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1 **Retrospective and concurrent perspectives of the transition into senior professional** 2 **female football within the United Kingdom.**

3 Women's football is now the fourth most popular team sport in the UK with the Football
4 Association (FA) aiming for women's football to be the second most popular team sport by
5 the end of 2020. According to the latest 'UEFA Women's across the National Associations
6 2016/17' report, there are now 215 professional players in England and approximately 49 are
7 international professional players. A recent report by FIFPro highlights that 46% of current
8 female players worldwide combine their football career with study and, as such, may
9 experience further challenges not typically associated with the traditional male football JST.
10 Female football has become more professionalized and athletes currently transitioning into
11 the first team are entering a different culture to those who have previously transitioned before
12 them, with more demands than previously experienced. For example, previous research has
13 found increased activity demands on professional basketball players compared to semi-
14 professional basketball players (Scanlan et al. 2015). Similarly, the increase in frequency of
15 training and matches between professional and semi-professional attributes increased
16 physical and mental demands on athletes. While junior-to-senior transition (JST) research in
17 male football has previously been explored (e.g. Morris et al. 2016), due to the shift from
18 semi-professional to professional status of female football in the UK there is a need for this
19 phenomenon to be further explored within the context of elite female football.

20 **Junior to Senior Transition Research**

21 To be successful in sport and develop their careers, athletes are required to navigate
22 numerous transitions throughout their careers (Wylleman et al. 2011). These transitions can
23 be both normative (i.e., predictable, such as JST), non-normative (i.e., unpredictable, such as
24 career-ending injuries; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and quasi-normative (i.e., transitions
25 predictable to a group of athletes such as cultural transitions; Stambulova, 2020). Career

26 frameworks, for example, the holistic athletic career model (HACM; Wylleman, 2004; 2019)
27 suggest how transitions outside of sport such as academic transitions can impact an athlete's
28 development within their sport. Wylleman's framework adopts a career-long perspective,
29 starting with initiation in sport, through to termination of an athlete's sporting career. The
30 model highlights how normative athletic transitions athletes (i.e., JST) may interfere with
31 transitions outside of sport (i.e., moving into higher education). Secondly, Stambulova's
32 (2003) athletic career transition model (ACTM) argues that during transitions, athletes
33 experience a number of transition demands (e.g. increased task demands). Athletes' resources
34 (e.g., competencies, efficacy, social support) facilitate the coping process in relation to
35 transition demands. Barriers, however (e.g., lack of funding, support), are factors that
36 interfere with the coping process. Athletes may appraise both demands and barriers as
37 challenges or threats, and the balance between demands and barriers and athletes' resources
38 determines successful, unsuccessful, or crisis-transition outcomes. For example, when there is
39 a balance between athletes' resources and the demands and barriers, a successful transition
40 outcome is more likely.

41 Within career transitions can be challenging to negotiate successfully with many
42 complex factors that may hinder the transition. For example, managing demands away from
43 football such as education. The aforementioned models also highlight elements to ease
44 athletes making the transition, for example, having a strong support network on which to rely.
45 Pummell et al's. (2008) findings support both the ACTM and HACM, highlighting external
46 pressures made transitioning a more stressful experience for the athlete. These findings are
47 further supported in the work of Morris et al. (2016), who investigated male youth football
48 players transitioning into the first team and reported factors such as friends, family and
49 similar external pressures made the transition more challenging but also reported social
50 support facilitated the transition. Stambulova et al. (2020) postulated in their ISSP stand on

51 career development and transitions of athletes that research on major normative transitions
52 such as the JST have recently explored their temporal structures, with each transition having
53 multiple phases and each phase having a different set of demands. Stambulova et al. (2017)
54 highlighted one such four-phase model underpinning the JST in Swedish ice hockey. The
55 preparation phase covers the last year of junior sport prior to competition in senior sport. The
56 orientation phase refers to the first year as a senior athlete. The adaptation phase covers the
57 second and third seasons as senior athletes and finally, the stabilization phase relates to the
58 third and fourth season as senior athletes. They further detail the transitional experiences of
59 Swedish ice hockey players within each of the four phases. For example, preparing for
60 physical challenges during the preparation phase, accepting and learning team norms and
61 traditions during the orientation phase, and performing well and taking responsibility during
62 the adaption phase. Despite the plethora of JST research, the present study aims to further
63 extend the scope of where this knowledge can be applied by exploring the JST experiences of
64 UK female football players within the context of an increasingly professional setting.

65 Research investigating transitions in women's football is scarce, and with female
66 football growing globally, the need to investigate within-career transitions is paramount in
67 order to contribute to the delivery of support services. Likewise, exploring this transition the
68 JST into professional football from the perspective of females should not be ignored and
69 shedding light onto their experiences helps to promote inclusivity in research. Thereby,
70 adding to knowledge in relation to this area subtly promotes an element of social justice by
71 exploring an underrepresented group. Previous research that has investigated support
72 structures in female football has produced some pertinent results. For example, Gledhill and
73 Harwood (2014) highlighted the support structures elite level youth female football players
74 relied on to have a more positive youth development, citing peers, football brothers and
75 fathers as being positive influencers on their development. Similarly, work by Gledhill and

76 Hardwood (2015) posited two critical proposals for successful youth talent development in
77 female football. Firstly, players, coaches, teachers and parents need to “adaptively interact to
78 produce an optimal talent development learning environment (p.25)”. Secondly, optimal
79 multi-agential interactions between these critical figures will result in a perceived supportive
80 talent development environment. Both pieces of research highlight how, for female athletes to
81 successfully develop in football, there needs to be numerous support systems in place to
82 effectively manage the demands placed upon them as they transition through different career
83 stages. These results can be further applied to supporting athletes making transitions into
84 senior football, ensuring athletes have the necessary support systems in place to increase the
85 likelihood of completing the transition.

86 In Gledhill and Harwood’s (2015) paper, however, there was a focus on collating data
87 from athletes who had withdrawn from the sport, potentially limiting our understanding of
88 successful transitions and career development. Likewise, Gledhill and Harwood (2014; 2015)
89 papers did not explicitly explore the JST and as such may neglect some of the intricate
90 experiences associated with this transition, again, leaving gaps in knowledge. The papers also
91 did not consider the environment of female football in general and the impact this has on
92 talent development and transitions of female athletes. Since their publication, female football
93 has grown significantly with the continued development of the Women's Super League
94 (WSL) notably with increasing broadcasting rights and sponsorship deals, furthering the
95 professionalization of the sport. Despite offering some significant findings concerning the
96 psychosocial factors of female football, some areas require further investigation, in particular,
97 the JST, with consideration given to the changing environment of female football in the UK.
98 The present study therefore aims to explore the experiences of professional female football
99 players from the perspective of transitional and senior athletes, considering the potential

100 impact of the increased professionalism of female football in the UK on these transitional
101 experiences.

102 A systematic review conducted by Gledhill et al. (2017) highlighted the lack of
103 research exploring female football players, suggesting greater representation is required given
104 the proposed global plans for female football development (FIFA, 2014) and increased
105 professionalization of football in the UK. Given the increase in professional and semi-
106 professional status of female football players within the UK combined with football
107 becoming a more holistic and inclusive sport globally, the need to answer these unanswered
108 questions is paramount. In particular, the perceived importance of creating effective
109 transitions in womens' football acts as a call for research to investigate the transition
110 experiences of female football players. Stambulova and Wylleman (2015) called for future
111 research to be translated into information that can be used as recommendations on a national
112 level as well as inform the provision of support services to athletes. The present study seeks
113 to address this niche area of research and understand the experiences and perceptions of the
114 JST in football. From both a retrospective perspective (senior players recalling their transition
115 experiences) and from a lived perspective (players who are currently making the transition
116 reflecting on their experiences).

117 **Dual Career Research**

118 The concept of dual careers (DC) relates to the challenge of combining sports with
119 studies and/or work (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015; 2019). The EU Guidelines on Dual
120 Careers of Athletes (2012) highlight challenges relating to DC such as balancing sports
121 training and education and safeguarding the development of young athletes. The guidelines
122 also highlight some of the key benefits associated with being a DC athlete, notably, a
123 balanced lifestyle, reduced stress, expanded social networks and social support networks,
124 enhanced adaptation to life post-retirement and improved employability prospects. In line

125 with this, the guidelines aspire organizations, governments and sporting bodies to create the
126 right environment for DC athletes in order the better manage the challenges and increase the
127 benefits of a DC athlete. Previous research investigating student-athletes DC experiences has
128 also suggested that student-athletes face transitional changes at an academic, athletic,
129 psychological and psychosocial level (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Situational conditions
130 can also contribute to the effectiveness of a transition experience (e.g., financing, quality of
131 coaching and cultures), if these conditions are not supportive then athletes may experience
132 more barriers when making the transition, such as student-athletes overload, overtraining and
133 even burnout (Elbe & Beckmann, 2006).

134 More broadly, DC research has often under-researched the development pathways of
135 minority athletes such as women and athletes with disabilities. In Stambulova and
136 Wylleman's (2019) critical review they reported DC athletes need to obtain and maintain an
137 optimal DC balance i.e., balance between the varying and competing demands experienced
138 from sport, education and wider life. Stambulova et al. (2020) also suggest that when
139 managing multiple transitions, athletes need to prioritize demands in order to distribute their
140 available resources accordingly. The ISSP position stand stipulates a greater need for
141 research to bridge the gap between research and practice in order to facilitate athletes' DCs.
142 Likewise, it is argued DC athletes also must contend with DC barriers (e.g. lack of flexibility,
143 financial support). An athletes' personal resources (e.g. support network), motivation and
144 identity can be key contributors to facilitating DC adjustment. In order to further our
145 knowledge, Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) encourages "deeper exploration of individual
146 career pathways, including minority athletes (e.g., females) (p.85)". By exploring these
147 experiences, we can better inform practitioners when delivering interventions to athletes
148 making the transition by informing them of the likely barriers and demands they are facing
149 and how best to facilitate a successful transition. Likewise, in line with the EU Guidelines on

150 Dual Careers of Athletes (2012) findings may facilitate organizations in supporting many of
151 their DC athletes by creating the appropriate supportive environment for DC.

152 This paper aims to (a) to explore the JST in the UK female football players (i.e.,
153 perceived demands, barriers, resources, and coping strategies); (b) to analyse how changes in
154 the UK female football context (i.e., increased professionalization) influenced players'
155 perception of the transition.

156 Method

157 Organisation and Participants

158 The organisation selected for the research was a full-time professional club competing
159 in the WSL, the highest club standard in the UK. The organisation is a highly successful team
160 having previously won the WSL and had a variety of coaching and support staff available to
161 the players including club doctor, physiotherapist, nutritionist, strength and conditioning
162 coach, performance analyst and sports psychologist (lead researcher). Typically, the club
163 trained five days a week and competed between once and twice a week. The organisation also
164 has an excellent youth development structure, with the regional center being awarded tier one
165 status and providing support for up to 60 athletes between U10 and U16 age categories plus a
166 development squad (a team of players aged 16-18, the final stage before entry into the first
167 team). Six female professional football athletes took part in one semi-structured interview
168 each as part of this research. The athletes were grouped into two groups of three participants
169 a senior group who had already successfully made the transition into female football and
170 were first-team regulars and a transitional group who were currently in the process of making
171 the transition into the first team. At the time of the interviews, senior athletes were aged
172 between 22 and 26 and transitional athletes were aged between 18 and 19. Senior athletes had
173 made the JST at different clubs from different areas around the country whereas transitional
174 athletes were currently transitioning from the development squad into the 1st team. Using two

175 groups allowed for the exploration of whether the increased professionalism in female
176 football influences the transition experiences of athletes. Senior athletes made the transition
177 during the initial stages of growth in women's football when the first players were starting to
178 turn full-time professional. Transitional athletes were making the transition into a club that
179 was a full-time professional organization and into a sport that was now more
180 professionalized. Eligibility for this study was, senior athletes must have previously
181 experienced the JST, and transitional athletes must be in the process of making the transition
182 into the first team. This criterion was used to ensure relevant data was collected for each
183 group.

184 **Interview Schedule**

185 Construction of the semi-structured interviews was informed by previous theoretical
186 frameworks (e.g., ACTM, HACM) and was adapted from research papers investigating the
187 JST in football players (e.g. Morris et al., 2016). "What were some of the challenges you
188 associated with moving up to the first team" and "What / who has hindered you throughout
189 the transition?" are examples of some questions asked to the participants. These questions
190 were structured around the transition, challenges and coping strategies in order to address the
191 present studies aims. The lead researcher presented the initial interview schedule to the
192 research team for a critical peer debrief. Following discussions, the research team agreed that
193 the changes made to Morris et al. (2016) interview schedule would elicit data that addressed
194 the preset studies aims. Likewise, a semi-structured interview would grant the researcher
195 access into the individual experiences associated with the JST that other methods would not
196 (e.g. focus group). Both groups received mildly adjusted interview schedules, for example,
197 "what challenges did you experience in relation to training" versus "what challenges are you
198 currently experiencing in relation to training". This ensured relevant questions were asked
199 and allowed each group to discuss their own experiences in greater depth. Interviews for both

200 groups covered vital areas such as a) introduction and background of the athletes, b)
201 transition experiences, and c) support and coping strategies.

202 **Procedure**

203 Once ethical approval was acquired from a UK University Ethics Review Board, the
204 manager of the club involved was approached and provided with a brief of the research aims
205 and interview schedules. Consent was acquired from the manager and permission granted to
206 interview six players from the first team. Participants for each group were recruited based on
207 their suitability for the project and the lead researcher who also acted as a trainee sport &
208 exercise psychologist for the host organization used a homogeneous purposive sampling
209 technique (participants who share the same or very similar traits) to identify participants who
210 were both eligible for the project and who would produce results rich in information that
211 would provide further comprehension and understanding of the research question (Patton,
212 2002). The lead researcher was provided with appropriate training prior to data collection to
213 ensure competence in conducting interviews. Participants were approached and given
214 information regarding the study, once participants agreed to take part in the research, a time
215 was arranged to conduct a face-face audio-recorded interview. All interviews took place at
216 the football club's training ground, and all participants were advised on their right to
217 withdraw, confidentiality procedures, risks, and safeguarding. Interviews lasted for
218 approximately 30-45 minutes with an average time of 41 minutes. All athletes were
219 interviewed individually. Upon completion of the interviews, all data were transcribed and
220 subjected to analysis.

221 **Data Analysis and Research Credibility**

222 Similar to the extant career development research, the researchers position this paper
223 within the post-positivist paradigm, whereby the researcher followed a series of logical steps
224 to analyzing the data, recognizing there may be multiple perspectives rather than a single

225 reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stating a papers philosophical positioning helps to refine and
226 clarify the research method and provides transparency (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The
227 researchers adopted an abductive approach (a combination of both inductive and deductive)
228 to thematic data analysis. This allows the researcher to construct new meaning and identify
229 (initial) themes from the data and find key themes, commonalities and differences between
230 the interviews. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019), six phases of thematical
231 analysis were recursively conducted to analyze the data and identify themes. These phases
232 included: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes
233 (grouping codes and data together), (4) reviewing themes to confirm they are found
234 throughout the dataset, (5) defining and naming the identified themes and (6) producing the
235 report. During the familiarization phase, the lead researcher read and re-read the
236 transcriptions, while also listening and re-listening to the audio files to become familiar with
237 the meaning and context of the verbalizations. The next phases of analysis involved
238 generating codes and Nvivo software was used to facilitate this process. Generated codes
239 were grouped into themes and subthemes based upon phrases of similar meaning and
240 underlying concepts. Once all transcripts were analyzed, a further review was conducted by
241 the remaining authors. To negate some of the limitations of inter-rater reliability as
242 highlighted by Smith and McGannon (2017), a different researcher acted as a critical friend
243 to ensure data collection and analysis were plausible and defensible. Discussions between
244 researchers and critical friends helped to ensure coherence between the raw data and our
245 interpretations of this data, and this often involved the refining and naming of themes. To
246 generate additional data and insight into the participants' experiences, member reflections
247 took place between the lead researcher and participants regarding interpretations of the raw
248 data. This allowed a collaborative exploration of potential gaps in analysis and discussion of
249 the researchers' and participants' interpretations of the data (Schinke, et al. 2013).

250 We would like the research to be judged on the characteristics outlined by papers such
251 as Richardson (2000), Smith and Caddick (2012), and Sparkes and Smith (2013). These
252 judgments include firstly, width, which refers to the magnitude of data collection, analysis
253 and researchers' interpretations. Second, credibility is the research findings being believable,
254 and transparency is the outline of procedures used to collect and analyze data. Thirdly,
255 verisimilitude which questions whether the study demonstrates "a credible amount of
256 cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'" (Richardson, 2000, p.937).
257 Finally, does this research display rigor that relates to whether the study appreciates
258 "complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s) and data
259 collection and analysis processes" (Sparkes & Smith, 2013, p.197). To meet Smith and
260 Caddick's (2012) recommendations the research team have included detailed descriptions of
261 participants and their contexts, numbers of participants used and how many there were in
262 each group, non-identifiable details of the organization that was involved with the research,
263 as well as information regarding types of interviews used and length of data collection
264 sessions. Data collection methods and analytical technique details are also included, and these
265 approaches were regularly checked with project co-authors to ensure the methods being
266 adopted were relevant and appropriate to meet the research aims.

267 **Results**

268 Following analysis of the transcriptions and audio files, common themes generated
269 regarding the demands, barriers and coping resources and strategies used to manage these
270 demands were developed. These are presented as two groups a) senior athletes and b)
271 transitional athletes. The themes generated for each group are a) Perceived Transition
272 Demands, b) Perceived Transition Barriers and c) Perceived Coping Resources and
273 Strategies.

274 **Perceived Transition Demands**

275 *Senior Athletes (SA)*

276 Perceived transition demands relate to the athletes' challenges during the transition
277 into the first-team environment. Senior athletes reported DC issues as a perceived transition
278 demand, particularly in relation to managing the balance between education and football.

279 When I moved up to London, I started University at the same time, and football
280 always took a priority I was playing in the champions league during my first semester,
281 so I was missing so much University, and then when I eventually did turn up, I just
282 didn't understand the topic. The University understood that I did sport, but the
283 department didn't really support me with it, which made balancing the both out very
284 difficult (SA 3).

285 And,

286 When I first made the move to the first team I was at University at the same time so
287 obviously the lifestyle associated with University didn't really help, going out quite
288 often, drinking more than I probably should have been so I had to cut that down a lot
289 in order to meet the extra demands (SA 1).

290 These athletes seemingly present different experiences related to DC issues, one athlete
291 discusses the challenges of football interfering with education. Whereas, the second athlete
292 discusses how a University lifestyle (drinking, partying) initially hindered her football career,
293 and as a result, required adjustment. A consideration here could be given to the culture of the
294 football club the athletes were transitioning into and the context of female football in the UK
295 at the time of transition. While some teams were professional, the majority were still semi-
296 professional athletes and as such, DC athletes transitioning into a semi-professional
297 environment may have experienced fewer demands related to balancing education and
298 football in comparison to the few that were transitioning into professional football clubs.

299 Senior athletes also reported adjusting to the higher standards of senior professional
300 football as a pertinent transitional demand. Senior athletes reported factors such as increased
301 competitiveness as a demand, “everyone was doing everything they could to win, it was very
302 competitive, and if you weren’t doing everything you could to win, it was brought out
303 (SA2)”. Similarly, athletes reported increased physicality as a demand for example,

304 I think the physicality was the biggest challenge I experienced during matches, it still
305 probably is especially international level as well to get the stage I want to get to. But
306 especially as an 18-year-old, physically it was a big challenge as I imagine it would be
307 for most 18 year old’s (SA 3).

308 Naturally, JST athletes would experience greater challenges associated with increased
309 physically, training with teammates who are more competitive and have enhanced technical
310 abilities and tactical nuances. Therefore, athletes reported a settling in period whereby they
311 needed time to adjust and cope with these increased demands.

312 *Transitional Athletes (TA)*

313 Transitional athletes also experienced DC issues as a salient perceived transitional
314 demand, reporting football as their main priority and as a result, education often suffered. For
315 example,

316 Well it (football) interferes a lot with things like university, like I can very rarely
317 attend university sessions. Even when I am at university I don’t really know anybody
318 because I never really had chance to meet them so a lot of the time they are like who
319 is this person (TA 2).

320 And,

321 I think finding a balance between football and university can sometimes be difficult, it
322 would be so much easier to just focus on football 24/7 but finding the time to balance

323 University and to make sure I am fully ready to play football at each training sessions
324 and at each match every weekend is a challenge (TA 1).

325 Here, transitional athletes discuss a lack of time to attend and engage with their education
326 because football consumes so much of their time. Whereas senior athletes reported balancing
327 football and education as a challenge there was a mix in experiences between football
328 interfering with education and education interfering with football. For example, some athletes
329 from the senior group describe having to adjust their University lifestyle in order to focus on
330 their football (e.g. less drinking/ partying). The transitional athletes' narrative is very much
331 focused on football consuming their time and trying to catch up with their education. For
332 example,

333 I don't get my days to myself anymore in terms of things like University work I can't
334 do it during the day anymore I have to do it from half 4 until like 11 at night or in the
335 mornings before I go to training so that has changed a lot. Then there's things like
336 eating wise I have had to change my nutrition to be able to cope with the amount of
337 extra training sessions there are (TA 3).

338 This finding could be understood within the context of professional female football. The
339 senior group were transitioning into a primarily semi-professional environment, which may
340 have meant that some (not all) DC athletes had more time to focus on education. Here,
341 education may have then interfered with their football development at times (e.g. university
342 lifestyle). Whereas, transitional athletes are all transitioning into a full-time professional
343 environment, where the time commitments for football are much more significant. In turn,
344 this leads to less time for education (e.g. attendance at lectures).

345 As well as DC challenges, transitional athletes reported maintaining a satisfactory
346 social life as a pertinent transitional demand due to a lack of time. For example, "I haven't
347 been out since I have started University because I have been training full time and football

348 becomes the priority (TA 1)". While some transitional athletes felt they were able to maintain
349 a social life while part of the development squad, since turning professional, this was no
350 longer the case.

351 With the development squad I could socialize, go home and train. With the first team
352 you are training in the day and then have to go home and catch up with University
353 work and there is little time for socialization, which does make it difficult (TA 3).
354 This finding was less salient from interviews with senior athletes, who did not discuss
355 maintaining a satisfactory social life as a main transitional demand. Some senior athletes
356 instead reported that by maintaining a social life it helped with other demands "friends helped
357 me out, some close friends would travel with me, helped break my journey up" (SA 1).

358 Transitional athletes, much their senior counterparts also discussed adjusting to a
359 higher standard of professional football as a perceived transitional demand. Transitional
360 athletes discussed demands such as increased pace for example "the pace of training, just the
361 way they play, everything is two touches, really quick and the shot speed is a big difference"
362 (TA2). Likewise, they also highlighted challenges of playing in competitive matches, for
363 example, playing in front of bigger crowds and against high quality opposition "bigger
364 crowds, something I had never really experienced before and playing against top quality
365 player week in week out was difficult" (TA 1). Both groups of athletes reported adjusting to
366 the higher standards of professional football as a pertinent demand, particularly in relation to
367 the increased physical demands and competitive nature of training. However, transitional
368 athletes also discussed playing in front of bigger crowds, whereas senior athletes did not
369 report this. Arguably, the increased media coverage and growing popularity of female
370 football within the UK presents new demands to athletes transitioning into the professional
371 senior environment.

372 **Perceived Transition Barriers**

373 *Senior Group*

374 Perceived transition barriers refer to themes that interfered with the individual's
375 ability to cope with the transition demands. The sub-theme of anxiety was constructed from
376 the interview transcripts and often represented a feeling of 'nervousness'. Senior athletes
377 often reported feeling 'nervous' or 'anxious' when they first made the transition to training
378 with the first team.

379 I was with my first club, at around 15 years old so I was just thrown into the first team
380 really and I was nervous to start with, I had gone through the pathway all the way to
381 the first team. But I was very nervous, I was only training a couple of times a week.
382 (SA 3).

383 Here the athlete discusses the sensation of being 'thrown in' at a young age, and as a result,
384 feeling nervous of training with senior players. Similarly, athletes discussed struggling with
385 having to move away from home in order to pursue a career in professional football.

386 Some of those difficulties were moving away from home for the first time properly,
387 erm, you get used to being away from home with international camps and stuff, so it
388 wasn't a case of feeling home sick, but it was a massive change for me. I come from a
389 small town in Scotland so to move to a big city like London was a huge move for me
390 and carried with it a lot of pressure (SA 3).

391 Professional female football at the time of transition was rare within the UK and the sport, in
392 general, was still slowly growing. As a result, some of the senior players had to move to
393 completely new areas in order to pursue their career goals. This in itself acted as a barrier to
394 coping with the transition, as the act of moving so far away from home presented challenges
395 within itself.

396 *Transitional Group*

397 Transitional athletes also reported heightened anxiety and feelings of nervousness
398 when making the transition into the first team. Here the athletes discuss the pressure to
399 perform well and demonstrated a desire to want to impress their senior players, players they
400 had discussed as being their idols while growing up.

401 You are training with some players that you look up to as a young player and then all
402 of a sudden you are training with them it just takes a lot to get used to, like there are a
403 lot of big names and big players here so you don't want to make any mistakes as you
404 don't want them to be thinking 'oh here is another young player coming up' 'looking
405 at them making mistakes again, we don't want them back and stuff' (TA 2).

406 While both groups reported experiencing anxiety towards the transition, there were
407 differences between the groups in terms of sources of their anxiety. Transitional athletes
408 feared making mistakes in front of their idols (senior players) and wanted to earn their
409 respect. This finding could further be explained in relation to the changing environment of
410 female football in the UK. With increased media coverage aspiring female football players
411 have more access to female role models which previously had not be so common. Therefore,
412 those currently transitioning into the first team were transitioning into an environment with
413 players that they had looked up to during their youth careers and players who they had used
414 as role models. For example, "I was playing with some huge names in women's football,
415 people who I had only seen on television, who are people that I look up to" (TA 1).

416 Aside from reporting feelings of anxiety, athletes also reported similar negative
417 emotions, such as feeling under pressure when making the transition, mainly as a result of the
418 standard of players "there is obviously a lot of pressure on me because they are a very high
419 standard, so I have to try and step up to that and be on par with them" (TA 3). This sub-theme
420 may link with the perceived transition demand of adjusting to the standards of professional
421 senior football. Naturally, with female football transitioning to full-time professional, the

422 standard of the sport will improve. With these improving standards, junior players entering
423 this environment are expected to adapt to these standard and as such, this carries with it a
424 sense of pressure on the athlete.

425 **Perceived Coping Resources and Strategies**

426 *Senior Athletes*

427 Perceived coping resources and strategies related to the methods employed by athletes
428 to manage the perceived demands associated with the transition. Senior athletes often used
429 social support as a key coping strategy, for example, when facing challenges related to
430 commuting to training sessions, matches and training camps, particularly early on in their
431 transition, parents seemed to be the most prominent form of support.

432 My dad took me everywhere I needed to be, driving to Loughborough and back after
433 games to take me where I needed to be and stuff, so I have always been very lucky
434 that they have helped me out (SA 2).

435 Family was also an essential form of support for athletes in facilitating coping with ‘issues’
436 relating to both football and personal problems. “Family was a huge thing for me, my parents
437 especially my dad was very supportive of me making the move, and if I had any issues,
438 especially football issues I would just go to him” (SA3). Support received from friends and
439 family was primarily emotional (e.g. encouragement, motivational) support, notably for
440 challenges they experienced both within and outside of football.

441 Teammates, support staff, and coaches were also salient sources of support for senior
442 athletes. Senior athletes often used this support to facilitate confidence towards the transition,
443 for example, “Staff probably helped because they gave me confidence”(SA2). Pertinently,
444 different members of the athlete’s support network were utilized in response to different
445 demands and barriers. Staff and coaches primarily for technical, tactical and physical
446 development, teammates for emotional support, technical, tactical and physical development,

447 and finally, family and friends for emotional support. This knowledge can be used to
448 implement more effective support structures within organizations, educating staff and senior
449 members of squads on the importance of offering support and guidance to new athletes
450 making the transition.

451 Senior athletes also opted for a variety of personal development methods in order to
452 match the demands of the transition. In particular, this was in response to the demands
453 associated with task difficulty. Many of the senior players were not training full-time during
454 the initial phases of their senior careers therefore, undertaking voluntary sessions were
455 required to ensure they were at the peak of their game.

456 I put in a lot of extra training sessions, I was training with the first team, then training
457 with the University team then doing some extra training on my own, trying to put into
458 practice what I was working on at the time (SA 1).

459 *Transitional Athletes*

460 Transitional athletes also relied on social support to manage some of the demands
461 associated with the transition and much like their senior peers, they too did so primarily for
462 emotional support. However, the majority of their social support was through teammates and
463 staff who the athletes suggested provided emotional, technical, and tactical support during the
464 transition. From a staff perspective, i.e., managers and coaches, the support provided tended
465 to come in the form of advice on technical and tactical development. For example,

466 The staff have been quite good actually, I have a few conversations with the first team
467 manager and he kind of just makes sure that any mistakes that I make it's not really
468 my fault it more just me having to adapt to this level so he takes the pressure off a bit
469 (TA 3).

470 This technical and tactical advice aimed at helping players manage the challenges associated
471 of adjusting to professional senior football (e.g. increased physicality, competitiveness).

472 Unlike the senior athletes, transitional athletes discussed the importance of senior players in
473 facilitating development and facilitating the transition. Senior players were perceived to be a
474 pertinent coping strategy by acting as a role model, sharing their experiences and providing
475 tangible emotional support to them during the transition.

476 But being in the first team helped me to develop these ideas, speaking with senior
477 players and then seeing how committed people were to their football I didn't really
478 understand that until I came down here. Like I thought I need to start doing stuff like
479 that to make sure that I develop. Seeing what some of the players do when they go
480 away on international camps as well helps me with that (TA 2).

481 Transitional athletes, therefore, appeared to want to utilize the experiences of their senior
482 peers and apply this knowledge to their development in order to manage the transition.

483 Similar to the senior group, it was perceived that personal development, primarily
484 undertaken through extra conditioning sessions, often in response to the extra physical
485 demands of senior football was a pertinent coping strategy. Transitional athletes felt the need
486 to undertake extra conditioning sessions to manage the challenges associated with the extra
487 demands as they thought they were playing "catch up" compared to the more senior players
488 in the squad.

489 I go the gym a lot more as well, I look at the players on the pitch and think wow I
490 want to be like them, so I go the gym to cope with the extra physicality. Setting
491 targets helps me a lot because it keeps me on track and gives me a bit of purpose to
492 my training sessions (TA 2).

493 Transitional athletes also discussed using reflective learning as a key coping strategy.
494 Players reported reflecting both individually and within groups regarding performance in
495 training and in matches to facilitate their development and track their progress. The idea of

496 reflecting on performance also seemed to act as a tool to facilitate goal setting and areas for
497 development.

498 I came up with this idea with one of the other players, we always share a car ride into
499 training and debrief in the car and we just came up with the idea of writing it down,
500 we both wanted to improve and we felt this would help us and it just helps me to track
501 my progress along the way (TA 3).

502 This ability to reflect and share experiences with a peer who is experiencing similar
503 challenges to themselves facilitated athletes making the transition for several reasons.
504 Firstly, it provided space for athletes to vent frustrations and seek support and advice from
505 peers viewed as equals. Secondly, it allowed the athletes to learn from their own
506 experiences, understand why they were or were not successful in a situation, and learn
507 from that. Finally, it allowed athletes to understand and identify their own educational and
508 developmental needs. For example, if they were reflecting on struggling with fitness, then
509 the athletes would become aware that fitness is an area they would like to develop on to
510 better manage the challenges of the transition.

511 **Discussion**

512 The present study aimed to (a) explore the JST in the UK female football players (i.e.,
513 perceived demands, barriers, resources, and coping strategies); (b) analyze how changes in
514 the UK female football context (i.e., increased professionalization) influenced players'
515 perception of the transition. Senior and transitional athletes reported challenges associated
516 with balancing education and sport, although there were some differences in their
517 experiences. Senior athletes reported a mixture of education interfering with sport, and sport
518 interfering with education. Whereas, transitional athletes' experiences were focused on
519 education interfering with sport. Both groups of athletes reported anxiety as a salient barrier
520 to the transition, although there were some differences between groups in terms of the source

521 of their anxiety. For example, transitional athletes often reported fear of making mistakes in
522 front of senior athletes as a key factor in experiencing anxiety with the senior group reporting
523 nervousness. Both sets of athletes adopted a range of coping resources, notably relying on
524 social support and engaging in personal development. Transitional athletes uniquely made
525 reference to engaging in group-based reflective practice to aid their development. The
526 increased professionalization of female football in the UK appeared to have an influence on
527 the different JST experiences of transitional versus senior athletes.

528 A key finding associated with the present study refers to the perceived transition
529 demands experienced by both sets of athletes. Both groups reported the demands of balancing
530 education with sport as pertinent. Transitional athletes reported that the demands associated
531 with full-time professional meant there was very little time for education, resulting in non-
532 attendance and ‘catching up’ during free time in evenings. This finding is supported by de
533 Subijana et al. (2015) who suggested that Spanish elite athletes perceived DC to be difficult
534 with managing time between study and sport as a significant demand. Stambulova and
535 Wylleman (2019) posited that the demands associated with DC often “compete with each
536 other” and as a result, athletes need to find an optimal balance between their sport and
537 education in order to fulfil all of their goals. This finding also further extends the work of
538 Gledhill and Harwood (2015) who identified role strain as a key demand associated with
539 talent development in UK female footballers. The findings of the present study would
540 suggest, that athletes from both groups, in particular, transitional athletes struggled to find
541 this ‘optimal balance’. As a result, education was often perceived as less of a priority. With
542 athletes leading intense lives, when they experience numerous overlapping transitions,
543 athletes distribute their resources accordingly (Stambulova et al. 2020). Gledhill and
544 Harwood (2015) reported the lack of the necessary self-regulatory capacity and social
545 competence as key predicting factors in female footballers who did not progress. That is to

546 suggest, footballers who were not disciplined in their lifestyle, and did not live the lifestyle of
547 an elite athlete did not progress. In the present study, transitional athletes' distribution of
548 resources was focused on managing the demands of football, with education, and wider life,
549 less represented. Transitioning into a full-time professional environment, as was the case for
550 transitional athletes results in less time for other, competing demands. This finding furthers
551 our understanding of the challenges DC female footballers undergo during the JST into
552 professional female football in the UK. As such, support systems in place could further focus
553 on facilitating the optimal balance between competing demands, as per the updated ISSP
554 position stand (Stambulova et al. 2020).

555 While both sets of athletes reported anxiety as a barrier, the sources of anxiety
556 differed slightly. Senior athletes tended to report feelings of nervousness whereas transitional
557 athletes reported fear of making mistakes in front of senior athletes. Bruner et al. (2008)
558 suggested perceived readiness for an elite competition to be a stress source for several rookie
559 ice hockey athletes. This finding further extends the scope of where this knowledge can be
560 applied and support findings from previous JST research. For example, Morris et al. (2016)
561 cited athletes experience heightened anxiety before transitioning into male senior football.

562 Seeking support from friends, family, teammates and coaches, and personal
563 development were salient coping strategies for both senior and transitional athletes. Morris et
564 al. (2016) found support from friends, family, fellow professionals and staff to be a salient
565 strategy to manage JST demands. Likewise, Gledhill and Harwood (2014) highlighted the
566 importance of non-football friends, football brothers and football fathers as potentially
567 positive influencers on talent development. The present study reported that while both groups
568 adopted similar strategies, transitional athletes cited seeking support from senior teammates
569 as a prominent source of social support. Whereas, senior athletes discussed seeking social
570 support from family and teammates. Ullrich-French & Smith (2009) highlighted the vital role

571 of friends who were teammates had in supporting talent development. Transitional athletes
572 also adopted individual and group-based reflection techniques to help manage some of the
573 demands. Research suggests how reflective practice can be a vital tool in gaining a deeper
574 understanding of oneself and exploring ways to develop (Knowles et al., 2014). This finding
575 extends previous JST research (e.g., Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Morris et al, 2016;
576 Stambulova et al, 2017) as it identifies a unique strategy employed by athletes to manage the
577 demands of the transition. Stambulova's (2003) ACTM indicates an athlete's internal/external
578 resources must match or exceed the internal/external demands placed on them to successfully
579 navigate the transition. As a result of the increased professionalism of female football in the
580 UK, transitional athletes were experiencing similar, but arguably more intense
581 internal/external demands and therefore, required to utilize more internal/external resources
582 and strategies to manage the transition.

583 **Differences Between Groups**

584 While both senior and transitional athletes shared similar experiences, there are also
585 some key differences which the changing context of female football in the UK may explain.
586 Notably, transitional athletes' experiences of balancing a DC. While the senior athletes do
587 discuss balancing a DC as challenging, it was less salient throughout their interviews. For
588 some, at times it was challenging, whereas for others it was much more manageable. This
589 difference in experience is likely the result of the context of professional female football at
590 present. Athletes are transitioning from a part-time to full-time football, from a junior to a
591 senior and often transitioning into higher education. While many of the demands are similar,
592 the transition of female football from semi-professional to professional requires greater
593 commitment and investment from athletes, resulting in greater difficulty finding the optimal
594 balance. As a result, when distributing their resources across the competing demands
595 (Stambulova et al. 2020) football now requires more of these resources, with less afforded to

596 education and wider life. This may also explain the differences in coping resources adopted,
597 with transitional athletes adopting further coping methods (e.g. reflective techniques)
598 compared to the senior group. While the increased professionalism of female football in the
599 UK is welcomed, more awareness and support of the challenges transitional athletes face is
600 required.

601 **Strengths and Practical Implications**

602 The present paper provides a detailed understanding of the JST into professional
603 female football, enhancing our understanding of elite female football. The results from the
604 present study offer a suggestion of transferability whereby other settings may be able to adopt
605 some of the findings (Smith, 2018), for example, coaches and practitioners from sports
606 outside of football recognizing similarities in the demands experienced by their athletes.
607 There is also an element of naturalistic generalizability within the present study, that is, for
608 certain readers the present study may resonate with their own experiences (Smith, 2018). For
609 example, an athlete who has made the JST may read this research and find the results
610 reverberate with their own personal experiences. The current study may also offer some
611 useful insights for applied practitioners and may facilitate practitioners understanding of their
612 clients' transitional experience into professional female football. Such findings may also
613 facilitate practitioners working at an organizational level, for example, working with coaches
614 and support staff to raise awareness of the dynamic challenges faced by athletes. The results
615 of the present study alongside existing research could be utilized to inform organizations
616 (e.g., Universities, Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme) and sporting bodies (FA). This
617 information can be used to ensure the right environment is created for DC female football
618 players and facilitate them in managing the demands and minimize potential barriers to a
619 successful transition, in line with the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers in Athletes (2012).

620 **Limitations and Future Research**

621 A limitation of the present study is all participants were or had been student-athletes,
622 while this is common internationally in women's football there are still a large number of
623 female football players who choose not to extend their academic pursuits so the main findings
624 from the present study would not necessarily be generalizable to those athletes who choose
625 not to further their education. Another potential limitation of the present study may be
626 athletes from the senior group transitioned into senior football at different clubs, so while the
627 context of female football U.K. was the same, the idiosyncrasies of the specific clubs they
628 transitioned into may have influenced their transition experiences. All participants were
629 recruited from one club, alternative clubs may have had more/fewer support systems in place
630 for transitional athletes and as such their experiences may be different. Finally, University
631 support structures were not considered for this paper, nor were the subjects being taken by
632 athletes and the demands required of those subjects, i.e. how many days a week they were
633 expected to attend University classes, all of which could influence the transitional
634 experiences of athletes.

635 Future research could investigate precisely the challenges of being a DC athlete in
636 professional female football and begin to examine the unique demands to having such a role.
637 For example, the motivations for undertaking a full-time career in both education and sports,
638 the benefits of being a DC athlete, and investigate the support system in place for DC football
639 players. Such research would have wide-ranging real-world implications and could not only
640 enhance the development of female football players academically and athletically but also
641 reduce the risk of athletes suffering from burnout alongside other pertinent wellbeing issues.
642 Such research should also consider the support systems available given to professional female
643 football players by both the host club and University and investigate how the support offered
644 supports players in managing the demands associated with making numerous transitions.

645

Conclusion

646 To conclude, the present study has extended on previous JST research (e.g. Gledhill
647 and Harwood, 2014; 2015) by exploring the transition into professional female football and
648 the influence of the increasing professionalization of female football in the UK. In particular,
649 athletes experienced demands of balancing education and football, maintaining a satisfactory
650 social life and adjusting to the demands of professional female football. Transitional athletes'
651 experiences of these demands differed slightly from senior athletes, particularly in relation to
652 balancing education and football. By further understanding these experiences, stakeholders
653 will be in a more informed position to advise relevant organizations and sporting bodies to
654 create the right environment for DC athletes.

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