"YOU GET KNOCKED DOWN AND YOU GET BACK UP AGAIN! IT'S THE ONLY WAY!"

EXPLORING TRANSITIONS, CRITICAL MOMENTS, IDENTITY AND MEANING WITHIN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

A MIXED METHODS APPROACH.

ALAN JOHN TONGE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Liverpool John Moores University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2021

Abstract

Much of the current transitions-based research literature has investigated 'end points' (i.e., coming away from sport and the retirement stage) and not 'within transitions' (i.e., what happens more frequently whilst in the sport). More definitively in relation to football, there has tended to be a specific research focus on younger age groups such as academy players and academy environments. There is limited research which involves professional players and professional cultures. This has been largely in part due to the difficult nature of research access and confidentiality issues around professional sport. Therefore, the present thesis has extended knowledge of transitions by moving the research field into professional sport (football) and professional football culture. As well as the 'end points' of transition the thesis has investigated experiences that professional football players had more frequently and how these experiences threatened, disrupted and challenged identity.
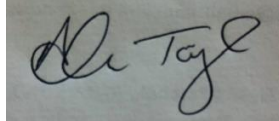
Across three studies utilising a pragmatic research philosophy, the thesis explored transitions, critical moments, athletic identity, and the culture of operating in a first team professional football environment. Study One used an evocative, analytic auto-ethnography which provided a rich, detailed account of personally lived experiences of the author. These experiences were charted around different transitional points spanning approximately 20 years in total and written using a monological narrative approach. Key moments were highlighted using a showing, not a telling approach. The narrative presented a range of issues within the journey of a professional footballer. Key existential themes were considered from a "feeling and emotional insider viewpoint" rather than a "detached but interested" outsider viewpoint. The monological narrative presented many challenges through the eyes of a professional footballer and their daily practice. These challenges included lived experiences around transitions, cultural adaptation, experiences with managers and coaches, support mechanisms, de-selection and coping with the end of a career. To extend the monological viewpoint, Study Two employed 'an alternative voice' approach and in-depth qualitative phenomenological interviews were used to assess critical moments within the journeys of six ex-professional footballers. The purposeful sample included players who had played for professional football clubs at what was an elite level (i.e., they had all played in the highest tier of English professional football). Analysis of the narratives was based on an existential-narrative framework which centralised on the subjectivity of human experience. The interview data suggested that as the players made journey into and through the professional game, frequent issues appearing had an impact on their identity and mental health. These issues included deselection (e.g., being left out of a team or squad), loans, short term, and long-term injuries, dealing with negative media and challenging relationships with teammates, coaches, and managers. These more frequent experiences brought about feelings such as isolation, anxiety, fear, loss, desperation, anger and even humiliation. Finally, Study Three used a positivist, quantitative, survey approach to assess the prevalence of critical issues (and topics wrapped around critical issues) unearthed within Study One and Study Two. Data were collected from a cohort of 212 ex-professional football players (40% of the sample had primarily played at Premier League/Championship level and 60% had played primarily at League One/ League Two level). Analysis of the numerical data suggested that

as the players navigated their way through the professional game, high percentages of issues were reported which can have an impact on and threaten identity. The data also suggested that support around transitional points and critical moments was low and that more was needed to be done from a cultural perspective to assist players develop a broader identity, deal with critical moments more effectively and help maximise career longevity.

Findings from the thesis can be disseminated to help educate and inform staff who are based around players within professional football (e.g., welfare, managers, coaches, parents, and agents) and more specifically sport psychologists within their training (and development) who aim to work in professional football. Often, players do not talk openly and discuss issues which have affected them until they have left the game. By providing insight and a greater understanding on the types of issues that players experience and face within their journey as professional athletes, improved support mechanisms can be administered and embedded.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Signed: **(Alan Tonge)**

…………………………………………………………………………….

Date: 5th October 2021

…………………………………………………………………………….

Some of the research conducted within the PhD has been presented at the conferences listed below and some of the PhD work has been used to inform two book chapters and one journal commentary article:

Presented material at the student BASES conference at Liverpool John Moores University, 1st April 2015

Presented material at the BPS – DSEP Annual Conference, Cardiff (British Psychological Society – Department of Sport and Exercise Psychology), 13th December 2016

Presented material at the 3rd Annual Sport and Fitness Conference 'Competing in the Dark: Mental Health in Sport', 21st March 2018

Presented material at the Football Collective Annual Conference, Bramhall Lane, Sheffield, 28th November 2019

Presented my PhD research at the BPS – DSEP Annual Conference, Solihull (British Psychological Society – Department of Sport and Exercise Psychology), 2nd December 2019

Souter, G., Tonge, A., & Culvin, A. (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of pro footballers, *Managing Sport and Leisure,* DOI: 10.1080/23750472.2021.1877569

Tonge, A. (2020). 'Understanding mental health and wellbeing issues in elite soccer players. An existential sport psychology approach'. In Dixon, J. G., Barker, J. B., Thelwell, R. C., & Mitchell, I. (2020). *The Psychology of Soccer.* Routledge.

Tonge, A. (2021). 'Exploring Transitions in UK Football.' In Agnew, D. (2021). *Athlete Transitions into Retirement. Experiences in Elite Sport and Options for Effective Support.* Routledge.

Acknowledgements and Dedications

Since making the corrections to this thesis, I tragically lost my twin brother, Kevin, to sepsis. He was only 48 years old. This came as a huge shock to all the family, and it has made me look at life in a completely different way, as we simply do not know what is coming tomorrow. A huge thanks to LJMU and to the examiners for allowing me more time to complete the additions. It has hit home to make sure we should strive to get something out of every day and act on anything that is required of us, no matter how small. Make a difference to others. Be kind always. Tomorrow is promised to nobody. RIP my dear brother.

To the greatest teachers and people, I have ever known: my father, my mother, my sister, my nephew, my son Sam, and my daughter Lauren. Without your examples of love, integrity, courage, morality, ethics, unconditional support, and striving to walk in light, my life would mean nothing.

A huge thankyou to my supervisory team, especially the totally brilliant Dr Mark Nesti for being fully supportive amidst the endless questions, framing, and content of the PhD, as well as the philosophical questions about life's journey and introducing me to existential psychology which has guided work with professional players in The Premier League. Many thanks also for the contributions of the brilliant Dr Robert Morris whose calm, patient, insightful advice, and thoughtful manner has been a vital component in me completing this PhD.

I would also like to thank the Professional Footballer's Association (The PFA) for their kind financial support over the duration of this PhD and the smooth administrative applications for funding each year. Without you, this research would not have been possible to complete.

If I can help any player within the game of professional football in some small way, a game that was a huge part of my life and still is, then my plan of completing this PhD, and getting the findings 'out there' to assist with better support and understanding, will have been more than worthwhile.

As a final point, the completion of the PhD takes me way back to my English Literature days: aged 15 or 16 years old, sat in Mrs Wood's school classroom studying my GCSE set text "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens. There was a poignant final line that I have never forgotten and carry verbatim with me to this day. It fits neatly with the completion of this work and the hours I have sacrificed, in the hope of helping some professional footballers to get the absolute best from their careers, particularly through receiving the right support within their transitions and critical moments:

'It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done, it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.'

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER SIX: STUDY THREE

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER EIGHT: REFERENCES

FIGURES AND TABLES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Biographical Information and Introduction.

A PhD has often been described as a personal journey to better understand pertinent issues and add value to help inform others, either from a knowledge perspective or from an applied perspective. For me, this journey started years ago, a long time before I decided to enrol and complete this study. Consequently, I believe it is important to set some context. I also place credit in living your words and connecting deeply with what you are setting out to achieve. Lived words in action can be a very powerful mechanism and through an array of experiences, is not something readily seen within many walks of life. By undertaking this PhD, I hope to provide a profound insight into the plethora of issues I, and others, have experienced around professional football: a game that I have deeply loved for many, many years. These experiences range from the warm, joyful memory of getting lifted into the air by my father at 7 years old, when our beloved team, Manchester United, came back from 2-0 down in an FA Cup Final, to exiting the game at 24 years old having had a severe and career ending injury to my spine. I always wanted to be a professional footballer and have some fantastic memories of playing in the playground at school, coats on the ground for goalposts and emulating the heroes of the time. The love I felt within this period was strong and as I journeyed through the differing stages and transitions of football, I must be honest and say that sadly, the love started to ebb away. It became more of a motivation than a love. This was predominately through harsh coaches and coaching practices (i.e., those that included very little praise); high demands and expectations around training; playing for much of the week (i.e., almost every evening and often twice at a weekend); and the task of trying to balance education and other areas of my life (i.e., social/friends) with these demands. Collectively, these posed primary reasons for suffering a serious back problem at only 22 years old and having to retire from the

game after a lengthy rehabilitation period at only 24 years old. From this journey, and through a subsequent career in teaching and learning, I have always been interested in the psychological side of sport (especially, professional football). As a result, I have pursued a course of research to try and help the next generation coming through and how they could deal with these issues more effectively. I have always been interested in informing applied practice to help advance knowledge and understanding of the issues that players battle with. I intend to share the results from my PhD via differing means such as within presentations, module design on University courses, educating key stakeholders (such as professional clubs, The FA and the PFA), journal articles and book chapters. Nesti (2010) postulated that an ongoing issue within sport psychology and professional football clubs is that managers, coaches, and players are consistently striving for 'something else' and are not to be given material that they already know about or have picked up via knowledge of their craft and their own lived experiences. Much of current sport psychology literature and applied practice of sport psychology still appears to be reliant on a cognitive and behavioural paradigm (i.e., mental skills approaches, such as imagery, self-talk, arousal control, and goal setting aligned to a performance psychology focus). I believe this should be explored further by utilising various methods to capture more informed, rigorous, and meaningful data. The importance of mental health and well-being is a dominant issue within contemporary practice across all levels of the game. Exploring and understanding where these issues are being experienced and how these issues can be supported best will be a key focus of this PhD. My experiences, and the experiences of other professional footballers within football culture, can hopefully provide insight into what may help and inform current sport psychology practice. This can then help with education packages and learning opportunities to help football clubs support players

with optimal efficacy, as they make their way through and strive to remain in a notoriously difficult profession. Everyone who plays the game to a level and cares for what they do has to leave the game at some point, whether that is at academy/ schoolboy level, apprentice, young pro, middle years pro or senior pro. It has often been said that you do not leave the game – the game leaves you!

1.2   Outlining the rationale for the PhD.

As well as a dream career for many youngsters who partake in the beautiful game, making your way through professional football to gain a fulfilled career can be a demanding, brutal, passionate, and ruthless experience (Nesti, 2010). The level of scrutiny and interest is vast. Many hundreds of boys are now scouted from as young as five years old, can enter development centres at around seven and eight years old, and then can be admitted into a professional football academy by the age of nine. It can be argued that we are amid a football culture which fears missing the potential talent of a young player, as this can lead to financial reward where the club can sell them on for a vast fee further down the line. This potentially can come at a cost, with players consistently being told by parents, teachers, and coaches that they are the next 'big thing'. This can develop the formation of an exclusive athletic identity (e.g., Pike, 2021). The journey is then perpetuated with a string of movements (i.e., transitions) and critical moments (i.e., more frequent occurrences), as players attempt to progress through varying age groups and levels to gain a career in the game. Out of the 1.5 million players who are involved within youth football, it has been approximated that only 180 will play at Premier League Level. This equates to a damning statistic of 0.012% (Calvin, 2017).

Although transitions and critical moments are a developing area of interest, the academic literature still has much to consider (Nesti, 2010). As the industry is highly pressurised and there are many ups and downs along the journey, it is felt that the training, support, and wellbeing of players who enter the academy from nine years old should be gradually developed to help them deal with the psychological and sociological challenges they may face as they progress their way through the game. It can be argued that many football clubs already believe that players somehow already have the skill sets in place to deal with such an emotional and extremely demanding rollercoaster ride. Efforts, which try to address some of this knowledge and skill deficiencies, can be seen within projects run by the PFA (Professional Footballers Association) and LFE (League Football Education). For example, the LFE runs projects aimed at football apprentices that consider topics, such as identity and player personal development. Similarly, the PFA runs 'transition' workshops. However, three concerns arise from these ventures. The first is that only a small percentage of apprentices will get to play or operate within a first team environment. Consequently, it can be argued that there is an overemphasis on personal development and not what players will face within the pro game (i.e., personal skills needed to achieve and move on after deselection at age 18). Secondly, the 'transition' workshops focus on coming out of the game when a player is facing the end of a career and looking to step into another one. Thirdly, although these are encouraging and important areas, and have their worth, they are predominately staffed by third parties from the periphery of the game. It can thus be argued that professional football clubs, or support staff within the clubs, should be considering and taking more responsibility themselves, as there are around 650-800 players potentially out of work every season who may need extra care, support, and guidance (BBC, 2021).

1.3   The research aims, questions, and overall structure.

This PhD has a threefold purpose with the overarching rationale being to investigate existential (i.e., existence within football) changes and experiences within a cohort of UK-based ex-professional football players. As well as transitions 'out' of professional football, the thesis will investigate challenges that occur whilst 'in' professional football. This will involve exploring player experiences of transitions and stages (e.g., apprentice to professional, reserves to first team), critical moments (e.g., issues that occur more frequently), identity impacts, football culture and the support available. The first aim of the PhD is to present a personal journey to becoming a professional footballer and reflect upon the impact that it has had, from a mental health and well-being perspective. This piece of work also aims to explore how my identity was affected through these experiences. It is hoped that the insight gained from this personal narrative can help to inform current practice, assist players within differing stages of their journey, and offer support to enable them to cope more robustly on what is an unquestionably demanding and arduous path.

The second study of the PhD will expand on Study One by employing a phenomenological method (Nesti, 2004) to capture 'alternative workplace voices.' The aim, here, is to interview a sample of ex-professional players who exited the professional game, following the auto-ethnography author's retirement date. The interview will specifically probe what transitions and critical issues they have faced; what these experiences meant to them; how these experiences have affected their identity, and how they viewed themselves at differing moments of their careers.

The third study of the PhD will utilise a quantitative based survey approach to examine the prevalence of the issues that have been brought to light from the auto-ethnography and qualitative-based interviews. This piece of work will critically reflect

upon what applied sport psychologists can do to support players more effectively, especially within first team environments. It will also reflect upon what applied sport psychologists can do to advance workshop and training knowledge for a wider array of stakeholders, to help players progress and stay within the professional game, thus achieving a fulfilling and well-rewarded career.

The overarching rationale of the PhD is to seek new ways to understand the lived world of a professional football player and will be completed by exploring experiences around transitions (i.e., stages) and critical moments (i.e., more frequent challenges), including how these experiences can impact upon identity development. This will raise awareness so that organisations (i.e., professional football clubs) can consider the importance of creating a healthy organisational workplace culture, which provides appropriate support to help players navigate through these transitions and critical moments. The PhD will highlight issues which can potentially create mental health and well-being challenges and suggest how these can be managed most effectively. Findings will be discussed in relation to the potential work of applied sports psychologists and allied practitioners.

The PhD will be structured via another seven chapters. Chapter Two will provide a critical literature review of the current research field of transitions and critical moments. Chapter Three will set out the philosophical underpinning of the thesis and present the methodology and methods, which will be used to answer the research aims and objectives. Chapter Four, Chapter Five and Chapter Six will present the sequential research studies. Chapter Seven will draw the thesis together via a 'Summary and Conclusion' section, identifying the overall knowledge contribution of the thesis in relation to theory, practice, and future research. Chapter Eight will present the references used throughout the work.

1.4   Definitions of terminology throughout the PhD.

Athletic identity	Those who place too strong an emphasis on their athletic identity become somewhat one dimensional, and in that sense may solely view themselves as a sports person at the expense of other social roles (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).
Authenticity	To reflect and take a stand on one's existence, while observing that most people seem to dwell in functional, superficial everyday life (Heidegger, 1962).
Cognitive behavioural psychology	Acquiring knowledge through experience, thought and sensory input which focus predominately on techniques to alleviate symptoms (Corlett, 1996).
Critical moment or boundary situation	A personal experience that can have a negative, or positive impact upon the person in it. The person can be thrown into a state of crisis if not dealing effectively with, or trying to escape a boundary situation (Nesti, 2004).
Existential psychology	Related to human existence and involves questions relating to anxiety, identity, meaning, isolation, and death (Nesti, 2004).
Identity foreclosure	This occurs when an individual makes a premature commitment to an occupation or ideology (Marcia, 1966).
Phenomenology	An approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience. It is used to describe how human beings can experience a certain phenomenon such as a transition, or a critical moment (Nesti, 2004).
Transition	Evolved from the Latin term 'transmission.' The process or period of changing from one state or condition to another (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000).

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide a critical review of literature. Following this review of literature, a rationale for expansion to current knowledge and unanswered questions within current academic work will be put forwards. Firstly, the development of athlete transitions research will be investigated, as well as an exploration of the current conceptual transition models. The literature review will then critically examine academic material based on an athletes' journey through sport with associated topics considered such as athletic identity, existential identity, football culture, youth to senior transitions, resilience, trauma, 'transitions or critical moments', anxiety, authenticity, loneliness and sport psychology support before presenting gaps in knowledge that are to be further probed and explored.

2.1   Athlete transitions.

The career transition of athletes is an important issue within academic research because all athletes will have to overcome a plethora of transitions as they attempt to carve out a successful career before facing retirement. Throughout the duration of a dedicated involvement within their sport, athletes will often have to face change or disruption (Nesti, 2010). This disruption can come via the means of an increase or decrease in competitive level, a change in teammates (if it is a team sport), a change in coaches and support staff and often a change in location or environment (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The academic interest and study of transitions has received plenty of attention from sport psychologists and researchers over the past few decades and has focused upon areas such as retirement, coping strategies, transitions from youth to senior environments and dual careers (Grove, Lavallee & Gordon, 1997; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2014; Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner & Lindahl, 2015). As well as focusing

on specific points, academics have also been interested in age, levels of competition, support mechanisms, within sport career transitions and intervention strategies (Lavallee, 2005; Lally & Kerr, 2008; Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). A transition occurs when moving from something secure to something new (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and can present a variety of psychological challenges that need to be overcome. Depending on the nature of the transition (planned or unplanned) these challenges can bring about a loss of purpose and meaning, a loss of athletic identity, a loss of social identity and can cause "a change in assumptions about oneself" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

Early transition research used gerontology (study of aging) and thanatology (study of death and dying) to explain the experiences of transition and to introduce some theoretical solidity into our understanding. One of the first studies involving gerontology examined the transition and experiences of retirement from a general population sample (Atchley, 1976). Although interesting and informative, a general population sample is not an athlete sample and arguably differing needs and paths may need to be considered in a separate manner. Other theories that have been used to explain the challenges and experiences of transition, especially within retirement, are activity theory, disengagement theory and social breakdown theory (Havighurst & Albrech, 1953; Cummings, Dean, Newell & McCaffrey, 1960; Gruenberg & Zusman, 1964). As well as using aging, researchers have also employed thanatology to definitively explain the experiences of athlete transition when finishing a lengthy career or having to retire prematurely. Thanatology is the scientific study of death and dying and investigates the changes that accompany death such as the wider psychological and social implications. As some athletes must leave their sport at differing stages (e.g., through deselection (or release from a contract), injury or

retirement) thanatology provides a solid means to understand these experiences and a thanatological model such as Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief, provides a sound bedrock to work from. However, from a critical perspective, it can be argued that not all athletes see leaving sport as a 'social death' or a period of sadness or disappointment. Some may have had exemplary careers and fulfilled themselves and may welcome having to leave their sport as this provides them with the opportunity to explore and pursue other avenues and career paths.

2.2   Models of transition.

One of the early models put forwards to investigate transitions was from Schlossberg (1981). This model was put forward to explain of the experiences of change and adapting to retirement and was structured around three key components that effected a transition outcome. The three components of the model contained the perceptive view of the transition taking place, the environmental factors and the individual factors of the person experiencing the transition (see Fig 2.2.1.).
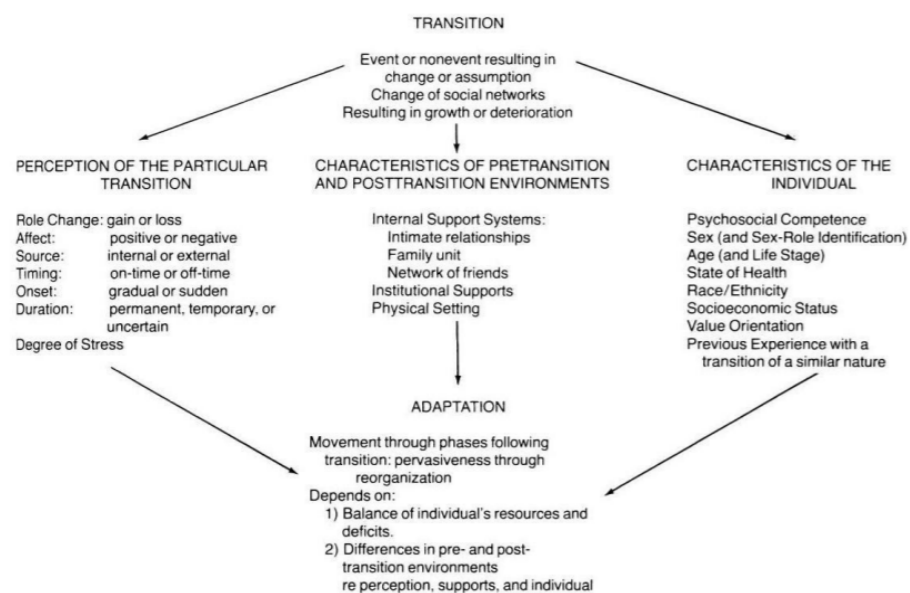
Fig 2.2.1. Schlossberg (1981) Adaptation to Transition Model.

Critique of the model proposed by Schlossberg (1981) came via Taylor and Ogilvie, (1994) who argued that the model was general and lacked specific operational detail in relation to the transitions and components specifically experienced by athletes. Following their critique Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) developed a more athlete centred model to help us understand how athletes navigated transitions based on retirement experiences (see Fig 2.2.2.).

```
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │ Causes of Athletic  │
                    │     Retirement      │
                    │        Age          │
                    │     Deselection     │
                    │       Injury        │
                    │     Free Choice     │
                    └─────────────────────┘
         ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐
┌──────────────────────┐            ┌──────────────────────────┐
│  Factors Related in  │            │   Available Resources    │
│ Adaptation to Retire │            │      Coping Skills       │
│       -ment          │            │     Social Support       │
│Developmental Experi. │            │ Pre-retirement Planning  │
│     Self-identity    │            └──────────────────────────┘
│ Perceptions of Control│
│    Social Identity   │
│ Tertiary Contributors│
└──────────────────────┘
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │ Quality of Adaptation│
                    │ to Athletic Retirement│
                    └─────────────────────┘
         ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐
┌──────────────────────┐            ┌──────────────────────┐
│   Retirement Crisis  │            │       Healthy        │
│   Psychopathology    │            │       Career         │
│    Substance Abus    │            │     Transition       │
│ Occupational Problems│            └──────────────────────┘
│ Family/Social Problems│
└──────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────────┐
│     Intervention     │
│      Cognitive       │
│      Emotional       │
│     Behavioural      │
│       Social         │
└──────────────────────┘
```

Fig 2.2.2. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) Model of Transition
(Adapted from Schlossberg, 1981).

As well as this more athlete specific model from Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), which focused on the nature of retirement from sport, Stambulova (1994) also suggested that the time points of an athlete's career, such as the definitive transitions and crisis points, should also be considered. This led to the construction of the transition

developmental model of an athlete's career proposed by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004). The model identified the normative transitions that an athlete typically faces as they attempt to navigate a sports career and is the most common model used to help understand where transitions potentially take place at differing ages (see Fig 2.2.3.).

A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational levels.

AGE	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic Level	Initiation	Development		Mastery	Discontinuation	
Psycho-logical Level	Childhood	Adolescence		Adulthood		
Psycho-social Level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents		Partner Coach	Family (Coach)	
Academic Vocational Level	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Vocational training Professional occupation		

Note. A dotted line indicates that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation.

Fig 2.2.3. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) Athlete Transition Model.

The model is split into four components: athletic level, psychological level, psycho-social level, and academic vocational level. The athletic level builds upon the work of Bloom (1985) who suggested that there are differing stages as an athlete progresses through their sport (e.g., initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation). The psychological development levels were split into childhood, adolescence and adulthood and based on the ego development work proposed by Erikson, (1950). Erikson's work, however, was not athlete centred, broken down across a full lifespan into eight stages (see p.34) and not from 10 years old to 35 years old as shown in the Wylleman and Lavallee model. The psycho-social level considers the social factors

surrounding the athlete as they develop and suggests there are key stakeholders as the athlete progresses within their sport (e.g., parents, family, coaches). The final part of the model considers the academic development of the athlete and consider differing transitions needed to be faced (e.g., from primary to secondary school, from secondary school to college, from college to higher education). The model also considers a vocational perspective as athletes take part at differing levels and that discontinuation can come at any age and a new career path out of sport would have to be considered (i.e., retirement through injury, or deselection leading to a lack of motivation and drop out).

Adding to the conceptual models presented by Wylleman and Lavallee, (2004) and Taylor, Ogilvie and Lavallee, (1994) and to inject some definitive, contextual substance into transitions within a specific sport, Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) presented a model based on the typical journey of an academy football player through to a professional level football player and put forward some of the challenges associated with differing changes in culture and environment (see Fig 2.2.4.).

Table 8.3 Socio-cultural model of elite player development in professional soccer at Academy, post-Academy and first team level.

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

Fig 2.2.4. Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) Football Model of Transitional Development.

One of the intriguing parts within the Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood model is the noted change in support levels from full time academy entry (highly supportive) to an early year's professional player (up to under 23s – bereft of social support) before finally becoming a first team professional player (typically crisis management, sophist). This perceived lack of support or appropriate measures in place to help may have a serious impact on the psychological development and growth of a player as they strive to make a career in the game. This can be seen within many ex-professional player autobiographies where they reflect and outline difficulties and challenges that they have had with their mental health and well-being within differing situations (e.g., Gascoigne, 2005; Mcgrath, 2007; Gillespie, 2013; Carlisle, 2014; Merson, 2017; Jansen, 2019; Pike, 2021). This is a gap identified within the conceptual models of transitions, which warrants further exploration and research and one which this PhD will shed more light on. The value of models can be questioned in relation to how effectively they represent transitional experiences within professional sport. The models tend to have a positivist and 'generalised' focus rather than encompassing of experiences as players venture through the game. It can be argued that the model provides a promising framework for researchers to comprehend the journey of young footballers within sport career transition experiences, as it suggests there are three key transitions that they will have to navigate (entering the academy full time, post academy (19 to under 23s) and first team mastery). However, all these stages have various challenges and differing cultural experiences which need further understanding and exploration.

There have been many sport career transition models put forward to explain some of the key issues that an athlete will have to overcome as they initiate, develop and progress within their chosen sport. The early models of sport career transition had

a succinct focus on individual and environmental considerations whereas Taylor and Ogilvie's model (1994) model was constructed to help us understand how athletes definitively prepare for life after sport. The Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) model focused upon an overall athletic career and has suggested differing life span components within sports career development such as the athletic level, psychological level, psychosocial level, and educational level. Building upon this Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood, (2013) specifically designed a model for transitions in football and highlighted some of the issues a player may have to face as they journey from pre academy to first team level. This is promising and provides a base from which to explore and enhance the transition research further; that is to investigate what a player must deal with from a more frequent perspective and not at end points or stages. Therefore, examining athletes and what they face on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis will add insight and knowledge to the current research area.

2.3   Transitions and retirement from sport.

A large majority of the transition literature has overly focused on retirement or end points (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). There has been exploration of identity issues (Lally, 2007), the decision-making processes within retirement (i.e., voluntary, or involuntary, Lynch, 2006) and the way that athletes have coped with their transition out of their sport (Koukouris, 1994). As well as these topics of interest, there have also been a plethora of participant demographics explored including differing sports, differing nationalities, differing age ranges, differing levels of competition and ability, and the support of significant others, such as coaches, family, and friends (Lally & Kerr, 2008; Agnew, Marks, Henderson & Woods, 2017; Roynesdal, Toering & Gustafsson, 2018).

Researchers have explored the main reasons for the retirement transition. In 1988, Allison and Meyer investigated the decisions to retire from a sample of female professional tennis players. Five key themes emerged from the data which were: injury, the demands of travel, their age and progression, other competitors, and frustration. One of the topics cited within their findings (age) appears within different transitions-based research. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993a) suggested that as athletes age within their sport de-motivation issues can start to appear, especially if success and progression is not happening. As athletes age some will prepare for transition out of the sport better than others. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) argued that issues associated with a range of topics such as physical capability, psychological challenges and social status can have a debilitating influence on an athlete competing within the higher echelons of their sport.

As well as the aging process, another issue within transitions-based research around retirement is the topic of deselection. Deselection is being released from a contract (or not having a contract renewed) (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Sadly, deselection or failure is a key part of sport and can sadly cause psychological difficulties (Nesti, 2010). Deselection at this juncture (retirement) can cause an athlete to have issues with their self-esteem and confidence and can potentially have an impact on their next steps, especially if sport is all they have known. A key point here is that deselection within the transitions-based research seems to focus on retirement or at 'an end.' Deselection can occur regularly within some sports (e.g., professional football) and is a topic worthy of further investigation to explore how an athlete handled the experience and how it made them feel. Deselection is something that all footballers must face at some stage and if holding too strong of an athletic identity (or

even an exclusive athletic identity where they see themselves as a footballer and nothing else), there could be ramifications in relation to mental health.

Another key component that has been considered in the transition out of sport is the aspect of having a serious injury, which causes either premature retirement or is the accumulation of 'war wounds' after a long career (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993b). A serious injury can not only curtail an athlete's career prematurely but can have lasting effects after a sports career has finished (both psychologically and physiologically). Potential psychological challenges associated with injuries can include frustration, grief, unfulfilled career aims, identity issues and can have impacts on planning forwards, whilst attempting to get healthier (Rotella, 1985). It has been argued that a serious injury which forces an athlete to retire prematurely can be one of the most traumatic and debilitating components of making a successful transition into something else, especially if the athlete is at or near the peak of their career (Lavallee, 2005). Athletes forced into retirement often face more emotional and social barriers as they have no choice over the situation (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993).

A plethora of work has focused on the adaptation to retirement out of sport and has helped sport psychologists understand some of the key issues from both a clinical, non-clinical and crisis transition perspective (Samuel, Tenebaum, Mangel, Visrshuvski, Chen & Badir, 2015; Ivarsson, Stambulova & Johnson, 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins & Ryba, 2016; Stambulova, 2017). There have been numerous stressors cited that can affect an athlete's transition into retirement. These stressors can come from areas such as finance, social effects, lack of meaning and purpose and can cause psychological challenges. In their research study with 540 players from European countries of Spain, Norway, Finland, France, and Sweden, Gouttebarge, Backx, Aoki and Kerkhoffs (2015) found that career dissatisfaction upon retirement

can cause distress, anxiety, alcohol issues and poor nutrition. In alignment with this, athletes who have experienced retirement transition as a crisis have reported problems including loss of dietary control (Messner, 1992), abuse of various substances (Chow, 2002), depression (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and loss of self-esteem and worth (Curtis & Ennis, 1988). The retirement out of sport can also cause relationship issues and a complete lack of daily structure (PFA, 2019). One of the underpinning factors of this adjustment difficulty is that the athlete may have been involved at some level within their sport since a young child and at the retirement stage, they are facing a "social death" due to a culled integration with teammates, coaches, support staff and management. Hughes and Coakley (1991) stated that this can be a major source of frustration for an athlete and can cause a range of emotions such as anger, denial, grief, sadness, and depression (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Making the step into retirement from sport requires the athlete to consider a range of questions and athletes who have had an involuntary step into retirement often find this step the hardest (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1993). As well as research into the negative components of retirement however, there is evidence also presented which suggests this transition can also be a positive experience (Stambulova, 2000). Moving away from something which has been a major part of an athlete's life can allow personal growth, development, and opportunities to explore other things (Chow, 2002). An aspect worthy of further research enquiry would be to explore athletes who had made successful transitions and those who had not and the key reasons behind this. It can be put forward that a high percentage of athletes will never reach the pinnacle of their sport and achieve what they set out to achieve and that these dreams and potentiality not realised can have major impacts on the psychological components of a retirement transition (May, 2009).

Along with research focusing on the positive and negative experiences of retirement transition, there has been research conducted within professional sport. Gearing (1999) investigated British male footballers within the period shortly after finishing. Findings suggested this period to be difficult and psychologically challenging. As well as Gearing's work, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) studied a range of American professional sports athletes and findings suggested the lower the profile you had at the end of your career, the more difficult the transition was into retirement. Adding to the knowledge base and understanding of athlete retirement transition experiences, Speed, Seedsman and Morris (2002) explored a sample of professional jockeys and findings suggested that this step was particularly difficult. Key themes emerging from the data suggested that areas such as financial difficulties, poor health, employment opportunities and psychological distress were a problem. To highlight the difficulties of professional athlete retirement, there has also been research undertaken with Australian Rules Football (Agnew, Marks, Henderson & Woods, 2017). They used a narrative enquiry approach to garner feedback from players who had been through retirement from the sport. Findings suggested that this was a particularly difficult time of their lives and some of the athletes had broader life issues to deal with such as alcohol and substance abuse. The perceived lack of support mechanisms reported by the players and the lack of opportunity to remain within the sport in some capacity was a worrying factor and one that needs exploring further.

As well as the difficulties and challenges of the retirement transition within professional athletes, there has been research that provides evidence of positive aspects to the process (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Swain, 1991). Allison and Meyer reported that over half of a sample of professional tennis players were optimistic about their futures and found retirement as a positive opportunity to do something else

and Swain's research found that although retirement created anxiety about future steps, it was no more stressful than other life events that the athletes had overcome, both sporting focused and within their broader lives.

As well as the positive and negative aspects of retiring from professional sport, other research, which has helped our understanding, has come via the topic of specific and definitive factors associated with this stage of an athlete's career. According to Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) there were varying factors to consider which helped the adjustment to retirement. These include the resources available to the athlete, support networks, whether there has been conscious planning for the retirement stage, the success the athlete has had in their sport and the timing (voluntarily or involuntarily). Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) suggest that athletes who have made the move into retirement voluntarily have better control and adjustment over those athletes where retirement has been forced on them (e.g., through deselection or injury) and Warriner and Lavallee (2008) stated that athletes who had plans in place in relation to retirement had a smoother transition that athletes who did not. Athletes who exit their sport prematurely and involuntary are more prone to psychological difficulties such as anxiety and concern over future steps (Nesti, 2004). Hurley and Mills (1993) have argued that the social support and mechanisms in place to help the athlete upon retirement is the most important aspect. This is an area worthy of further consideration to probe what professional footballers have experienced and felt and it would also be interesting to probe what level of support was available to them. Losing contact with team-mates, coaches, managers, and sport science support could be a daunting prospect which could bring on alienation, isolation, and loss of identity (Nesti, 2010). In the minimal research undertaken within the domain of professional football Gearing (1999) stated that one of most debilitating

factors around a retirement transition was players missing the unique culture of the dressing room and the banter with other players and staff. As well as probing this, another area worthy of further research and insight is the social support that athletes have outside of their sport, especially within professional football. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) have suggested that the support of friends and family can be vital within the retirement transition process. This can often be difficult within some sports (i.e., professional football) as many players come from across the globe and there can be substantial movement and change within a football player's career. The levels of player support offered within a professional footballer's career warrants further exploration and enquiry. High levels of support and care has also been noted as a key issue within a successful transition especially if the athlete suffered a deselection experience. Murphy (1995) noted that many players could be potentially left to fend for themselves and cut from the club as well as other players. Again, this is an area which is largely unexplored, especially within the domain of professional football and more research needs to be undertaken with players who have had lived experience of this. If social support is not offered and players are 'forgotten about' there could be major ramifications in relation to mental health and well-being. As well as deselection, another aspect which has been brought to light is the athlete's planning of the retirement transition. Murphy (1995) has put forward that the lack of planning and preparation is a key factor in an athlete's adjustment to life after sport. Contemporary transition research is starting to explore this issue in more detail and there is focus on what is known as 'dual careers' (Brown et al., 2015; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Franck, Stambulova & Ivarsson, 2018). It would be interesting to explore whether professional footballers seriously plan for their next steps and to explore how they see themselves at this stage. Research around transitions suggests that planning for an exit

or retirement stage is not high on an athlete's agenda. This could be largely due to clubs and coaches wanting the athlete to focus exclusively on aspiring to be the best they can become and making the grade (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Within their research, Blinde and Strata (1992) encouraged athletes to think about having broader interests as this could make the transition process less daunting when having to be faced. However, within a sport such as professional football, this could be difficult as the culture is based on results and the manager and coaching staff will want a full focus on the task at hand. Failure to do this from both a manager's and player's perspective could result in job losses and difficulties with getting another opportunity. This almost exclusive focus on player's seeing themselves as a footballer and nothing else can be potentially dangerous (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Other research that has focused on adaptation to retirement is based on the amounts of success and career goals that athletes have achieved (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Sinclair and Orlick (1993) put forward that the small percentage of athletes that manage to gain success within their sport tend to have a smoother transition out. As the high end of sport is lucrative, opportunities may arise for those athletes who have had success. However, it can be critiqued that this is not absolute, as many elite athletes have not transitioned out of their sport well and there has been a plethora of autobiographical, media and anecdotal evidence to suggest that even though you are a high performer, a smooth transition is not guaranteed (e.g., Gascoigne, 2005; Mcgrath, 2007; Gillespie, 2013; Carlisle, 2014; Merson, 2017; Jansen, 2019; Pike, 2021). Further insight into this would be informative to explore why some athletes transition through differing stages of a professional football career more effectively than others. It seems that the more the athlete associates themselves with their sport

and nothing else, the harder it is to deal with transitional experiences when coming away from the sport.

One final aspect of the success of a retirement transition emerges from timing. Schlossberg (1981) has suggested that many athletes judge themselves on how they are progressing within their sport, as it is such a short career for many. All athletes have the potentiality to grow and improve and aspire to be at the very top of their sport, however, for many, this potentiality never gets realised (May, 2009). Potential not getting realised can cause psychological harm including feelings of frustration, guilt, anxiety, desperation, and poor ethical choices (Kay, 2016; Pike, 2021). This is a research gap which is worthy of further probing quite simply a high majority of athletes will never reach the top of their sport.

Adding to the large research base of transitions and retirement across a broad range of sports, there is definitive research which has investigated academy and professional football environments such as the youth to senior transition (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015), transitions from a coaches' perspective (Roynesdal, Toering & Gustafsson, 2018), deselection and identity within youth players (Brown & Potrac, 2009), athletic identity within football apprentices (Mitchell et al., 2014) and a unique, applied paper on critical moments experienced by English Premier league level players (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012). At the culmination of this work, Nesti et al., (2012) argued that more research is needed utilising various methodologies and methods within elite level professional football to capture the athlete's voice and real lives of those who function within this world. This will enable us to understand better the player's experiences and the differing transitions/critical moments they face on a regular basis and not at retirement or at an 'end point.' This is seen as a major justification for the formulation of this project.

2.4   Transitions and existential perspectives on identity.

An identity can be defined by the varying meanings an individual attributes to themselves. This can come via a personal perspective, a social perspective, a religious perspective, a spiritual perspective, and an athletic perspective (Nesti, 2004). Identity theory suggests that the main components of identity are based around people's roles, behaviours, and commitment to the role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Identity is fluid, dynamic and is not fixed as life can change from day to day (Nesti et al., 2012). The development of personal identity starts within childhood and according to work by Erikson (1950) a human being ventures through eight distinct stages (Erikson, 1950, see Fig. 2.4.1.). The eight stages start with early infancy and progress through to late adulthood:

Stage	Period (age)	Favorable resolution attitude	Unfavorable resolution attitude	Psychosocial task
1	Early infancy (0–1)	Trust	Mistrust	Hope
2	Late infancy (2–3)	Autonomy	Shame and doubt	Will
3	Early childhood (4–5)	Initiative	Guilt	Purpose
4	Middle childhood (6–12)	Industry	Inferiority	Competency
5	Adolescence (13–19)	Identity	Identity confusion	Fidelity
6	Early adulthood (20–24)	Intimacy	Isolation	Love
7	Middle adulthood (25–64)	Generativity	Stagnation	Care
8	Late adulthood (65+)	Ego integrity	Despair	Wisdom

Note. Source: Erikson (1950).

Fig. 2.4.1 Erikson's (1950) Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development.

Stage One. Early Infancy. At this stage of the Erikson model the conflict is trust vs mistrust. The outcome at this crisis point is for babies/ very young children to develop a sense of trust from those giving care and a sense of security to them. If this is

missing within early experiences mistrust can become an issue. Stage Two. Late infancy. The second stage of the Erikson model is autonomy vs shame and doubt. During this stage, children develop a sense of independence in areas such as toilet training or independent feeding. Navigating this point will lead to autonomy, whereas failure at this point may result in shame and doubt. The third stage of the Erikson model is Early Childhood. During this stage the conflict is initiative vs guilt. If navigating this developmental point successfully, the individual will build a sense of purpose and start to being creative, whereas individuals who display selfishness may experience a sense of disapproval, resulting in guilt feelings. Stage Four. Middle Childhood. The fourth stage of the Erikson development model is industry vs inferiority. This primarily relates to experiences within the school environment. Navigating this point in the development model will build competence, whereas failure to navigate this point may bring upon feelings of inferiority. The fifth stage of the Erikson developmental model highlights the transition into the adolescent years (Adolescence). The conflict during this stage is identity vs role confusion. Navigating this point brings about a strong sense of self and an ability to be authentic, whereas failure can lead to a sense of uncertainty and role confusion. Stage Six. Early Adulthood. The sixth stage of the Erikson development model highlights intimacy vs isolation. Navigating this point brings about the formation of loving, intimate relationships with other people. Success can lead to secure, trusting relationships, whereas failure may result in feelings of loneliness and isolation. The seventh stage of the Erikson model is Middle adulthood. The conflict at this stage is generativity vs stagnation. Navigating this stage will lead to legacies and giving back to communities. This may lead to feelings of achievement and generation, whereas failure may result in questioning legacy and achievements. The final stage of the Erikson model is Late

Adulthood. This highlights the final conflict within the life development pathway which is ego integrity vs despair. This involves casting an eye back on one's life journey and whether it was fruitful/ non fruitful. Navigating this point successfully leads to feelings of wisdom. Whereas failure at this point results in angst, sadness and can bring upon depression. The Erikson model has not been used to consider as a framework to consider athletic identity development, however research (Mitchell et al., 2014; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) has promoted links between the Erikson (1950) model and the development of youth footballers. Mitchell et al., (2014) specifically at the fifth stage of identity development (identity vs role confusion) suggested that given the range of issues experienced by young footballers Erikson's work can provide a useful theoretical underpin. Transferring this into the experiences of professional footballers and examining critical moments across an extended life cycle (i.e., a full professional football career up until retirement) may help yield even deeper understanding of identity development and crisis points.

The environments or culture within sport (and specifically professional football) may have a very strong influence within identity development and formation as an athlete commits to an athletic career, or even more definitively to becoming a professional footballer. In early work on professional football by Gearing (1999), the environments and culture are defined as unique and potentially effect identity development. This was echoed by Mitchell et al., (2014) who suggested that if an individual forms an exclusive athletic identity, there could be problems when they face crisis points. This is because when a player has an exclusive athletic identity (i.e., they see themselves as a player and nothing else) and this identity is taken away, it can be argued that they have little, or no identity left. This can have major impacts and ramifications on mental health. Theory which supports this view is known as

'identity salience' (Hale James, & Stambulova, 1999; Horton & Mack, 2000). Horton and Mack, (2000) suggest that if one is competent within a role, a person will identify with that role more favourably, however if one is not competent at the role (which carries significance or importance), there can be issues with anxiety, confidence, and self-esteem. Adding weight to this, Brown and Hartley (1998) argued that as commitment to a role gets more and more, the identity with that role becomes heightened and Mitchell et al., (2014) put forward that this is potentially dangerous as there is a worry that individuals can become too 'fixed' or 'one dimensional.' This can become an issue within a footballer's journey as they may give up on, or lose motivation within, other roles (e.g., education, friends, social life, personal development) as they strive to make the grade as a professional football player. This can lead to problems within identity development (e.g., narrow as opposed to broad).

Many athletes become involved with their sport from early childhood, and this becomes an important, integral part of their identity (Nesti, 2010). As progression takes place (e.g., within differing levels) the commitment to that identity grows and self-worth can be built around the many ups and downs that sport brings. An identity that is built around winning and glory can be problematic as sport can bring a plethora of lows too. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) have argued that if an athlete sees themselves as an athlete and nothing else, their self-concept can be weak and fragile. Within football, and more specifically academy and professional football, not extending beyond the confines of the sport can cause problems (Mitchell et al., 2014; Nesti, 2010). As many coaches and support staff within football solely want athletes to focus specifically on their sport and getting better at it, as opposed to other roles, this can be damaging in relation to holistic growth (Buber, 1958). As individuals get better and become more dedicated to their sport, other components of their lives can become

affected. This can come in the form of friends, relationships, education, social investment, and other career interests (Lavallee, 2005) and can potentially lead to an identity crisis if the sport does not work out (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Erikson, 1968; Nesti, 2010). Martin et al., (1995) have argued that there are two parts to an athletic identity: a private part (self), and a public part (social). Conflict can occur when the two parts do not marry up or are misaligned. Self-identity is how the athlete sees themselves and public identity is how the athlete perceives how others see them. Within academy and professional football, it can be argued that managers and coaches are powerful (Potrac, Jones & Cushion, 2007) and there can be a tendency for a young player to define themselves on how they are perceived by significant others. However, if influenced too much and without developing a strong sense of self, it can be difficult to advance and progress into professional football (Nesti & Littlewood, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that there may be positive and negative connotations to developing a strong athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000). The positive aspects of athletic identities revolve around commitment, dedication, confidence, self-esteem, and social esteem (Mitchell et al., 2014). Negative connotations of having a strong athletic identity have been associated with becoming overly focused, dismissing other roles such as educational development, becoming one dimensional and neglecting the chance to gain skills aligned with other career opportunities (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). As well as this, there has also been evidence with overly strong athletic identities being linked to clinical psychological issues, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Horton & Mack, 2000; Carlisle, 2014; Merson, 2017). Athletes with strong athletic identities can also face psychological challenges within transitional experiences (Brewer et al., 1993; Gascoigne, 2005). When they cannot do what they love or face career ending injuries or deselection

(being released at the end of a contract) all manner of psychological disturbance could appear if the transition is not managed effectively. Athletes who place a high stock of their self-worth around themselves as an athlete may face the greatest difficulties. This is a research area which needs further attention to investigate where the challenges or threats to identity occur, as a sudden or dramatic change to an athlete can yield major issues and place an athlete into an identity crisis (Erikson, 1950; Erikson, 1968; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Research has demonstrated that serious injuries can be one of the most problematic issues to deal with as an athlete may not be qualified or skilled in another area or career (Webb et al., 1998). For many this forced loss of identity can cause a serious psychological challenge. This can come via a low or depressed mood state, anxiety about future steps and the struggle to find another identity away from the sporting environment (Murphy, 1995). Much research within this area has focused on issues leading to career end, or retirement (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). It would be informative to explore where identities have been challenged, especially within a career journey as this could lead to an explanation and provide insight at points where identity could be developed, which could help the 'retirement' or 'end point' of a professional footballer.

2.5   Professional football culture.

Whilst the concept of identity threats and challenges have a specific focus on a person such as a professional football player the culture and context in which the player operates and exists needs to be further considered also. The culture within professional football can take time to fully understand (Nesti, 2010). A culture of an organisation is based on components such as values, attitudes and acceptable behaviours which underpin the way the organisation operates (Wilson, 2001). As well

as Wilson (2001), Jones (2010, p.179) has also stated that a culture is 'the shared set of values and norms that controls organisational members' interactions with each other and with people outside the organization.' The lack of insight and understanding of football culture is an issue that can quickly find applied sport psychologists out and if not understanding this key issue, there is a danger that opportunities to practice or even prospective employment may be quickly overturned (Nesti, 2010). To overcome this potential issue, Nesti has suggested that if the applied sport psychologist has been a former athlete who has had competitive experience at a good level or even better, a former professional footballer who has operational experiences of the culture and environment, 'there could be a greater acceptance of their role and function' (Nesti, 2010, p.17). This may in part be due to a former athlete understanding that the culture of professional football is fast paced, harsh, win at all costs and ruthless. Put simply, without gaining results, things can rapidly change, and decisions made extremely quickly. This can reduce in job losses, contracts being terminated, changes in player personnel and support staff being removed. The work in this PhD will hopefully go some way to helping this lack of understanding of professional football by offering a level of insight which is rare within current academic literature.

The culture of a professional football club may have been structured and re-enforced over many years of its history and there may be a range of components which have the capacity to inform the people who operate within the culture. This could come from geographical positioning (i.e., what surrounds the club and where the fans typically come from – e.g., a small working-class town), the expectations of the club and its supporters, the clubs playing philosophy and style and the type of players expected to fit the history and traditions (i.e., some clubs operate a strong youth system by bringing their own players through) and finally the past

achievements and successes of the club. All these aspects create a distinctive, unique culture which has been stamped within the operating behaviours and values of the club. A professional football club also has a club badge (or motto) which is often inlaid into stadium floors and doors and sometimes has a Latin phrase attached to it (e.g., Arsenal FC have 'Victoria Concordia Crescit' – 'Victory through Harmony' and Manchester City FC have 'Superbia in Proelio – 'Pride in Battle'). Despite these broader components to professional football club cultural structure, there is extremely limited research into the lived experiences of football players who operate within this cultural context. One piece of research however which did explore professional football club organisational culture (at Premier League level) was written by Ogbonna and Harris (2015). Whilst providing some unique and interesting aspects around culture, from a critical perspective, the focus was primarily based on management of the organisation and only a small part touched on players and how were portrayed in the media. The research did not reveal any day to day or frequent player experiences of being an individual located within a distinct culture.

One of the issues and difficulties of undertaking research within the domain of professional football is the problem with access and getting to players to capture data (Nesti, 2010). This has been exacerbated over the past 25 years with the increase of agents and varying stakeholders around the player wanting to know what the player is doing at any one moment and why etc. Anecdotally, players have sometimes been known to take part in some level of media training and are carefully told what to say, when to say it and even how to say it. This has risen with the pressure and explosion of social media with many football clubs and ex-players promoting the careful use of such platforms (e.g., Rooney, 2020). Football clubs have been described as tough, demanding environments to operate in successfully (Ferguson, 2000; Nesti, 2010)

with many from the outside never getting to see or engage with the 'real inner daily workings' of professional football. Most people see professional football operations from the 'outside' tuning in to see teams running out on a match day or following the opinions of media outputs such as Sky and BT. Over the past 25 years however, there have been interesting and intriguing insights into professional football club culture via documentaries and video footage. These glimpses have ranged from small clips on You Tube to full scale documentaries on Amazon Prime and Netflix charting club journeys involving successes and failures. Some of the footage has provided a definitive managerial and disciplinarian focus (e.g., Peter Reid and Bobby Saxton half time at Sunderland (You Tube, 2010); Neil Warnock half time at Huddersfield Town (You Tube, 2007), Barry Fry in the dressing room pre match, half time and post-match at Peterborough/ Birmingham City (You Tube, 2012), John Sitton half time at Leyton Orient (You Tube, 2020), and some have provided a much broader insight into football club operations (e.g. Big Ron, Football Manager (You Tube, 2012); All or Nothing, Man City (Amazon Prime, 2018); All or Nothing, Tottenham Hotspur (Amazon Prime, 2020); Sunderland Till I Die (Sunderland Till I Die Docuseries, 2018). Within the Sunderland 'Till I Die' documentary, there was an extremely unique and rare piece of footage with a player engaging in some work with a sport psychologist and some interesting insight into the mental health challenges of a player and his family waiting for a contract offer and whether they would have to move away. Two components emerge from these clips which warrant further exploration and enquiry within the PhD research. Firstly, it was suggested by Nesti, (2010) that psychological work within a professional football club should be fully confidential. It is highly likely that speaking to someone whilst being filmed on camera would be questionable from an authentic perspective and capture the reality of professional

football experiences and depth of reality and critical issues that the player may be facing. The second critical element emerging from the footage and video clips is that more authentic player voice research is needed to better understand their world and where they could be supported best. A high majority of the footage focuses on managers, coaches, scouts, agents, support staff and fans. The confidential reality and psychological challenges from a players' perspective would not be captured authentically or revealed within a documentary series.

As well as documentary insight and video footage there has also been academic research undertook involving professional football culture. Parker (1995) completed ethnographic based research involving a group of football apprentices in the early 90s and found the cultural environment to be one driven by fear, control, and authoritarian based coaching. He also found that the environment was extremely harsh with little margins for error and evidence of toxic masculinity amongst both playing and coaching staff. Adding to the insights of Parker and driving his work from a sociological perspective, Roderick (2006) also used a qualitative methodology to write about young player experiences within apprentices/ professional football. He revealed the culture to be demanding, brutal and ruthless with the players having little voice and to basically follow a culture 'of put up with it or go.'

Gearing (1999), using the 'differing masks' work of Goffman (1959), described football clubs as having a unique culture which shapes the lives of young men as they journey from an apprentice to a professional player. The culture created pushes their playing staff to dedicate themselves fully from a football perspective and to create a tight, cohesive unit. This is done through training, competition, sharing dressing rooms, eating together, sometimes socialising together and developing 'group' norms. Gearing also likens professional football club culture to that of the

military where a high level of operation is completed 'together' and those seen as outsiders such as the media are fed scraps and kept at arm's length.

Another perspective revealed within Parker's (1995) research was that the management and coaching staff promoted a high level of autocratic and authoritarian behaviour towards young apprentices. This can be seen in volatile and reprimanding approaches to mistakes or errors made both on field and off field. This approach could potentially create a 'fixed' identity in a player as the culture formed is very much one of conformity and 'I say, you do.' The research suggested there was no opportunity for space to 'be yourself' as the young players consistently 'towed the party line' to satisfy the needs of the hierarchy and what the manager and coaches wanted. Approaching a manager to ask a question or even debate actions was seen as a 'no go area' and eradicated. This created a particular formation of culture where castigation, ruthlessness, authority and 'put up or shut up' was evident as the player made their journey from an apprentice to professional. The formation of this culture was seen as a way of preparing players to become de-sensitised, cold, harsh, unfeeling as professional football is primarily based on outcomes, results and is masculine and macho (Parker, 1996; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Roderick, 2006; Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013).

As well as forming this strong 'athletic' or 'football identity' to push for a professional contract other components of identity formation have not been seen as important within football-based research. The work of Brown and Potrac (2009) revealed that football clubs were not really interested in the educational side of young apprentices, and young players reported that you were expected to eat, breathe, and live football. Although seen as an important addition to the apprentices' weekly operations, the players interviewed in Brown and Potrac's work suggested that

education was there as a 'tick box' exercise and most tended to see it as a day off or a chance to exert some 'banter' and toxic masculinity over others who did want to study and do something extra. Parker's research agrees with Brown and Potrac's work in that players described college attendance as an opportunity to lark about and discuss sexual prowess and what the players had been getting up to outside of the football environment. Put simply, the research pointed out the fact that the culture was one of dedication to football and 'being a footballer' and college/ education, although arguably important in growth and self-development, did not fit into player plans. Clearly this was a worrying finding as only a very tiny percentage make it and gain a career in the professional game (Calvin, 2017). Messing about at college and not dedicating yourself to something outside of your role as a footballer (i.e., education) could have serious implications later down the line in relation to mental health and well-being as you are seeing yourself as a footballer and nothing else. Further research into this narrowing of identity is something that would be useful and insightful especially as players navigate their way through the professional ranks. The narrowing of identity formation could provide psychological challenges within differing experiences. These experiences need to be captured more fully to provide us with more understanding of the potential turmoil a player or professional is going through. The work of Brown and Potrac provides us with a qualitative insight into the plight of a small number of deselected apprentices. Interviews revealed that deselection had been a harrowing and psychologically challenging experience. This can be seen in the quote of "I felt as though I didn't know who I was anymore because football was my life, and I didn't have that anymore. It was difficult time in my life" (Brown & Potrac, 2009, p. 151). The commitment to dedicate yourself and make the grade is understandable however it can be argued that a player needs other interests

beyond their role as a professional football player to develop a deeper, more balanced, complex identity to help deal with the shocks to the system that football typically throws up on a regular basis (Nesti, 2010). The work of Brown and Potrac (2009), focused on young players and their experiences of deselection (getting released and not gaining a professional contract). More insight into player experiences within the professional game would accrue further knowledge and understanding and help inform training, support mechanisms and sport psychology delivery strategies.

Another area of professional football culture associated with transition and moving through differing levels within a football club is toxic masculinity and conforming to this part of a culture. To gain some understanding of what toxic masculinity is, a piece of research by Dempster (2009), examined a group of male undergraduates within a British University. One to one interviews and questionnaires were completed by 24 males who were asked to consider the concept of masculinity within a sporting environment. Findings from this research suggested that sport can promote 'laddish practices' to bond teams and that some were in acceptance, but some wanted to distance themselves from these types of activities (i.e., banter, drinking, smoking, discussing relationships with females etc.). The promotion of toxic masculinity within a professional football culture may pose psychological challenges for players in terms of wanting to be part of the team and conform to team norms, but by acting in a different manner than they would want to (i.e., not being authentic to who they truly are). This psychological challenge has also been revealed by Kay (2016) who interviewed a group of football apprentices around club culture and conforming to group pressures around rituals and 'becoming one of the group'. Findings from Kay's interviews involved instances such as placing apprentices in tumble dryers, kicking balls in their faces whilst they looked down through the hole in

a massage bed, being smeared in polish or Vaseline and even more sinister stuff. Naturally, some of the apprentices reported finding this extremely difficult. Kay (2016) goes on to suggest that 'some will claim this kind of stuff makes aspiring professional sportsmen and sportswomen stronger' (p.374) however one apprentice reported that 'they were not mentally strong enough to survive in the environment' (p.374) and another quoted that the older apprentices' group 'made my life hell' (p.374). Whilst managers and coaches may argue that the path to becoming a professional footballer and staying within professional football is tough and that players need to build and attain the mental fortitude to deal with this culture, it can be argued that many of the apprentices in Kay's work were only 16 years old and were away from home for the first time. This was clearly an issue of concern in relation to welfare and safeguarding. As well as Kay's work, McGillivray and McIntosh (2006), stated that a young Scottish player was encouraged by the coaching staff to think about football all the time. This can be a dangerous concept and can lead to a foreclosed identity (i.e., not exploring anything else or any other roles). A narrowing formation of identity may suppress development and cause issues for players when having to face up and deal with the range of psychological challenges that professional football throws up (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Adding value to specific cultural insight within professional football, there has been some generic research undertook which focused on 'acculturation.' The research examined experiences of individuals when entering a new environment or country (Cuellar, Harris & Jasso, 1980, see Fig. 2.5.1). A group of 'study abroad students' were investigated, and it was found the more time they spent in a new environment, the more accustomed they became to the culture and therefore the new ways of operation and behavioural practices. The 'acculturation' model is split into four

components: arrival, culture shock, integration, and adjustment. This piece of research could provide a useful template to transpose into a sport context as players' transition across differing stages in their careers and therefore will face new cultures and psychological challenges within this culture (i.e., schoolboy to full time apprentice, apprentice to young professional, young professional to senior professional and exit). The model suggests there will be a period of getting used to a culture and reveals there will be challenges of integration into a new culture. This model will be useful as the PhD unfolds and explores the transitional experiences of players and whether there is sub-cultural change between schoolboy, apprentice, and professional levels within a football club.
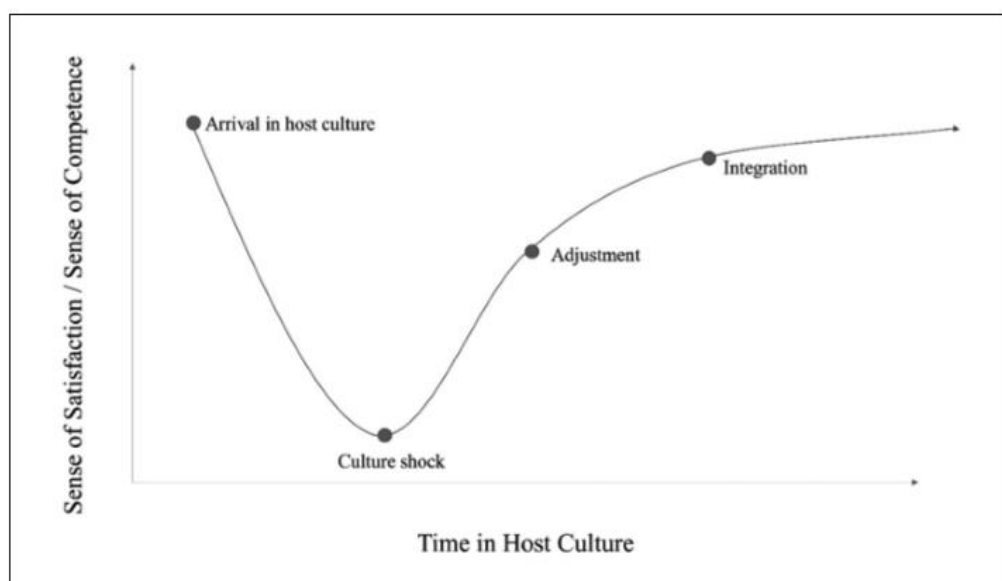

Fig. 2.5.1. Cuellar, Harris, and Jasso (1980) Acculturation Model.

2.6   Youth to senior transitions.

Research (e.g., Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008; Wylleman, Reints & De Knop, 2013) has indicated that the 'junior to senior' or 'youth to senior' transition throws up plenty of challenges within a range of domains (e.g., physically, socially, psychologically). The level of support is a crucial factor in making this transition effectively. Where appropriate support is applied, athletes may find the transition more of a positive experience (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008) however where there is a lack of support and an excessive demand on outcomes and results (i.e., such as professional football) an athlete may find this psychologically demanding (Pummell & Lavallee, 2019). Research specifically applied to football has revealed a series of challenges such as an increase in speed and power, an increase in both aerobic and anaerobic fitness and an extreme level of scrutiny both internally and externally (Finn & Mckenna, 2010). The transition between an academy and a first team environment throws up even more social and psychological challenges such as being 'a new kid on the block', playing and mixing with experienced professionals (often international level), being accepted within the group, adhering to group norms and culture, staying grounded despite the potential of high changing income or finance and having communications with the first team manager and wide array of coaching staff (e.g. assistant manager, coaches, analysts, strength and conditioning coaches (Roynesdal, Toering & Gustafsson, 2018). The difference in culture between an academy and first team environment is wide. As Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) have pointed out in their work most academies tend to offer a highly supportive approach, are nurturing, caring and empathic whereas first team environments are seen to have heightened competition, are ruthless, macho, masculine and results driven (outcome oriented). This width between the two cultures can lead to

first team staff questioning the development of youth players and whether they are being prepared effectively for the step into the first team world. This is an ongoing research question and one which requires further enquiry. As Calvin, (2017) has stated also, the number of youth players becoming professional players is extremely low. To aid with this extremely tough transition from academy to professional, researchers such as Mills, Butt, Maynard and Harwood (2012), have suggested trying to balance out a range of skills and qualities to give youth players a maximum opportunity to reach the required levels. Skills and qualities such as developing a youth player holistically (i.e., physically, emotionally, tactically, technically, socially etc.) and making sure they are as prepared as possible for the next step is a recurring research interest (Roynesdal, 2015). More understanding is needed on the psychological component of development as Nesti (2010) has suggested that as a player progresses into the first team environment (and beyond), they are evenly matched physically, tactically, and technically, however something that may be worthy of further exploration research wise are the psychological attributes and profiles of professional players as often matches are won and lost within this domain. This could be both from a performance perspective (i.e., Weinberg & Gould, 2015) or from a broader perspective (Nesti, 2004).

2.7 Transitions or critical moments?

For the last 20 years, researchers have focused upon transitions both in and out of sport (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). These have ranged from the transitions associated with youth athletes into professional sport (i.e., youth to senior), career ending injury and retirement (Brustad, Babkes & Smith, 2001; Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004). Transitions can be classified as "normative" or "non-normative"

(Scholossberg, 1984). A normative transition is where an athlete exits one stage of their development and enters another one. For example, within a football context, this can be classed as going from schoolboy football to an apprentice, or from a youth team to a reserve team, or from a reserve team into a first team. A non-normative transition is something that is unexpected or not planned for. This could be a season ending injury, a change in coaching or managerial staff or receiving the news that a contract won't be getting renewed. When critiquing these two terms, it can be put forwards that transition sounds like a "smooth end point" where a clear and comfortable change takes place however this is arguable as much change is challenging, disruptive and can create anxiety (Nesti, 2004). A high majority of sports transitional research has tended to have a distinct focus on career end or retirement from sport (e.g., Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Samuel, Tenebaum, Mangel, Visrshuvski, Chen & Badir, 2015; Ivarsson, Stambulova & Johnson, 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins & Ryba, 2016; Stambulova, 2017).

When drawing from academic material on transitions within other high performing and pressured domains (e.g., military environments) a high percentage have also investigated the psychological challenges of retirement or re-engagement with another career or opportunity (e.g., Iversen et al., 2005; Demers, 2011; Tsai et al., 2012; Buckman et al., 2013; Hines et al., 2014;). Relatively little attention in the academic literature has been paid to the broad range of transitions that an athlete, or more specifically that a professional footballer faces frequently. The range of issues that a player faces more frequently have been termed critical moments, or boundary situations (Yalom, 1999; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Players may have to face psychologically challenging issues within their journey through professional football. There has been research conducted within samples of apprentices and scholars (e.g.,

Roderick, 2006; Brown & Potrac, 2009) however the deeply unpleasant and often anxiety evoking experiences within higher performance environments (i.e., at professional/ first team level) have not yet been fully captured and understood. Wider literature that investigated change has helped academics gain understanding of the psychological challenges of cohorts such as the military (e.g., Robertson & Brott, 2013; Yablonsky, Barbero, & Richardson, 2015), and issues such as the impacts of injury, relationships with peers, movements including family (i.e., deployment), relationships with significant others and coming out into 'civvy street.' This work has provided knowledge and insight into the psychological challenges and difficulties that military personnel face within their career journeys. Probing another unique culture of a professional football environment will help us understand more deeply the issues that football players face as they journey through their careers and the psychological challenges they face on a frequent basis as opposed to retirement. One of the key reasons why football and professional football has not been explored is that it is often a closed environment and culture where lived experiences and academic research is extremely difficult to undertake (Nesti, 2010). This often comes down to difficulty of access where many players are suspicious and distrusting of "outsiders" or individuals that are not from their world. Using a mixed methods approach to capture this information would be a promising way to bring these experiences to life and make the lived world of a professional footballer more fully understood by the range of support staff. One paper that sheds light on "within career transition" was completed by Pummell, Harwood, and Lavallee (2008). They examined the experiences of adolescent event riders. Although this can be seen as a promising starting point, the distinct lack of understanding and focus since within this research area seems underdeveloped as athletes will always undergo change, disruption, and challenge on

a regular basis. Schlossberg, (1981), also discussed transition and its effect on cognitive thoughts and behaviour. This is important within the lives of elite level athletes as sports environments can be often demanding, challenging and highly stressful (Nesti, 2004). A range of methods to capture these experiences would be interesting to explore whether there suffering, sacrifice and pain around transitions and it is certainly not a smooth and easy process which some of the current literature suggests.

The transitions within the journey from schoolboy footballer to apprentice footballer to professional footballer is driven by much movement, both upwards and downwards. As suggested, the current transitional literature tends to focus upon "sport end" aspects such as retirement (or coming away from sport) as these are ultimately situations where change is inevitable and must be faced. There is a clear deficiency within contemporary sport psychology work which recognises that there are more frequent boundary situations (Yalom, 1999) or critical moments (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) along the way. These critical moments must be confronted and passed through and can have much alignment to the development of mental resilience, existential courage, and learning (Nesti, 2004) and can assist with the challenges of life away from the game. More work is needed to help understand and gain more knowledge of these critical moments. Current research has not readily considered that many experiences of footballer's transitions can be negative and traumatic. This has been in part due to a suitable theoretical underpin. However, a potential theoretical grounding of existential psychology recognises that topics such as existential anxiety, undesirable and adverse experiences can be beneficial to human growth and self-learning (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2015; Savage, Collins & Cruickshank, 2017). A sequential mixed methods approach could provide substance to the theoretical

grounding of existential sport psychology approaches within professional football and potentially advocate that this is a more useful discipline to consider when sport psychologists work within these environments and cultures.

Another point that is not considered in any depth in current literature is that transitions can be accelerated within the journey into and within professional football and can place high demands and pressures on someone, especially if the player is still in the throes of adolescent development. This has been recognised by Lavallee and Wylleman (2000) who suggested that athletes can be placed under great strain if they are placed into environments where their cognitive maturational level is tested, and expectations are high. For example, playing a year (or two) underage, or being placed into competitive environments before readiness can promote a strong athletic identity at the expense of other social roles (Mitchell et al., 2014). A qualitative based methodology could capture this experience and shed light on the psychological demands specifically when playing underage (e.g., 15 playing in an under 18s side or 17 playing in a first team environment).

Other key transitional points (or critical moments) can involve the experience of coming out of the sport which you are involved with. As highlighted earlier in the literature review, this is an area that a high majority of the current transitional literature has tended to focus upon (e.g., Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). This work has examined some of the negative factors associated with the transition such as loss of self-esteem, confidence, and loss of identity, however the literature tends to miss 'an athlete voice' and a qualitative based method could lend substance by unveiling the processes and steps involved when living through these experiences. These experiences can add value to the current knowledge and highlight scenarios where

sport psychologists could support professional footballers more effectively when they need to make a crucial decision around a transition or a critical moment.

2.8   Anxiety.

The link between anxiety and sport constitutes one of the most popular areas within sport psychology research (Nesti, 2016). However, a large majority of this research has focused on the notion of "competitive anxiety" (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). "Competitive anxiety" is related to the feelings of apprehension and nervousness experienced before playing and competing. The concept can be further broken down into "cognitive anxiety" (i.e., what you are thinking) and "somatic anxiety" (i.e., what physical symptoms comes from the cognitive anxiety). The key questions that have come out of this framework centre around whether anxiety is fundamental or detrimental to performance. Common tools within anxiety research are questionnaires, as they request athletes to rank their thoughts and feelings on a scale called the Competitive State Anxiety Scale – 2 (or, CSAI-2). This scale allows researchers to sum the scores and establish whether anxiety constitutes a plus or minus within performance. Within this work with professional players, Nesti (2016) suggests that anxiety can be felt positively before players go out to perform, with feelings of anxiety and excitement extremely closely linked.

One fundamental point which seems to have been missed within current work is that competitive anxiety is not the only area where anxiety can be experienced within a sports context. Nesti (2004), has implied that the blinkered cognitive based approach to anxiety has limitations from a sport psychology perspective. A substantial amount of applied sport psychologists may follow the recommendations from current research that anxiety is seen a negative emotion and will therefore apply cognitive based methods to manage the symptoms away (e.g., by employing imagery or deep

breathing techniques). Although not refuting the fact that the CSAI-2 could be a useful means of helping a player to understand how they deal with competitive anxiety and that this has its place within mental skills training, other methodologies and methods may unearth other contexts to where anxiety is felt and where a sport psychologist could support best. This insight is supported by Corlett, (1996), who warned applied sport psychologists employing mental skills training techniques to control anxiety such as imagery and goal setting may be inappropriate in its totality. He also suggested that attempting to control or remove anxiety via mental skills training is not needed, as anxiety is an inevitable part of the sports experience and needs to be utilised constructively. Further research is needed to shed light on this.

In relation to the concept of anxiety, there has also been work recently which has investigated the experiences within athlete journeys involving the concept of trauma and resilience (Howells & Fletcher 2015; Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015). The phrase 'talent needs trauma' has come into the spotlight within recent work. The movement of athletes through their sport journey is often viewed as linear and smooth (Tinning, Kirk & Evans, 1993) however there is consensus growing that the journey is characterised by transitions, stages and facing up to differing experiences which can provide an opportunity to learn and grow. These have been labelled as 'traumas' within recent research (Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015). From a critical perspective, the word trauma can be seen as deep, wounding and can relate to 'major damage' (Collins, Macnamara & McCarthy, 2016), however it has also been suggested that trauma can be more realistically be associated with minor harm or impairment (Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015). Howells and Fletcher (2015) researched Olympic swimming champions and their autobiographies and revealed that there was a correlation between suffering life trauma and having high sporting success. Sarkar,

Fletcher, and Brown (2015) added to this by suggesting that adversity was an important part of development which related to winning and high achievement. Both sets of researchers have also implicated that adversity related experiences can lead to success 'later down the line' and as well as trauma within the sporting environment it can also be experienced within an athlete's broader life. This is an interesting concept to examine within the journey of professional footballers and a qualitative research approach could capture this more fully. This can be underpinned by the message of Collins and Macnamara (2012) who suggested that 'talent needs trauma' than 'talent is caused by trauma.' One critique of this is that trauma is something that could be experienced differently by individuals and resilience is needed to cope with the trauma and move through it. Resilience seems to indicate a re-phrasing of existential psychology literature around the need to develop character through experience by recognising the freedom to choose a course of action (or not choose). Therefore, resilience is not a skill but a quality of a person and this can make a huge difference to how it is acquired (i.e., through formation and not taught directly). Further enquiry and research are needed to help gain knowledge around what issues athletes must venture through at differing points in their careers and how they grow and move through these challenging times.

2.9   Authenticity.

Authenticity constitutes another concept that can be considered when studying the experiences of professional football players. Ronkainen and Nesti (2015) suggest that it is one of the most debated parts of existential psychology and in turn, provide a simple explanation that to be authentic is to "be true to oneself" (p.4), acting in alignment with one's beliefs and values systems. The use of differing methods could

bring some colour to the notion of how challenging it is to stay authentic when entering and pursuing actions of "the they" in a professional football environment (Heidegger, 1962). One of the proponents of "the they", and consequently social identity in a football environment, involves the concept of "banter". Although having its place, it can often border on bullying and remaining true to one's core beliefs and values (e.g., not allowing anyone to be bullied, or stepping in to stop bullying) can prove challenging, especially in group environments. Specifically, Roderick (2006) refers to the idea of the working-class shop floor football apprentice conformity to explain this phenomenon. Heidegger (1962) suggests there is no escape from "the they", as you can't avoid "being with" (p.157). As a result, Ronkainen and Nesti (2015) recognise that authenticity doesn't centre on doing radical things, or doing things different to everyone else; instead, it's about making decisions knowing that there are other options available to choose from. It could be argued that staying authentic can be challenging within elite sport, because, at some point, an "authentic" love for your sport may morph into a "career", where the concept of "play" is replaced by winning at all costs (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2015). Interestingly, Roderick (2006) states that some professional footballers can dis-identify from the culture that they're in to keep personal authenticity. Kay (2016) also alludes to the harsh, macho culture within football apprentices and how challenging it can be to remain authentic to who you really are. The concept of authenticity is something that this PhD research will investigate, providing further insight into its role in transitions, critical moments, and identity development.

2.9.1 Loneliness.

When dealing with a transitional experience such as being deselected or suffering with injury, a professional football player may have to contend with bouts of loneliness. Mcgraw (1995) suggested that loneliness (or isolation) can be an issue which is detrimental to achieving happiness and Nesti (2016), also recognised that loneliness can come into prominence when separated from friends and family and is an issue which needs to be considered in sport psychology practice. The discipline of existential psychology provides a deeper understanding of loneliness with a more intricate explanation that suggests loneliness is based on being lost (Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988). More interestingly and being related to specific times within an athletes' career, a person can be lonely whilst immersed within environments if others do not share the same values or meanings. Many existential psychologists put forwards the argument that loneliness (or isolation) is a fundamental part of our being (e.g., Yalom, 1999) and is one of the four givens of human existence alongside freedom, meaning/meaninglessness, and death. Some sport psychology research has revealed that loneliness can be experienced within sporting contexts such as going away on tours and players coming over from differing countries and cultures (e.g., Alison and Meyer, 1988; Schinke, Yukelson, Bartolacci, Battochio and Johnstone, 2011) and there has also been sport psychology research on the tragedy of athletic injuries (Tracy, 2003). Adding to this promising work involving experiences of tours, migratory experiences and injuries, further research is needed to attain a more in-depth account of where experiences of existential loneliness is felt within elite sport and the challenging aspects associated with these experiences. Loneliness is

regularly mentioned as a part of athletes' life worlds, but sport psychology lacks sound theorising and research on its nature and forms. From an existential perspective, loneliness is considered as a part of human condition and a vital dimension of critical life transitions (Rosedale, 2007). Rather than a problem that needs to be overcome, loneliness is a potentially positive force in the search for meaning, personal values, authenticity, and self-knowledge. This is something that needs further research attention within the world of professional football.

2.9.2   Sport psychology support and professional football.

Nesti (2010) has found within his applied work that professional football players usually have an excellent grasp of the use of mental skills. Other researchers have supported this and have found that high level athletes have competent skills in relation to imagery use, goal setting techniques, breathing techniques, self-talk, concentration and keeping aggression under control (Gould et al., 2002; Jordet, 2005; Anderson, McNeely & Windham, 2010; Gumusdag, Yidiran, Yamaner & Kartal, 2011; Larsen & Engell, 2013; Farina & Cei, 2019). Coaches and sport psychologists have supported the use of these skills however many of them have been learned by the athlete themselves as they have progressed and transitioned through their sport. A few researchers started to question whether mental skills approaches are fit for purpose especially within professional sport environments (Nesti, 2004; Anderson, 2005). They have put forward that when working with professional athletes in their applied experiences most of the dialogue is based on broader life concerns and developing self-knowledge to help overcome these concerns. A

mental skills approach tends to be performance driven (i.e., used within training and competition) however researchers have argued that applied sport psychologists should be able to provide care also (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). Adding to this, Watson and Nesti (2005) have stated that an applied sport psychologist should be able to support with mental skills approaches, performance driven interventions and arguably support which moves into a holistic domain underpinned by counselling psychology. Nesti and Littlewood (2011) have pointed out that a professional athlete faces a wide range of issues within their journey which can connect to performance and much of these issues tend to have a broader focus. This can link into identity which considers the athlete in their totality by examining how they see themselves at differing points and how they think other people see them and how they manage to deal with the many challenges that professional sport brings on a daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal basis. It has been argued that as well as developing mental skills, a professional athlete should also strive to acquire self-knowledge and by acquiring self-knowledge they can move through the challenges more effectively (Corlett, 1996). This will help them become a stronger person and develop a stronger sense of self (i.e., who they are). Professional football will bring challenges and there will be moments in a professional footballer's career where they face difficult times and changes that need to be addressed. It is at this juncture where a sport psychologist could assist in relation to helping with identity development and to help the player understand that they are ultimately responsible for their development of self-knowledge and their journey towards self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968).

In reviewing the current literature which envelop the topic of transitions, there are areas missing which are worthy of knowledge enhancement and further exploration. It has been found within the review of literature that much of transitions-based research has predominately focused upon the experiences of athletic retirement, stages, end points and challenges associated with leaving or coming away from a sport. Adding to this, there has been research based on adjustment experiences, coping strategies, psychological support after career end, resources available to help career end and planning strategies as retirement is approaching (Brown et al., 2015; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Franck, Stambulova, & Ivarsson, 2018). A high majority of the transition-based research literature can be criticised for overly focusing on retirement, or end points which see transitions as single steps or stages to be smoothly negotiated when the experiences maybe anything but (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). There needs to be more insight within 'day to day' or 'frequent experiences' as this is an area of research which is currently limited. There are gaps within our knowledge base around what happens to an athlete whilst they are 'within their sport' and what occurs on a more frequent basis (i.e., throughout a career). There is also a lack of insight around identity and how this is threatened, challenged, affected, and developed in professional football careers. The work of Erikson (1950; 1968) can provide a useful theoretical base to help us understand this more in relation to the potential of having a strong or exclusive athletic identity based around professional football. There are also gaps within our knowledge base around effective support mechanisms within professional football and what may be most useful

for a professional player to access when they are facing and experiencing a transition or critical moment.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Research philosophy.

To answer the thesis aims and research questions and to plug the gaps which have been unearthed within the review of transition-based literature, the PhD will be underpinned by a pragmatic research philosophy (Giacobbi, Poczwardowski & Hager, 2005). A pragmatic research philosophy abandons the methodological approach of total positivism (i.e., a single reality) and total interpretivism (i.e., reality is formed by individuals and groups) and combines both elements to fully explore and answer research questions. The pragmatic methodological approach is not wedded to a particular ontological or epistemological view.

As the PhD has focussed upon an applied topic for study (i.e., professional footballer experiences of within career transitions and critical moments), research across differing paradigms was the best choice so that the most detailed knowledge can be generated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Sparkes, 2015). Therefore, a mixed methods approach was deemed the best choice for the PhD research requiring a mix of both qualitative and quantitative components (Sparkes, 2015).

3.2 Research design.

Teddlie and Tashkkori (2009), have put forwards that mixed methods research is based on the research philosophy of pragmatism. Many academics engage with mixed methods research to help fully answer a range of questions in as much depth or detail as possible. Mixed methods approaches can employ primarily a qualitative approach with a smaller quantitative approach, an equal mix of both methods, or a primary quantitative approach with a smaller qualitative approach (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). To answer the research questions within the PhD it was decided from the mixed methods choices that a primary qualitative approach will be used

along with a smaller quantitative approach. This staggered methodological approach is known as a sequential design where one study follows on from the other (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). A mixed methods design allows researchers to acquire a rich, contextual understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (i.e., issues associated with transitions and critical moments) as well as generalizing from a population (i.e., professional footballers). Some of the primary reasons for employing a mixed methods approach within the PhD include the following:

1) There may be insufficient arguments in relation to a using either a singularly qualitative approach or singularly quantitative approach

2) There can be a multiple arguments approach embedded within the research

3) There can be an argument which suggests that the more evidence the stronger the argument (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015).

Benefits of using mixed methods designs can include:

1) Triangulation – this is the convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results utilising differing methods (i.e., throughout Study One, Study Two and Study Three).

2) Complementarity – elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of results. from one method against the results from other methods (i.e., Study One, Study Two and Study Three provides a bigger picture).

3) Development – uses the results from one method to help shape another method (i.e., from Study One to Study Two to Study Three).

4) Initiation – reveals new perspectives and contexts using the results from one method against the results from another method (i.e., from Study One, Study Two and Study Three).

5) Expansion – extends knowledge by using differing approaches to data collection (i.e., via the differing methods within Study One, Study Two and Study Three) (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015).

3.3   Research methods.

Three differing methods in the thesis have been undertaken incorporating two methodologies (i.e., qualitative, and quantitative). A sequential approach has been chosen to investigate the PhD aims/ questions where two methods will be qualitative based (employing an interpretive, explorative paradigm) (Study One and Study Two) and one method will utilise a quantitative approach (employing a positivist, conclusive paradigm). The mixed-methods to be used within the three studies are auto-ethnography (Study One), phenomenological interviews (Study Two) and a survey approach (Study Three).

In summary, both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research methods have traditionally been associated with differing paradigms, ontologies, and epistemologies. Pragmatic, mixed methods approaches have gathered pace in recent times (Sparkes, 2015). Mixed methods approaches can be based upon differing research questions, samples, data collection methods and data analysis. The design of a mixed methods approach is flexible, can have equal amounts of quantitative or qualitative methods or have a dominant approach either way.

3.4   Research Journey: Re-visiting the aims and objectives of the thesis.

As well as recognising that transitions out of professional sport can be challenging for many (i.e., career end or retirement), the PhD aim is to explore the more frequent issues that a professional player faces whilst they are in the sport and examine how

these issues can potentially impact upon their existence and identity. To achieve the overarching aim of the PhD, the diagram below sets out a brief overview of how the research journey will unfold and the methodological/ methods approaches within each study of the thesis. Following each study, a sequential overview will be provided and outline how the previous study sets up the next part of the thesis.

Study One Definitive Aim:

Present an auto-ethnographical narrative that critically reflects upon personal experiences of transitions and critical moments (e.g., schoolboy to apprentice professional, apprentice to young professional, young professional to senior professional and senior professional to exit). The reflective narrative will present psychological challenges and threats to identity and meaning as I moved through the game.

Study Two Definitive Aim:

Utilise a phenomenological methodology approach to explore 'alternative workplace voices' based on transitions and critical moment experiences of former professional footballers and what these moments meant to them in relation to threats to identity and meaning as they moved through the game (PhD Study Two).

Study Three Definitive Aim:

Explore the prevalence of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers' and to examine the role of the applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners in supporting players through critical moments within the 'hard to reach' culture of elite professional football. (PhD Study Three).

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY ONE

An auto-ethnographical narrative that critically reflects upon personal experiences of transitions and critical moments.

4.1   Introduction.

To attain the level of becoming a professional footballer, players typically engage and then specialise with the sport from a young age (Bloom, 1985). If showing promise, players typically journey through grass roots (or early years' pre-development academies)**,** representative sides (e.g., Town Teams, County Teams or National Youth Teams) before moving into a professional club to gain a level of coaching expertise. These movements can be defined as 'transitions' as the player is moving from one stage to another. Research on transitions has tended to focus on 'stages' and has investigated what support, resources, preparedness, planning strategies etc. are developed to navigate the transition in the most effective manner (i.e., youth to senior) (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015). As the transition of a youth player to professional player in football is tough and the odds are incredibly small (Calvin, 2017) it can be argued that the research base has ceased at a certain point (i.e., what happens when the player moves into the professional ranks and what frequent issues do they have to face?). The critique of 'transition' is that the movement from one stage to another makes it sound easy, smooth, and comfortable to attain. Arguably this is not the case as sport is full of highs and lows and if maintaining a love and passion for the sport, anxiety fuelled issues can occur on a more frequent basis as change and disruption is inevitable (Nesti, 2010). The transition research base has also tended to focus on end points such as retirement or career change (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and bar Pummell, Harwood and Lavallee's (2008) 'within career transition' work little attention has been paid to what athletes go through daily, weekly, and monthly as they journey through their sport. There is little insight into how these frequent experiences affect their identity. In relation to identity formation, as a player progresses through their journey, there are many people around

the player. These can include family, friends, schoolteachers, and coaches. Without realising, these people can add to the player forming a particular strong athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder (1993). A strong athletic identity can potentially be both beneficial and problematic (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). The potential of a strong athletic identity can push an athlete to dedicate, commit, persevere, and excel, however the problematic part of an athletic identity is that the athlete may turn away from exploring other roles (i.e., disengage with education, suffer mental health and well-being issues if unable to play etc.). If forming an exclusive athletic identity (Marcia, 1966; 1980) there is the issue of 'identity foreclosure' occurring. This is where a player fully commits to their role as a player without exploring other roles. A worrying issue with this is that if a player does not progress to becoming a professional player or must retire through injury, or is sold, or deselected there may be mental health and well-being issues to contend with as their exclusive athletic identity can be challenged or threatened (Nesti, 2004; 2010). If the primary goal is being a footballer and nothing else the potential of deeper, psychological issues is a danger as the player's identity is one dimensional (Wiechman & Williams, 1997; Brown & Potrac, 2009). Out of the 1.5 million who play football at all levels in the UK, only 180 will play in the Premier League (Calvin, 2017). This equates to a success figure of 0.012%. Over the course of a journey from youth team player to professional player there will be an attrition rate of around 85% (Lally, 2007). There are also hundreds of professional players out of work every summer as contracts end and managers look to change team squads and bring other players in to improve performance. The amount of change and disruption to identity is vast (Nesti, 2010). This high attrition rate in the movement from youth to professional and the deselection of hundreds of professional players every season makes this

course of research important. If a player's identity is closed (Marcia 1966; 1980), it could potentially harm their ability to explore other avenues and roles and it may also hinder their capability to deal with the frequent challenges that professional football throws up.

There is currently a gap in the transition-based research and a lack of empirical insight which investigates 'within transition' experiences of professional football players. Due to the closed and often highly confidential culture which professional football sits in, academic research of this nature has been extremely difficult to undertake, and it tends to cease post youth experiences or youth deselection (Brown & Potrac, 2009). External support means such as parents, coaches, support staff and sport psychologists may benefit from this enquiry as it will shed light upon the psychological challenges of a player within the journey from youth to professional and how these issues can be managed best. The aim of this study is to acquire critical insight into a professional footballer's journey and how identity was challenged within daily, weekly, and monthly issues as well as the traditional navigation of 'end points' or 'stages.'

4.2   Method.

An auto-ethnography was used to tell "my story." Auto-ethnography basically posits the researcher (e.g., "the self") as the focal point of the study (e.g., "I") and is part of a qualitative research approach which supports the researcher as the central hub of a tale. According to Douglass and Carless (2013) auto-ethnography is a category of writing and research that connects "the self" to a social context. It is autobiographical in nature and endeavours to decipher the lived world of the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of an area (e.g., the journey from youth to professional football). Ellis,

(2004) proposes that auto-ethnographical accounts are often penned in a first-person vantage point and can appear in a range of literary practice such as short stories, poems, fiction, scripts, and novels. Ellis also stats that auto-ethnographic texts "showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotions, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness" (p.38). The content and structure describe my football journey the highs and lows and, on many occasions confused upheaval. Auto-ethnography is defined as "a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnographic (looking outward at the world beyond one's own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of oneself) intentions" (Schwandt, 2001, p.13). Wolcott (2008) further states that ethnography is about the "it" and by a researcher writing through a reflective, personal, singular lens, the "auto" part was added. This qualitative method has a distinct focus on the self and often brings emotions to the fore and the concept of auto-ethnography is to bring a story to life. The researcher is the key component of auto-ethnography, and the underpinning task is to help the reader feel the emotions that the subject has felt. Within auto-ethnography, there is a process of self-reflection evident throughout the tale and the overarching objective of this self-refection is the creation of original knowledge and insight into a particular phenomenon. It is hoped by revealing some of the lived experiences within professional football that heightened awareness, education and even cultural transformation can take place. Auto-ethnography provides an opportunity for the author to 'talk back' at the current research within a particular topic to provide a template for change (Ellis, 2004).

4.3 Data analysis.

The theoretical frameworks which will underpin the auto-ethnographic story are derived from the narrative of chaos and quest (Frank, 2013) and the transformative

learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). The narrative of chaos and quest arose from a patient's experience of chronic illness (Frank, 2013) and suggests that when there are traumatic stories or events to be unfurled, it is important to step away from the scenario to reflect upon them and reveal a deeper understanding and meaning of them. Transformative learning is a key part of development within a wide range of contexts (Sparkes, 2003). The process can be steady and solid, or it can be unexpected and rapid. The work of Mezirow (2000) can be utilised to highlight transformation through my eyes (e.g., an individual) and learning through a life story or journey (i.e., through transitions and critical moments). Mezirow (2000) also suggests that experiences of depth and turmoil (e.g., life changing experiences) can provide transformative learning opportunities and that transformative learning goes to the root of our being where it involves a critical self-reflection process. The critical self-reflection process includes existence, experience, and expression. Existence is the part of the tale which takes into consideration the holistic journey from start to finish and experience is the inside tale of what I make of the journey personally; basically, my story as I have lived it. This experience involves a meaning making interpretation that only can be written when the journey maker has come away and turned back to look deeply at their path through a critical lens. The expression is classified as the inside-out story where the story is written for external benefits and where something is considered for the world beyond mine. In terms, this is where my story is considered and used to aid and inform the journeys or practice of others.

4.4. The Auto-Ethnography.

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it

was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way'

<p align="center">(Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities)</p>

When I reflect upon my early years, I am always proud to recall and remember vividly the excellent work ethic, sacrifices and unconditional love and support demonstrated by my parents. I was extremely fortunate to experience a secure, loving home and nothing was ever too much for my father. His temperament was incredible and despite early morning starts and late finishes, he always made time for me and my brother when he arrived home from work. He was an absolute bedrock of support and encouragement, and, on many occasions, he would meander up to the field at the top of the road where we lived and would play football/ cricket with us. The magnetism that he had was that as soon as we had walked onto the field, many school mates would appear from all angles; drawn in like some hypnotic trance. What started as my Dad, brother and I, would end up with at least 7 a side, sometimes more! Crumpled coats or tracksuit tops would be cast to the floor to make goals and games would end when we could no longer see, well into the cool, serene dusk of the evening. The teams would be picked, the pitch would be sorted, and the play would commence, usually to the cry of "10 half time, 20 up." My father made time for anyone, he would never judge, or criticise and always allowed everyone to join in and play, no matter what the score or how the game was flowing. As far back as I can remember, he always invested quality, authentic time into me and the family. Strong foundations were laid, morals, values, character was put in place. We always seemed to have a football, or be at a park, or somewhere with goalposts. It was a glorious time of my life.

As well as my early experiences within football and sport, I also hold fond memories and really enjoyed my schooling, gaining knowledge and education. A couple of primary teachers really stood out along the journey of 5-11 years old. I always seemed to respond best to those who vested an authentic interest in me and any context where expression was encouraged holds a warm, valued memory; I particularly loved to write stories, be creative in language and was fully encouraged to do so. Quite often, my chair would scrape out from the table in the primary school classroom, and I would be off like a bullet to show the teacher my work, which was always constructive and praised highly. One fond memory I hold was when I was in Junior 1 (approx. 7 years old). There had been a competition to design a project on the Solar System and magically the teacher had selected my work with another pupil, and I had won joint first prize. When we were called to the front there were two prizes perched on a wooden desk on the top. I'm not sure where it came from, but there seemed to be a pause, as the prizes were different, and we both scanned the pair of them. Because at the time, I felt it was the right thing to do, I stepped back and offered the first choice of prize to the other boy. This is a memory I am very proud of. My character formation and values had already started to form.

I really enjoyed walks on cold, crisp weekends when my father would talk about nature and bird life around the local canal and lodges. There were strong connections. A great start to life and living. The teachers always encouraged the pupils to bring things in for the nature table, such as fir cones, leaves, acorns etc. This would encourage conversation and discussion about the real world around us where would huddle round on the classroom carpet and observe in awe and wonder what each other had brought in.

Right from this very young age, there was also a real love for football. I can recall playing with tightly rolled up socks, paper scrunched into a ball and sellotaped together; anything I could kick and anywhere I could construct goals I did! My Dad put together some fantastic nets in the garden and there was fondness of being your heroes, moving like them, playing like them. As it was reaching dusk, there were always dramatic scenarios created, with late winning goals and last-minute penalties, World Cups, FA Cup finals, league title wins, we played out them all! All in all, there was a very, very strong football identity laid in the early days and my love for the game was strong.

As I progressed into the juniors at primary school, football was something I sensed I was particularly good at. There was a green and gold ball that was kept in the storeroom of one of the classrooms and when the bell went, we used to rush to the teacher at the time and peer longingly as he went into the storeroom to fetch it out. There could've been a one-million-pound cheque in his other hand, and we wouldn't have batted an eyelid. We used to hare down the school stairs and out onto the field and we would gloriously play. What an immense sense of joy and freedom. It was total immersion and time raced by.

My first involvement with the school team was born from standing out in PE lessons and playing well out on the fields at the back of the school. It was an exciting time and the game seemed easy! It was as if the ball, a smaller size than I was used to was tied to my foot on occasions. I can recall the first time the school team was pinned to the old school door. I raced across the yard and was met with devastation when my eyes scanned the sheet to see I wasn't named as captain. This, at the time, didn't seem right? I was easily the best player in lessons and on the field and yet one of my friends had the word captain written next to his name. I can remember being

feeling incredibly down about this moment and was utterly shocked, surprised, and confused.

A couple of weeks later, however, my initial despair turned to joy. There was a second game and teams were sellotaped up in their usual place. As I was making my way to observe the details, a friend of mine called to me "Tongie, you are the captain." I raced over and there it was in all its glory on the team sheet: "7 - Alan Tonge – Captain." What an unbelievable feeling and moment. On reflection, it was clear the teacher, who was a superb fellow couldn't differentiate between the two of us and had shared the load.

I can also recall with great fondness a five a side competition that was held on the school yard. It involved us and four other school teams. I can recall the experiences with astonishing clarity and warmth. Everything seemed so easy and it was like I was two yards quicker than everyone else. I felt totally in control, had space, time, and went past players/ scored goals at will. What a feeling. We managed to get to the final and near the end, we were awarded a penalty. All eyes turned to me. I placed the ball and just knew I would score. I looked at the ball, at the goalkeeper and had a confidence that seemed unnatural. I couldn't wait to run up and hit it. The net bulged. We had done it. We had won.

4.5   Junior football.

The natural progression outside of the playground experiences and primary school team football was to get involved with a junior team. I can recall a neighbour telling my Dad that a team trained at the local secondary school and that I should go along to get involved. The first session stood out for one special memory. Late on in a sports hall, the moment presented itself. A game of approximately 7-a-side with 5-a-side

goals was underway. I received the ball, motored forward, and moved the ball from side to side as I glided past 3 players, 4 players, and smashed it past the keeper. The net bulged and I could hear other players, parents, and coaches gasp in admiration! I can vividly recall the coach saying, "unbelievable son, I've never seen a ball hit like that before." After the session had finished, we filtered into the changing room and sat down quietly on the benches, wide eyed, sweating from our exertions, legs swinging under the wooden benches due to joy and happiness. The changing room door swung open, and the coach appeared offering a few words of wisdom. He went onto conclude "well done everyone…and the man of the session today was" …his eyes scanned to me… "Alan Tonge." I walked up nervously, sheepishly, but elated and received a small, golden trophy. A special moment. This was my first ever proper coaching session. I was clapped off people in that dressing room and my new teammates patted me on the back and wanted to be around me. The respect was instant. They wanted to know you, talk to you, be near you, be on your side. It felt amazing. As was the norm back then, I played a year young in this side. I was 9 years old playing in an under 11's team, so it seemed my ability was ahead of its time.

The first jolt I ever had in my junior football experience came when I had made the move from primary to secondary school. I had really enjoyed primary school football and had even managed to represent Bolton Schoolboys at 10 years old, which was a great feeling. As of any other secondary school-based team, trials were held and it would be interesting to see where I figured, as all the best players in the local primary schools had filtered into the secondary school. I started the trial like a house on fire, and everything seemed so, so easy. For some reason, after this initial start I couldn't get into the game and the ball just wasn't coming my way and I lost some interest or motivation. On reflection, I'm not sure why this was. After the

practice game, the PE teacher in charge called us into a circle and we awaited his feedback. His words left a lasting effect and would impact me, in some ways, for the rest of my career. He eyes scanned round to me, and he said "When the trial started, for the first twenty minutes, I thought we had a genius in our ranks, and then you went to sleep for twenty minutes. What were you playing at?" At only 11 years old, and being surrounded by other boys, these words stung and instantly made me very wary of this teacher. I didn't have the tools to respond or answer back as I was only a first-year pupil in the 'big school'. I just stood there going ashen faced. Sadly, it didn't stop there. When the school matches started, the teacher didn't let up. If I wasn't getting into games early, or hadn't been involved with the play for a while, he would shout (in front of parents), "Do you want me to bring you a chair on for you Tongie?" I hated it. This hurt me very much and did little for my formative confidence. What could you say? I didn't have the tools to answer back, as it was an adult versus a youngster scenario. I had to battle through it. It had a huge impact on me as both a footballer and a person. I got on with it, I suppose it toughened my mind in a way, but it had no impact value whatsoever on me as an aspiring footballer, trying to improve, grow and get better. It made me very wary of criticism and significant others. If I hadn't started the game well, or was struggling to get some early touches, I knew the words would be served up sooner or later; I was waiting for it. I was aware of it. It didn't help when your teammates would laugh too. As my secondary school football experiences evolved, I managed to get selected to represent The Bolton Town Team. Amazingly, my schoolteacher was the manager, which meant even more scrutiny and the opportunity to throw comments my way whenever he felt like it. I must have seemed like an easy target as no way would I answer back. One Town Team match we had gathered to play, and we all filtered into the changing rooms ready to hear the

side. In walked the teacher and launched what I would categorise as 'uncalled for' comments. He started his team talk and then swung his attention round to me. It was something along the lines that I had let him down, as I had turned up with a jumper and tie on instead of a jacket and tie. It was the feeling of isolation and all eyes fixing on me that I didn't like at all. It was awful how words could wound, but they did. My mother, who I loved dearly, had spent hard earned money and bought that in the week and I looked incredibly smart. Was there really any need for it? Why did he do it? I remember getting changed feeling ashamed, low and went out playing that game feeling dreadful. I was devoid of confidence, didn't really want to get on the ball, so hid most if the time. I wasn't at the races mentally. It made me feel like I had no confidence, and my self-esteem was at rock bottom.

My football was really a key factor in my life, and, despite the external challenges, I was battling on and improving all the time. I represented the Greater Manchester County side and before long I was becoming aware that scouts of professional clubs were starting to take an interest. It was after a county game that a scout had approached my mother and father and said it was rare for a boy of my age, having the ability to cross the ball so well. He said that he would be keeping an eye on my development.

Anything is easy in hindsight, but on reflection, I was starting to play too much football. I had commenced training with a professional club on a Monday and Thursday evenings, I was training and playing with the school, and I had commitments to my Sunday club (midweek training, game Sunday). Coupled with studying for my GCSE's, I was finding the going very challenging. At one stage (I think I was around 15 years old) I had developed sties on both of my eyes! These were huge warning signs that I needed a breather, but I just couldn't seem to find one.

I simply didn't want to let anyone down, so kept digging in finding more, battling on. It seems to be managed better these days, and if you are attached to an academy, you are protected much more and have more support and exit strategies around you. My son has started playing; however, I am ultra-cautious with him. If I feel he is doing too much, I have a protective arm round his shoulder and won't allow him to burn out just to satisfy someone else. I have no problem phoning coaches and saying he has had school commitments and won't be able to come to training. Someone must look after him! Hindsight and experiential knowledge can be a wonderful thing!

As my football evolved, I was conscious of scouts being around Sunday morning matches and I started to get trial invites to professional clubs. I was performing well and started get the attention of some top clubs. All wanted to sign me with some sort of deal. I seemed to get advice coming from all angles. "Be patient!", "don't commit just yet" were some of the common phrases. When one club came calling, however, and as my family supported them, it was impossible to turn down! I was invited to train on a Monday and Thursday evening, from 5.30pm - 6.30pm.

The first time we drove into the gates at the training ground, the enormity and history hit you and gave you goosebumps. This was the breeding ground for some of the greatest youth players that had ever lived, and the club had a fine history of looking after local players. I ventured down the steps into changing rooms, subdued, apprehensive, and nervous. The kit-man arrived and tossed some yellow shirts, blue shorts and black socks onto a treatment bed that was in the middle of the dressing room. A mad frenzy ensued, players grabbing kit and, most importantly trying to get kit that fitted! We then ambled over to an indoor AstroTurf pitch, across the car park. Walking in, I can remember the foggy haze and thinking it seemed to be colder in there than it was outside! It felt surreal to be there.

After a warm-up had taken place with some passing work, I met the person who was to be a huge influencing factor on my football and my life. With his grey and purple Adidas initialled coat zipped up to his chin to stave out the cold, he spoke to me in what felt like an abrasive, abrupt manner. "Alright son, not seen you here before, who's sent you down?" I recited the scout's name. He scanned me up and down, an etch of puzzlement on his face and said "Ah, ok, enjoy it then." I'm not sure if he even knew who the scout was, and I returned to the training feeling slightly perplexed!

As well as the youth team manager, the manager and his assistant coach used to take sessions on occasions. I can recall the harshness, the pressure on not to make an error in crossing and finishing drills. The tempo I was used to had been stepped up and balls were now drilled at you, with your first touch expected to set yourself to play immediately. If the play was not as it should, sarcasm (or banter as they call it) would be thrown into the mix by the coach and critical comments were made that didn't make you feel particularly great. It's called banter in football circles. It would create laughs amongst the other players, and this made it even harder to bear. You just got on with it and shrugged it off. It's all you could do. It was a learning process.

> "Ok what I want you to do is get the ball out wide, take a touch and hit it into the area that I've coned off…go…"
>
> *The cross did not reach the area.
>
> "What was that? ...I've seen better crosses in a cemetery (laughs from the other players) …Do you know what you are supposed to be doing? …CONCENTRATE!"

The coaching and training at the professional club sharpened you up and made you really focus, but we are human beings after all and after experiencing some of this coaching approach around my mid-teens, I became aware of negative voices in my own head, such as 'Do not mess this up' or 'Just get a decent cross in.' It was very different feedback indeed to what I was receiving at my grass roots club.

The training sessions kept on and soon I was invited to play for the "B" team. The "B" team was the first club within the professional club's structure. It was tantamount to an under 16s side. For some reason, and I'm not sure why, this caused another issue, as the school I attended had a policy of "we come first." I was desperate to play for the professional club's side on a Saturday morning and went to see the teacher who basically said, "Sorry you can't do that." My ambitions were being cruelly stamped into the ground before they had even started. I just couldn't believe it. All the lads who had been playing in my Sunday team were granted it no problem. Why me? My mother and father went in to see the headmaster, who basically supported the PE teacher and echoed the same thing.

"Come in Mr and Mrs Tonge and take a seat. I've spoken to the PE teacher, and he has said that he wants Alan to play for the school team."

"We understand this, but Alan has a chance to play for a professional youth side and this could evolve into something special, such as a career in the professional game. It is really exciting."

"I have to back my teacher I'm afraid and what he says goes."

".... But no other players have had this issue. Their teachers have been fully supportive and have allowed the players to be released and play for the "B" team on a Saturday morning."

"I'm sorry, but we operate on a policy of school comes first."

When my Mum and Dad arrived home and broke this news to me, I was heartbroken. After further dialogue and persuasive argument, a compromise was reached, which I still felt was cruel, but better than nothing at all! On reflection, and for some bizarre reason, it was just the school/ the teachers being awkward. The compromise was that I would play for the school team one week, and the professional club "B" team one week. A huge obstacle had been placed in my way already and my career hadn't even started! I really felt this had an impact on my progress including getting to know some of the other players and keeping in the gaze of the club's coaches. Without even knowing, the school's stance could have damaged my career and association with an elite club before it even started!! Why?? This is a question I ask a lot in reflection. Surely a teacher of worth would want to see a pupil striving and have photos up at the school?? I felt and found this very strange and couldn't find any reasons at all why this would be happening apart from a jealousy or some sort of personal vendetta.

As well as the teacher's input, my father, even though I loved him dearly, would be sometimes quite critical of my performances and praise was only lavished on me in what felt minimal circumstances. There were many times when there would be a silent car journey and the odd "Went through the motions today son." I'm sure there was a greater message underpinning this; however, at a young age I had no chance of understanding what the message was, and it made me confused and unhappy. I eventually saw that it was his way of wanting the best, but it didn't make me feel great to be honest. I felt subdued, down, sad. I was trying my best! You could not be brilliant or a world beater every week! It just wasn't possible!

4.6   Moving up the ladder.

One of the greatest decisions I ever made was the time I heard a local team called Bolton Lads Club was trying to recruit some talented local players and I knew that some of my teammates were heading there from other local boys' clubs. The coaches were unbelievable with me, there was constant encouragement and praise and I flourished. For my engagement, it helped that the coaches had sons who were at professional clubs and the connection was of much benefit. It was if they knew what it took to coach, train and produce lads to further their development. I produced some of the best football of my young life. They could see my quality and had me on everything. Free kicks, corners, encouraging me to try things and even if they didn't go so well on occasions there would be an "Unlucky son" or "Never mind, next time." I absolutely loved my time within this excellent little club, and it must be the greatest period sports wise of my life. I was totally immersed in the Sunday league; I relished the challenges, the local derbies, the rivalry, the emotion, the joy, the freedom to try things and just play! As the team progressed and developed, I noticed and started to become aware that scouts were following the team and starting to watch games on a regular basis. Following one of the county matches I was involved with, a scout of one of the local top sides my pulled father to one side and said, "What a fantastic crosser of the ball Alan is" following with "that was rare for a youngster of 15 years old."

As well as me training within the club's school of excellence on a Monday and Thursday evening, I was invited for an extended trial around the Xmas period. The trial was to be from 28th December to early into the New Year and I was to stay in halls of residence and come into the club daily. When I reflect on this period, it was one of the moments where everything seemed so easy. I seemed to find myself in

some sort of trance, where I always had space and time, my touch was immaculate, my energy levels were full, and the trial went unbelievably well. There were plenty of matches going on within the indoor centre and on grass. The manager and coaches in their badged coats seemed to be full of encouragement and I was clearly impressing. Constant cries of "Great ball son" and "Quality passing son" were passed over in my direction. I was requested to go and join in with reserves one morning too. The coach stuck his head around the dressing room door and said, "Can you come with me this morning Al?" I was around 15 years old. I felt great, important, and different. I felt like a professional footballer! This was the life for me! After the extended trial had concluded, the youth development officer called me to one side and said the club would like to offer me terms and added that the manager wanted to see me and my parents early the next week. The elation was incredible. I was on top of the world. All the family were supporters of this club and I had been a supporter since I was a youngster. It was absolute utopia. The youth development officer added "As you are aware, we particularly look after the young, local boys at this club." As my Dad was working and my Mum did not drive, I had got a lift home with another local player and his father who had been offered terms. The car pulled up at the front of the house where I lived, the door swung open and off I shot!

"Thanks for the lift", I recited as I dashed away!

I shot down the path, rushed through the door and without taking a breath said to my mother:

"They want to sign me; they've offered me terms."

"That is incredible son, absolutely incredible."

I continued about a hundred miles an hour… "They, they want to speak to you and Dad next week and you have to go in and see the manager…"

Through tears of happiness, my Mum hugged me tightly and said, "Brilliant news son, we're very proud of you"

What a glorious moment!

The hard work now started, and the first experiences of an elite level environment came within "B" team football. I was with a coach who had a lot of time for me. He was an academy graduate who had played in one of the most glorious periods of the club's history. He spoke to you as a person and not some robot and was warming in his persona, offering plenty of praise and encouragement. When there wasn't a game, I would be invited down to train on a Saturday morning, so there was no respite. It was probably the club's way of integration, however we used to join in with the older, full-time apprentices (first and second years) and some seemed to have a problem with this. At the top of the training ground pitch, there was a small, neatly groomed area which had been affectionately christened "Little Wembley." I recall heading up there one morning and after a warm-up, starting some circle work. The objective would be to keep the ball off two the lads in the middle (who were trying to intercept the passes). Older, more established players would constantly try to ridicule you, by hitting the ball a lot harder than need be. This was naturally made it more difficult and ultimately was followed by a poor touch, or the ball bouncing off you. As soon as this happened, expletives from the youth team coach would rain down and he would question your touch, your control, your ability, followed by banter that would belittle you in front of others basically insinuating that you weren't up for it. I'm not sure why this was happening, or why they would do this, but it seemed like a case of

testing you out. Who was this kid coming into the environment? How good was he? What was his touch like? What was his character like? He better not think he is taking my place. Sadly, it had a reversal effect, because it got to the stage where you hoped the ball wouldn't come to you, or you hid away. It certainly didn't seem like elite level coaching what I'd envisaged. My confidence was low; I wondered what I was doing there, and I had hardly started the journey yet! True acceptance was going to be a tough thing and I had to learn quickly.

A week or two after this initial training experience was one of the most destructive and emotionally shattering situations, I would ever encounter within my short football life. I was still settling down, a few doubts had crept in, I was low in confidence and was selected to play in a game that had been outstanding from the previous season, a cup final. My Mum and Dad received a phone call the day before requesting if I could play as there were injuries within the older players. I, of course, said yes and can recall making my way to the meeting point, walking across the club car park, and seeing the orange minibus that the lads used to travel on for away games, parked, getting loaded with kit. I was nervous, anxious, and wary of what was to come. As I was still only a schoolboy and was going to be playing with older players, I was extremely anxious. Quite simply, I did not feel ready for this and was overthinking and felt pressured. It was a big deal! I was a 15-year-old playing with and against 17-18-year-olds and this is where I saw it at first hand. What world was I entering? A hard, unforgiving, brutal world. A world where no-one cared about your emotions, your thoughts, your feelings. It was all about results. All you could do was try and keep composed, dig in and do your best. It was like waiting to go into the lion's den. If there was anywhere else I could've been, I would've been there in a shot! We won the final 4-2 but, for some reason, I absolutely got hammered

afterwards. Still to this day, I wasn't sure why this happened to me? Because of nerves, I made an early mistake and under hit a back pass to the keeper and our centre half had to intervene and make a last-ditch tackle, which got him injured. I got absolutely lambasted from the touchline and can recall even the physio having a go when he came on to treat the player.

"What the f**k was that? (The coach's name) has told me to tell you if you do not sort yourself in the next 10 minutes; you are f*****g coming off. F*****g pull yourself together."

I took a deep breath and turned away. I felt lost, out of my depth. I had to find something, and had to really dig in to get through, which I did. There was no choice! I was in it! You had to learn quickly and find a way. The game seemed unbelievably fast where you took a first touch, and an opposing player was closing you down like a flash. There seemed no time to breathe! This was totally different to anything I had encountered before. I had played at good levels, including for my town and county, but this was something else. Welcome to the world of professional football! After the game, there was more brutality. The coach was on my back, vitriolic, his face matching his red coloured top. He screamed obscenities right in my face.

"Are you sure you want to be a professional footballer son, are you, because watching that I am not sure it is for you?...I mean come on, some of your touches and passing today, f**k me …you cannot take extra touches, don't you realise that son…and you nearly got players killed on occasions…f*****g useless."

The changing room was tight and small which didn't help, nor did the ranting and raving in front of others. It was a baptism of fire. I was only 15 years old! I felt terrible, confused, and ashamed, I didn't know where to turn, what to do next, what to say to my parents after. This was not the sport and game I had loved playing. I clammed up and pretended all was ok. My mind was whirring away. I was in a state of traumatised confusion. I can remember feeling very alone with no one to talk to. I didn't want to appear as soft or weak and who would listen anyway? The fact of the matter was I wanted to be a professional football player. It was a dream of mine from playing in the garden with my Dad.

A few days after on a Saturday morning, I had come to play for the club's "B" team. I was milling about, getting myself ready to go over to the other training ground and the coach spotted me and shouted after me whilst I was heading down the stairs. He apologised about the abrasive nature of Thursday night's attack:

"Can I have a quick word son?"

"Yep, sure"

"I just want to apologise for the other night. I think I went a bit over the top at times. I was a bit harsh on you and I just wanted to say it is for your own good."

I just nodded and carried on heading down the stairs. As I was only 15 years old, I wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean. One thing I did know that our relationship was always going to be demanding from now on as I knew what he could be capable of. I can recall walking away shrugging my shoulders and thinking, "well I've just got to push on now, take the experience as constructively as possible, do my

best and keep working hard." There was nothing fundamentally going to change in my approach and outlook. The thing it did do though was make me very conscious and wary of his behaviour and how he could flare up. If he communicated in a way that I could understand and learn from, I would have appreciated that. The total experience confused me a lot as a young player trying to make my way in the game.

4.7   Heading into the big boy's playground.

One of the key things I had felt within junior football and in anything that made me improve and grow was trust and connection. Now I had started to become involved with a professional club, it was becoming abundantly clear that sadly there wasn't going to be much of that. From that initial tirade, the experience turned into one of survival than one of confidence, composure, surety, and growth. This was one of the key issues that I had to deal with from the movement of grass roots football into a professional football environment. I had to regularly dig deep, draw on own reserves, mental strength, keep battling. I knew I was a decent player, but now I had come into this elite world where competition was fierce, I wasn't really made to feel like one. It felt there had been a levelling off period. There was limited praise, maybe on occasion and this affected my motivation and preparation for competition; I was lying in bed on the morning of games overthinking – running lots of little scenarios through my mind which was in the main, negative imagery, envisaging lots of conscious thoughts about what would happen if I made an error or a mistake! In a strange kind of way, it made my concentration harden, and toughened my mind, but it wasn't the best of preparation from a personal perspective. I didn't look forwards to playing on many occasions; it was now a job more than a loved pastime. I was doing it for me, no-one else. Metaphorically it was like going to war every Saturday morning. Win or nothing.

What about personal development and growth and improving? What about learning my trade and being given feedback and the tools to become a better player? That didn't seem to be top of the agenda. It was certainly a challenging environment and culture. You were treated like a man at 16 years old! It was a tough, brutal world, full of harshness where integrity, openness, and honesty, despite being on everyone's lips was a weakness. I was very proud of myself for coping with this environment and producing some very decent performances against what I felt were very taxing circumstances. It was sink or swim, digging deep, being brave and getting through rather than freedom, enjoyment, and joy.

Although I would never admit it to anyone, as it seemed like a glorious opportunity to the external observer, I was unhappy in the environment and the long bus journeys to training were playing havoc with my mental state. I used to catch the number 94 bus from the top of my road, and this would take about an hour to get to the training ground. Lots of thoughts used to go through my head.

"I would rather be going anywhere else than here" … "Is there another opportunity I could investigate or go to?" … "Why can't the coaches be more supportive and offer more encouragement?"

I used to sit through my bus ride and imagine what life would be like outside of the world I was in, and I used to think about other opportunities and other jobs and what they would be like. I pushed on in the hope that things would improve and get better, and I used music as something to keep me going.

After digging in, pushing on and getting in some decent performances, I got a call up for the reserve team at 16, which was quite a rare feat back then. At this stage of my career, it was apparent I was rated, and was someone who could play, but I wasn't being treated as though I was rated. I didn't feel it. In fact, I felt no connection with the coaches and manager whatsoever. To be honest, there wasn't really a close relationship built with these support staff and communication/ dialogue was limited. In fact, there wasn't a relationship at all. You were told something, and you did it! All there seemed to be were bit parts of dialogue and noticing him and the assistant manager stood on the side watching junior games, and on occasions watching the apprentices train for a small period. On occasions, however, and even though we were very young players and learning our trade, the manger wouldn't hold back, especially if games weren't panning out as much as well as hoped. I witnessed some severe dressing downs at half times/ after games and the hostile criticism would be peppered with expletives. The dressing room door would crash open and the manager would crouch down a couple of inches from your face, hands tightly scrunched behind his back and scream a vitriolic tirade that seemed to last an eternity.

"YOU!...you f*****g c**t…their midfielder is taking the f*****g p**s out of you…what are you f*****g going to do about it eh?"

You tried to keep eye contact away from him in case he remembered a minor incident about yourself in the first half, where he would launch towards you. There seemed to be a cultural mantra of him "doing it for your own good" but I never had a personality who bought into this dominant, primary method of approach. Only later did it emerge, and on retrospect you realised that the approach was a test of character and he was

after players who would stand up to him and respond back. His reasoning was that if you could not do that then how would you cope in a first team environment where crowds were ruthless and winning was everything. There were not many 16, 17- and 18-year-olds who would do this! To this day, I never fully understood the approach and was an opposite to what I had experienced so far in my football journey. Encouragement, respect, and someone believing in me brought the best out. However, I did not mind the odd bit of discomfort if I could understand what it was for and why the discomfort could make me grow. I could certainly look after myself and hold my own and considered myself someone who would always give their all, whether that be in matches or in training. I was a team player. The professional football environment that I experienced was built a culture of fear and a harsh, brutal one to come to terms with. It was a tough world, with many egos apparent and lots of dominant challenge every day. There was a distinct hierarchy in dressing rooms, and some of the hierarchy bordered on bullying, control, and territory. The manager was new to the job when I first signed schoolboy forms and, on reflection you wondered whether certain coaches were acting up to suit the manager's abrasive style. They would not have been in a job otherwise. There was lots of survival strategies evident in the football culture at the time, and often it was about looking after yourself and making sure it wasn't your fault. Things could quickly escalate, and you didn't want to be the one without a chair when the music stopped. A team environment, but also incredibly selfish. Some players were particularly good at this and would cosy up to the perceived experts (i.e., the management or the coaching team), or act like a clown seemingly to gain approval. There was a word for them in the footballing world. The modern parlance would be a social networker. We called them "busy." We would come back from training, and someone would say, "Look at busy over there" or,

"You've been a bit busy today." It was a cultural phrase of trying to buy favour through different means rather than on the football pitch. This was never me and it was not my personal values. I wasn't a yes man. My family were not, and it was never, ever encouraged to get on. Some did it. I had seen their methods, but it was never my method. There's a phrase that permeates modern existence that says, "It isn't what you know, it's who you know." I wanted to get on through sheer 100% ability, not acting like a fool in the dressing room to get noticed or gain a foot on the ladder. I could never see the point to be honest. It seemed like acting to me and not being genuine.

One of the key things that ran deep inside the football clubs I'd played for was the shop floor working class culture of banter and wind ups. It happened at all levels, whether it involved the players, the coaches, the manger, the canteen staff, the physio, there was always fun which was poked. It could be incredibly funny or incredibly embarrassing, whichever was the perpetrator's intention. When I arrived as an apprentice, dressing rooms were shared and it was like the first day of school all over again. Right from the first moment of full-time existence, there was banter, mickey taking and a distinct ranking order amongst the older boys/apprentices. There was even an older apprentice who was tagged as a foreman, and he would be link between the management and the youth players. As you were new, you didn't know whether the older boys were being serious or having a mess about and they'd say things like "The gaffer has just been down and wants to see you", or "a senior pro wants a quick word in the first team dressing room." Both would involve either knocking on the manager's door or on the first team dressing room door, which as a young, fresh-faced novice could be a terrifying experience. The knock on the door would instigate a "Come in" …and the entry would be usually met with a steely gaze and "What the

f**k do you want?" … "I believe you want a word with me gaffer?" … "F**k off" he would say" …the door would be closed, the face would be red and there would be hysteria and laughter from the bottom of the stairs where the apprentices would be huddled laughing, belittling you. I never really got some of the humour to be honest. I was there to learn and develop my craft as a football player, not to enter the school system again. On many occasions, it was difficult finding meaning amidst all this madness.

As well as your football training, there would be a rota of duties that you would have to attend to as part of the daily work. These could be pumping balls up, getting the training kit together, sweeping dressing rooms, cleaning boots and cleaning showers and the majority would have to be done before you could get pardoned for the end of the day. The youth coach would come down, check all areas and it would either be met with "Ok, all good see you tomorrow", or "There's still f*****g mud on the boot room floor", or, "The floor has s**t in that corner." This would be met with the customary groan, knowing that you would have to wait for another hour before it would be checked again. If it was your job that had let the others down, you could end up with something called a "court case." A court would be assembled amongst the older players, and it would be enacted as though it was a real court case. The accused could have a defence and there would be a prosecution and a judge who would pass sentence. If found guilty, there was a range of punishments that could be served and some of them were gruesome. They'd range from having Vaseline smeared all over you, having boot polish smeared all over you, and I even saw youth players having to run naked laps in the training ground snow before being pelted with snowballs by all the playing staff, management included! There were also punishments handed out where it involved acts that you had to do in

front of the other players, like dancing in a nightclub, chatting a girl up or even made to pretend you were making love to the physiotherapist bed in the dressing room! This would be more excruciatingly embarrassing if some of the first team players had heard what was going on and had wandered into the dressing room. I never associated this with the art of playing football and wondered where the initial message of "We look after the youth players here" fitted into it all? As daily existence developed you started to change and become not yourself, acting differently to mould into the culture and the environment, keeping quiet, not voicing an opinion. It was hard as your core values were constantly challenged. I felt an air of timidity around myself. The expression, joy, and freedom that you had when you were a young player in that playground at primary school had started to wilt away like a dying flower and the love of the game was getting tested. I wasn't getting any water or sunlight to grow! My football life within this club was dying before it had even started. It evolved into a safety first, hand brake on approach, where you didn't want to make mistakes and get a hammering! You felt yourself ultimately protecting yourself and retracting or withdrawing. Of course, I worked hard, tackled hard, passed well, always did my best, physically and mentally for the club, but the fact of the matter was I couldn't totally be me in this environment and culture. It was if I was an educated person operating in a relatively uneducated environment. It was if you were a top, trained chef having to operate in a café! On many occasions, I felt I didn't fit in. There seemed to a bias towards some of the other players, who were acting the clown all the time, or weren't afraid to speak out and be vocal. I would not have dreamed of knocking on the manager's door to ask for some support, so that option was null and void. The last thing I wanted to do was disclose this to the coach, because I didn't want him thinking I was soft, or couldn't cut the mustard. I didn't want to burden my parents outside of

the club, because I didn't want them to think I was struggling within this privileged, unbelievable opportunity. I didn't want my girlfriend and girlfriend's family seeing I was struggling, and I put this male, macho, dominant act on. It was a pride thing. Maybe I should've spoken out, but who would listen? I felt I had no-one to turn to and no-one to talk to. It had evolved into a battling, digging in situation; a basically 'pretending that all was ok' scenario. Someone who understood people would have been invaluable at this time.

Still to this day, there are subtle comparative factors to modern coaching, performance, and the scrutiny of the media. For many entering a football environment, especially at younger levels, the freedom is removed, and high pressure reveals itself to some as young as 9 years old. This makes me quite sad, after all football is all about play and not saving lives! The modern game has huge rewards, and it seems that these rewards must be chased at all costs.

On occasions within the journey in and through professional football, it was not all bad or doom and gloom! I felt warmth and genuine respect from some of the other club coaches (typically the ex-players who had been there and done it) but sadly not with some of the others. I had played in a youth team game on the club first team ground and was walking towards doing a training session the morning after. On my shoulder came an ex-player who was heavily decorated with major honours:

"I just wanted to say I thought you were "f****g brilliant on Wednesday night…you reminded me a lot of myself…used the ball well, won your aerial battles, drove your team on, absolutely f*****g magic."

This made me feel 10 feet tall. Another time, there had been training on the first team pitch where there was a crossing and finishing drill. As the ball was played to me in a wide position, I knocked the ball towards the dead ball line and swung over a perfect shaped sweet cross at the hallowed end, which was duly bullet headed past the keeper (by the first team centre forward). As I was heading back to position, the coach, who again had been a decorated hero at the club whispered:

"What a f*****g cross that was, you keep this up, do you hear me?"

Again, I felt invincible, chest out, wanted, and most importantly rated. For me, it was all about connections, genuine connections and not those sought from acting the clown. This is what I was here for, to develop my game, to show what I could do. It was all about being and becoming and little bits of praise here and there certainly championed the cause.

Another issue that seemed to rear its head on occasions, was coaches favouring other players. It became a frustrating way of existence when you saw other players seeming to get away with things in training and in matches that you were hauled over the coals for. Communication that was peppered with expletives towards you would remain quiet when someone else made a misdemeanour. When I saw this happening, both within training and within matches, I would think to myself (about the coach):

"You're bang out of order…you slaughtered me for not knocking a ball through first time, someone else has just done it in the team, and you have not said anything."

This caused anxiety and frustration, but you just battled on with it. You loved and wanted to play for the club and head towards the first team and that was a key issue. The coaches knew this.

Another area that made me ponder on occasions was the inconsistent treatment of the other players away from the training ground and on match days. One of these players was the son of the manager and there would be occasions where apprentice jobs needed to be finished off. The manager would peer his head round the dressing room door and say, "Are you ready son?" The son would then relinquish his duties, stand his brush in the corner, and leave for his lift home. I was always led to believe that a team was a team, and the key elements of an effective team were to stick together through thick and thin. Although other players said in jest, "Ah, he's leaving, again, is he?" none of them had the moral courage to speak out and confront the issue. It was a very difficult scenario. Should I have spoken out? Would anyone listen? Intuition told me not to. Although what was happening was clearly wrong, and challenged my inner thoughts and core values, who was I to argue? It certainly made me think that this environment was not a level playing field. It was become increasingly clear that there were a lack of depth and connection within the club to really thrive and move my game forwards. It was seen in odd patches, but these were sparse.

At the end of the working week, and usually after a game on the Saturday, most apprentices would head into the town for a night out, where most of the banter and tales would come out early Monday morning. I was in a steady relationship at the time, so even at the tender years of 16/ 17 years old, I was happy to be settled. To be honest, and although I believe fully in social cohesion and building team bonding, I didn't really get much from the tales that would be told. All in all, there seemed to be

a glut of poor, unethical behaviour from many. Far too much drinking, bragging about exploits with women, and generally banter that would involve treating and talking about others with a distinct lack of respect. Although challenging and again clashing with personal core values, I just nodded, smiled, and carried on getting ready for training. I stuck to my guns. I had the tools before I went in. I was reasonably well educated, which seemed to be unusual for this environment and culture. A lot of the banter and chit chat that emerged from dressing rooms was based on filth and basically who could make the biggest clown of themselves. In a professional football club environment, education was not seen as an important factor, and many were suspicious of educated people.

One morning the minibus had arrived at training and the young players got off. We wandered over to the training pitch and the coach was stood there.

"Did you do well in your exams?" he asked me.

"Not too bad", I responded proudly… "I managed to get 5 GCSE's, A-C."

"What the f**k are you doing here?" he said.

This would be frustrating, and he would often say in training when selecting teams or picking sides for a small-sided game:

"The brainboxes go over here" and the "Thick c***s like me go over there."

This created a divide amongst the young players and although I was doing absolutely nothing wrong, you were made to feel as though you were some sort of alien, or there was something wrong with you if you had a decent educational background. It was if

there was some sort of bullying culture created and you were often challenged and attempted to be ridiculed on quite a few occasions. As part of the apprenticeship, there was a referee's course that everyone had to attend. I was a keen learner and would try and absorb most things to improve my knowledge of certain things. Anything that could help me improve or get better. During the course there was a question thrown open which involved me putting my hand up and providing an answer of "ungentlemanly conduct." The instructor was clearly impressed, however a few of the apprentices behind me started sniggering and shouting "Eh, what?" This carried on into a coaching course the next week and as I was walking towards the session, first thing in the morning, someone behind me called "Oooh, ungentlemanly conduct" with a few laughs from some of the other players in the group. I lost my temper, and even though knew I was crossing a boundary, and felt fearful of implications, I turned around and grabbed him by the throat. He panicked and backed down. I was starting to get fed up with it all. Even though most of the group were 17/18 it still bordered on youthful secondary school behaviour. I was here to learn and get better, not get belittled and taken the p**s out of. Later, one of my teammates ran after me and said, "Nice one Tongie, he needed that." It died down as soon as it had begun, but sometimes, people need to learn lessons and be put in their place. He'd think twice before doing it again.

As well as most of the players being quick to weigh in with sarcasm and belittlement, there were often occasions where the coaching staff would undertake strange things too, especially around a group of 16- and 17-year-olds. One incident involved the assistant manager shouting to the apprentices "Right everyone over in the sauna now." We had a sauna between the apprentice dressing room and the reserve team dressing room, which would typically fit around 6/8 in comfortably. For

some reason, the assistant manager wanted everyone to cram in there (approx.14 of us plus the assistant manager himself). Some of the others found this hilarious and classified it as banter but I just didn't see the joke to be honest. We crammed in there and then the assistant manager would start with daft questions. "What do you think of this?", "It's great in here isn't it?" It was hard to respond, because if you didn't respond, you came across rude, if you responded and it didn't sound right, the other apprentices would laugh at you. It was a strange experience. Another occasion involving banter came at an event staged at the ground. There was some sort of supporter's event and we got told we had to go with our blazers, shirts, and ties on. It was getting towards the end of the night, and the apprentices were sat round a table observing what was going on, and were quiet, not saying very much. The assistant manager came over and said that we all had to go on the dance floor, do a dance for 30 seconds and then come off. Again, I didn't see the point to be honest and it seemed more like acting stupidly, than with professionalism and dignity. He came to me and said:

"Right Tongie, your turn, off you go."

"I'm not doing it."

"What do you mean you're not doing it?"

"I'm not doing it." "Right, no-one leaves here till Tongie does it."

It was a stand-off, and I wasn't making myself look a fool for other people's benefit and laughs. No way. I stood my ground and wouldn't move. I was proud of myself; sometimes you had to stand alone if you knew things weren't being done for the right reasons. I was summoned to the coaches' office in the morning, and it was mentioned

by the youth team manager. It had obviously got back what had happened. He said to me "Fair play for standing your ground Tongie, good lad." Even though the easy option would've been to partake in the banter, and dance in front of strangers, I walked out of that room feeling proud of myself. I wasn't going to compromise me and what I truly believed in for the sake of others humour. It was tough though. I had to stand alone and by my values.

One of the yearly cultural events used to revolve around the annual Xmas dinner. Within this, the apprentices would have to sing, tell a joke, or act a scene out in front of the manager, coaches and first team players. Although I'm sure it was highly amusing for the senior people, it was terrifying for a young lad, especially if you had a quiet, introverted personality! If you did something random, or forgot words to a song, this would stick, and a nickname would be bestowed on you for the rest of the season. Again, you could never be sure if players were laughing with you or laughing at you. It was a test of character and made you dig deep.

On occasions, I can recall academics coming into the training ground to deliver some material based on their work or findings. Everyone would be clustered into the dressing room and the spotlight would firmly be on. They stood out as what would typify an academic. This was a tracksuit, jeans, t-shirts, and training kit world and not jumper and trousers one. The best always listened, because they had respect for people, and they wanted to improve their game in any way they could. Others wouldn't listen and banter would be flowing "Where did you get your shoes from?" or "Did you play?" would be typical questions thrown into the mix. I recall one academic discussing the effects of toothpaste and how it could weaken you (most would clean their teeth or the morning of a game). He brought a player to the front, requested him to rub a small amount of toothpaste onto his gums, left it a little bit and

asked him to raise his arms. The fella then took hold of one arm, put a small amount of resistance on it and asked the player to try and push his arm up. The player really struggled, and the message had struck home. As well as "toothpaste man" as he was affectionately known, another female fitness professional turned up one day and went through the concepts of a healthy diet. She advised percentages of carbohydrates, proteins and fats and went onto discuss the importance of grains, wheat, corn, and nuts. Again, the banter followed with one senior professional shouting out "Do you eat that from a nose bag?" There were sniggers all around and you had to be able to handle yourself to survive that and not lose the message. It was a "welcome to our world" message.

Seeing past the banter, I've always believed it was useful if a senior player bought into something as you had more likelihood of other players following the example. One professional had started ingesting seaweed tablets as part of his regular diet. He said that he felt fantastic and that his fitness had improved. Before you knew it, there were tonnes of boxes arriving at the training ground, and even the apprentices were taking these on board. Much to everyone's amusement, there was one side effect; your urine turned a luminous colour, but it was a small price to pay to get ahead, as the small percentages mattered in this world.

As with many top clubs in a variety of fields, the culture was win, win, win and losing was not an option. This was always promoted both in training sessions and within competition. Even if a team was getting a pasting, there would no let-up and a view would be cast of "Enjoy, it and hold no mercy, it could be you on the other side." The culture was a tough one, the environment was hard, where praise was scarce, and expectations were huge. Sadly, there was experiences of bullying. Some will say that it was all about building character, but coaches knew what you wanted

(to become a first team player) and they thrived on that. It was an extraordinarily difficult environment to trust people and be open. You had to be extra careful who you divulged things too, and many players would come into the physiotherapist's room, where at least there was a quiet area and where you felt the medical experts understood what confidentiality was about. You had to try and hide any weakness all the time, always appear to look in control and press on. I would never have dreamed saying I was struggling, or going to ask for help, even in an appraisal situation. I feel this is still a big problem even to this day. There was no room for being soft and sensitive; this was a man's world you were in!

On occasion, there were some brutal exchanges in the dressing rooms at half-time with expletives and anger peppering the dialogue. If you were struggling or not performing at the expected level, it was not uncommon for the dressing room door to swing open on its hinges and tirades launched at players. If you had been the recipient, it was always hard to perform after that. It was all about understanding and learning. Most of the time, it could've been a hammering for something that you didn't understand why. In the heat of the moment, it was difficult for any player to have replied with, "I don't understand what you mean?" so you just took it. I suppose some coaches are more educated and could explain the reasons better and what the player could do better in the second half, but in this lived world, it seemed to be some sort of cultural norm. I can say it toughened your mind and rose your concentration levels, but I am not sure whether it was conducive to improving performance and expression was difficult after being the receiver of such a vitriolic attack. Other typical behaviours that the coaching staff used to partake in involved banging on the window that overlooked the training ground. The manager/coaching staff must have thought that the upstairs window was the perfect vantage point for watching the action

unfold and it could provide a bird's eye view on playing positions and what was happening out on the pitch. If there was a stray pass, or a player didn't win a challenge for example, the window would be thudded and on occasions, you wondered whether the window would crash through! You didn't want to glance up like a naughty schoolboy, as you'd probably witness the manager's or the coach's mouth frothing, blood red with rage! From a personal perspective, it wasn't the most traditional method of coaching, and it certainly wouldn't have been my approach, but it tightened concentration, as you didn't want to make a mistake and feel the wrath! Over the four years of my development as a youth player to a professional player the record of winning games was high. It was bred into you. It was win or nothing. When he was at a match, the manager often used to stick his head around the dressing room door and say, "Enjoy it, but win." Also, on occasion, the junior sides would house a first team player coming back from injury and you would regularly be able to observe these players in action. I would watch how they warmed up, how they behaved, how they prepared. It was a great education. Once, there was an elite level player coming back and I can recall thinking that they would stroll back in and in some ways be a hindrance in the side (i.e., we would be carrying them that morning). How wrong I was. Within 5 mins of the kick-off, he was barking orders, tearing up and down the pitch like there was no tomorrow and had absolutely clattered into someone on the far touchline. Again, I was witnessing what it was like to be a winner and how to get to the top of your trade and that whoever you were at the club, the standards were set, and you would have to adhere to those standards and forever keep striving to surpass them. The environment was so incredibly demanding. We got to the end of the season, had won the league comfortably and I felt I had played well and certainly earned my winner's medal. I saw the manager a week or so later and he handed me a

list on what he felt I'd done wrong throughout the season, and I remember humorously relying back "It's a good job we won the league, or else you'd have us all shot!" It was a consistent story of strive, strive, strive and this proved to be both physically and mentally challenging.

At the end of the season, we always went on a little tour to play in a competition, and it was interesting to see different parts of the world, different cultures and play against different players. On one tour, we had played well, got through to the final and I had played in every game leading up to this. I was sitting in the dressing room and really looking forwards to the challenge. The coach arrived with his ruffled sheet which he had taken out of pocket…eyes peered towards him…

"…And the team for the final is…"

The coach went through all the positions and my name was not there. In fact, I was not even on the bench. I couldn't believe I wasn't in it. I had been left out and was extremely disappointed. There was absolutely no explanation from the coach, and I took my place on the bench timidly and watched the action unfold. This may sound extraordinarily harsh, and possibly selfish, but the team lost the final and it didn't bother me one bit. I didn't really feel part of it and would have found it very hard to celebrate, especially with the coaching staff if we had have won it. There were plenty of occasions like this where you had to be mentally resilient, and I (and many others) found the going tough because nothing was said to you outlining the reasons why you had been left out. It was therefore difficult to understand and reason why certain decisions had been made, or why you had been deselected to help you improve for the future. Loads of questions would be running through your head and you felt you were

always judged all the time, both on and off the field. Across the youth teams, reserve sides and one 1st team appearance in a friendly, I represented the club in 108 games, across 4 seasons, and was unbeaten in 90 of them (win/draw). We won the leagues that we played in 3 times out of 4, we won a prestigious major youth tournament abroad, reached the latter stages of the youth cup competitions over the two years I was apprentice and when I reflect, I am extremely proud of those figures.

One of the things that making your way in the game does bring is lots of interest outside of your close circle. This can come from media exposure such as the local newspapers or in modern day terms things such as social media platforms. One of the biggest challenges away from the game is making sure you stay around people that you trust. There would often be occasions where I would be watching my girlfriend play rounders and someone would saddle up and say, "Hello Alan, is there any chance of some tickets for Saturday?" or if the first team had done really well, "Is there any chance of two Cup Final tickets?" It was difficult at times, and I would often go out of my way to accommodate the different requests that I was receiving. You didn't want to come across unhelpful, but also sometimes it wasn't realistic to get hold of some tickets at the drop of a hat. I can say that I always tried my best and if the ticket had cost money, I simply passed them on for the money I'd purchased them for. As I was only 17/18 years old and still living at my parents at the time, I had grown up around lots of different people, and you could check the house number in the telephone directory. On occasion there would be a call in the evening, where my parents would relay "There's someone on the phone for you", and someone would say (who I'd not seen for a very long time) "Hi Alan, how are you keeping, is there any chance of a ticket for the Cup Final?" Like I mentioned, it was hard to say "There isn't" most of the time, because you didn't want to let anyone down. It was about

learning quickly on how to approach these requests and be firm if the task was unattainable.

Away from the ticket's scenario, many people would also want to talk to you all the time about football even in places such as the supermarket, restaurants, the cinema, or even when you were taking money out of a cash machine. It was never about how I was, or what I felt, or any issues I may be having, it was always about other players, games, and what was happening. Aside from the close people around you, there would sadly be also people who you felt wanted to see you fail. Again, this was a hard lesson for a young player to learn. I would often get "That's not a proper job, you only kick a ball around" and there would be silly, sometimes spiteful comments that weren't needed. It was a tough world in there, and people hadn't a clue what it was really like. I always enjoyed talking to people about football, as I enjoyed hearing different perspectives and views. This often took place pre-game or post-match, or even in the local pub on a Sunday. All the time you were learning and one thing that you do realise is that people can quickly vanish and head onto the next big thing.

As many within professional football will tell you, the time absolutely flies by and the seasons I spent as a young professional had gone quickly. I felt I had progressed ok, and the moment had arrived for contract renewals. The kind of thing in professional football you always knew was approaching but pushed firmly to the back of your mind to concentrate playing as well as possible. The day started off as normal, lads drifting into the training ground, skipping down the steps to the dressing rooms, sitting down, unrolling their towels of kit, chatting; the whine of the ball "pumping up" machine whirring noisily in the background. I sensed the lads were strangely quieter on this day for some reason; there was an unbeknown anticipation puncturing

the air as if the moment had presented itself in a way that only a moment like this could. There had been rumours that this was the day that contract renewals would be on the table and decisions about people's livelihoods were going to be made. We sat in the dressing room, wondering what order players would go and see the manager. A face appeared around the door. The face of the reserve team manager. A face that seemed full of humility, sensitivity, compassion. That's what I read anyway. This moment was potentially life changing, enormous. The first person had received the message that the gaffer wanted to see them; it was here, time stood still. Lads dealt with it in different ways. Some did not change, they pretended they were not bothered. Their minds were away into the future, "I'll get a club nearer home" or "I'll sort something." How could you not be bothered? Of course, they surely wanted a contract and to stay! This was one of the biggest clubs in football. I sensed acting again, which happened all too often within this macho culture. This was a surreal experience; hopes, dreams, goals realised, or identity smashed to pieces within an instant. I sat transfixed, my eyes darting across the room, trying to remain composed, in control. A few players held contracts that weren't up for renewal yet, so nothing affected them. It was business as usual for them. Lots of laughter and banter still occupied those lads. Slowly, one by one, players returned to the dressing room. All in all, there was humility and compassion. The words whispered when some of the players returned, "He's given me another year", or "I've got another two years." There wasn't any fist pumping, cockiness or whooping and hollering; maybe that would be shared outside of the dressing room with family and friends. As one by one appeared, you congratulated them, or gave them a handshake. What else could you do? You had to be big, be courageous to acknowledge their achievements; even though potentially your news could be one of absolute devastation. After 2 or 3

players had arrived bearing their good news, the first departure appeared, and their bad news was delivered. A hunched, quiet, etch of pain on the face followed by the cultural phrase, "I'm getting bombed" broke the anticipated air of silence. There were some tears. Even the hardest of personalities were now stripped to their core and the true impact of what had happened emerged. This was greeted by gasps of "Never" or "No way mate." Even on this day of all days, some players had the depth and capacity to wind up others, so even this earth-shattering news had some hanging on for an "I'm joking" or "Not really, I've got another contract." The elapsing time and moment of patience informed the players this time it wasn't a wind up. The player slumped onto his dressing room seat as players surrounded them offering condolences and words that they hoped would help in some way. Nothing could really be said.

The face appeared at the door again and requested me. The moment of truth had arrived. "C'mon Al." I drew a sharp intake of breath, rose, and moved forwards. I edged towards him, rigid, apprehensive, like a dog following its master. I scanned his face and eyes for clues; was he positive? Was he negative? It was a poker face; he was giving absolutely nothing away. I climbed three short flights of stairs, my head bowed, a million thoughts going through my mind. Scenarios of what if this and what if that? Along the short passageway we moved, before a sharp knock on the light brown wooden door labelled Manager. I recall the noise of the door opening before, "Gaffer, Alan Tonge" was recited. I edged passed and headed into his office. The manager was sat behind a desk in front of me on a dark leather chair with his initialled red training jumper on. My eyes scanned the surroundings; photos of the manager, alongside other managers and famous people adjourned the walls. There was a window behind him to the glorious, sacred pitch, where so many battles had taken place, where so many battles had been won. For a split second I felt unease, respect, a

sense of smallness. A myriad of emotions really. The door closed behind me. It was me and him. As with the reserve team manager, I quickly scanned his face for clues. Nothing. And then it was delivered. Like a slinger reaching for his gun first and pulling the trigger:

"I'm sorry, and there is no easy way to say this, but we're going to have to let you go son."

His words hung in the air for what seemed a lifetime. A truly surreal experience. I could feel my body become numb, I nodded with humility. It was like my body had caved in, and I'd lost all control of my physical self; like a set of bellows with the air squeezed out…

"We feel that you haven't quite got the pace to make it as a regular at first team level."

I took it as best as I could in that moment; what was I supposed to do? Start arguing? Challenge the manager? Cry? Beg for another chance? I was stripped down to my core and I portrayed who I truly was. I can remember saying "thanks for the opportunity to play at this unbelievable club" and that was that. He said:

"You've never given me one minute of bother since you've been here, and we'll try our best to get you fixed up with something else."

I turned away towards the door. My legs feeling as though they had been on a long-distance run. My head spinning with a million questions. All that I had worked for since a young child of 7, all my dreams of staying at the club I had supported since a boy had been blown apart. I was scared, isolated, and vulnerable. What now? What comes next? Where do I go? What do I do? How do I tell people?

I watched aghast as many of the young players who had suffered the same fate dived into the training room to steal training kit including shirts, shorts, and tracksuit tops. I also had to observe many of them sell on match tickets that were left for the rest of the season for exorbitant prices. This included for a major final and some of the money that was getting passed about was silly. Tickets had been passed to first team players and wedges of cash were being handed back a few days later. This wasn't right and I always had the supporter at the heart of everything I did. Mine were passed on for face value. There was no way I could see a lifeblood supporter having to pay hugely over the odds to follow their team. It was sad to see really.

Anyway, for the meantime, I attempted to keep the devastating news hidden to buy myself sometime to think. It was absolutely devastating telling my parents. They had been there all the way from me being a youngster kicking a ball in the garden for the first time and ultimately, I felt I had let them down. As always, they were a tower of strength and fully supportive of whatever I wanted to do next, or wherever I wanted to head:

"Don't worry, something will turn up…it's happened for a reason…"

I also kept the news hidden from my girlfriend's family, but this in time proved to be a big mistake. One afternoon, I wandered into their kitchen after training and was met by:

"Have you seen the local paper tonight?"

"No, why?"

"You're getting released lad, it's on the sports pages!"

Silence.

Of course, I already knew, but I had to act that I didn't know. The paper was passed my way. All I could do is pretend I was shocked and aghast and read the little paragraph over and over that was staring at me in the face.

"Eight players are released… (name of club) have issued their retain and release list and the following players have been given a free transfer"

The inevitable questions started:

"What are you going to do now?"

"Have you got another club lined up?"

"Why have they released you?"

It was very, very difficult to deal with and for the current moment, the future looked very grey indeed. The news started to leak out week by week and someone at a wedding reception who had obviously heard the news could not wait to stick the

dagger in. I was sat with my girlfriend when the man in question said sarcastically in front of a table full of people:

> "So, you've been sacked then?"
>
> "No, sadly I have been released on a free transfer."
>
> "That is being sacked, isn't it?"

He would not let it go. I hated that term. Sacking to me was such a negative expression; it was like you had done something wrong! I had behaved, tried to do my best, had worked hard but just fell short of the mark, like hundreds of others young players and young professionals. I tried to smile and pretend all was ok, but it was hard. This experience had cut very deep and a huge part of my who I was drastically affected. Within social situations:

> "How are you doing Alan?"
>
> "I'm not too bad thanks."
>
> "How's the football?"
>
> "Errr, yeah, it's not too bad at the moment thanks, still working hard, I'm sorry I can't hang around, I've got something to do."

I didn't want to face others, or bump into old school colleagues in the village where I lived and must lie to them. As per above most people who I come across would be consistently asking how the football was going and if I was looking forwards to the new season and saying that I might be getting my chance in the first team soon. I just didn't want to say I'd been released and felt a complete failure. One problem I faced is

that the club had basically shut down for a few weeks over pre-season and everyone including management and coaching staff had gone away on holiday. That was all well and good for them, but I was left in limbo, and it was torture for a while whilst I was left in isolation wondering what was happening next. I frantically tried to chase the manager down to ask him if there'd been any enquiries but was informed, he was in the USA for a month.

"Hi Gaffer, how are you doing, its Alan Tonge speaking."

"Hello, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if there was any interest or contact from other clubs who were interested in taking me on."

"Errrr, no nothing yet, but if there is, I'll let you know immediately."

It started to feel as though the club was fobbing you off and they didn't really care. The days seemed to drag and drag and all I could do was try and keep myself as fit as possible and keep getting plenty of runs in and ball work on the field near where I lived. I decided to take the bull by the horns and start phoning around some clubs myself. An agent would help with this in the modern day. After a few phone calls where some managers got back to me and some didn't, I was offered an opportunity and went on trial with another club for a period of two weeks. This raised motivation levels, provided new hope and it was viewed as a fresh start. I scanned the local papers every day, where new signings would be mentioned with the local sides, and I wished this was me and often wondered why it wasn't me? After a hard two, which extended to three, weeks on trial, including a series of games and "come back tomorrows" or "there's another match next week where the manager wants to look at

you". I was absolutely crushed when a coach called me to the side of the pitch after training one morning:

"Thanks for coming on trial with us for the last few weeks, you've done great, and we've been impressed with your attitude, but I've had a long chat with the manager, and we feel as though we have as good as in your position currently. There's nothing more we can offer you I'm afraid. We're sorry."

I just turned away and walked off. I felt used and as if the intensity of the last 3 weeks had been a waste of time. It was interesting as I had turned down this club and coach when I was younger at 15 years old. They put an offer on the table and it makes you cynical that grudges were held even four years later. That was my thought processes anyway. I drove home in tears, slammed the front door shut, threw my kitbag onto the living room floor, drained, confused, and angry and said to my mother:

"All that graft - training and playing for 3 weeks and they offer me nothing. I've had enough."

I felt I was back in the same spot again. What was going on? I was plummeting down at a rate of knots. I had been turning out and playing at an elite level club a few months ago, performing what I felt was at a decent level and now I was attempting to break into clubs lower down the leagues, other cliques, some squads with older players and with youngsters that they had brought through their own youth system. I felt like an invader desperately trying to find a door that would open for me and for

someone who would believe in me and give me a chance to resurrect my career. The phone was silent. Nobody seemed to want to know, and this was a very concerning time. I recall sitting on the floor at home, wading through the job ads in the newspapers and writing off for different opportunities, putting letters together, sending off applications which was all a completely new process to me. I was hoping and praying that someone would pin their hopes on what was currently an ex elite level professional player or give a chance to someone who had been in the game at a high level playing with some great players. I soon started to learn and quickly realised that many respected you for what you had done and where you had been, but quite simply, I was unqualified in any other area. I was totally, totally lost and in desperation. I got numbers off different people and rang managers at all levels, including the non-leagues and left messages, sometimes with their wives. Often though, there was nothing, not even the courtesy of a reply or call back. The club that had let me go told me that they had tried to get me fixed up, even with clubs in different countries and that the summer had been a particularly challenging one for moving lads elsewhere. It was all nonsense in my humble opinion; bluster that didn't mean anything, a strategy that many clubs use just to get rid of you really. One morning, the phone rang, and it was a representative from another club. The hair on my arms stood up as I picked up the receiver "Hello Alan, can you come down and have a trial with us, the manager would like a look at you?" I came off the phone, jubilant, a chance at last. I never even knew where the club was and set about finding out! I trawled magazines for results and team pictures, trying to make myself familiar with faces and names. It was a long way away, approximately a 4-and-a-half-hour trip, but there was a story that had to be finished.

My Dad had provided me with a map and a day or two later I was good to go. Their manager had remembered me from playing under him on a representative trip and he was from a similar area to me. On the phone, I had told him where I was from and he jokingly replied, "Yeah, I know where that is, it's where they eat the first born!"

I was heading into the unknown. My family were sad, but happy at the same time, as it was such a long way away and this was devastatingly the beginning of the end of a relationship that had been going on since I was 14. I had little money left; it was a trial not a contract and so seeing my girlfriend had become difficult. Games were on a Saturday afternoon, and they didn't finish till 4.50pm. I didn't have the physical time to drive back on a Saturday night and then come all the way back on a Sunday night. I had wanted to be a professional footballer since childhood, and I quite simply didn't want to fail or be a failure. It was a case of digging in, digging deep and sacrifices had to be made to stay in the game. I moved into digs with several other lads. There must have been around 7 or 8 lads in the household, as well as the landlady and landlord. I kept myself to myself and music played a big part. I often just used to sit in my bedroom and listen to loads of tunes whilst laying on my bed. I worked hard and did my best and tried to impress. I was there for around 1 week and played ok. Early feedback was not promising though, and the youth manager pulled me outside and said they weren't sure if they could offer anything just yet. They were ready to let me go back North. This was no good whatsoever to me, I reacted, thought quickly, and said, "If the club can pay my digs, and give me some expenses here and there, I'll prove to you I can earn a full contract." The youth manager informed the manager, and he was very impressed with my attitude, and I was placed on a "non-contract." I had bought some time and was still in there fighting to resurrect my career.

Within that world, I saw things on occasions that weren't right and whatever way you analyse things or come away and think about things deeply, you couldn't conclude they would ever be right! Things tended to happen at the speed of lightening in this environment. All would be fine one day and the following day all hell would be breaking loose. A player I had known throughout my schooling, both primary and secondary had arrived at the club one day. It was a total surprise because the club was at the other end of the country, and I knew what sort of commitment it took to move down there. It seemed bizarre that our paths had crossed once again, as we exchanged pleasantries in the dressing room before training. I can recall we had travelled up North to play in a league game and by the end of the match I think we were 5-1 or 5-2 down. We had been informed that the manager had gone and sat in the bath with 10 minutes to go, which again, was a total blow that he didn't want to be associated with the performance in any way shape or form. After that game, the lad in question got absolutely slaughtered, told he wasn't good enough and that he was getting moved on immediately I can remember the manager telling him to "F****g hurry up and get changed", and that "a representative of the other club was waiting to talk to him outside the dressing room." He had only been at the club 5 minutes and had just moved into a house with his girlfriend and furnished it all. I can remember thinking that this world was ridiculously unforgiving. Many things ethically weren't right. It was if the manager had saw something he didn't like and wanted it changed as soon as possible and to hell with the consequences. Absolutely brutal culture. The lad was very upset and again, I suppose you had to act immediately, swallow your pride, and get on with it. There was no time to be moping about, and if it wasn't you, it was accepted. It certainly tested your mental resolve being witness to ridiculously harsh acts like this.

Throughout the season, I had been playing in the reserve side and had been playing well. I hadn't let anyone down and had I overheard the reserve team manager say, "Tongie, steady as a rock." This made me feel good that my performances were being recognised and they were seeing signs of a reliable player. I went on to win the young player of the year award, which was presented on the pitch before a first team game, so all in all I was moving in the right direction. As the season ebbed away, it had come to crunch time and I knew the club would have to make a contract decision one way or the other. I remember watching a first team game right at the end of the season and a mate of mine seeming to know what was coming (he had played with the assistant manager at a previous club). I was fully aware I kept going on about my next steps and what would be happening and how concerned and whether I would be moving back home and my mate turning and saying to me, "Tongie, it ain't over till it's over", which I thought was odd. Early the next week, I was informed that the assistant manager wanted to see me, and I was called down to the office at the training ground:

"Alright Tongie, come in and sit down…we're going to offer you a deal…you've had a really good season…is that ok?"

He informed me that they would give me a one-year contract and would see how my development progressed over the next season. I was euphoric. I was still in there fighting. He said the money wasn't great, however I was grabbing the pen out of his hand to sign the deal and keep the boyhood dream of playing first team football alive.

4.8   What becomes of the broken hearted?

I couldn't wait for the next season to come quick enough. I now had an opportunity of which to build a future on. I had started off the season well in the reserve side and the chance arrived to play in the first team. Throughout the week, there were a few injuries to differing players and the right full back had hurt his hamstring. On the Friday morning, all the players gathered for a team meeting, and I got the nod. It was just a simple:

> "Tongie, you'll be playing tomorrow. Make sure you get forwards when you can and go and link up with your winger."

This was what I had waited for. I felt a myriad of emotions, excitement, nervousness, apprehension, confidence. They were all there. I was just short of my twentieth birthday. I would be making my first team debut at 19, which again was something I was proud of. I recall being nervous throughout the morning of the game and kept running things over and over what may happen. The sun was shining, it was a beautiful day and there were loads of good luck messages. This is what I had been waiting for. Making my debut in the football league was an incredible experience and one that you would never forget. The date, the players you were up against, the players you played with, the weather. All of it was locked in the memory. I managed to do well and was more than happy with my performance, even though we lost 1-0 to an 88th minute goal! I remember heading out in the evening and there was plenty of interest around the local town. Although I wasn't saying anything there were lots of chatter around and everyone wanted to be around you.

"He made his debut today you know."

 "Wow, that is amazing."

"What was it like?"

"You must be good to play at first team level."

There were lots of alcoholic drinks flying around, especially from another lad I had made my debut alongside. He was revelling in it and clearly enjoyed the attention and fluffing up of the ego; I wasn't too fussed to be honest. It was great making my first appearance within league football, but I was sensible enough to recognise, there was still plenty to do and learn. The next challenge I faced was to try and win a regular place in the side. Many players come into a first team; staying in one was a different proposition. I was in and around the first team for the remainder of the season, making the odd appearance here and there and being on the bench. It was fantastic to be involved and I tried to stay as grounded as possible. I used to love talking to fans as I left the ground. They had hung around and waited for me to sign their autograph books and it was the least I could do to engage in some dialogue with them.

"Great win today, Alan, you did well."

"Thank you, that means a lot. What did you think of the game?"

"I thought this player (says name) and that player (says name) did well, but (player name) could have done more. The ref was a joke as well. We should have had at least two penalties."

I stayed and spoke to them for as long as they needed. They paid their money and were the lifeblood of any club. As far as possible, I would always stop and chat about

the game, and sign any programmes or talk about football in general. It is still something I love doing to this day. In the right company, and being with supporters who are ardent club followers, I could have a beer and willingly talk all night!

The following season I realised I would really need to push on and really try to establish myself. Again, I worked hard in the pre-season and played in a few first team pre-season friendlies. My first team appearances were still in and out, and I wasn't fully establishing myself a first team regular. This was frustrating, and it was made even more frustrating when the manager brought in a player who he knew from his youth days at a former club, who played in my position. This made me ponder my future. One of the senior pros at the club said he had spoken to the manager and came to me one morning:

"Are you ok mate, how are you feeling?"

"I'm a bit p****d off to be honest. I thought I deserved a chance to establish myself and the manager has gone and brought another player in."

"I know, tell me about it. I was with the manager over the weekend, and I did say to him what on earth have you done that for, Tongie is easily good enough to play regularly. Stick at it mate."

Again, arising from the feelings of disappointment came a means of motivation and you got your head down, battled on, did your best, played as well as you could and trained as hard as you could. It's all you can do really. Moping about or moaning just wasn't in my character. This was possibly due to the work ethic that my Father had passed on all those years ago and it was always about never giving up and seeking positivity out of the depths of despair. You had to keep plugging on to try and prove

people wrong, and arguably most importantly trying to prove yourself right. Through my knuckling down, and demonstrating a good attitude, I was now getting the opportunity to play in different positions, which highlighted my versatility. In training, the manager said I needed to keep doing more, as he felt that there that was more in my locker. A phrase he used to use and often said to me was, "Tongie, you just do enough to win a race." There probably was more I could've given under the right circumstances and within the right environment. From past experiences, maybe I'd evolved in my career to playing safe and could've expressed myself more. I think my performances were often the sum of my past experiences. It had maybe caught up over the years and had a telling effect? I had learned to do a job because that is what it had evolved to. A job.

At first team level, you were playing for points and often your livelihood! It did make you cautious. I realised that you needed to do the basics well, but allegedly doing something that you loved should have been more than this. It was more of an existence, playing for a short-term contract at the end of a season and consistently wondering whether you would be offered a new deal. I sadly never had the privilege of signing a long-term deal, (as many outside the upper echelons don't) and with this came pressure and insecurity. How could you push your life on and get a mortgage, or settle down, if there were possibilities that you were getting moved on at the end of the season? You could end up at the other end of the country or moved out within an instant. There were lots to think about and you were constantly weighing up what if. This brought much psychological challenge.

On the performance side, for many reasons I enjoyed playing in the first team much more than the reserves. It was more intense, there were more fans and more exposure. I found it easier for some reason and even though it seemed frenetic from

the outside looking in, I found that you got more space and time to think than people realised. Maybe it was more pressured in the reserves because players were trying to prove themselves to get in the first team. I'm not sure. It was just how I had found the experience. If your touch was ok and your passing was ok, you could more than survive and play well.

As the season developed, there was the potential to play in a big derby-based clash on Boxing Day. The manager had wanted a specific marking job doing on their star player. In relation to this, the reserves had a game earlier in the week and the manager had come down to watch. Again, I was very aware of this and although felt had done ok, I maybe could've done more. History repeated itself. I got absolutely massacred in the changing rooms afterwards and felt terrible.

"I needed someone to do a job for me on Saturday and I've wasted my time coming down here for a performance like that! You were a f*****g embarrassment. You've made me think now whether I can trust you. I don't know. I'll have to have a think. Get yourself in the f*****g shower."

It was crazy. I felt I had done ok, but you were judged constantly and scrutinised all the time. It had an effect. It got to Friday and the manager sat us all down in the training ground and he read out the side. I was in. As we walked out to train, the manager sidled up to me and said:

"Don't let me down, you're fortunate to be in son."

Again, having to dig deep, after being told I was very lucky, the main thing was that I was in the first team. Hardly ideal preparation in my opinion, but I was ready to go to war. As it turned out, it was possibly the most memorable and best performance of my career. The lad who I had been employed to mark didn't get a kick. I used the ball well when I got it, I set up the first goal with a brilliant cross and we won 2-0 with 3 goals disallowed. A right mauling of our local rivals! I got man of the match and was awarded 5 stars out of 5 in the local paper. It was magnificent afterwards, the lads rejoiced, and everyone was congratulatory and euphoric. A momentous occasion. After the game, the manager was completely different and came up to me whilst I was getting changed. He sat down next to me and said:

"Tongie, you were f*****g unbelievable today. That lad you played against has hardly had a kick and he is a top-quality player, make no mistake about that. I'm very proud of you."

You quickly learned that football is peppered with ups and downs. One moment I was facing not being included, the next I was being told I was unbelievable. It does make me laugh on reflection. We were told to report for a light session in the morning, as at Xmas, we had a game on the 28th of Dec, and we had to focus on that. There was no time to dwell on the brilliant Boxing Day win as we had another occasion to prepare for. You had to move on quickly.

After a run of decent first team performances where I was starting to establish myself, the manager pulled me to one side and informed me I was getting a 2-year contract. This was amazing and I was on the phone to tell my parents and absolutely over the moon, as it would give me security for a little period and with security comes

less pressure to survive, to relax and play to maximum levels. My idea was that I could really push on and become a first team regular. One morning however, I was called down to the manager's office at the training ground. I knocked on the door:

"Come in Tongie and sit down. I've had a word with the board about the new contract and I'm afraid we can only offer you another one-year deal."

This was a shock. The Manager could see I was shocked. He went onto to say:

"Take a year and trust me."

What can you do in this circumstance? Lose your temper? Give the manager a blasting? Tell him I'm moving on, or looking for something else? I walked out of his office confused, angry, bewildered and let down. This was a chance to settle, and it had been removed and it was back to the uncertain ground of short-term deals. I was finding it difficult to fully move my life on and set down some roots. This was typical within professional football, and although I had no inkling at the time, this comment "take a year and trust me" would truly backfire in the period to come. I decided to sign the deal and off I went again trying to prove myself to earn something hopefully more substantial.

As I pushed on and over the course of the next season, I had started to get some pains in my lower back and when I moved in certain areas, such as within stretching exercises or exaggerated movements, I would get pins and needles down my legs and in my feet. To try and earn a new contract, I stupidly kept on playing. I had been chosen to play in a first team game away from home and I knew something

wasn't right. I found myself in a situation where I played, when there was no way, I should have played. It had taken quite an amount of time to establish myself in the first team and quite simply I didn't want to give up my place. I couldn't afford to throw away the chance. We travelled up and were in the hotel before the game and I remember telling my best mate I was in a lot of pain. He kept saying, "What are you going to do?" "What are you going to do?" I decided to battle on; for what reason to this day, I don't know? Maybe I didn't want to let anyone down? Maybe I thought the manager may have blown his top as I should've told him a few days back? Maybe I thought it would go away? I don't know. After chewing things over, I decided I wasn't going to tell the manager and decided to dig in and push on. Pre-match, I rubbed loads and loads of deep heat onto the area to try and calm it down. I am not sure why I did this and got some strange looks off the physio. Fear? It seems ridiculous but I was in a moment I couldn't get out of and in hindsight I should have spoken out. Three quarters through the game I came off and told the physio about it. I was sent for an MRI scan and ended up with major surgery on my spine. The discs had slipped forward and in certain movements they were pressing on my spinal nerves causing the tingling. The surgeon later told me if I had had a hard tackle within the match I could've ended up in a wheelchair. When my back was opened to operate on, the surgeon commented to my parents "it was a mess." I was in bed flat on my back with morphine for 10 days. It was the darkest, most challenging part of my young life. I felt helpless and totally, totally worried about my future as a professional footballer.

After an intensive stay in hospital, I came back into the club to start my extremely long road to recovery and within a few days was informed that the manager was moving on. He had been given an opportunity at a higher-level club and would be moving with immediate effect. This turned out to be an absolute disaster because new

management and coaching staff arrived, and it was clear from day one they wanted to bring their own players in and quite simply they wanted me out. My contract was ending in July, and they told me quickly that I wouldn't be getting my contract extended. This really affected my rehabilitation programme. Shortly after I had gone to see the surgeon and the end was nigh.

"Come in, sit down," as the surgeon held my x-rays to the light, "I've got some bad news I'm afraid."

My heart sank… "Ok…what's that I murmured back?" (knowing what was coming).

"It is in my professional opinion that you will not be able to get to the full fitness required to carry on as a professional football player."

I nodded because I kind of knew. It wasn't about the physical side, it was about the tackling, the heading, the turning, the challenging for a ball and getting a knee in the back.

"Are you qualified in anything else?" the surgeon asked inquisitively.

"I'm afraid not, but the club may sort something for me" I responded hopefully.

How wrong I was!

"I'll contact the PFA immediately and get a report to them to get your insurance and football league benefits underway."

I mumbled "Thanks", but I was away with the fairies. I honestly did not know what to do or say. I was in some sort of trance or hypnotic state. A huge part of my life was drawing to an imminent close and I was only 24 years old. I went out of the hospital and cried a million tears. It was over.

The surgeon's words rang over and over in my mind. I came quickly to the realisation that would be nigh impossible to reach the physical fitness I had as a professional footballer and that a return to that level would be extremely dangerous. This twisted my hand. It was a forced call rather than choice. If I had had another year on my contract I could have rehabilitated more patiently and at least attempted 100% to get back to full fitness, but quite simply my contract was running out and my rehabilitation would take a long time. It was the toughest period of my life having to retire as a professional footballer. A senior player in the club at the time phoned the union and tried to help, and to see if the club could extend my contract somehow, but sadly I had to decide what was best. I sensed I wasn't wanted and did not want to stay around when this was the case. The financial implications and constraints at the club at that time was apparent and at that time, no-one seemed to be interested in me and my physical and psychological well-being. I looked to higher people for support and frankly it didn't seem to be there. I was getting nudged towards the exit door.

Since childhood, football was all I really knew. I had been involved in teams at all levels, and by and large had enjoyed the ride. Coming away from the game proved to be a difficult time. I was very lost indeed, vulnerable and kept thinking "what now?" My professional football identity, which was (and still is) a big part of who I am had gone. Quite simply, I really hadn't a clue who I was anymore and where I was heading next. When I was an apprentice, I had gone through education that you had to complete as part of your personal development. I had undertaken a BTEC in

Sport but wasn't really trained or skilled in anything. I sat down, went through the newspapers, and sent plenty of letters and CVs out for jobs that I thought I may be able to do. Sadly, nothing was coming back, and I was starting to really question my future and was worried about where I would be heading next. I was wrestling with a problem around who I truly was after coming away from professional football. I was invited to work part-time in the football in the community scheme, which was fantastic, but sadly the hours were sporadic, and it wasn't enough to get by on a few hours here and a few hours there. The club/s I had been involved in (or system) could have done more in my opinion. A set of new management and coaches had arrived and, as per a lot of organisations, they wanted their own staff/players in. In a deeper sense, it was unforgiving and there was a clear lack of care for a fellow human being who was having a tough time. I pretended all was ok, but it clearly wasn't. I pretended I was coping, and all was fine externally, but internally I was very lost and unsure of my next steps. External influences were used to try and maintain some level of coping, but these were wrong. I acted as if all was ok in social situations and started drinking too much and was putting on weight, which harmed my rehabilitation and my health. I ended up heading into bookmakers to fill my time and my days were completely unorganised.

The culture of professional football was brutal and unforgiving. To seal the deal about how uncaring it was, my P45 dropped through the door when I was still in the throes of my rehabilitation. This, I felt, was extraordinarily harsh and made me feel completely worthless. This really did signal the end of my career and the next thing I was doing was signing on to receive incapacity benefit. Yet again, it was all about maintaining humility and digging deep. There is a saying you can easily be forgotten in football, and it can be a case of "out of sight, out of mind" and once you

depart the playing side, or head away from a club, it can be very difficult to get back in again or stay visible.

After a couple of years of working on getting myself back to full fitness, I started getting some work through agencies, and doing odd jobs that weren't particularly stimulating. I came to the realisation and epiphany that I had to lay some foundations and start again! It was the beginning of another chapter of my life where I would start to grow once more. I was only 28, but felt it was like having to go back to 18 and being where I was after finishing a BTEC. It was a big decision, a sacrifice, but had to be done. I enrolled onto a sports science degree at my local university and re-engaged with my education. Since picking the degree up, I have trained as a teacher, completed a master's degree in philosophy and am now writing this PhD! Self-knowledge accumulation is a never-ending process. The more you know, the better-informed choices you can make along the way and the more you can grow. It proved to be an excellent decision.

Football has always been a big part of my life and a strong part of my identity and although you leave it sometime, it never really leaves you. I am currently in the ex-players' association at two professional clubs because I managed to achieve a professional status, which makes me very proud. To get to a professional level is only privileged to the few. It's a lifetime identity, because in some way, shape or form, people always want to talk about it! My son has started playing to a good level and I am now following him around, as my Dad did to me and am very proud of how he is doing. He is a really good player, and you never know; he will hopefully surpass me and what I achieved. I will certainly try to attempt to guide him and ready him for the trials and tribulations of "the beautiful game". My journey of football and being associated with it at a professional level has certainly been a profound experience. It

still runs deep within my life, and even though I have been a teacher for over 15 years now, people always ask what it was like, and what certain managers and players were like and even though it happened many years ago! They never ask about how my teaching is going, or what I was like as a player, but are keen to enquire about the "bigger names."

I have carried forward a few experiences (i.e., life as a professional footballer has made me philosophise about life and human behaviour as I have tried to move my life on). Some of the experiences along the way were of course unbelievable and I was extraordinarily privileged to get to do this at such a young and tender age. This was an important part of the construction of this PhD, and with an auto-ethnographic method to guide and frame, and to try and show, not tell, to return to and express these feelings and emotions in writing has somewhat been cathartic. Hopefully my story can help football-based education and learning in some small way and really underline that footballers are persons first and players second and the game has ups of course, but there are plenty more downs where players need support and help. Culturally, however, football still seems to focus on the fact that if a player is performing, clubs aren't really interested in their outside world, and they are left to their own devices to manage that. The current data tells us how extraordinarily difficult the journey is to get a professional contract. Out of approximately 600 apprentices getting a full-time opportunity at 16, an incredible 500 of those will not be in the game at 21 (The PFA, 2019). This is an eye opening, hard hitting, and brutal statistic. I wouldn't change much of the experience at all, however, there were some harsh lessons along the way, and these have shaped me and have been carried forwards into my ongoing life. With some of the harsher experiences, especially at crucial developmental stages, I have learned that much of the time, out of bad comes

good and would pass this advice on to any young player making their way in the game. It really is all about trying to consistently find meaning amongst the madness (Nesti, 2004). The deep, lived experiences borne out of adversity and traumatic experiences made you grow up quick, and develop mental resilience, not just in a playing perspective, but from a life perspective too (Mezirow, 2000). Alongside the mental resilience though, it was important for me to maintain humility and integrity at the same time, as this has always been a part of my personal identity and how I was brought up through the most beautiful of teaching through my family. These personal, core values were often challenged within a professional football environment where inauthenticity seemed to constantly be around you and there seemed to be much demand to handle the social pressures that professional football brings. You sensed a lot of players were acting up to gain credence (not everyone, but enough). Honesty, openness, kindness, and a caring nature seemed to be taken as a cultural weakness and this was hard to realise, especially when this was who you were as a person. It made you wary of others, especially the coaching staff. One minute they could be fine, the next they could be in an incandescent rage. You had to survive, and I learned to keep going, to never give up, to cling onto hope, to rise and triumph over adversity and not to compromise my deepest beliefs. Within football, there can often be incongruence between who you are (i.e., personal identity) and what a culture expects from you (athletic or social identity). I promote this within my current teaching career, about trying to get the best out of yourself every day of your life. To stretch yourself and keep going and have hope even if things are difficult and to never stop learning and developing. I am very keen on time management and hate being late for anything, even getting to places early! Never be on the minutes, as this isn't good practice. This is passed onto the students, even though in the modern-day time management doesn't

seem to be that important! The standards I try to set are also paradoxically infused with warmth, care, and compassion (from a personal perspective I feel the best ways to grow and learn!). From experience, the greatest thing you can ever give anyone is honest, authentic time and this will always be. Sadly, modern society seems to be having trouble with this. This is important to me as I will never ever be convinced that shouting in a youngster face or giving them a hard time around something which constitutes a game will create a solid long-term platform to build on. The game is ultimately about play and joy and it's certainly not about saving lives. Many forget this.

4.9   Discussion.

The purpose of this study was to provide a critical, longitudinal insight into an athlete's journey (i.e., to becoming a professional footballer). As well as challenges at differing stages (i.e., from schoolboy to apprentice to professional) it was revealed there are many more issues to contend with which occur on a more frequent basis. These issues have added a level of insight to the navigation of 'end points' or 'stages' where much of the transition-based research currently sits (Schlossberg, 1981; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015). The study extended knowledge of the current, positivist, generalised conceptual transition models by revealing that as well as challenges when coming away from sport (i.e., at career end through deselection, retirement, or injury) there were also more frequent challenges occurring within the journey to and through professional sport (i.e., football). These challenges need to be understood and considered when supporting players effectively. The current study also provided further definitive context and insight into the current football specific conceptual transition model of Richardson,

Relvas, and Littlewood, 2013) who suggested that there were marked differences within cultural experiences and psycho-social development across apprentices (i.e., 16-19), post academy (i.e., under 23s) and the first team and how players were being prepared to step up the levels.

Adding to the research suggestion of Nesti et al., (2012), this study has captured more deeply an athlete's voice to enhance knowledge and understanding of being in the complex world of professional football. As only a small number of players get the opportunity to play professional football (Calvin, 2017) and with challenges of access and confidentiality to capture data (Nesti, 2010), the insight was seen as unique and novel and can add something different to the current transitions research base. The psychological challenges of the player within the auto-ethnography and how their identity was affected can help build case studies and critical discussion to enhance support, training and understanding for managers, coach education and applied sport psychologists. This will aid knowledge and fuel understanding around the reality of a player's world, what they find difficult, how issues affect their mental health and well-being and how they see themselves at differing times in their world.

As per many aspiring footballers, the author revealed early experiences of playing and had formed a strong athletic identity around the sport (Mitchell et al., 2014). However, there was also identities formed around being a son, a brother and around the importance of education. It can be argued that the identity was strong to football, but not exclusive as education was seen as valuable and provided a deeper source of meaning (Nesti 2004; Nesti, 2010). This contradicts previous research including passages through football culture (Brown & Potrac, 2009) who suggested that youth players saw education as something to be avoided if they were to attain a professional contract. This 'exclusive identity' or 'foreclosure of identity' has been

reported as potentially dangerous as players can suffer a range of issues and exit the game at any time (Marcia, 1966; 1980). However, from external actors within the player journey (e.g., friends, coaches, teachers, neighbours) the author revealed that they felt they were often seen as 'Alan the footballer' as the notions of being skilled as a player created interest especially when making the transitions through school football to youth football and into professional football.

As the author ventured through various transitions and into professional football, they noted that there were sub-cultural changes to become accustomed to. These experiences of change agree with the conceptual model of Richardson, Relvas, and Littlewood (2013) who pointed out that there were differing cultures within a football club (academy 16-19, post academy (up to under 23s) and the first team environment. The authors lived experiences around professional football culture differed slightly with the Richardson, Relvas, and Littlewood (2013) model. Their model suggests that an academy culture is nurturing, caring, empathic and process oriented. The author revealed that grass roots football provided this level of experience, however all the levels experienced within the route to professional football were ruthless, harsh, macho, and competitive. This initial adaptation to professional football entry took some getting used to and supports the first stage of the 'acculturation model' research of Cuellar, Harris and Jasso (1980). They suggested there were four points when becoming acclimatised to a new culture. These were arrival, culture shock, adjustment, and integration. Arrival in the culture was a very different experience to a grass roots club and the authors identity was challenged at this time. The environment was more serious, players were quicker, stronger, skilled and the coaches were more demanding. This led to a period of growth to acquire the skills and personal qualities that the culture demanded (Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown,

2015). The findings within this study align more with the work of Parker (1995) and Roderick (2006) who stated that professional football environments are harsh and brutal worlds. More insight and ongoing research around professional football culture would be useful as this is clearly a determinant of players acquiring the competencies to make it to the next level and operating as a first team player. Arguably, if academies are providing too much care, empathic and nurturing experiences (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013) it is much harder to step into and operate within the first team world where results are key and outcomes critical.

Within their journey into and through professional football, the author revealed that some of their experiences with coaches and managers were extremely tough to comprehend and deal with. These occurred within both academy and first team environments. Experiences included castigation, vitriolic language, use of punishments and volatility. These experiences supported the cultural insight of Brown and Potrac (2009), Potrac, Jones, and Armour and Potrac, Jones and Cushion (2007) who stated that coaches and managers are powerful as they hold keys to player progression and stepping up and that there can be issues with 'toxic masculinity' within certain performance cultures (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006). The experiences of the author suggested there may have been identity challenges occurring at this point (Erikson, 1968) as personal identity (cerebral, educated, sensitive) was clashing with role identity (macho, masculine, ruthless) (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). This was further exacerbated within the authors experiences of dedicating themselves to gaining further education qualifications when they were a youth player. Only a couple of players were interested in the educational component of the working week. A high majority were not interested, and this caused tensions within the group and amongst the coaches and managers. Within this specific environment, developing a richer,

broader identity did not seem to fit the role expectations and identity of becoming a professional footballer (Brown & Potrac, 2009). This needs further research as football is unstable and only a small percentage of players become full time professional players and make a living from the game. Players not engaging in education when a youth player or within broader roles outside of football foreclose their identity which can lead to problems within their psychological development (Nesti, 2004).

One of the most prominent issues that the author had to deal with in their journey was deselection. Deselection experiences within professional football can be split into two. The first is the weekly experience of not making the squad and the second is a brutal, traumatic experience of 'getting moved on' or 'bombed out' as known in professional football culture. It can be a tough blow when you have been training well all week and the team sheet is pinned up or read out and you do not appear on it. This was psychologically an anxiety inducing experience which created a range of emotions (disappointment, confusion, anger, fear (of future) and de-motivation). A promising area of research which appeared recently underpins the notion of this finding suggesting 'talent needs trauma' (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015). Current research indicates that to attain full potential, traumatic experiences are needed along the way to grow and build resilience. Taking this from an existential perspective, Corlett (1996) suggests that courage is needed within these moments to make choices and move forwards in the best manner. This is where effective psychological support would be useful as the author revealed they were uncomfortable approaching the manager or coach to ask why there was no squad place or inclusion and there was nothing coming back from the manager feedback wise either. This has been raised

within the applied experiences by Nesti (2010) who found that communication practices can be flawed and need to be improved in some football cultures. This is something that needs raising within coach education. The lack of communication may be in part due to the closed, brutal culture that the author was operating in (Roderick, 2006) and the fear of being seen as weak or needy if they approached the manager. The application of mental skills techniques (e.g., Weinberg & Gould, 2015) at this juncture would not have been the appropriate course of action as a much deeper examination of self was apparent. This is an area where improvements could be made within football environments.

The second experience of deselection was extremely tough and traumatic. Being told that a contract is not being renewed and that the manager wanted to move you on was a bitter pill to swallow. The authors experiences of this add further insight and knowledge to the research of Brown and Potrac (2009) who interviewed a sample of deselected apprentices around their departures. Although informative, the research did not fully capture the extreme emotional turmoil that players face when being told they are not good enough to progress and that they are being moved on. Research by Hughes and Coakley (1991) revealed that effective support is critical at this time and a lack of understanding of what a player is going through is needed. At this time there can be an identity crisis issue (Erikson, 1968) as players are not being moved on through choice. It is involuntary. This can be seen within the authors story as the identity of potentially going higher and progressing through the game was being disrupted. This experience affected both social identity and self-esteem. The author highlighted they avoided people around the area where they lived as being a professional footballer at an elite club formed a big part of who they were and people were interested in this (Marcia, 1966; 1980). There was confusion, sadness, anger,

shame with the process of having to grieve the potential loss of a career. This experience supported the five-stage grief model of Kubler-Ross (1969) as the removal from being at the club could be seen as a 'death.' After having to come out of a club, the lack of structure and routine was raised as a major issue as the author had been involved in football since very young and had been a professional player for several years. The experiences of being with a group for most of the week and then having this removed was a challenge. This isolation was tough to deal with and the player felt alienated and lost (Yalom, 1980). Much more support is needed for players around this critical time and ongoing research on how to support a player best through this moment is crucial.

4.9.1   Conclusion.

The purpose of the auto-ethnographic story was to reflect upon and consider how lived experiences had impacted on identity challenges within the journey from a young player to becoming a professional player. This was to add value and knowledge to the current research base which sits around stages or end points (i.e., retirement). The auto-ethnography has revealed insights into how identity was challenged and threatened on the journey to becoming a first team player. The data of the auto-ethnographic story suggests that a strong athletic identity can be an issue when faced with career issues such as deselection, moving away from home, coaching relationships, and retirement through injury. Feelings of loss, grief anger, uncertainty, despair, and isolation were felt, along with a distinct lack of support and care. A period of deep uncertainty and mental health related challenges followed. These challenges

144

included feelings of anxiety, isolation, loss, trauma, and challenges to social identity.

Consistent with the recent work of Brown and Potrac, (2009), the distinct lack of social support and care received from both management and clubs was concerning and to be much more critical, null and void. This was a particularly traumatic experience given the amount of dedication and commitment that was put in over several years and considering the level and amount of onus that the environment placed on professionalism, the feelings of backs turning, doors closing and being dismissed as a thinking, feeling human being were, in particular, bitter pills to swallow.

As well as raising more depth and awareness of the impact of transitional "end" points within sporting careers (e.g., Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000), it is hoped the auto-ethnographic story will add further insight to the transitional work of Pummell, Harwood and Lavallee (2008) and Morris, Tod and Oliver, (2015) and bring further awareness of the dearth of complexities and issues that sports persons (e.g., professional footballers) face on a more frequent basis (e.g., critical moments) as they attempt to navigate a professional football career successfully.

It is also hoped that the auto-ethnographic story can contribute in some way to bringing knowledge and awareness to those who are involved with the care and development of both youth and professional athletes. Deeply traumatic experiences within the world of professional sport, such as deselection and retirement through injury can leave an immense impression on the social, physical, and psychological identity of a person (Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015; Agnew, Marks, Henderson & Woods, 2018). If supported

properly and not left isolated to deal with issues and work out what to do next, the traumas which sport bring can be used as fuel to help propel you on and grow. This is something which needs recognising and addressing within football clubs (and wider sport). As Brown and Potrac, (2009) have recognised, issues that impact psychological wellbeing is still an area which is gaining understanding and one which warrants more research attention and investigation. It is hoped that the auto-ethnographic story will help contribute to applied knowledge within topics such as transitions, critical moments, identity and meaning and that some of these terms can be considered in the ongoing understanding of athletes lived worlds and the type of support they receive within professional sport. As well as the many high moments that players have and experience, there is also plenty of hardship, suffering and sacrifice also.

4.9.2 Limitations.

There are some methodological limitations to the current study which need to be highlighted. Although providing a high level and unique insight into an often closed and hard to access environment of professional football, the auto-ethnography experiences of the author was written through one voice and one viewpoint (i.e., monological; singular) and the experiences occurred several years ago. Using a retrospective recall approach around past events can be challenging with the danger of the writing being driven through an emotional bias of the negative events. Also, the reflective account of dialogue can only be written as semi-fictional (i.e., it is impossible to remember verbatim everything that is said).

4.9.3 Recommendations.

The current findings may be of use to a wide range of stakeholders who are around the journey from a schoolboy player to becoming a professional football player. These could include players themselves, parents, academy coaches, education and welfare personnel and applied sport psychologists. The research will hopefully help stakeholders become more aware of the array of psychological challenges which professional players face and how to manage these challenges in the most effective manner. It is not just challenges at transitional points which need awareness (i.e., youth to senior, or retirement), it is ongoing challenges (i.e., daily) and offering a player the most appropriate means and effective support as possible to access. It has been revealed within the auto-ethnography that many of the psychological challenges which a player faces within their journey can arise from the formation of a strong, or more concerning, an exclusive athletic identity. Getting injured, deselected, moved on (i.e., sold) or experiencing difficult relationships with managers and staff can lead to identity challenges and issues for a player. Not having the right support could lead to mental health issues. This is an area which requires urgent attention.

It is recommended that further research should now be undertaken to explore 'an alternative workplace voice' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Examining experiences of professional footballers who had either played at first team level for an elite club (e.g., in the top division of English football), had longer career spans and had exited the game after the period of the auto-ethnography may add further knowledge, breadth and value to the 'monological, singular' voice captured within Study One.

CHAPTER FIVE: STUDY TWO

Exploring 'alternative workplace voices' based on transitions and critical moment experiences of former professional footballers.

Study One Definitive Aim: Present an auto-ethnographical narrative that critically reflects upon personal experiences of transitions and critical moments (e.g., schoolboy to apprentice professional, apprentice to young professional, young professional to senior professional and senior professional to exit). The reflective narrative will present psychological challenges and threats to identity and meaning as I moved through the game.

Findings: Within the stages of transition (i.e., schoolboy to apprentice, apprentice to professional, professional to exit, there were more frequent issues occurring which provided a psychological challenge to navigate. These challenges brought about a threat to identity and included dealing with cultural change, deselection, being in and out of the first team environment, injuries, difficult coach and teammate relationships, social identity challenges, movement between clubs and retirement.

Implications: The culture created within a professional football club can have an impact on how psychological challenges are dealt with. If the operational practices have evidence of toxic masculinity, then withdrawal and not speaking out about issues can become a problem. Aside from coaches, opportunities to speak to qualified professionals in confidence who understand the array of issues which professional players face is crucial. This can help aid the psychological growth of both the player and person.

Study Two Definitive Aim

Utilise a phenomenological methodology approach to explore 'alternative workplace voices' based on transitions and critical moment experiences of former professional footballers and what these moments meant to them in relation to threats to identity and meaning as they moved through the game (PhD Study Two).

5.1 Introduction.

Previous research (e.g., Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee., 2008) and Stambulova's (2003) model of transition propose that support staff can provide a wide range of assistance when athletes are facing a transition. The model suggests that athletes (e.g., professional footballers) may discuss aspects of their development and progression with several people across their career. Through a critical lens football can be predominately a macho, masculine, aggressive world (Nesti, 2010) and caution can be seen as a primary factor when a player discusses their football development and life outside of the sport with a manager or a coach. This could be largely due to managers or coaches having control or selection power (Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002) and the players not wanting to appear weak or vulnerable and put levels of doubt in coaches' minds over mental toughness or resilience to perform and progress (Crust, Nesti & Littlewood, 2010, Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015). This potentially can lead to a problem of being real (i.e., authenticity) within such a demanding culture and environment. As revealed within Study One, as well as transitional experiences, there are also issues which occur on a more frequent basis within the world of a professional footballer.

Drawing on applied experiences, Nesti et al., (2012) have termed these 'critical moments' and purports that a critical moment involves the subjective, lived experience of an individual which will summon an emotive reaction. This becomes an attractive area for further research attention within Study Two (i.e., what happens to a footballer within their career to cause a change or threat to their identity). Balague (1999) alluded to the topic of identity in her work, but since then it has received minimal coverage within sport psychology literature. The papers that have examined it have tended to focus on transitions at end points such as the finish of a sports career,

a non-normative ending to a sports career and retirement through injury (Knights, Sherry & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016). Most of the research work focusing on the topic of athletic identity or sports-based identity have employed questionnaires or measurement scales which has led to a narrow approach of psychological theory when utilising methods to collect data (Nesti, 2004; Watson & Nesti, 2005). These researchers advocate that this is due to an obsession in psychology to measure and control coupled with the lack of awareness or uncertainty about employing other psychological theory such as those involving existential methods. Maslow (1968) asserted that identity was a key component in a human beings' psychological development and growth, and Erikson (1968) put forwards an 8-stage identity development pathway which suggested if certain elements are not satisfied within a life journey, then a crisis of identity will occur. The Erikson model focused on identity formation and challenges within 'broader, general life' and there has been scant published work within sports psychology academic literature that has examined this topic when applied to an athlete's journey through their sport. This is a promising area to use and apply to the path of a footballer's 'life cycle' to help us understand more fully some of the issues they may be facing and how these issues could potentially lead to crisis within their identity development. Most of the literature has tended to utilise North American approaches which tends to focus on a narrow approach of cognitive or trait based psychological theory (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Despite the high profile and interest within a sport such as professional football, there is little in the academic journals which provides a critical perspective of identity and at what times in a professional footballer's career where it can be threatened or challenged. Autobiographies and news accounts have detailed the lives of

professional football, however these are often 'ghost written' or do not provide a deep academic analysis of events and occurrences within professional football culture.

Building on the insight provided from Study One, and to address the potential limitation of a 'one voice' reflective research approach and 'recall issues' on a football career which was short and occurred a number of years ago, Study Two will provide the platform for an 'alternative workplace voice' and interview a sample of six elite level professional players, some who had 'full careers' and also players who extended the retirement date from the auto-ethnography. All six of the players have played in the first team at the top level of the sport for extended periods of time. This approach will help broaden perspective and develop the richness of existing knowledge. Such perspectives may provide a deeper understanding of differing critical moments that players have faced and how these moments throughout their career have threatened or changed a perspective on their identity. It is also hoped that information accrued from the players will highlight instances where an applied sport psychologist could assist best and suggest where effective support could be employed to help develop and guide players through these critical moments. Currently, Stambulova's (2003) model does not elaborate on, or suggest the most appropriate type of psychological support which staff could provide and this is an area which warrants further research attention and exploration. The findings from the next part of the PhD could then be used to inform sport psychologists within their training (and development) to support professional football players more effectively when dealing with and moving through critical moments within their careers. The definitive aim of Study Two is to advance theoretical knowledge by examining further the factors associated with critical moments and how these moments challenged identity/meaning amongst a cohort of ex elite level professional players. This research will compliment

Study One and make a difference to our knowledge and understanding of the idiosyncratic issues that professional football players face as they move through the game to exit (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Through a detailed analysis of their experiences both pre, during and exiting professional football it is hoped that Study Two will shed light on the psychological challenges faced and identity challenges whilst navigating a career in the game.

5.2 Method.

The second study of the PhD maintained the philosophical positioning of the researcher with a relativist ontology, a subjective epistemology, and an interpretivist paradigm (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2015). To extend findings from the auto-ethnographical story within Study One and to further capture a professional footballer's lived experiences with critical moments a qualitative phenomenological research approach was chosen. Phenomenology is a method of looking at reality (Nesti, 2004). Phenomenological research is different to other qualitative methods because of its focus upon an individual's experience of a definitive thing or event (Polkinghorne, 1989). The key factor in employing this methodological approach is that it attempts to capture what something means to someone, rather than other traditional qualitative approaches where people are requested to describe their behaviours and actions. To guide with the structure of a phenomenological approach, Husserl proposed a specific method. The first stage of Husserl's method has been termed "the rule of epoch" which led to a direct focus on the "what" of the experience. Cohn (1997) also suggested that the key component of the "rule of epoch" is to describe the experience as fully as possible. The second stage of the phenomenological method was to focus on the description through the

phenomenological interview. The questions were designed as open ended, and the interview was put together following the advice of Dale (1996) who likened it to a conversation with a purpose. The final stage of the phenomenological interview was referred to as "the rule of equalisation." This required the interviewee (or co-researcher) to describe the experiences accurately without attempting to put any structure or order to the conversation. Ihde (1986) sums up the phenomenological method by stating that the idea of this approach is to "describe, not explain."

This method was deemed the best fit as it will lead to a detailed, thorough account of how professional footballer's experience existential factors such as critical moments and how these experiences are woven into their identity and accrual of self-awareness and self-knowledge. The phenomenological interview was compiled in a semi structured 'open ended' manner and allowed the players to describe their experiences thoroughly. This was done to help provide applied sport psychologists with rich, powerful details that may be impossible to attain in other ways (Nesti & Sewell, 1997). The interview guide was sent to the lead supervisor prior to undertaking the interview process and regular meetings were held to enable clarity, flow, pitch, and content. A chronological 'timeline' (i.e., schoolboy to apprentice to professional to exit) was employed to align with the shape of the identity development model of Erikson (1968) and to reveal any points of challenge or 'crisis' within their journey. As well as the predominant questions which framed the interview guide, probe questions were also used to help deepen understanding and to make clear how the player was 'seeing themselves' at that juncture of their career (Patton, 1990). The underpinning application of this method was to gain a fuller and holistic view of a footballer's experiences from start to finish which would help applied sport psychologists in training to acquire an understanding of the world lived by not merely

the thinking subject, but as Soren Kierkegaard suggested the acting, feeling, living human individual (Kierkegaard, 1944).

5.3   Participants.

Participants (male, n = 6) were invited to take part in the study (see Table 1). The purposeful sample (Marshall, 1996) included players who had played for professional football clubs at what was an elite level (i.e., they had all played in the highest tier of English professional football). They had a wide range of experience in professional football (5 - 25 years; $\bar{x}$ = 16) and had accrued a robust number of appearances between them ($\bar{x}$ = 323). In two players' cases this included full international recognition (with another two players having international recognition at under 21's level). This criterion was put in place so that the players were able to draw on extensive, personal experience and describe their long term, lived experiences of the critical moments they had faced within their professional football careers. The sample was justified as the topic of critical moments within professional football careers is largely unexplored. This is in part due to the difficulty of access and getting the opportunity to engage with and speak to professional players who have played at the top of the professional game. The study has been methodologically designed to capture a deeper understanding of a professional footballers' journey where retirement was more recent to the auto-ethnography from Study One.

5.4   Participant details.

Table 1

Sample Information.

Code	Career status	1st team Appearances	International recognition	Player retirement date
Player 1	Professional (retired)	75	Yes	2000
Player 2	Professional (retired)	256	Yes	1998
Player 3	Professional (retired)	7	No	1995
Player 4	Professional (retired)	603	Yes	2008
Player 5	Professional (retired)	513	No	2013
Player 6	Professional (retired)	485	Yes	2002

5.5   Procedure.

After ethical approval was granted from the Research Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences (RISES) at Liverpool John Moores University (**17/SPS/021),** contact with potential participants took place via a letter and information sheet outlining the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study (see Appendix). A willingness to participate was received from six participants and data collection began in June 2017 lasting approximately two months in total. Interviews took place in confidential areas at a location suited to the participant. The participants were assured of complete confidentiality.

5.6   Interviews.

Participants were provided with a Liverpool John Moores information sheet and informed consent form to sign (see Appendix). Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the aims, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with all six participants, which adhered to a semi-structured phenomenological interview guide.

The phenomenological interview guide was drawn together on emergent themes drawn from the auto-ethnographic story and previous literature on critical moment experiences, identity and meaning (e.g., Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti 2015). The interview guide focused upon four distinct stages of a professional footballer's career (early days, developing towards being a professional player, being a professional player and exiting the game). Pilot testing of the interview schedule took place with an ex professional player, to help refine interview skills and to try and elicit suitable, informative responses from participants to answer the research questions and to provide a depth of narrative for further analysis. The interview guide broadly covered lived experiences to, within and out of professional football, with questions focusing on critical moments, identity and meaning experienced within a professional football career. The interview guide used is situated in the Appendix.

5.7   Data analysis.

The interviews were recorded on an iPhone seven device and transcribed verbatim to allow for data analysis to take place. The interviews lasted between 37 - 47 minutes ($\overline{x}$ = 42 minutes) and produced narrative totalling 60, 000 words in total ($\overline{x}$ = 8,450). After transcription, the narrative was sent back to the players within two weeks which enabled them to add anything that had been missed and to check for accuracy and

clarification. The transcription was also listened to numerous times by the researcher and notes were taken around the player's stories and experiences. The analysis was based on an existential-narrative framework (Richert, 2010) which centralised on the subjectivity of human experience. Thomas and Pollio (2002) also advised the objective of existential narrative is to ascertain patterns of description that reveal the key components of an individual's experience of something (e.g., a critical moment). Questions were asked around the experience of critical moments such as "how did this impact on how you saw yourself at this point?" or "how did you see yourself then?" or "how did that critical moment affect you and what you thought about yourself?" Phenomenological interpretation as stated by Kerry and Armour (2000, p.9) is based on "a style of writing that is animating and narratively rich" with participant quotes used to "catch hold of what it means to be actually situated there." The interpretation of the narratives involved scrutinising the player responses through an existential perspective. This can be termed as a "story analyst" approach where data collected from subjects is put through a detailed examination and critical issues emerging from the interviews are subjected to further content analysis and grouped into common themes (Patton, 2002; Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2013). The common themes within the interview data were informed by Braun & Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework (see Table 2 below):

Table 2

Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-Step Framework.

Step 1:	Become familiar with the data
Step 2:	Generating initial codes
Step 3:	Searching for themes
Step 4:	Reviewing themes
Step 5:	Defining themes
Step 6:	Writing up

The objective of employing thematic analysis was to search for and unearth themes (i.e., similar patterns or content within the interview responses). Braun & Clarke (2006) highlighted two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Semantic themes are described as '…within the explicit or surface meanings of the data where the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written.' (p.84). As opposed to this, the latent level goes deeper and '…starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (p.84). The semantic themes were the named critical moments that were found during the data analysis process and the latent analysis was based on deeper meanings which arose from each of these themes.

5.8   Methodological rigour.

Throughout the process of collecting, analysing, and presenting qualitative data, it is key to align with the areas of good practice (Patton, 2002). The rigour of studies associated with phenomenological research depends on how the researcher has

precisely probed the topics under scrutiny (Polkinghorne, 1989). It could be argued that the sample was small, however professional football (and access to professional footballers) can be a difficult population to access and capture data from. This is in part due to a cultural distrust of anyone not connected to football and uncertainty of where the data is going (Nesti, 2010). It can be put forward that the sample size was justified. Data saturation within qualitative research is seen when no 'new' information or detail is being unearthed and can be referred to as 'redundancy' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was seen within the data and how the patterns were emerging through common themes. After six interviews, there was no new information being provided so justification for finalising data capture was reached (Patton, 2002).

Another element of good practice within qualitative research is trustworthiness. Trustworthiness within Study Two was determined in the following ways. Firstly, the findings replicated fully the language used by the ex-professional players to demonstrate the rich detail of the interview transcripts. Secondly, post interview, the ex- professional football players were provided with a full copy of the interview transcript to make sure they were happy with the transcription accuracy. Thirdly and in relation to the importance of establishing rapport and trust within between interviewer and interviewees and to capture quality data, it is worth noting that the interviewer held a background and understanding of professional football culture. This part of the process was considered an integral component of the depth, detail, richness, and rigour of the data collected. The operations in and out of professional football clubs have been described as closely guarded (Pain & Harwood, 2004), with a unique macho culture (Parker, 2001) and a distrust of 'outsiders' (Nesti, 2010). The background of the interviewer was seen as an important factor within the

credibility and dependability of the interview process, with an opportunity for the researcher to develop a closeness and familiarisation with the participants and therefore enhance the quality and trustworthiness of their responses (Biddle et al., 2001). This part of a qualitative process emphasises the significance that the interviewer/interviewee relationship plays in the accumulation of rich, qualitative data (Schrum et al., 2005). As the researcher was an ex professional footballer, the issue of bias could be a critical factor. To alleviate this and to avoid 'biases' of the interviewer (Sparkes, 1998) and to make sure the transcripts were being analysed as transparently as possible, there were ongoing meetings with the PhD supervisory team. This helped provide a critical eye and a second opinion within the process. Within the domain of qualitative research, this is seen as a crucial part as the researcher's thoughts and opinions can cause bias issues when analysing and reporting the data (Sparkes, 1998).

After transcribing the data collected, the six players were visited again (member checking) to ensure that the interview transcript and narratives provided a true and accurate account about what had been discussed. Shenton (2004) put forward that scrutiny is a process within qualitative methodology that can be used to help methodological rigour when undertaking research. Parts of the PhD have been presented at accredited organisational conferences (i.e., BASES and BPS) and questions from critical friends have been asked and responded to. This led to reflective practice and additions/ tweaks to ideas going forwards. Throughout the qualitative processes of Study Two, it can be put forwards that appropriate steps were put in place and adhered to to capture the best quality data possible.

5.9   Results and Discussion.

The results and discussion section of Study Two reveals the key issues which emerged from the narrative analysis of the interviews. The section is combined to allow quotations, synthesis and underpinning of theory to the emergent themes. The analysis diagrams which follow show the 'critical moments' experiences which emerged out of the narrative from each player. These experiences have been presented within a 'career timeline' which has then been used to drive the discussion. The discussion will be underpinned with academic theory from the literature review.
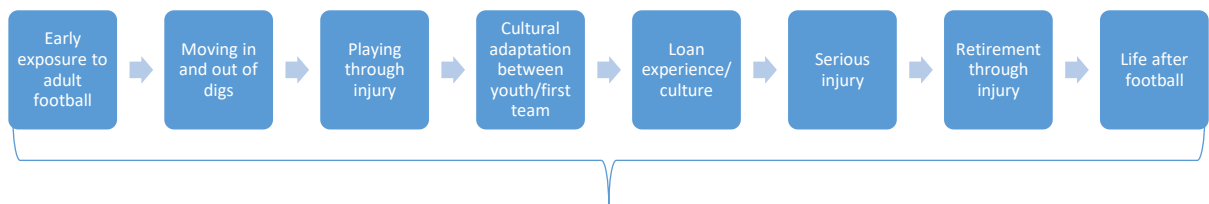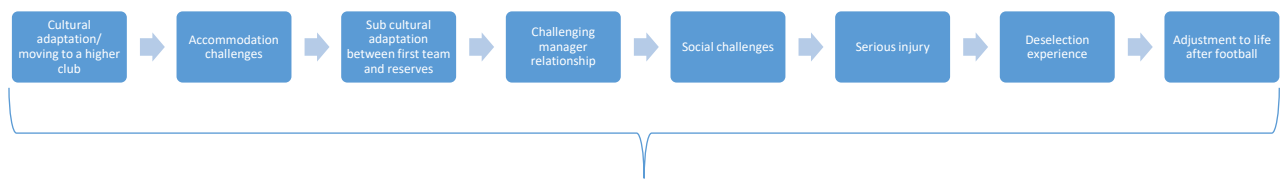

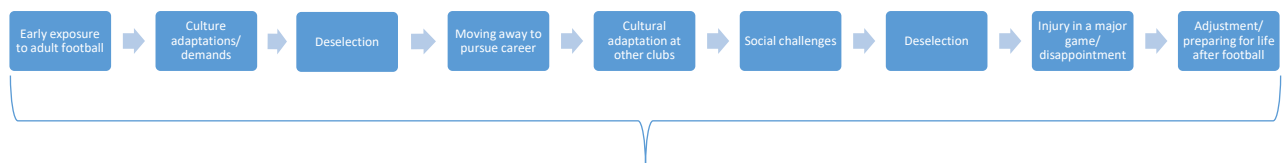Player 1: Critical Moments Timeline
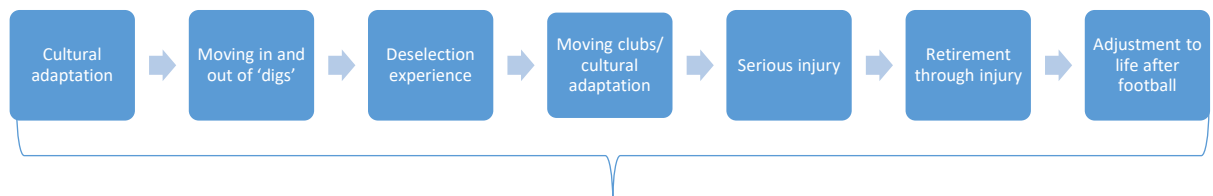
Player 2: Critical Moments Timeline
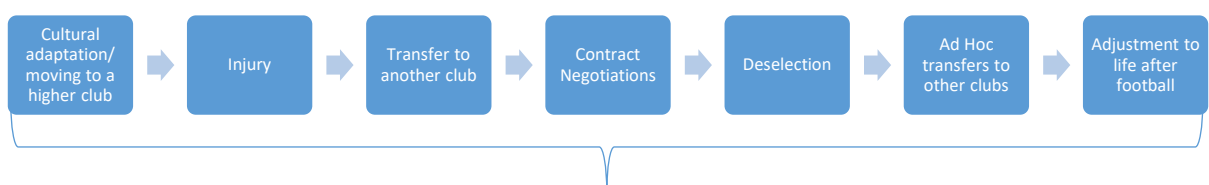
Player 3: Critical Moments Timeline

Player 4: Critical Moments Timeline

Player 5: Critical Moments Timeline
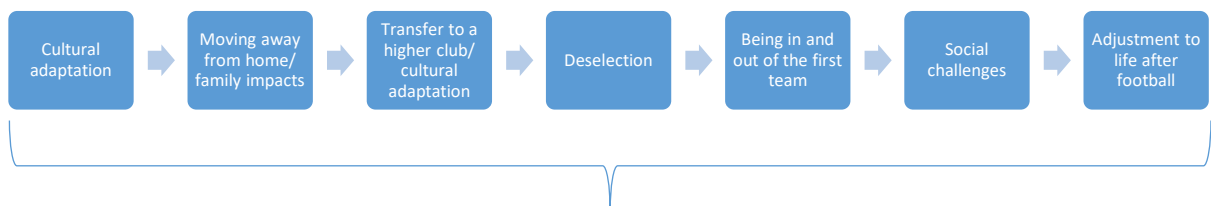
Player 6: Critical Moments Timeline

The analysis of the six ex-professional football players interview data revealed intricate meanings and insight around identity threats or challenges within their football careers. These are seen within the journeys to, within and from professional football and are presented through differing contexts (early years, apprenticeship, professional football, and exit). In presenting the differing contexts, the identity development model of Erikson (1968) was used to help frame what the player may have been experiencing and how they were seeing themselves at that time.

5.9.1 Early experiences and exposure to football.

All six participants had become involved in football at a very young age, forming a strong athletic identity and their reflective memories yielded very happy and joyful experiences. Many of the players recounted as being talented or special and a few played under-age football, sometimes against much older players. For example, Player 1 described kicking a ball as young as he can remember and going to the park regularly to play football. His Father was a professional player and he stated, "I was immersed in the professional game early on and I used to watch the first team train (where his Father was manager) and then when I was about 12 and used to join in with the apprentices." Player 2 also recalled in detail their early feelings and experiences around football and stated, "When I was seven or eight years old, and nine or ten I played for the school team like a lot of lads did if they were good, and I played above myself (in a higher age group) so at nine I was playing in the year above, and even back then I remember saying I wanted to be a footballer." Player 3 continues the thread with their early association with football and suggested "it's the same story like everyone I suppose, my Dad was a keen, keen, lover of football basically and I was born with a football underneath my arm more or less, and played for the school team and played colts" (junior level) and Player 4 also described their early memories and identity with football and combined this with a very honest assessment:

> "I wasn't great from an educational view in schools, I was thick, I couldn't read or write and what happened was, what gave me relief was the football because that gave me the confidence and it ended up without a ball I had no confidence and when I was a young lad growing up it was very difficult for me so I was like the star player in school and everyone wanted me on their team but when it came

to like Maths I was like bottom of the class (laughs). Thankfully I could kick a football. I played for the school teams and people started paying attention to me, because I was scoring goals for fun, and I was the best player in the school and got a lot of attention from outside the school from different teams."

Finally, Player 5 and Player 6 also detailed their early experiences with football and how they were showing talent at an early age. Player 5 recalled at the tender age 13 or 14 of how "there were a lot of scouts coming around watching you and I started to get invited into various clubs and I had a lot of trials around the North West" and Player 6 stated "I was playing at school level from a really early age and then it progressed then to being involved with your school and the town team and in the town team environment people start to take notice and observe you more."

Lally, (2007) defines identity as "a multi-dimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic" (p.86) and from the perspective of identity theory, "the core of an identity is the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Stets and Burke, 2000, p.25). To fully understand identity from a narrative perspective, it is necessary to listen to the story's athletes tell, and the early associations they have from with their sport. These stories reveal the early stages of identity development and the experiences that the athletes go on to have in their chosen sport. Mitchell et al., (2014) suggests that where athletic identity has been seen to be strong, but not exclusive to the athletic role (i.e., broad), there can be long lasting psychological benefits, however, it has been noted that those who place too strong an emphasis on their athletic identity can become somewhat one-

dimensional, and a sense of "I am a player and nothing else" can subconsciously be developed (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

The narrative from the players surrounding their journey towards professional football and their identity development suggests that education was not considered too important as the objective was to completely dedicate themselves to making the grade as a professional footballer. This finding is in alignment with the research of Brown and Potrac (2009) who also stated that a narrowing of identity based solely on becoming a footballer could be prohibitive and prevent a player exploring and engaging with other societal roles. This is in part due to the coaches wanting them to solely focus on becoming a player and avoiding distractions from other things. Identity foreclosure can occur at this juncture and this can potentially become a problematic issue from a psychological development perspective. The work of Erikson (1968) provides a useful template to transfer into a sport context. Erikson stated that between the ages of 12-18 years old (identity vs role confusion) adolescents start searching for a sense of self and personal identity and begin to commit to a career and become more independent. This can be seen as a major stage of psychosocial development where the adolescent must acquire the roles they will occupy as an adult and find out exactly who they are and what they want to become. This can be problematic within professional football as not many players make the grade (i.e., become a professional) and this can lead to role confusion and identity crisis if getting deselected after their apprenticeship has finished (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

5.9.2 Transitioning into full time football culture.

As their football journey developed and the players started to become noticed more, they revealed the distinct differences when leaving the joys of schoolboy football behind and recalled their experiences of critical moments as they ventured into professional football full time. The players shed light on some of the challenges they faced and how it impacted on their identity development:

> So, you basically finished school, you did your GCSEs and four weeks later I was training full time and that was your job now. The manager spoke to us on the first day about his expectations and then we, I think the 3rd day in of pre-season we had a round robin seven a side with the first team and the reserves and I've still got a (elite players name) poster on my wall and I'm in his team now. That was it, you got on with it and you know you're expected to perform [P1].

> One of the challenges was moving away from home. I didn't drive, I was a bit lazy, I didn't drive for three years! In my apprentice years, I was only up the road, I was only 19 miles from home, yep moving home and living in digs, even though it was only up the road was really strange, but you know, I lived next to the training ground so you get some perks about not having to travel in early on the bus, or travel home like some of the lads [P2].

Player 2 also described how he was seeing himself at the time of this transition:

> I was very quiet at first, I don't think I was that boisterous, yep I was quiet and there were some loud characters in our changing room and there were a couple of bullies as well, I won't name them and that happened a lot in the football era, it maybe still does?.....those kind of challenges made you get your head down and concentrate and it was just a real shock the first couple of months and once you got into the routine of full time football, I think I was quite a likeable character, I was always up to some mischief [P2].

Player 4 described their initial experiences of moving into football full time and how a teammate/ friend was a big help in them settling down:

> I went in there and I was very nervous because I wasn't the brainiest person, but I met a lad called (gave players name), ex (club and country name) player and we both came from a council estate, and we ended up best friends still to this day. We looked after each other and we were both very fortunate that we got into the 1st team at a very young age [P4].

Player 5 identified where their initial challenges came in the transition from schoolboy to full time player:

> Once I'd left school I went into the club as an apprentice, and it was difficult because you're going from school into a full-time working environment at a football club and I can remember looking at all of the goalkeepers there at the time and thinking "wow where am I going to fit in?" [P5].

And finally, Player 6 described their initial experiences of joining a professional football club full time:

> You went in full time to the club at 16 and the apprenticeship was between 16 and 18, and when I joined it was two local lads and the rest were from elsewhere and a big part of the apprenticeship wasn't just training and playing, there was education too and then the progression from that is you start heading towards that professional assessment really and they make a judgment on what they see and what progress you've made and I jumped into the professional game just short of my 17th birthday [P6].

The reflective narratives provided by the players support the idea of the acculturation model of Cuellar, Harris and Jasso, (1980) who stated that there can be a culture shock following arrival into a new environment. The narratives indicated that the arrival into a new culture was a daunting experience and provided a threat or challenge to identity as they were entering

the world of work for the first time and taking on the role of a full-time player within a professional football club (Erikson, 1968). The model suggests that it takes time to adjust and get used to the new experience and your roles and responsibilities. At this point, it may be useful to have an induction held by a first team player which could help the transition and outline the expected club and player demands and standards. Player 2 mentioned that there were 'one or two bullies' in their initial experiences which indicated that their workplace may have had a level of poor organisational health leading to an unhealthy culture (Nesti, 2010). Where players are unsure on personal roles and responsibilities, scapegoating and bullying my become commonplace and easy targets may get sought after to alleviate the stresses and strains that these players are suffering with. This is clearly poor practice and needs addressing. Player 1 also intimated that there may have been pressures on 'accelerated development' in relation to roles (Erikson, 1968) as within a few days of entry they were training with a first team player that had been on a poster on their wall a few weeks before. These experiences contradict the positivist, transitional development model put forwards by Richardson, Relvas, and Littlewood (2013) who suggest that 16-19 academy environments are process oriented, nurturing, caring and empathic.

5.9.3   Professional football challenges.

The third stage that the players made in their journey (from apprentice to professional) revealed critical moments and challenges as they attempted to make their way through the game. Moving away on loan to gain game time was seen as a critical moment within this stage of their development. This

again highlights the acculturation model (Cuellar, Harris & Jasso, 1980) and getting used to a culture within another environment. The topic of homesickness within this cultural adaptation was raised by a few of the professional players, especially those who had to move some distance when heading away on loan to progress their development. For example, one of them revealed:

> It was hard, I'm from a close-knit family and and then all of a sudden, I'm living in digs and having to look after myself and it was a massive change for me. When I first moved there, I didn't like it at all, that was another thing I had to overcome, I had loads of things to overcome. Anyway, I can remember thinking c'mon don't be soft, pull yourself together, people are going to war at 19, and have fought in World Wars at 18 and 19 and you're worried about moving home and being homesick, maybe I was a bit weak mentally at the time but that's the way it was. There were a lot of negatives, a hell of a lot of negatives, that's why I kept coming home every weekend [P3].

Player 5 also recollected that moving away was a challenging aspect, especially within loan deals to lower-level clubs, yet this was an aspect of professional football which was key to being seen and keeping a career in the game:

> The biggest problem I had at the time was living away from home, I was always waiting for that 5pm on a Saturday afternoon because I've always been a home bird and I've got close friends and I just wanted to get on the motorway and get home and I found that difficult, I really did find that difficult. In the first few months I had a bed in a front room in a rented house and you know you've gone from living at your Mum's house with everything done for you and it was tough, it was really tough, and I used to dread getting up Monday mornings and having to drive back there and psychologically that can really affect your training and your game [P5].

Finally, Player 1 within their storyline described the challenges of moving from an elite level club to a lower-level club and the experiences that affected their identity:

> I didn't think it was as professional as my other club. Basically, the dressing room ran itself where I'd come from, just unbelievably high standards and I didn't get that here, I didn't enjoy it, training was ok, the Manager used to put some good sessions on, but he was struggling, because I just think some of the characters he had in the dressing room I thought weren't trying for him. It was sad. What disgusted me the most was that there was a drinking culture and a gambling culture, and I wasn't used to that. It really challenged my values. I also think some of the times when you come from a big club, the expectations on you are higher and sometimes there's a resentment as well especially if it's not a great dressing room, so all in all, it wasn't a great time for me, but your resilience that I had learned along the way got me through it [P1].

The above narratives revealed that players moving from their 'parent club' to another loan club can bring upon psychological challenges which can affect identity. This may be in part due to the player having a long standing and deep meaning for the club they had served and had been at for a few seasons and the level they had been operating at. The narratives had brought upon threats to the players 'sense of self (i.e., who they were and how they saw themselves at that point). This finding supports the work of Smith and McGannon (2018) who suggested that dominant cultures can play a part in the formation of self-image and identity. As the players were in the early stages of their careers, they were not advanced enough to gain a regular first team place at their current club and so had to go on loan to gain experiences and exposure to first team football environments to help with their development. Parker (1995) put forwards that football managers are powerful within this movement especially when a player has not fully transitioned into becoming a regular first team

player at the club they are currently serving. Managers can be dominant when telling a player what they need to do to develop and where to move to. This can lead to existential challenges of anxiety, isolation, loneliness, and lack of self-belief that they are not progressing as well as they should (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). The issues of isolation and loneliness felt by players within the above 'critical moments' can provide an opportunity to examine identity (Yalom 1980). According to an existential psychological perspective this discomfort can accompany periods of growth and change. Examining their deepest selves in these moments requires courage (Corlett 1996) and despite the discomfort this type of anxiety can be construed as something positive. The more a person develops, grows and strives to become more authentic, the more anxiety they will face (Kierkegaard 1944). By facing a critical moment (instead of not facing it) and moving through it, existential courage can be developed, so if a moment was to present itself again in the future, the player would be more likely to deal with it better (Nesti et al., 2012). This can be seen in the narratives with players telling themselves to get on with it and not to be soft and by becoming a role model and raising standards at the club they have gone on loan to. Within the ever-changing culture of professional football where loan experiences are becoming more and more common, it is crucial that the right support for the player is available at this time. Challenges such as this can influence both personal and professional development. Another issue which emerged from the player narratives was based around the topic of exposure and recognition from external sources as their careers started to develop (e.g., media and fans). These experiences were described in both positive and negative ways. One of the players revealed that as he had started

to play with and be involved with the first team squad, he gained more recognition from supporters and that he often used to pretend he was someone else to avoid this unwanted attention:

> You used to go out in the day or at night and people used to come up to me and say you're xxxxxxx and you play for xxxxxx, and I always used to say that I wasn't! And a few used to say well you really look like him! (laughs) and a good few used to say you're lying; I know you're him! And I used to say yep that's right I am, but I don't want you coming up to me because I play for xxxxxx! I want you to come up to me because of me! [P3].

Player 2 detailed how others including supporters of the club he played for would look at you differently from a social perspective as you were progressing in the game and gaining first team recognition:

> They don't see you as a person that's for sure. First, they see you as a footballer and if they get to know you, they see you as a person then. To be honest, you'll always be the footballer first. If you get into conversation, they always seem to know what's best for you and your teammates and what you should be doing and when and what you can do better. I don't know of many other jobs or careers where that would be the case. Imagine getting to know an elite surgeon and saying you should have done this better or that better or you could do this better. Everyone is allowed an opinion of course but some talk absolute garbage, and I can't entertain that sometimes, yes have an opinion, but talk with a bit of humility and understanding [P2].

Player 4 provided a slightly different insight into a situation they faced when they had moved from a small club to what he termed 'a giant of a club.' He explained how this experience made him feel and how there were damaging psychological effects brought on by the weight of expectation which impacted his identity:

> It was tough, very tough. I found it very difficult to handle and I certainly felt that pressure while I was there, there's no question about that. Most of the time I felt really intimidated

173

about the whole thing and I used to try and be first into the dressing room and often I would head into the reserves team dressing room and sit in there until all the 1st team lads had gone home and I used to try and have a drink on the Friday evening to calm me down for the Saturday game. I played within myself for nearly all of the time I was there. I don't really like it when top players get criticised because they (external people) don't know what they are going through and even now many of them may be having the same problems that I had. Because of media scrutiny and everyone recognising you everywhere you go, the expectations are massive and quite simply you have to win football games at that club [P4].

Player 4 also went on to discuss how their identity had been affected by moving to and playing for an elite level club and what they felt about the psychological effects of this change and how they had felt there was no one to turn to and talk to from a support perspective:

We're all human beings aren't we, but people don't really see you like that, they only see you on that football pitch and they think that everything's normal, but you have a life don't you, a life outside of football too. Football is different though, cos we're in the spotlight all the time, it puts a lot of baggage on you, doesn't it? The thing is if I'd have said to the manager, or the coach, or even the other players that I can't handle the pressure, I'd have got the piss taken out of me and there was no hiding place. I started to get a reputation as well, from the media and other sources but a lot of it was just escaping and getting away from the pressure [P4].

Player 5 described the feelings that emerged when he finally achieved his career goal of playing in the Premier League and how the supporters started to see him differently:

It was amazing, amazing. People start being different towards you and before they hardly had spoken to you, and I remember people just started coming up to you and saying do you remember me from school? I'm just walking around my hometown and people who have never even spoke to you before were coming up to try and speak to you and asking if

174

you can get things signed, get hold of tickets and things like [P5].

Player 5 also went on to describe when he made his Premier League debut and walked back into the pub that he used to go in after games to meet friends and family:

I was a bit taken aback to be honest, and me being me I just spoke to anyone anyway, but you just notice the change of how people see you now and it was just my life just sort of changed completely and it had gone from walking in the bar after a lower league game and no one really saying anything to walking in the bar after a Premier League game where everyone stood up and started clapping and cheering and I was thinking whoa hang on a minute, you'd never clapped before when I walked in! But it just shows you doesn't it (laughs) that they'd obviously watched the game on television that afternoon and had a few pints and yeah everyone started clapping and I felt a bit uncomfortable with it to be honest [P5].

The narratives revealed psychological challenges and identity changes within differing contexts. Some of the movements faced by the players in their careers created fear, anxiety, confusion and apprehension and they expressed how they felt they were seeing themselves differently at this time. The players described how other 'actors' such as teammates and fans had caused them to feel differently. These moments can provide an opportunity to grow what Kierkegaard (1944) terms 'the self.' The narrative context of moving upwards into a higher-level club brought about new challenges for one player of recognition and exposure. This experience initially brought about feelings of anxiety and nervousness which led to having a drink on the eve of a game. This moment indicates that a level of psychological support may have been needed at the time as the player was clearly wrestling with their professional

identity (i.e., being at a big club) and their personal identity (i.e., quiet, shy, feeling as though not fitting in). Other players spoke about recognition and being seen differently by others after playing in the Premier League. This brought about social demands such as acquiring tickets and getting material signed. There was also narrative which suggested that as a player starts to progress in their career fans started to give opinions in public spaces, even when not asked to. Nesti (2010) suggests players within these moments need to exercise the philosophical virtue of humility and stay grounded. Research has implicated that if a player takes their eyes off the path that has brought them to this level, and start to believe their own hype, there may be a decline in performance (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). It is important to hold on to values that have been hard won and as Salter (1997) argued values are the most integral part of a person's identity.

Another issue that arose from the player's interview data came via the experiences of deselection. The volatile, often insecure world of professional football suggests that many players get selected and deselected over a typical season and that at any one time only eleven players can be chosen out of a squad of 25. Add the substitutes to this and potentially there are approximately seven dissatisfied or unhappy players every week of the season (Nesti et al., 2012; Tonge 2020). There can also be vast amounts of change with players coming and going and squads continually getting re-vamped to help get better results and maximize the profile of the football club. As revealed within Study One deselection within a professional football can appear in two ways. The first is the weekly experience of being left out of a team or squad and the second is the experience of being moved on after a contract has finished. At

these junctures, the narratives have revealed that there can be issues with identity and how a player is seeing themselves. Player 2 described their experiences of having to face a difficult situation around deselection and a threat to their identity and immediate future:

> I played quite a few first team games on the trot up until Xmas, but I wasn't naive enough to think I'd made it and I kind of knew that the manager was going to make a few summer signings and I'll tell you exactly where I was and my heart sunk a bit, and like I say I'd played quite a few games that season but I never went 'oh here I am giving it the big one' or anything like that because that wasn't me. I was on holiday relaxing, and I opened the newspaper, and there were 3 players, 2 who could play in my position all signed for the club on the same day. I read the article and saw the smiling faces staring back at me and thought wow and my stomach went and the first thing I thought was I'm going to have my hands full now [P2].

Following this experience their career at the club started to wane and it was time to consider how they would deal with this ongoing threat to their identity:

> The appearances started to become less and less over the following season, and I knew I had to get away, I probably stayed, I'll be honest with you, I probably stayed about 15 months too long, but you always think that you're going to get back in the first team and play on a regular basis again…you're not, but in your mind, you think you will. I stayed too long, and I realised that later. After you've been involved with the 1st team and then not anymore, it's your confidence that gets smashed because you start questioning your ability and you start over analyzing things all the time [P2].

Another player also revealed the often brutal, unforgiving culture of professional football and how they had to face the prospect of facing 'end point' deselection, moving on and looking for another club after making several 1st team appearances and then falling out of favour:

177

> In the meantime, a letter had dropped though from the club saying I was getting a free transfer and that I was free to speak to other interested parties. So anyway, I've gone in later on in the week as the manager was away at the time and the first thing I've done is showed him this letter and said I've got this, chucked it on the table and I pulled my jeans up to reveal a very poorly knee that was still very swollen after an operation I'd had and I said to him 'would you give me a job looking like this?' He replied, 'don't worry, we'll get you rehabilitated, I'll put you in the shop window and help get you a move, I'll play you in as many games as possible in the reserves and we'll get the best possible club for you.' Anyway, as per usual it was empty promises and he hardly spoke to me again [P3].

Player 5 also described their experiences and feelings of a deselection experience when a new manager came in who made it clear they weren't part of his long-term plans and the psychological challenges that ensued:

> A new manager came in and for some reason he didn't take to me. We came back pre-season and he pulled me in to his office and he said, 'I don't want you training with the group anymore and you'll need to move on.' So anyway, there was me and another lad and we were made to train in the afternoons away from the first team group. You just feel isolated, don't you? Its horrendous, it's not good at all and I remember going home and telling the Mrs I'm not allowed to train with the team, so the situation is getting even worse now and I just didn't know what to do. I was thinking a thousand thoughts and getting more and more anxious about what I should do for the best [P5].

The narratives revealed that one of the most challenging parts of a journey through professional football is the issue of deselection. A high percentage of players want to play at the highest level they can and to play as much as possible. As the players had been involved in football since they were very young, this is understandable as it is a big part of who they are as a person (Erikson, 1968). The work of Deci and Ryan (1985) provides a description of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and how deselection can affect these

motivations. If a player is in a first team and performing regularly, career advancement and better financial positioning can come to the fore. If a player is not playing and performing regularly in a first team, they can become invisible and disillusioned (i.e., feel alone and isolated) and be in a weaker position when contract renewal approaches (Nesti, 2010). Due to the scrutiny and high profile of elite level professional players it is understandable that identity may be threatened or disrupted within the contextual circumstances of deselection and isolation. An existential psychological approach suggests that these types of moments provide an opportunity for growth, the formation of greater self-knowledge and development of courage (Corlett 1996). The existential approach in these circumstances is not about making a player feel good, but about getting the player to look at themselves more closely. This can cause anxiety however as Nesti and Littlewood (2009) suggest anxiety is most felt where the player has a choice or decision to make to move forward. As seems to be the case in the player narratives, one of the most challenging components of deselection is where a player is unsure and cannot readily identify why the deselection has taken place and it may cause frustration and anger (Nesti 2010). This can provide an opportunity for the player to engage in a process of deep reflection and develop the courage to make positive change (Corlett 1996). As the narratives have revealed, deselection experiences can bring about feelings of anxiety, loss, confusion, de-motivation, and despair. It is at this juncture where character and attitude are vital in terms of career progression (Parker, 1996; Roderick, 2006) and that the 'talent needs trauma' and adversity growth research of Sarkar, Fletcher and Brown (2016) provides a good reason for why effective support is needed at this time. It is crucial for

the player to 'know themselves' as the accrual of self-knowledge is the key to excellence in any domain (Corlett 1996). Effective support at a deselection point can help the player reflect on who they are, where they are and where they want to get to. Much of current applied sport psychology has tended to rely on a cognitive or behavioural paradigm (i.e., the offering of techniques to help improve mental skills) and it is this which has held back alternative applied approaches within domains such as professional sport. The work of Erikson (1968) may provide us with further insight into identity development around the critical moment of deselection. At the sixth stage of identity formation, Erikson suggests that a crisis point may occur termed 'intimacy v isolation.' As the players have formed a strong athletic identity and have loved playing the game from an early age, relationships have been built within differing contexts (i.e., with the sport itself and between managers, coaches and teammates). As Potrac, Jones and Cushion (2007) have pointed out the manager/ coach is powerful because they 'hold the cards' and are in control of selection and deselection. At a point of deselection, relationships can be put under strain if communication practices are not as they should be. In his applied experiences, Nesti (2010) highlighted that communication practices in some professional clubs can be weak. This can be down to the extremely changeable, demanding, results driven culture created or even the skills and qualities of the manager themselves. At this point a player may be told why they are getting deselected, or they may not be told, or even as Player 3 points out the shock of coldly receiving a letter through the post which is incredibly poor practice indeed. An identity crisis may happen at this key moment of a player's career as the player has lost the intimacy of being involved regularly

with the sport/ club and has started feeling isolated, uncared for, unsafe and lost. A greater understanding of issues such as deselection and how to help a player deal with them is key within professional football and can enhance the applied sport psychology offerings within elite level team sport. Aftercare is a growing and important area within professional sport and one which requires ongoing research attention.

A further critical moment that emerged from the professional football player's narratives was around the psychological challenges of injury and the effects that this had on their daily lives and their identity as professional footballers. Tragically a few of the players interviewed revealed it was injury that had sadly claimed their playing careers in their mid to late 20s. Player 1 described the moment vividly where they realized it was all over following what he stated was a 'cowards tackle' and following a lengthy rehabilitation spell he had to confront the prospect of doing something else and the recreation of a new identity:

> I think it might have been a Friday morning before a game on the Saturday and I went to kick a ball in training and there was like no conviction and I just limped off and said to the manager 'I can't do this anymore', there wasn't a buildup of thinking and consideration of 'shall I retire, shall I retire', that was the moment, that moment, and I drove home from training and I cried my eyes out all the way and I told my wife the decision and she said 'are you alright, are you sure about this?' and I said 'I've never been as sure of anything in my life.' Psychologically that tackle had absolutely ruined me [P1].

Player 2 also revealed the challenging aspects of a career ending injury and the difficulties that this caused within other aspects of their lives:

I had problems in my hamstring, the medics thought it was sciatica and they kept injecting my hamstring. I was playing in games, and I was getting to 70 minutes, and it was going like a ball, and I was having to come off every game. It came to light it was coming from my back, I had developed a disc bulge. I had a major operation and they said I'd be back playing within 3 months, but I was getting lots of bleeding after the operation, and when I started to rehabilitate it was getting worse! Finished! They paid my contract up which bought me a bit of time, but I was very worried about working again and found it difficult to see a future [P2].

Player 2 then went on to describe how a potential career ending injury had impacted on their life and how they spiraled into a catastrophic period both personally and socially:

I was in bits, lost loads of weight, and it was very stressful on my marriage. I couldn't even pick my young daughter up and it was so severe I couldn't even hold her because my back would spasm. A couple of weeks later it really started to sink in and eventually I lost my marriage through it. I started to go out drinking regularly, I won't lie to you, I wasn't bothered about anybody, it was a case of sod everybody else. I just thought how could football do this to me. I just was in a nightmare for around a good couple of years. I got totally reckless, a loose cannon, I got done for drink driving, I got a year and a half ban, the same week I got a restraining order from my ex-wife, the police came round and you're thinking to yourself 'what on earth is going on with me?' I was sat in a police cell, and I looked down and I had foam slippers on with my toes popping through and I can remember it like it was yesterday and I was thinking 'What the hell is going on, this isn't me, I wouldn't say boo to a goose' [P2].

When asked how they had managed to get over this horrendous period and move their life on once again, Player 2 stated:

It was the kids. The kids. I remember coming home and I don't what the precise bit was that shook me up, but I thought 'you know what, what role model am I to my kids here?' And they were very young still, one was seven and one was three and I would say to myself 'c'mon what are you doing, you're

182

better than this, wake yourself up, what will the kids think of this you being an absolute waste of time' [P2].

Player 3 also detailed their experiences of having to finish with elite level football through injury and the psychological difficulties they faced when their career had ended:

> The crazy thing is that you just can't escape or get away from football, you drive in town and you see people with football tops on, you drive past a park and there are goalposts up, you watch the news and football is on the news, the papers are hammered with football, social media is hammered with football, you just cannot get away from it and that was what I found the most challenging thing. You've got to understand that all my life I've enjoyed playing football and I used to go to bed thinking about playing football, I used to get up thinking about playing football and what I could do different with a ball for years and football was etched in my brain, honestly it was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. If I had a chip in my brain that I could remove on my football career and my career, I'd willingly just pull it out (laughs). It's not too bad now, but for years and years I wouldn't watch football and I didn't want anything to do with football. It was a very tough time [P3].

And finally, Player 3 summarised his experiences about having to depart elite level professional football in the following manner:

> A lot of lads who get to a professional football level have been born with a football underneath their arm and for that football to be snatched off you in your mid 20s is so, so hard to take. The thing is if you have a normal job and you start that say at 18 and you finish it in your mid 20s and you can't do it again, you've only been doing that for 4 or 5 years, but with football you've been playing it for as long as you can remember, maybe when you were 3 or 4-year-old and to get a serious injury and for it be snatched away is horrible, horrendous. And another thing too, football is a career where you can get a very good wage, especially these days and for a lot of players, especially if you leave an elite level club, the wages can go down by quite a margin. Many other jobs, you work your way up on a scale and you're getting more and more each year. Players live to their lifestyle, and I think a lot try to maintain that when they're

on their way down too. I mean come on some players are getting helicopters to Cheltenham (racing) but what happens if that's not there anymore. You can't live a million a year lifestyle on 500 grand a year and then you can't live a 500 grand a year lifestyle on 250 grand a year etc etc. I think that's where a lot of the problems start [P3].

When a player comes to the end of their career, either through choice or non-choice, deep psychological related problems may arise if they have developed a strong, or even exclusive athletic identity along the journey to becoming a professional player (Brewer et al., 1993; Brown & Potrac 2009). A strong, or exclusive athletic identity is where the players see themselves in relation to their playing status and nothing else. The lack of significance that players attach to areas such as education or differing areas outside of their sport could be a product of the development of a 'glorified self' (Adler & Adler 1989). This can prevent long term planning and thinking ahead. Interestingly, one of the players who had suffered a horrendous injury revealed that they had not paid attention at college and saw it as a bit of waste of time. This narrowing of identity had created problematic issues later and had led to an identity crisis when having to come out of professional football (i.e., the player engaging in behaviours that were damaging such as drink driving and having relationship difficulties). The existential work of Frankl (1984) can help us understand this extremely challenging time in relation to threats to identity. When an individual loses meaning within something that they love doing and something that they have loved doing for a long time, a gap in their life has been opened and it can cause major ramifications in relation to their mental health. Frankl termed this as an existential void. He argued that when a sense of deep loss is experienced and a person loses their identity and who they are (i.e., existential

oblivion), there is a danger that deconstructive behaviours may rush in to fill the void to help the individual cope with the critical moment they are facing. This could be partaking in alcohol abuse, drug taking, smoking, gambling, anything to help bring about a temporary buzz or stimulation to help them feel better and fill the void. The danger is when the buzz or simulation wears off, the player may feel guilty about what they have done and to stop the feelings of guilt, the cycle may start again. Frankl labeled this as being in 'existential neurosis.' The findings from this player suggest that support within this time is critical so that the player feels a sense of belonging and feeling wanted. If support is not provided, it can lead to a catastrophic decline within an individual. This needs serious attention within the professional football world. The finding also resonates with Brown and Potrac's (2009) research who suggested that education is often seen as a distraction within professional football as by and large coaches want dedicated and committed players. This is an issue which needs raising again (i.e., the importance of education or broadening identity through different means both within apprentices and within professional players). The interview data suggests that despite education being an important component of the EPPP (Elite Player Performance Plan) there still seems to be a lack of importance which clubs (and players) tend to place on education and qualifications. This could be because clubs are running as businesses and are operational to produce professional footballers first and foremost. It can be put forward that it is crucial for a player to develop a broader identity possibly through education, or within areas beyond their sport to help them develop holistically and cope more effectively with the critical moments that professional football ultimately

brings. It is crucial that players see education as important and the reasons for this explained by ex-professional players who have been through the journey. The findings of this PhD can help support this. Having a broader identity and deeper sources of meaning within components of life can help develop a stronger sense of self which in turn will help deal with the shocks to the system when they arrive. This can make the transition out of professional sport as smooth as possible when it ultimately arrives.

5.9.4   Exiting the game and reflecting on playing careers.

The final part of the phenomenological based interviews focused on the critical moment of players exiting out of the game and their reflections on the journey that they had made. The narrative suggested that there were many differing experiences where some had managed to stay in and around professional football in another guise (i.e., a coach) whereas some players had found difficulty in moving their lives on and were critical of the support they had received from their clubs and wider support mechanisms. Player 1 reflected on their next steps after professional football when having to sadly retire through injury and the challenges that they faced when having to adapt to something else:

> It was very challenging, you look at what you had at (elite level club name) and when you're there, you take it for granted a little bit; I did anyway, I'll hold my hands up to that and actually when I came away from that I wished I'd have embraced every day. That's the problem sometimes with the big clubs and young players in the academy, when they come out into the real world they freeze and can't cope with it because they are so protected and sheltered. And you're always learning whilst you're in the game and the bad coaches you learn from them because you just don't want to treat people like that, that's a lesson, there's always things that you learn from any experience, so in my case people dealing with long term

186

injuries, you've got to be aware what they are going through and realise that they are going through some dark times, some really dark times [P1].

Player 1 went on to describe they did seek support, but it brought them to a stark realisation:

I actually saw a psychologist; she was a lady who'd been in a car accident, so she was a disabled lady and actually it put my problems into perspective really. I saw her a couple of times, she phoned me the day before I was supposed to see her again and said she'd been in another serious car accident and her husband had got killed in it. I just couldn't see her again, because I couldn't open up and tell her my problems, because she'd got far worse than mine, but you know the club didn't offer anything, this was something I'd done off my own back; the club weren't very good to be fair [P1].

Finally, Player 1 offered advice for players just starting their journeys and coming into the game:

It's tough being a young player, that's why you need plenty of support. Some of them are coming in at ten or 11 years old and younger and are on more or less a full-time training programme. They go to school, and they train more hours than the 1st team! They're ten and 11 years old! They're mini professionals really. At 16 that kid has had five or six years of this, and the sad fact of the matter is some of them are getting told you're not going to be good enough! Maybe the system needs a re-visit or more scrutiny on what is going on in there [P1].

Player 2 detailed their exit from the professional game and the challenges they faced at this time, especially the learning they took from neglecting their education when entering the game as an apprentice:

On reflection, all we did in college was we went in, played pool for an hour, and then went home (laughs) and that was your day

187

at college. I don't even think we did a class to be honest! We may have done one hour here and there and then went home and you got a certificate!! I think footballers even as apprentices because they all want to make it take a step back and if they really understood what could happen to you overnight, they'd do it. However, because you've entered that world, I think you become lazy and you think 'I'm here to be a footballer, nothing else' but you do have the time to do both. Footballers are home in the afternoon, and you can do a course, or add another string to your bow, but I do understand it to an extent as they are young players and they want it bad, but you should still do the other bit. It's vital. Someone told me a stat the other day Something like 0.01% of players who go into football academies at a young age are still playing at the age of 23. It's unbelievable and it's a stat that one of the lads I know at my current work told me, and I went what, that's unbelievable. And it's much harder now, there are a lot of foreign players in the game, you get players from all around the world, and you've got to be better than them. Don't get me wrong, football is a brilliant game and it's the greatest game ever, but it's very hard to get a full and successful career [P2].

Player 2 although doing other things was thankful that the club still gave him some part time match day hours around hospitality and meeting fans and went on to describe the difficulties of getting work within professional football and staying visible:

You only actually appreciate a lot more things when you come out of it and when you're in it, and I was on good money at (club name) you don't have to worry and you don't even know what's in your bank account, I was swapping cars every six months, we had two cars, and I was never worried about the mortgage or bills, but when you come out of it, reality bites and you realise that's the reality of millions of the everyday people you know. That's the real world, but you're in a huge bubble in football and you're just surrounded by that bubble constantly and you don't do it intentionally but that's all you care about, and you get very selfish with it, you do It's a massive shock when it's not there anymore [P2].

To be honest I'm lucky to be still involved at the club part time and there are loads who can't get back in, I spoke to a player the other day who's been a manager around the lower divisions, and he went for a job a few weeks ago and it was a League Two job, and he was told that 150 people went for it. Incredible

really. To be honest, the management has never appealed to me, I like the coaching, but management has never appealed [P2].

Finally, Player 2 explained the difficulty of having a conflict with personal values and with what can go on when attempting to stay in the game to get further employment:

> Quite simply I'm not one who will upset the apple cart and sometimes I do back down, but I'm not saying I won't stand my ground, it's just that I'm not at the forefront of everything like some of the ex-players seem to be when trying to get work. I just think there's ways and means to do it. You can be it and not pester or cosy up to someone. There's a fine line between being busy and pestering. I think I do it in a nicer way, because I don't ask for anything off anybody, I'm not one of them. Where I don't like things in football and you get it, is that some ex-players will basically slag off other people in a role for them to have a chance of getting in. It's sad especially when that other person is doing a good job, but they want it. It's like stitching someone up and it's nasty and vindictive really. And that's the reality of professional football sometimes, but I wouldn't do that and it's something that I really don't like at all [P2].

Player 3 described their experiences of professional football and the way it shaped and affected their identity when having to come away from the game at a relatively young age:

> The main thing that I took away from professional football was its not all negativity but it's not all positivity either, that's what many think, it's not all glamorous, there are loads of challenges in that environment and I've always said this, it's not as great and glamorous as people make out. Football haunts me in many ways! I've told my son to take up snooker (laughs). I would say to him if (manager's name) was there, don't sign (laughs again). The crazy thing is there wouldn't be anything that I'd change. If I went into (elite club name) as a big time Charlie, ignorant and rude, I'd look back and think I changed this about myself and that about myself, but I've no qualms about how I acted and behaved. I was just being me, and the flip side to that is ok, what should have I done to get on? Had my hair cut?

Should I have had more shaves? Should I have changed me as a person? And no, no way, I wouldn't change a thing. If you have to change to get on, what's the point? [P3].

Player 4 reflected on their career experiences and provided the following overview of coming away from professional football, their advice for young players starting out on their career and to seek out the support mechanisms where possible:

I would say though that the most important thing is that if you have any problems is to talk to someone, because of who I was, I never talked to anyone, I just kept things inside my head, and the one thing is you have to look after yourself because it is a very cutthroat business, it's a totally ruthless business to be in, and a lot of elite players get fortunes these day, but money isn't everything, yes you want to be the best and you want to play at the top, but what people don't see is that it's a difficult world to be in and your family around you is very important, your family is important. I think taking advice off ex-professionals is important, you don't have to take everything on board, but an experienced campaigner can give you some good advice and it may benefit you in the future. I think in many ways the parents don't help these days and if you're starting to show a little bit there is a lot of pressure on a young player because some clubs are paying lots of money for youngsters at like 12, 13 or 14. I do feel sorry for them because it's difficult to go out and really enjoy yourself as it's immense pressure for them at that young age. I have an old school approach and I fully believe in letting a youngster go out and play and enjoy it but these days it's like you've got to do this, and you've got to do that and there doesn't seem to be no real relaxation from a lot of them going out to play. Everything seems to be done for them to perfection these days. Like robots in many ways. Not many really express themselves [P4].

Player 5 provided the following descriptions of their football career coming to an end and the experiences around being weaned off football:

To be honest, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do next, and you know I'd been in football all my life since I was 16 and football had sorted me out financially a little bit and I wasn't at a desperate stage, as I'd earned more money over the last few years of my (elite club name) career than I'd earned for the last

18 years, so it was crazy like, madness, so anyway, I wasn't really thinking where is the next wage coming from so I was alright in that respect and I can remember thinking I'd like to stay in the game like and I always wanted to prolong my playing career as long as I could and I was thinking you know, I'll try and keep playing till I'm 40 and I'd been training every day but you got into that frame of mind where it didn't really matter if I was playing or not, and sad as it was I was earning decent money for being a number two and I thought I can train every day, I can keep fit, they can call on me if they need me, so it sort of reached that stage really, so when they talk about what happens when players get to the end of their careers you get these people, you know, they get depressed because they miss the euphoria, or they suffer a lot with the sudden ending of their career, I was slowly weaned off it and that really helped [P5].

Player 5 also provided some reflective comments when asked about what they had learned from their journey through the game:

When I look back and I've talked about living away from home and the challenges of that I think I would have advised myself to be more receptive to that and looking back I think I was feeling sorry for myself a little bit and I should have really embraced it a little bit more, but you know, I've no complaints really, I've had a journey from going from (elite level club name) heading down to the lower leagues, and then eventually back into The Premier League, it's sort of been a roller coaster ride, I've played in all four professional leagues, I've played in all the cup competitions and I even managed to get a place on the bench in The Europa League, so it was only really The Champions League that I never really got involved with, so I can't really complain, and if there was a regret, it would probably be never getting the chance to play at Wembley, I had been on the bench there a couple of times, but I never actually got to play, but other than that I can't complain, I've had a solid career [P5].

Finally, Player 5 provided an overview on how their family and values had helped their journey within professional football and lessons they had learned along the way:

To be honest, I've always been that lad from (village name), and you can't afford to change or become someone you're not,

and why should you become someone else, I still see a lot of the same people and I go in the same pubs and everyone treats you the same and even when I went into the Premier League and everyone changed towards me, but I never changed towards them but you always get some people who'll say "oh, he's changed him" and that's when you have maybe said one wrong thing, and it might be one tiny thing, a minor thing because people are watching you all the time and they may pick that up and run with it and they're just trying to find the bad points aren't they, but as a whole I'd like to think that I never changed much, and I'm just the same bloke…and these lads now in the Premier League it's incredible some of them are earning 100 thousand pounds a week plus and you know how can your life not change with those sort of wages and it is difficult you're going to have bigger houses, bigger cars, you're going to have women throwing themselves at you, and you can understand the challenges of that when you're in your early 20s and you know everybody wants a bit of you and all these people latch onto you, put your money into this and put your money into that, and there's always people trying to pull you down as well, but like I've said you have just got to get good people around you who you can trust and that would be my advice for any player, keep the people who were there before you got to where you got to and they're still there now, that's one of the things I found most useful, I still knock about with lads who I went to school with and yep the journey that I went on nothing changed really [P5].

Player 6 recounted their experience of the transition at the end of their football career and the challenges that they faced when having to finish playing and take up a coaching career:

It was a difficult time and it wasn't a difficult time, because what it did it made me focus on what I wanted and I had to leave because a new management team came in and I wasn't part of that…but it gave me a belief probably within myself that I could do this, I could get far more active in that role (assistant management) and then the next step of managing, but at this time it was a case of where and what, you think where can I take these experiences, but you have to give it a crack and you have to find out where your skills and qualities are best served [P6].

Player 6 also went on to detail their views on the often cutthroat, brutal world of professional football which is purely based on results as they attempted to carve another career out:

> You may have heard the term, love the game, hate the industry, and I get that, I do get that, why people say that because there is the game and the beauty of the game and the ways that you feel what it should be about, coaching, development, bringing players through, and getting them from you know where I was as a youngster to the top end of the game, then you see the industry and the influences within that industry and outside of the game which play major, major part in determining allegedly whether you're any good or you're not and that judgement call is made from purely results so you have got to try and separate the two and everybody has got an opinion and those outside influences are massive when it comes to decision making at the top because PR is involved, brand issues are involved and merchandising issues are involved and all that and if the spin is not great out there then we're not selling as many things as we should and we're not getting the best sponsors in so something has to go which is not really an area you want to operate in to the point that you want to coach and see development but it becomes results based [P6].

Player 6 provided detail on the importance of developing various qualities and maintaining a strong sense of self how those qualities serve you well as you try to navigate through the game:

> You've got to keep that element of desire and wanting to do it and once you get to the top levels a lot of it is judged by other people so now it's the scrutiny of it all and how can you handle that scrutiny, not necessarily pressure, because pressure can be what you make it but the scrutiny is unbelievable and then your strength of character comes into it and are you capable of handling it when everyone knows what you should be doing, most of them no idea how to do it (laughs) and they can quickly think he's hopeless and he's not (laughs). Your character comes through your upbringing, probably from your experiences you've gained along the way, not just in the game, but from life's experiences as well shapes you a little bit and where you are, your community, and what football club you're at. They all build you [P6].

And finally, Player 6 provided some thoughts for younger players making

their way in the modern game:

> We're living in an industry now of self-preservation which has been created by the industry so you do get lots of different personalities in there who probably do think beyond where they are at, but that's the nature of the industry….its created big personalities, characters, big egos, not only players, but managers and coaches too, and everyone is being judged so quickly now, everyone wants to hit the ground, make a statement, and then see where it takes them and that's part of the dilemma we find ourselves in, it's become impossible because if you're not that type of person you get found out anyway but everybody is different, for example we saw (football manager name) go from this pretty reserved quiet type of personality to doing a daft dance on the touchline and that's like wow, what is that all about? And he seems to be remembered more for that than he is his managerial skills! Of course, we want characters, we want personalities, but most importantly you've got to remember who you are and where you've come from and I remember (elite level player name) once saying he wanted to be a coach, he wanted to be a manager, and when he came out of the game, he hated who he had become, he hated the person who he'd become through the industry, which is very cutthroat and this is what he's implying and that changed him as a person and obviously the people who knew him and who were surrounding him have gone wow, he's different and we don't particularly like that and eventually he realised that and got out of it, and it can be like that [P6].

As well as developing identity across a general lifecycle (Erikson, 1968), it

can be put forward that parts of the identity development model can be

compressed to help us understand crisis points within a footballer's life cycle.

If navigating through the game and gaining a full career (i.e., retiring at 35-40

years old) a high majority of players will have to do something else (i.e., find

another career). The eighth stage of Erikson's model can help us to understand

this point of exit. Although suggested at 65 years old, Erikson claimed that if a

person had not lived a full and engaging life when reflecting and had not

completed activities that they wanted to do, there is a crisis point. He termed this stage 'ego integrity' vs 'despair.' This reasoning could help explain why a high percentage of players may suffer with mental health and well-being issues when leaving the sport. This can be seen within some of the player experiences and psychological challenges provided within the narratives. A couple of the players evidenced a level of planning forwards when their careers and final contracts were coming to an end (Player 5 and Player 6) and stated that this helped them when having to transition out of the sport and move into coaching and management. This finding is in alignment with the work of Sinclair and Orlick, (1993) and Murphy, (1995) who suggested that planning a transition or route out of being a professional player can help when having to face it. A few of the other players that were interviewed reported experiences of almost sudden, disrupted threats to their identity (through injury and deselection) which brought about feelings of anxiety, angst, and uncertainty. These feelings may have been brought upon due to a lack of planning and having a narrow identity which was based around their lives as a professional footballer. When a professional football player has a strong or even exclusive athletic identity and has not achieved what they wanted to achieve at the end of a career (or even when having to leave football early through injury or deselection), a feeling of regret, disappointment and sense of unproductivity may be an issue. This could lead to issues with self, including mental ill health problems such as anxiety and depression. The point of exit of a professional player needs to be taken very seriously indeed and support from wider stakeholders and differing guises is crucial (i.e., Club, FA, PFA,). This is an area that needs to be constantly examined (quality of 'within care' and

'aftercare' for players) and the appropriate support and provision to understand topics such as identity and identity crisis is critical. When dealing with critical moments throughout professional football and especially upon exit, the constant accrual of self-knowledge and awareness is a key component of healthy identity development (e.g., May, 1977; 2009). As Nesti (2004) points out our fundamental human existence hinges on working hard at being all you can be, whilst accepting that this can never fully be completed. We are always a work in progress. The narrative findings have revealed that professional sport can provide platforms for life experiences, moments for growth, development, and deeper learning along the journey from academy to professional player. Traumatic experiences revealed within the interview data such as deselection, getting moved on, career ending injury can help individuals' grow psychologically and offer an opportunity for reflection, creativity, and innovation (May, 1977; May, 2009). Although useful and having its place, the mental skills approaches seen in much of contemporary literature and applied sport psychology practice (e.g., Weinberg & Gould, 2015) would not be fit for purpose to help support some of the challenges that Study One and Study Two has revealed. Much of current sport psychology practice tends to focus upon either cognitive or behavioural approaches and it doesn't accurately consider the totality of a person in what Kierkegaard, (1944) terms the thinking, feeling human being. As Nesti, (2010) has alluded to there is no place for terms such as spirit or courage within cognitive and behavioural psychology practice whereas there is in existential psychology.

When supporting a player through a critical moment the work of Nesti (2004) and Ronkainen and Nesti (2016) has highlighted that a person

ultimately has a choice through one of the four givens of human existence (i.e., freedom) where they can either pretend all is well (by not facing up to the anxiety that accompanies a critical moment), or they can seize the opportunity to face the anxiety and develop mental resilience, existential courage and personality (Nesti, 2004). Further theoretical underpin for supporting critical moments and identity development emanated from the lived experiences of Viktor Frankl within the horrors of Auschwitz in World War Two. Frankl suggested that everything else could be stripped bare from a human being except for their freedom of choice in any given circumstance. On one occasion when trudging through the brutally extreme conditions barefooted wearing nothing but rags, Frankl's wife came into his imagery, and he realised that "Love is the highest and ultimate goal to which man can aspire" and that "The salvation of man is through love and in love." (p.49). Incredibly he found a crumb of humour amongst his extreme adversity and went on to say in jest to his comrade "If only our wives could see us now." Through Frankl's suffering he realised that "Everything can be taken from man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way." (p.75). This seems very much aligned to Nietzche's premise "What doesn't destroy us makes us stronger." This theory (although not hinging on life or death as Frankl's experiences did) underpins the qualitative findings of both Study One and Study Two by suggesting whatever circumstances a professional footballer finds themselves in (e.g., deselection, injury, going on loan, being in and out of the team and exiting the game) there is always a choice. If an identity (e.g., a professional footballer) lacks weak core values, then this choice will be much harder to make and

there may be a temptation to follow the group or 'the herd.' Kierkegaard (1944) warns us of this and states the crowd is untruth! The key is developing a stronger sense of self based on facing critical moments and learning the quality of courage to make a constructive choice as opposed to a poor choice. In professional football culture this can be hard due to being in a team and doing what the manager says. Support away from the team and manager may be needed when making this choice. Freedom is part of Yalom's (1980) four givens of existence and there can be an argument put forward that existential sport psychology support may be a better option than mental skills approaches when supporting professional footballers in day-to-day practice.

5.9.5   Conclusion.

Most of the transition literature has helped provide us with an understanding around differing stages in sports careers (e.g., Stambulova 2003; Wylleman & Lavalle 2004) and transitions such as moving from youth to senior (Morris, Tod & Oliver 2014) or athlete retirement or exit (Grove, Lavallee & Gordon 2008). However, this can be criticised as both Study One and the narrative based research of Study Two has revealed that athletes face a much wider range of issues within their sporting journey and daily lives. A better term for these experiences is critical moments. Most issues revealed from the interview narratives suggest that within a footballer's career there are moments when players must confront anxiety associated with an unexpected event, which in turn leads to a threat or change to their identity where they may see themselves differently (Nesti and Littlewood 2011). The events described within the interviews suggested cultural adaptation, homesickness, moving clubs, loans,

deselection, coach/ manager relationships/ teammate relationships, injury and facing the end of a career are some of the major challenges that a professional footballer will have to face and navigate within their career journey. Some of these challenges within the interview narratives brought about feelings of uncertainty, confusion, despair, fear, anger, shame, humiliation, and loss. This potentially could in part be down to a high number of professional players having a strong, or even exclusive athletic identity (Brown & Potrac 2009) and being involved with football from a very young age (Calvin 2017). When a player faces these frequent challenges, or unplanned for issues within their career, it can provide an opportunity for self-examination, psychological growth (though adversity/trauma) and development to build a stronger sense of self by confronting the existential anxiety accompanying their non-normative transition or critical moment (May, 1977). The interviews revealed that the players faced threats or changes to their identity right throughout their playing careers and at these important points they had to examine who they were at the time to allow them to learn, progress, maintain psychological equilibrium or move forwards. Nesti and Littlewood (2009) have suggested that it is of utmost importance to develop a strong sense of self to keep performing at the top levels of sport and that players will continually have to remind themselves that they have other identities outside of and beyond their professional football role.

5.9.6 Implications.

Findings from Study Two could be used to help inform the applied delivery of sport psychology within professional football. The narratives suggested that as

a player makes their way through the game, issues start to appear which may require specialised support outside the realm of the management and coaches. It can be put forward that applied sport psychology support within professional football may be best served at an organisational level with the overarching aim to promote an environment which supports transparency and openness and avoids closure and retraction. The narratives suggested that the environment of professional football is rapidly changing, volatile with a wide range of issues to deal with on a frequent basis. If not managed carefully, this can create a pseudo culture of brittle masculinity where inauthenticity is high and roles and responsibilities are misunderstood (i.e., acting and pretending all is well when it is not). By helping build a culture, an applied sport psychologist can create conditions for effective development and help players deal with the abundance of issues when they arrive. One of the interesting findings from Study Two is that the issues that the ex- professional players raised as challenging were not performance psychology focussed and were not referenced to playing (i.e., pre-game/ during game/ post game). The issues that they raised centralised on homesickness, going out on loan, coach/manager relationships, social challenges, deselection, injuries and moving on from the sport. This determines the type of applied sport psychology support that would be useful within professional football and a key difference in what you could offer at academy level and in a pro-environment. This is seen as an insightful suggestion in relation to the training and development of an applied sports psychologist who wants to operate with professional footballers and professional football culture.

5.9.7 Limitations.

The second study of the PhD had some limitations. First, the study involved the retrospective recall of a small football-specific, purposeful sample of ex-professional footballers. The participants of the study were expected to recount events which occurred several years ago, and potentially the interview data may have been subject to response or retrospective recall bias. However, to overcome this, it is put forwards that the retrospective nature and design of the study afforded an opportunity for ex-players to deeply reflect on experiences affecting identity that could not have been readily accessed by other means or approaches.

Another potential limitation of this research lies in the sample for the data collection. All six players were from a UK background and therefore had progressed within the professional game through the UK system. It is recognised that a high percentage of players, especially in the modern Premier League, come from a wide array of different countries, backgrounds and cultures. Due to the uniqueness of this study, the research can be seen as a starting point and offer more research opportunities going forwards in relation to experiences of transition, critical moments, and professional player support. More investigation on further non-normative transitions and critical moments involving players with differing nationalities, religious and spiritual backgrounds and from differing leagues across the world would add even more currency to the knowledge base helping the future training of applied sport psychologists. One final limitation is that the sample was gender specific (all male). Again, as a potential research opportunity, it would be interesting to investigate what psychological issues and challenges there are for players

within the female game as this continues to grow and gain more traction and exposure.

5.9.8   Recommendations.

The findings from this research are congruent with and add further weight to the applied experiences and reflective musings of Nesti and Littlewood (2009) who wrote about their applied practices when operating with first team players in The Premier League over the course of nine seasons. Hopefully the research findings of PhD Study Two can supply sport psychology educators and course writers with more evidence to consider a different angle when working with and supporting professional players as they navigate their way through the game, specifically around the topics of critical moments and identity.

Another recommendation for further research would be to collect data from wider staff within the world of professional football (i.e., managers, coaches, analysts, scouts etc.) to investigate what critical moments they experience in professional football culture and how this impacts upon their identity and identity development. To build upon the research findings from Study One and Study Two, further research will now focus upon the prevalence of issues that have been unearthed.

CHAPTER SIX: STUDY THREE

Exploring the prevalence of critical moments within professional football

Study Two Definitive Aim

Utilise a phenomenological methodology approach to explore 'alternative workplace voices' based on transitions and critical moment experiences of former professional footballers and what these moments meant to them in relation to threats to identity and meaning as they moved through the game (PhD Study Two).

Findings As players navigated their way through professional football, many psychological related issues came to light. These issues appeared to provide threats to the players' identity and in places highlighted areas of crisis. Erikson's (1968) identity development framework was used to help provide a deeper understanding around some of the issues raised.

Implications: To maximise effective support for players journeying through professional football, and to address the broader issues raised, it is suggested that a broader type of psychological support would be beneficial. Clubs need to recognise this.

Study Three Definitive Aim:

Explore the prevalence of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers' and to examine the role of the applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners in supporting players through critical moments within the 'hard to reach' culture of elite professional football. (PhD Study Three).

6.1   Introduction.

The precarious and unstable environment within first team professional football presents players with an array of issues to deal with over the course of their football careers (Roderick, 2006). The current transitions-based literature tends to focus on end points or stages and does not truly reflect the more frequent experiences that a professional footballer will have to deal with. Research has presented a level of understanding through applied accounts (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Nesti et al., 2012) however knowledge of critical moments, and how they impact identity, is limited.

Study One and Study Two have provided a deeper contextual insight into experiences of critical moments and identity impacts using player voice accounts as opposed to applied practitioner accounts. Study Three will now provide an investigation into the prevalence of some of these issues.

Study One of the PhD highlighted personal and retrospective experiences associated with a personal journey from schoolboy football into professional football. The study provided insight on both highs and lows and how these moments affected identity development. As well as normative transitions (i.e., schoolboy to apprentice, apprentice to professional, professional to exit) there were other issues that affected or threatened identity within the journey. These have been termed as critical moments (Nesti, 2010).

Building on Study One, Study Two explored 'an alternative voice' and investigated the retrospective perspectives of critical moments, identity and meaning from a sample of UK based, male ex-professional players (n=6). Phenomenological interviews were utilised to capture these experiences. As footballers moved through the transition from youth to senior football, there were more frequent issues occurring including factors that were associated with a change or threat to their identity. Understanding these critical moments and how their identity was affected is likely to add substantially to the current bank of knowledge, given this was a sample who have lived and existed within their sport.

Study One and Study Two have shown that moving successfully from youth to senior sport is a process that takes place over several years with many differing issues and changes taking place, rather than as a singular event as previously conceptualised in the transition literature (i.e., at the start of, or the end of a career). Study Three will now examine the prevalence ex-professional player critical moment experiences in a

larger, quantitative based manner (i.e., using a survey approach). This type of study will provide some numerical knowledge around experiences of transitions, critical moments, identity and meaning, specifically in a professional football context and will help answer the overall thesis aims.

Currently there is no previous research which has examined a large sample of ex- professional football players with the aim of demonstrating prevalence surrounding transitions and critical moment experiences. This is a unique factor within this PhD. Such research will provide insight into the around the operating culture of professional football and will highlight areas where applied sport psychologists could potentially assist and support players in the most effective ways. Study One and Study Two has presented qualitative experiences around transitions and critical moment issues. Study Three will now present the prevalence of those issues. The primary aim of PhD Study Three is to survey a sample of ex-professional players to capture views of operating within professional football and to explore prevalence around some of the transitional and critical moment issues which Study One and Study Two have revealed.

6.2   Method.

Due to the pragmatic research philosophy chosen to address and answer the thesis aims, the researcher changed their approach within the third study of the PhD to a realist ontology, an objectivist epistemology, and a positivist paradigm (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). To provide insight into prevalence findings from the auto-ethnographical story and phenomenological interviews, a quantitative method was chosen. Quantitative research involves the collection of data so that the information collected can be quantified (Biddle et al., 2001; Thomas, Nelson &

Silverman, 2015). In the first instance the accumulated data enabled the researcher to gain a numerical based understanding of the challenges that ex-professional football players faced within their career. Using the findings from Study One and Study Two, a 20-question online survey was designed and developed (see Appendix) with simplified, definitive response options (i.e., agree/disagree). This was to help gain a prevalence-based understanding of the topics under scrutiny (i.e., critical moments/ transitions/ culture/ support). The method allowed for not just representative data of the study, but also ensured that the research was credible, easily replicated and thus had a strong reliability (Creswell, 2003). When designing the survey, the length was a vital component as too long of a survey could potentially lead to de-motivation and dis-engagement and too short of a survey would not capture the level of information needed to answer the research questions. The validity of a survey tool refers to how accurately the data is collected and measured (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). Validity can be demonstrated within the PhD Study Three research design tool through previous coverage of the topics within Study One and Study Two (e.g., content validity of critical moments/ transitions). The data collection tool was constructed using the findings within PhD Study One and PhD Study Two. This included prevalence of deselection, injuries, moving clubs, manager and teammate relationships, social demands, and challenges, exiting the sport, psychological support offered whilst in the sport, planning for next steps, trust and maintaining love for the sport This allowed the researcher to analyse and evaluate percentages of data based around professional footballer transitional and critical moment experiences.

The reliability of the data collection tool refers to the consistency of the results gained (Biddle et al., 2001). The design of the instrument used to collect data in this study was based on a simple construct of 'agree' or 'disagree.' This was to allow for

simplicity of findings representation. The percentages found through the ex-professional player responses can then be considered within courses for future sport psychology training and applied practice.

6.3   Participants.

Initially the online survey link was sent to a sample of ex-professional football players who had retired from the game in recent times (i.e., up to 2017). The players were then asked to recommend ex-professional players that they knew. Following this recommendation, messages were then sent via Linked In and via private messages on social media. The purposeful sample (Marshall, 1996) included players who had played for professional football clubs at what was an elite level (i.e., they had played in the highest tiers of English professional football such as The Premier League or The Championship). Players in the sample had also played what was still considered to be elite level (i.e., a professional player) but had mainly played in the lower leagues (i.e., League One or League Two). This allowed for a wide range of data to be collected around issues and critical moments that were typically faced. Exclusion criteria was set that the player must have been a professional player for a stage of their career (i.e., those who had been deselected/ released and left the game before professional forms were signed (i.e., released at 17 or 18) were not included. This criterion was put in place so that the players were able to draw on personal experience and reflect upon their lived experiences of some of the critical moments which they had faced throughout their professional football careers. The sample was justified as the topics of critical moments within professional football is largely unexplored and Study Three of the PhD was methodologically designed to capture a prevalence understanding of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers.

6.4   Procedure.

Ethical clearance was granted via the Liverpool John Moores Ethics Committee (18/SPS/031). The 20-question survey was designed via Survey Monkey. Initially the survey was presented to the possible participants with no requirement to take part. The process involved the distribution of the survey link to a sample of ex-professional football players as well as a Participation Information Sheet. The survey did not collect any personal information from the participants, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). The use of an online survey led to an increased sample size. In total 210 ex professional players managed to <u>fully complete</u> (212 filled in the online survey, but there was the odd question that had <u>not been completed</u>).

In the first instance the survey captured some biographical/ demographical data, but did not request any names (e.g., of players, clubs). This was to satisfy Liverpool John Moores ethics requirements and so there was no link, either implicitly or explicitly to identify who the players were. More specifically the players were asked how many years they had spent as a professional, how many clubs they had played for and whether they had gained international caps (i.e., represented their country). After an initial group of ex-professional players had completed the survey, further contacts were made and a snowball sampling strategy was utilised to send on to ex-professionals who fitted the inclusion criteria (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015). This was done to capture as many respondents as possible and to help the data be as generalisable as possible to the population under scrutiny. The survey took approximately 10- 15 minutes to complete and was open for 1 calendar month. When this date had been surpassed the survey was closed and the results were analysed.

6.5   Data analysis.

Data analysis is described as a process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the data that has been collected (Biddle et al., 2001; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Following the scoring of each survey, the results were analysed. The online survey tool (i.e., Survey Monkey) automatically compiled the 'overall sample' results numerically (into percentages). These have been presented visually within the results section. As well as the 'overall sample', the data was further broken down using SPSS version 26 into levels of leagues (Higher Leagues (i.e., Premiership/ Championship) and Lower Leagues (i.e., League One and League Two)).

6.6   Results.

The survey was sent to 250 ex-professional footballers in total. There were 212-part completions (i.e., the odd question not completed) and full completions of the survey totalled 210. This totalled a response rate of 85%. This was excellent as a recent study within this traditionally 'hard to access' population yielded a response rate of 29% (Gouttebarge, Frings-Dressen, & Sluiter, 2015). The sample were all ex-professional football players who had played for clubs within the professional UK leagues. The players were all male and it was stipulated they must have retired from the game within as recent time as possible (i.e., up to 2017). When analysing the data, it appeared that some of the surveys appeared to have a couple of questions that had been missed, or not answered (i.e., completed totals having 210 and 211 e.g.). These will be reported throughout the data analysis. Early questions within the survey captured some biographical data about playing length as a professional, number of clubs represented, playing level, and whether the players had international experience. These are presented in the following table (see Table 1):

Table 1

Biographical Data of Sample.

Length of time as a professional football player? N=212	1-3 seasons	4-7 seasons	Over 8 seasons
	17% (35 players)	20% (42 players)	64% (135 players)
Number of clubs played for? N=211	1-3 clubs	4-7 clubs	Over 8 clubs
	36% (76 players)	45% (95 players)	19% (40 players)
Majority of professional playing level? N=210	Higher (i.e., PL or Championship)	Lower Leagues (i.e., League 1 or League 2)	
	40% (85 players)	60% (125 players)	
Representation at international level? N=211	Yes	No	
	39% (83 players)	61% (128 players)	

Q5 Looking back on my professional football career, i achieved everything i set out to achieve

Answered: 212   Skipped: 0
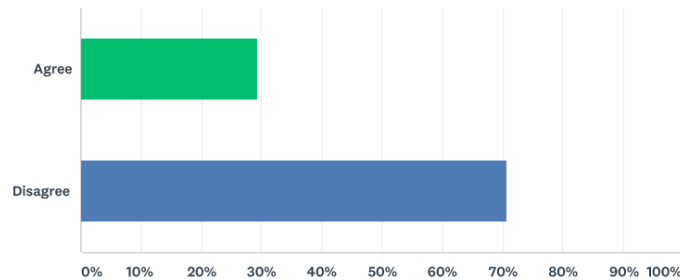
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Agree	29.25%	62
Disagree	70.75%	150
TOTAL		212

In the initial group of questions, the ex-players were then asked if they had achieved everything they set out to achieve within professional football. 29% agreed with the statement in that they had and 71% disagreed and stated that they had not.

The next part of the survey requested the ex-players to reflect upon and tick any of 10 psychological challenges that they have had to face and deal with within their professional playing career. The following results were totalled in relation to the frequency of experiencing these critical moments (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frequency of Critical Moments.

Critical Moments	Percentage/players
1. Deselection	81% (172 players)
2. Playing whilst injured (or not 100%)	73% (155 players)
3.Challenging internal club relationships (e.g., manager/coach/other players)	67% (141 players)

4. Not holding a first team place (e.g., in and out)	62% (132 players)
5. Long term injury problems	61% (130 players)
6. Contract negotiations (wages increasing or decreasing)	58% (124 players)
7. Being singled out by the manager/coach for criticism (in front of others)	48% (102 players)
8. Having to move clubs (impacts on family)	47% (99 players)
9. Having to deal with negative media coverage	37% (79 players)
10. Interest from external sources as career grew	30% (64 players)

The ex-players were then asked about the previous psychological challenges (i.e., critical moments) and whether they felt they could talk openly and in confidence to someone within their club/s about them (see Fig.1.). 23% agreed that they could talk openly, however 77% disagreed with this.

Q7 When having the previous psychological challenges to deal with, i felt i could talk openly and in confidence to someone within the club/s if they were bothering me
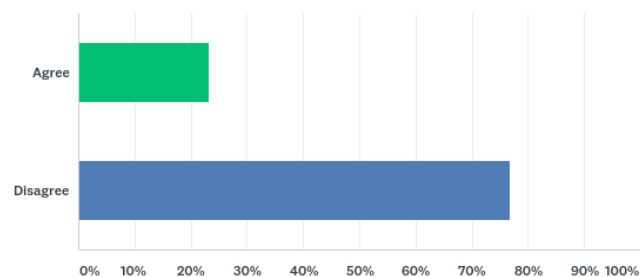
Fig 1. Overall sample data.

The data was broken down further into 'Higher League Level' (i.e., Premier League and Championship and 'Lower League Level' (i.e., League One and League Two). At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 1A) 32% agreed that they could talk openly and 68% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 1B), 17% agreed that they could talk openly and 83% disagreed.

Table 1A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	27	32
Disagree	58	68
Total	85	100.0

Table 1B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	21	16.8
Disagree	104	83.2
Total	125	100.0

The ex-players were then asked when having these more frequent psychological challenges to deal with (i.e., critical moments) did they seek support, or did they keep the issues to themselves and try to work the issues out themselves (see Fig 2.). 91% of the ex-players preferred to keep the issues to themselves (i.e., avoided asking for support) and only 9% admitted asking for support.

Q8 When having psychological challenges to deal with within my football career i preferred to keep the issues to myself and work them out myself (i.e. avoid asking for support)
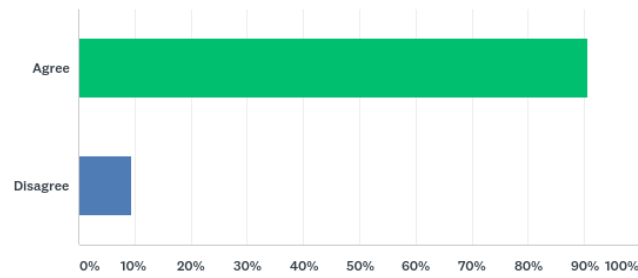

Fig 2. Overall sample data.

At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 2A) 91% agreed that they preferred keeping the issues to themselves and 9% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 2B), it was the same. 91% agreed that they could talk openly and 9% disagreed.

Table 2A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	77	91
Disagree	8	9
Total	85	100

Table 2B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	114	91
Disagree	11	9
Total	125	100.0

The next question on the survey requested the ex-players to think about whether their love for football (i.e., the primary reason why they played) had been challenged throughout their professional career (Fig 3.). 70% agreed that their love had been challenged and 30% disagreed.

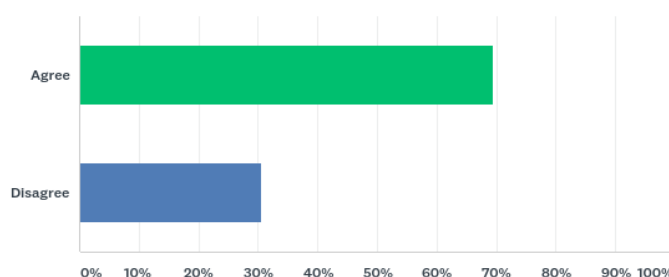Q9 My love for football was sometimes challenged throughout my career

Fig 3. Overall sample data.

At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 3A) 60% agreed that their love for the game had been challenged and 39% disagreed. 1% of the sample missed out this question. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 3B), 76% agreed their love for the game had been challenged and 24% disagreed.

Table 3A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	51	60
Disagree	33	39
Total	84	99

Table 3B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	95	76
Disagree	30	24
Total	125	100

Players were then asked about what they missed most when the stopped playing or came away from the game (Fig 4. and Fig 5.).

Q10 I missed the feelings of winning when i stopped playing
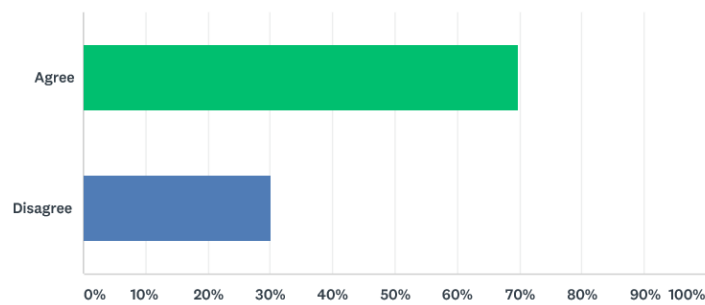
Answered: 212   Skipped: 0

Fig 4. Overall sample data.

70% of the players reported that they missed the feelings of winning and 30% said that this was not missed. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 4A) 69% agreed that they missed the feelings of winning and 31% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 4B), 70% agreed they missed the feelings of winning and 30% disagreed.

Table 4A

Higher League Level Data

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	59	69
Disagree	26	31
Total	85	100

Table 4B

Lower League Level Data

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	87	70
Disagree	38	30
Total	125	100

Q11 I missed the dressing room/ banter when i stopped playing
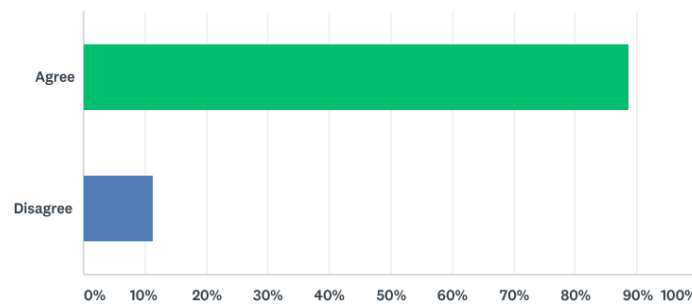
Answered: 211   Skipped: 1

Fig 5. Overall sample data.

In relation to the dressing room, 85% of the players stated that they missed the banter and the camaraderie with other players and staff members and 15% said that they did not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 5A) 84% agreed that they missed the dressing room banter and 16% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 5B), 92% agreed they missed the dressing room banter and 8% disagreed.

Table 5A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	71	84
Disagree	14	16
Total	85	100

Table 5B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	114	92
Disagree	10	8
Total	124	100

Q12 Looking back i had to make much sacrifices to play (and remain in) professional football?
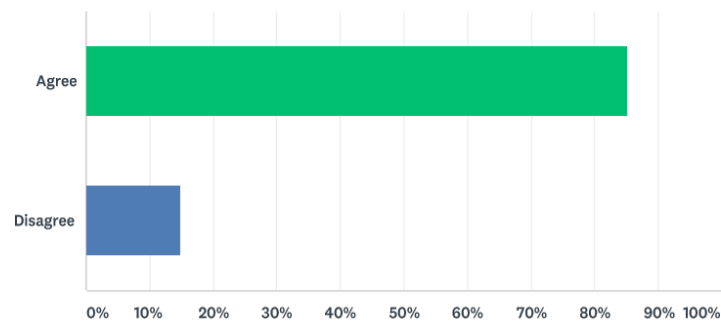
Answered: 210   Skipped: 2

Fig 6. Overall sample data.

When asked about sacrifices and having to give up certain things to play and remain in professional football (Fig 6.) 85% of the players reported that they had and 15% said they had not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 6A) 84% agreed that they made sacrifices to stay in professional football and 14% disagreed. 2% missed the

question. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 6B), 86% agreed that they made sacrifices to stay in professional football and 14% disagreed.

Table 6A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	71	84
Disagree	12	14
Total	83	98

Table 6B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	107	86
Disagree	18	14
Total	125	100

Q13 It can hard to trust people within professional football
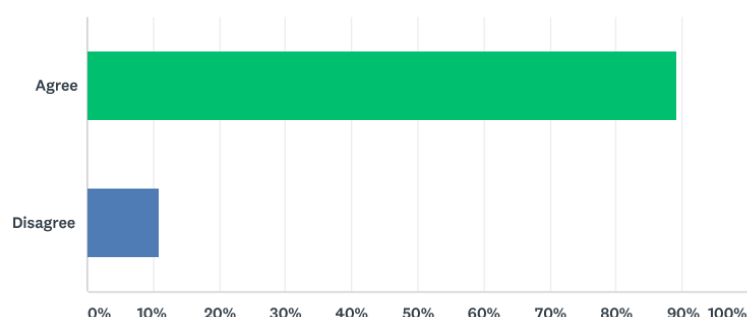
Answered: 212   Skipped: 0

Fig 7. Overall sample data.

When asked about trust in professional football and trusting people (Fig 7.) 89% of the players said it was hard to trust, with 11% saying trust was not an issue. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 7A) 88% agreed that it was hard to trust in professional

football and 12% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 7B), 90% agreed that it was hard to trust in professional football and 10% disagreed.

Table 7A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	75	88
Disagree	10	12
Total	85	100

Table 7B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	113	90
Disagree	12	10
Total	125	100

Q14 Even though being involved within a team, i have felt isolation within my football career (feeling lonely)
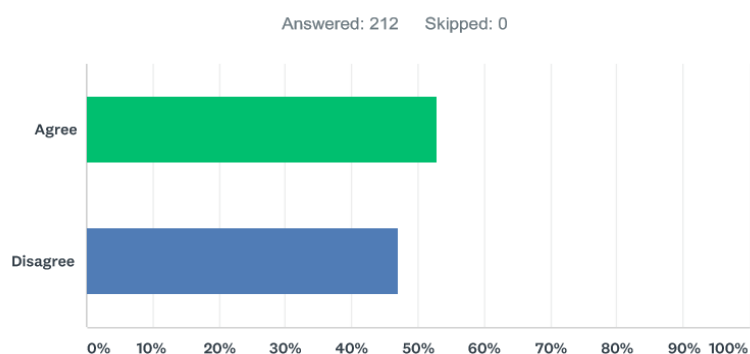
Answered: 212   Skipped: 0

Fig 8. Overall sample data.

The next question asked about isolation and whether players had felt this within their football careers (Fig 8.). 53% fed back that they had felt isolation and 47% said that

221

they had not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 8A) 54% agreed that they had felt isolation in professional football and 46% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 8B), 52% agreed that they had felt isolation in professional football and 48% disagreed.

Table 8A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	46	54
Disagree	39	46
Total	85	100

Table 8B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	65	52
Disagree	60	48
Total	125	100

Q15 I have felt frustrated/ angry if someone took my place
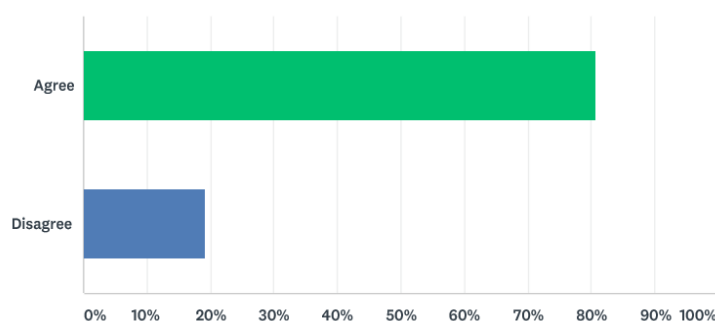
Answered: 212   Skipped: 0

Fig 9. Overall sample data.

When the players were asked about frustration and anger if someone had taken their place (Fig 9.), 81% reported that they had felt this and 19% said that they had not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 9A) 82% agreed that they had felt anger and frustration if someone had taken their place and 18% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 9B), 79% agreed that they had felt anger and frustration if someone had taken their place and 21% disagreed.

Table 9A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	70	82
Disagree	15	18
Total	85	100

Table 9B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	99	79
Disagree	26	21
Total	125	100

Q16 Professional football can be difficult to escape from, especially in public
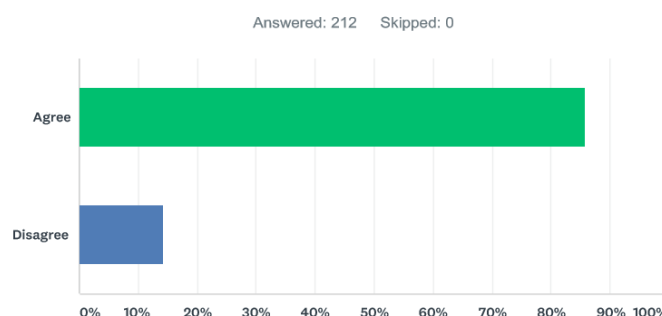
Answered: 212   Skipped: 0

Fig 10. Overall sample data.

223

The next question asked whether football was difficult to escape from (Fig 10.). 86% of the players said it was and 14% reported that it was not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 10A) 94% agreed that it was difficult to escape from professional football and 6% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 10B), 81% agreed that it was difficult to escape from professional football and 19% disagreed.

Table 10A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	80	94
Disagree	5	6
Total	85	100

Table 10B

Lower League Level

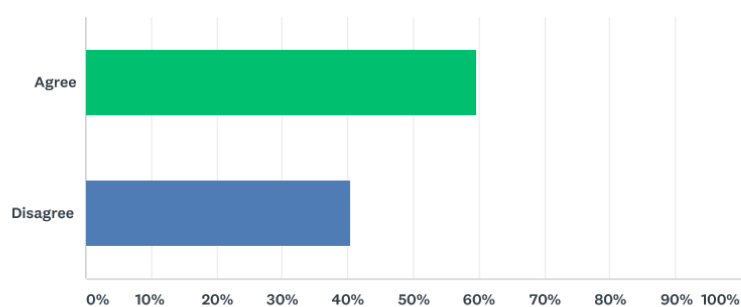|	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	101	81
Disagree	24	19
Total	125	100

Fig 11. Overall sample data.

The next question on the survey enquired whether 'being yourself' in professional football was hard (Fig 11). 60% reported that it was and 40% said it was not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 11A) 59% agreed that if was hard to 'be yourself' in professional football and 41% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 11B), 61% agreed that it was hard to 'be yourself' and 38% disagreed. 1% missed the question.

Table 11A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	50	59
Disagree	35	41
Total	85	100

Table 11B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	76	61
Disagree	48	38
Total	124	99

Q18 As well as the challenges, there have been plenty of highs within my professional football career too
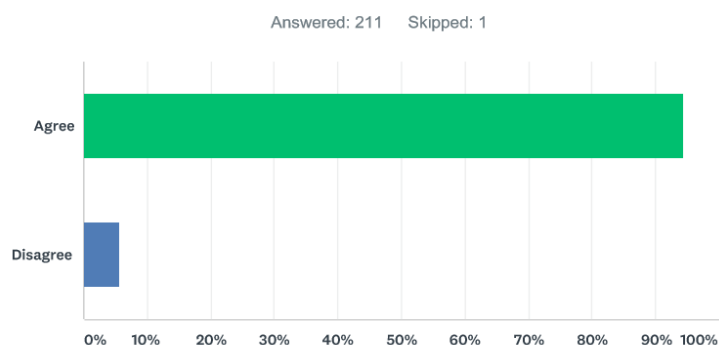

Fig 12. Overall sample data.

As well as the psychological challenges the players were asked whether there were plenty of highs in their careers too (Fig 12.). 94% said that there were and only 6% said that there were not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 12A) 99% agreed that there were plenty of highs too in professional football and 1% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 12B), 91% agreed that there were plenty of highs in professional football and 9% disagreed.

Table 12A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	84	99
Disagree	1	1
Total	85	100

Table 12B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	113	91
Disagree	11	9
Total	124	100

Q19 Team mates spoke about life after the game, or going into other careers
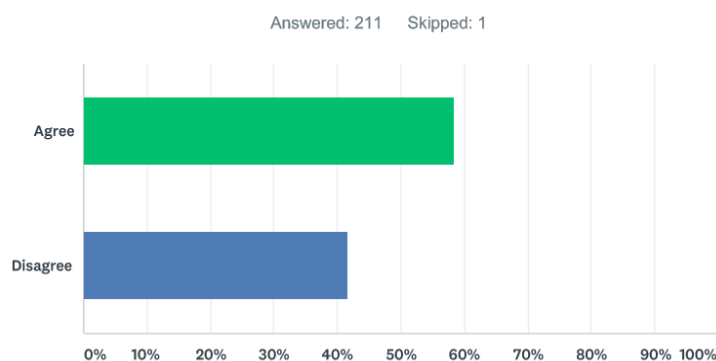
Answered: 211   Skipped: 1

Fig 13. Overall sample data.

When asked about life beyond the game, and whether teammates spoke about next steps or future careers, 58% reported that they had and 42% reported that they had not (Fig 13.). At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 13A) 62% agreed that players spoke about next steps or future careers and 38% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 13B), 55% agreed that players spoke about next steps or future careers and 44% disagreed. There was 1% missing.

Table 13A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	53	62
Disagree	32	38
Total	85	100

Table 13B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	69	55
Disagree	55	44
Total	124	99

Q20 When i finished playing, i was fully prepared for my next steps
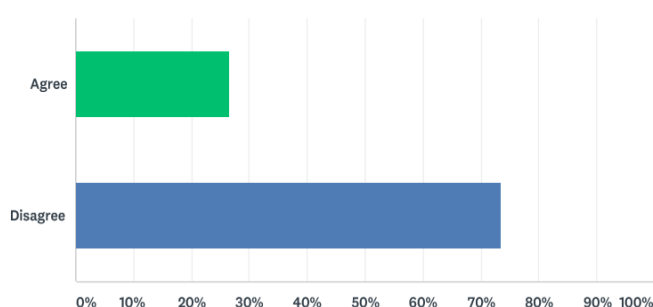
Answered: 211   Skipped: 1

Fig 14. Overall sample data.

227

The next question asked the players whether they considered themselves to be 'fully prepared' for the next steps and life beyond the game (Fig 14.). 27% stated that they were prepared and 73% reported that they were not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 14A) 28% agreed that they were ready for their next steps and 72% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 14B), 25% agreed that they were ready for their next steps and 74% disagreed. There was 1% missing.

Table 14A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	24	28
Disagree	61	72
Total	85	100

Table 14B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	31	25
Disagree	93	74
Total	124	99

Q21 I was financially secure when i finished playing and this took the pressure off my next steps and decisions
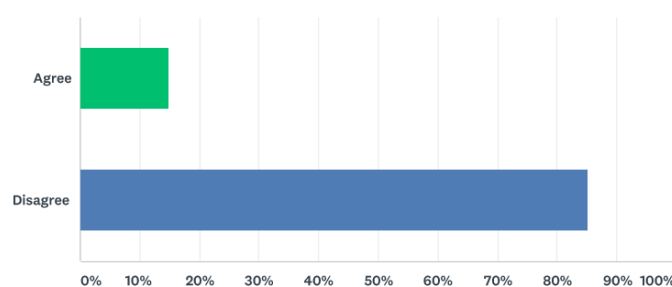
Fig 15. Overall sample data.

When asked about their financial position on retirement and taking the pressure off next steps (Fig 15.), 15% of the players agreed that they were secure, however 85% reported that they were not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 15A) 20% agreed that they were financially secure on retirement from professional football which took the pressure off next steps and 80% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 15B), 11% agreed that they were financially secure on retirement from professional football and 87% disagreed. There was 2% missing.

Table 15A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	17	20
Disagree	68	80
Total	85	100

Table 15B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	14	11
Disagree	109	87
Total	123	98

Q22 I was fully supported by the club i was at when i finished playing

Answered: 212   Skipped: 0
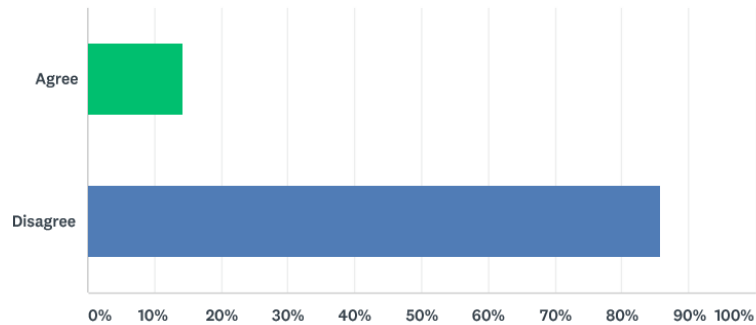
Fig 16. Overall sample data.

When asked whether they felt 'fully supported' by the club that they finished their career with (Fig 16.), 14% reported that they were and 86% said that they were not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 16A) 20% agreed that they felt 'fully supported' from their club when they finished their career and 80% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 16B), 10% agreed that they felt 'fully supported' from their club when they finished their career and 90% disagreed.

Table 16A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	17	20
Disagree	68	80
Total	85	100

Table 16B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	13	10
Disagree	112	90
Total	125	100

Q23 I found it very hard for a spell when my football career finished

Answered: 210   Skipped: 2
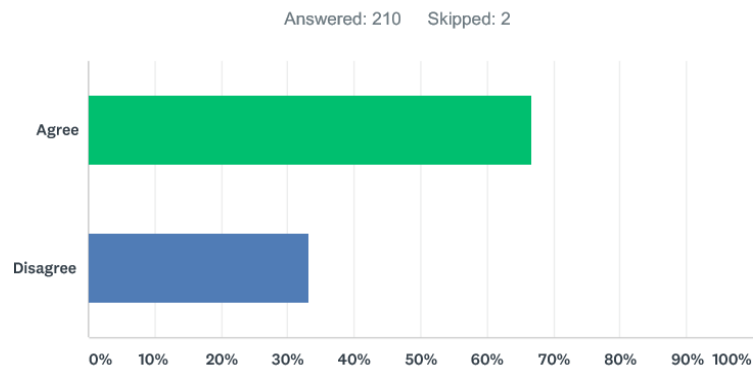
Fig 17. Overall sample data.

The next question asked the players whether they found it hard after their career had finished (Fig 17.). 67% stated that they had and 33% reported that they had not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 17A) 70% agreed that they found it very hard for a spell when their football careers had finished and 29% disagreed. 1% was missing. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 17B), 63% agreed that they found it very hard for a spell when their football careers had finished and 36% disagreed. 1% was missing.

Table 17A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	59	70
Disagree	25	29
Total	84	99

Table 17B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	79	63
Disagree	45	36
Total	124	99

Q24 If given the opportunity, i would readily go through it all again?

Answered: 212   Skipped: 0
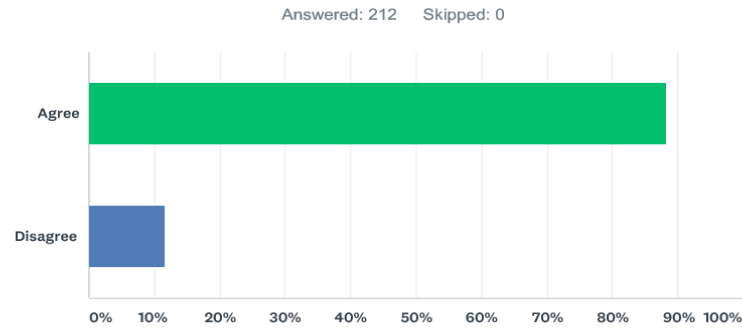
Fig 18. Overall sample data.

The final question of the survey asked the players if they had the opportunity, would they readily go through it all again (Fig 18.).

Table 18A

Higher League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	78	92
Disagree	7	8
Total	85	100

Table 18B

Lower League Level

	No of Players	Percentage
Agree	107	86
Disagree	18	14
Total	125	100

88% said that they would and 12% said that they would not. At the 'Higher League Level' (Table 18A) 92% agreed that they would readily go through it all again and 8% disagreed. At the 'Lower League Level' (Table 18B), 86% agreed that they would readily go through it all again and 14% disagreed.

232

6.7   Discussion.

The aim of this study was to explore the prevalence of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers' and to examine the role that an applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners could play in supporting players through critical moments within the 'hard to reach' culture of elite professional football. The study offered a shift from Study One and Study Two to capture data relating to the wider scope of transitional and critical moment experiences within professional football culture.

In the initial questions, it was interesting to find that out of the 212 ex-professional players within the sample, only 29% agreed that they had achieved everything they set out to achieve and 71% reported that they had not. This could be in part due to extrinsic motivating factors when moving through the professional game (i.e., winning trophies, being financially secure on exit) and whether these had overshadowed the intrinsic factors of the game (i.e., love, striving to be the best player they can) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Football can be extremely changeable, unstable and results driven (Nesti, 2010) and many players can move several times in their careers, both upwards and downwards. Not every team can succeed or win domestic trophies, and this could be a determinant of dissatisfaction when coming away from professional football and a measure of how you see your career has panned out. This can have ramifications on your identity when a playing career has finished and whether on reflection you see your career as fruitful or disappointing (Erikson, 1968).

The results also demonstrated that as players moved into a first team environment, they faced more frequent challenges (stressors) all of which can have an impact on their identity. These challenges included deselection (81%/ 172 players),

pressure to play whilst injured (73%/ 155 players), challenging relationships with others (e.g. managers, coaches, other players) (67%/ 141 players), holding down a first team place (62%/ 132 players), dealing with long term injuries (61%/ 130 players), contract discussions or negotiations (58%/ 124 players), being singled out for criticism by the manager (48%/ 102 players), moving clubs and its impacts on family (47%/ 99 players), dealing with negative media coverage (37%/ 79 players) and heightened interest from others (e.g. fans) (30%/ 64 players).

One of the most concerning findings within the sample was the perceived lack of support and staff to confide in. The 'overall sample data' was in alignment with the 'higher league levels' and 'lower league levels' in that 91% of ex-professional players preferred to keep issues to themselves with only 9% saying that they would speak out to someone. The data highlighted that players were dealing with many challenging and stressful issues throughout their time in the game (i.e., deselection, injuries, challenging manager and coach relationships, teammate relationships, being in and out of the first team, moves and having to deal with external pressures and expectations). Dealing with external pressures and identity challenges was further highlighted within 86% of the overall sample data stating that professional football was difficult to escape from, even in social situations. Broken down further there was a slight difference at the higher levels (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and the lower levels (i.e., League One and League Two). 94% of players who operated at the higher level agreed it was difficult to escape from as well as 81% at lower level. The lack of appropriate support and opportunity to disclose issues, such as these, is a concern. The data highlights that players may not be getting supported effectively or they may want something else, as opposed to the traditional, dominant application of mental skills approaches (Nesti, 2010). The findings support the research of Parker

(1995) and Roderick (2006) who suggested that professional football clubs are ruthless, aggressive, and macho environments, in which asking for help does not fit in with the cultural landscape. More work and education are needed so that players can feel safe opening up about any issues that may be causing them stress and anxiety. The nature of football, as a result driven industry with an incredible amount of change, provides a challenge in this regard.

A dominant issue emerging from the data analysis centred around the topic of deselection (81%/ 172 players ticked that they had experienced this). To inject some cultural context into this finding, there is no player in professional football who will play every match of their career and there may be several issues that can potentially surround a deselection experience. This could be a loss of form, a suspension, a rest period after showing fatigue, a tactical issue, or a run of poor form. The deselection experience is part and parcel of the life of a professional footballer and, due to the nature of their profile, this can be a much different experience to deal with after coming through a youth development system. Most youth players who come through as young professional players will have been regularly involved in teams throughout their scholarship (i.e., youth teams/ under 18s/ under 23s etc.) and due to the competitive nature of professional football (i.e., a squad of 25) there will be many players who either don't get into the starting 11, or even worse don't even reach the match day squad (Nesti, 2010). It is within this critical moment where an 'in depth' psychology perspective which examines and helps develop identity could be more fruitful. The data has found that being deselected may evoke a 'negative reaction' as 81% of the overall sample stated that they felt angry if someone took their place. Breaking this down further demonstrated that 82% at higher level (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 79% at lower level (i.e., League One and League Two) had

experienced this. Helping the player recognise that anger will be of no use at this moment and offering an existential approach such as using the anxiety they are feeling to grow and develop may be the best option at this stage (Nesti, 2004; 2010). Also, recognising that 'talent needs trauma' (Sarkar, Fletcher & Brown, 2015) is also another useful theoretical underpin which could be called upon when a player faces deselection.

To add more weight to 'appropriate support' findings from the survey suggested that players felt as though they could not talk to anyone within their environment if they had an issue (77% of the overall sample). This was further broken down into 68% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 83% of lower-level players (i.e., League one and League Two). Interestingly, there was a fair difference between the higher level and lower-level data (68% v 83%). This difference suggests there may be more 'support opportunities' and access to speak to someone in confidence within higher level clubs. It is suggested that lower league clubs need to consider the data around this finding and appreciate where better support could be utilised. This finding demonstrates where better understanding and more appropriate support mechanisms within professional football could potentially help the player move past difficult experiences and grow as a person. There could be an opportunity via the support of an applied sport psychologist where the player could examine their options more robustly and find ways to help get through the difficult issue such as deselection (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

As well as a deselection experience within a match day scenario, there are other potential deselection experiences which will be encountered and must be faced in professional football. Arguably the worst scenario for many players is when they are informed by the manager that they will be transfer listed after their contract has

finished (i.e., cut from the club), or when a player is facing the end of their career and have been told that their contract will not be renewed, or even being sent on loan to a lower-level club. These all could be classified as a deselection experience. The data highlights that players feel clubs do not do enough for them especially at exit or upon leaving. This is seen within 86% of the overall sample stating they did not feel supported by their clubs upon exit with further analysis revealing 80% at the higher level (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 90% at the lower level (i.e., League One and League Two). The above contexts can cause huge ramifications in relation to identity (Nesti & Littlewood, 2009). This is because the scrutiny and interest from many is extremely high, and it is no surprise that identity is challenged or disrupted within these times. An existential psychology approach puts forwards that a psychological challenge such as deselection provides an opportunity for players to introspect and self-examine what they must do to get back into the squad and even better the starting 11 or to move their lives on. To do this takes a great amount of courage, and this is something that is seen in high performance sport environments (Corlett, 1996). It can be argued that traditional mental skills training support such as deep breathing techniques to aid relaxation, goal setting or positive self-talk would not be the most effective type of support at this moment. This is because these techniques may remove the feelings of anxiety, when the feelings of anxiety are crucial to help the player choose the best course of action thus doing so develop a stronger sense of self (Nesti, 2010). There is also an argument where some academic literature makes a mistake in referring to critical moments in a player's career as a clinical issue when the issue may not be clinical (Nesti, 2004). Murphy & White (1995) proclaim that even a small issue has the potential to cause a significant disruption to identity development. To support a player most effectively within these

disruptions, an existential sport psychologist could work with the player to identify key reasons for suffering the deselection. An existential sport psychologist can help support with broader issues whereas a performance, narrow based approach such as offering mental skills cannot. The existential sport psychologist could then help the player engage in a process of rigorous self-examination to identify what they could do to get their starting place back. This can be tricky within professional football for two reasons. The first is that rigorous self-examination is not easy in such a demanding, fast paced world and takes courage. Rigorous self-examination and lasting change take time and is not a popular path to follow in a 'short termism' result driven environment (Corlett, 1996). As Relvas, Littlewood & Richardson (2013) have pointed out within their professional football transitions model, much of the reaction to issues at first team levels is 'crisis' based or a 'sophist' approach is taken to provide at solution, even though this may not be the right course of action. The second reason is that some managers may not communicate well with players and will not tell the player the reasons why they have been left out of a team or a squad (Nesti, 2010). This can be very frustrating and challenging as it can leave the player guessing what they have done wrong when it may simple be a tactical decision. This lack of clarity may evoke emotional reactions such as frustration, anger, and disappointment. Within this situation, an existential psychological approach would be more useful and beneficial over a mental skills training approach, as it is not about removing the anxiety that accompanies the feelings and thoughts that the player is having, but about getting them to face up to an important change they could make. This approach is not about making players feel good, but about helping them to become fuller themselves.

As well as deselection and due to the nature of a results-based culture, and the level of scrutiny that a professional player faces, the findings of this study confirm

that many players experience a broad range of psychological challenges and stressors as they journey through the game. These stressors have been reported as pressure to play whilst carrying an injury (73%/ 155 players), internal club relationships (67%/ 141 players), not holding down a first team place (62%/ 132 players), dealing with a long term injury (61%/ 130 players), contract discussions and negotiations (58%/ 124 players), being singled out for criticism by the manager (48%/ 102 players), moving clubs (47%/ 99 players) dealing with negative media following a poor performance (37%/ 79 players) and dealing with external sources as a career starts to develop (30%/ 64 players). The findings support work by other sports-based researchers (e.g., Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Cote, 2009) and broader cultures such as military environments (e.g., Barker & Berry, 2009; Allen et al., 2010) who suggest that navigating your way through a professional career driven by results or a performance driven culture is extremely challenging. Moving successfully from the academy environment to a professional environment brings about many issues to deal with which may threaten, or challenge a player's identity (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015). You could be the number one player with a huge reputation within the academy environment, however you could be the bottom of the pile as you transition into the first team environment where competition for places is fierce (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013). The knowledge gained from these research findings can add value to applied sport psychologists wishing to operate in this domain about the array of issues that players may come to the with. It is of utmost importance to understand and appreciate the broad range of psychological challenges and stressors that emerge as a player makes their way through professional football. This research and insight for contemporary sport psychologists working with elite level professional players is a valuable addition to the current knowledge base of transitions and critical moments.

The training and development of professional players has shifted dramatically over the past 25 years due to a change in culture (Kay, 2016). The introduction of the EPPP (Elite Player Performance Plan) shifted the onus away from cleaning boots, sweeping terraces, and undertaking menial chores for little money. At the very top of the modern game there is much public acclaim and high rewards. This can maybe have a deeper impact on identity issues and formation as the 'menial jobs' alluded to by Kay (2016) arguably kept players grounded and humble, built character and gave players other things to focus on. Having it too smooth and easy as players work their way through the differing levels toward professional football can potentially cause issues in player motivations. Many elite level players post academy (i.e., in the age window of 17-23) can become wealthy without playing many first team games. This can affect desire, identity, and character development to progress and has led Calvin (2017) to proclaim there's 'No hunger in paradise.' Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2013) have noted this within their professional football development path model and have suggested that the subculture of post academy (i.e., from 17-23) is uncompetitive, lonely, uncertain, stagnant, and bereft of social support. A void can appear between the academy and the first team environment, and this appears to be quite a big gap (the step from under 18s/ 23s football to first team). However, the window of 17-23 may be an excellent opportunity for a sport psychologist to work with a player. They are within touching distance of radically changing their lives and will seek to do anything (ethically) to progress themselves to becoming a regular elite level first team player (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013). Taking this into consideration, as a player gets closer and closer to the first team environment, trust was revealed as a prevalent issue within the data collection. 89% of the overall sample data stated it was hard to trust others and breaking this down further, 80% of higher-

240

level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 79% of lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) stated they found it hard to trust It can be argued that the players within the survey were not referring to 'trusting themselves' but rather their 'distrust of others.' Trust is another term which is not readily seen with the academic sport psychology literature and there is little information to draw from bar the broader, philosophical writings of Socrates and St Thomas Aquinas and from material within theological literature. Trust can be ignored or forgotten about when results are going well and the team is progressing, however, and almost inevitably, when results go against a team, the scrutiny and pressure to act can become apparent. Trust issues within professional football can potentially emanate via trusting the manager and coaching staff in what they are telling you, trusting your teammates, trusting the support staff, trusting agents, and trusting people within your circle away from the club. A breakdown in trust within any of these differing groups can cause psychological angst and strain within a player (Nesti, 2010). As professional football is such a scrutinised, brutal culture to operate in, great care needs to be taken as players may feel let down or betrayed and question the morals, values, and ethics of the people around them when trust is broken. This may lead to unhealthy working practices (i.e., a poor culture) and players may then struggle to be fully themselves (Nesti, 2004). To support this, the data from the ex-professional players revealed that the notions of 'feeling isolated' and 'being yourself' was something they felt was an issue at points in their career. This is something which needs consideration within the organisational culture and success of a professional club. Firstly, isolation is one of the four existential givens (Yalom, 1980) and that although operating within a team environment, isolation is something that ex-players will have to face from time to time, especially if they are facing a challenging issue. According to the existential

241

perspective isolation can be productive in that it allows us to deeply reflect and consider ways forward (Nesti, 2004; 2010). Within the data, over half of the overall sample (53%) reported feelings of isolation and feeling lonely within their careers. Breaking this down further, 54% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 52% of lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) highlighted that isolation is something that they had felt even though they were involved in a team sport. More awareness and support are needed where managers and coaches need to recognise where players may be feeling isolated and do as much as possible to make them feel included. This could be around deselection, injury, going out on loan to gain first team football or dealing with external issues. This adds insight to the model of Relvas, Littlewood and Richardson (2013) who pointed out that as a player moves from the academy (process oriented, empathic culture) and into professional football (results driven, harsh culture) the level of support tends to decrease. An existential sport psychologist could help here by working with the player to grow and develop courage to choose the best course of action when dealing with a challenging time.

As well as isolation, the survey data revealed difficulties of 'being yourself' within professional football (60% of the overall sample of players suggested that this was challenging). Broken down further 59% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 62% of lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) stated that 'being yourself' in professional football was difficult. Taking an existential stance on analysing the data, 'being yourself' (i.e., authentic) is something that human beings find difficult and that it can elude many most of the time (Kierkegaard, 1944). The main issue comes from holding core values and trying to live by these values' day in day out. Often, core values can be challenged, or

threatened and it can be hard to stick by these in such a ruthless profession. Abandoning core values can cause psychological strain and guilt and as professional football is largely a result driven business, this can be a potential problem. As a professional player makes their way through the game and gains more recognition and attention, it is of huge importance to make sure that these personal, core values are not abandoned and that players maintain some level of humility. There can be incredible extrinsic awards, such as very high wages, public esteem, social recognition, and interest from a wide array of media. Maintaining humility at this time can potentially lead to even greater success. The topic of humility is not readily seen within academic literature; however, Crust (2007) has argued that humility is related to mental toughness and Robinson (2007) has also suggested that humility is a key trait in relation to ethics, morality and remaining grounded.

The current base of academic mental health, or psychological challenges-based research within soccer to aid our understanding tends to decrease post academy (i.e., after 18 or 19 years old; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014). Means of understanding psychological challenges and mental health related issues within elite level football have come via newspapers and within autobiographies (e.g., Gascoigne, 2005; McGrath, 2007; Gillespie, 2013; Carlisle, 2014; Merson, 2017; Jansen, 2019; Pike, 2021). These players have spoken openly about the challenges of operating within professional football and dealing with the exposure, fame and adulation associated with playing at the top levels of game. Stressors that have been raised within Study One and Study Two such as deselection, serious injury, moving clubs, media exposure and loss of identity post playing career has led to severe mental health issues and poor coping mechanisms are reported such as overuse of alcohol, poor dietary habits, drugs, and gambling. Although incredibly insightful, these accounts are

not underpinned with academic theory and due to confidentiality have little indication as to what interventions and appropriate support was offered within their careers, if any. Due to the closed culture and the general suspicion of 'outsiders', the opportunity to undertake lengthy psychological work with elite level professional players at English Premier League level is extremely rare indeed (Nesti, 2010). This distinct lack of academic based research and detailed insight which could further aid our understanding on how players at first team levels can be supported best is put down to the fact that it is difficult to gain access due to confidentiality and trust issues.

Within the aforementioned autobiographies, it is clear a high percentage of players were drawn to and started playing the game when they were very young and the construct of a strong and on occasion exclusive athletic identity was formed (Brown & Potrac, 2009). An athletic identity can be productive in relation to high commitment and the dedication to excel and improve, however it can be argued that other social roles can be disregarded or not engaged with, for example within important areas such as education (Mitchell et al., 2014). An overly strong, almost one-dimensional formation of an athletic identity has the potential to become a problematic issue as the player makes their way through the game, especially when having to deal with a transition or critical moment. This type of narrow identity can contribute to serious mental health related problems as players strive to navigate their way through the professional game (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Overly strong athletic identities can also impact a player when having to leave the sport, as they may have no or little identity left. Although professional football clubs have a responsibility to make sure young players develop a broader, richer identity and that they undertake academic and vocational qualifications, the simple view of 'I'm here to become a professional football player and nothing else' remains the number one objective for a

high majority (Hughes & Leavy, 2012). This can be termed as 'identity foreclosure' and has the potential to diminish motivation to acquire other skills and experiences beyond the training and competition environment. To address this and other issues, Nesti (2004; 2010; 2016) has suggested a radical support perspective (existential sport psychology) over the traditional, dominant uses of cognitive and behavioural psychology within sport, which primarily includes mental skills training (MST). MST is useful and has its place, however it is technique-based and involves the use of imagery (or visualisation), self-talk, goal setting strategies or relaxation procedures such as breathing control. Study One, Study Two and Study Three has shown that players, especially at first team level, face a broader range of issues within their journey and therefore a broader theoretical approach may be needed to support them more effectively. This has been presented as a Socratic method (long term, developmental) as opposed to a Sophist one (short term, quick fix). The pathway of a human being must always remain open, unfinished with perspectives from both performance and care angles being considered (Corlett, 1996; Anderson, 2009; Brady & Maynard, 2010). When a player faces a critical moment within their careers, it provides them with an opportunity to rigorously examine who they are and where they want to get to. This assessment of their identity can be broached from a performance perspective and a broader perspective (i.e., off the field). This can then lead to the development of self-knowledge, existential courage, and practical wisdom (Corlett, 1996). Developing this broader, richer identity can help with the shocks to the system which players typically face as they move through the game. These shocks can include deselection, injury, poor form, going out on loan to a lower club, media scrutiny and critique, poor relationships with managers and coaching staff and even poor relationships with teammates. Within applied sport psychology work, it has put

forwards that players who tend to develop and have a broader identity (within areas such as family, education, religion or even spirituality) tend to cope with issues arising better than those players who have a narrow or exclusive athletic identity. This is an important point as the culture of elite level professional soccer can be a potential breeding ground for psychological challenges, or mental health related problems. It is a brutal, ruthless, and demanding world and where there is a requirement for quick answers, minimal trust and incredible amounts of change, players can be placed under immense mental strain (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). It is argued that players can deal with issues within this high octane and pressurised culture much more constructively if they have a broader identity and see themselves as more than just a professional soccer player.

Maintaining a love for the game was seen as a challenge for many of the sample of ex-professional players with 70% of the overall sample agreeing and 30% disagreeing. Breaking this down further, 60% of the higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 76% of the lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) suggested that their love of the game was challenged at times in their careers. These results could be due to the nature of volatility and rapid amounts of change within professional football (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006) as well as levels of distrust and expectation to conform as part of a wider organisational culture. These experiences could threaten or challenge love for the game as a professional career unfolds. Furthermore, it was noted that the players reported having to sacrifice much to stay within the sport with 85% stating they did and 15% stating they did not. Breaking this down further, 84% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 86% of the lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) stated that sacrifice was a requirement to stay within professional football. The

negative side of sacrifice to stay in football is that it may contribute to forming a strong or exclusive athletic identity (Mitchell et al., 2014). This can include giving up social events, having to move away from home, making sure rest is adhered to, making sure diet is correct and dedicating yourself to training and playing. It is important to have a strong athletic identity to carve out a career in professional football, however if having an exclusive athletic identity, there can be psychological issues when having to deal with critical moments such as injury, deselection, poor relationships with teammates and managers/ coaching staff as the players sees themselves as a player and nothing else. It is important that players have other constructive sources of meaning within their lives and those that do tend to deal better with these issues (Nesti, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2014).

The final part of the data analysis revealed that a high number of players found it extremely difficult when coming away from or 'transitioning' out of the professional game. The data revealed that a large percentage of professional football players did not feel fully supported when having to transition from a club at the end of their career (86%) and 67% of players found the transition very hard for a spell after their careers had finished. Breaking this down further, 80% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 90% of lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) did not feel supported by the club they had finished at and 69% of players at higher levels (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 63% of players at lower levels (i.e., League One and League Two) stated they found coming away from the game very hard and challenging to deal with. These findings agree with the research of Gouttebarge, Backx, Aoki and Kerkhoffs (2015) who surveyed 540 players from Norway, Spain, Finland, France, and Sweden. They found that retirement from professional football can cause distress and anxiety which can lead to

alcohol issues and poor diet. This seems to be the definitive point on which a high percentage of the academic transitional based literature has focused on. A plethora of academic work has focused on the adaptation to retirement out of sport and has helped sport psychologists understand some of the key issues from both a clinical, non-clinical and crisis transition perspective (Samuel, Tenebaum, Mangel, Visrshuvski, Chen & Badir, 2015; Ivarsson, Stambulova & Johnson, 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins & Ryba, 2016; Stambulova, 2017). The quantitative findings from Study Three provide further support to suggest that when retiring, or coming away from professional sport, stressors can arrive via areas such as finance, lack of structure, social challenges, lack of meaning and purpose. The findings within this study revealed that professional football players missed the banter and camaraderie of the dressing room (85% of players) and 70% also missed the feelings of winning. Broken down further, 84% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 92% of lower-level players (i.e., League one and League Two) missed the banter and camaraderie of a dressing room and 69% of higher-level players (i.e., Premiership and Championship) and 70% of lower-level players (i.e., League One and League Two) missed the feelings of winning. Within unique and high-performance environments, this is a difficult thing to replace and may help explain why high percentages of players struggle when they come out of professional sport (PFA, 2019). Clubs keeping more contact with players via invites into the training ground and setting up more ex-players associations which involve golf days or dinners may help remedy this issue.

The results within this study confirmed that many players found it difficult coming away from the game and may have experienced their retirement transition as an identity crisis. Academic work which supports this finding has revealed issues such as loss of dietary control (Messner, 1992), abuse of various substances (Chow, 2002),

depression (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and loss of self-esteem and worth (Curtis & Ennis, 1988). To underpin the findings of Study Three, there is a broader area of topical research which has suggested that unique careers such as departing a military environment can cause psychological angst such as anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Iversen et al., 2005; Buckman et al., 2013; Robertson & Brott, 2013). It has also been found that retirement, and more specifically retirement out of professional sport can also cause relationship breakdowns and a lack of structure and purpose to everyday life (PFA, 2019). These findings are of concern and implicate that a high percentage of ex-professional footballers struggle when having to leave their sport. This can be put down to the reason that many of them have been involved at some level within their sport or career since a young child. When having to come away from professional football, and a career that they have loved for a long time, they are facing a social death due to a culled integration with teammates, coaches, support staff and management. Research which underpins the transitions prevalence of the Study Three findings (e.g., Hughes & Coakley, 1991) has stated that retirement can be a major source of frustration for an athlete and can cause a range of emotions such as anger, denial, grief, sadness, and depression (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). This emotional turmoil needs serious attention in the type of support and transitional care that athletes receive as they move away from the game (i.e., Aftercare is crucial and needs serious examination for ex-professional footballers).

6.8   Implications.

Study Three has considered the prevalence of psychological related challenges within professional football. As a player navigates their way through the game and makes transitions through differing levels to the first team, it is argued that a broader range

of issues starts to arise and must be faced. Most of the current academic literature within this area has tended to focus on end points such as retirement (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). As the findings suggest, there are a wide range of psychological challenges that can evoke anxiety within a player journey (due to a threat to or change in their identity). To fully understand anxiety, a broader psychological type of support is needed and not one where anxiety is managed away via techniques. Within his applied experiences, especially at Premier League level, Nesti, (2010) found that many professional players already have high quality mental skills. This was also found by Tonge, (2010) when researching elite level professional football players and their use of imagery skills. An offering of existential sport psychology support is arguably better served at professional level and within first team environments, where the person is met first and the player is met second (Martens, 1987). The reality is that sport psychologists may have to work with athletes who have a range of concerns both within and out of the professional sports environment, all of which could have an impact on performance. This could be relationships (e.g., manager/coach/teammates), moving clubs, heading down levels or changing roles. A major concern is that many sport psychologists do not have the training or experience to deal effectively when a player presents such matters, especially at first team level. The above issues could potentially lead to mental health issues; however, they only require deeper attention when there has been a diagnosis by a clinical sport psychologist. If most sport psychologists are unable to deal with the broader issues facing the athlete, then it is recommended that these gaps are filled within sport psychology courses and training. There is no need to refer an athlete to a clinical sport psychologist if their problems are not clinical! This has been analysed and evaluated in the case study chapter example of Tonge, (2020).

6.9   Limitations.

A potential limitation of this study is that the questions on the data collection tool (i.e., the survey) could have been set up so that some qualitative data could be added too. This may have added some extra insight and underpinning understanding to the percentages provided by the quantitative questions. This could have added some definitive context. However, the researcher wanted the data collection tool to be as simplistic as possible to capture how many as opposed to questions around what, how, why, and what (this was covered within the other PhD studies). The aim of the survey was to provide indications of prevalence over material unearthed within the qualitative components of PhD studies one and two. If adding qualitative components to the data collection tool, the survey may have become lengthy, cumbersome and the sample may have become de-motivated when completing it therefore leading to the potential of even more missing parts or incomplete returns.

One final limitation worth raising was that some of the surveys were not fully completed. The odd part or question was not ticked, and some responses had 210 and 211 as opposed to the full sample response of 212. Although extremely small, it is worth mentioning in relation to consideration of future methodological design. The incomplete parts (minimal) had no bearing on the findings of the study.

6.9.1   Applied considerations.

Based on the findings of this study, there are a few issues that may have been overlooked within research writings based on transitions. The first one is that along with anticipated transitions (e.g., youth to senior) there are many more issues which appear on a more frequent basis. These can be termed critical moments and will arise when there is a threat to or change in someone's

identity. It can be argued that a sport psychologist operating within this environment (at first team level) can play an important role in guiding the process of helping the player to face up to the issue in question (Tonge, 2020). The sport psychologist is not there to tell the player what to do, but to help the athlete face and confront a challenge or change in their identity. It is crucial that the sport psychologist approaches the player as a person in possession of free will and that anxiety will be a natural part of attempting to choose the right course of action. It is through this approach that the player can examine and select a potential way forward and develop existential courage to act on this choice.

The findings from this study suggest that sport psychology courses should consider organisational culture in the first instance (and subcultures within differing age groups) that fully support growth and flourishing (i.e., identity development). Promoting a culture of openness and providing effective support if needed will help alleviate some of the issues raised throughout the PhD. This will then help promote better mental health and well-being within professional football environments. The findings are considered generalizable to both professional football and to other high-performance populations, such as the military. There is potentially much change to face within a career, or journey through life particularly when one's identity is threatened or challenged. When having a critical moment to deal with and overcome, it is crucial to ask rigorous questions of self about what is wanted, what this means and how this can be achieved. Whatever you can do to make you better at your job or make you happier in what you do is a key

task. This is considered a never-ending process as humans are beings of potentiality (May, 2009).

As our identities are fluid, dynamic and changing day by day, it is crucial that sport psychologists move away from offering quick fixes and quick solutions. In the fast paced and extremely changeable world of professional football, this can be a challenge as results are wanted here and now. Due to the demands and regular change within professional football, it is put forwards that person-centred approaches such as existential sport psychology are more suitable. The aim is to guide the player to make choices despite feeling uncomfortable and anxiety fuelled (e.g., becoming more themselves). According to Corlett (1996) and Tonge, (2020) complex issues about persons, critical moments and identity should be addressed with patience, as the accrual of self-knowledge is key to excellence in any performance domain.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Study One Definitive Aim: Present an auto-ethnographical narrative that critically reflects upon personal experiences of transitions and critical moments (e.g., schoolboy to apprentice professional, apprentice to young professional, young professional to senior professional and senior professional to exit). The reflective narrative will present psychological challenges and threats to identity and meaning as I moved through the game.

Findings: Within the stages of transition (i.e., schoolboy to apprentice, apprentice to professional, professional to exit, there were more frequent issues occurring which provided a psychological challenge to navigate. These challenges brought about a threat to identity and included dealing with cultural change, deselection, being in and out of the first team environment, injuries, difficult coach and teammate relationships, social identity challenges, movement between clubs and retirement.

Implications: The culture created within a professional football club can have an impact on how psychological challenges are dealt with. If the operational practices have evidence of toxic masculinity, then withdrawal and not speaking out about issues can become a problem. Aside from coaches, opportunities to speak to qualified professionals in confidence who understand the array of issues which professional players face is crucial. This can help aid the psychological growth of both the player and person.

Study Two Definitive Aim

Utilise a phenomenological methodology approach to explore 'alternative workplace voices' based on transitions and critical moment experiences of former professional footballers and what these moments meant to them in relation to threats to identity and meaning as they moved through the game (PhD Study Two).

Findings: As players navigated their way through professional football, many psychological related issues came to light. These issues appeared to provide threats to the players' identity and in places highlighted areas of crisis. Erikson's (1968) identity development framework was used to help provide a deeper understanding around some of the issues raised.

Implications: To maximise effective support for players journeying through professional football, and to address the broader issues raised, it is suggested that a broader type of psychological support would be beneficial. Clubs need to recognise this.

Study Three Definitive Aim:

Explore the prevalence of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers' and to examine the role of the applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners in supporting players through critical moments within the 'hard to reach' culture of elite professional football. (PhD Study Three).

Findings: Analysis of the data suggested that as the players navigated their way through the professional game, high percentages of issues were reported which can have an impact on and threaten identity. The data also suggested that support around transitional experiences and critical moments was low.

Implications: More needs to be done from a cultural perspective to assist players to talk openly, develop a broader identity and help maximise career longevity. Further training and knowledge of differing approaches such as existential sport psychology as opposed to mental skills training could help as could embedding some of the findings within coach education.

7.1   Overall aims and objectives of the thesis.

The overall aim of this PhD thesis was to extend knowledge around transitions, critical moments, identity and meaning, definitively within professional football.

The first objective was to present an auto-ethnographical narrative that critically reflected upon personal experiences of transitions and critical moments (e.g., schoolboy to apprentice professional, apprentice to young professional, young professional to senior professional and senior professional to exit) involving psychological challenges and threats to identity and meaning. (PhD Study One).

The second objective of the thesis was to utilise a phenomenological methodology approach to explore 'alternative voice' critical moments of former professional footballers and what these situations mean in relation to threats to identity and meaning as they moved through the game (PhD Study Two).

Finally, the third objective was to explore the prevalence of critical moments within a larger sample of professional footballers' and to examine the role of the applied sports psychologist and allied practitioners in supporting players through critical moments within the culture of elite professional football. (PhD Study Three).

General findings from the three PhD studies indicated that (a) as players made their way to and through the professional game, there were other frequent psychological challenges that started to appear over and above the normative or anticipated transitions, (b) these psychological challenges impacted on the player's identity (c) these frequent issues included deselection, dealing with short and long term injuries, strained manager, coach and other player relationships, holding a place down in the first team (i.e., being in and out of the side), contract negotiations, moving clubs (including loans) and dealing with wider interest (i.e., media, fans) (d) appropriate support for players is crucial as they move from the academy or youth

environment (supportive) into the first team environment (non-supportive) and face the range of critical moments unearthed (e) existential sport psychology can provide a better means of supporting players as they navigate the sport, as opposed to the dominant cognitive approach of mental skills training.

Overall, the major finding from the current thesis was that professional football players faced more frequent issues whilst they journeyed through professional sport which had an impact on their identity. The current transitions-based literature tends to focus on the experiences of transitions out of sport (i.e., at an end stage such as retirement). Findings from the thesis have added further knowledge which presents a more frequent range of complex stressors that players must face when navigating through their sport. The issues raised by the players were not directly performance focused but were issues that could affect performance. These 'critical moments' centralised on homesickness, coach/ manager relationships, teammate relationships, deselection, what their digs were like when going on loan, social issues, dealing with injuries and moving away from the game. There was limited reference to playing or competition scenarios. These findings can determine the type of applied sport psychology support that would be useful and beneficial and a key difference between what could be offered within the academy and what would be offered within a professional environment (i.e., around the first team).

With reference to the findings of the thesis, the chapter will now discuss the conceptual, theoretical, and practical implications of the PhD from the and will conclude with future research directions.

7.2   Practical implications.

There are a few practical implications that have emerged from Study One, Study Two and Study Three. Firstly, we now have some extended knowledge of 'within career transitions' as opposed to transitions at 'end points' (i.e., retirement). Study One showed that as well as normative transitions from schoolboy to professional football, there were factors occurring more frequently within professional football club culture which had an impact on identity formation. One of these impacts was the resistance from managers and coaches to accept that a broader identity would help on the journey. Many managers and coaches encourage the formation of a narrow identity with the complete focus on becoming a professional footballer. Although this is extremely important, it is also crucial to allow a player when coming through the youth system to develop their identity in other ways which disassociates from the norms of typical football club culture. This could be through formal education engagement and other external means (i.e., learning a language, engaging with other constructive opportunities). If who you are is too closely associated to what you do (i.e., identity foreclosure), there could be psychological difficulties to contend with later when organisational stressors appear (i.e., deselection, short- and long-term injury, going out on loan, moving clubs, internal club relationships etc.). It is crucial that the key stakeholders around a player (i.e., manager, coach, agent, family) recognise this and encourage the formation of a broader, richer identity. This will help the player deal with critical moments and shocks to the system more effectively when they arrive.

A second practical implication emerging from the thesis would be the different types of applied sport psychology provision offered between academy level and professional level. It is suggested that coaches could help assist academy players with

their mental skills development (i.e., relaxation techniques, goal setting, imagery deployment, positive self-talk) whereas a sport psychologist within an applied knowledge of identity formation could help players at first team level. In his applied work Nesti (2010) has recognised that a large majority of first team players already have high quality mental skills so they may need something else. More applied sport psychologists with existential understanding and backgrounds could help fill this gap. The existential sport psychology approach as advocated by Nesti, (2004; 2010) suggests that when a player is dealing with a psychological challenge within their career (i.e., a critical moment) and if they care about what they do, there will be amount of anxiety to deal with. Existential psychology states that normal anxiety is a constant throughout our lives, due to our freedom and is something that can be used to create or propel us forwards (May, 1977). This differs to other psychological approaches, such as cognitive or humanistic, where anxiety is managed away, or suppressed through mental skills applications and positive thinking (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). This general lack of awareness of broader psychology has led to a narrow, restricted approach and as Nesti has purported in his applied experiences, the higher an athlete reaches within their sport (i.e., professional level) the more competent they are with the use of mental skills (i.e., imagery, concentration, positive self-talk, goal setting). First team environments are not an extension of academy environments. This suggests that mental skills training may be of use to players making their way through the game (i.e., when schoolboys or apprentices) but for professional players, already competent in these areas, something else is needed to help support them with their needs and issues (Tonge, 2020). Important advancements within sport psychology support and interventions have arrived via Anderson (2000) and Lavallee & Cockerill, (2002) who focused on applying counselling strategies to

meet the broader range of issues that athletes may face as they progress through their sport. This has provided a differing option for sport psychologists where marital issues, financial difficulties, issues with wider family, media problems and transitions all have the potential to impact on performance and career duration (Buckman et al., 2013). An applied sport psychologist operating within a professional football environment must always carry with them that the culture is results driven. Quite simply, if results do not go according to plan, positions can be quickly on the line with potential job losses or changes in personnel. It has been put forwards within work by Andersen, (2009) and Andersen and Tod, (2006) that the success of sport psychology work, especially within elite level professional football is notoriously difficult to prove or substantiate. Adding to this work which is wrapped around performance and results, Gilbourne and Richardson, (2006) put forwards that sport psychologists operating within high performance environments should provide a caring, supportive role to get the best of people who have to competently function within there. Watson and Nesti, (2005) however have suggested that effective sport psychologists within elite level environments should possess knowledge of both. They should be able to attend to MST if needed and provide a broader psychological service to meet issues which the players face more frequently. Through their applied experiences, Nesti and Littlewood, (2009) have argued that many of their encounters working with athletes at higher levels have involved discussions of broader concerns, rather than those directly related to playing performance. The research findings within Study One, Study Two and Study Three have substantiated these broader concerns. This needs to be considered within university courses, National Governing Body awards and in the applied training of sport psychologists moving forwards.

The third practical implication is based on the importance of developing a strong sense of self to help stay in the professional game for as long as possible. The PhD research findings support the views of Mitchell et al., (2014) and Nesti & Littlewood (2009) who stated that humility, courage, resilience, choice, authenticity and dealing with adversity constructively are crucial components within identity development and professional football progression. It can be argued that many football clubs at youth level do not offer an effective programme of development (both demanding and supportive) to help players develop qualities that will help them move into and through professional football. Offering an environment of little challenge (i.e., nurturing, caring, empathic where everything is done for a player) could stifle psychological development and identity formation. This may not help a player face up to individuality in relation to choice and responsibility (Frankl, 1984) and will not aid their progression from the academy to first team. Coaches have a responsibility to encourage individuality and choice and allow a player to grow and flourish as opposed to telling them what to do and treating everyone the same way. Traditional football club culture has followed a pattern of manager and coach authority over the years (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006) and the findings within the PhD has suggested that this still seems to be the case within some clubs (conformity and suppression).

The fourth practical implication lies in the concerning findings of Study One, Study Two and Study Three around mental health and well-being support. Some of the findings reported challenging psychological issues especially around deselection and injury. It is put forwards that every football club should operate a mental health related screening process on a regular basis (i.e., monthly/ bi-monthly) which provides a confidential opportunity for players (and staff) to discuss anything that is

troubling them. This is also very important around 'end point' deselection or moving on involuntarily from a club. Allowing players to simply walk away with little support is appalling and needs addressing immediately. Some clubs may do this well, but it is argued that ALL clubs need to do this as findings within the thesis has revealed there are still plenty of issues which need attention. Traditional professional football culture tends to be closed, masculine, harsh and ruthless. The PhD findings suggest it is very important that some professional football environments are dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century and that mental health and well-being is placed at the core of cultural operations. Therefore, it is recommended that every professional league football club, or club who runs a full-time operation (i.e., professional club within the non-league system also) embeds a 'transitional plan' for every full-time player and supports that player with their exit. The player should not be left to face this alone.

The final practical implication lies with organisational culture and educating managers and coaches to create an environment for a player to flourish in. The findings within Study One, Study Two and Study Three suggest that a majority of professional football culture continues to be harsh, ruthless, and vitriolic in places with evidence of toxic masculinity behaviours and even bullying being reported. It is suggested through the sharing of these research findings that professional football clubs need to keep working on getting a cultural balance. The ideal is creating a culture which is not too harsh and ruthless but is not too soft and pampered either. This can be linked to the philosophical arguments of Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas who suggested that care and kindness alongside challenge and adversity leads to balance and harmony. Anything too much on one side is heaven (too soft and pampered) and anything too much on the other is hell (too harsh and ruthless). More

262

education and guest presentations from academic researchers who specialise in structuring organisational culture could help with this (e.g., Nesti, 2010). If the academic has a professional football background, or feel for the sport through a lived experience, this may be appealing for clubs to listen and engage with.

The practical implications may help in some way to addressing the wide range of mental health and well-being challenges reported by ex- professional football players within Study One, Study Two and Study Three. Working on building an effective organisational culture within a professional football club then offering one to one support for players may help maximise the chances of being successful and help players develop a strong sense of self and a broader, richer identity. This can help professional football players deal with the shocks to the system that the sport will ultimately bring. As the findings have demonstrated, having a strong, or even an exclusive athletic identity can be problematic. Broader identity formation can come in the form of developing a religious or spiritual identity, partaking in education, or undertaking differing courses, working with charities or foundations, staying humble and grounded when their careers are going well and staying around people that are trustworthy and want the best for them. A narrow, or even exclusive athletic identity can potentially cause immense psychological difficulties when disrupted, or even obliterated. This needs awareness.

7.3   Theoretical implications.

The findings of Study One, Study Two and Study Three have added knowledge to 'end transitional stages' of a career such as retirement and coming away from the sport at an academy (i.e., deselection following being an apprentice) to more frequent issues which happen on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. These issues can be

termed as critical moments as they indicate that anxiety will have to be faced and moved through. Arguably this is different to the term 'transition' as this indicates that the movement is smooth, clean, structured, and easy to navigate.

Findings from the studies have also added knowledge and value to the design of positivist transitional models which are solely based on retirement (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981; Taylor & Ogilvie,1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and the sport specific 'stages' model of a professional footballer's journey (Relvas, Littlewood & Richardson, 2013). The studies within the thesis highlight that there are more holistic concerns and challenges which appear more frequently within an athlete's journey (i.e., a professional footballer). These more frequent challenges can threaten or challenge identity but can, however, provide an opportunity for growth, acquisition of self-knowledge and courage to choose the best ways forward (i.e., deselection, injury, loans, homesickness, manager and coach relationships, team-mate relationships, external interest and moving clubs).

A high number of professional players at all levels of the game will have to carve out other opportunities when their professional football career is over (i.e., have a dual career). This can be problematic if the player has a strong or even exclusive athletic identity (i.e., see themselves as a player and nothing else). Findings from the thesis suggest that it is important to form a broader identity to deal with the shocks to the system which arrive in differing guises as players' journey through the game. Having an overly strong or exclusive athletic identity can cause mental health challenges. Alongside the concept and challenges of strong or exclusive athletic identity formation, there needs to be more engagement and awareness of broader psychological theory such as the identity work of Erikson (1950; 1968) and the existential work of Frankl (1984). The work of Frankl (1984) suggests that even

within difficult times and suffering a human being has a choice and this cannot be taken away. These researchers have helped provide a template to understand issues that appear in professional football careers such as identity crisis or difficulties when there is a loss of meaning. The work of Erikson (1950;1968) suggests that a human being must go through a series of crisis and resolution points as they navigate successfully through a 'life cycle.' Failure to navigate these points can lead to psychological challenges. As a full professional football career typically ends at approximately 35-40 years' old it can be argued that some of Erikson's model could be re-aligned or bought forwards to fit a footballer's 'life cycle' and help explain the crisis issues they are encountering. For example, this could help explain relationships with their sport, with managers, coaches and within experiences within deselection (i.e., intimacy vs isolation) and reflecting on the success or non-success of a professional football career (i.e., ego integrity vs despair). Despite the issues of chronology and timelines being slightly out Erikson's model is a useful template to help researchers understand identity formation and identity development within professional footballers.

7.4   Recommendations for further research.

The findings from Study One, Study Two and Study Three present opportunities for further research within football contexts both from an empirical and methodological perspective.

Firstly, more research focusing on differing biographical and demographical player samples would be insightful to explore experiences of transitions and critical moments and how they impact upon identity. This could range from players who have arrived from overseas (i.e., migratory experiences), clubs which operate further afield

from the English structure (i.e., Europe and The Rest of the World), players with differing religious or spiritual backgrounds, female players and players who operate within differing levels of the game. This would help provide deeper insight into how critical moments are handled by those who have deeper and broader sources of meaning within their lives.

It would also be useful for future research to explore professional football club support mechanisms, what is offered from an applied sport psychology perspective and why there seems to be a lack of applied sport psychologists who operate on a prolonged basis at first team level within UK professional football. Research suggests that a higher percentage of applied sport psychologists operate at academy level (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014). First team level is a different world.

Future research could also investigate isolated critical moments within professional football such as deselection and loan experiences and probe how players handle these challenging times effectively. A method of player journaling or keeping a diary would provide some insight and findings which can help us understand further support needs.

Finally, future research could broaden its approach and investigate critical moments and identity impacts within parents, managers, coaches, analysts, scouts, agents. Investigations could be carried out using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to help us understand the psychological challenges of wider staff around a football club. This would help with building a supportive and integrated culture.

From a methodological perspective, future research could provide more insights from academics who are also applied practitioners and currently operating within the domain of professional football, especially at first team level. This may take the form of more case study accounts or ethnographical or auto-ethnographical

writing. This would help further broaden our knowledge and understanding so that the most effective support can be offered when dealing with transitions and critical moments and with the immense psychological challenges when being in the game and having to come away from the game.

7.5   Thesis limitations.

Throughout Study One, Study Two and Study Three, there have been some potential limitations. The first limitation (Study One) was that it was designed using a 'one voice, monological' approach and written in a semi-fictional manner as it was impossible to recall everything that was said verbatim. Events recalled also happened several years ago which brings into question the issue of retrospective recall. However, the study was seen as unique within its design. It was felt by the author that there is currently limited material with academic research which provides this level of insight into the realities of life within professional football and the impacts of transitions and critical moments on mental health and well-being as players journey through the game.

The second limitation (Study Two) was that the participant sample in the study was narrow and may not have captured the diversity of current football player demographics (i.e., six males, white British UK based ex-professional players). However, it must be pointed out that getting hold of ex-professional players to engage with this type of research was challenging. Being an ex-professional player, myself was seen as a positive in this regard and helped build trust in capturing the level of data which is currently lacking within academic research journal articles. The lack of diversity of the participant sample can open further research angles and approaches which can add knowledge by capturing a broader experiential range of players

including players with different spiritual and religious backgrounds, players who have migrated to the UK from differing areas of the world, females and their experiences of transitions and critical moments and players who play in different countries and leagues across the globe. The third limitation was that the participants of Study Two were expected to recount events which occurred several years ago, and potentially the interview data may have been subject to response or retrospective recall bias. However, to overcome this, it is put forwards that the retrospective nature and design of the study afforded an opportunity for ex-players to deeply reflect on experiences affecting identity that could not have been readily accessed by other means or approaches.

The final potential limitation (Study Three) lay in the survey design. The survey was kept as simple as possible to engage ex-professional players and get as many full completions as possible. However, the survey responses may have yielded further information if a qualitative space was added for the participants to fill in. For example, after questions such as 'I have felt isolation' or 'being yourself can be challenging' a qualitative space could have requested 'can you explain further.' There may have been a missed opportunity here to gain some more insightful data.

To finalise, whilst writing the PhD revisions there have been two tragic losses of players which indicate how important this ongoing research is in relation to dealing with transitions and critical moments and understanding how issues can impact upon identity. One was Jeremy Wisten, a young player who took his own life following a deselection experience from Manchester City FC and the other player was a 32-year-old Yeovil Town FC professional, Lee Collins who was tragically found dead in a hotel room. Lee's wife has requested that clubs and differing stakeholders in the game such as The PFA and The FA provide much more support around transition points and

take on board more experiential knowledge when players they are having to face a critical moment within their lives. This is crucial. Hopefully this PhD can help provide a sea change and through the findings of Study One, Study Two and Study Three start the process in helping get better support in at the professional level of the game.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REFERENCES

Adler, P.A. & Adler, P (1989). 'The Glorified Self. The Aggrandisement and the Constriction of the Self.' *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 52 (4), 299-310.

Agnew, D., Marks, A., Henderson, P. & Woods, C. (2017). Deselection from elite Australian football as the catalyst for a return to sub-elite competitions: when elite players feel there is 'still more to give.' *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10, Issue 1.

Alfermann, D. & Stambulova, N. (2007). 'Career transitions and career termination.' In R.E.G. Tenebaum, ed. *Handbook of Sport Psychology*. 3rd ed. New York, NY:Wiley, 712-736.

Allen, E.S., Rhoades, G.K., Stanley, S.M. & Markman, H.J. (2010). Hitting home. Relationships between recent deployment, posttraumatic stress symptoms and marital functioning for Army couples. *Journal of Family Psychology,* 24, pp. 280-288.

All or Nothing. Manchester City. (2018). Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/ Manchester City Prime Video.

All or Nothing. Tottenham Hotspur. (2020). Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/ Tottenham Hotspur Prime Video.

Allison, M. & Meyer, C. (1988). Career problems and retirement among elite athletes: the female tennis professional. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, pp. 212-222.

Anderson, D.E., McNeely, J.D. & Windham, B.G. (2010). Regular slow-breathing exercise effects on blood pressure and breathing patterns at rest. *Journal of human hypertension*, 24 (12), pp 807-813.

Andersen, M.B. (2000). *Doing Sport Psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Andersen, M.B. (2005). 'Yeah, I work with Beckham': Issues of confidentiality privacy and privilege in sport psychology service delivery. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 1: pp. 5-13.

Andersen, M.B. (2009). 'Performance enhancement as a bad start and a dead end: a parenthetical comment on Mellalieu and Lane', *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, 20: pp. 12-14.

Andersen, M.B. & Tod, D. (2006). 'When to refer athletes for counselling or psychotherapy', in J. Williams (ed.), *Applied Sport Psychology: personal growth to peak performance*, Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, pp. 483-495.

Atchley, R., C. (1976). *The sociology of retirement*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman

Balague, G. (1999). 'Understanding identity, value and meaning when working with elite athletes.' *The Sport Psychologist*, 13 (1), 89-98.

Barker, L.H. & Berry, K.D. (2009). Development issues impacting military families with young children during single and multiple deployments. *Military Medicine*, 174, pp. 1033-1040.

Barton, W. (2014). *Fergie's Fledglings*. Vertical Editions.

BBC, (2021). Released players: Clubs announce summer 2021 retained lists. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/57319431

Biddle, S. J., Markland, D., Gilbourne, D., Chatzisarantis, N. L. & Sparkes, A. C. (2001). Research methods in sport and exercise psychology: Quantitative and qualitative issues. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 19, 10, pp. 777-809.

Big Ron Manager. (2012). Available at: https://youtu.be/qkVl3ZhFzf0

Blinde, E. M. & Stratta, T. M. (1992). The sport career death of college athletes: involuntary and unanticipated sports exits. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 15, 1, pp. 3-20.

Bloom, B. (1985). *Talent development in young people*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Bochner, A.P. & Ellis, C. (2006). Communication as autoethnography. In G.J. Shepherd, J.S. John & T. Striphas (eds). *Communication as autoethnography, Perspectives on theory* (pp 13-21). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Boss, P. (2004). Ambiguous loss, research, theory and practice. Reflections after 9/11. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, pp. 551-566.

Bourke, A. (2002). 'The road to fame and fortune: Insights on the career paths of young Irish professional footballers in England.' *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5, 375-389.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3, 77-101.

Brewer, B.W., Van Raalte, J.L. & Pepitas,A.J. (2000). 'Self-identity Issues in Sport Career Transitions'. In Lavallee, D. & P.Wylleman (Eds.), *Career Transitions in Sport: International Perspectives* (pp29-43). Morgantown, WV: Fitness International Technology.

Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L. & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, pp.237 – 254.

Brown, C. & Hartley, D. L. (1998). Athletic identity and career maturity of male college student athletes. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 29, pp. 17-26.

Brown, G. & Potrac, P. (2009). 'You've not made the grade, son: deselection and identity disruption in elite level youth football.' *Soccer and Society*, 10 (2), 143-159.

Brown, D. J., Fletcher, D., Henry, I., Borrie, A., Emmett, J., Buzza, A. & Wombwell, S. (2015). A British university case study of the transitional experiences of student-athletes. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, *21*, 78-90.

Bruner, M. W., Munroe-Chandler, K. J. & Spink, K. S. (2008). Entry into elite sport: A preliminary investigation into the transition experiences of rookie athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 20, 236-252.

Brustad, R.J., Babkes, M.L. & Smith, A.L. (2001). Youth in Sport: Psychological Considerations. In R.N. Singer, H.A. Hausenblaus & C.M. Janelle (Eds). *Handbook of research in sport psychology*, (2nd ed., pp. 604-635. New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Buckman, J.E., Forbes, H.J., Clayton, T., Jones, M., Jones, N., Greenberg, T. & Fear, N.T. (2013). Early service leavers: A study of the factors associated with the premature separation from the UK Armed Forces and the mental health of those that leave early. *European Journal of Public Health*, 23, pp. 410-415.

Calvin, M. (2017). *No Hunger in Paradise: The Players. The Journey. The Dream.* Random House.

Carless, D. & Douglas, K. (2013). 'In the Boat but Selling Myself Short: Stories, Narratives and Identity Development in Elite Sport.' *The Sport Psychologist*, 27, 27-39.

Carlisle, C. (2014). *You don't know me but…..……..A footballer's life*. London: Simon and Schuster Ltd.

Chow, B. C. (2002). Support for elite athletes retiring from sport: the case in Hong Kong. *Journal of the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance*, 38, 1, pp. 36-41.

Cohn, H.W. (1997). *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice: An Introduction into Existential Psychotherapy*. London: Sage.

Collins, D. & MacNamara, A. (2012). The rocky roads to the top. Why talent needs trauma. *Sports Medicine*, 42, 907-914.

Collins, D. MacNamara, A., & McCarthy, N. (2016). Super champions, champions and almosts: Important differences and commonalities on the rocky road. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6.

Corlett, J. (1996). 'Virtue Lost: courage in sport.' *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 23: 45-57.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). Research design: *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crust, L. (2007). Mental toughness in sport: A review. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 5, 3, pp. 270-290

Crust, l., Nesti, M. & Littlewood, M. (2010) A cross-sectional analysis of mental toughness in a professional football academy. *Athletic Insight Journal*, 2, 2.

Cuellar, I., Harris, L. C., & Jasso, R. (1980). An acculturation scale for Mexican American normal and clinical populations. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 2*(3), 199–217.

Cummings, E., Dean, L., R, Newell, D.S. & McCaffrey, I. (1960). Disengagement: A tentative theory of aging. *Sociometry*, 23, 23-35.

Curtis, J. & Ennis, R. (1988). Negative consequences of leaving competitive sport? Comparative findings for former elite-level hockey players. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, pp. 87-106.

Dale, G. (1996). 'Existential-phenomenology: emphasising the experience of the athlete in sport psychology research.' *The Sport Psychologist*, 14: 17-41.

Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M., (1985). The general causality orientations scale: Self-determination in personality. *Journal of research in personality*, *19*(2), pp.109-134.

Demers, A. (2011). When veterans return. The role of community of reintegration. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16, pp. 160-179.

Dempster, S. (2009). Having the balls, having it all? Sport and constructions of undergraduate laddishness. *Gender and Education*, 21 (5), 481-500.

Dezin, N.K & Lincoln, Y.S. (2008). *Strategies of qualitative enquiry* (3rd ed). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Ding, L., Velicer, W.F. & Harlow, L.L. (1995). Effects of estimation methods, number of indicators per factor, and improper solutions on structural equation modelling indices. *Structural Equation Modelling*, 2, pp. 119-143.

Drahota, J. A. T. & Eitzen, D. S. (1998). The role exit of professional athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 15, 263-278.

Douglas, K. & Carless, D. (2013). "In the boat" but "selling myself short": Stories, narratives, and identity development in elite sport. *The Sport Psychologist, 27*(1), 27-39.

Douglas, K. & Carless, D. (2011). A narrative perspective: Identity, well-being and trauma in professional sport. In Gilbourne, D., & Andersen, M. B. (2011). *Critical essays in applied sport psychology*. Human Kinetics.

Douglas, K. & Carless, D. (2006). Performance, discovery, and relational narratives among women professional tournament golfers. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 15, 2, pp. 14-27.

Drahota, J., A. T. & Eritzen, D. S. (1998). The role exit of professional athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 15, pp. 263-278.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about auto ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E. (1994). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: Norton.

Farino, M. & Cei, A. (2019). *Football Psychology: From Theory to Practice*. Routledge.

Ferguson, A. (2000). *Managing my life. My autobiography*. Hodder and Stoughton.

Finn, J. & Mckenna, J. (2010). Coping with academy to first team transitions in elite English

male team sports. The coaches' perspective. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching,* 5 (2), 257 – 259.

Franck, A., Stambulova, N. B. & Ivarsson, A. (2018). Swedish athletes' adjustment patterns in the junior-to-senior transition. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *16*(4), pp. 398-414.

Frank, A.W. (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*. University of Chicago Press.

Frankl, V. (1984). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to Logotherapy*. New York: Simon and Schuster Ltd.

Gascoigne, P. (2005). *Gazza. My Story*. London: Headline.

Gearing, B. (1999). Narratives of identity among former professional footballers in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13, 1, pp. 43-58.

Gernon, A. (2017). *https://inews.co.uk/sport/football/why-former-footballers-struggle-retirement-44759*.

Giacobbi, P.R., Jr., Poczwardowski, A. & Hager, P.F. (2005). A pragmatic research philosophy for applied sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 18-31.

Gilbourne, D., & Anderson, M.B (2013). *Critical Essays in Applied Sport Psychology*. Human Kinetics.

Gilbourne, D. & Richardson, D. (2005). 'A practitioner focused approach to the provision of psychological support in soccer: adopting action research themes and processes. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 23, pp. 651-658.

Gillespie, K. (2013). *How not to be a football millionaire*. Liverpool: Trinity Mirror Sport Media.

Gledhill, A. & Harwood, C. (2015). A holistic perspective on career development in UK female soccer players: A negative case analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *21*, 65-77.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubledau.

Gouttebarge, V., Backx, F.J., Aoki, H. & Kerkhoffs, G.M., (2015). Symptoms of common mental disorders in professional football (soccer) across five European countries. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, *14*(4), p.811.

Gouttebarge, V., Frings-Dresen, M. H. W. & Sluiter, J. K. (2015). Mental and psychosocial health among current and former professional footballers. *Occupational medicine*, *65*(3), 190-196.

Grove, J. R., Lavallee, D. & Gordon, S. (1997). Coping with retirement from sport: the influence of athletic identity. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 9, 2, pp. 191-203.

Gruenberg, E. M. & Zusman, J. (1964). The natural history of schizophrenia. *International Psychiatry Clinics*, 1, 699-710.

Gumusdag, H., Yidiran, I., Yamaner, F. & Kartal, A. (2011). Aggression and fouls in professional football. *Biomedical Human Kinetics*, 3 (1): pp 67-71.

Hale, B. D., James, B. & Stambulova, N. B. (1999). Determining the dimensionality of athletic identity: a 'Herculean' cross-cultural undertaking. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 30, 1, pp. 83-100.

Havighurst, R. J. & Albrecht, R. (1953). *Older people*. New York: Longmans, Green.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Herbert, I. (2020). *https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-9085355/The-tragedy-Jeremy-Wisten-shows-football-young-players.html*

Hines, L.A., Gribble, R., Wessley, S., Dandeker, C. & Fear, N.T. (2014). Are the armed forces understood and supported by the public? A view from the United Kingdom. *Armed Forces and Society*, 41 (4), pp. 688-713.

Holt, N. (2003). Representation, legitimation and autoethnography. An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2, 1, pp. 1-22.

Horton, R. S. & Mack, D. E. (2000). Athletic identity in marathon runners: functional focus or dysfunctional commitment? *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 23, 2, pp. 101-119.

Howells, K. & Fletcher, D. (2015). Sink or swim: Adversity and growth related experiences in Olympic swimming champions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 16, 37-48.

Hughes, R. & Coakley, J. J. (1991). Positive deviance among athletes: the implications of over conformity of the sport ethic. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, pp. 307-325.

Hurley, E. D. & Mills, B. D. (1993). Athletic retirement: prepare for the best. Do coaches and athletes lose their identity after retirement from sport? *Coaching Volleyball*, August/September, pp. 22-26.

Ihde, D. (1986). *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ivarsson, A., Stambulova, N.B. & Johnson, U. (2016). Injury as a Career Transition: Experiences of a Swedish Elite Handball Player. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*.

Iversen, A.C., Nikoloau, V., Greenberg, N., Unwin, C., Hull, L., Hotopf, M. & Wessley, S. (2005). What happens to British veterans when they leave the armed forces? *European Journal of Public Health*, 15 (2), pp. 175-184.

Jackson, S. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow in Sports*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Jansen, M. (2019). *What was, what is and what might have been*. Polaris.

John Sitton Half Time Rant. Orient for a Fiver. (2020). Available at: https://youtu.be/XVj45yN72uU

Jones, G.R. (2010). *Organisational theory, design and chang*e. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Jones, R. L., Glintmeyer, N. & McKenzie, A. (2005). Slim Bodies, Eating Disorders and the Coach-Athlete Relationship: A Tale of Identity Creation and Disruption. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport,* 40, 3, pp. 377-391.

Jordet, G. (2005). Perceptual Training in Soccer: An Imagery Intervention Study with Elite Players. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17 (2): pp140-156.

Kay, O. (2016). *Forever Young*. Quercus Editions Ltd.

Kenyon, G.M. & Randall, W.L. (1997). *Re-storying Our Lives. Personal Growth through Autobiographical Reflection*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Kerr, G. & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). The retirement experiences of elite female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 12, 2, pp. 115-133.

Kerry, D.S. & Armour, K.M. (2000). 'Sports Sciences and the Promise of Phenomenology: Philosophy, Method, and Insight.' *Quest,* 52 (1): 1-17.

Kierkegaard, S. (1944). *The Concept of Dread*, trans. S.Lowrie, Princeton. NJ: Princeton University Press.

Knights, S., Sherry, E. & Ruddock-Hudson, M. (2016). 'Investigating Elite End of Career Athletic Transition.' *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28, 3.

Koukouris, K. (1994). Constructed case studies: athletes' perspectives of disengaging from organized competitive sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 11, 114-139.

Kübler-Ross, E. & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Simon and Schuster.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.

Lally, P. & Kerr, G. (2008). The effects of athlete retirement on parents. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 20, 42-56.

Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8, 85-99.

Larson, C.H. & Engell, C. (2013). The Art of Goal Setting: A Tale of Doing Sport Psychology in Professional Football. *Sport Science Review*, Vol XXII, pp 49-76.

Lavallee, D. (2005). The effect of a life development intervention on sport career transition adjustment. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 193-202.

Lavallee, D. & Cockerill, I. (eds) (2002). *Counselling in Sport and Exercise Contexts*, Leicester. The British Psychological Society, Sport and Exercise Psychology Section.

Lavallee, D., Gordon, S. & Grove, J. R. (1997). Retirement from sport and the loss of athletic identity. *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, 2, 129-147.

Lavallee, D. & Wylleman, P. (2000). *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives*. Morgantown, W.V. Fitness Information Technology.

Lewis, J., Ritchie, J., Ormston, R. & Morell, G. (2014). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Sage Publications.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation* (Vol. 47). Sage.

Lincoln, Y.H. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Enquiry*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Lynch, D. (2006). *Adjustment to retirement of horse racing jockey*s (Unpublished master's thesis). Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. *Handbook of adolescent psychology*, 9, 11, pp. 159-187.

Marcia, J. E., (1966), Development and validation of ego identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 3, pp 551-558.

Marshall, J. (1996). 'Researching women and leadership.' *International Review of Women and Leadership*, 1, 1-10.

Martindale, R.J.J., Collins, D. & Daubney, J. (2005). Talent Development: A Guide for Practice and Research Within Sport. *Quest*, 57, 4, pp. 353-375.

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.

Maslow, A.H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

May, R. (2009). *Man's search for himself*. WW Norton & Company.

May, R. (1977). *The meaning of anxiety*. New York: Ronald Press.

McGillivray, D. & McIntosh, A. (2006). 'Football is my life'; Theorizing Social Practice in the Scottish Professional Football Field. *Sport in Society*, 9, 371-387.

McGrath, P. (2007). *Back from the brink. The Autobiography*. Arrow.

McGraw, J. G. (1995). Loneliness, its nature and forms: An existential perspective. *Man and World*, 28(1), 43–64.

Merson, P. (2017). *How not to be a professional footballer*. Harper Sport.

Messner, M.A. (1992). *Power at Play*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Josey Bass Inc.

Miller, P. & Kerr, J. (2002). 'Conceptualising excellence: Past, present and future.' *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 140-153.

Mills, A., Butt, J., Maynard, I. & Harwood, C. (2012). Identifying factors perceived to influence the development of elite youth football academy players. *Journal of Sports Sciences,* 30 (15), 1593-1604.

Mitchell, T., Nesti, M., Richardson, D., Midgely A.W., Eubank, M. & Littlewood, M. (2014). 'Exploring athletic identity in elite level English youth football: a cross sectional approach. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 32, 13, 1294-1299.

Morris, R., Tod, D. & Oliver, E. (2014). 'An Analysis of Organizational Structure and Transition Outcomes in the Youth-to-Senior Professional Soccer Transition.' *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 27:2, 216-234.

Murphy, S. (1995). Transitions in competitive sport: maximising individual potential. In: S. Murphy, ed. *Sport Psychology Interventions*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, pp. 331-346.

Muscat, A. C. (2010). *Elite athletes' experiences of identity changes during a career-ending injury: an interpretive description* (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia).

Nesti, M. S. & Sewell, D. (1997). Anxiety control and performance in figure skating. *Cognitive enhancement in sport and exercise psychology*, 18-22.

Nesti, M. (2004). Ex*istential Psychology and Sport: Theory and Application*. London: Routledge.

Nesti, M. (2010). *Psychology in Football: Working with Elite and Professional Players.* Taylor and Francis.

Nesti, M. & Littlewood, M. (2009). 'Psychological preparation and development of players in premiership football: practical and theoretical perspectives.' In T. Riley, A.M. Williams and B.Drust (eds), *International Research in Science and Soccer*, London: Routledge, pp.169-176.

Nesti, M. & Littlewood, M. (2011). 'Making your way in the game. Boundary situations in England's professional world.' In Gilbourne, D. and M.B. Anderson. (2011). *Critical Essays in Applied Sport Psychology*. Human Kinetics.

Nesti, M. Littlewood, M., O'Halloran, L., Eubank, M. & Richardson, D. (2012). 'Critical Moments in Elite Premiership Football: Who Do You Think You Are?' *Physical Culture and Sport, Studies and Research*, 23-32.

Ogbonna, E. & Harris, L.C. (2015). Subcultural tensions in managing organisational culture: a study of an English Premier League football organisation. *Human Resource Management Journal*. 25, 217-23.

Ogilvie, B. & Taylor, J. (1993). Career termination issues among elite athletes. In R. N. Singer & L. K. Murphey (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (pp. 761-775). Sydney: Macmillan.

Ogilvie, B. & Taylor, J. (1993a). Career termination in sports: when the dream dies. In: J. M. Williams, ed. *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*. London: Mayfield, pp. 356-365.

Ogilvie, B. & Taylor, J. (1993b). Career termination issues among elite athletes. In: Singer, Murphy, and Tennant, eds. *Handbook of Research on Sport Psychology*. New York: Macmillan, pp. 761-775.

Pain, M. A. & Harwood, C. G. (2004). Knowledge and perceptions of sport psychology within English soccer. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *22*(9), 813-826.

Patton, M. Q. (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd Edition) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (2002) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (3rd Edition) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Park, T. & Hobin, S. (2012). *Sons of United*. Popular Side Publications.

Parker, A. (2001). Soccer, servitude and sub-cultural identity: Football traineeship and masculine construction. *Soccer & Society*, *2*(1), 59-80.

Parker, A. (2000). 'Training for glory, schooling for failure. English professional football, traineeship, and educational provision.' *Journal of Education and Work*, 13, 61-76.

Parker, A. (1995). 'Great expectations: Grimness or glamour? The football apprentice in the 1990s.' *The Sports Historian*, 15: 107-126.

Pepitas, A.J., Brewer, B.W. & Van Raalte, J.L. (1996). 'Transitions of the student athlete.' In Etzel, E.F., A.P. Ferrante and J.W. Pinkey. *Counselling college student athletes. Issues and Interventions,* 137-156. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Peter Reid and Bobby Saxton at Sunderland 1996/1997. (2010). Available at: https://youtu.be/TUCvk2HxZ_E

Pike, S. (2021). *The Greatest Footballer That Never Was*. Reach Sport.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1989). 'Phenomenological research methods.' In R.S. Valle and S. Halling (eds) *Existential Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology*. New York: Plenum Press, pp 41-60.

Potrac, P., Jones, R. & Armour, K. (2002). 'It's All About Getting Respect': The Coaching Behaviors of an Expert English Soccer Coach. *Sport, Education and Society*, 7, 2, pp. 183-202.

Potrac, P., Jones, R. L. & Cushion, C. J. (2007). Understanding power and the coach's role in professional English soccer: A preliminary investigation of coach behaviour. *Soccer and Society*, 8, pp.3–49.

Pummell, B. (2008). *Junior to senior transition: Understanding and facilitating the process*. Loughborough. Loughborough University.

Pummell, B., Harwood, C. & Lavallee, D. (2008). 'Jumping to the next level: A qualitative examination of within career transitions in adolescent event riders.' *Psychology of Sport and Exercise,* 9, 427-447.

Pummell, E.K. & Lavallee, D. (2019). Preparing UK tennis academy players for the junior to senior transition. Development, implementation and evaluation of an intervention program. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 40, 156-164.

Ravizza, K. (2002a). A philosophical construct: a framework for performance enhancement. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 33, pp. 4-18.

Richardson, L. (2000a). Evaluating ethnography. *Qualitative enquiry*, 6, pp 253-255.

Richardson, D., Relvas, H. & Littlewood, M. (2013). Sociological and cultural influences on player development. In: Williams, M (ed). *Science and soccer: developing elite performers*, 3rd ed. London: Routledge, pp. 139–54.

Richert. A.J. (2010). *Integrating existential and narrative therapy: a theoretical base for eclectic practice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.

Robertson, H.C. & Brott, P.E. (2013). Male veterans' perceptions of midlife career transition and life satisfaction. A study of military men transitioning to the teaching profession. *Adultspan Journal*, 12 (2), pp. 66-79.

Roderick, M. (2006). *The Work of Professional Football. A Labour of Love*? Routledge.

Ronkainen, N.J., Kavoura, A. & Ryba, T.V. (2016). Narrative and Discursive Perspectives on Athletic Identity: Past, Present, and Future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise,* 27: 128–137.

Ronkainen, N.J., Tikkanen, O., Littlewood, M. & Nesti, M. (2015). An existential perspective on meaning, spirituality and authenticity in athletic careers. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 7(2).

Ronkainen, N. & Nesti, M. (2015). 'An existential approach to sport psychology: Theory and applied practice.' Int*ernational Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 15.

Rooney, W. (2020). https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wayne-rooney-social-media-is-a-problem-teach-young-players-how-to-use-it-p03ghsvtt

Rosedale, M. (2007). Loneliness. An exploration of meaning. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 13, 4, pp. 201-209.

Rotella, R. J. (1985). The psychological care of the injured athlete. In: Bunker, R. J. Rotella, and Reilly, eds. *Sport Psychology: Psychological Considerations in Maximising Sport Performance*. Ithaca, NY: Movement Publications, pp. 273287.

Roynesdal, O. (2015). *The transition from academy to professional football*. Norway: Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.

Roynesdal, O., Toering, T. & Gustafsson, H. (2018). Understanding players' transition from youth to senior professional football environments. A coach perspective. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 13(1) 26–37.

Salter, D. (1997). 'Measure, analyse and stagnate: towards a radical psychology of sport.' In R.J. Butler (ed). *Sports Psychology in Performance*, Oxford: Reed Educational and Professional Publishing, pp 248-60.

Samuel, R. D., Tenenbaum, G., Mangel, E., Virshuvski, R., Chen, T. & Badir, A. (2015). Athletes' experiences of severe injuries as a career-change event. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 6, 99–120.

Sarkar, M., Fletcher, D. & Brown, D.J. (2015). What doesn't kill me……...Adversity related experiences are vital in the development of superior Olympic performance. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 18, 474-479.

Schinke, R., Yukelson, D., Bartolacci, G., Battochio, R. & Johnstone, K. (2011). The Challenges Encountered by Immigrated Elite Athletes. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 2, 1, pp:10-20

Schrum, L., Thompson, A., Sprague, D., Maddux, C., McAnear, A., Bell, L. & Bull, G. (2005). Advancing the field: Considering acceptable evidence in educational technology research. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 5(3), 202-209.

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analysing human adaptation to transition. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 9, no. 2, pp. 2-18.

Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seligman, M. & Csikszentmihlyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: an introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.

Sinclair, D. A. & Orlick, T. (1993). Positive transitions from high-performance sport. T*he Sport Psychologist*, 7, 2, pp. 138-150.

Smith, B. & McGannon, K.R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology, *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11:1, 101-12.

Smith, B. & Sparkes, A.C. (2009). 'Narrative enquiry in sport and exercise psychology: What can it mean and why might we do it?' *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10, 1-11.

Smith, B. & Sparkes, A. C. (2005). Men, sport, spinal cord injury, and narratives of hope. *Social science & medicine*, *61*(5), 1095-1105.

Sparkes, A.C. (2015). Developing mixed methods research in sport and exercise psychology. Critical reflection on five points of controversy. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 16, 49-59.

Sparkes, A.C. (2003). Bodies, identities, selves: Autoethnographic fragments and reflections. In J. Denison and P. Markula (Eds.), *Moving Writing* (pp. 51-76). New York: Peter Lang.

Sparkes, A.C. (1998). Validity in qualitative inquiry and the problem of criteria: Implications for sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 12, 363-386

Sparkes, A. & Smith, B. (2002). Sport, spinal cord injury, embodied masculinities, and the dilemmas of narrative identity. *Men and Masculinities*, 4 (3), pp. 258-285.

Speed, H., Seedsman, T. & Morris, T. (2002). Life beyond the winning post: the retirement experiences of jockeys. In: *Australian Conference of Science and Medicine in Sport: Sports Medicine and Science at the Extremes*, October 13, 2002.

Stambulova, N. (2017). Crisis-Transitions in Athletes: Current Emphases on Cognitive and Contextual Factors. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 16: 62–66

Stambulova, N. B. (1994). Developmental Sport Career Investigations in Russia: A post-perestroika analysis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 8, 221-237.

Stambulova, N. B., Engström, C., Franck, A., Linnér, L. & Lindahl, K. (2015). Searching for an optimal balance: Dual career experiences of Swedish adolescent athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 21,* 4-14.

Stambulova, N.B., Alfermann, D., Statler, T.A. & Cote, J. (2009). ISSP Position stand: Career development and transitions of athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7, 4, pp. 395-412

Stambulova, N. B. (2003). 'Symptoms of a crisis-transition: A grounded theory study.' In N. Hassmen (Ed.), *Svensk Idrottspykologisk Forening* (pp. 97–109). Orebro, Sweden: Orebro University Press.

Stambulova, N. B. (2000). Athlete's crises: a developmental perspective. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 31, pp. 584-601.

Stets, J.E., & Burke, P.J. (2000). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63, 3 pp. 224-237

Stuewe-Portnoff, G. (1988). Loneliness. Lost in the landscape of meaning. *The Journal of Psychology*, 122, 6, pp. 545-555.

Sunderland Till I Die Docuseries. (2018). Available at: www.Netflix.com/ Sunderland Till I Die

Swain, D. A. (1991). Withdrawal from sport and Schlossberg's model of transitions. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, pp. 152-160.

Taylor, J., Ogilvie, B. C. & Lavallee, D. (2006). Career transition among athletes: Is there life after sports? In J. M. Williams (Eds.), *Applied sport psychology* (5th ed., pp. 595-615). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 6, pp. 1-20.

The PFA, (2019). https://www.thepfa.com/wellbeing/mental-health-and-football/wellbeing-introduction

There's Only One Barry Fry. (2012). Available at: https://youtu.be/hMx6LDc4-Nw

Thomas, S.P. & Pollio, H.R. (2002). *Listening to Patients. A Phenomenological Approach*. Springer Publishing Company Inc.

Thomas, J.R., Nelson, J. & Silverman, S. (2015). *Research Methods in Physical Activity*. Human Kinetics.

Tinning, R., Kirk, D. & Evans, J. (1993). *Learning to teach Physical Education*. Sydney, Australia, Prentice Hall.

Tonge, A. (2020). 'Understanding mental health and wellbeing issues in elite soccer players. An existential sport psychology approach'. In Dixon, J. G., Barker, J. B., Thelwell,. R. C., & Mitchell, I. (2020). *The Psychology of Soccer.* Routledge.

Tonge, A. (2010). *Exploring the use of imagery function amongst elite level UK professional footballers*. Unpublished MPhil Thesis.

Tracy, J. (2003). The Emotional Response to the Injury and Rehabilitation Process. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 15, 4, pp. 279-293.

Tsai, J., Harpaz-Rotem, I., Pietrzak, R.H. & Southwick, S.M. (2012). The role of coping, resilience, and social support in mediating the relation between PTSD and social functioning in veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Psychiatry*, 75, pp. 135-149.

Warnock Uncut. (2007). Available at: https://youtu.be/kQtWVcFpvHg

Warriner, K. & Lavallee, D. (2008). The retirement experiences of elite female gymnasts: Self-identity and the physical self. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *20*(3), pp.301-317.

Watson, N. & Nesti, M. (2005). 'The role of spirituality in sport psychology consulting: an analysis and integrative review of literature.' *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17: pp. 228-234.

Webb, W. M., Nasco, S. A., Riley, S. & Headrick, B. (1998). Athlete identity and reactions to retirement from sport. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 21, pp. 338-362.

Weinberg, R. S. & Gould, D. (2015). *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (6th ed.). Champaign, IL, US: Human Kinetics.

Wiechman, S. A. & Williams, J. (1997). Factors affecting Athletic Identity and expectations in the high school student athlete. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 20, pp.199-211.

Wilson, A.M. (2001). Understanding organisational culture and the implications for corporate marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35: 353-367.

Wippert, P. & Wippert, J. (2008). Perceived stress and prevalence of traumatic stress symptoms following athletic career termination. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 2, 1-16.

Wolcott, H.F. (2008). *Ethnography. A way of seeing*. Altamira Press.

Wylleman, P., Reints, A. & De Knop, P. (2013). A developmental and holistic perspective on athletic career development. In P. Sortiriadou & V. De Bosscher (Eds.), *Managing high performance sport* (pp. 191 -214). London: Routledge.

Wylleman, P. & Lavallee, D. (2004). 'A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes.' In M. Weiss (Ed*.), Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective* (pp. 507–527). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D. & Lavallee, D. (2004). 'Career transitions in sport. European perspectives.' *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 7-20.

Yablonsky, A.M., Devers, E. & Richardson, J.W. (2016). Hard is normal. Military families' transitions within the process of deployment. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 39, pp. 42-56.

Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy.* Basic Books.

Yalom, I. (1999). *Momma and the meaning of life: Tales of psychotherapy*. London: Piaktus.

Appendix 1, Consent Form, Ph.D. Study 2

Exploring critical moments, identity and meaning in professional football

Mr Alan Tonge/ School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

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 *(if appropriate please specify the type of study or particular intervention you are seeking consent for – e.g., focus group, interview, training programme)* ☐

For studies involving the use of audio / video recording of interviews, focus groups etc or where there is a possibility that verbatim quotes from participants may be used in future publications or presentations, please include the following:

5. I understand that the interview/focus group will be audio / video recorded 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

Name of Person taking consent   Date   Signature
(if different from researcher)

Note: When completed 1 copy for participant and 1 copy for researcher

Appendix 2 – Participation Information Sheet, Ph.D. Study 2

Title of Project*: Exploring critical moments, identity and meaning in professional football*

Researcher: Alan Tonge

You are being invited to take part in an interview. Before you decide it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what it involves. Please take time to read the following information. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

1.   What is the purpose of the interview?
The purpose of the interview is to attain information about psychological challenges and topics professional footballers have faced within their career journeys. This will include discussing areas such as transitions/critical moments, identity, anxiety, authenticity and loneliness.

2.   Who can take part?
Players who have played professional football can take part. This is due to the research being focused on topics that professional footballers may have experienced and therefore it is important that the information comes from players who have had lived experience/ careers within professional football.

3.   Do I have to take part?
No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do, you will be contacted by the researcher to ask about your availability to arrange a time for interview. At the interview you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

4.   What will happen to me if I take part?
If you decide to take part in the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences within professional football. The interview will be recorded for transcribing purposes, but no real names will be used in the write up. You will be asked a series of questions about topics such as transitions/ critical moments, anxiety, identity, authenticity and loneliness. The session will be around 45 mins long and you will be given a debriefing sheet at the end.

5.   Are there any risks / benefits involved?
There are no benefits associated with taking part however the findings will help the researcher in understanding the psychological challenges that footballers face within their careers and this information will be of benefit to developing players (young players making their way in the game) who might be able to integrate this knowledge into their performance skill-base and also benefit coach-based and sport psychology based education packages that can expand upon the "traditional" use of mental training techniques (MST) in football and other sports.

The research findings will have implications for the role of applied sport psychology delivery within the elite professional environment and offer insights into the knowledge and understanding of dealing with key issues that consistently arise within professional football.

To minimise risk associated with this study, both my PhD supervisors are BPS/HCPC registered chartered sport psychologists with considerable experience of dealing with issues such as transitions/critical moments, identity, anxiety, authenticity and loneliness. If necessary, they can be used for referrals.

6.   Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Any information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. You do not have to provide a name on any information sheets and therefore the information you provide cannot be identified with your name. The interview will be recorded and transcribed but this will only be heard/seen by the researcher/ supervisory team. You are requested to provide the researcher with a signed or initialled consent form. This will be kept by the researcher separate from the any other information you provide. This will be stored securely and destroyed within 24 months of completion of the study. Pseudonyms will be used in all transcripts and reports relating to the study to protect the identity of individuals and organisations.

7.   Has this study been approved by an ethics committee?

   Before any data is collected, the study will be approved

8.   Who to contact with enquiries about this study?

Alan Tonge – a.tonge@ucfb.com

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with the researcher in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Appendix 3 – Interview Guide, Ph.D. Study 2

Introduction and familiarisation phase

Can you provide a brief overview of professional playing career? Probes: appearances/ international recognition/ clubs played for

Early years/ youth phase

Can you describe your experiences of early years and youth football? Probes: family, early coaches, education, critical moments, feelings, overcoming challenges

Moving on in the game phase

Can you describe your experiences of getting recruited and moving into a professional club? Probes: critical moments, coaches/managers, challenges, feelings, identity and meaning, overcoming challenges

The professional game phase

Can you describe your experiences of professional football? Probes: critical moments, deselection, moving clubs, coaching/manager relationships, challenges, feelings, threats to identity, overcoming challenges

Coming out of the game and next steps phase

Can you describe your experiences of coming out of professional football? Probes: retirement steps, support, challenges, feelings, threats to identity, overcoming challenges

Closure phase

Is there anything I should have asked you which I didn't, and you think is important to critical moments within your professional football career and what these critical moments have meant to you?

Appendix 4, Ph.D. Study 3 Survey Questions

Length of time as a professional football player (number of years/seasons):

Number of clubs played for:

Majority of playing level throughout your professional football career – (please tick one)

Higher leagues e.g., Premiership/Championship

Lower leagues e.g., League One/League Two (including National League/National League North)

Did you represent your country at international level? (e.g., under 21s, under 23s, full caps) yes/no

1. Looking back on my professional career, I achieved everything I set out to achieve - agree/disagree

2. Which of the following psychological challenges have you had to face/deal with as a professional football player? (Please tick)

Deselection (getting dropped or released)
Long term injuries

Playing whilst injured
Heightened interest from media/fans/external sources as career took off

Contract negotiation challenges (wages decreasing etc.)
Difficult relationships with teammates/ managers/ coaches
Having to move clubs/ homesickness

3. When having the above psychological challenges to deal with I felt I could talk openly and in confidence to someone about them (within the club) if they were bothering me - agree/ disagree

4. When having psychological challenges to deal with within my professional football career, I preferred to keep them to myself and work them out myself - agree/disagree

5. My love for football was sometimes challenged throughout my career - agree/disagree

6. I miss the feeling of winning now I'm out of professional football as a player - agree/ disagree

7. I miss the dressing room and the banter now I'm out of professional football as a player- agree/disagree

8. Looking back on your career, do you feel you had to make a lot of sacrifices to remain in the game - agree/disagree

9. It can be hard to trust people within professional football - agree/disagree

10. Even though being involved with a club/team I felt periods of isolation within my professional football career (being lonely) - agree/disagree

11. Even though being in a 'team' I have felt frustrated/angry if someone took my place - agree/disagree

12. As your career grew, professional football was difficult to escape, or get away from, especially in public - agree/disagree

13. 'Being yourself' can often be hard in professional football - agree/disagree

14. Throughout my professional football career, there were more highs than lows, more lows than highs, a balance – please tick one

15. I received banter off my teammates if doing something different (e.g., talking about another career/ doing a qualification) - agree/ disagree

16. I was fully prepared for the next steps after I finished playing - agree/disagree

17. I was financially secure when I finished playing and this took the pressure off my next steps - agree/disagree

18. I felt fully supported by the club when my professional career came to an end - agree/disagree

19. I found it extremely hard for a period after my football career had finished - agree/disagree

20. If given the opportunity, I would be prepared to do it all again? agree/disagree

If there is anything you would like to add to this survey, please do so: