integrating the both of them [academy and first team]"[Adam]

It appears some coaches attempted to create a sub-culture that was not totally distinct from the academy and first team environments, but incorporated elements of both cultures from academy and first team. With regards to this, Marc suggests *"it is very much a development approach"* and *"to go the extra mile for an individual"* however also stated the importance of *"creating a winning mentality"* across the group to help develop attributes needed to successfully transition to the first team. It would further appear the EPPP perhaps agrees with the creating of this sub-culture to support the 18-21 phase of development, with the EPPP stating *"age/phase specialist coaches need to be able to merge the need to learn how to win with the continued need to develop the player technically and tactically" (p42).*

Whilst some coaches had a 'solid' group of players where they could create an environment and culture for the players to thrive, Jordan identified how he had a real *"transient"* group of players, with players "*coming up"* from the U18s, and players *"dropping down"* from the first team, providing an array of challenges for Jordan. Rob further highlights this issue:

> *"because you still have to realise that within the group, I can still have some young ones, and speaking to the ones who are 19 and 20, is not the way you speak to the ones who are 16 and 17. So in my role there is a lot of balancing it."*

It appears under21 coaches have to manage players who are at different stages within their development (Bloom, 1985; van Rossum, 2001). van Rossum (2001) suggests that coaches are often strict, distant and very critical of the young athletes during the later phases of development. Furthermore, Bloom (1985) suggests during the 'middle'

and ‘perfection’ years coaches’ can be disciplined, demanding and focused, as opposed to the more supporting culture for younger athletes.

Jordan and also Rob, identify how they have to work with a range of players who are at different stages of their development. Rob suggests he has players as young as sixteen in his post academy phase, alongside players as old as 21. This would suggest coaches have to successfully develop and manage players at very different stages within their careers, perhaps providing a supporting and positive coaching style for the younger players, and a more critical and strict coaching style for the older players within the post academy phase of development. Nevertheless, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) reported within their applied work, first team managers often proposed the creation of a more ‘supportive environment’ for young professional players during this 18-21year period, enabling them to develop their character, step away from the ‘comfort zone’ of the youth academy and forge new ‘identities’ as first team players. Here, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) highlight how the ‘supportive environment’ may help young players develop new ‘identities’ ready for the first team.

4.6 Summary of Study One

To summarize, it appears a range of ‘environmental’ issues exist at this developing mastery phase of development, specifically with regards to role clarity, evaluation and communication channels. Nevertheless, coaches highlighted positive developments within their respective organizations from the introduction of the EPPP, which included developing stronger links between the academy and first team environments. However, even with the implementation of the EPPP clubs have differed in their approach to integrating the mastery development phase into their organizational

structure. Although all football clubs within the research had similar general organisational structures, each respective football club differed (slightly) in their organisational structure with regards to the day-to-day operations and training environment, both from a physical (such as physical distance) and cultural perspective (distinct operational practises) (Relvas et al., 2010). Coaches further highlighted the importance of their role to develop developing mastery players to not only be ready to play first team football, but also holistically to develop the individual. Furthermore, whilst coaches mainly appeared to suggest 'positive' relationships with the first team manager, one coach in particular highlighted a non-existent relationship with his first team manager. All coaches reported the first team manager would always have the final say, even on players within the 18-21 phase of development under the supervision of the under21 coach. Lastly, with regards to evaluation of the under21 coach role, some coaches highlighted winning as a factor of their evaluation as a under21 coach. However, coaches' suggested a more important factor in the evaluation of the under21 coach role was creating an environment that allowed under21 players to flourish and preparing them for a football career within elite level football.

Chapter 5. Study Two

5.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research is to explore and develop an understanding of the developing mastery phase of development within English Premier League football. The results from Study One offered the reader a sense of the different structures, working practices, coaching approaches and issues regarding the development of football players at this stage of development through the perspectives of the Under21 coach. Study Two attempts to extend the findings of Study One, however through the perspective of the researcher, and further explore this phase of development through a period of protracted engagement within an EPL football club. Given that Study One was primarily based on the perspectives offered by the Under21 coaches, and data were collected through 'snapshot' semi structured interviews, Study Two examines the day-to-day working practices of the under21 coach, support staff and the players and the surrounding environment and the day-to-day psycho-social and cultural issues they face.

The work of Richardson et al., (2013), building from the transition work developed by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004), highlighted the longer, potentially more complex phase that exists beyond the previously researched 'academy to first team' transition (Richardson et al., 2013). Furthermore, they suggest this period of development can be uncompetitive, lonely, isolated and uncertain for developing mastery phase football players and potentially coaches too. Richardson et al. (2013) further suggest 'social insecurity' may exist at this stage of development. However, the special edition issue of Richardson et al. (2013) was developed over a period of time, bringing together previous applied pieces of research (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), alongside the

publication of the EPPP (2011) and has yet to empirically examine this phase of development. Therefore, it would seem essential, extending our knowledge from Study One, to explore, through the researchers perspectives, the key issues that surround this phase of development from a psycho-social and cultural perspective (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). With regards to this, the specific aim of Study Two is as follows:

Aim 2 - To examine the day-to-day working practices of the 18-23 phase of development and the associated psycho-social and cultural tensions that may exist during this critical phase of development for players, coaches and other support staff.

5.2 Methodology

In more recent years, ethnographic research has moved from a marginal place in social science research to a more central position (Hammersley, 1992), and has been utilised in education (Flemin, 1995), nursing (Smyth & Holmes, 2005) and sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Cushion, 2006). The work of Biddle et al. (2001) and Krane and Baird (2005) suggested the need to move away from more traditional research methods including both quantitative research, and more traditional qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) to more creative, alternative methods that allow for greater understanding of certain individual, social and cultural phenomena. The overall aim of ethnography is to place specific events and encounters into more meaningful contexts (Tedlock, 2000). Ethnography refers to the practical steps taken to collect data from 'natural, real world settings' through the position of an 'involved actor' which aims to reconstruct the participants every day lives (Rock, 2007).

Naturally, ethnography is inductive, historically situated and situational bound, realizing, and embracing the researchers influence on the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). An ethnographic researcher will typically follow these steps when conducting ethnography: gaining access, finding a role, establishing relationships, and attaining information through a variety of means from different sources. The different sources shed light on the lives and life worlds of a particular group of individuals (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Once access is gained, something particularly difficult in elite sport (Parker, 1995), the ethnographic researcher is able to 'get behind' the culture and working practices of an organization or group of individuals over a prolonged period of time. This could be several months (as in this study), or over a number of years (Krane & Baird, 2005). This time spent in the field by the researcher to experience the daily life of the participants, within their natural setting, gaining a deeper and more contextual understanding of the phenomena under study. However, the research does not finish there. The researcher must leave the field in order to reconstruct parts of the cultural scene that they have become more familiar with but from the position of the researcher looking in (Bowles, 2014). The writing and representation of the research is deemed a vital part of the ethnography process (Krane & Baird, 2005).

5.2.1 Rationale for Ethnography in Study Two

As we considered this 'developing mastery phase' a relatively 'new' phase within EPL football, it was important to be able to explore the culture, behaviours and working practices of this group over a longer, deeper, protracted time (Tedlock, 2000). Therefore, the aim of the ethnography was to allow for an in-depth analysis of the developing mastery phase of development within EPL football.

An ethnographic approach allows the researcher to establish relationships with different stakeholders and attempt to understand their day-to-day existence, thoughts and feelings with respect to their working environment (Wolcott, 1995). More specifically, a prolonged immersion, such as this ethnographic study, will allow for a better understanding of the culture and potential sub-cultures that exist within a developing mastery phase within an EPL club. However, this creates a difficult challenge for an ethnographic researcher, where the researcher has to attempt to make sense of, and create meaning through what the researcher sees, hears and feels. Furthermore, the ethnographic researcher has to attempt to understand the everyday language within the culture, interpret this language and attempt to understand the meaning behind it.

Austrian-British philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) spent the majority of his working life writing about language, and the importance of it. Wittgenstein (1953) utilized the title 'language games' for some of his work. He suggested 'language games' are what we play out in every day life, and in most cases, it is how you use this language, as opposed to the actual words used. In one of his more famous statements, Wittgenstein (1953) stated, *"if a lion could speak, we could not understand him"* (p222). With regards to this statement, which has been debated ever since it was first published, philosophers such as Churchill (1989), have suggested Wittgenstein is perhaps wrong. However, the point is that because the lion has lived such a different life, the frames of reference would be so different, even if the language used was the same, we, as humans would not be able to understand it. Wittgenstein (1953) further believed that we cannot learn a language, or understand one unless we actually take part in that form

of life to which the language is used, to understand the context in which words are used, and how they're used. It would appear that this has relevance in particular to the football world, were Parker (1995) highlighted the feature of language, and "banter" (Champ, 2017), which may be difficult for 'outsiders' to understand.

With regards to the methods utilized for data collection, ethnographers can use multiple methods including participant observation, informal conversations, interviewing (such as unstructured interviews) to record the meaning that these individuals attach to their everyday activities (Krane & Baird, 2005). Furthermore, Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) suggested that it is not wise to solely rely on what people say about their beliefs and actions, and instead should look to observe and watch their behaviours also. This corresponds with Study One, were we have gained an understanding, through the perspectives of the coaches, of the under21 phase, but only through what they have said, as opposed to allowing the researcher to explore the everyday actions and behaviours of the coaches (plus the players and other key stakeholders). Ultimately, this study attempts to understand the 'real lived', 'day-to-day' aspects of the real world of the developing mastery phase of development for coaches, players, support staff and other key stakeholders working within, or close, to this stage of development.

5.2.2 Fieldwork Approach

As highlighted above, an ethnographic approach allows the researcher to develop and establish relationships with key stakeholders in the area of investigation, which helps develop a clearer, deeper understanding of their day-to-day existence and their thoughts, feelings and perspectives with respect to the culture that they are embedded

in (Tedlock, 2000). However, gaining access to the level of which was required for this study (developing mastery phase), at the level of the clubs in this research (EPL), was always going to be an extremely difficult task (Parker, 1996).

5.2.2.1 Gaining Access

My most difficult task would be to gain access to this phase of development. The idea would be to follow a developing mastery team over a period of time, observing training sessions, match days, interacting with the coaches, players and other key staff, observing pre and post match meetings, discussions and becoming embedded myself in the culture.

My initial introductions to potential gatekeepers and participants within this study was from the under21 coaches I had interviewed previously for Study One. I knew that gaining entry typically requires building rapport, trust, and the obtaining gatekeepers sympathy. Originally, the research team and myself aimed to gain access to 3 EPL clubs (through the 6 previous clubs were I interviewed the U21 coaches).

It became obvious early on, after discussions with these coaches that I would be lucky if one club accepted my proposal for Study Two. Whilst the coaches were friendly, open and honest during the initial interviews for Study One, they were quite frank that it would not be possible to, what would effectively, become almost part of the group for a significant period of time for Study Two. The main concerns centred around the close proximity of this group to the first team, and the subsequent privacy and confidentiality issues that this may have.

In the final interview I was conducting, as usual I began informally chatting with the coach, where I planned to ask about the possibility for the Study Two and if it would be an option. Here, it's important to say we have changed the name of the coach and the club from Study One, as we feel it's important to make clear distinctions between Study One and Study Two, and further protect the confidentiality of the coach and club.

After the final interview of Study One, with Luke, under21 coach at Torrent FC, we began to chat about football, as he had some time before he took his group out for their afternoon session. This was typically normal, as coaches liked to ask more about the research, myself and my background, and my plans for the future. Before I asked about the possibility of Study Two, Luke asked about my background in football. To which I told him about the experiences I have had within Performance Analysis, both at university and within an EPL academy, part time. After talking briefly about Performance Analysis, I stumped up the courage to ask about the possibility of Study Two. To my surprise, Luke replied with a *"sure, no problem".* After further discussions with Luke, he went to grab the Academy Manager quickly, to which we agreed it would be better to start officially the following week, and we could meet up properly again before being introduced to the team and other staff. The Academy Manager liked the idea of the study, and suggested that, at the end, I could perhaps create a presentation on my findings (fully confidential) and that he was happy to grant me full access to observe, talk and be around players and staff at Under21s.

Ethnography involves extensive fieldwork to enable intensive familiarity with the setting and the people within it (Tedlock, 2000). It was my main concern, to be able

to ‘blend in’ to the group as naturally as possible. As reported by Krane and Baird (2005), the success of ethnographic fieldwork is to be able to integrate into the group under investigation, and maintain a high level of comfort with (almost) all of the group. It was discussed with the coach that maybe due to my experiences within Performance Analysis, I could help out with ‘bits’ within that area, such as setting up cameras before training, helping the Under21 Performance Analysis with any clippings of certain moments of training or matches, and generally helping out day-to-day with the setting up of training sessions. Before I had to ask, the coach said for next week when I’d start data collection, he’d give me some training kit that I would be able to wear, which would help the integration of myself into the group.

Ethnographic researchers are usually perceived or positioned as ‘the outsider’ who don’t tend to belong to the research setting, or ‘an insider’ who appears to be a member of the group under investigation - although there are other approaches than this such as overt and covert. (Berg, 2004). For Study Two, it appeared that I was granted privileges which could be argued I was seen almost as an ‘insider’, such as relationships with all members of the staff for the Under21s staff and other academy staff, full access to the training facilities and dressing rooms, involved in pre and post match meetings and also breakfast and lunch.

5.2.2.2 Entering the Setting

Following the approach suggested by Relvas (2010) in his ethnographic work within professional youth football, I suggested perhaps introducing myself to the group, outlining my background and offering a brief summary of what I would be doing. However, Luke suggested it would look better if he introduced me briefly, as it wasn’t

unusual for players, and also coaches, to have external people watching their sessions. With regards to my introduction, I suggested that a less 'academic / theoretical' approach might be better received and that perhaps mentioning my experiences working within football would also suggest that I "understood (a little bit about) the game". Luke agreed and said no problem. The ability to talk football with these coaches and eventually players in 'football language', as I understand the game to a decent level from a tactical and technical point of view appeared to assist in the integration of myself into the club.

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggested the presence of an 'outsider' may hinder data collection processes and alter the behaviour of people within the research setting. In this regard, and following the creation of, what I perceived to be, a solid rapport with the staff and players throughout the club, I ensured that I refrained from showing any desire to collect data. Instead, I decided to develop friendly relationships with all staff and Under21 players within the club, and it was during casual conversations with these participants where ideas, concerns and thoughts could be shared. Whilst it was obvious that I was not a staff employee as such, it was important not to be seen as just a 'researcher', and more as a person helping the club, with genuine interest to learn and understand more about this under21 phase, which ultimately was the goal of the research.

5.2.2.3 Timescale of Ethnographic Research

Timescales with regards to ethnography can vary widely, with some researchers entering environments for a condensed period, such as Relvas (2010) who entered each professional football club within his research for one month at a time. Within this

month, he would spend every day within the respective club. However, in other ethnographic research within football, such as Champ (2017), Champ spent 3-4 days per week at one professional football club, however it must be noted this was in a research-practitioner role and perhaps different than how I would approach data collection in this study. Due to my PhD being part-time and only fee-funded, alongside this research I was working full-time as a Further Education and Higher Education lecturer. This meant the data collection would, at times, be 'sporadic'. It was agreed with the under21 coach that typically I would attend the club 2-3 days per week (including a match day) for a period of six months. However, on occasions, such as term time holidays, I would be able to spend a longer period at the club. Luke highlighted it was an open door, and every week I would be sent the schedule to training days, and I could come in whenever I could.

5.2.2.4 Recording and Collecting of Data

As mentioned above, it was imperative for myself not to be seen as only a 'researcher, therefore I did not use a dictaphone throughout this particular study, or a specific notepad during discussions, and instead wrote up observations and conversations at breaks when alone, or in the car after the afternoon session before I drove home. As highlighted in the work of Parker (1996) recording or noting down events in the presence of coaches and / or players could be perceived as awkward or unusual behaviour and affect relational building and trust with the participants. Using a dictaophone or writing notes during conversations with participants had the potential to hinder relationships I had with staff and players, and potentially creating some hostility or questions as to why and / or what I was writing (Parker, 1996).

When in and around the club, I would follow the Under21s and their day-to-day activities. Typically this would consist of training sessions, talks, lunch, meetings and matches (when I could attend). As the relationship with Luke and the other staff developed, I would begin to help out where I could more and more, such as helping set out cones for sessions, move goals, set up cameras for recording, count the balls at the end of training sessions, shout over the goalkeepers when needed and other simple tasks. Helping out in activities such as this gave me a presence/purpose in and around the group and allowed for a more natural existence. It became apparent that I (quickly) began to gain the trust of Luke and the support staff. The players also appeared to be more comfortable asking questions and engaging in meaningful dialogue with myself. These close relationships and my personal sense of feeling part of the group allowed for the collection of rich and detailed information about practices and perspectives of all participants within the Study (Tedlock, 2000).

The data I gathered from the detailed observations of training, meetings, matches, plus the actions of coaches, players and the various conversations between myself and players or staff were recorded in a 'field diary' (Hammersley & Atikons, 1995), and written during isolated breaks or before leaving for the journey home (typically after afternoon sessions / match days). These field notes were made up of conversations, any observations and anything else I thought was potentially interesting and would be beneficial for the study. At the end of each day (typically during the evening) these field notes were made into a 'research log' which described in more detail the daily experiences, adding more context, thoughts and descriptions and further reflections from the research (Sparkes, 2002).

5.2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was not a distinct stage of the research process, as the analysis was inseparably linked to data collection. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggested the data analysis within qualitative research was a continuous cycle of collecting, analyzing and reflecting on the data that was collected. By doing this within ethnographic research, it allows new ideas for lines of inquiry and to also 'mop up' any issues or 'key information' that may have been missed with regards to the study aims. Ethnographic analysis has been the subject of fierce debate over recent years (Scott-Jones & Watt, 2010), with regards to how much of the process can be 'systemized'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) who are experienced and respected researchers within the area of ethnographic research suggest due to the interpretive nature of ethnographic research, applying some kind of systematic approach to ethnographic data analysis goes against all its values (Brewer, 2000). I knew that I had some basic questions that I wanted answering from this research, and it would be linked to what I have read and digested previously regarding transitional theory, football culture and psychology and identity previous research and theory. Thus, I intended throughout this study to 'let the data emerge from the field', I understood it was not a neutral process, instead it was highly subjective and influenced by me, the ethnographic researcher, and as such I had to be really careful with my personal bias and views – and attempt to reduce these as much as possible.

Whilst I knew my data well, and I knew it was my interpretations of what I had seen out in the field and aligned to the basic questions of the research, the sheer size and volume of data was an issue. However, it must be noted that this analysis process was on-going whilst collecting data, as I was constantly re-reading notes to help guide

future data collection. However, towards the end of my data collection, I decided to follow the advice of Brewer (2000), Scott-Jones and Sal (2010) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and their recommendations concerning the two stage process of analysis which consisted of ordering, collating and managing the data. This two-stage approach helps to better manage the data, is easier for the researcher to follow, and concludes with the actual data analysis (Scott-Jones & Sal, 2010). The following section briefly discusses 'the end of data collection analysis'

Firstly, I began to re-read from beginning to end the research log that I had created, alongside the original notes I had made. As I read, and re-read, through the notes and log, I jotted down any 'stand out' bits of information on a separate sheet. These 'stand out' bits of information may have consisted of descriptions of something I had observed, or a conversation with a player, coach or other member of staff. This information was then grouped from months one to six, which had key information that I thought was relevant for each month of data collected within Torrent FC. Following this, I began to search for themes throughout the months, creating mind maps of the crucial themes that appeared across the period, that I could embed, blend and explore together. My approach was similar to 'progressive focusing' as highlighted by Sinkovics and Alfoldi (2012) within their analysis stage. Within their work discussing ethnographic research within business research, they suggest that the analysis stage is interlinked to both the tasks of theoretical basis and fieldwork and that neither the theory nor the data should take precedence over the other, but the overall analysis should provide a transparent link from the data to the theory.

5.2.4 Writing and Representation

The ethnographic approach for Study Two allowed me to live and experience day-to-day interactions with a range of staff and players. Study Two intends to highlight aspects of practice that may appear 'hidden' from the surface (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) and not picked up from the interviews in Study One, and further offer a deeper, more contextual understanding of issues already discussed in Study One.

Writing and representing ethnographic data is a crucial and notoriously difficult aspect of ethnographic research. The need to represent the experiences and perspectives of myself, coaches, players and other staff in a way that stays true to the data, alongside relevant theory was challenging. When representing data, there is no standard set of rules or procedures to follow, and instead Wolcott (1990) suggested that this should depend on the personal and practical constraints of the ethnographic researcher. In addition to this, Bowles (2014) stated that there is no exact blueprint for representing ethnographic research, but it needs to remain faithful and authentic to the phenomena under investigation (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005).

As highlighted previously, I decided to write in the first person, as I knew that my own thoughts and beliefs, having been in and around this environment for a period of 6 months were fundamental to the investigation, and my view should not be neglected (Tierney, 2002). Furthermore, as highlighted in the work of Richardson (2000), it's important that the author does not dominate the text, and there is a balance between the author (myself), and the participants' voice (Richardson, 2000). Following the

suggestions of Tedlock (2000) and Richardson (2003), my inner feelings and reflections in the themes are highlighted in *italic* font and are indented.

The following narrative themes aim to inform you, the reader, of what and how I viewed different situations, whilst not aiming for you to accept anything as the absolute truth (Mitchel & Charmaz, 1998). Rather, I aim to engage you in my experiences during this research, and to try to make sense and reflect on my experiences, drawing your own interpretations based on the presented data (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006)

5.3 Results and Discussion

Torrent FC is an established English Premier League club and has experience of playing within both the Champions League and Europa League. Torrent FC further has teams from U8 up to U23 through the academy and a first team club. The U23 team plays in the Barclays U23 Premier League (now called Premier League 2). As with all professional football clubs in England, it is only at U18 level that a league exists with 'competitive' football. Nevertheless, the U23s at Torrent FC are considered part of the academy, and report to the Academy Manager as opposed to the First Team Manager on football (and non-football) related issues.

The narrative themes presented below are not in chronological order, and instead offer the key, crucial themes that emerged through the data collection and analysis procedures for Study Two.

5.3.1 "The Under23s? It's no man's land"

It was 8.30am, and I was grabbing a coffee from the canteen before the morning training session when James, a coach and analyst only a little older than me came over, *"tea for me, please, one sugar"* he smiled at me. I'd spoken to James a few times; he had considerable experience in top-level football despite his young age, and was always asking me to send him any interesting articles I found with regards to football and psychology. James worked throughout the age groups as a Performance Analyst and was often with the U23s, but also coached the younger age groups too. *"So what's your plans for the immediate future?"* I asked, after him quizzing me about what I intended to do after the PhD, *"Well, I plan to work up coaching wise at the age groups here, get to U18s as lead, then hopefully into first team – if I have to drop down a level, so be it." "I see you didn't mention the 23s? You wouldn't fancy that role?"* I replied, curiously. *"To be honest, I'd rather not if the truth be told. For me the 23s is like no man's land. Who are you in charge of? Who is your boss? I don't really see where you stand. That's not just here, by the way – I think it's like that across the country" "No man's land? That's an interesting way of putting it",* I said back. *"It describes it perfectly for me" he quickly responded. "Is that a lot different than the 18s, then?"* I asked, not wanting to interrogate his thoughts too much relatively early in the research. *"For me yeah. 18s you know exactly what you're working with. You've got a solid group of players, all hungry to push on and improve, you're always at the academy, you know what your job is."*

> *That night on the way home, James conversation stuck with me. I wonder what are the perspectives of the under21 staff on their role here and being in "no man's land". From what I had seen so far, I could see where James was coming from. I was intrigued to find out from staff in and around the academy their*

thoughts on this phase of development. Is it a respected phase of development? Is this feeling of "no man's land" felt throughout the academy, and even perhaps at the first team? However, finding answers to questions such as this will be difficult, and I'll have to be well trusted for them to speak as honestly as James did.

"No-man's-land – a situation or area where there are no rules, or that no one understands or controls because it belongs to neither to one type nor another" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). The following morning as I set off from the hotel towards the complex for the morning session, I still pondered the meaning of *"no man's land"* and was eager to explore this concept in more depth. As I was walking into the training ground I saw Carlos, the assistant U23 coach just popping out to his car, *"Hey Chris, how are you? I hope you haven't travelled all the way from Liverpool just for today ha ha, as I don't think you'll get much out of the session."* he laughed, rather nervously, I smiled back *"No no, I stayed in a hotel last night so don't worry. What's up?" "Well, we've only currently got 8 players for the training so we're going to have to improvise." "Seriously?"* I replied, rather shocked… *"We had 17 the other day". "Welcome to U23s, mate!"* he smiled, as he jogged off in the direction of the car park. *"No man's land…"* I thought.

At breakfast, I hadn't seen Luke or any of the other staff, so I headed out to our usual pitch to see if they'd gone out early. Luke, Carlos and Steven (U23 strength & conditioning coach) and Rob (U23 lead analyst) were in a circle talking. *"Morning, chaps"* I said as I approached them. *"Morning Chris, apologies but…"* Luke went to say before Carlos interrupted *"I've already told him about the lack of players for today!"* Luke continued *"Ah right, well… it can happen quite a bit, so don't be surprised if you see this a few times when you're here." "No problems at all, Luke."*

I decided not to follow up with any questions, as it didn't feel right, in front of the other staff in what appeared to be a serious conversation before my arrival. "*You need any help with anything?"* I asked. *"Yeah, we're just about to set up now. We're going to start with rondos, OK?"*

After the session, I helped Luke grab the mini goals, to go over to the 'shed', which kept much of the equipment, *"I enjoyed watching that session, considering you only had 8"* I said, Luke produced a somewhat empty smile, *"Yeah, I'm experienced enough to improvise and make good sessions with only a few players, it's part of my job. The issue is motivation – how do you motivate the players when they look around and see only 7 team-mates, because the others are up with the first team, or a couple are out on loan, and the ones maybe up in the first team are younger than the lads here!" "Yeah, I know what you mean",* I replied*, "and what is the solution to that?"* I asked. *"Well, I haven't got an answer for that. Is it better that we're really fluid, and players can go from 18s to first team, back to 23s and then to first team again? I see the positives in that, but also the negatives. Would it be better to have a real solid 23s that didn't really change over the course of the season, one solid group of players? I'm not sure. "You mean and they stayed with you, even if the first team wanted them?" I asked curiously "Well, we all know that isn't possible, and I don't know if it would be right, either."*

After the morning session it was lunch, and the lads were then done for the day. As I walked in with Luke, it was clear he was fairly stressed about something, but I wasn't sure what. Perhaps it was the session with only 8, or maybe he was thinking about the conversation we just had. I wanted to ask what he was thinking, but I thought it was

best to leave it at this point. I felt a little sorry for Luke due to him being constantly subjected to last minute player changes. After all, from my time watching the training, I thought Luke was an excellent, dedicated coach.

It would appear that challenges reported in Study One were also highlighted within Study Two. Work by Richardson et al. (2013) highlights the critical nature of this particular phase of development, however there are uncertainties surrounding the approach to take to enable and support players in a smoother transition to the first team. Whilst Torrent FC have had success over the years with academy graduates playing for the first team, it appeared the introduction of the EPPP (2012) and the subsequent *'formal'* developing mastery phase, has resulted in significant doubts surrounding the management and development of players. It would seem this phase of development provides some 'organisational challenges' (Fletcher, Rumbold, Tester & Coombes, 2011). Fletcher et al. (2011) examined the organisational stressors experienced by people working within professional football. The research highlighted 'role ambiguity' and the 'cultural or political environment' as highly reported stressors. Following from this, the work of McDougall, Nesti and Richardson (2015), suggested interdepartmental conflicts were often an issue for practitioners working within a high performance sport environment. Whilst the study above is through the perspectives of sport psychologists only, it provides an insight into the challenges and internal conflicts that often exist in the top end of sport. Whilst I hadn't seen any actual 'internal conflict', I felt Luke perhaps was a hostage to some of the issues he appeared to face at this stage of development and wondered what input he had on some of the issues he faced.

Danny was one of the more mature players within the under23 group at Torrent FC. Danny was 21 and had been in and around the under21/23 group for a couple of years. We'd spoken a couple of times, as he seemed to have an interest in university and research. I could see Danny walking to catch me up as we were walking in from the session, so I slowed down…*"Alright Chris, how are you?"* Danny said, *"I'm not too bad, Danny, what about yourself?" "Yeah I'm alright, I suppose". "That doesn't seem alright then, what's up?" "Nothing new, I just feel like I'm going through the motions a bit, but I've felt like this for ages, you've studied sport psychology haven't you? What can ya do?".* Whilst I had studied sport psychology, I was not a qualified sport psychologist, and furthermore, I was not in this role to give psychological support or advice. I hesitated… *"I've studied Sport Psychology yeah, but I'm not a Sport Psychologist as such. What about the Sport Psychologist here?"* I suggested, *"I don't see him much, to be honest. He's not a constant here and does more work at the first team, I think…" "Ah right, well is it something you could speak to Luke about?* I further suggested. *"Nah, I don't think so, look, Luke is a brilliant coach, but it's hard for him to create an atmosphere with us, because we're all dying to get out of this group ha ha. I've been here a while too, so it's the same thing for me everyday when I'm here. Football's a close circle and I've got mates at other teams in the Under21s and they say the exact same thing." "Ah right, I see. But I thought you were with the first team twice last week?" "Yeah, I was, but I don't really feel like I'm part of that when I go there; I just sort of make up the numbers. Anyway, are you here tomorrow?"* "*Yeah, I'm here all day again." "OK, well we can meet for a coffee if you want? Would be good to talk about stuff". "Yeah, of course, see you tomorrow then."*

After we arranged the time, the morning over breakfast, I began to think of the questions I could ask James, but more importantly, I wondered what he looked

to get from me. I felt a little nervous, truth be told… players find you out quick if you don't know your football. I need to do a little digging round what it's like in the first team, what's his perspectives are when he goes up there? What does he see? How does he feel?

The next morning, I got to the site bright and early, ready for the 'catch up' with Danny. We said we'd meet at 8.45, and it was now 9.05. It was a little surprising, as my experiences suggest footballers tend to be on time for most things, as they routinely have to be in places at certain times. I wondered if I had got the place wrong, but it was unlikely it was anywhere else other than the canteen. It wasn't a secret meeting or anything, just a catch up. As I was finishing my coffee, I saw Luke walking past. *"Alright Luke, have you seen Danny at all?" "Danny has travelled with the first team this morning mate, think he got the call late last night. I only found out myself first thing this morning. He won't be around for a couple of days."*

The more I was in and around the under23s, the more the term 'no man's land' made sense. How could Danny go from one afternoon being with the u23s, thinking he would be meeting me the following morning for a coffee, and the next going away with the first team. Furthermore, Luke only found out this morning. I wondered about the pathway of young elite footballers. Perhaps this is the only solution? Maybe it needs to seem almost ad-hoc, week-to-week. It suggests this phase of development is at least fluid, and the players here are thought of up at the first team. I was looking forward to seeing Danny, having that coffee and discussing how his trip was away with the first team.

It was Tuesday morning and as I was approaching the door, I saw Danny getting out of his car. He immediately saw me and shouted over, *"Chris, we can catch up now? Sorry for the other day, but it was out of my hands." "No problem at all, let's catch up over a coffee now."* As we sat down in the corner of the canteen, it was rather quiet,

so I knew we had enough space to be able to properly talk without the distractions of others, or Danny not wanting to talk in front of people. *"So, how was it with the first team?"* I asked curiously, expecting a positive response - as what I'd learnt so far, all the players would like to be up there:

"Well, to be honest, it was a bit of the same old. I don't want to sound ungrateful or anything, as others players here are dying for the opportunity to go there but I'm 21. I first played for the 21s or 23s, whatever you want to call it, 3 years ago. I've been up with the first team quite a lot, but I haven't played yet. So after the first few times you go, and you're like WOW. This is unbelievable, playing with some of the best players in the world. But that feeling goes away quite quickly, and you're thinking, well what's next? And that's where I'm at. I knew I wasn't going to play; unless there was a freak injury crisis, or they all got sick or something. So I was just going through the motions, the last training session was just a tactical session and I just stood there for an hour basically. I'm not knocking the manager, it needs to be done, but to be honest I even thought I'd rather be playing a under21 game here, or learning something new in a session from Luke, or something."

I was a little surprised by Danny's comments, as I'd always thought that the players were happy to be up and around the first team, but this seemed to paint a different picture. I was eager to gain more of an understanding of how this 'no man's land' affected him. *"I hadn't really thought of it like that, James, I'll be honest. How does this impact you? Sort of in-between the groups?"*

"It's quite difficult, I don't wanna just say 'oh you need to be mentally strong' coz I'm sick of hearing that, but it's true. You've got to have quite a lot of self-belief; otherwise you start questioning yourself quite quickly. Especially when you go the first team. The level is ridiculous, the speed of play and technique is top, and I mean top. But I think I got used to that, so now I'm thinking – why aren't I getting a chance? Does he not trust me? Or am I simply not good enough for that level?

These questions have been surfacing the last few months, each week that passes by, another week where I haven't played first team, is a wasted week." [Danny]

"So, I'm just trying to map out your development in my mind, you have been up the first team how many times? And if you're not there you're with the 23s?"

"Yeah, and at times I've been at the fist team for 2-3 weeks at a time, but I don't feel like I'm still part of that, really. I still feel a bit on the edge, even though everyone is nice up there with me, and I mean that… but I'm still on the outside. Then I come here and I'm one of the main group, one of the leaders I suppose. So I'm constantly wrestling with two different roles, and I've just got to keep thinking of the long goal – play first team Premier League football." [Danny]

This short conversation with Danny highlighted the difficulty that young players at EPL clubs can face when attempting to 'transition' to the first team. The youth to senior (academy to first team in football terminology) has been highlighted as a critical transition, one to which many athletes are unsuccessful. For example, Vanden Auweele, De Martelar, Rzewnicki, De Knop, and Wylleman (2004) suggested that only 17% of athletes could effectively cope with the transition to senior sport. However, the work of Green (2009) suggests within professional football this number is far less with only 1% of academy football players going on to play football professionally for a living.

Research by Morris, Tod and Eubank (2016) examined the youth-to-senior transition elite level football within the UK (not EPL) utilising qualitative methodology. This research adopted interviews both pre and post transition (two weeks prior and two weeks post transition) and highlighted a number of key themes such as 'motivation for the transition', 'anxiety and confidence' and 'social support'. However, the research

within this thesis suggests there is no clear transition for players attempting to transition to the first team, at least within Torrent FC, and potentially the EPL in general, and it perhaps would be impossible to conduct a pre and post study examining the transition phase to the EPL, as in no set transition phase actually occurs, and is instead a long, complex journey were players don't feel they belong with the first team or the academy and instead experience numerous daily within-career transitions in an almost permanent state of flux.

It is further useful to critique the work of Morris et al. (2016) and other youth-to-senior football transition research (see Finn & McKenna, 2010) here against the current data and research, to examine the wider differences between the data and perhaps provide an argument just how critical context is when conducting and representing research within elite sport. Unlike the work of Morris and colleagues, plus other researchers investigating the youth-to-senior transition in professional football, this research has highlighted that no definitive 'transitional period' exists. It would therefore seem impossible to capture (explicitly) this phenomena 'pre' and 'post'; as the transitional period may last one year, one week, or maybe a collective of daily challenges and changes that the young football player may have to navigate (Nesti and Littlewood, 2011). This phase of development is perhaps unique to the elite level EPL football, and not found in lower levels of professional football, or outside of the UK due to differences in organisational structures, cultures, squad size and level (EPPP, 2011). Recent research by Røynesdal, Toering and Gustafsson (2018) highlighted there is a 'staggered approach' that is often involved for young players that go up to the first team, aligning with the work of Morris, Tod and Oliver (2014). Their work suggests players often get 'called up' to the first team due to an injury, or if a first team manager

sees a player he is interested in (Morris et al., 2014). Nevertheless, whilst it would appear that this aligns with the research within this thesis, I argue that the research to date has not truly highlighted the length, difficulty and complexity of this critical period for young EPL football players, as highlighted in one of the field notes I made during my time at Torrent FC:

> I have been around this phase of development at Torrent FC for some time now, and it really is an extremely difficult phase of development for all parties. Today it sunk in the animosity, and perhaps jealousy that exists here between the players, all fighting to get out. Sam, a player who I hadn't seen much was walking over to the group, *"Oh, here comes Luke. Bet he can't wait to tell us about his loan, bezzies with John Mc and Eddie, I bet"* one of the players said. They all smirked as he got closer. *"How's it up there then Sam?"* one of the lads asked. *"Yeah, it's been good, being with the older pros and that all the time"* he said. *"Oh yeah, what's Eddie and that like?"* a couple of the players smiled around. *"Yeah. He's sound actually. Least I've got a chance of playing some first team football there, anyway."* Sam said, confidently, who then walked over to Luke and the other coaching staff who were on the other side of the pitch chatting to the goalkeepers. *"Why does he think he's got a chance* with their first team?" one laughed, to which another said *"I've been here with him here for nearly 2 years, and we both haven't got a sniff. I'm more likely to start upfront against Chelsea this weekend"* to which one of the defenders quickly replied *"Maybe that's a bit far" laughing.* The group of players laughed together.
>
> As the group was walking in, I slowed down purposely until I was walking alongside Francis. One of the more 'senior' players within the under21s, and who said the *"more likely to start against Chelsea"* comment. We'd spoken regularly and I knew I had a relationship where I was able to ask potentially difficult questions; *"not a well liked member of the group Sam, is he?" "Ha ha, that's just banter Chris"*, he quickly replied. *"Come on"* I smiled, *"You know I know what banter is, but there was definitely a bit of venom in that". "Nah, I know, Sam's a top lad, I like him but we're all at it here at times. Some of us*

have been here a long time, and we hear the same stories, and we say the same stories ourselves. Everyday we're all living in hope we get the call for the first team squad, or someone wants us on loan, or to even buy us and each time that doesn't come, we have to save a bit of face – and give it out to people who it might come to, I suppose." "So there isn't much of a team ethic here, no?" "No, not really. We have a laugh and that but we're all out to come out on top, and we all know it deep down. We're all on our own paths every day; fighting our own battles every day, that's football though."

This narrative further highlights the *'continuous transitions' or 'critical moments'* these players have to face on a daily basis. Schlossberg (1981) described the transition in terms of changes in thoughts and behaviours that take place not only in reaction to an event, but also in the absence of an event. This 'absence' of an event is of significance to these players, who have to face up to their daily encounters, in what they see as a lack of change, which paradoxically leaves them in a constant state of flux (Nesti, 2004). As opposed to 'transitions', which appear as something relatively smooth, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) opt for the term 'boundary situations' from existential psychology due to the change potentially being quite traumatic and personal. Furthermore, Richardson et al. (2013) propose this 'post academy phase' of development is a lonely, stagnant period of development with a lack of social support. It would appear the 'no man's land' nature of the post academy phase of development is a stagnant period of development football wise, at least in the perspectives of the young players. However, when players face these boundary situations boundary situations, with the correct type of support by sport psychologists, can produce growth and personal development, whilst acknowledging the pain and anxiety that exists as these young

players navigate their way through the elite levels of football (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

5.3.2 "It looks good on paper, but is it really?"

Job done, I thought as I walked into the canteen of Mulsby United (a lower league stadium where Torrent FC play some of their Under23 games, as stipulated by the EPPP). Torrent FC had just convincingly beaten Canelo United, a top EPL club with experience in The Champions League, 3-0 in the league with a solid performance. The first team manager of Torrent FC was amongst the spectators. It was well documented within academy circles that he would be there today, and as such I got the feeling the pressure was a little greater on the staff, and of course the under23 players were looking to impress. The pre-match video lasted a little longer than usual, and Luke and Carlos explained their bits in a little more detail, and seemed a little more stressed than usual.

I had assisted with the filming of the game, so as per usual when helping out with the analysis side of things, I went downstairs to meet the others for the dinner after the game. As I sat down with the equipment, Luke, the lead coach walked in… *"happy with that, then, I guess?"* I smiled.

> *"To be honest mate, they were poor. Really poor. That wasn't really a challenge for our lads. So I'm kind of disappointed. On the flip side, I know the gaffer [first team manager] will be happy with that so I suppose if he's happy, I should be happy; because he thinks everything is runnin' smooth here, but it eats away at me that these lads aren't getting the challenges they should be. That was easy for every one of them and now they haven't got another game for two weeks."*
>
> *"Would the gaffer not notice that, in terms of quality?" I curiously asked.*

"Not really, he doesn't really know them, and will take it as a good performance for us. He won't have done any analysis on Canelo United Under23, and I wouldn't expect him to but he won't know there midfield had an average age of about 18, but ours 21 – that in itself makes a massive difference so we had more experience, and it wasn't a challenge. I looked at the players afterwards and not one gave me any signs of "that was difficult", and you know, the players don't like it really either. They want to be challenged."

Shortly afterwards Carlos, the goalkeeper coach Dave, and analyst Mike, came and sat down beside us with their plates of food. Mike was busy linking up the codes to the footage, and Carlos and Luke began to talk about the game. *"Well, the gaffer will be pleased, I bet"* Carlos said. *"It's a good performance from the outside, we done our things well,"* he continued, before Luke interrupted *"Well, it's a good performance from the inside as well. You can only beat what's in front of you is one of the oldest sayings in football, and it's true. We played well – the problem is it wasn't really a challenge for the lads, but we say this all the time" Luke said, taking a swig of his cup of tea, "I suppose this result, it looks good on paper, but is it really? Has Riley been challenged or exposed down the outside? Not really. Did Johnny have to rethink and make difficult decisions when receiving as a 10? Nope, not really again. Lots of it was very easy for them – so it'll be interesting to see what the gaffer thinks."*

On the way home that evening I wondered what the after dinner chats would have been had we lost 4-0, against a really good team – which provided many challenges to the lads. Is this what they would have wanted? Would that have heaped pressure on the staff, and potentially demoralised the players? Or would it have given the players, and potentially the first team manager, a more realistic view of were the lads are at…we were in for recovery tomorrow – it was a great opportunity to ask this, and see if Luke had changed his opinions after re-watching the game, and reflecting on it.

The following morning I met Luke and the other staff in the canteen for breakfast before the recovery session. Sky Sports News was on in the background as always,

and Luke and Carlos were talking about the clips they had watched last night of the game *"I think the gaffer will be impressed with Riley, Murphy and Xavier, for sure. They've done the things they're looking for well, in terms of how the first team play anyway*" Carlos said. Luke responded: *"Yeah, that's right. I think Xavier really impressed, especially in his 1v1 defending and his support on the counter attacks. He's a terrific athlete, but it was clear he was a level above there. The lads he was up against were younger, slower, weaker, less intelligent with the ball and made it quite easy for Xavs."* I decided to interrupt with the question that had been swirling around my mind all morning: *"What would have happened if we lost 4-0 last night, Luke? And it really was challenging for the lads which I know you want?"*

Luke and Carlos both laughed, *"he's got a point, Luke"* Carlos said. Luke nodded his head *"I know. Well, Chris… it's a fair point but Torrent FC is a very well run club, and the people high up understand that we work in development, and whilst I think the gaffer is happy we won 4-0, I don't think he would have completely lost his head with the result, if at all. But I think it may have looked a little bad for the academy, as we should be winning most games. I guess it's finding a balance, trying to get the challenges they need but also having a healthy winning mentality for the lads, which them gives them confidence if they go with the first team."*

Previous research has discussed the idea of long-term athlete development and the ages and stages of development of athletes. Within these stages, it is suggested that athletes experience a 'training to win' stage at around 17-18 years of age (Bayli, Way & Higgs, 2013). Bayli et al. (2013) suggested that within this phase of development athletes should switch to a more *'optimising performance'* – i.e. focusing on improving their performance in pressured environments within this *'training to win'*

stage of development (Bayli et al., 2013). Whilst the model lacks scientific rigour, and isn't specific to elite level football, it is interesting to note the suggestions at this phase of development and the critique against the current competition for EPL players within the developing mastery phase. Bayli et al. (2013) suggest the objectives at the 'training to win' stage is the final phase of athletic preparation, with the athlete's technical, tactical, mental, personal and lifestyles capacities now fully established, with the focus of training shifting to the maximization of performance and a 'focus' on major competitions. However, issues presented within this research highlight concerns surrounding the level of 'meaningful' competition to adequately prepare players for EPL first team football. As Luke highlighted, there is a lack of *genuine* challenges for these young players at this stage of development, and thus the players are not able to develop the tactical, mental or potentially other capacities required for EPL first team football in these competitions as suggested by Bayli et al. (2013). It would appear the EPPP (2012) aligns itself with the work of Bayli et al. (2013) and further suggests the league should replicate the professional game where winning is considered essential (EPPP, 2012).

It is also important to note that at the beginning of the 16/17 season (approximately half way through the PhD research) the EPPP and EPL adopted to change the name, some regulations and frequency of competition of the Under21 league, and to replace this with the Premier League 2 (PL2). The aim behind this change according to the Premier League (2017) was to shift to a greater focus on technicality, physicality and intensity to bring players as close to the first-team experience as possible. Nevertheless, developing mastery phase staff within Torrent FC had suggested they

hadn't experienced any 'meaningful', significant changes from the under21 to PL2 league, as Carlos highlighted in one of our many conversations:

> *"The change to PL2 has I suppose brought a bit more structure, games are a bit more organised than they were previously, and we follow more of a pattern to the first team, so that's a positive. Also you can now play more overage players, which has benefits for the younger players, playing with and against older players, whether they get out of second gear is a different story though. Overall though I think the competition is the same generally and it still has the same issues and will continue to do so unless there is massive changes to the system."*

From my time at Torrent FC it was clear to see that that the approach taken within this developing mastery phase was a developmental orientated approach, with a focus on the development of individuals, allowing them to take risks in matches, and less of an emphasis on the opposition or team analysis, and more focused on improving the individual in areas of importance for their specific position. Coaching sessions were engaging and stimulating for the players, lots of technique work and individual tactical work, as opposed to team set ups and shapes. My personal beliefs with regards to talent development in football have always followed this approach (a longer term and individually focused development programme) and thus, I acknowledge my bias on this, and is in part a possible explanation of why I found the development programme at Torrent FC on the whole *excellent.*

Nevertheless, even being upfront with my own personal bias in this research, questions arose for me after an event with Johnny, a 20 year old Torrent FC player within the Under23 squad following a defeat to another Under23 team within the PL2.

Torrent FC had been beaten 2-0 against another top Under23 league side within the PL2. It was one of the first defeats of the season. However, the approach taken by the coaches immediately after the game and the following week was exactly the same as the previous weeks in which they had won their games. The communication was the same, the analysis and break down of the game was the same – the way they spoke to the team and also individuals. To me, it displayed professionalism, aligning with the philosophy of Torrent FC academy surrounding individual development and not being distracted in the face of defeat. However, I noticed Johnny, a 20 year old who had been around this phase of development for some time, a good, solid member of the group who usually always gives his 100%, going through the motions. *"Come on, a little faster please Johnny"* Luke clapped his hands, to which Johnny mumbled something back that Luke or myself couldn't catch. This lethargic attitude continued for Johnny, to which was a surprise to all the staff. Towards the end of the session Carlos called Johnny over – *"everything OK, Johnny?" "Yeah, fine, boss"* Johnny replied. *"You seem a little off out there. Are you disappointed in the result from Saturday? You shouldn't worry about that – that's gone, as long as you keep doing your individual bits we spoke about – you'll be fine"* Carlos said. *"Yeah, I know, cheers boss"* Johnny replied quite abruptly, and almost sarcastically, as he was walking off.

I was keen to follow Johnny the following days to try and dig deeper and see what the issue was with him. The following day I noticed that Johnny had stayed out to do some stretching after the session, so I thought it was an opportunity to see if I could get a little closer to him. Johnny had never been up with the first team for any significant period of time, however had had a short loan spell in a lower league club – but didn't play. *"Alright Johnny, how's things?"* I asked, a little apprehensively as we hadn't

spoke much previously apart from the usual greetings and shakes of hands that you have to do 3-4 times a day within football. We spoke briefly about the weekends EPL football before eventually moving on to how Johnny was doing… *"you see I had a little run in I the other day then with Luke and that? Bet you didn't expect that from me eh" "Yeah, I seen it, and I was a little surprised, you're right"* I replied to Johnny. *"Has there been something bugging you?"* I asked Johnny.

> *"Well, you know, I'll be honest with ya, firstly I was pissed off with the result, and I didn't play great. Not the worst, but not great either – and someone could have been watching… you know what I mean? There is always someone watching, some of us could lose a chance of another loan due to that performance, but what pissed me off more is there is no reaction after it, from the players or coaches or anything. No one really gives a fuck."*

I was rather taken a back by the anger within Johnny's words. It was clear this was something he felt strongly about, and it was also clear that I needed to explore it further. I nodded to him, and stayed silent for a couple of seconds, *"what is it that's pissed you off the most?*" I asked.

"The fact no one really gives a fuck. This mightn't mean much to maybe to Zlatin dropping down for a game to get match fit, or some of the other players who I won't name, but even the coaches – no one gives us a proper bollocking, no one got called out... was all too easy. What's that about? Just shit."

I could see where Johnny was coming from, and I understood his point of view. I hesitated in my response, but thought it was important for me to play devil's advocate, and see if 1) he understood the reasons for the behaviours of the coach and 2) if he agreed with this approach:

"I don't have the answers, mate… but is it not to do that here at Torrent FC they're more focused on your individual development, to make sure you're good enough when you go up to the first team, as opposed to focusing on results and more short term goals?"

"Well the games mean a lot to me, they always have. I don't know the future for me, and I want to be able to remember these games and say I gave it my all. I'm a professional football player, I want to win and I want these games to mean something to me, even if we lose. Honestly I'd rather Luke or Carlos absolutely bollock me for something and make it feel real, spark some competition in the lads rather than sit me down and nicely point out what I need to improve on. Coz I don't feel am getting to the other side of the game, and might be why it was a shock at Forest Rovers [lower league team Johnny had a short loan spell at]. If these games don't mean anything to anyone, then what's the fuckin point. Coz I give a shit, they mean a lot to me."

The words of Johnny struck me quite hard. The tone of his voice, the look to which he gave me when I perhaps suggested the games are not so important here, he was serious – that evening I made some reflective notes based on my discussion with Johnny:

> *That was a difficult conversation today with Johnny, as I think he may of took offence to my question regarding the importance of the results within the PL2 / Under21 league. It was an innocent question at the time – in my view at least, but I can see why it would offend him. I've just questioned the importance of everything he works for, every day. This is his job, his life – and I'm questioning the importance of the under23s?*

Balague (1999) was one of the first authors to discuss the importance of meaning and identity when working with elite athletes. As a Sport Psychologist, Balague highlighted many issues that arise when working within elite level athletes are actually issues of identity and meaning, as opposed to more simple, specific performance related issues. Reker, Peacock and Wong (1987) describe meaning as *"making sense,*

order, or coherence out of one's existence" (p44). Furthermore, Reker et al. (1987) state how meaning and purpose inter-twine, with purpose referring to, *"...intention, some function to be fulfilled, or goals to be achieved"* (p44). With regards to both of these definitions, personal meaning is having a purpose and striving toward a goal or goals.

The work of Frankl (1946; 1978) discussed through an existential lens the importance of finding meaning in life. Within his theory of Will to Meaning (1978), Frankl argued that whilst the work of Freud and Adler suggested human beings are driven by pleasure in Freud's research, or power in Adler's work, in fact human beings are inherently and intrinsically driven to find meaning in one's life. Frankl (1978) further argued that at times psychological issues such as depression, anxiety and identity crisis can be linked to meaning, or the lack of meaning, in a person's life (Erikson, 1958; Frankl, 1978). However, this is not to say that finding meaning will, or should bring 'happiness' to a person, but allow a person to courageously face suffering and dispiriting circumstances, as these too can be given meaning (Frankl, 1978).

The work of Frankl (1978), combined with the work of Erikson (1963) allows us to analyse the deeper meaning of Johnny's conversation and behaviour with myself. Johnny viewed himself as a professional football player, and Johnny was also widely viewed as this within Torrent FC, a player who always gave a 100%, loved a challenge (both literally and psychologically) and would do anything that was asked of him. Johnny carried these perspectives of himself into his work every single day, and valued these highly. Johnny found meaning within his work as a professional footballer, and viewed the league and fixtures as his work, something he valued so highly, and attached so much meaning to it. When the value of this was questioned by others

within his environment, or perceived not to be valued so highly compared to how Johnny felt, Johnny took this personally, a wound to his identity and his purpose within his life (Erikson, 1963).

The experiences of Johnny resonated with me, and made me re-think and question some of the previous views and thoughts I had with regards to talent development in youth football. Perhaps by creating a fluid environment, that focus' on individual development – whilst this helps develop technical and tactical ability, with individual programmes, it may take away some of the meaning behind this phase of development for players, a lack of meaning within the games which can cause a range of psychological issues related to anxiety and loss of motivation (Nesti, 2010). I was keen to explore this in further detail at Torrent FC.

5.3.3 "If you're not in the first team by 20, you probably won't be"

The PL2, or Under23 or Under21 league as it's often still frequently called has received criticism through the media over recent years. For example, Nicky Butt (Winter, 2016), Head of Academy at Manchester United stated:

> *"...and the under-23s league is crap. If you're not in the first team by 20, you're not going to make the first team, so why have it 23? You're just stagnating people. 21 was bad enough. I'd really throw all money at the under-19 league, go alongside Europe"*

As I read the Nicky Butt article on the train down to Torrent FC, I shook my head in disbelief. How could he say something like that? How does he think that may make his own players feel? However, part of me was also intrigued to discover if these thoughts were common across EPL football clubs. The results of the first study within

this thesis suggested it as each day, month, year that passed it became more difficult to 'make' the first team. However, I didn't think it was quite as ruthless as the above interview with Nicky Butt made out, but it was something that I was keen to explore through my observations and discussions within Torrent FC. An early reflection during my initial weeks at Torrent FC highlighted a potential issue that I could see developing throughout the team:

> *Today I got to see a little more about the mini-groups that exist within this phase, and the conflicts that seem to exist between the mini-groups. The 2 younger players (Carl and Anton) were 16 years of age, the youngest by some distance among the rest of the group. They mainly were with the other younger players within the group who were originally in the U18s before being moved up, and were 17/18 years of age. Carl and Anton were extremely enthusiastic, bouncing off each other during the sessions and were really lively, responding to the coaches instructions. These young lads were playing with some lads who were 4/5 years older, which is a massive gap at this phase, and were thriving, and seemed to be loving it. You could see why they had practically skipped the second year of their U18s and were here now. Following the technical work, the lads went into a game, 8v8 and… SMASH! Johnny, one the older players, rattled Carl with a heavy, two-footed challenge. Carl lay on the floor, crying in pain as Johnny got up, silent, spat on the floor and strolled away, un-phased. Johnny winked at Mick, another older player who had been around this phase for a while. The physio ran on to help Carl, who limped off clinging to the physio's arm. I think this was a clear message. Be careful here. This is not an environment to show off too much, not to be too enthusiastic, there are players here who've been here a long time, and are not too happy about it.*

As the season progressed, Carl and Anton continued to impress, and there were rumours that they were about to get the call up to the first team. They still spent a lot of time together and with a couple of the younger ones, and at times there still was

some tension with the older, senior player of this phase. After another training session where Carl and Anton had both excelled, I wanted to ask Luke about the development of Carl and Anton and what he expects for them in the future. After I grabbed the static camera that filmed the session, I approached Luke who had just finished taking a phone call… *"Luke, I've been curious to get your thoughts on the development of Anton and Carl, how you think they've done and what's in store for them?"*

"I think they've done extremely well – they'll be with the first team soon, maybe in blocks, just to get a feel for it, as they don't want to spend too long here I'm afraid." Luke said, with a slight frown, and then continued *"The Under21s has been perfect for both of Carl and Anton, they've played against better, stronger, faster players, which has helped their game, and they've been given lots of tips and individual focus to help improve their technical, tactical game and other elements. Now they could skip here, and go straight the first team. They don't need to stay here any longer like Johnny and James, it's a nightmare for them in comparison. Watching two younger lads flying, hitting their goals, watching them pass you by – and there isn't anything they can do about it. It's why there is that tension between the younger ones and the older ones; not just coz of maturity, but because Carl and Anton have actually got a chance."*

"…and Johnny, James and that haven't got any?" I replied, rather surprised.

"You can never say never, but it's very slim. We've done some research and I think if you haven't made your debut by 20, you've got about 3% chance tops of playing EPL football"

"How many here are in that slim to none group, Luke?"

"To play for Torrent FC? 90% of them here, now won't ever play for Torrent FC".

"And how many of those players know that?" I quickly replied.

"About half of them, I'd say. And the other half realise more and more everyday. That's why it can be so difficult. They lose all hope! Your goals that you've had since you were 8 years of age, the reason why you've made so many sacrifices, your purpose, is slowly being taken away, eroded, day by day, month by month. Half of players here have all but lost the will; but I can't say I blame them"

After the conversation with Luke, I think I could guess which half it was. Not only by age, but the behaviours and mannerisms of the players too. I watched trainings, gym work, match day pre and post, travelling at times with the teams, and the older group of players appeared to be just going through the motions almost. Luke, Carlos and others would try and motivate them, *"come on lads, a bit of intensity please"* they would often shout, directed at 5, 6, 7 players who were with us everyday. My mind wandered back to my interactions with other coaches at this phase of development, where I was told by one coach this is a *"black hole"* for some players – it seemed appropriate!

Whereas Johnny, still found meaning within his work, his life as a professional footballer and everything that came alongside it, the same couldn't be said for some

of the other players his age, and perhaps a little older. Coaches would regularly comment on Johnny's professionalism, both in and outside the academy. Johnny was doing his coaching badges, alongside regularly captaining the Under21s. Johnny still had belief he could play for Torrent FC or at least in EPL football, and made that clear to me following a PL2 game vs Ruzafa FC, another top team within PL2 who as a club regularly plays in European competition.

After the pre-match video presentation by Luke, identifying the concepts the team have worked on, and the importance of the individuals utilising the tactical and technical work they've been training on, the lads were in the changing room getting ready. Johnny was the captain and was doing his best to motivate the players, the younger lads were together, they seemed motivated and excited to play, the music was loud as usual, but the other older lads who Luke had spoken about previously were quiet. We had a first teamer down with us from Spain, who was quiet, so I wondered if the lads were trying to follow suit. I was surprised by how little emotion they showed, there were no nerves, but no excitement either – even though Johnny was trying his best.

After the game, in what was an excellent 3-2 win against Ruzafa FC; we all boarded the bus back to Torrent FC, minus the first teamer who shot off straight after the match in his car, and a couple of the Under21 staff who lived closer to the ground than Torrent FC facilities, so instead drove home. What was left on the bus was myself, a physio and the main group of players who had been around this phase of development all season. An stony silence engulfed the team bus. Johnny sat next to Anton and Carl, the younger lads who he had a run in earlier on in the season. They appeared to be

more close now, and I wondered if it was because their goals still aligned with each others – to get to Torrent FC first team. They were discussing the game and how it went, and engaging the usual 'banter'. I was sat next to them and could hear it all. The other older lads were all quiet, no emotion, no conversations, no banter - just sitting on their phones. Is this how a 3-2 win in the PL2 against a top team, and rival, should be? I asked Johnny if I could get his thoughts on the game, to which he came over and sat directly next to me. After discussing the game for 10-15 minutes, I mentioned how surprised I was by how quiet the bus was, especially after a big win like this. Johnny nodded, looked around towards the back of the bus and proceeded to explain in detail:

> *"Mate, it's always like this now. No matter how much I try and motivate the lads, it's impossible. Most of them have lost it now, I don't think they even care or want to play footie. I try not to spend too much time with those ones, it's too much negativity, that's why I sit with Anton and Carl quite a bit even though they're a bit younger. If you was on this bus two years ago, it'd be a different story with the likes of James, Bobby and Scott, they'd be shouting, lots of banter going off, all excited and happy after the win – now, nothing. This doesn't mean anything to them. They're basically just depressed that they're here, depressed, worried; and that's why they're so quiet, I think. They've got no belief – something you know I'll always have."*

Frankl (1946) in his pioneering book Man's Search for Meaning coined the term 'existential vacuum'. Existential vacuum refers to a person, group or society who has a lack of goals, lack of purpose and free-floating anxiety (Reker et al., 1987). Frankl (1946) stated that existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century, with human beings often not knowing what they want to do, resulting in a malaise of emptiness, meaningless and angst surrounding the future. The work of Frankl (1946, 1978) discusses the importance of human beings finding meaning in

life, even in the most difficult circumstances. Furthermore, life-span psychologists have further explored and theorized purpose, the development of meaning and the importance it plays over the course of one's life (Erikson, 1963; Jung, 1971). Perhaps most notable, although not within sport psychology research (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), is the work of Erikson (1963). Erikson (1963) linked societal values with developmental tasks to be accomplished. Erikson suggested that 'meaning' for adolescent, young and middle-aged adults are centred around establishing a stable identity, an intensive search for self, and being productive and creative, both in their 'occupational' and 'sexual' identity.

Erikson (1963) stated that the 5th stage of development (identity vs role confusion), which can happen from approximately the ages of 12 and 21 (and argued this now continues to later life in the 21st century), is a major stage of development, were a young person has to learn the roles and identity he will occupy as an adult. This stage marks a significant shift from childhood to adulthood, in which Erikson (1963) suggests within this stage there are numerous complex challenges for a young person, perhaps more so than any other stage within his framework. Furthermore, Erikson (1963) suggested young persons during this stage of development begin to discover and ask fundamental existential questions of "who am I?" (Erikson, 1963). The work of Erikson (1963) can be used as a guide to explore the development of these young elite level football players, and the issues and potential crisis they face. This study has highlighted how often players at the developing mastery phase of development struggle to deal with the challenges of their goals slowly slipping away from them. This then presents itself as a lack of meaning and purpose within not only their careers as professional football players, but also lives, as athletic-identity research

continuously highlights how individuals identify with their athlete role, and are unable to separate themselves from their role (Raalte & Linder, 1993).

5.4 Summary for Study Two

It becomes apparent through this research that it is perhaps during this developing mastery phase of development where an identity crisis potentially occurs for young football players, particularly those players who have spent a significant period of time within this phase of development. The young players, from the eight years of age have identified as a football player and it is only at this stage, the last, critical stage, before the 'final' transition to the first team, that these young players realise the difficulty, and unlikely reality of them becoming EPL football players, or even professional football players, resulting in significant issues with self-motivation, meaning, purpose and identity (Balague, 1999). Furthermore, as time continues to pass, when young player still remain within this phase of development, the phase becomes more stagnant, but also more depressing, with a lack of meaning and purpose were the goals and ambitions that were originally in place for some of these players, aligned to their identity (Erikson, 1963), become lost, losing purpose and meaning, almost creating would could be termed as an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1946). With regards to this, it is becomes pertinent here to offer some a practical solution to help assist and support these players during this critical phase of development. EPPP (2011) should consider obliging clubs to appoint a [sport] psychologist with an approach specifically on lifestyle and well-being, focusing on developing identity and assisting players in finding meaning within their work as young professional footballers.

Chapter 6 Study Three

6.1 Introduction

Becoming an English Premier League (EPL) professional football player is the dream for so many EPL academy football players (Nesti & Sulley, 2015). However, the journey in becoming an EPL player can often be a difficult, demanding and often traumatic experience for young players as they are required to navigate through a range of complex, critical psycho-social challenges whilst trying to 'make their way in the game' (Roderick, 2006, Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013). Richardson et al. (2013) further stated that it is common for youth football players within EPL academies to be lauded as 'future stars' due to their technical and tactical ability as a football player, yet fail to make the successful transition to the first team environment. The work of Nesti and Littlewood (2011; p14) as applied Sport Psychology practitioners in EPL football suggested that young EPL players often *"have fallen well short in reaching their potential"* (even when potentially being the most gifted physical and technically) due to difficulties in adapting to constant change, challenges and critical moments, and the potentially damaging impact this may have on a persons identity (Erikson, 1968; Nesti, 2004). Richardson et al. (2013) have suggested that these challenges, constant change and threats to identity appear most at the developing mastery phase, with further evidence of this being provided in both Study One and Study Two of this thesis.

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences and journeys of these young developing mastery phase EPL players with a specific focus on identity development, crisis and change through the work of Erikson's 8 stages of psycho-social development

(Erikson, 1968) and the subsequent work that has followed within the area (see McAdams, 1985).

6.2.1 Identity

As discussed in the Literature Review of this thesis, identity as a concept has received significant attention through the 20th and 21st century, in particular within the human and social sciences. In research, the term has often been used as a way of understanding the self, individuality and the factors that affect the development of a person's personality (Kroger, 1993; Archer, 1994). Adams and Marshall (1996) stated principal functions of identity consist of *understanding the self*, providing *meaning and direction* through values, beliefs and goals, *personal control* and free will, endeavouring for *consistency, coherence and harmony* between values, beliefs and commitments and supporting the *recognition of potential* through a sense of future and alternative choices. The work of Nesti (2004) has argued the importance of professional and elite level athletes understanding themselves and their beliefs and having a broad identity, in order to navigate their way through the constant, high level demands of professional sport. Nesti (2004) has further argued for the use of Erikson's work on identity as a framework to develop our understanding of the identities of professional athletes.

Erikson (1953, 1959, 1963, 1964, 1968) was a psychoanalyst and a development psychologist most famous for his work on psychosocial development and 'personal' identity. Perhaps Erikson's most original contribution to the study of identity is his 'eight ages of man' or the 'eight stages of psychosocial development' which were discussed, reworked and developed in his collections *Identity and the Life Cycle*

(1959) and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). The aim of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (see table below) was to add a psychosocial dimension to the previous work of Freud and his psychosexual development.

Table 1 Eight stages of Psychosocial Development – Adapted from Erikson (1968)

Stage	Basic Conflict	Basic Virtue	Positive Resolution	Negative Resolution
Infancy (0 to 18 months)	Trust vs Mistrust	Hope	Sense of security	Mistrust of people and the environment
Early Childhood (18 months to 3 years)	Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt	Will	Sense of independence	Sense of self-doubt and shame
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Initiative vs Guilt	Purpose	Balance between spontaneity and restraint	Feelings of guilt and lacking self-initiative
School Age (6 to 11 years)	Industry vs Inferiority	Competency	Sense of self-confidence	Sense of inferiority and failure
Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Ego Identity vs Role Confusion	Fidelity	United sense of self	Role confusion, identity crisis and negative identity
Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)	Intimacy vs Isolation	Love	Form close personal relationships	Retreat into isolation, loneliness and fear relationships
Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Generativity vs Stagnation	Care	Promote well-being of others	Stagnant and feelings of unproductiveness
Maturity (65 to death	Ego Integrity vs Despair	Wisdom	Sense of satisfaction with life well lived	Despair, hopelessness and depression

Erikson viewed identity as a fluid and transitional concept that develops through life in a series of crises and resolutions, which can have both positive and negative elements that shapes a person's character, values and beliefs. However, Erikson

(1968) also stated that whilst identity develops through the whole of a person's life, identity was largely, and most significantly developed through adolescence and young adulthood. According to Erikson (1968), it is at this stage where an 'identity crisis' is most likely to occur when young people search for their values, goals and meaning in life. Erikson suggested to resolve these crises young persons will have to develop a clear sense of self, commitment to achieving personal goals and developing relationships, whilst a failure to resolve these crises could lead to isolation, an inability to make decisions and an avoidance of personal responsibility (Erikson, 1968). Drawing on the theoretical work of psychosocial identity stages of development (and later Marcia, 1994; Kroger, 2000) Erikson, followed by Marcia (1980) discussed the coping mechanisms young people utilise when confronting their identity, these coping mechanisms include:

- *Foreclosure:* in order to suppress the anxiety that attends lack of identity, some young people prematurely assume an identity of 'convenience', such as a parent's value system without giving it too much personal thought if this relates to them.

- *Moratorium*: a *'time out'* from oneself, while exploring different options and identities, such as a gap year travelling or trying new hobbies.

- *Diffusion:* diffusion represents a kind of apathy in which youth lacks any kind of passion or commitment to something such as a career or a hobby.

- *Positive role identity (or identity achievement):* this is the sense of really knowing who one is, and where one is heading in life, such as firm career aspirations and an understanding of their characteristics and how it can relate to their role.

- *Negative role identity:* This can refer to a rebellious denial of expectations, such as going against the expectations of parents and society and choosing a path against what is deemed 'the right path'.

In this regard, it is perhaps surprising that the use of Erikson's theoretical framework of identity has been limited within performance sport research and instead research has opted to focus on athletic identity, often from a positivist position (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder, 1993).

6.2.2 Narrative Identity

Building on from the work of Erikson (1968), McAdams (1985, 1993, 1996) built a life story model of identity. McAdams' work suggested that each of us develop an identity by constructing a conscious or unconscious narrative of the self, which develops through the stages of psychosocial development (Erickson, 1968; McAdams, 1993). McAdams (1993) stated identity as an internalised, evolving story of the self, constructed by crafting narratives from previous experiences and future expectations. Sparkes and Smith (2009) also highlighted how humans are storytelling animals, and that these stories are essential to how we view ourselves and shape our understanding of the world. Furthermore, Sparkes and Smith (2002) suggested that as individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives, they engage in what is seen

as a process of claiming identities, selves, and constructing lives. In addition, they suggest that how individuals recount their stories has a direct relation on what they claim of their lives (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). Somers (1994) highlighted how previous research has showed us that stories guide action, and that people construct (ever-changing) identities through stories, with their experiences constituted through narratives. Somers (1994) further stated that people attempt to make sense of what has happened, and is happening to them in some integrated way through narratives, and that humans are guided to act in certain ways, and not in other ways, based on their memories, projections and expectations from their available social and cultural narratives (Somers, 1994).

Stories are not only information about the inner-world of the storyteller, but in fact it reveals in-depth details of the storyteller's identity, feelings and intentions (Murray, 2003). Murray (2003) further points out that narratives provide structure and a sense of identity. Literature has continuously linked narrative research and identity (see Cortazzi, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Crossley, 2000). However, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), suggest that the relationship between identity and narrative is an extremely complicated and multifaceted relationship; with Lieblich et al. (1998) further highlighting that identity can have many components. Despite this complexity, they argue that since identity is a narrative construction, then a narrative form of analysis is well suited to understanding this phenomenon (Lieblich et al., 1998). Cortazzi (1993) argues that narrative analysis can be seen as 'opening the window on the mind', however, also states that if we are analysing narratives of specifics group of people it is a window into their culture. Therefore, narrative can be used to explore both the individual and/or group subjectivities (Riessman, 1993) and

was deemed an appropriate method for this study, yet not without issues and complications which are discussed below.

6.2.3 Identity, Narrative and Storytelling within the Developing Mastery Phase

The aim of this particular study is to capture the experiences and perspectives of elite level football players within the developing mastery phase as they progress through this critical phase of development. It is noted that this particular study draws on many theoretical frameworks with regards to identity (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1985), transitions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Richardson et al., 2012) and narrative research (McAdams, 1993; Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Carless and Douglas, 2013) and could be described as an ambitious piece of research. The aim is to explore how developing mastery players navigate their pathways and journeys through their clubs in order to become established first team EPL football players and the impact this culture may have on their developing identities (Erikson, 1963). It further explores how these players tell their stories, what cultural narratives they draw on and the significant stories and moments they decide to tell, and why as they progress to first team English Premier League football – capturing these experiences, stories and thoughts as they happen through longitudinal qualitative research. However, this was not without challenges to myself as a researcher. The ultimate challenge surrounded the method of analysis that would be deemed most suitable for this particular study – a more traditional, thematic narrative analysis, exploring the data for themes across the players – or a more individual themed narrative analysis, exploring the individual players' stories through the developing mastery phase and its impact on their identity (McAdams, 1993). These issues, alongside further research and theory work relating to narrative research and identity are presented in the Method section below.

6.3 Method

Alongside the constant theoretical framework of transitions through this thesis (Schollsberg, 1981; Wylleman & Levallee, 2004), this research is heavily influenced by the identity work of Erikson (1968), and within this particular study the narrative identity work of McAdams (1993). Within the field of 'narrative psychology', the aim is to examine storytelling by a particular person or set of people, and how these stories give meaning to their lives and impact on their identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). Sparkes and Smith (2009) suggested storytelling is an activity that can impose meaningful order on the events of a person's life, and these narratives are shaped by the lived experience of a person. Narrative representations can provide rich contextual detail that can help situate theory in to practise and connect with readers (inc., practitioners) (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; 2014).

Longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) has been an emerging methodology over the last decade within methodological discussion and debate within social and psychosocial research (Thomson, Plumridge and Holland, 2003). LQR can often be distinguished from other qualitative approaches due to 'time' being a significant factor and making 'change' a key focus for analysis (Thomson et al., 2003). Typically, LQR is utilised through a series of interviews with a single individual or group of people, over a significant period of time (Cresswell & Eklund, 2007). Maher and McConnell (2011) stated within health and health care literature, LQR has been particularly usefully applied in capturing 'transitions' within care and health (Calman et al., 2013). Therefore, we propose LQR, alongside a theoretical framework of Erikson's identity (1968) with further support from McAdams (1993) narrative identity, as a useful method to attempt to capture the stories and perspectives of young, elite level football

players as they attempt to 'transition' to the first team (Wylleman & Levalle, 2004; Richardson et al., 2013). Moreover, the study will look to explore the impact of elite football culture on their evolving and developing identity (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1993; Nesti, 2004); Carless and Douglas, 2012; 2013).

6.3.1 The Procedure

4 EPL football players within the developing mastery phase of development were recruited from 3 EPL clubs, all with experience competing in Europe either in The Champions League or The Europa League. The players were within the ages of 18-21 and all had played at least one season within the Under21 league prior to the opening interview.

6.3.2 Data Collection

All players were interviewed a total of 4 times over a period of 16-20 months, across two football seasons. The opening interview adopted a semi-structured approach, in order to develop rapport with the player and allow him to 'map' his 'academy' life journey (Sparkes & Smith, 2002) from entering academy system at the age of 8, his development and experiences up until entering the developing mastery phase, and his thoughts, feelings and perspectives on this stage of development. Furthermore, towards the end of the first interview I would ask the players their thoughts on their respective (near) futures, what goals and plans they had for the up and coming season. After the initial interview, the following three interviews adopted a more informal and unstructured approach (Biddle et al., 2001), in effect 'catch up' interviews. A dictaphone was used to record all the interviews and I also made detailed notes following the interview, highlighting periods where the player displayed certain

emotions. As often stated in narrative research – the 'how' somebody says something is as important as 'what' they say (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). After the interviews I would write further 'reflective notes' on the interview – highlighting any pertinent issues, or anything that I felt I needed to improve and work on, such as developing the questions, issues not fully explored or ways to discuss particular topics before the next interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and each interview lasted between 46 minutes and 2.5 hours. The plan was to interview each player every 4 months, which would equal a period of 16 months over two seasons. However, the unpredictable nature of football often meant that at times I could not access the players at the times I wanted and had to wait a further 1-2 months depending on the situation to be able to 'catch up' with the players.

When conducing the follow up interviews, I would look over the transcription and the notes I made from the previous interview in detail. This would allow me to briefly summarise to the player what we discussed during the last interview, significant stories he told, and the goals he discussed for the near future. Following this, I would ask the player to describe in detail his recent experiences, picking up from were we last 'caught up'.

The unstructured approach to the interview allowed the participant to freely describe his experiences, therefore allowing the data to emerge naturally, rather than an explanation or analysis, deriving from phenomenological principles (Nesti et al., 2011).

6.4 Data Analysis

Earthy and Cronin (2008) define narrative analysis as "an approach taken to interview data that is concerned with understanding how and why people talk about their lives as a story or a series of stories. This inevitably includes issues of identity and the interactions between the narrator and audiences" (p5). Furthermore, Riessman (2005) stated narrative analysis within the human science typically refers to a broad family of approaches to diverse kind of texts, which have in common a 'storied form' from experience. More specifically, Riessman (2005) suggested narrative accounts encompass long sections of talk and extended accounts of lives within context, that develop over the course of single or multiple interviews. Riessman (2005) stated whilst the different definitions of analysis lead to different methods or analysis, all require the analysis to construct the text for analysis, select and organise documents, and choose sections of field notes for 'closer' inspection. Moreover, narratives do not speak for themselves, they require interpretation when used as data in social research (Riessman, 2005).

Whilst Sparkes and Smith (2009) suggested there are numerous ways in which you can analyse narrative research, providing a definitive definition of 'narrative analysis' is particularly difficult (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Ways to analyse narrative texts include structural analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), performative analysis (Riessman, 2008), and creative analytical practises (Richardson, 2000). With regards to the different methods of analysis, Smith and Sparkes (2009) created a 'Typology of Narrative Analyses' as shown below:

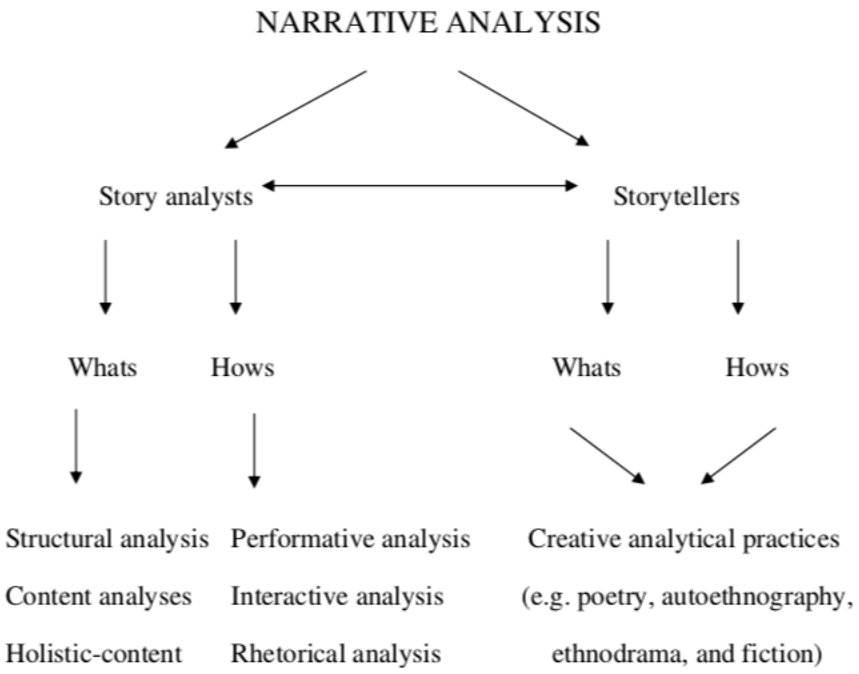

Figure 3: A Typology of Narrative Analyses (taken from Smith & Sparkes, 2009)

Whilst this study does not intend to critique each narrative analysis approach, or even discuss each narrative analysis typology in detail, it is necessary to provide an overview of the approach of narrative analysis chosen for this study, and the reasons why. Smith and Sparkes (2008) stated a structural mode of narrative analysis focuses on the formal plot and organisation of the story to tease out the distinct structures that hold it together with a view to identifying it as a particular narrative type. Furthermore, classic narrative work by Labov (1972, 1982) stated narrative structures have formal properties, with each having its own function. Included in the 'fully formed' narrative are six common elements – an abstract (summary of the substance of the narrative), orientation (time, place, situations, participants), complicating action (sequence of events), evaluation (significance and meaning of the action, attitude of the narrator), resolution (what finally happened), and coda (returns the perspective to the present).

Ahmed and Rogers (2016) further suggest that structural narrative analytical approach offers the opportunity to unravel the 'how' and the 'why' stories, facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomena under exploration. Ahmed (2015) highlighted that the structural model of narrative analysis focuses primarily on the role of 'plot'. The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle regarded narrative as the lived experience, and 'plot' not as a static structure but the work of composition (c335 BC). Czarniawska (2004) argue that the 'plot' of a narrative is how events are coherently brought together and are dependent on the way in which the narrators organise these events and experiences (Riessman, 2008) and how the narrative analysts (myself) impose themselves within the structure.

Ahmed (2015) argued that analysing a single narrative has theoretical value, and whilst we are all uniquely positioned in time and space, and our experiences are particular to us, our uniqueness in itself is a common thread that connects us all (Day Sclater, 1998). As such, the subjective truths and accounts told by players are relevant in that they allow us to seek resonance to other young elite level football player experiences as the players will draw on wider narrative and cultural resources which shape the meanings they construct (Ahmed & Rogers, 2016). A structural narrative analysis was adopted in order to capture the players' experiences. The 4 players provided extensive in-depth data for their stories, as such it was decided to analyse each player's narrative individually through the structural model. This provided some challenges in the *'how to'* analyse from a structural model for narrative analysis. I decided to follow the Ezzy (2002) step-by-step approach to narrative analysis, with a specific focus on structure (Riessman, 2008). This included compiling the stories, noting my responses to the stories, analysing the explicit content and the context of

each story focusing on insights and understandings whilst considering the 'content' that lies between the lines. Finally, I was able to identify stories or content that illustrated these insights and the subsequent interpretation of the story (Ezzy, 2002).

6.4.1 Criteria for Judgement

Sparkes (2000) suggested an importance part of qualitative research, and in particular narrative research, is establishing criteria in order to judge the piece of research. With the applied focus of this study, a recommended criterion for judgement has been established. This study should be judged against its coherence (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998), authenticity (Sparkes, 2000), verisimilitude (Sparkes, 2002) and practical utility (Sayer, 1992). From this study, the reader ought to be convinced that the arguments and conclusions drawn from this piece of research are logical, authentic and provide opportunities to help develop our practical understanding of the challenges and issues faced by developing mastery phase players. Lastly, there is one final element of judgement criteria, which was also proposed in the ethnography PhD work of Devaney (2019), that the reader senses a genuine care and empathy from the researcher working with these players. This is seen as an important criteria for judgement within this piece of research due to the relationships developed between the researcher and football players, and for the study to be successful a genuine sense of support and understanding was required if these football players were ever going to open up and discuss parts of themselves, their stories and their vulnerability that they have perhaps yet to discuss with anybody else. Such criteria perhaps could be seen as unusual or vague for researchers from different fields but it's important when working within applied research, which certainly I consider this study to be, with a focus and interest in the participants stories and journeys, who they are as people and how this

football culture impacts them, it feels entirely suitable criteria for judgement (Devaney, 2019).

6.4.2 Representation

With the mass amount of data collected and analysed, alongside confidentiality issues, it was deemed unrealistic to present four, singular case studies. Subsequently, two 'composite characters' were created to tell the stories and journeys of the four players.

The two composite characters and their stories each tell of a player and his journey through the academy of an English Premier League club and into the developing mastery phase of development. During the first point of analysis, it became clear that there was many issues and challenges that players may have discussed, but the constant theme of identity, and the impact of elite football culture on the development the player's identity during a crucial stage of their development (Richardson et al., 2013). Identity, the construction of identity (Erikson, 1968) and how identity is constructed through narrative stories (McAdams, 1985) is central to James' and Michael's story and as such, there will be a continual synthesis to the theoretical and empirical literature within the stories to help explain and understand the meanings behind the stories discussed by each player.

The stories of the players are presented as what could be termed a '*case study'* for each character's story and narrative. Firstly a detailed background of the player is presented, following this the narratives of the player, including dialogue between the player and myself are presented relating to his development before and through the developing mastery phase.

The narratives of the two players, who both share *some* similar, common experiences, but also have very different perspectives on the culture of elite level football and the impact this had on them and their identity. Player 1 – James, is a player who heavily identified as a football player and displayed a strong performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013) and had to continuously confront threats to his identity (Erikson, 1963), whilst Michael at times attempted to resist this performance narrative, and as a result of this encountered critical issues relating to his development and career within elite level football. These narratives are mapped across a chronological timeline through the player's journey through the developing mastery phase. However, they do not necessarily include every event and yet focus on the critical moments (Nesti et al., 2012), transitions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), and significant stories relating to their identity (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 1985).

6.5 Findings and Discussion

6.5.1 James' story:

6.5.2 Introduction to James & his relationship with me

James, 19, is a current elite level football player for Hatton United, who operate within the English Premier League and often within club football's biggest European competition, the Champions League. James has been with Hatton United for over 10 years, and signed his professional contract at the age of 18. Whilst James has been on pre-season tours with Hatton United first team and played in uncompetitive fixtures (i.e., friendlies), James has yet to play in a competitive fixture for Hatton United's first team, and often plays for the Under21 squad. As I arrive at the club, the coach from Study One is waiting for

me, walks me inside and introduces me to James, James smiles, shakes my hand and looks me in the eye "Nice to meet you, let's go through to the canteen", he says. At this point, James only knows I am here to interview him about his career, but seems relaxed and asks me if I'd like a coffee. As he gets me a coffee, and himself a tea, we sit down in the corner of the empty canteen and we begin to talk…

The above passage was my first encounter with James. Over the following period of 20 months and across two footballing seasons, I interviewed James four times in total. James and I struck up a positive relationship, and we'd often talk football, university and life in general during our encounters. During our interviews, I attempted to act as an active listener (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), but James would often take this further, and directly ask questions, sometimes to seek help in clarifying what he means, and sometimes to ask what I would do in a given scenario. Throughout the four interviews I had with James, James would often portray his feelings, thoughts and perspectives through the experiences he had, depicting these as stories, with other characters, a setting and a plot (Sparkes & Smith, 2002).

As James and I sit down in the canteen, we begin to talk about James's early experiences within football. I ask James about his early experiences within sport, and within the first conversation James talks about his rejection at an early age from Hatton United:

"I came here on trial with the under 9s and they originally said 'no' and I went away and went to Hatton School Boys and came back again to join the Under 10s but again they said 'no'. I came back a third time with the under 11s and the Academy Manager signed me."

The rejections at Hatton United for James at both under 9s and under10s before eventually joining Hatton United as an under 11s seem of significant importance for James and the construction of his identity as a *"fighter"*… *"I think the rejection at under 9s and under10s made me realise that I'm going to have to fight for my place, and I had to continue that fight to get my scholarship."* James continues to talk about his early experiences and how his mum and dad have influenced his identity… *"I think mum and dad were both driven in what they did, both were successful in what they did… it was just drilled into me from a young age to be that [driven]."*

> *"I always remember when I was little; I thought I'd broken my wrist at school and my dad was taking footie training that night and I was crying in the car and saying, 'I've broken my wrist.' My dad said 'you've got footie training, you don't need your wrist' and I'm like 'It's sore!' He said 'you've got two options, the hospital and not training or you can go and train and I'll see what you're like after training.' My dad bandaged it up and within a week it was miraculously healed but I was only eight at the time but it was just like, little things like that, they've stuck with me."*

Within the opening conversations with James, he's eager to make explicit references to past experiences and the narrative resources James has utilised to demonstrate the characteristics he believes he has, relating to *"mental strength"*, *"fighting spirit"* and other similarly aligned phrases: *"I'm used to fighting people off here [at Hatton Utd], I always have done and I'll continue to."* James continues:

> *"I think, when I was younger, when I was 15 or 16 and you were playing other lads for your scholarship in the under18s and at the time I was a bit like 'shit we've brought a Hungarian centre half in.' The academy manager was here and I remember speaking to him and he was like "don't you worry", he said "you'll*

fight them off, you've always done it. From then on it just gave me the confidence to think, you know what… anyone who comes in, I'll just fight them off. If he's Portuguese, I'll fight him off. If he's Spain's top centre half, I'll fight him off. I might be naïve in saying that as he might be a brilliant player but in my heart, I will fight off any centre half."

James appears to hold in high regard his parents and coaches views on him, highlighting that the *"comment from my manager has always, always stuck with me"*. The work of Erikson (1959; 1963) highlighted the importance of not only parents in identity formation but also significant others such as peers, teachers and coaches and the influence they can have. Erikson (1963) suggests the child feels the need to demonstrate specific competencies that are valued by 'society', and by doing this they can develop a sense of pride in the accomplishments they achieve. Throughout our opening interview, James continues to make references to the early challenges he faced within Hatton United's Academy and how he has managed to *"battle through"* those challenges. It's clear in my interpretation that comments by the coaches at Hatton United have influenced the thoughts and feelings of James's view of himself, what and who he is. Furthermore, there has been a wealth of football culture literature which has discussed the 'macho', 'demanding' culture associated with professional and elite levels of football (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006). It appears that James aligns himself to these cultural norms in his use of language, often referring to *"battling against team-mates"*, *"being up for the fight"* and other similar phrases. Not only with regards to the *'macho culture'* associated with professional football and the *'fighting for your place'* narrative that James regularly calls on and displays within our dialogue, James also highlights the professionalism required at Hatton United, something which he 'buys into' alongside the staff at the club:

"I think personally the way I am on and also off the pitch, I'll be as professional as I can be and the staff respect that. I've got a really good relationship with them. I just think if you don't [have a good relationship] they're not going to play you. Or when the first team gaffer [manager] rings up and says "who've you got for me?", they're not going to say you if they don't like you." [James]

"And why do you think that that is important for you? [CD]

"You've got to be professional as you can be so whether any manager be it below or above the First Team rings up and says 'do you want to play?', your manager can't say 'well he's a divvy [idiot]' or 'he doesn't work hard'. He can say 100% he will work hard and do anything for you." [James]

"... And some players don't do this?" [CD]

"You get your own personality and you get a bit of money, you move out and you get your own independence and then it becomes like there isn't any rules for you. It's how you show the manager what you do without the rule; do you carry on sticking by the rules of the club and working hard and being first in the gym and last out, or do you get your new car and go on a night out? For me I enjoyed the transition to professional but so many players fall out of the game just because they're idiots but for me I found it really easy to be professional." [James]

The notion of professionalism within the culture of elite level football is evident. Jones (2010) defined organisational culture as *"the shared set of values and norms that controls organisational members' interactions with each other and with people outside the organisation"* (p. 179). The culture of a football club may manifest itself in numerous ways through logos, mission statements, language and events that display meaning to the organisation. This has the ability to shape those individual behaviours within the culture. However, empirical research on organisational culture within

professional football is limited, and the research that gives an insight into the organisational culture in professional football is focused around the management of the club from a business perspective through stakeholders (see Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Ogbonna & Harris, 2015). However, work by Roderick (2006) and Cushion and Jones (2006) have provided insight into the uncertainty, constant scrutiny and ultra-harsh environment within football, where coaches regularly display symbolic violence through abusive language, harshness and personal castigation within many / most training sessions, even at an academy level. However, the results from Study Two of this thesis suggest that perhaps as the game progresses and develops, with more regulations and enhanced coach education, that this culture is changing in favour of a more progressive and understanding approach to player development and psychological issues players face along the journey.

One narrative that continues to be an ever present is the concept of 'hard work' and 'dedication'. A strong sense of dedication to the role of being a footballer is highly promoted at professional and elite level clubs, with some coaches wanting players to think about nothing else besides football (Parker, 2000; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). Holt and Dunn (2004) and Holt and Mitchell (2006) suggested that 'living and breathing' football is encouraged within youth development environments. Living and breathing football appears to be perceived as a way to explicitly demonstrate the player's commitment and motivation to becoming a professional player. James also draws on this performance narrative (Carless & Douglass, 2013) and suggests that he is often *"the first in training and last out"* and *"one of the hardest workers day in day out."* James believes that this commitment has helped his relationship with his coaches and strengthened a positive perception of who and how he is within the academy.

Furthermore, he believes that this attitude has enabled a smooth transition to 'professional status'. It is important to note that whilst James is technically a professional football player, and has a professional contract – James doesn't belong to the first team and is still typically referred to as an *"under21 player"*. As such, James has never played for the first team (excluding pre-season when first team players are on senior international duty), and does not train with them either:

> *"I think my route, I think, I might be wrong but I think it is going to be a go out [on loan], get some League 2 football, get bashed a little bit whoever; then step into League 1, play a bit more football on loan, again, get a bashing, get some bruises but hopefully by then you've impressed the gaffer enough for him to say 'yeah, come and train with us [the first team]'. I think the goal eventually is to get to the first team and be seen as a first team player."*

Whilst James has highlighted that his year with the under21s has been more *'competitive'* and more akin to, what he describes as, *'proper football'* rather than playing in the under 18s. James further discussed how he spent some time out of the under21s team, on the substitute's bench due to more experienced players at the under 21 level playing:

> *"Yeah it was tough. I was coming into the team (under 21s) thinking 'how am I ever going to play?' For the last ten years I've played every minute of every game, but I came into the squad and the centre halves basically were thinking about me 'right, fuck you, you're not taking my place son. They wanted to play and progress and they were ahead of me. To be fair to him [the centre half], he kept me off the team for two, three months at the back end of last season, I didn't really get a sniff. But then, now, I'm getting my share...I'm the one saying fuck you [to lads coming in behind me]. It's my time to do that to other players and say 'no, this is my time; I'm keeping you little fuckers out the 21s team'."*

James is settled in the under 21s but he's looking at the next opportunity and how to get to the first team. Towards the end of the interview, it appeared to me that James had realised how he often had utilised language that portrayed him as a 'ruthless' player through this *'fighter identity'* and reasoned why he needed to be like this:

> *"It's an arrogance and it's not something I say often but I personally feel that eventually, given time, I will fight off virtually anyone because I want to get in the First Team so if I don't believe I can do it, who else is going to believe I can do it?"*

As James is training at 11am we finish the interview there, and I thank James for his time, and discuss a good time and date for the following interview. James mentions to me *"it was good to discuss and reflect a little on my journey, makes you think about things doesn't it…looking forward to catching up soon."*

Reflective Stop Off One

For myself, the aim of the opening interview was to develop an understanding of James, who he is, his background, how he perceives himself and who has influenced his identity. James utilised short stories and examples to explore his past, and explain how his identity was constructed through interactions with his parents, coaches and the environment and culture at Hatton United. Through my interactions with James, I had the feeling that he was a committed, motivated player and identified highly as a football player. James often utilised words and phrases such as 'a fighter', 'never give up' and 'to always battle' to demonstrate the characteristics he has as a person, and how he believes that these are important attributes in order for him to make it as a footballer. The work of Carless and Douglas (2006; 2013) can be used to help align James story to a particular, dominant elite sport narrative, which is the performance

narrative. Carless and Douglas (2013) stated that the plot of performance stories are revolved around achieving performance outcomes, such as winning or in this case making it to the first team. These stories are recited within the media, by coaches, successful football players and even governing bodies (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Within the performance narrative, the performance-related outcomes (in this story making it to first team) come to permeate all aspects of life, whilst other areas are neglected. Whilst this was only the opening interview with James, I had a feeling that this narrative was going to dominate our conversations going forward. It was clear James had no other plan other than to play football for Hatton United's first team, yet he was unsure of the path he would take to get there. I was looking forward to my next 'catch up' with James.

6.5.3 The Frustration Grows

5 months later I catch up with and James at Hatton United. As yet, he had not gone out on loan. As we sit down in a little room away from any coaches or players within Hatton United's academy section, I ask James how he is, and remind him of the last time we caught up… James looks at me, sighs, shakes his head and begins to explain his current situation:

> *"Frustrating, proper frustrating! Since we last spoke, Fabio [first team player at Hatton United] has came down to play [for the 23s] and after playing two or three games for us, played in the semi-final of the Premier League 2 Cup against Bronby City, so I had to sit out on that one. Then Silva [another first team player at Hatton United] came down and has probably played more games than I have this season. It's been proper frustrating! All the feedback I'm getting from the coaches has been good but I'm suffering from the lack of competitive game time… You need to play to stay fit and to learn what you can and can't do in a*

game. I think between 17 and sort of 23 you're still learning aren't you?" [James]

"Of course... you're always learning…" [CD]

"And you need to play as much as you can, no disrespect to anyone here but when we organise friendlies, like, friendlies on the front pitch, it's in front of five people or a semi-final against Bronby City in London, in front of 2,000 people so the motivation's completely different for everyone. So it's frustrating but it's just one of those things, you can't do anything about it." [James]

"Yeah, so have you been getting any game time…?" [CD]

"Yeah, whenever there's no First Team players coming down [to the academy] I'm pretty much in. I've played occasionally in the League, when we played Crosby Town, I was there. I came on against City, I've played a few but it is not been consistent enough to get a good rhythm in my game. It has hurt my season… It started off really brightly from August to December and then the gaffer changed; things changed here at the 21s people started to come back from loans and then the lads start dropping down from the first team. And regardless of their attitude towards the game, they're more likely to play; not because it's John's fault [the under 23s manager] or the gaffer's fault, it is just how it is. The way I look at it is like this; he's 23 now so I've got four years on him. If I'm where he [Fabio] is in four years, I'll be fuming and he's in quite a good position… he's on crazy money but he's still playing in the under 21s so if I'm where he is, I'll be fuming. But that said he is still in quite a good position; he's got a good name for himself, good salary, good opportunities outside of Hatton United. I think his career at Hatton United is over and kind of has been since he signed… surely I'm seen as the future… So if they don't have a future beyond July here, then why waste minutes on them that I could benefit from… he's not going to get anything from playing a 21s game. I think that is one of the most frustrating things for me, the fact that they don't (appear to) have a future here but they are wasting the minutes that I'd benefit from." [James]

I felt that James had been eager to get some of his frustrations off his chest, and not playing was really hurting him inside. Nevertheless, James continues to state how the feedback he is getting from his immediate coaches has been positive and good. I felt genuine empathy and sympathy for James and the issues he was experiencing. Whilst James highlights his utter confusion with his current predicament, he makes no mention of his uncertainty with regards to his career in professional football, or even at Hatton United. Furthermore, James talks of himself as 'the future' of Hatton United. It appears that during this period of time, James has no real thoughts, or at least not displaying these thoughts to me, about potentially not making it at Hatton United and whilst facing potential threats to his identity as a football player for Hatton United and instead still sees himself as a future football player for Hatton United.

James appears to have a strong sense of who he is and his goals for the future regardless of the challenges he has been facing. However, whilst this may appear as a positive, and at times it will be, Erikson (1968) raised numerous issues with having a clear role identity at too early of an age and the issues that this may bring. Erikson (1968) suggested having too much of an 'ego identity' can happen when a person is so involved in a particular role within a particular society or culture. Erikson titles this *"maladaptive tendency fanaticism"* in which young people may only believe there is only one-way, one pathway they have to follow – without regard for others and understanding of their issues or experiences. Whilst this may seem a little extreme to align with James' experiences, James seems to talk with little regard for other players within Hatton United, in particular Fabio – a first team player who is currently 'taking minutes' from James and contributing to the threats to his identity that James is facing and seems fairly dismissive of Fabio's chances in 'making it' at Hatton United.

James further displays tendencies of obsessions with making it to the first team, regularly stating *"it's all he thinks about"* and *"it's the only thing I want, to make it to that first team."* Erikson suggested that the way to overcome issues relating to *'maladaptive tendencies'* was for young people to enter a 'moratorium' where they could explore their identity whilst taking 'a time out' from the stresses of education and/or work-life. These experiences often include travelling and exploring other places. However, within the world of football, and for young professional football players at clubs there is no real option outside the world of football. The work of Nesti (2004) discussed the issues of young football players having a 'narrow identity' and how this often happens due to a lack of exploration of who they are, with limited narratives to draw on from the external (to football) world (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). For James, he can only draw on the performance cultural narrative in order to make it as an elite footballer. This obsessive narrative dominates professional sporting narratives [and is actively encouraged / demanded from within the environment]. This obsession is typically reinforced by successful players, for example Steven Gerrard's interview on BT Sport *"you have to be obsessed"* went viral when discussing how he made it as an elite player football club at Liverpool FC. However, across the world of professional sport, some consideration is needed when drawing on narratives such as this. Firstly, as highlighted in a wealth of talent development literature (Reilly & Williams, 2003) there are a range of skills needed to become a professional football player such as high technical and physical ability, not solely psychological characteristics such as 'commitment' or 'dedication'. It is noted that by being committed you can develop technical and physical abilities – but there are 'ceilings' players can and will reach (Reilly & Williams, 2003). By following and believing in

this obsessive performance cultural narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2012), it brings up a range of issues for players like James, who are required to be 'obsessed' and 'committed' to being a first team football player. James feels that he needs to align to the obsessive cultural narrative, even whilst facing the difficulties of breaking into the first team, and in this case, difficulties of just getting game time at the under 21s level.

James's continued to voice his frustration at the apparent inequitable preference that was afforded to first team players who were dropping down to the under 21s:

> *"If Fabio is always dropping down to play, then there has got to be a level playing field between me and Fabio. There has got to be! It can't just be that he has come down [from the first team] so he's going to play. I know for a fact that if it was up to Jonno our 21s gaffer, he'd play me 'coz (I believe that) Fabio doesn't care. Fabio doesn't want to play in the 21s, you can see it on the pitch. I know Jonno would (want to) choose me. So if it was a proper Second Team and up to Jonno I would be chosen but it's not; it's the 21s. So when they do come round, they're picked and I don't know if that will change next season. Hopefully he'll be gone next season to be honest."*

Alongside the threats to James' identity he is currently facing, he also displays anger towards the first team players that appear to be blocking his path. James accuses the first team players such as Fabio as lacking any sense of duty or care for Hatton United's under 21 team:

> *"You know I'll give everything in the game, always. I get that it's they're usually with the first team, but it is like when he sends down the likes of Fabio, Luka, Florent, they couldn't care less. They couldn't care less about their fitness because they are going to be gone. Luca less so than the other two but the other two; fuckin hell, they don't care." [James]*

"So can you tell me what happens, say a couple of days before, or say the day before, when they drop down?" [CD]

"The day before, they'll train with us, do the shapes, walking last in, first out and then start a club game the next day. It's fucking frustrating. This season also strangely it has always been fucking defenders. There's not been many wingers or centre mids or strikers drop down. So, it is so frustrating because they know as well, they are playing with these lads that don't want to play and if we're playing this style of play which the gaffer wants us to play and we've got one lad that's not running and putting the effort in… they just get out of it every time don't they, and don't put the graft in." [James]

It seems hard for James to hide his disappointment when he explains the current situation at Hatton United, and often displays emotions by putting his hands on his head, big sighs and using emotive language to display his thoughts and feelings. Towards the end of the interview James appeared exasperated, *"I don't know what more I'm supposed to do…"* There was an awkward silence for a few seconds; I sensed he was waiting for some reassurance from myself… then he recounted the dominant preferential culture; *"It's obviously the way it is… the first team defenders take priority over the 21s, even when it's supposed to be a 21s game*." James has decided to bring in the actor 'Fabio' as an important part of his story to me, and the negative impact this is having on his development. Fabio, according to James, is obstructing his development at Hatton United. James' attributes some blame for his lack of development to Fabio and has some resentment towards him. This is the first time James' appears to question his role at Hatton United to me, often with phrases as simple as, *"I just don't know what I'm meant to do..."* James presents a sense of helplessness and appears to be questioning what he can do, without specifically saying that he is worried about not making it at Hatton United.

Reflective Stop Off 2

I left James with a heavy feeling of sympathy and empathy. I could feel the frustration in James when he was discussing his experiences, and his future plans. I actually began to feel a little guilty. Why? Well, we (as academics and researchers) and practitioners working within football, need to tread carefully when making bold statements when discussing the successes, and also failures of players making their way in the game; statements such as psychological factors are the biggest factor in making it (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), this is something that I have been guilty of in my early years as a practitioner and early academic. It's clear from my interactions with James, his conversations, and how he tells me he's perceived around Hatton United that James is the most professional, committed, mature player at Hatton United's academy with the 'best attitude'. However, whilst all this may be true, James is not getting the opportunities he thinks he deserves – and it appears nobody is giving James the reasons why. James seems to be beginning to question the dominant performance narrative in football of single-minded dedication and obsessiveness are the characteristics required to make it as a first team football player (Carless & Douglas, 2006; 2012; 2013).

6.5.4 A glimmer of hope…

James and myself had not spoken face-to-face for 6-7 months due to a range of logistical reasons – as the following sections will uncover. However, James had discussed with me at the end of interview 2 that he was keen to go out on loan to gain some *'competitive'* experience if playing for Hatton United's first team was not an

option any time soon. As I sat down with James in a quiet and empty room at the back of the Academy, we opened up from where we left off…

"The last time we caught up was the back end of last season and you said you were looking to go out on loan; so can you tell me what's been going on since we last met…?" [CD]

"I had a brilliant pre-season, I went to a tournament, I was captain. I did well; played in a game against Fleetby City and we got wacked 4-1... I got injured shortly after that, so I was out for 10 days. I missed the next two games and then whilst I was out the two defenders got sent from the first team to the Academy. So the plan of getting as many games as I can before Christmas went out of the window because the first team centre halves were always going to play and it turned out even the gaffer wanted them to play, even the friendlies so that just left me stranded because I couldn't get a game.. [James]

"At all?" [CD]

"No. Nothing. No matter how well I did in training, I was not gonna play. That was frustrating and then I sat down with the academy manager and our coach, Pablo, and then I said to them what am I meant to do? I can't just not play. That's not an option." [James]

"So what happened with that?" [CD]

"So, I was sort of going out on a trial basis at clubs. I went to Merebank and that was shit because Sean Warren was about to get sacked as he'd lost his last 10 or something so he weren't looking to take someone… anyway, and then one of the coaches here put me in touch with the gaffer at a lower league club. One of our players was already on loan there and I went down there for a week and their gaffer absolutely love me. So I stayed for another week and I played in a ressie [reserve game] game for them and I did well and they rated me. They liked me; I was there sort of player and I was on the phone to Pablo our 21s coach and I was saying I've done well, but there was no need to stay unless they were going to definitely give me something in January, and he was like "come back, I'll speak to them" and then we'll go from there so I came back and I was like…" [James]

"OK, right, so what happened next?" [CD]

"So I was like, brilliant. They were about 7th or 8th in the league when I went, come to December and their gaffa was like "Come in whenever, there is no stress, we want to hit the ground running in January" but results started to go against Merebank, so come Boxing Day the gaffa resigned, so the gaffa that wanted me ended up leaving and took his assistant who also liked me. So, yeah… so bearing in mind from August to December, no ones seen me other than the clubs I've gone to, other than the shitty friendlies were I've got half an hour here or there, so then come January I was a bit stuck and I was fighting against time to get out and get places, went to Donton Rovers, they were looking for someone to go straight into the first team and they we're fighting for promotion and looking to the Prem, so it was too much…Especially for me as, well I've just turned 20, at the time I was 19 year old centre half and what I've learnt, is

that in January, clubs are looking for a quick fix. They're not looking for some 19 year old project for the next five years, they might look for that in the summer when they've got a preseason and they can plan, but in January coz they're going game, game, game, game… unless they need you immediately in the team there and then, they're not going to take you"

James continues to tell me more of these short, but ultimately unsuccessful trials / stints at other clubs, resulting in 5 clubs in as many months. These conversations between James and myself highlighted the chaotic, unpredictable and potentially ever-changing development pathway for young U23 football players within the English Premier League. It further provides us with an insight not reported within the transition literature of the level and number of rejections players will face on an almost monthly basis (Wylleman & Levallee, 2004; Nesti et al., 2012).

Within our conversations James is again demonstrating the performance narrative, using detailed, descriptive language to demonstrate how he keeps going, from club to club in his search for first team football [on loan from Hatton United]. These stories James tells me are chaotic, with numerous characters, at numerous places and numerous interactions and conversations with various people in the football world. These are challenging times for James, facing numerous rejections from football clubs, which would seem to threaten his identity and who he is. However, James continues to display this fighting, obsessive character he displayed to me in our opening interview, and has no hesitations throwing himself into further trials with clubs, even after rejection and rejection.

At this point, James and I had been talking for almost two hours. I could sense James was looking to build up to something, something important to him, and was looking to open up. James has discussed about his lack of game time, issues with not playing, what the future holds for him, but hasn't yet said anything concrete about his future at Hatton United. I felt this was where maybe he opens up about this, and tells me of his doubts. It goes quiet for what seems an eternity. James coughs, looks at me, sighs and opens up…

> *"Well, to be honest, there has sort of been a decision made on me for next season, that I'm not going to be at Hatton United, so their limiting my game time and playing others instead…so I sat down with the coaches at Hatton United, who said it wasn't them who had made the decision but the first team staff. This was about a month ago or something. They're telling me it's come from the first team staff and that's why I haven't been in the 21s squad, coz first team players are playing. So anyway, I'm left out the squad against Brickchester U23s, and I'm a bit pissed off but I still go and watch and I go in the box, and Emile, one of the first team coaches is there and he goes "what's up?" and I go "nothing, why?" and he said "you're not injured?" and I said "no" and he said "well, I thought you'd be playing" and I said "no, because Fred and Bradley" and he went "oh, I saw your article in the paper, after the Merebank game, you scored and did well didn't you?" and I said "yeah" and I was like, well, I thought it was him making the decisions so John is telling me it's not him, and Emile is saying it's not him… because I sat down with Emile and had a good chat for like 10-15 minutes and he asked me the question "How long is left on your contact?" so that tells me he doesn't know…*

It's interesting to note that in his conversation with me, James did not dwell on being told that he had no future at Hatton United by the academy manager. James seems to only touch on this briefly to help inform the more significant part of the story – that the decision isn't from the first team, and why there is still hope that James can make

a career playing first team football for Hatton United. James utilises a conversation with Emile, first team coach at Hatton United, to help support his argument and point that a future still exists at Hatton Untied. It's easy for readers of this non-fictional story to make a judgement, and perhaps to some it would seem clear that James has no future at Hatton United – but given the performance narrative in phrases *"never give up"* are common, alongside James character of continuing to push through difficult times [and been successful in transitioning through these critical moments so far], it's easy to understand how James still sees a future at Hatton United, in particular when he hasn't had a clear ending of his career at Hatton United (such as termination of contract). James continues to talk about his conversation with Emile, the first team coach, and what that means.

> *"So I was told that the first team made a decision on me, that's fine, if they have, tell me why and I'll go off and do whatever I've got to do to make a career and prove them wrong, but Emile the first team coach doesn't know my situation. So I don't understand how a decision by the first team has been made. Because the gaffa can't have seen me, because the last time we spoke, Janaury to May we had Fabio and Mikel playing, had Jose playing so now sort of from August up until Christmas I had Diami playing and I know the [first team] gaffa hasn't seen me. I know for a fact he hasn't seen me live, and I've never trained under him.... so I'm sort of in a bit of a no mans land thinking well does the gaffa not like me? He's never even seen me play so it can't be him!!... but it's all the sort of not knowing at the minute is killing me, because like I said, come I had sort of accepted in my head that the first team had made a decision n on me, but now I'm questioning everything again!!"*

Reflective Stop Off 3

It seems that James needs some closure on this and needs clarification if this is the end for him at Hatton United and if it is, he needs a thorough explanation of why this is and the reasons behind it. James tells how he will go out and "prove them wrong" if he is released from Hatton United, and "do what he has to do to make a career". These are significant words from James, and it's the first time James opens up about his future not being at Hatton United. Again, James demonstrates his identity and characteristics throughout the stories he tells, using Hatton United and the first team as "them" and how he'll look to prove them wrong [that it was a mistake to release him] and continue to work hard and fight through the challenges to make a career in professional football. It appears in the last six weeks James has had two critical moments (Nesti et al., 2012), both conversations with key stakeholders at Hatton United. Firstly, with the under23 coaching staff which resulted in being told he has no future at Hatton United, and secondly the brief conversation with Emile, first team coach, who wasn't aware of James' contract situation, is surprised with James is not starting vs Brickchester U23s. It's interesting to note that James choses to use his encounter with Emile, and the significance of it, as opposed to what seemed a significant conversation with the under23 coaches.

Perhaps James is not ready yet to accept the likelihood of him not having a career at Hatton United, and thus the reason all his focus is on his conversation with Emile. James has only ever lived the culture of professional football, and cultural performance narratives that seem to permeate Hatton United. James has been told since the eight years of age that he's a Hatton United football player, and that every

challenge he has faced he has overcome. That to play professional football for Hatton United you need to be obsessed, never give up, be the first in training and last out – drawing on the narratives of his heroes who have played for Hatton United. However, these narratives that he's drawn on so often, been told so often, are crumbling before James as 'false narratives' – and these haven't worked for James, who is grappling to still have some control over this. These are shocks to James identity and identity construction of who he is, and instead of potentially accepting the decision that has been made and using this as a time to form and develop a new identity (Nesti, 2004), away from Hatton United, James is [understandably] clinging on to some hope through the conversation with Emile that he can still have a career at Hatton United. This is an extremely tough time for James, and I can see this in James the way he speaks to me, the language he uses, his expressions he makes – he wears his heart on his sleeve so to speak, that's who he is. Everything he has worked hard for, is crumbling beneath him and he doesn't know how to work his way through this next, and potentially 'ultimate' challenge at Hatton United. James was struggling to accept this reality, and although he said it's fine if he has no future here, he just wants to know - I suspect differently. I think he isn't really ready for this, and unprepared for this outcome. It will be devastating for him. I had developed a close relationship with James, and we could talk openly and honestly not just about football, but about education, life, development, psychology and other things that interested us both. I was hoping things would turn out a little better for James by when we next catch up but in truth, I was apprehensive for James' future within the game.

6.5.5 Life after Hatton United

I'd been travelling for nearly two hours, and I was just approaching James apartment that he rented, and as you can see from the title, James was no longer at Hatton United. *"Look out for a weird looking farm, it's a sharp left when you see it, I'm in the coffee place on the corner of there"* he told me on the phone. We'd been texting about organising this *'final catch up'* for the study – and it appeared James was quite eager to catch up with me, and tell me about his recent experiences. As I pulled up, James waved through the window of the small cafe, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. I could see why he was keen to catch up with me – there was literally nobody else about excluding the barista behind the till. As I walked through the tiny doors of the small cafe, James says "*a bit of a change from Hatton isn't it*?" he laughs. *"Not half"*, I reply smiling. James seemed in better spirits, more relaxed and joking around. The café is old, large windows and lots of wood. *"I've ordered us a couple of coffees.."* he says as we sit down at one of the three small wooden tables in the café. It's been five months since we last caught up and as you can imagine, a lot has changed within this period. *"Well Chris, let's go from where we left off shall we? I've got a lot to talk about"* James says, laughing. *"Go on"* I reply, *"let's start from where we last left off..."*

> *"Well, not long after our interview I found out that I was going to be leaving Hatton United. I was told I wouldn't be getting a new contract. It wouldn't have been right for me to stay anyway. Even if I was offered a new one… well it would have been hard to turn down, but probably with hindsight it wouldn't have been right for me to take. so I came to the end of my Hatton United days, so I spoke to our 23s coaches and I said 'I'd hate not to be involved against Hatton Rovers [rivals of Hatton United] and play a part in it, last game, ten years… just a nice*

way to move on from it all'... but it come to it the day before, I was named in the team and then the day of the game they told me I wasn't in the team or even on the bench. So it left a bit of a sour note in my mouth cos as it would have been great even if they'd put me on the bench, put me on for the last five minutes, whatever but I think looking back how I ended at Hatton United, after everything I gave to Hatton United, it would have been nice to have but like I say, that's football."

The above passage of conversation is the first story James decides to tell me in this final interview. This experience for James is one of significant meaning, hurtful, painful meaning, a reminder of the brutal world of professional sport, and in particular football. James wanted *"to go out on his own terms"* as he described – a phrase often aligned to retirement in sport and used by boxers, footballers and other sportsmen managing the transition out of their sport. James feels this was snatched away from him, but without any logical reason – and continues to describe this experience and how it made him feel:

"Truthfully, in my head I almost allowed myself to think about captaining the team on my last game, you know what I mean? I thought they might even do something like that for me and it came to it and I got told on the day that I wasn't on the bench and it was a bit of, sort of last kick in the bollocks, do you know what I mean and it was just like, to be honest I couldn't really believe it 'cos, the coaches had never said a bad word about me and the game wasn't, there wasn't anything on the game, it wasn't a final, the League had been won, we were wherever we were in the League. It was a big game, of course it's the derby, of course it's a big game but there was nothing on it. It wasn't make or break for anyone's season or for any player's season and I even had players coming up to me and saying 'I wish I could give you my place in the team'."

This is the first conversation I've had with James since the previous interview, and it's clear why James has decided to tell me this as his first story, what he deemed one of his most important experiences in relation to his transition out of Hatton United. Smith and Sparkes (2009) stated that participants would often craft and change their stories, including meaning full parts of their experience and often omitting other parts, depending on the audience. This bitter, hurtful experience for James is something he wanted to discuss first, and is the first story he decided to narrate to me due to the meaning this has to him. James often uses slang and everyday football talk when narrating his experiences, such as when James talks of feelings of embarrassment when he says *"I felt a bit of a idiot"*, talking about how it made him feeling not being in the squad, but being around the group for the final game, almost feeling like a *"cheerleader"* in James' description. When James looks back to reflect on his time at Hatton United, he is met with some resentment and ill-feeling towards Hatton United, as he goes on to explain to me:

> *"What I thought was, you've trusted me for the last ten years that I'm not going to ruin a game. You've given me the armband for nine of the last ten years; you know I'm not going to let you down. I think in the end it was 'why do you deserve special treatment when the world keeps going round', do you know what I mean? It has left a bad taste in my mouth to be honest." [James]*

James is describing his previous ten years at Hatton United. He has given everything to the club and feels he has been treated unfairly and unjustly. James is narrating the cold, ruthless world of professional football that is often reported within research (see Roderick, 2006; Nesti et al., 2012). This cold, harsh environment that exists within professional football is likely to shape the

characteristics, behaviours and beliefs of people working within that environment each day. James goes on to explain how these experiences have changed him a little as a person, making him a little *'tougher'*, *'stronger'* and *'meaner'*:

"I think looking back at my time at Hatton United, at times I might have been too nice so maybe lads went with the First Team when I wanted to go or a lad started ahead of me when I should have started and I just carried on, I was just professional me and I did my work and I'd train how I should have done and never put a face on, didn't ever question, I questioned the manager and always said 'why aren't I in the squad?' but I never, I never disrupted his sessions or did anything. Now I've learnt, if Hatton United aren't going to look after me after everything I did for them, well then how can I expect any new club, after I've been there six weeks, six months even, six years, cos, that, I gave half my life to Hatton United and what did I get?... Of course I got a lot back in terms of things but as an end and as being treated "fairly" coz' there's no fairness in football and I don't think I was treated fairly… but that's football. So now I've definitely learned from it. I've definitely learned to make people know that I'm unhappy at certain points, when the time's right."

"Can you draw on a time when that's happened? [CD]

"Well it was, the season just gone, in about February and when I wasn't playing ressies [reserves football] and it was me and there was Fabio down from the first team and Toni also was playing at the time I was fucking pissed off!! I should have been playing ahead of both Fabio and Toni, they shouldn't have been in the squad or anywhere near the team. So for about a week I was just kicking Toni and every single day I just kicked… and one day a ball fell between us and I don't regret it… but it could have ended up coming back to haunt me… but I smashed him!! I went over the ball and I put basically ended him with a challenge that injured him!" [James]

"How did you that make you feel afterwards?" [CD]

"Well that stayed with me, in a good way, that was a big sort of moment… cos beforehand me and him got on, me and him were mates off the pitch and that tackle obviously sort of ended that, but now I know that I've got that in me, I've now learned that sometimes that's the best way to do it, just be a proper nasty bastard!! Cos there's times where it calls for it and the other 99.9% of the time I will be professional me, I will do everything right but there's times when people need to know that you're pissed off and people need to know that you want to play over him and if it comes down to me or him, it's me… so I'm not going to be as nice but I think it's just, just being more selfish and looking after number one, which is being still ultra-professional every single day but then as well it's doing what you have do to."

James tells me how previously he was friends with Toni, and they would talk often and be friends in and outside of Hatton United, but what James did to Toni ended that. Previously, James wasn't sure if *"he had that in him"* as part of his character and who he was, but rather than view this as a potentially negative development of James, one of bitterness, or anger, he viewed it as an essential characteristic needed in football, and as such was happy he was able to demonstrate it. With the transition literature, Schlossberg (1981) described a transition in terms of changes in thoughts and behaviours, but this can also happen not only in a transition, but in the absence of an 'expected transition'. Within these changes in behaviour, persons may become more withdrawn, or display more anger and resentment; typical of the behaviour James has demonstrated here. This 'absence' of transition, and absence of playing time for James has resulted in him displaying previously unseen behaviours, especially at Hatton United. Richardson et al. (2013) football transition model suggested this phase is stagnant, traumatic and lonely for players. Perhaps it is no surprise that players have to individually become more *'nasty'*, *'stronger'* and *'selfish'* as James highlighted in order to progress to the next level – regular first team football. James had always

spoke of how he was always a *"hard worker"*, *"obsessed with making it"*, *"fighter"* all aligning with the performance narratives highlighted in the work of Carless and Douglas (2006; 2012; 2013), but never in the literal sense. This was the first time James had really displayed behaviours of being someone a little different, with a little more of an edge than in our previous interviews. Perhaps James was taking on a new identity, and wasn't now just the 100% ultra-professional, hard-worker he had always viewed himself as, but now as the ultra-professional hard-worker with an edge, who can be nasty when he wants to be, or now knows *"how to look after himself more"* as he explained. McAdams (1993) stated identity as an internalised, evolving story of the self, constructed by crafting narratives from previous experiences and future expectations, these previous experiences James has faced has impacted how he views himself now, and has crafted and developed an image of himself, *'less soft'* now, "*meaner"*, "*harder"*, "*more nasty"* as he describes to me. However, after James discusses his new identity, James flips back to the conversation of leaving Hatton United, and the difficulty in leaving the club he has spent so long at:

> *"It was really, really hard to walk out knowing that I'm not coming back to work here again. I didn't really know what to do because I'd cried all my tears, they were gone. I didn't have any more tears to cry but saying bye to, like, the cleaner, the chef, the kit woman, like, every little person that means a little bit to you and that you've built up a relationship with over the years, it's, erm, it was hard, it was really hard but again, it was, right, I need to kick on…. but I didn't have a club nailed on, where I was going in July, erm, which was hard because I would have loved to walk out of Hatton United knowing exactly where I was going."*
>
> *"So at the time you didn't have a club lined up?"*

"Well, no, but I had three options, at the time which was a club up in Scotland, a Portuguese B team and Roby FC and to be honest I was expecting all three. I would, from the conversations I had with the managers I was expecting to get all three, play them against each other, choose the best option and get a decent contract. I went away that weekend, couldn't really switch off and then I came back for a couple of nights and then I was going away again with my missus and my family for two weeks again and I really wanted to have it done so I could switch off, forget footie for once and just relax, but again, it didn't work that way!! It was a nightmare situation. I was thinking every-day, I could be going on three day trial at really low clubs here, I couldn't get my head round it. It was really, really hard!!!.... and the time was just ticking, and ticking, and ticking. When I was away I was like, 'right 30 days, let's get sorted'... and then another phone call and I was like 'shit, 12 days oh my god... We haven't got anything sorted? Why have I still not got anything? I thought we'd have three offers by now...

The above passage describes a common occurrence for players at the end of each season following being released - the pursuit of a new club, a new contract, the ability to continue playing football for a living. The work of Brown and Potrac (2009) investigated deselection from elite youth football clubs, indicating feelings of fear, anger and humiliation. The work also highlighted the 'resentment' felt at the club, something that James has also felt throughout these interviews. However, the study did not capture players attempting to find a new club, to continue their identity as a professional football player. Furthermore, excluding the work of Roderick (2006), there has been limited research exploring player's critical moments and challenges players face when attempting to find a new professional club. It's clear from my interpretations that this 'phase of development' for James has been the biggest challenge he has ever faced, and is experiencing some critical threats to his identity as a football player. In my interpretations the most challenging issue for James it that he

has lived the performance narrative, bought into the narrative and culture that in order to make it as a professional footballer you must put the game as your number one priority in life, and dedicate everything to it. Yet James has done this, and is still not reaping the benefits and rewards he feels he deserves. This continues until a week before the start of pre-season when finally, an offer comes in for James from Roby FC, a Championship club that has had significant experience in The Premier League:

> *"Then the offer came in and I thought thank God I've got somewhere to go… but the offer came in and I didn't like it, like, I'll be honest, they sent me a picture of the terms and I was thinking 'I don't want it'. I was thinking 'that's not right, I don't want that'… it was only one year plus one year and I was thinking I wanted three years, I wanted time, I need time to prove that I'm good enough. I don't want to get to Christmas and be worrying about getting renewed again… I called my dad but my dad was made up 'great, you've got an offer, Championship club' with lots of Premier League experience."*

James tells me that the issue with the contract was nothing to do with the money, but the length of time. The one-year plus one-year that James tells me has at Roby FC is only a one year contract with the option, if the club decide they want James, to renew the contract for another year. Understandably, James has major doubts and concerns about this contract due to extreme stresses he has already faced within the last 12 months in finding a club and doesn't want to be in the same situation after Christmas were he will again be pushing to sign another contract at Roby FC or find a new club. In the end, after discussing the contract with both his dad and agent, who both convinced him of the opportunities at Roby FC, he eventually decided to take the offer, and tells me his feelings after agreeing to the contract:

"So it was that last minute and it was a feeling of elation and just relief, pure relief! More than anything pure relief, cos my target at the end of May was first day of pre-season have somewhere to go! Somewhere to prove yourself and I'd got it and it was Roby FC and what a club!! ... now looking back, it's the best call I ever made to come here and just, well, to be honest, trust myself, trust myself that I'm good enough and to prove it and I don't know, my contract's not been extended yet but the one plus one is in the Club's favour so the Club can decide and the Chief Exec says that you'll come in and you'll get in front of the gaffer and if you do well it's up to you, you'll be in the First Team set up!"

Whilst James tells me of the intense feelings of elation he experienced when receiving and signing the contract from Roby FC but told me when signing the contract, James says he was *"aware"* that he would start with the under23s, until he proved himself, which he was *"fine with"* as he'd trusted himself he would be in the first team soon. Soon after he tells me of his first weeks at Roby FC, and how the difficulties and challenges began again, almost immediately:

"The first two weeks of pre-season were OK here, but then the first team went on a first season tour, all that worry that I'd had in June came right back at me the third week, when Andres [a Estonian player recently signed for Roby FC in the same position as James and only a little older] went with them, I was thinking 'shit, he's already ahead of me, I'm going to end up in the same position as at Hatton United where he's jumping up and even though I'm better than him he's going'. I was thinking 'for fuck's sake'. I did honestly think that, there was a day where I just thought 'fucking hell, what have I done?" [James]

"And how did you react to that?" [CD]

"Well, like what I said earlier I've got a different side to me, so being a bit nasty and knocking on the Academy Manager's door and saying 'what the fuck is that about? Why's he going with the First Team, is it to do with the last two weeks?

Am I seeing something completely different because from my point of view, he's been shit and I've been on top form?' and the Academy Manager just said 'don't worry, I'm as surprised as you' which is genuinely music to my ears cos I thought 'great' ...then he said 'now, listen, he's been brought in, he's played internationally, he's played top level.'

James further displays his new, developed identity to me, how he will be pro-active in doing something when he is not happy, such as in this case confronting the Academy Manager. The ruthless, macho culture of elite football has been discussed in previous literature (Nesti, 2004; Richardson et al., 2013), and perhaps this is James' way in dealing with these stressful situations is to take on a more *"selfish"*, *"tougher"* and *"nastier"* identity as he explains to me. Whether this is James being authentic or not, James feels like he has to take on this identity in order to navigate his way through this critical development time. Once again within the conversations, James displays this performance narrative, the singular, linear narrative of *'making it to the first team'*. James says he has been on *"top form"*, and is happy with his performances, yet because he is not with the first team. James worries he is failing, and neglecting the other environmental factors that can influence and change the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013). If the performance narrative of James' life were not so dominant he would perhaps be able to appreciate and be happy with his own performances currently, in a new club and a new team, which has been acknowledged by the Academy Manager. However, this is not the case – and after now with the first team away on pre-season tour, without James, he is put on the bench for a U23 pre-season game, which brings up familiar feelings of anxiety and stress again for James:

"With Andres away with the first team, and me here [with the 23s], all that starts playing in your head and after the last eighteen months at Hatton United I was

thinking 'oh, what's going on, come on'… I'm here with the 23s and Andres is actually playing for the first team out there [first team are in Portugal on a pre-season tour]… then I fuckin' didn't start a pre-season game for the 23s and I was thinking 'shit, have I lost my place in the reserve team? No way… so that's on mind! And I'm thinking, this is not what I wanted?... but just keep going, you've still got the armband, you started the first game with the armband and ended the second game with the armband, just keep going, keep working, keep dominating'.

In relation to the performance narrative, a second 'hierarchical narrative' appears to be developing for James. Aligning with the performance narrative, a common theme for James is to display anger and frustration that other, more senior players are above him within the hierarchical system of players in his position. This narrative becomes a crucial part of James' story – with ill feelings discussed in relation to Fabio, Toni and now Andres. Again, like the performance narrative, this narrative is out of James's control, and is impacting his development as a professional football. As James story develops, these other senior players are discussed more and more, shaping James story and were he currently sits within the hierarchy at Roby FC:

> *"So in my head that was a turning point to 'okay, he might be with the First Team for the next couple of days but slowly and surely, you're just going to chip away at that' and I did and in the meantime, We had Warren, Ballester, Vincente, Andres, Riley and then me. So at that point I was sixth choice in my head. Riley went out on loan, and he was cover for the whole back four and he was fourth choice centre back. So now I'm fifth choice! That's how I operate. I just look at it, who have I got in my way to either get injured, take out [meaning who can James injure via a bad tackle] or be suspended for me to play? I did it at Hatton United and the highest I ever got was eighth or whatever it was and I never really felt close to it! Here, I feel more close to it, I can see it!"*

James continues to tell me that whilst fifth choice, he feels closer to the first team, and over the course of the season in the Championship, with approximately 40-50 games

being played at first team level, James is *"fully expecting"* to be involved in some competitive, first team games. James also says who is in his *"way"* and who does he need to *"take out"*. Again, this seems a different James than the one at Hatton United, as he is open about what he is willing to do in order to get to the first team, and is happy to tell me he will happily injure a player in his position if it means it gets him closer to the first team. McAdams (1993) suggested that personal stories are important because this is how we construct our sense of self. Furthermore, Spence (1982) suggests telling stories of our experiences as humans over time allow the development of a narrative thread, which shapes our identity. As James story has evolved, so has James. James now sees an essential characteristic of making it as a professional footballer as being ruthless and selfish, to which he now views himself.

As we approach the end of the final interview, James begins to reflect on his journey from when he first got his professional contract at Hatton United to now, pre-season at Roby FC – almost 3 seasons later:

> *"In the first year at Hatton United with the U23s I definitely developed as a football player, and the second year I definitely developed mentally but that was because of the situation I was in and the struggles I had… but after 18 months of ressie [21s/23s] football you want to be kicking on to bigger and better things!! You want to be in men's footie. My 18 months of ressie football has been broken up so my first 8 months were brilliant and I learnt a lot from that. The next bit was shit, proper shit! Then I get a brilliant pre-season in and then shit, people come down and then next 10 months was just purely, I didn't learn much about my game, I couldn't, I didn't expose myself to anything other than players that I knew from training every day. I went out and went on a few trials for clubs and learned a little bit there and what the clubs wanted. That wasn't*

23s football, that was me on the back of that. I learned a lot, mentally but in terms of how I played, very little."

"So you feel you learnt more about the game and yourself in those trial periods?" [CD]

"Yeah because if I'm just in the 23s and I've got no opportunity in the First Team like I never at Hatton United, and I'm not going to play on the weekend, I'm just training. I'm just training against player X who I've trained against for ten years. I know him inside out and I know what he's going to do. I should do. The player I am and the player I'm going to become, I need to learn the player in ten minutes! I went to Lochin Town who were struggling in League One, manager under pressure, they had a big 36 year old centre half, I learned a bit from him, how he manages his body and how he plays and what it means to for him to win on the weekend. I went to to Cammel FC and another style and again, what it means to win on a weekend. They weren't struggling at the point I went to them but then all of a sudden… a month later, the gaffer's gone so I learnt how short the life span is in football and I learned that the hard way!!! I could have got a loan in January and my life could have been very different on the back of that loan but it didn't happen!! My opinion is if you stay in that reserve environment, for two years, same coaches, same players every day, you stop being on the young team in training and you start being on the old team and when that happens I think you're in a little bit of trouble."

When listening to James's stories and how he narrates them, I sense James has a little bit of personal regret from his time at Hatton United. Not just the way he felt he was treated at the end of his time at Hatton United, but the fact that he put *"so much trust"* in Hatton United. James tells me that his dad, his agent and himself were *"a bit naïve"* whilst at Hatton United. The reason for this is that James felt when he was playing well and in the Under21s team is the time he should have looked to have gone to another club in pursuit of first team football, due to his reputation being higher at the

time and therefore being able to negotiate with a lower league, first team club. James with a hint of regret explains to me what he wishes he had done whilst at Hatton United.

> *"What I wish I would have done is sign a one year contract, play as much as you can in that year. If you're not knocking on the First Team door, get out of there. Don't waste your time convincing yourself that 'if that happens and this happens'. If he likes you you'll be in, if you're not knocking, clearly not knocking, if you're not within touching distance of the First Team move on!! I think between me, my dad and my agent we were all a bit naïve, like 'it's alright, you're playing now, you don't need anything, you're playing' and then all of a sudden, bang, bang, bang, this happens, that happens, you're stuck, you're not going to play for six months, you're going to be out of sight, out of mind. What now? So, I would say while you're in the shop window, make the most of it because I played, that first year I played in the ressies, I was back on the fringe of the England squad, doing well and maybe, a lot of things could have happened differently and at that point it would have been best to go and get some men's footie."*

After almost two hours of talking, and James telling me his stories, thoughts, perspectives on his life and football, the interview approaches its natural end. We have been up and down and spoke about everything relating to Hatton United, Roby FC and his thoughts on football at this phase of development. I want to ask James about any succession planning he may have if football does not work out, but I can't bring myself to ask him. Why? Firstly, I know how much this means to him, and I don't want to offend him. I don't want to cast doubt on his ability to make it as a professional footballer. Secondly, I know what the answer probably is. I don't think he's thought about a different career in the slightest. He is fully committed as a professional footballer and that is all he wants to do – play first team professional football. He is

living this performance narrative, and takes all the issues this linear, single narrative brings – because it's his obsession to become a first team player and that is his only thought, his only dream, what he thinks about when he wakes up, and when he goes to sleep. As I thank James for everything, his time and effort during these interviews, his willingness to open up, how much I have learnt from him, and how much I admire his determination and drive, James opens up with something quite profound and emotional, which took me back with surprise:

> *"In the end, I just want to be able to look myself in the mirror and say I gave it my all. My absolute all and threw everything at it. To be proud of myself and say you know what, whether that means playing in the Premier League, or Conference North – I put everything into it and I didn't let anyone tell me I'm not good enough. I want to be able to look back in 10 years time and be proud and be able to say – I gave it my all. That's all that matters isn't it?"*

I nod, and smile to James, *"that's the most important thing for any of us"* I say, a bit stuck for words, and feeling slightly emotional myself. We shake hands and smile; I wish James well and good luck at Roby FC. *"Good luck in Spain, maybe I'll come and visit"* James laughs as I get into my car, *"adios!"* I shout back as I drive off. That was that. This wasn't the end for James, or the end of James story, but it was the end for me, the final interview. I had mixed emotions driving off, feelings of empathy and concern for James but also wishes and hopes that I see him playing first team football soon and everything turns out OK for James – he deserves it.

Final Reflections for James

The story of James highlights the unpredictable, volatile nature of elite level English football and the continuous threats and challenges to their identity young players face at this stage of their development (Nesti, 2010). James' story further supports the work

of Richardson et al. (2013) that suggests this developing mastery phase of development is, or at least can be, a stagnant, lonely time for players. Ultimately, James story is an insight into the every-day psychological demands, pressures, tensions and critical moments they face as they try and navigate their way through the game (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

James displayed a strong, evolving performance narrative throughout the interviews. The work of Carless and Douglas (2009) and Douglas and Carless (2009) has suggested the significant mental health issues that can occur when an individual rigidly follows the dominant performance narrative, with complete disregard for other dimensions of their life. Through the stories, James anchors himself as a young, hungry professional football player who will do anything to reach first team status and play first team football. In line with McAdams (1985) narrative identity work, James displays who he is through short stories, often involving other, important 'actors' to narrate his journey through the developing mastery phase of development and (hopefully) into first team football. Throughout the stories, James brings in other, key actors that directly threaten James identity and the performance narrative, specifically Fabio, Toni and Andres. The anger and frustrations directed by James towards these are perhaps unsurprising given that he views these as direct threats to James identity as a professional footballer.

James' story highlighted his 'development' as a person, and the impact this tough, ruthless culture of elite level football had on him (Nesti, 2004; Richardson et al., 2013). James viewed himself as more selfish, tougher, nastier but was happy he had developed these characteristics and seen them as necessary to help propel him into

the next phase of his career i.e. first team. This more selfish, tougher self was developed during James periods out of the squad, when he was only training and with 21s and unable to get any minutes. Erikson (1968) believed identity was a key development task of the teenage into adulthood years where young people need a sense of purpose, meaning and projects in order to develop and become more rounded human beings. When young people struggle to find meaning and purpose in what they are doing – like James described feeling at times, they may experience negative psychological emotions and at critical moments experience an identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). This identity crisis can manifest itself in negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours such as James purposely injuring a teammate. Furthermore, Erikson (1968) believed that identity was not only the development of the individual, but was entwined with the culture and this culture provided young people with certain beliefs and values. The culture of elite football made it acceptable for James to think he can purposely injure a teammate, be nastier, and tougher to other players as it was all part of the dominant performance narrative that embodied the sacrifices and 'obsessive' nature required to make it as a first team professional footballer (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

Lastly, it was only in the final stages of the interview, where James reflected on his journey so far that he moved away from this performance narrative and demonstrated, for the first time, an effort narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Within sport, effort narratives prioritise effort and application over winning, or in this case playing for the first team (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Whilst the performance narrative accounts for "dedication" and "hard work", these are seen as essential in order to get to the performance goal – i.e. playing for the first team. An effort narrative differs from this,

as it is largely controllable and sustainable regardless of external influences (such as first team players dropping down or a manager signing somebody in your position).

6.5.6 Michael's story:

6.5.7 Introduction to Michael & his relationship with me

Michael, 20 is a current elite level football player for the English Premier League club Eslida FC. Eslida FC is an experienced top half EPL club, with many years in the top flight of English football. Furthermore they have experience competing in Europe, often within the Europa League. I was put in contact with Michael following my first study with Under21 coaches, and when we arranged to meet up he had been sent out on loan, to Chatsworth United, a championship club in London. I had done my research on Michael, and knew he had some experience playing for Eslida FC first team in the EPL when he was only 18 years of age. Since then, Michael had been sent on loan numerous times, so I was keen to explore these experiences with him. We met in a quiet Costa Coffee in central London, "nice to meet you mate, I'm Michael", Michael said as I approached him. "I got you a latte mate." "Thanks", I replied, and we began to talk…

Above was my first encounter with Michael, and over the period of two football seasons (equating to nearly 20 months), I interviewed Michael four times in total. Again, similar to James, Michael and I struck up a positive relationship and at times our conversations would go outside the realms of football, and he would curiously ask me about university, research – and at times suggesting perhaps this is something he would have liked to have done. As always throughout these

interviews, I attempted to act as an active listener (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Again, similar to James, Michael would portray his feelings, thoughts and experiences through stories, with characters, a setting and a plot (Sparkes & Smith, 2000). To give some context, Michael had a little more experience than James, and was almost two years older. As we chatted a little about living in London, we moved on to Michaels' early experiences in football:

"Well, I was eight and I was playing for just a local team, and the scouts approached my parents, said would I like to go on a trial at Eslida, I was eight and I went down and done a six week trial at Eslida. Obviously you can't sign no papers and things until you're nine, but I wasn't really enjoying Eslida at the time." [Michael]

"Was you not?" [CD]

"No, and I don't know really know why…, I just wasn't and I said to my dad 'I don't like it' and he's not going to force me. That's not him. He said 'what do you want to do?' and I was like 'I don't want to play for them no more'. I was a kid, do you know what I mean? So me dad, he always said if I don't want to play football, don't play it."

"OK, so what happened after that?"

"Then Whiston City come in and so I went to Whiston City when I was nine and signed with Whiston. I signed for two years with them, but I just didn't fit in to be fair. It was good at first but again I didn't like it, I wasn't enjoying it and obviously I was a kid so that's not good if you're not enjoying it at that age. So, and then Eslida come back in for me and I signed for them and I've been there ever since."

Whilst similar to James in that Michael also had been at an academy from a young age, it appears that Michael's early experiences within football were not positive, and he wasn't really committed to football in the same way that James appeared to be at the that age. Michael is quite open about the fact he didn't enjoy his time firstly at Eslida FC and secondly Whiston City. Already, Michael has touched on some kind of indifference that he felt to football and the academy football environment at two different clubs, something that would reappear in further interviews. Eventually, Michael signed again for Eslida FC and continued to discuss his experiences progressing through the academy system:

"At the ages of 11, 12 and that it was all about having fun - nothing really serious about the game, just learning and getting different coaches each year. It was just about progressing and trying to get that next contract and then it starts getting a bit more serious when you get to Under 16s, you start missing school one day a week and you have to come in and train with the Under 18s and see what it's like and then they make a decision on you. If you get a scholarship that's when you start, at sixteen and I had the same path I suppose."[Michael]

"By getting a bit more serious, what do you mean? [CD]

"Well I always wanted to be a footballer when I was a kid. I hadn't been brought up to think anything else. Nothing ever come into my head 'I wanna be this, I wanna be that' it was just 'I want to be a footballer'. It was the only thing I wanted to do. Literally I didn't think about anything, becoming anything else. I probably couldn't have become anything else really."

Even though Michael had some negative experiences within academy football at a young age, he still suggested that he always wanted to be a football player as a child and never thought about anything else. However, Michael didn't say this as

something positive, or in a way to demonstrate his obsessiveness with football or the performance narrative James displayed – instead, Michael said this was a hint of regret, and importantly said *"I probably couldn't have become anything else really"*. I asked Michael what he meant by this comment:

> *"Well, I wasn't really clever, not in an academic sense. I only got one GCSE and that was P.E. I didn't really do coursework, I was a bit arrogant and stupid, you know "I don't need to do it" coz I played football. I regret that, to be honest, I'd liked to have studied, I enjoyed Spanish, and I was always told I had potential but just didn't try… then I started doing two days a week at Eslida when I was 14 and that was that with school basically, I finished school and went straight to Eslida full time at 16, which was fucking hard!!"*

Michael tells me that he regretted some of his behaviour and attitude to education as a youngster, and whilst being told he had potential and enjoyed some lessons, never really took school seriously. At times, Michael uses phrases such as *"it just really happened"*, *"just one of them, I don't really know"*, *and "looking back, I suppose that's just what happens"*. Whilst Michael stated he always wanted to be a footballer, he appeared to have no real goals or objectives as a young player, and just followed the 'typical' path of a young football player without really thinking about his future and what it was that he wanted. Previous research has explored the education system within professional football academies (Richardson et al., 2005) and the issues that surround it. A great demand is 'supposedly' placed on education for young footballers, as realistically the likelihood of making a career out of professional football is in fact less than 1% (Green, 2009). In addition to education being important as a backup for football it is also a method of developing the whole person, the identify of a young player, giving him greater resources to draw on,

understanding and learn more about themselves with greater opportunity to grow, and deal with the inevitable setbacks that will occur in football (Nesti, 2010). I felt perhaps Michael regretted his early experiences with education a little more than he told me, and wondered how things may have been different for him if he took education seriously.

We continue the conversation and Michael moves on to talk about his experiences playing within the under21s and with the first team, and the issues he faced whilst seemingly exploring his identity and other areas of interest to Michael:

"I got offered a proper contract at eighteen but I wasn't really liked at the start to be fair, it's hard going up to the 21s coz you've just turned 18 usually, and other things are important as well, not just footie – but that's not really allowed if you know what I mean? I grew me hair and I think I went a little bit weird. I think they thought I didn't give a shit or something. Think I came across as arrogant but I was just weird and had long hair. I think I went off footie a little bit, like I got really into my music and the feeling I got off playing music and going out listening to it was unbelievable, so I started looking at things a bit different. I was listening to The Doors loads, and Jim Morrison, he's a fucking legend and didn't give a fuck, so we'd go out and I'd be drinking fucking whisky and taking whisky flasks out with me."

"Why wasn't you liked because of that?"

"It's seen as not interested isn't it, not football type thing. I could tell they never, they would both [the under21 coaches] go for me, question my attitude. I was still giving everything in training, but I enjoyed other stuff as well and that doesn't look good I suppose. In the end as I matured a bit we got on better and have a decent relationship now."

Erikson (1963) suggested young adulthood is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of oneself, and not necessarily a cause for concern, in particular for young people. It would appear that Michael was exploring his identity, developing who he is as opposed to just being a footballer – perhaps in the 'moratorium status' as highlighted by Marcia et al. (1990). Within this 'status' Marcia (1980) suggests it's a time for 'exploration' and 'finding oneself'. Marcia also reported that this is healthy and normal and should be encouraged to young people to avoid identity conforming and further identity crises in later life. However, within football, as Michael suggests, this was an issue. Cushion and Jones (2006) ethnographic research into academy football culture suggested coaches were often favourable to players who 'conformed' to the culture and displayed 'the right attitude' such as working hard and being 100% committed. Whilst Michael suggested he still worked as hard as ever, he was enjoying exploring other identities and further finding who he was. However, in football this was deemed an issue for not displaying the obsessive, performance narrative required within professional football (Carless & Douglas, 2013) and this can lead to exclusion and difficult relationships with coaches and others living the performance narrative. It was only after Michael *"left that weird phase and grew up a bit"* as he labels it, that he began to kick on and progress at Eslida FC, were he trained with the first team:

> *"Yeah, the first time I trained with them, wow, that felt a different level. Then my first training game, it was a box-to-box but still a big game, just an eleven a side. It was vast, do you know what I mean, you felt like a tiny fish in a big pond, and they hardly know your name, most of them… it's scary to be fair but it went proper well and then they know your name and they had a couple of players come off and say 'well done', 'you've done well there' and that was a big confidence booster for me. Once they can see that you've managed to cope you*

start getting involved a bit more and more then and then, yeah, you've just got to be ready whenever. That's it really, they have loads of good players but they just wouldn't be ready on that day, I've seen that before" [Michael]

"Could you tell us a bit about when you've seen that before?" [CD]

"I've seen lads who are very good players, but if you go up twice and don't cut it, well, they'll just say nah not good enough. And you won't be asked again, as harsh as it sounds. I reckon I got a bit lucky to be fair, I went away to Germany with the 21s and about five days into that I got the call 'you need to fly to America to join the first team' so I had to fly to America on my own, and I was shitting myself, like going away with the first team is different. You're with them all week, and I ended up doing well there so I was in the spotlight so I stayed around the first team for a bit after that and ended up making my debut about 4 months later" [Michael]

"For the first team?" [CD]

"Yeah, in the Premier League against Fulling FC, a massive club who've won the league god knows how many times! Anyway, I remember the day before, I didn't think I was going to travel, I wasn't expecting to travel and, I was in the squad and absolutely buzzing!! I thought there's no way I'm going to be on the bench and then I ended up being on the bench and I thought fucking hell, that was a shock and then, in the warm up the assistant come up to me going 'if you get on you need to look for those runs in behind" and I was like 'why's he tellin' me that?' I still didn't realise, sounds mad but I honestly didn't realise. I was like 'yeah, yeah, sound' and then, I remember just warming up and I had just come to sit down and he was like 'get your gear off' and I was like 'what the fuck?'. I went 'what?' and he said 'get your gear off, you're going on' and I'm like 'am I going on?' and he's like 'come on, come on, don't fuck about, get your gear off' and I was just thinking 'oh my god' and it was on the telly as well."

"What was that like? That experience?" [CD]

"It was the most scared I'd ever been in my life, coming on to the pitch, I can't even explain it. I come on and was jogging and that and it was the Coliseum and I felt like 'wow' and yeah, I had the first touch, grabbed the ball and then I got that chance. I didn't think about it to be fair, it was just the first thing came into my head and just shoot, do you know what I mean. I could have passed it I think but I didn't I just went with it, the game was dead, no Eslida FC player had a shot on target. Everyone, all the fans were buzzing after that a young kid come on and he only wanted to shoot and things and then I was getting praise, I remember getting on the coach, after getting changed, all the lads were congratulating me, and took my shirt off me and signed it and went round everyone for me. I was like, fucking hell, buzzing. I was on a coach and I had my phone with me and Twitter was going mad and I was getting text messages off everyone and I was just like, I'd never been that happy. Oh my god, it was like, that feeling was a joke that I'd never experienced before."

Following on from Michael's debut in the EPL, he came on as a substitute the following week for 15 minutes and *"done well"*, but then suffered an injury that week and had numerous problems with his hamstrings for the remainder of the season. From the massive high of playing in two EPL games, Michael found himself with the under21s again, without a look in to the first team. *"That was hard to come back to, not just the injuries but being in the 21s and thinking – I've been through this already, I should be up there now. Especially coz I'd already had a taste for it."* Michael was then sent on loan for the remaining 6 weeks of the season to lower two club Croxton Town, a moment of realisation for Michael:

"I didn't know anyone when I got there. It was a shithole. It was just a shithole. The facilities were shit, it was just like a dull place. The pitches were shit, but it made me realise how fucking good life is at Eslida. That's maybe why they sent me [laughs]. They're ten years behind down there, and that was scary to be fair.

That was nearly two seasons ago now and I understand it all better now…" [Michael]

After Michael returned to pre-season following his injuries, he was still training with the under21s mostly, and was keen to go out on loan. Michael told me it was he who pushed going out on loan, as more than a year had passed since his two Premier League appearances and didn't feel he was going to be given the opportunity of playing first team football at Eslida in the immediate future. Michael lays some of this blame at the first team manager of Eslida FC, who he struggled to *"develop a relationship with":*

"I' wasn't really a fan of the manager either, I've never really spoke to him properly. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful he gave me my debut but there was just things I didn't like. He used to call me young boy, fucking young boy and I was like my name is fucking Michael. He was always interested in the older players, and just didn't really give you the time, never speaking. He never, ever once got me on his own and had a conversation with me. I've been in his office when I've had to have been, but that was it."

In face of the issues with the first team manager, and eager to play first team football, Michael went out to Bromsfield United and really enjoyed his time there, however, in only his fourth appearance for the club disaster struck – and he broke his leg in a clash with an opposing defender. Michael winces as he describes, and punches his fist to demonstrate the impact of what happened, explaining the shock, the fear and all the emotions rolled into one:

"That was probably the hardest thing that has ever happened to me. I thought my career was over then. I spent five days in the hospital and I come home for three days and then I was back in Eslida, but not doing anything obviously.

There wasn't anything they could do at the time like, was just getting me out of the house. It was the worst point of my career, not involved in anything, just on the bike, just ticking over. To be fair I made quick progress, but when I came back training with the under21s, the first session back I felt like everything was a million miles ahead, know what I mean? I felt so slow and had no sharpness. I was thinking at the time "oh my god, am I always going to be like this?" So it took loads of extra work for fucking months and months, and then I came on for the 21s for like the last 20 minutes, and the adrenalin was a boss feeling. It made me realise that I missed footie, but that last adrenaline only lasted 2-3 weeks then it was difficult to maintain it, I just came back down to earth really and realised that I'm still only playing 21s football here, it was tough to maintain it and it's been like that since. I haven't really got a sniff of the first team since in terms of playing, I wanted to go out on loan but the coaches said it wasn't right as I was still coming back from the broken leg, and who knows what could happen in a game. So yeah, that lasted all last season to be honest so I feel like I've been trying to work hard and get back to where I was, but it's been tough. Like before I came on loan here, I was training with the first team, but then playing 21s… and I need more than that".

Within the timeframe of Michaels' rehabilitation, a new manager came in at Eslida FC first team, to which Michael is obviously excited *"it's a lot better, training, everything – and he fucking knows my name. We had lots of good discussions and talks, and he suggested it would be good for me to go out on loan, as a couple of clubs had been interested… so here I am down in London"* Michael laughs, *"had some experiences haven't I eh, been a whirlwind to say the least".* Michael suggested the transition to a new [not permanent] club had been easy due to his pervious loan experiences *"I didn't know anyone here, but I wasn't too bothered. Chatsworth have a young squad as well so it's not too bad, easy to get on with people and I know how everything works, people are a bit frosty at first with a loanee but that doesn't bother me, I've done it twice already now. I'm ready to just*

kick on now and show what I'm made of, whether it be at Eslida football club or somewhere else. There's no point looking back, saying I should have left then, or I should have done this, just got to focus on now… here."

When Michael suggests *"there is no point looking back, saying I should have left then"*, I probe Michael on this, to which Michael admits to me that he feels he has stagnated in his career at Eslida FC, and has some regrets from not taking an opportunity to leave Eslida FC for a Championship club who were in for him:

> *"Yeah, they was in for me, I was so close. I actually told the new gaffer Alfonso that I want to leave. I said to my agent, yeah sort it out. I thought it was done. I went on holiday but when I came back Alfonso rang me, and said 'I don't want you to go.' I told him that I want to go, that I'll play more. He convinced me in the end, said I'm in his plans. In the end they got relegated so maybe it was for the best [laughs] but I don't know how much I was in his plans because I didn't play. That's football though, maybe it was because someone else was looking to leave or whatever, anyway I'm here now and will give it my all here and see what happens. Alfonso thinks this will be a good experience as they are a top club, who play a style that'll suit me… so I'm quite excited about it. Am I open to moving away from Eslida? Definitely. Am I open to staying at Eslida? Definitely as well."*

Reflective Stop Off One for Michael

The aim of this first interview was to get an understanding of who Michael was, what his values were, his aims, what he was looking to achieve in football and what

his experiences were. I was surprised at the range of challenges Michael had faced, at such a young age. I didn't get the same feeling that I did with James that Michael truly loved football, and was obsessed about it. However, I didn't view that as a bad thing, either. He was able to view things for what they were – and was perhaps a little more cynical, which may not be a bad thing in football. Perhaps due to his age, Michael didn't talk much about his parents, although he said they have been supportive of him throughout his career. Michael was quite open in talking around the issues he's had with coaches and other senior figures at Eslida FC. Michael didn't seem the type to 'conform' and was very much his own person. I perhaps felt that some of these issues he had was him exploring his identity further, pushing boundaries, pushing against the norms of professional football culture. I was excited to catch up again with Michael to see his developments at Chatsworth United. I didn't have the same concerns or worry for Michael that I did James, perhaps as I seen Michael as a little bit more experienced, he'd already been chewed up and spat out in professional football – and was aware of the 'politics' of football as he told me. Maybe he could handle whatever was thrown at him.

6.5.8 From bad to worse to bad again, back at Eslida FC

I was waiting for Michael in a Costa Coffee in the city centre of Eslida. In the end, Michael had some issues in London, to which I was already aware of. I like to keep track of the people involved within my research, so will often search online to see of any news on them. I'd seen in the local papers in Chatsworth he was involved in some issues, and was now back at Eslida. I was keen for him to explore what exactly happened, but was also aware that he may not want to disclose everything. As

Michael walked in, I'd already bought him a cappuccino "I've got them in, this time" I smiled. "Thanks mate" he laughed "you remembered it was a cappuccino as well!" As Michael sat down, we began to talk and quickly got on to the topic of his experience at Chatsworth United:

"Well I settled down there OK, got on with the lads, but I didn't get on with the manager. He was a bit of a control freak, and I hated that. Telling me to stand somewhere, then say, no a yard in front. Fuck off! I like to be free, that's how I've been used to as a kid so it was hard getting used to playing for him, and we had a few arguments to be fair, one was quite serious." [Michael]

"What happened? [CD]

"By the way, I've never argued with a coach like this before, so it's not like it's always me but I ended up shouting across the pitch to him. He was telling me what to do, every step by step, then would stop it and go no, no… you know in front of everyone. So I was like 'yeah, yeah' and he just kept telling us 'no, like this, like that' quite patronising and talking like 'you need to be there' and I'm like 'okay' so I step to the side and he's like 'no, no, one yard in front' and you're not going to be standing still in a game are you so I said 'okay, I'm fucking standing here' and he was like 'okay' and then kept going on and on and I ended up losing the ball a few minutes later and then he ended up shouting dead loud across… so that's when I just spat back and was like 'who the fuck are you shouting at? Don't be shouting at me and I started fuming. No-one's fucking speaking to me like that, I've never done that to a coach, never, and after it the Assistant Manager comes up to me and says 'don't worry about that, the Manager has got good intentions for you and he wants you to do well, he's going to want to see you though'. So, the next day he called me into his office in the morning and had a good conversation, about twenty minutes and it was positive so obviously that didn't really bother him. It might have been a bit good, do you know what I mean? So I'm not getting treated like a little kid. I'm playing men's

football, so I don't regret it to this day, I'd do exactly the same thing. I felt like I was in the right, so, I voiced my opinion."

"Was it resolved then?"[CD]

"Well, sort of. Then he got the sack coz we couldn't win a fucking game, and some new fella came in and I thought happy days, a new manager is coming in, at first it went well and the first meeting I had with him went well, and then he didn't start me next game, so, I went and I had an argument with him saying that I should be playing and then he was like 'okay, I'll give you your chance then' do you know what I mean but like in a a sarcastic way so he started me the next game and then he dragged me off at half time. It was like his way of saying 'I'm in charge' do you know what I mean? So I was fucking fuming with rage. It was an away game so I was fucking proper angry so I just got changed at half time and got off without him knowing. I wanted to kill him. I did, I swear to God. I couldn't believe it like. I felt embarrassed. I was just like 'you cheeky bastard'. I was like 'oh my God' I didn't know what to do. So I got showered and got changed and walked to the nearest ASDA and phoned a taxi to there and got off in one. Stupid looking back like, I know. I stayed off the next day and went training on the Thursday and I see him, and I just walk past him and didn't say nothing and he called me up to his office and he was like 'where was you?' and so I said 'I left'. 'Why weren't you there for the team talk?' and I said 'I left'. I was still fucking fuming… and he went 'you won't be involved in the game on Saturday then.' And I said 'yeah, I know that' and he was like 'right okay, erm, I think it's best that you just get your stuff and drive back down to Eslida.' So, I was like 'fine by me' and I just walked out and that's the last time I ever spoke to him."

Following on from what was his final day at Chatsworth United, Michael arrived back at Eslida FC and as he anticipated, was called into the 'gaffers' office. Michael says he had a good conversation with Eslida's first team manager and took some advice on board:

"Well obviously he wasn't happy, which I understood. The report he got from Chatsworth was never going to be positive, was it? But I said to him, you wasn't there, you didn't see how he spoke to me. I took a little bit from it to be honest, about how to react in certain situations and I definitely learnt from the experience. The gaffer agreed that it wasn't a great environment for me to be in so young and on loan, and they didn't deal with situations well but still, he said I'm getting paid to play, don't be sulking. I still don't regret what I done, stood up for myself and that's important to me. When I came back I had to train with the 21s, until I showed a bit more fire he said but within a few weeks I was in back in the first team as he was made up how I was training and how hard I was fucking working, which I always do."

From the dialogue with Michael, patterns have begun to emerge in how he tells stories to me, what he focuses on as important events in his development (McAdams, 1985), and brings a real 'players' voice on the transition theory that has perhaps so often failed to grasp this messy, volatile, continuous transition for young players within professional football – such as the passage above. In part, to enable a 'smoother' transition to the next level of professional football, players are supposed to conform to the coaches' ideals of what makes a good professional (Parker, 2001; Mitchell & Holt, 2006). In Mitchell's (2015) doctoral work with young [soon to be] professional football players, he suggests that players will modify their behaviours, attitudes and characteristics in order to please coaches and conform to the traditional cultural norms of the respective club. This has further been supported by Cushion and Jones (2006) work, which demonstrated the abusive language and authoritarian behaviour displayed by coaches to young football players at professional clubs. Furthermore, Cushion and Jones (2006) suggested young players were given very little autonomy, and were expected to take verbal abuse from coaches without responding. Nevertheless, it

appears Michael does not conform to these traditions, and is not afraid to answer back to a coach, and in this instance, a first team manager, if he feels he has been treated unfairly. These elements of Michael's character were noticeable early on in our dialogue, where he openly spoke about falling out with coaches and not liking certain coaches due to their attitude and behaviours to him. Perhaps more so than other young professional football players, Michael explored his identity at younger ages, and whilst reflects on this as 'a weird stage' these experiences allowed Michael to find who he is, what his values and beliefs are, to understand himself more which allows him to navigate through the unforgiving and ruthless world of football.

It appears that often young football players are expected to feel 'privileged' to be playing football professionally, regardless of how they are spoken to or treated by senior staff, and should always be happy being *'paid to play'* football as the first team manager told Michael. These expectations are often met by young football players who are wanting to impress their coaches at every opportunity to reach their dreams and will conform to these expected behaviours, even if it is not them being authentic or real (Mitchell, 2015). However, for Michael, this seemed different. From an early age Michael has expressed different opinions on football, from his time at his boyhood club that he didn't like at first, to *'going off football'* a little while, and having mixed experiences, both positive and negative, whilst out on loan at clubs – and he's not afraid to discuss these openly. In essence, Michael has, and continues to, resist conforming and co-operating to coaches' ideals and values (Potrac & Jones, 2009), and instead follows his own values, and beliefs, which in his words have *"been important for me to stick to what I believe"*. Whilst this may have 'hindered' Michael in the short-term whilst at Chatsworth United on loan, and ultimately being sent back

to Eslida FC, Michael said he wouldn't change those experiences as he felt it was important to stand up for his own beliefs and values.

To align to some theoretical context, it appears Michael is successfully navigating through the fifth stage of Erikson's (1968) eight stages of psychosocial development – identity vs role confusion with the positive resolution of a firm sense of self and high levels of self-awareness. Bee (1992) suggested towards the end of this stage, the person should have a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to be and their appropriate role. Erikson (1968) further suggested this growth and these changes can at times be uncomfortable, as experienced by Michael as he was navigating through the world of professional football whilst exploring his identity, pushing boundaries and finding out who he was, and how this affects himself and his relationships and behaviours within the football environment. This aligns with the work of Carless and Douglas (2012; 2013), were Michael has looked to resist the singular, linear performance narrative where becoming a first team football player is the only goal and everything else is sacrificed. Throughout Michaels' story he has talked of other things in life that are important besides football, and resisted the elite football cultural narrative, which in turn has led to issues with coaches throughout Michaels career, but allowed him to have a greater sense of self-worth and positive for his overall identity development and well-being (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

Reflective Stop off 2 for Michael

For somebody only 21 years of age, Michael has had a range of challenging different experiences, with multiple loans at clubs far from Eslida. I feel these experiences have helped Michael in finding himself and who he is, with greater levels of self-awareness.

To me, Michael does not seem to be the 'typical' football player, when compared to my work with other football players over the years. He's able to step back, step away from football and view this from a different angle. These are potentially really challenging times for Michael, on the brink of making first team football yet still with very few appearances – however, having a really bad loan experience which was displayed in the media, and being sent down to the 21s again at Eslida damages Michaels' profile. Nevertheless, Michael seems calm about this and is confident in his football ability, regardless of the 'attitude' questions asked about him. I don't view these as attitude problems, I see it more as strength of character and lack of conformity. However, I've developed a good relationship, and we really get on, so I'm aware that this may be some bias on my behalf, although my role here is not to question the truth or validity of the stories Michael tells me, and instead try to understand the reasons he is telling me them and the development of his identity through these life-stories within the football world. I was less worried about Michael than I was James, I felt he could deal with the shocks to the system that the football world regularly gives out, as he had a clear sense of who he was and what he stood for. I was looking forward to our next catch up with Michael to see his developments, but I didn't expect him to be at Eslida FC.

The best experience I've ever had; Admiral Town

As always with our catch-ups, we meet at a local Costa Coffee in-between Eslida FC, and his loan club Admiral Town. Admiral is only a short journey away from Eslida FC and is fairly local. Michael was sent out to Admiral Town by Eslida FC after an unsuccessful loan at Chatsworth United. As we sit down I remind Michael of the last

time we caught up, and asked him to touch on from where we left off and what has happened since, to which Michael takes a sip of his coffee, and begins to explain…

> *"This has been brilliant lately, you know. I'll go from the start but talk about the important bits or we'd be here all day…" [Michael]*
>
> *"Yeah, of course.." [CD]*
>
> *"Well, obviously after Chatsworth United, which was a disaster, I had to go out somewhere, once the gaffer could trust me again. One day he said 'you're ready to go back now, your head's in the right place, you need to be on loan', erm, and that's where it's going. My head was always in the right place like, to be honest. I just spoke up for myself, but they make a judgement on you quick in football if you don't follow the line" [Michael]*
>
> *"What do you mean by that?" [CD]*
>
> *"You're just expected to follow the rules and not speak up, well, if you're a young player that's what you're supposed to do init? And if you speak up or stand up for yourself it's seen like you're questioning them, loads of managers are like that though, paranoid that you're trying to get one over on them."*

Following on from previous stories Michael has told me, this one again starts from a conversation with a coach / manager. Whereas James decided to bring in actors in the form of other, more senior players who were stopping him reaching the first team, Michael decides focus in on his conversations and issues he's had with coaches or managers from academy to first team and these form major parts of his stories. Again, Michael suggests that whilst the manager thinks he isn't fully committed or mentally ready, Michael always was – but he just speaks his mind and says what he thinks and doesn't follow the line. These are further insights into how players are perceived who

don't follow the dominant performance narrative and how these negative perceptions of players can be easily formed.

Michael was eventually 'allowed' to go out on loan again, this time to Admiral Town. Michael face lights up when he begins speaking of his experiences at Admiral Town and how the season has gone. Michael tells me he nearly went on loan to another team up in Scotland, but this didn't work out and instead was sent out to Admiral Town, to which he had a great start:

> *"I got off to a good start at Admiral Town, first training sessions were just good, and it felt good about the place, you know, and when I went to Chatsworth I felt uncomfortable straight away and it was shit! When you're comfortable you play your best football in my opinion and that's why it worked for me but also coz it was quite close. The loans I've had before were all fucking miles away, like 4/5 hours away from home. After training I like coming home and seeing me mum or me mates and doing other stuff and I couldn't do that at other loans, there was nothing to do apart from the football but here I can do it."*

The above passage is of significant importance because it demonstrates how Michael views other areas of his life, such as having other interests, hobbies, relationships outside of football are important for his well-being. Michael saying, *"there was nothing to do apart from the football"* signifies he is *more* than just a football player; he has other dimensions to his identity and these are important to him as he navigates his way through the unpredictable world of football. In turn, at Admiral Town he could pursue these other elements of his life, which helped his on the pitch performances and led to what he describes as the best experience he's ever had in football:

"It was the best experience I've had in footie so far, I felt really good on and off the pitch… just going into every game, and you knew we were going to win every game. We ended up winning the league, which was unbelievable. The celebrations and stuff, yeah, that's my most enjoyable moment for obvious reasons."

It has only been two weeks since Admiral Town won the league, with over 5 games remaining in the league. Michael tells me how this is *"just what was needed"* after Chatsworth United and the experiences he had there:

"I needed this after what went on at Chatsworth United, this had to be a positive loan, because if you get a bad loan, and then another bad loan then where does that leave you at the end of year? How does that look to everyone else? So I knew the pressure was on for this to be a good loan."

Interestingly, Michael views the need of having a good loan not [only] for his own confidence, or belief in his ability, but how it's viewed in the world of football by coaches, managers and clubs. Michael explains that two bad loans consecutively would potentially put his career in jeopardy as another club, including Eslida FC, who would not likely give him an opportunity, as he would be deemed *"a risk"*. However, on a personal level, the bad experience at Chatsworth didn't seem to overly worry Michael:

"I was just looking forward to getting the next loan, I didn't focus too much on the last one, it was a bad loan, a bad experience but so what? Other players can react really badly and really worry but for me, if you have a bad loan, you have a bad loan, do you know what I mean? The only thing you can do is go and have a fucking, the next one, and make it a good one and get your head round that. I didn't worry too much to be honest."

It seems Michaels' strong sense of self allows him to navigate through what would appear difficult, stressful situations more easily than perhaps other players within this phase of development. Nesti (2004) suggested that players with a developed identity and a strong self are able to deal with the shocks and constant challenges that playing professional football brings. Michael doesn't live the performance narrative described by so many athletes within previous narrative elite sport research (see Carless & Douglas, Douglas & Carless), but whilst Michael does not live the performance narrative, and at times actively resists it, it appears at times he is actively 'playing the part of the athlete' to managers, coaches and clubs (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Reflective Stop Off 3 for Michael

From my interactions with Michael, I feel he views these negative (and the same for positive) experiences differently than James. Michael appears to not get caught up in 'making it' – and takes things in his stride as they happen. He is able to step back and view his experiences in context, and understand the volatile nature of football. When reflecting on his 'bad loan' at Chatsworth – I get the impression whilst he understood how it is perceived; Michael wasn't actually overly worried about this. He understood that bad loans happen, that this wasn't the right loan for him. I wonder how James would have coped in circumstances such as these? Or perhaps James would never find himself in these circumstances due to never resisting the narrative culture? Nevertheless, Michael is aware how this bad loan is perceived, in particular falling out with a manager and getting sent back to Eslida FC. He acknowledged to the Eslida FC manager that he couldn't act and behave like that, although to me he said he would do it again if spoken to by a manager like that again. Here, Michael is playing the athlete role and actively stating his agreement with the manager, working 'extra hard'

in training to show his head is 'back' in the right place – although he tells me his head was always in the right place and didn't' hasn't done anything differently.

At times, I have to be honest; during my conversations, discussions and reflections I did question the meaning of football to Michael. How important is football for him? Can he deal with these situations better because he doesn't care as much? Or is that myself thinking players should be living the performance narrative? Has Michael done well because of his natural ability and creativity as opposed to his commitment and dedication? However, these feelings began to change when Michael described his experiences at Admiral Town, and I could see the joy and elation on Michaels' face, and how happy he seems when talking of recently winning the league with Admiral Town. That experience did mean a lot to Michael, and perhaps he was able to enjoy it so much as he was still allowed, and had time, to explore other areas of his life whereas he had not previously at the two former loan clubs. I was unsure exactly how Michaels career was going to pan out, whether at Eslida FC or not – but I didn't worry for him like I did James.

6.5.10 Be selfish and don't take it to heart too much!

It was now January, and 8 months after Michael won the league with Admiral Town. Michael has recently started at a new loan club, Gatesville City in League 1. Michael has already scored 4 goals in just 2 games. I was surprised Michael was at a new loan club and had not formally left Eslida FC – after telling me these were his wishes in the last interview. I knew Eslida FC had a new manager so I was keen to explore this with Michael – did Eslida FC have a plan for Michael now they had a new manager? Did he now see his future at Eslida FC? After a brief discussion about last weekends

boxing, our conversation wanders to football, and I remind Michael of where we ended the interview last time, and ask for him to describe his experiences since then…

"Yeah. So I was at Admiral Town and my aim was to finish that loan and then leave Eslida FC for a new club."

"Even with the new manager coming in?" [CD]

"Yeah, he came in and was making all signings in the summer so there obviously wasn't any room for me so I needed to go before I wasted another year, just do the best for me and go!" [Michael]

"In what way was it obvious?" [CD]

"Well he took my squad number away from me, so it doesn't get much more obvious, know what I mean? That's when it's time to go. He never had a conversation with me or even looked at me to be honest, but I knew he didn't want me but fuck it, I wanted to go anyway!" [Michael]

"Not even a conversation?" [CD]

"With the first team manager? No, nothing. If he doesn't want you there and it's clear that he never then you've got to go. He took mine and 3 other players squad numbers away for this season so that's it – done."

"And how does that make you feel?" [CD]

"At this moment? I couldn't give a fuck. My mind was 'well I'm going anyway'. I went into that first day of pre-season training with the mind-set of 'get fit and get ready to go'. Do what I need to go and get out of there. That's been my aim since the day I finished at Admiral Town." [Michael]

Michael had originally planned to go back and sign for Admiral Town, after a successful spell were Admiral Town got promoted and Michael scored some vital goals to secure it, but a fee wasn't agreed between the two clubs. Michael was left waiting around and after numerous other potential deals fell through, Michael had to remain at Eslida FC until at least January (English football transfer windows now run from approximately mid May to mid August, and then again open from 1st – 31st of January). This is 6 months of Michael's career at a club that appear not to want him, and that he doesn't want to be at. I ask what Michael was doing in that period, and if he got any under23 minutes:

> *"I wasn't playing any games. I wasn't allowed to play in any league games for the 23s, so, my match fitness has just been horrendous… I got a couple of games in the cups; I played 30 minutes in one, 20 minutes in another. So I just had to keep doing my own fucking fitness and look after myself cos I knew I was going to be going somewhere in January and I needed to be ready for wherever, so, I was just done with the club, you know what I mean? I was going in and doing my own stuff, looking after my shit."*

Within this time period, Michael has been training with the 23s or by himself. Michael tells me he hasn't trained with the first team since he got back from Admiral Town and the first team manager has never seen him *"kick a ball"*. Michael also says that a lot of the work he did was individual and created sessions by himself, with no sports science support or other coaches. Interestingly, Michael had said in previous interviews that he had a good relationship with under23s coaches and staff, so I was surprised to see that a lot of the training he was doing was alone, and asked him about his relationship with the 23s coach who he used to be close to:

"He's fucked me off a little bit [not making an effort with him], but I don't know if that was just out of his hands, I don't know. So in the end I wasn't really no one's, it didn't really matter cos everyone knew I was going. I weren't there to serve the club so I just went in done my training and use what you can from the Club, you know what I mean?"

I wondered how this made Michael feel. I reflected on how I would feel in the same situation – anger, hurt, neglected. Whereas with James I seen the change in him, somebody who became a little more selfish, and tougher due to the hurt and eventual resentment he had towards his previous club, I didn't notice the same angers or frustrations with Michael. I thought perhaps he just hid it better, so I probed Michael on whether he felt any anger or resentment towards Eslida FC, to which he quickly responded:

"No, none at all. It's just football - there's no loyalty. The same time I lost my number one of the senior players did too, over 20 years service and after that what for him? No help. If they [the clubs] can make something off you they will, know what I mean? They'll squeeze the best out of you and then two weeks later you're gone. That's just football though, that's no reflection on Eslida."

Michael uses phrases such as *"that's football"*, *"that's the way it is"* quite often throughout our conversations, and appears to accept the culture of football as it is, but not conform to it. He genuinely appears to have no ill feeling towards Eslida FC, and from my interpretations this is as a result of him having a strong identity as well as strong relationships outside of football that helps him navigate his way through this unpredictable world without having to live the performance narrative. We continue our conversation, Michael laughs and apologies that he hasn't *"got much more to say about that 6 months"* as it wasn't the most exciting 6 months and *"there isn't much to*

tell." Michael told me it was *"very normal"* in the fact that he would go into training, then go home to his girlfriend who he has recently bought a house with. He's aware that I'll be moving to Spain soon and goes 'off topic' and asks questions about Spain, and divulges that he has been studying Spanish, both lessons and through an app Michael has downloaded. Again, all these short stories he tells me, about his girlfriend, learning Spanish, enjoying music, spending time with his friends, going to festivals and travelling when he can are all important aspects of Michael's identity – he has continuously displayed other elements of who he is, and views these as strong and important parts of himself, and therefore doesn't view football in the same way as James where football *is* everything for him.

Our conversation turns to his most recent experiences, those at league 1 club Gatesville City where he is currently on loan and has been there just under a month. Gateville City are situated over an hour away from Eslida FC and are considered a small but progressive club that play attacking football. Michael states that he knew he was 100% going in January but was aware that it would probably be a loan as he is out of contract at Eslida FC this summer – and therefore another club would only look for a loan and option to buy if he *"done well"*.

Michael stated that whilst not being disrespectful to Gatesville City and *"the lads there"*, Michael felt he was a level above Gatesville City and had to think about the decision to go there on loan, but was swayed after speaking to the club and the manager:

> *"If you've got a club that really, really wants you and a manager who likes you, it's going to make you feel more relaxed, more confident, and they are an*

attacking team, see how many chances they create in each game, if they're creating a lot of chances it gives you more chances to shine, that's my position. I just weighed it up and thought 'fuck it, let's just go for six months, half a season, see what I can do'." [Michael]

"Is it important to you the style of play of a team?" [CD]

"I need to put myself in the best position I can, so I had to check these things as I'm a striker, I'm judged on goals. More chances I get the more I score, the better it looks. I basically need to score goals to say 'I'm still here", know what I mean?" [Michael]

"It hasn't been a bad start then? [Referencing to his 4 goals in 2 games] [CD]

"Yeah it hasn't been but I've been proper single minded here. I haven't been passing sometimes when I should have, I couldn't give a shit, as long as I was getting a goal, people that need to know me aren't watching Gatesville games, they're looking at how many goals I'm getting and to be fair this manager has been sound with that" [Michael]

"You've developed a relationship with this manager?" [CD]

"No, not really. We don't speak much but it's sort of a mutual awareness – I'm helping him by scoring goals, and he's helping me by playing me every week and I'm no problems, I don't associate with the lads outside of footie, my diet has been spot on… I've just kept my head down and got on with it as this is my last 6 months contract at Eslida so I need to be in the shop window so my next contract is a good one." [Michael]

It's clear towards the end of our interview that Michael is very much focused on his career, and impressing at this loan club, but for the financial reasons associated with it, as a good loan would lead to a good contract with another club. Michael says that he has to be *"a lot more calculated"* in his approach and *"analyse every situation"* in

order to chose the best option for him going forward. However, Michael does tell me it's not all about money, it's finding the club, which fits him and his lifestyle well (i.e. being able to spend time with his girlfriend, friends and family), but the money is a big factor as *"it's only a short career."* As we are reflecting on Michael's journey, he opens up and explains how he's changed and developed after every loan:

> *"You're in a different mind-set, each loan, in life, every fucking six months. That made me more ruthless, cos I knew I was going to be fucking off, like, for a few months and I need to do what I can for me, like they're not going to be fucking paying my bills, I was always thinking - I need to make sure I get a good contract out of this, out of this move so in my head I was always like "fuck you's, I'm doing what I need to go".*

The short-term culture that permeates football and football management (Cruikshank et al., 2013) also heavily impacts players and their development. It can be also suggested, drawing from Michael's stories that the short term, ruthlessness of football also impacts player's thoughts and views on the clubs they represent, which results in what appears to be more financial driven decisions due to the continuous uncertainty that surrounds professional football players careers. I wondered if Michael had these feelings when he made his debut in what seems so many years ago for Eslida FC? The way he described it, the best feeling he's ever had, the joy I saw on his face was when he was telling me what it was like going onto the pitch. I wonder if Michael would like to feel like that again about football? As we're approaching the end of the interview, and the end of reflecting on Michael's loans, he tells me he understands whilst it's lots of young boys dreams to play professional football for a living, he admits it's not for everyone and football has *"chewed up and spat out"* many young, talented football players:

"It's a tough skill, football. It's tough. It's beaten many people before. You've definitely got to be thick skinned 'coz you're going to get loads of kicks and get down and if you take it to heart too much you're going to fucking… it's going to fucking kill you. You've got to have a strong head and focus on you and just do what's right, do what's best for you."

Final Reflection for Michael

Michael views himself as a strong-minded, strong willed person, which he has demonstrated throughout my time with him. "Not taking it to heart too much" as Michael says again has highlighted that his strong sense of self allows him to view the setbacks and challenges in a realistic, detached way which has enabled him to progress and navigate his way through the ups and downs of football (Nesti, 2004). Without wanting to do a compare and contrast with Michael and James, I can't help but look at the both players and what they hold for the future. I feel Michael is more prepared to face exiting football, and I feel it won't be such a struggle for Michael when that time comes. The opposite I felt for James, I don't think James is prepared for a life outside of football, he hasn't thought of anything else. Making it to the first team and being a professional football player is what he thinks of when he first wakes up, and when he goes to bed.

Michael has not lived the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013), and attempted to resist the performance narrative and dominant elite level football culture, to which he has faced issues in forming relationships with coaches and at times other teammates. However, not following the dominant performance narrative, and having other narratives to draw on such as friends, family, and enjoying other things in life such as music, learning another language has helped Michael acknowledge and

understand that football isn't the only thing, there are other important aspects of Michael's life, which he equally finds important.

6.6 Concluding Thoughts & Critiques for Study Three

The above Findings and Discussion section has provided a synthesis to the findings and theory, and offered an attempt to discuss them alongside relevant previous narrative and identity research, alongside previous transition literature. However, it was deemed appropriate to offer a further, short, concluding section, which critiques the research in relation to the results. The two stories by Michael and James offer an insight into the complexities of the developing mastery phase of development within elite level football, and is one of the first studies [to our knowledge] that utilises longitudinal research in order to capture the young professional football players journey's through the academy, into the under23s team and [sometimes] into the first team.

The evolving stories of Michael and James align to the narrative work of Carless and Douglas (2012; 2013). This performance narrative (whether living it, resisting it or acting it) has greatly helped us map and tell the stories of these specific players. Within the work of Carless and Douglas (2013), they stated that performance excellence and success is achievable *without* the need to live the performance narrative and provide accounts of elite levels in the 'mastery phase' that maintain strong links to relationships and other non-performance narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2012). However, I feel that this is an oversimplification and provide reasons *why* some athletes, and in this case footballers, chose to live the performance narrative and why some resist or act it. I use the word *choice*. Whilst I acknowledge the huge influence

parents, coaches and other significant stakeholders have on the development of young players; these narratives are in part decisions made by these players. For example, with James, he stated that his biggest qualities were his work ethic and professionalism. James also openly acknowledges he was never the quickest, or the most technically gifted player as he developed at Hatton United academy. If James didn't live the performance narrative – was not obsessed with making it as a professional football player – would James have got a scholarship at 16 years of age? Would James have got a professional contract at 18 years of age? Michael, who viewed himself as a creative player who scored goals, a free player – never lived the performance narrative – but did he ever have to? From what Michael said, he was one of the better players, scored lots of goals and was naturally always quick. Having these footballing skills in part allowed Michael to resist the performance narrative and yet still progress and develop at his club, even when confronting issues with coaches and other support staff. On the contrary, James's skillset were his dedication, 100% commitment and never give up attitude – these are the characteristics he had and those that the coaches liked, and therefore James was able to navigate his way through to the development mastery phase due to these characteristics, even with what may be considered physical or technical deficiencies compared to other players.

Lastly, this is not to say I agree that players have to live the performance narrative if they want to make it the 'top' of professional football, but I am offering reasons and suggestions why some young players and athletes may live the performance narrative and why some are able to successfully resist it. However, I agree with Carless and Douglas (2012) in that coaches, managers, governing bodies and sport psychologists have a role to play in supporting alternative narratives – for too long athletes, coaches,

researchers within elite sport have suggested hard work, dedication and the correct mentality are the key characteristics that make the athlete, even when in football certain players are blessed with innate physical qualities or outstanding technical brilliance. It's important as researchers we look to address the narratives young players live and the identity they create and develop (Erikson, 1968) – and the reasons *why* they do this.

Chapter 7. Conclusions, Implications and Future Research

7.1 Conclusions, Implications and Future Research

The final chapter of this thesis aims to provide a detailed, comprehensive synthesis of the research findings that have been presented and discussed in the previous chapters across the three studies. Furthermore, the theoretical implications from a transition and identity perspective are discussed, alongside the applied implications of the research are presented in relation to holistic talent development within EPL football.

7.2 Aims of the Thesis

The findings of the thesis are drawn together and considered with regards to the original objectives of the research. The aims of the research were as follows:

Aim 1 - To explore how the developing mastery coach fits into the organisational structure and culture of the club and the subsequent impact this has on the coach's approach to coaching within the club.

Aim 2 - To examine the day-to-day working practices of the 18-23 phase of development and the associated psycho-social and cultural tensions that may exist during this critical phase of development for players, coaches and other support staff.

Aim 3 - To examine the players evolving identity (Erikson, 1968) throughout this phase of development and the impact of the 18-23 phase of development on the players' identity through a narrative identity framework (McAdams, 1985).

Chapter 1 of the thesis introduces the context and importance of the area of research and discusses briefly both applied and theoretical work in relation to the aims of the thesis. Chapter 2 of the thesis reviewed existing research that was relevant to the objectives of the study, and exposed gaps in the current literature, which highlighted the importance and necessity of this research. Chapter 3 was the methodology chapter, which critiques qualitative research, the development of I the researcher through this process, and the impact of this on the research. Chapter 4 utilised semi-structured interviews to capture the development master phase environment, the role of the coach within this phase of development and the operation practices with regards to this phase of development, all through the perspectives of the Under21/23 development coach. Chapter 5 utilised methods of ethnography to explore the day-to-day lived experiences of the under23 coach and his support staff, and the players within this phase of development and was presented through key themes that emerged over the course of 6 months. Chapter 6, the final study, explored, through narrative identity framework alongside transition theory, the development and challenges faced by football players within the developing mastery phase of development over a protracted period of time.

7.3 Key Findings

The following sections presents a number of key findings that emerged from the thesis. These are discussed with relation to talent development and the developing mastery phase within elite level football, and the implications this may have for key stakeholders at The Premier League, The FA, development football coaches and other practitioners working within elite level football. These findings make a novel and original contribution to our understanding of talent development within elite level football across English Premier League clubs, specifically relating to the final phase of development before becoming regular, first team players. Throughout the three studies, theoretical discussions were placed alongside the results of each respective study. Here, the overall theoretical discussions are placed alongside the practical implications in an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

7.3.1 Transitions, Non-Transitions & Stagnation in the Developing Mastery

Whilst accepting talent development in not usually linear (Reilly et al., 20023), a major finding from the present thesis is the lack of 'tangible' progression players feel they can make during this phase of development, resulting in feelings of stagnation and a lack of meaning and purpose to continue to work towards 'making it' as an elite level football player. This was recognised across all 3 studies from coaches, support staff and players as they attempted to 'permanently transition' to the first team.

This thesis has shown the journey and challenges young elite level football players face during the developing mastery phase is often very different than previous transitions young players have faced (i.e. U16 to scholar) where the transition is considered smooth and almost linear (Richardson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the

findings from this thesis propose that this transition is not, for many players a 'smooth' transition into the mastery phase and instead is a series of 'critical moments' (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) that players face daily in the pursuit of playing first team professional football. The results further show that the developing mastery phase can be any length of time and a range of factors will influence the 'transition' [if it ever actually occurs] into the first team such as injuries, fixture schedule and 'luck'. It is argued that the Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) talent development model does not explain the challenges young players face within this talent development environment and does not factor the many non-normative transitions a young football player may face that has been highlighted within this thesis. Furthermore, it is suggested that much of the current research with regards to academy to first team transition within football does not adequately capture what this transition, or non-transition actually is. The work of Morris et al. (2017) examines the pre and post transition from academy to first team in professional football in the United Kingdom – and provides particular insights into social support and other important mechanisms for transition. However, the results from this research suggests there is in fact no clear, concise pre and post transitional phase for these young football players at this level and instead they face a lonely, unpredictable period were players may constantly transition and spend periods in the academy, first team and on loan and can transition between the three or more environments multiple times within a season – and face these challenges for up to 3 seasons and more.

Across Studies Two and Three, players discussed at length the stagnant, lonely experiences felt by players within this phase of development and, in their feelings, a lack of support offered by the EPL clubs. Whilst acknowledging study one was in the

early stages of this new phase of development, later on in the research, more intense feelings were expressed with players suggesting they stagnated after the first year of under23s football and were then eager to get out on loan in order to *"experience men's football"*. Aligning with the views of the players, this was also supported by coaches from Study One who highlighted that under23s football, whilst providing a fitness element for the players in terms of *"match fitness"*, failed to challenge and ultimately prepare players for first team football for a number of reasons including; a lack of competitiveness, a lack of meaning and purpose, with the developing mastery phase games programme being unrealistic to the 'real game' due to the lack of pressure on players to win and cope in highly stressful situations.

Conceptualising the results from the three studies, it appears many players enjoy the transition from a scholar (U17/U18) to first year pro (first year of the developing mastery phase). This first year within the developing mastery phase seems to be quite exciting for players as they play with older players, in first team stadiums and it is generally a step up in level. However, this excitement and enjoyment quickly fades for these young players if the next challenge is not close (i.e., experience with the first team, or out on loan). Coaches and players from across the three studies highlighted there are less opportunities for young players within this stage to play within a 'meaningful, competitive' environment that challenges players to enable them to progress. Throughout this thesis the coaches and players expressed a view that whilst they are required to fulfil Barclay's Premier League 2 fixtures these games may not be the most appropriate development for the individual at a particular time (Dowling et al., 2018). As such, if the next, expected steps of their development [into the first team or out on loan] don't appear and players remain stagnant in this phase of

development, players begin to struggle with issues of meaning, purpose and identity, beginning to question their career as football players.

7.3.1.1 Practical Implications for Transitions, Non-Transitions & Stagnation in the Developing Mastery Phase of EPL Football

Throughout the period of this thesis (2013 – 2019) changes have been made by the EPL to this phase of development, such as the league changing from Under21 league, to the Barclays Premier League 2. These changes included an increase in age limit to under 23s [replacing under 21s]. A further change allowed clubs to play an overage goalkeeper and 3 overage outfield players at any one time (Premier League, 2019). The Premier League (2019) suggested these rule changes were made to bring the league 'as close as possible' to first team experience and stipulated at least 3 games must be played at the first team home ground of the respective EPL clubs. However, whilst these changes have happened during the data collection phases the players experiences remained the same – that this phase of development, or rather no development, is uncompetitive, stagnant, lonely and lacking meaning and purpose – ultimately being described as the place that *"no player wants to be"*.

The FA and the EPL need to explicitly recognise the difficulties that this lack of [expected] progression and stagnation can have on a young player's personal and professional development. They must seek solutions to create a more competitive, progressive environment for young players during this critical phase of development; where they can find meaning and purpose in their football journeys throughout the 18-23 development phase and beyond. Whilst the loan system has been utilised previously with varying degrees of success, it is suggested from the findings of this thesis that the

FA and The Premier League need to examine and discuss the possibility of adopting a "Professional B" team approach for the elite level clubs within the English Premier League. Whilst this approach may seem radical, it has been considered a success in both Spain and Germany (2 of Europe's big five football countries) where elite level football teams such as Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, Barcelona, Real Madrid employ squads in the second, third and fourth tiers of their respective nations leagues. In Germany these 'B' teams are not allowed to progress higher than the third tier whilst in Spain they cannot progress beyond the second tier (Relvas, 2010). Some current EPL managers have suggested the need for a competitive environment for younger players and suggested that English football could follow a similar model. Pep Guardiola, current manager of Manchester City FC is in favour of adopting a similar model to that of Spain:

"[players] would compete every weekend with real games, fighting to survive – then managers in the Premier League will have more courage to pick them… In Italy, Germany, they are so tough so demanding, they are playing with guys who are 28, 29 or 30 and that is the best way to improve, not training with the first team sometimes" [Pep Guardiola cited in Willacy, 2019).

By adopting a "Professional B" team approach, it may allow elite level clubs to manage the individual development and progression of young elite football players whilst enabling them to experience a competitive environment with an emphasis on winning and coping with pressure. These key experiential performance elements are lacking in the current developing mastery phase as reported by both players and coaches. This approach for the developing mastery phase may create a more

meaningful, purposeful phase of development for these players allowing them to experience highly competitive 'senior', 'men's football' which includes promotion, relegation and intense pressure whilst still allowing clubs to manage the technical, tactical, psychological and social development of individual players by club employed practitioners (i.e., coaches, analysts, sports scientists, sport psychologists) ensuring that they are receiving the training required for young elite level football players.

Whilst this suggestion is perhaps radical and would not be devoid of 'moral' opposition nor contention (Willacy, 2019) due to the historic nature of the English football leagues and what would could be described as the decimation of lower league football clubs and culture (Willacy, 2019). Secondly, the work of Relvas (2010), which explored operational practices between youth and first team football environments across European football clubs, detailed how in some European countries the *"professional B team"* approach still created a range of issues for the respective clubs such as communication issues and distinct operational practices that provided issues for players transitioning from the professional B team to the first team (Relvas, 2010).

At the very least the FA and EPL need to not only develop a games programme that exposes these young players to a 'first team' environment where results matter and players are placed under pressure to perform and win, but to also work with and discuss the current phase with coaches and other key staff currently working in this phase of development to help implement strategies to make this environment more competitive, with more pressure and more similar to a 'current' first team environment.

7.3.2 Psychological Support and Developing the Whole Person

Key findings from this thesis have demonstrated the main, complex psychological challenges young elite players face during this critical stage of development. Across Studies One, Two and Three it was highlighted by the coaches, support staff and articulated by players the uncharacteristically, unfamiliar environment they face during this phase of development and the feelings of isolation, loneliness and uncertainty that can develop (Richardson et al., 2013). Throughout this thesis, the developing mastery phase was highlighted as *"a black hole"*, *"no man's land"*, *"the place no player wants to be"* and other, similar analogies with the same connotations. However, the current EPPP guidelines with regards to psychological support discusses decision making, confidence and coping under pressure as key psychological elements that need to be developed during the developing mastery phase (EPPP, 2011), and states that during this phase of development it is *"imperative that players learn how to win and develop strategies for coping with pressure"* (p42). It is argued within this thesis that in fact, players often are not exposed or have to 'cope under pressure' within the developing mastery phase and this cause a range of psychological issues for young football players related to anxiety, identity and meaning (Nesti, 2010). The EPPP (2011) also highlights 'decision making' and other mental skill training as essential for players to develop whilst in this phase. This was highlighted in Studies Two and Three were players reported seeing a Sport Psychology to *"help them on the pitch"* and given simple techniques such as imagery to help assist in on-field situations. Whilst these have value in the field of sport psychology, this delivery of psychological support appears superficial in relation to the issues of identity, meaning and transitions that these young players are facing during this critical period of their development. Mental skills training seems somewhat inadequate to the identity issues that James or

Michael experienced from Study Three or the existential crisis Johnny was facing in Study Two (Nesti, 2010) and as such there are a number of listed practical implications for the EPPP and sport psychology provision in elite football below.

7.3.2.1 Practical Implications for Psychological Support and Developing the Whole Person

A major finding from this thesis is that sport psychology guidelines within the EPPP need to be more comprehensive and take into consideration the issues players have discussed in this thesis regarding identity, meaning, and transitions. It is firstly suggested that the sport psychology guidelines provided by the EPPP (2011) need to be more detailed and comprehensive. These sport psychology guidelines need to specifically relate to the real-life issues young football players face at this critical phase of development. For younger players within the foundation and youth development phase, support should consist of Mental Skills Training such as imagery, goal setting and breathing techniques. However, the results from this thesis suggests that the approach to psychological support should take more of a holistic approach as players enter the professional development phase (developing mastery phase) that should incorporate counselling psychology, alongside more structured activity (such as workshops on career transitions, identity and meaning). By the EPPP advocating broader, more holistic support for players at this phase of development it may assist clubs to be more specific in their recruitment and appointment of sport psychologists who have experienced in delivering counselling psychology and broader identity development support (Nesti, 2010).

In addition, the EPPP should look to introduce an hours of delivery system for psychological support. The current EPPP states a minimum number of coaching hours that need to be delivered across the Foundation, Youth and Professional development phases. By introducing this for sport psychology support it would advocate and emphasise the importance of psychological support for football players. Similar to the coaching delivery programme, during the professional development phase players should have more access to psychological support both structured activity such as workshops and group sessions and access to support one-to-one on an ad-hoc basis. These workshops may educate players on the psychological challenges they will face as they navigate their way through the game either into the first team environment, on loan or exiting the game whilst individual support may focus on identity, meaning and personal growth.

Finally, if more in-depth guidelines are to be introduced then the evaluation should also be comprehensive and conducted by experts within the field. Within the current framework of the EPPP, the category of each academy is evaluated via a Premier League audit every three years and is conducted by two representatives of the Premier League. To assist in the audit of the Psychological Delivery Programme it is suggested experts within the field of sport psychology (such as accredited BPS Sport Psychologists or BASES accredited Sport Scientists with an expertise in Sport Psychology) audit the psychological programme at the respective club and the delivery of this programme – ensuring the appropriate, holistic and personal support is given to players in the developing mastery phase.

7.3.3 The EPPP & Relationships between the Academy and First Team

Further key findings from this thesis have identified communication channels between academy and first team as a significant issue relating to the Elite Player Performance Plan and the success of its implementation. The communication channels and management of young players between academy and first team were highlighted across all three studies as issues preventing the successful development and management of elite young football players at the respective clubs. This thesis builds on from the work of Relvas et al. (2010) and demonstrates the physical and cultural distances between the academy and first team environments. In Study One and Study Two frustrations appeared for coaches for having a lack of communication with first team staff and at times control between the developing mastery phase and first team environments. Coaches in Study One discussed a breakdown in both informal and formal communication with first team staff. Specifically, their issues were related to how coaches were not involved in the decision-making process of the transferring of players to and from the first team into the developing mastery phase. This was further highlighted in Study Two, were Luke felt frustrations over the limited players he had access to in training and lack of control he had over which players went to the first team and which stayed within the developing mastery phase. This was further demonstrated in Study Three were James experienced mixed messages between academy coaches and first team coaches which left James confused to his future at the football club. The introduction of the EPPP (2012) and the subsequent 'formal' developing mastery phase has resulted in issues surrounding the approach to manage players between academy and first team environments, with a lack of communication between developing mastery phase coaches and first team coaches highlighted as a key issue across the three studies.

7.3.3.1 Practical Implications for The EPPP & Relationships between Academy and First Team

Whilst the EPPP has implemented guidelines and processes for English academy football up to under23s [for category one status], the EPPP doesn't currently implement any formal requirements for the first team. A suggestion based from the results of this research is for the Premier League and the EPPP to work alongside first team stakeholders, such as the Sporting Director / Director of Football, First Team Coaches and First Team Manager to work closer with the developing mastery phase to better understand, and support, this phase of development. It is suggested that as part of the EPPP and audit process clubs go through, clubs must ensure they evidence strong, formal communication channels between the developing mastery environment and first team environment in order to achieve the categorised status (which is usually Category One for EPL clubs). Possible examples include bi-weekly meetings where a member of staff from both the developing mastery phase and first team are present to discuss player progressions and must be evidenced via minutes of meetings.

There are also opportunities to appoint specific talent development specialists, such as "Player Pathway Managers" and other similar roles which currently exist in some EPL clubs. Roles such as this may allow an expert in talent development and management to assist and support both academy and first team environments in better managing and supporting their players through this critical development phase and ensuring communication is consistent and constant, with regular player progression reviews for all players within this phase of development.

Finally, the work of Nesti (2010) suggests an effective method for developing communication and relationships is through the use of non-task activities, such as 'staff away days' to help create a culture where ideas and information are shared across the club. Whilst Nesti (2010) work has mostly focused on first teams, 'staff away days' could be implemented between developing mastery and first team environments in a method to assist the development of relationships between

7.3.4 Longitudinal and Narrative Research

The longitudinal, ethnographical style of research methods utilised for Study Two and Study Three allowed for a depth of data collection that would not have been possible through other research approaches (e.g., semi-structured interviews or questionnaires) (Krane & Baird, 2005). Biddle et al. (2001) suggested the majority of qualitative research studies have employed semi-structured interviews. However, it is argued that single semi-structured interviews, whilst providing an insight into a particular phenomenon, fails to capture complex areas of investigation such as transitions and identity and how, in football terms, young players cope with constant change and the impact this has on identity. This thesis, across chapters 5 and 6, highlights the benefit of longitudinal and ethnographical research to deepen our understanding of the culture of elite level football and the journey's both young football players and development coaches face. As a result of employing ethnographic and longitudinal research in Studies Two and Three, we now have a deeper, contextual understanding of the developing mastery phase of development and the impact of football culture on the development of a young players identity (Erikson, 1963).

This thesis also highlights the benefits of adopting the use of mainstream identity theory, such as Erikson (1963) and McAdams (1985) to support and develop our understanding of players development within the context of elite level football. Erikson believed identity was a specific developmental task of the teenage years, when young people pursued meaningful life projects, values and goals to commit to. By adopting longitudinal research this thesis was able to capture the development of young football players over a period of two seasons and explore how these players changed in character, taking on new identities to be able to cope with the volatile nature of this phase of development. Erikson (1963) suggested young persons during this stage of development begin to discover and ask fundamental existential questions of "who am I?" (Erikson, 1963). This thesis demonstrates how the work of Erikson (1963) can be used as a guide to explore the development of these young elite level football players, and the issues and potential crisis they face.

Study Three significantly contributes to our knowledge and understanding of player development and the associated challenges they face within elite football through the use of narrative research with a focus on narrative identity and the performance narrative. Study Three specifically critiques the work of Carless and Douglas (2012, 2013) and their work within narrative research in sport. Carless and Douglas (2013) stated that the plot of 'performance narratives' are revolved around achieving performance outcomes, such as winning or in this case making it to the first team. These stories are recited within the media, by coaches, successful football players and even governing bodies (Carless & Douglas, 2012). An important contribution to knowledge from Study Three is the understanding of how and why players take up and develop certain identities and the impact culture and cultural narratives within

professional football can impact players identity and their identity development. Study Three also further expands our knowledge of [athletic] identity in young players and offers new insights and questions into why certain players may view themselves as only a footballer more than others, how this develops and the issues it presents – critiquing the performance narrative research of Carless and Douglas (2013) and it's oversimplification of athletes resisting the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

7.3.4.1 Practical Implications for Longitudinal and Narrative Research

Practical implications include education to football academies, ex-players, media and journalists surrounding talent development, athletic identity and performance narratives and understanding how stories may be portrayed. Often a narrative of 'hard work = success' has been displayed throughout sport and sports media, with top athletes and stars commenting on their progression to the elite level as down to their obsession, hard work and dedication to their chosen sport without discussion of their 'natural' ability, technical, physical or even tactical. Conor McGregor, an elite level mixed martial artist, states in his 'Notorious' documentary that *"there's no talent here, this is hard work. This is an obsession… Talent does not exist. If you put in the time, you will reach the top, and that is that"*. It only takes a brief search through the media discussions of Cristiano Ronaldo to see this narrative of success is a combination of dedication and hard work and nothing else, with one report stating *"working hard is the ultimate key to his grand success"* and even suggests *"success is not hard to come by if we work hard and sacrifice enough to achieve it"*. Whilst these are not academic publications, and are less credible in their statements, they are read by young athletes,

fans, and others associated with sport – and contribute to the performance narrative discussed by Carless and Douglas (2012).

This discussion is not attempting to 'reduce' the importance of hard work in reaching the elite level of any industry – but attempting to ensure a balanced discussion is had, and understanding how technical and physical abilities, alongside a strong psychological skillset, will contribute to 'making' the elite level in football alongside 'hard work' and 'sacrifice'. It is suggested education to players and staff throughout academies is vital. The Premier League and The FA must ensure clubs and coaches are educated to understand the longer-term value of players exploring other identities and not solely identifying as 'football players.'

A simple solution to assist in changing this narrative is to allow current and ex-football players to share their *real and true* stories and journeys of their careers within elite level football – with players who have had successful careers in the game whilst exploring other identities and discussing the importance of being able to 'switch off' from football. This could be implemented in line with sport psychology workshops previously mentioned with the aim to develop a broader identity and explore other identities that will allow for personal growth and a stronger sense of self.

7.4 Limitations & Challenges

The following section highlights the considerations, difficulties and limitations experienced during the development and production of this thesis. This section is a method to allow myself to reflect on the conceptual, practical and methodological issues inherent within the research.

Initial difficulties included gaining access to EPL clubs and young EPL players (Parker, 1995). Letters were sent out to all EPL clubs but unfortunately only 6 responded in total. Whilst the research worked with 6 (30%) of EPL clubs, numerous coaches and players (throughout Studies Two and Three) within professional football clubs – the sample size still could be considered small. However, it is acknowledged that this research is not an attempt to generalise the findings across all EPL clubs or all players, but instead is designed to help develop our understanding of this development phase and how some of the findings may resonate with other clubs and players within EPL or professional football. The perspectives and narratives that are illuminated in this thesis may not be representative of other players journeys through this phase of development or coaches' perspectives. There could be arguments for alternative research methods. For example, within Study Three, semi-structured interviews with a greater number of players may have contributed to a broader understanding of players experiences, however, having 'one off' semi-structured interviews would not have allowed for such in-depth, contextual players accounts which were seen in Study Three. To date, there is no other research that has explored players journey and transitions at this critical phase of development within as much detail, depth and providing as much contextual knowledge as the current thesis. There are also arguments to suggest a quantitative approach could have been utilised to gain insight into identity and athletic identity via the AIMS (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001), to explore levels of athletic identity within the developing mastery phase across a higher sample of players. However, whilst these arguments are valid and this would be a worthy topic of investigation, I feel this thesis provides deeper, contextual, 'real-life' insight into this particular phase of development.

The representation of findings is a key component of qualitative research, however provided many challenges within this thesis. With regards to Studies Two and Three, vast amounts of data were collected over a significant period of time. Within Study Two, data was collected over a period of six months and over two years for Study Three. The representation differed for each of the studies and provided their own limitations. Within Study One, whilst content analysis procedures were adopted, it was a representational challenge to best capture and highlight the data's contextual, richness whilst still following content analysis procedures to evidence the raw data and transformation into the final themes. With regards to this, it was deemed appropriate to include both the content analysis tables and thick, descriptive quotes that represented the perspectives of the under21 coaches. Study Two produced mass amounts of data to be analysed and represented which provided a challenge. To me, all the data (conversations, observations, interviews) were important in understanding this phase of development. However, realistically only the data from the key themes that emerged could be presented and critiqued. There is scope to re-examine this data for future research purposes. Study Three was immensely difficult in finding the correct representational technique. The participants within this particular study were young, professional football players who have been in the media and therefore it was essential to provide anonymity and ensure none of the narrative stories could be 'traced' back to a particular player by a person reading this thesis. For this reason, alongside the mass amount of data collected and analysed, it was deemed unrealistic to present four, singular case studies and subsequently, two 'composite characters' were created to tell the stories and journeys of the four players. When discussing this research with staff and other researchers at the university it was often suggested to

utilise a ‘themed narrative approach’ – thematically analysing all four players journey’s and representing as such – similar to Study Two. However, I felt by following this approach it would negate the true lived experiences of these young football players over a protracted period of time which became a crucial element of the final study. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that Study Three is a lengthy study and perhaps not as structured as other approaches to qualitative analysis and representation.

Another challenge and potential limitation of the research was the ‘creative licence’ particularly with reference to Studies Two and Three. Perhaps due to my ‘positivist’ background, I at times wrestled with the dramatization of the data as suggested by Sparkes and Smith (2009) in qualitative research. Whilst acknowledging the research must also persuade readers as opposed to just telling stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009) I found this difficult at times. My supervisory team encouraged me to read creative-non-fiction pieces of work to help assist within this area. However, I wrestled with how creative I was allowed to be? When does non-fiction turn to fiction? Ultimately, I perhaps was not creative as I could have been with the data. Whilst I find the stories and experience of the coaches and players in Studies Two and Three fascinating, perhaps others may not and instead find them ‘boring’ and lacking any real ‘drama’ which may be a limitation of the practical utility of the research (Sayer, 1992).

Lastly, a final limitation of the research was the influence of me, the researcher, on the data collection and analysis of the research throughout this thesis. For example, conducting interviews with such experienced elite level coaches in Study One was challenging for myself – especially as at the time I was a MPhil student and very new

to the industry. I recall perhaps being a little reluctant to probe certain answers from such experienced coaches. However, as time went on and I developed confidence in my ability as a researcher and my knowledge of football and football culture grew – I was able to interact and probe coaches more in interviews, which was key to gaining rich, contextual data when immersed in the culture for studies two and three. Furthermore, in relation to this, I set out in my methodology section my philosophical positioning and how this developed across this thesis. I acknowledged the qualitative researcher is an important instrument in the research and how their previous experiences, both personal and professional, can shape the research (Littlewood, 2005).

7.5 Future Research

The findings from this thesis present a number of opportunities for future research regarding transitions, longitudinal qualitative research and talent development in sport. Firstly, it is suggested that more longitudinal qualitative research should be adopted in order to deepen our understanding of transitions and talent development in sport. More specifically, this research should focus on the lived experiences of young players / athletes as they progress and transition within their chosen sport. It is suggested that researchers should look to move away from single 'snapshot' or retrospective interviews and move towards capturing change and transition over time as it happens, such as Study Three within this thesis. This could be explored via a number of different transitions, such as retirement, de-selection and transferring to different clubs in order to better understand identity development within football players over time protracted period of time. This will allow for a potentially more honest, real assessment by the young football players of their experiences,

perspectives and feelings as they happen, than if the process was conducted much later, when further interactions and reflections by the player may colour their feelings and experiences.

A second avenue for future research is to adopt a pan-European approach to examining the developing mastery phase within elite level football. Whilst the work of Relvas et al. (2010) explores, from a pan-European perspective, the transition from youth to professional football, it fails to explore beyond the transitional phase and the different approaches to the management and development of talent within the developing mastery phase. As highlighted within this thesis, whilst many European football clubs follow similar models for their academy, the developing mastery phase can be quite different. England, for example, have a radically different approach to the developing mastery phase than Germany and Spain. Therefore it would make sense to examine these approaches to managing and developing players within this phase of development and the impact on young players identity and their development.

A third avenue for future research relates to culture and the impact of culture within professional football on identity and identity development. This may explore the impact of culture and cultural narratives on identity in young players development within football. The findings from this research suggest that football clubs culture and the cultural narratives displayed within these clubs can have a significant impact on identity development in young football players. Conducting projects such as these, over a longitudinal period would develop our understanding of culture and cultural narratives and its impact on identity and identity development within football. In relation to this, another possible avenue for further research is to expand on this current

research and explore performance narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2012) in a more deeper, sport specific context to understand why certain players may resist, live or act the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

7.6 Conclusions

This thesis explored, from a psycho-social perspective, the developing mastery phase of development within the English Premier League. The first novel feature of this research was the use of qualitative longitudinal research in the form of unstructured interviews spanning across two seasons with players as they experienced a range of transitions through the academy, loans, and first team of elite level football. Secondly, this research, applied in nature, examined closely, through the form of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research the structure and day-to-day working practises of an under-researched and complex phase of development. The use of these research methods allowed for an in-depth understanding of this critical phase of development and the issues experienced by players and coaches from an organisational, psychological and social perspective.

It is hoped that this research has helped develop our understanding of talent development and transitions within English Premier League football, specifically focused on the final stages of a young players academy career as they attempt to become 'established' first team players. The ethnographic and narrative research demonstrate the complex, lonely and stagnant phase of development at 18-23 years of age within elite level football. Findings that arose from the three empirical studies suggests that the English Premier League and the EPPP (2011) need to reconsider and re-evaluate this phase of development to create a more meaningful, competitive

environment whilst still allowing coaches to focus on individual player development. Theoretically, it further suggests there seems to be no 'clear' transition for many players from the academy to the first team, and they will often spend periods of time to and from the academy, first team and loans which can bring about a range of psychological and social challenges (Richardson et al., 2013).

A synthesis of the data in each of the studies suggests that talent development in EPL football is a complex, messy and unpredictable environment influenced by club structures, coaching approaches and philosophies. It further appears that there are clear tensions between individual development and winning football matches in academy football, which becomes more of a critical discussion as players progress to professional status but do not play regular first team football.

The methodology, and findings from this thesis are novel, and make an original contribution to current knowledge regarding the developing mastery phase of development within English Premier League football. The findings discussed above present opportunities for stakeholders such as the EPL, the EPPP and the FA to review and re-evaluate the current 18-23 phase of development within football. Secondly, the thesis may help sport psychologists, professional football coaches, loan managers or other similar professionals working within football to better understand and support players journey as young football players aiming to become first team EPL players. Finally, implications and suggestions are outlined for academics, sports media and professionals working in sport to better understand and report on talent development narratives in elite sport.

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School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Title: An examination into the 18-21 Phase of Elite Level Football: A Coach's Perspective

Researcher: Chris Dowling

School/Faculty: Liverpool John Moores University

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study which involves me being interviewed by the researcher ☐
5. I understand that the interview will be audio recorder and I am happy to proceed ☐
6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised. ☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: An examination into the Post Academy Phase of Elite Level Football: Perspectives of the Development Coach

Researcher: Chris Dowling

Email: C.Dowling@2009.ljmu.ac.uk **Mobile Number:**

School/Faculty: Liverpool John Moores University

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to read the following information. Please, do not hesitate to ask for more information. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to explore how the U21 development coach fits into the organisational culture and structure of the club and the role, practices, purpose and evaluation of the under21 development coach.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights or any future treatment you receive.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to participate in this research you will be interviewed for approximately 1 hour to explore your roles and responsibilities within your club and your experiences and views of the difficulties at the U21 level for young talented players. The interviews will take place at a venue and time that suits you, for example at your clubs facilities. Interviews can be done via phone or Skype also.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentially will be maintained at all times. To achieve this a tagging system will be adopted which will hide the participants names and ensure confidentiality (e.g. using alternative names (pseudonyms) instead of real names). Stored data and the audio file will be protected with a password and once the audio has been transferred into the password protected file it is deleted from the recording device. All information will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

To achieve this I will use a coding system to identify you, rather than your name. All information related to the study will be locked in a secure filing cabinet and on the

researcher's LJMU account, which is password protected and will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

Contact details of Researcher

Chris Dowling
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Tom Reilly Building,
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C.Dowling@2009.ljmu.ac.uk

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: An examination into the Post Academy Phase of Elite Level Football: The Under21 players' perspective

Researcher: Chris Dowling

School/Faculty: Liverpool John Moores University

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to read the following information. Please, do not hesitate to ask for more information. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study?
The study will examine, the different social, cultural and psychological issues players face when at the post academy phase of development and the players relationships with first team players, staff and other relevant key stakeholders.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights or any future treatment you receive.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to participate in this research you will be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes to explore your experiences and views of the difficulties at the U21 level, and the challenges you have faced during this period. The interviews will take place either at an LJMU classroom at the Tom Reilly Building or at your clubs facilities. If possible, you will then also participate in a further 3 'catch up' interviews across the course of two seasons as you develop and progress through the under21s.

Are there any risks/benefits involved?

I the researcher have ensured that the premises to be used for this study are appropriate and that any potential risks for you have been minimised. There is potential of emotional discomfort in the interviews, however this is a voluntary participation so if you don't feel comfortable answering a question you have the right not to without any prejudices or reason why you are not answering the question. The results of this study may be published in the public domain.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentially will be maintained at all times. To achieve this a tagging system will be adopted which will hide the participants names and ensure confidentiality (e.g. using alternative names (pseudonyms) instead of real names). Stored data and the audio file will be protected with a password and once the audio has been transferred into the password protected file it is deleted from the recording device. All information will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

To achieve this I will use a coding system to identify you, rather than your name. All information related to the study will be locked in a secure filing cabinet and on the researcher's LJMU account, which is password protected and will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

Contact details of Researcher

Chris Dowling
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School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

GATEKEEPER INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: An examination into the Post Academy Phase of Elite Level Football: The Under21 players' perspective

Researcher: Chris Dowling

School/Faculty: Liverpool John Moores University

Players from your organisation are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to read the following information. Please, do not hesitate to ask for more information. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study will examine, the different social, cultural and psychological issues players face when at the post academy phase of development and the players relationships with first team players, staff and other relevant key stakeholders.

Does our organisation have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and it is up to you, and the player, to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a gatekeeper consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights or any future treatment you receive.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to participate in this research, player(s) from your organisation will be interviewed for approximately 45 to 60 minutes to explore your experiences and views of the difficulties at the U21 level, and the challenges players face during this period. The interviews will take place either at an LJMU classroom at the Tom Reilly Building or at your clubs facilities. The player(s) then will be interviewed again four times over a period of 12 in shorter, 'catch up' interviews lasting 15-20 minutes to discuss their progress and any challenges since the previous interview.

Are there any risks/benefits involved?

I the researcher have ensured that the premises to be used for this study are appropriate and that any potential risks for you have been minimised. There is potential of emotional discomfort in the interviews for the players, however this is a voluntary participation so if the player don't feel comfortable answering a question they have the right not to without any prejudices or reason why they are not answering the question. The results of this study may be published in the public domain.

Will the organisation, and the player(s) taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentially will be maintained at all times. To achieve this a tagging system will be adopted which will hide the participants names and ensure confidentiality (e.g. using alternative names (pseudonyms) instead of real names). Stored data and the audio file will be protected with a password and once the audio has been transferred into the password protected file it is deleted from the recording device. All information will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

To achieve this I will use a coding system to identify you, rather than your name. All information related to the study will be locked in a secure filing cabinet and on the researcher's LJMU account, which is password protected and will only be available to the principal researcher which is I, Chris Dowling.

Contact details of Researcher

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LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY GATEKEEPER CONSENT FORM

Title: An examination into the Post Academy Phase of Elite Level Football: The Under21 players' perspective

Researcher: Chris Dowling

School/Faculty: Liverpool John Moores University

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered

2. I understand that the participation of the club and player is voluntary and giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will

4 .I agree to allowing a player from the club to take part in the above study researcher

5 .I understand that the interview will be audio recorder and I am happy to

6 .I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future quotes will be anonymised.

7. I have read the above study and have had the opportunity to satisfactorily answer any questions

8. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time

9. I understand this will remain completely anonymized and confidential

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of Researcher Date Signature