UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FOOTBALL: AN EXAMINATION OF THE JUNIOR TO SENIOR TRANSITION

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THESIS CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Professional women's football is receiving unprecedented attention, with live and television spectator records, sponsorship deals and media recognition reaching new heights. Despite this exponential growth, financial restraints, limited resources, and the permanent shadow of the men's game ensures that there are still many barriers faced by players trying to develop a career in women's football. Psycho-social and cultural challenges alongside reduced opportunities, limited exposure to competitive environments and minimal research in the female game has resulted in a lack of players successfully transitioning into senior teams. This thesis aims to develop an understanding of the cultural and psycho-social constructs of women's football and identify how these influence player experiences of the Junior to Senior Transition (JtST).

A multi-method longitudinal design (inc., interviews, observations, ethnography, voice notes and reflective diaries) allowed for lived experiences of the JtST to be captured. Study One utilised semi-structured interviews with academy staff (n = 6) and successfully transitioned first team players (n = 3) to examine perceptions of the JtST. Thematic Analysis identified key themes and common experiences across participants. Study Two adopted ethnographic principles (over a period of 25 months) to examine whether emerging issues from Study One manifested within the current academy environment, and how these influenced preparations for the JtST (n = 36). Study Three provided a narrower, ethnographic lens to centre upon a reduced concentration of players to examine the specific JtST that players experience (n = 17). The data for Studies Two and Three was thematically analysed throughout the collection process and represented through the use of Creative Non-Fiction and Vignettes (n = 4 for Study Two, n = 6 for Study Three).

Three key findings were identified across the thesis. Firstly, the academy environment has a multi-purpose nature, in that it is required to support players with their football, educational and holistic development. As such, a large range of individuals with many aspirations exist within one environment that lacks organisational structure and coherence. Secondly, the JtST requires movement between the junior, academy and senior, first team environments. Players survived within phases of uncertainty and isolation (i.e., 17-21 years) with, at times, poor and confusing communication, limited understanding, guidance and advice aligned to their individual development. Players struggled to manage and enjoy the JtST experience. Finally, the role of the academy coach (i.e., developing 16–21-year-old players with diverse educational and vocational aspirations, football technique, psycho-social characteristics, skills and behaviours aligned to various stages of maturation) is an increasingly demanding job. The focus of the academy coach, and supporting staff, cannot be solely to develop players for the first team, rather it must be to develop well-rounded individuals in football, education and proficiencies such as communication, identity development and psycho-social skills. Collectively, the results identify the limited ability for clubs to respond to the desire for more homegrown players, with the organisational structure of the academies being identified as hindering the ability for players to transition. Whilst a small number of talented players make the transition successfully, this is rare, with many opting to transition to lower league senior teams, or transitioning out of football altogether, due to the limitations and restrictions of the current development pathway.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

No portion of the work referred to in this 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.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. 1. Introduction

Growth in women's football has been recognised globally in terms of participation, media coverage and funding (Culvin, 2021). Of importance are the movements taken by governing bodies to support the game's development to a professional level both at the national and international standards. International teams have been projected onto a worldwide stage, receiving levels of interest that have never been recorded before, with the 2022 Women's European Cup tournament being the best attended international women's competition in history (574, 875 attendees, UEFA, 2022). Moreover, the 2022 Women's European Cup Final (England vs. Germany) broke the record for the highest attendance at a Women's Euros (87, 192 attendees) and recorded a record global television audience, with more than 365 million people watching (BBC, 2022). Alongside a surge in viewing (both stadium attendance and television viewing) the increase in social media engagement has also been notable. Increased advertising and sponsorship have brought the game into more frequent focus, alongside a stark increase in attention for both teams and player profiles (Petty & Pope, 2019). This growth has been used to provide "global snapshots" of the game, which further "communicate and commercialise" women's football. It is hoped that this enhanced media exposure and attention will continue to be an effective avenue to maintain and increase interest and revenue across the world (International Federation of Association Football [FIFA] Women's Football Survey Report, 2019, pg.6).

Alongside the focus on growth at senior level, strategies have been put in place around the world to continue the development and opportunities available for junior

players. The English Football Association (FA) have introduced a Women's and Girl's Football Strategy which is evaluated every four years (2017, 2021), to identify a vision for women's football across England. These strategies have been created to ensure more opportunities for young females to become involved with football at all levels (from purely for enjoyment, through to grassroots to professional academies), but also to improve the efficiency of the development pathway and increase the number of homegrown players making it into senior and professional teams. The opportunity for young players to represent their country is also increasing (with international representation from U15s through to senior level). The inclusion of younger age teams into the international development plan provides the opportunity for more players to represent their country than ever before.

Whilst these changes provide a significant increase in opportunity for female players, this growth also creates unprecedented pressures and expectations for developing players, as league clubs work to produce individuals who can perform at a level commensurate to international performance standards. FIFA have outlined in their strategy document (FIFA Football Strategy, 2019), how the competitive and current commercialisation success of the elite aspect of the women's game is in contrast to the psychological and cultural challenges that are currently being faced by players, staff and clubs when it comes to development and grassroots level football. Within the Women's Super League (WSL), clubs and wider organisations are struggling to understand why there is a lack of players successfully transitioning from the youth environment into the senior teams (The FA, 2017). The quickly changing landscape of professional women's football, whilst currently the focus of positive headlines and social media discussion, is not developing youth players for success at senior level.

The English Football Association (The FA) have responded to the call for more focused attention on the development pathway. The original 11 WSL professional teams all now have professional club academies, that follow a full-time structure and have education support and providers. Furthermore, for clubs newly promoted into the WSL, plans for development of their academy team to meet the WSL academy standards must be produced (if the academy does not already meet these standards). These changes come as a result from The FA completely rebranding the top tiers of the game for the 2018/2019 season and making significant changes to the senior and development team programmes. The WSL is the only professional women's league in Europe where all the teams are full-time, with the Barclays multi-million partnership being the biggest commercial investment by a brand in the history of UK women's sport (The FA Game-Plan for Growth Report, 2019). The new academy programme produced as a result of this investment provides a holistic programme, compromising of factors such as physical on and off pitch development and dual career support for players aged 16+. Despite this investment and growth however there are still issues regarding transitions, with there being a lack of home-grown players successfully making the move up into senior teams.

The two-year academy programme (initiated in the 2018/2019 season, outlined in the Game-Plan for Growth, 2019) required each WSL academy to partner with a further education institution and at least one local university. This is to support the requirement that players within the academy team must be enrolled on an education programme up to the age of 18 years (A-Level, BTEC, Apprenticeship, etc.) and then at 18+ be in higher / further education or have a second vocation, thus creating a permanent, invaluable dual career system for women's football in England (Harrison at al., 2020). The pathways leading to success at senior level are ever-changing and

are no longer the same as those taken by the players currently considered as experienced first team players. As such, the day-to-day impact that these changes have had on the players at academy level, and the influence of these changes on the junior to senior transition (JtST) has not been explored. The current thesis aims to examine the experiences of current academy players, investigating their lived experiences at club level, with regards to their cultural, and developmental journey.

Whilst the rise of women's football may be seen by sponsors, the media and spectators as an exciting advancement leading to global recognition for national and international players (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020), there is a duty to those within the sport to ensure that players are supported and managed throughout their footballing journey. In order to provide appropriate support, it is critical to understand the experiences and challenges that young players face during their development journey. Furthermore, capturing a current snapshot of the day-to-day environment of professional female football is essential, as the experiences of players who are coming to the end of their successful senior careers sit in a completely different environment to the ones faced by the current junior players. The current JtST encompasses a range of different pressures, challenges, expectations and experiences to those who experienced the transition in recent years, and as such a better and more relevant recognition of the current development pathway must be identified; and used to inform support and practice.

This research focuses on capturing the experiences of players at the junior/development level within the environment in which they develop. The research aims to develop an understanding of the cultural and psycho-social constructs of women's football and identify how these can influence player experiences of career

transitions. These topics are yet to be explored in research, and this thesis as a result will look to build upon reducing the knowledge gap with regards to the psycho-social and cultural challenges faced by young female footballers during their developing years. The research will follow players through different stages of the transition and will provide an unprecedented insight into the challenges and demands that female players face whilst navigating this transition.

The following literature review will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the above topics, with a view of providing a critical evaluation of the research and literature. The review will thus provide and scope out the theoretical and practical landscape aligned to the organisation, development pathways and transitions of women in professional football environments. It will begin by discussing the professionalisation of women's football, before identifying the impact that this has had on players transitioning to senior playing level. This will be followed by an overview of transition literature, with a specific focus on research on the JtST in a range of professional sporting environments. Finally, the review will discuss the impact that athletic identity and psycho-social factors can have on transition experiences and success. The chapter will conclude by clarifying the research aims and objectives.

1.2. The Professionalisation of the Women's Game

Given the growth of the female game, there is a need to explore the complexity of the 'new' female football world, and articulate the challenges associated with the journey to professionalism (Themen, 2016). The 2005 European Football Championship has been identified as the turning point for women's football, both

internationally and nationally (Williams, 2003). This was the first competition that obtained a level of buy-in from spectators that began to show similarities to the unparalleled attention that the men's international competitions get. It is from here that Williams suggested that the women's game needs to take the time to develop its own cultural, situational and organisational levels, enabling it to break away from simply mirroring the men's game. Bell (2012) supported this, identifying that while media attention and support from male counterparts appeared to be 'levelling the playing field', the journey of a female player and the pathway to senior playing level was still very much distinct and unequal. The women's game still required a period of cultivation to stand in its own right, and not in the shadow of the male game. Much of the research carried out in the men's professional game has been used to inform practice within the women's game, which has resulted in methods and systems, inappropriately in some cases, replicating those seen in male set-ups (Dunn, 2016).

With the professionalisation of women's football still in its incipient stages, there is the feeling amongst players and staff that the hegemonic masculinity, a fundamental cultural aspect in men's football (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), is still a driving force in the experience of day-to-day life for professional women football players (Woodward, 2017). Research by Scraton and colleagues (2018) identified that women's football remains dependent on the male sporting world for its survival, and that to 'make it in the female game' players are required to challenge the gendered sporting stereotypes that many individuals still hold, that suggest that 'only boys can play football'. The European female footballers who participated in Scraton's research reinforced the organisation of youth sport as a crucial factor in influencing girls and young women's opportunities to play football and go on to succeed at senior level. It is not only players however who are subjected to these

gendered stereotypes. Forbes and colleagues (2015) explored experiences of female football officials. The women interviewed disclosed that they felt that they had to continuously negotiate their identities as females and football officials in a space where men and masculinity are prevalent. Each participant reported having to overcome hostile attitudes that often greeted their presence on the pitch, with any mistake made being attributed to their gender. These examples of research suggest that while the female game is positively developing, players, officials and other individuals working in the game are still continuously compared to their male counterparts, regardless of their own performances.

In addition to challenging stereotypes, female footballers face challenges and pressures that, in general, male footballers do not have to contend with. Players are constrained by the cultural and social norms of women's professional football such as; the negative image / perception of women's football not being the same standard as men's football (Wisniewski, 2016), having to find financial support through a second / dual career (Harrison et al., 2020), and more limited access to support staff both on and off the pitch (Bell, 2012). Furthermore, the demands placed on female footballers pursuing a professional playing career include the pressure to live up to cultural expectations such as; suppressing feelings of weakness, acting in ways that they think their teammates will approve of, and creating an identity salient with that of these expectations (Magil et al., 2017). Pielichaty (2019a) identified that players across women's football are acutely aware of the perceived inferior position that their 'version' of the game occupies within the sporting hierarchy. Furthermore, Pielichaty suggested that attempts to strengthen the sport, for example, the introduction of a summer league system, artificial pitches and some physical aspects of the game (such as recruitment processes and replicating a more aggressive style of play) have diluted

it and taken away its identity in a bid to mould it around the men's game. For years, as the female game has taken time to evolve and develop, it has been assumed that in order for it to be the best it must follow the same path as the men's game. Despite this assumption, the footballing careers of the female players continue to stand apart from those of their male counterparts, a difference which has both benefits and drawbacks.

As building a career in professional women's football in England has become closer to a reality than a dream, due to the professionalisation of the WSL and semi-professionalisation of the Championship League, women and girls have had to consciously consider how football may work alongside their vocational, educational and family lives (Pielichaty, 2019b). Despite the growth in the game, the limited financial reward available to players (even as professionals) requires them to consider how the demands of a second career, or education can exist alongside the demands of a playing career (Dunn & Welford, 2014; Sleeman & Ronkainen, 2020). Specifically, young sporting women must invest in other identities, alongside their athletic identities, whereas males are often encouraged to solely chase their sporting dreams (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2020; Ryba et al., 2015). Furthermore, female athletes may also need to consider (and plan for) pregnancy and motherhood, being aware of the implications that this may have on their career as footballers (Sleeman & Ronkainen, 2020). Similarly, the same considerations must be made for those working in women's football. Ronkainen and colleagues (2019) evidenced aspects of psychological distress that are often faced by those trying to carve a career in women's football at the expense of other careers. Coaches and support staff often work to juggle multiple vocations, and identities, alongside their involvement within women's football, with many being encouraged to have a back-up plan (such as an alternative career or secondary income) in the same way that the players are.

The recent progress in women's football has resulted in more pressure being put on academy and development teams to grow and keep up with the demands of performance and engagement (Bell, 2019). Despite this commercial and organisational growth, knowledge and research within these areas is still dominated by examples solely within men's football. Even with The FA's professionalisation process, the WSL is still seen as the Premier League's 'little sister' (Woodhouse et al., 2019), with female teams still being bound to their male counterparts for financial and resource support. As such many decisions made by staff and practitioners working in football have taken inspiration from and been based upon strategies and techniques that have been successful in the men's game. Research focused upon the female player journey, and the factors affecting this journey is needed, to allow both researchers and practitioners to be better informed on the changing landscape of professional women's football. Furthermore, female specific research will allow future female players to be better prepared for, and supported through, the transition to senior playing level. Development pathways can be curated from research informed specifically by the organisational and cultural factors present in the professional women's football environment, rather than being informed by research conducted in the men's game.

1.3. Transitions in Professional Sport

The process of transitions, understanding how they occur and how different people experience them, has been at the forefront of social and counselling psychology for decades. Schlossberg (1981) explored how transitions occur throughout one's life, and continually bring a range of different challenges and experiences for each who face them. Alongside this, Schlossberg also identified how transitions often bring

sensations of crisis, adaptation, coping and stress to those experiencing them. Historically, transition research in sport was focused on athlete retirement, and as such early theoretical frameworks were derived from thanatology (stages of dying), and social gerontology (the study of the aging process) (Rosenberg, 1984; Wylleman et al., 1999). These theoretical positions were initially applied to aspects of practice within sport psychology, however, they have evolved and been refined to align more closely to the reality of the athlete experience. Furthermore, (sport) psychologists recognise that transitions could have either positive or negative outcomes, depending on the athlete and their coping processes. Stambulova (2009; 2003) suggested that the experience of the transition is dependent on the coping resources the individual uses, and whether these allow the athlete to cope effectively with transitional demands. These resources can comprise of both internal (e.g., personal characteristics) and external (e.g., social support, financial support) factors, that can positively or negatively affect the individual. A successful transition occurs when an athlete copes effectively with the next phase of their athletic development, maintaining a balance between transition demands and their personal resources and strategies. A crisis transition occurs when the athlete is not coping effectively, due to limited resources or facing too many barriers at one time (Stambulova, 2010).

Alongside the growing interest in understanding how athletes experience and cope with transitions across their athletic careers, researchers have attempted to categorise transitional phases to allow practitioners and athletes to better understand their development pathway and the subsequent experiences and challenges that they may encounter. Transitions are widely recognised as being normative and non-normative (Stambulova, 2009). Normative transitions are those that are expected and anticipated, such as transition from junior to senior level, or from school to

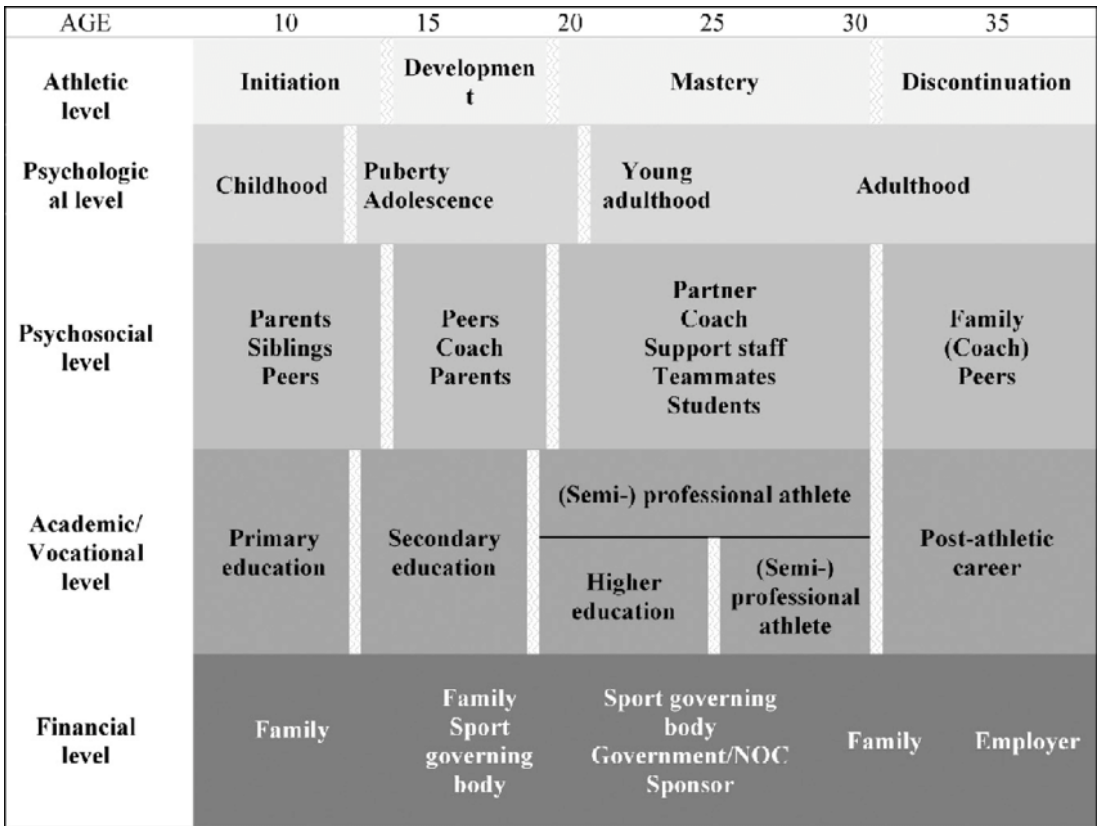
college/university, whereas non-normative transitions are those that are unpredictable and unplanned. Recently, Schinke and colleagues (2015) have added to these two categories, introducing quasi-normative transitions (QNT). This transition is derived from development psychology, with QNT being predictable only for a certain group of people (Hendry & Kloep, 2002). Schinke suggests that within sport QNT are those that could be seen as predictable for a specific population or category of athletes. Using boxers as an example, the research follows the QNT that are seen on a boxer's transition to the Olympic games, moving from entering the Olympic training programme, to entering major tournaments, to qualification focused prep, to Olympic podium and finally to post Olympic recovery. In reviewing the growth and advancements in athlete transition and development literature, Stambulova and colleagues (2020) identify that it is no longer enough to simply identify normative and non-normative transitions for athletes, rather the better the understanding of possible outcomes and experiences, the better prepared athletes and coaches can be to support and navigate transitions. Knowledge of each transition must be contextually and culturally informed by the specific sporting environment to give the athlete the best chance of avoiding a crisis transition. Consequently, subsequently reinforcing the requirement to do more research in the women's game, to allow contextual and culturally informed research to support female players.

Alongside categorising transitions, researchers and practitioners have used transition models to inform knowledge of which transitions may happen when, and how these transitions may influence an athlete's development journey. Talent development literature offered initial frameworks to follow athletes from childhood through to late adolescence. Both Bloom (Talent Development Model, 1985) and Côté (Developmental Model of Sports Participation, 1999) created development models to

provide an insight into athlete development, illustrating how talent and sports participation develops as individuals/athletes mature. Building upon these models, Wylleman and colleagues (2004) investigated a holistic, lifespan perspective of transitions, recognising that athletes face a range of different transitions throughout many aspects of their life, not just within their sporting career. This led to the creation of the Holistic Athletic Career Model (HACM, Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), which has since become one of the most recognised transition models for sport practitioners and researchers.

Figure 1.

The Holistic Athletic Careers Model.



Note: Original model taken from Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004.

The HACM underlines the interactive nature of the transitions in athletic domains of life alongside those in non-athletic domains. The model clearly identifies

a selection of transitions that an athlete may encounter from the beginning of their athletic career, through to retirement and beyond, hence why it has become so popular with practitioners and researchers alike. Moreover, through its holistic approach, the HACM also considers that an athlete may be preparing for, or experiencing, more than one transition at one time. It is likely that athletes may simultaneously encounter transitions in their athletic, vocational and educational journeys. As a result, in addition to coping with transitional demands, athletes are likely to have to cope with numerous challenges to their identity, and social and cultural norms (Wylleman et al., 2013, Ch.3.). As transition knowledge has progressed, researchers have identified that whilst the HACM gives a holistic overview of the transitions that athletes face, it fails to present in-depth, contextually rich insights of such transitions (Richardson et al., 2012). Moreover, the desire for transition literature to become culturally specific has led to research (and research models), focusing on sport specific development frameworks and pathways, allowing practitioners and researchers to understand transitions within distinct sporting cultures.

Within professional football, Relvas and colleagues (2010) ascertained that there are large physical and cultural gaps between developmental youth environments and professional environments in football clubs. The difference between these environments makes it difficult for clubs to create a succinct, coherent and informed pathway to develop players at youth level and move them through to professional level. This led to the production of the Sociocultural Model of Elite Player Development (Richardson et al., 2013). The model introduces the 'Developing Mastery Phase', as a critical one-two year phase of development, where a young male professional football player transitions out of the youth academy and continues their professional development (usually in an U23s team), before making the transition into

the first team. This period has been identified by Richardson and colleagues (2013) as the most critical period of development for a (male) player, often encompassing stretches of loneliness and isolation as they attempt to survive in this environment and prove their readiness for the first team.

Figure 2.

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

Note: Original model taken from Richardson et al., 2013.

The Sociocultural Model of Elite Player Development not only alludes to the changes in psychological and psycho-social levels that a player may face during the JtST, but also considers two new levels: the 'environment and cultural level' and 'nature of support'. Thus, allowing practitioners and researchers to contextually understand the JtST in professional male football. The model considers the specific development pathway that male footballers follow and encompasses the transition to senior football across the different levels. It is possible to clearly identify the challenges and changes that an athlete encounters from the start of the transition at academy level through to a mastery level aligned to the first team / professional level. Whilst this model has advanced understanding of the JtST in professional male

football, it cannot be assumed to also represent the JtST in the female game. While the Developing Mastery phase has been outlined to fit specifically with the U23's age group of the male development pathway, this period of development is absent in the women's development pathway and is yet to be explored within research. The organisational structure in women's football requires female players to make the jump from the development level at the U21's straight to the mastery level at the first team. The opportunity that male players have to engage and develop with experiences that are 'closer' to the harsh, results driven first team environment that they will be propelled into (Nesti, 2010), is not available to female players. As such, the cultural physical and technical gaps between the development and mastery stages is more significant (larger) within the women's football environment. Furthermore, not having this stage prevents opportunities for female players to experience a period of developing mastery that better mirrors that of the first team environment and is seen to form a vital period of development for young male footballers.

1.4. Junior to Senior Transition Experiences

The JtST is named so as it typically occurs when athletes transition from junior competitions (traditionally capped at ages 18-21 years) to senior competitions which are open to all ages. The transition usually takes place between the ages for 18-24 years but can happen earlier in early specialisation sports, such as gymnastics, where the transition is made earlier in line with athletes peaking in their teenage years (Bennie & O'Connor, 2006; Law et al., 2007;). The JtST is acknowledged as being one of the most difficult within-career transitions, due to it often spanning many years, with athletes having to navigate continual periods of uncertainty, loneliness and

isolation (Morris et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2009). Furthermore, it can often involve the athlete's first experiences of cultural and geographical relocation, in some instances moving countries and continents, requiring the athlete to overcome multiple challenges and adjustments at one time (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). Research findings share the general conclusion that the JtST is perceived by athletes, coaches and stakeholders to be a significant increase in standards, practice and performance expectations for players, compared to the expectations at junior level. Subsequently, the ability to successfully cope with the transition is associated with the athlete's personal maturation, identity development and commitment to overcoming challenges (Morris et al, 2016; Stambulova, 2010, 2017).

Research specifically examining athletes' experiences of the journey to senior level has provided valuable contextual and culturally specific knowledge. A meta-review by Drew and colleagues (2019) of qualitative research on JtST provides guidance on how to better prepare and support transitioning athletes. The review identified that the factors that impact upon athlete transition experiences and success fall into four categories; individual factors (e.g., psychological factors, personal development and perceptions of the transition), external factors (e.g., support available, performance development factors, physical demands and expectations and sources of stress), cultural factors (e.g., organisational culture and values compared to youth culture and values) and intervention strategies (e.g., coping strategies, mentoring and modelling and educational programmes). Drew and colleagues recommended that in order for JtST research to progress, the methods used to collect data need to continue to expand. Such methods should consider how to capture athlete transition experiences in more depth and over time as they happen, rather than as

reflective accounts in interviews after the transition period has ended. Similarly, Røynesdal (2015) and Borrás and colleagues (2009) have identified the need for the transition process to be captured in its entirety, rather than through a snapshot view. This is not just a claim to examine transitions more fully, but a call to adopt more in-depth, qualitative enquiry to better understand lived experiences of the athletes. Talented juniors and those who support and develop them, (e.g., coaches, parents, friends), develop expectations about smooth adjustments to senior playing level, but typically this is not the case, with even successful transition pathways rarely being seen as a linear journey (Debois et al., 2015; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Pummell et al., 2008). As such, more varied, in-depth, longitudinal approaches would allow for changes that athletes, staff and stakeholders might experience and manage throughout the transition to be identified.

In recent years narrative research has been increasingly used in transition literature, providing readers with research that utilises more in-depth methodologies and case study approaches (Demetriou et al., 2020). Subsequently this has begun to bring to light more holistic, lifespan approaches, which emphasise the importance of social, educational and personal domains alongside the context of an athletic career. Debois and colleagues (2012) used a lifespan perspective to document the experiences of an elite female fencer, while Franck and Stambulova (2019) created transition narratives for two Swedish team sport athletes. Both research papers highlight the importance of anticipating and understanding normative and non-normative athlete experiences as early as possible. Understanding and discussing these with the athletes who were going on to face the JtST allowed them to be more aware of initial experiences that they may face, role expectation in the senior environment, and acceptable and unacceptable on and off field behaviours. Furthermore, the importance

of carrying out more research that interlinks with the non-sport and non-athletic transitions which could/will affect the athlete's sport career was discussed. This has also been reinforced in rugby league transition literature (Jones et al., 2014), which recognised that managing transitions both in and out of the sporting environment was necessary for athletes to succeed. Players and staff reiterated the importance of understanding of the range of challenges that athletes face, and how establishing and maintaining a club culture that facilitates this is instrumental in athletes having a more positive JtST experience.

Whilst qualitative research methods have dominated the JtST literature, longitudinal, mixed-methods designs have been utilised more recently to investigate athlete adjustment and preparation patterns in specific sporting environments. The use of which allows for more contextually informed research (Cook et al., 2014; Nesti, 2011). This occurs through longitudinal methodologies being not only longer in term, but typically meaning the research is more immersed and connected with both the research setting, allowing better understandings of the day-to-day existence of participants (Relvas et al., 2010, Swainston et al., 2020). Franck and colleagues (2018) provided further support for such research being conducted. The research team examined adjustment patterns in Swedish club athletes across a two-and-a-half-year period, and measured transition variables, personality characteristics and factors recognised to affect the JtST (such as coping strategies, support, pressure, personal resources and the need for additional support in order to help the athlete cope with the transition). In addition, Franck ascertains that whilst sporting experiences have the most influence over how an athlete manages the JtST, attention and recognition should still be given to the other spheres of the athlete's life, alongside how these prepare individuals to manage and cope with transitional demands. The longitudinal

methodology used within this research allows a better insight not only into the transition process as a whole, but also into the within transition experiences and challenges that may be missed when only looking reflectively at the transition as a whole.

Pummell and Lavallee (2019) have also utilised similar methodology to better understand the impact that a longitudinal intervention had on developing UK tennis players readiness for the JtST. Senior tennis players were recorded on video discussing demands and coping strategies for the JtST, and these were used to give junior athletes an insight into the transition. Social-validation data indicated that the participants placed value on the intervention as a means to prepare for and (better) cope with the transition, showing increases in knowledge, coping, confidence and transition related skills. Data analysis also demonstrated that participants felt better prepared for the transition as a result of the upcoming intervention. Andronikos and colleagues (2021), built on Pummel and Lavallee's research, and used quantitative measures to identify factors contributing to the quality of the JtST in Greek athletes. Personal resources, environmental support and knowledge of transitional demands were the strongest predictors of successful adjustment to senior level in sport. Andronikos similarly concludes that in order to facilitate the transition process, longitudinal attention needs to be given to the development of personal resources prior to the start of the transition process.

Longitudinal research is rare in the female football environment, likely due to it's professionalisation still being recent. McGreary and colleagues (2022) have begun to explore transition experience through use of a longitudinal case study. Conclusions followed those of the aforementioned research, suggesting that a female football

player who is better informed and aware of their next phase of development is better equipped to manage the transition, and therefore more likely to travel through more smoothly. Further research is required to build upon McGreary's findings and explore longitudinally how interventions may be used to contribute to successful player experiences of the JtST.

1.4.1. Preparing Athletes for the Junior to Senior Transition

The JtST is recognised as a challenging period to navigate by players, coaches and sport psychology practitioners (SPP, Stambulova, 2009). The move to senior playing level is impacted not only by performance related factors, such as readiness for elite competitions and demonstrating competence, but also factors away from performance such as building relationships and continuing personal development (Bruner et al., 2008). Young male footballers often report feelings of anxiety and isolation in the time before their JtST as they have devoted their whole athletic career, and most of their lives, to trying to create a successful career in football (Franck & Stambulova, 2018; Kingston et al., 2018). This single-minded devotion to sport can lead to feelings of loneliness as the player tries to manage the demands of the transition alongside their own personal emotional response to the experience. Cook et al., (2014) reported the need to create an environment at academy level that facilitates player learning and encourages independence, but also begins to prepare players for the significant challenges and pressures that must be overcome in order to survive in the senior environment.

Researchers and practitioners working in professional football recognise the importance of having players who can cope with the turbulence of the move to first team football, and the feelings of isolation, angst and challenges to identity that come

with this transition (Dowling et al., 2018). As such, research has turned to focus on how football coaches, clubs and practitioners can work to develop athletes at academy level who can successfully cope with this transition (Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2014). Football practitioners recognise that young players are faced with a range of challenges from within the football clubs themselves during the JtST period including but not limited to; isolation, hierarchy, limited playing opportunities and adjusting to the performance environment. Mitchell and colleagues (2020) suggest that practitioners who work with players daily, who are constantly aligned to and aware of the organisational structures, working practices and cultures are those best placed to recruit, select and develop players with the most potential to successfully transition from youth to senior playing level. Furthermore, these individuals are then able to make first-hand recommendations of improvements or changes that could increase success during this transition period. This research reinforces the opportunity that comes with practitioner-researcher (P-R) roles, with those being embedded in these cultures and environments able to learn about and develop environments, and then disseminating this knowledge in research to extend beyond the environment they work within.

In addition to understanding changes, demands and expectations of the senior environment, Røynesdal and colleagues (2018) identified that players are required to juggle and negotiate the act of social integration alongside adherence to the performance-related standards expected by first-team stakeholders and players. Identifying in future research what first team stakeholders want, and then moving consciously towards these factors will facilitate acceptance and opportunity in first team environments. Additionally, research into stakeholders' perceptions of the JtST suggests that to help further with the transition, organisations could gradually

introduce players to a senior environment, providing them with the opportunity to integrate with the players at both a performance and social level (Morris et al., 2016). This would allow players to become familiar with the senior environment, learning about its nuances alongside the well-recognised, expected changes, allowing players to better understanding the environment they are hopeful to belong to.

Up until recently, research informed practices for the JtST in the female game were drawn solely from research based upon male environments (such as those mentioned in the above paragraphs). This has led to many practices and support processes echoing those existing in the male game. Despite the economic and commercialisation growth reported in women's football (Bell, 2019; Culvin, 2021), transition research conducted solely in the women's environment is still largely absent. McGreary and colleagues (2021, 2022) have begun to identify retrospective perspectives of the JtST transitions using interviews and a case study approach, but these still do not provide the level of detail needed to progress understanding of the transition across the professional game. McGreary continues to reinforce the need for further research, to understand more current experiences of female players and to better develop understanding of the organisational and psycho-social factors influencing the JtST. Developing this understanding is vital to improve player development, preparation and support ahead (and during) the JtST, and as such is a primary focus of the current thesis with the hope of extending the initial findings made by McGreary.

1.5. Introduction to Identity and its Influence on Transitions

Identity, and how it evolves, develops and changes, has drawn much interest throughout social, development and cognitive psychology. The notion of identity, and

understanding the self, is a constantly evolving subject that has been central to social science and psychology research for many years (Marcia, 1980). Throughout decades of research many definitions of identity have been published, with each one dependent on the research origins from which they are created. Marcia provides one of the most widely accepted understandings of identity, describing it as "*an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organisation of drives, abilities, beliefs and individual history" (p. 190,* 1980). Furthermore, inferring that a more developed identity (and understanding of self), will enable an individual to be more aware of their uniqueness, their similarity to others, their strengths and their weaknesses and how these characteristics impact one's journey through the world. In contrast, the less developed one's identity is, the more confused an individual will be about their distinctiveness from others, relying on evaluation and validation from external sources.

With regards to this thesis, it is important to consider how identity develops, and is challenged and supported during adolescence and young adulthood. This is due to the focus on youth athletes and their journey to senior playing level. As such, we continue to refer to Marcia (1980) and the suggestion that "*identity structure is dynamic, with elements continually being added and discarded" (p. 110*). During late adolescence physical development, cognitive skills and social expectations coincide to enable a young individual to construct their own journey to adulthood. It is thought that this formation of identity takes longer in females, with development revolving around relating to others and using commitment and crisis to initially form identity (Hodgson, 1977). Again, this knowledge is particularly pertinent with regards to this research as the focus is solely on young female athletes. Understanding how the participant population forms their identity is useful when considering how the JtST,

and the challenges and changes that come alongside experiencing it, can influence the formation and development of the young athlete's identity.

Identity is thought to be a fluid and ongoing process, that can be influenced by social and environmental settings. Adams and Marshall (1996) suggest that identity can be altered through identification and imitation processes, when self-awareness, focus and consciousness are heightened, or when incongruity exists between the real, current self and the ideal self (the self that could be). As societies have developed and evolved however, there has been discussion around whether identity is assigned or selected. Research originally suggested that one's identity was assigned based upon a person's meaning and values (Baumeister, 1997). As a result, changes to identity would be made over time as goals, values and beliefs evolve and are regarded as more or less important, giving more purpose and meaning to life (Waterman, 1988). Further research (Howard, 2000, p.367) suggested that identities are embedded within social groups and networks that individuals place themselves in. Norms and expectations of these groups dictate which aspects of identity are selected and given prominence.

At this juncture, it feels important to recognise the identity changes that (may) occur during adolescence and young adulthood and consider how these may impact an individual's preparation for and experience of the transition. Erikson (1968) maintains throughout his research that one's identity is constantly changing and evolving as a result of new information required from daily events, interactions and responses. As such, Erikson created the Psychosocial Theory of Development, which proposes a lifelong perspective of crises and resolutions that an individual might face, and explores positive and negative responses to these crises. Nesti and Littlewood (2011) suggested that within sport, these stages could help to better recognise and

understand transitions in identity and the affect that these can have on young footballers. Furthermore, the stages and different crises and resolution periods explored in the model could also be used alongside transition models (Richardson et al., 2013; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2019, 2004) to better understand athlete transition experiences. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1968) is briefly outlined below:

Figure 3

Table 1: Psychosocial Theory of Development Model

Age	Basic Conflict/Crisis	Resolution	Outcome
Infancy (Birth - 18 months	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	This stage relates to an infant's experience of feeding and comfort, children develop a sense of trust and safety when caregivers provide reliable care and affection. Without this, or if this is unreliable and dis-jointed, the infant will experience mistrust.
Early Childhood (2 - 3 years)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Will	At this stage children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills (such as toilet training) and a sense of independence (such as dressing themselves). Being successful in developing these skills leads to a sense of independence and autonomy, whereas failure creates doubt and may lead to feelings of failure.
Preschool (3 - 5 years)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	Upon reaching this stage, children need to feel as though they have control and power over their environments. This is experienced through having more independence, allowing children to play and explore. Success here leads to feeling as though they have a sense of purpose, too much power however can result in disapproval, leading to a sense of guilt.
School Age (6 - 11 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	Confidence	Here children are challenged with needing to cope with new social and academic demands, experienced through attending school and other activities. Success leads to competence, whilst failure to inferiority.

Adolescence (12 – 18 years)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity	At this stage there is a need to begin developing a sense of self, and creating personal identity. Social relationships are an important aspect of this. Those who are seen to be successful will be able to stay true to themselves during their development, whereas role confusion and a weaker sense of self may arise if an individual struggles.
Young Adulthood (19 - 40 years)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success here leads to strong relationships, whilst failure to form such relationships may result in isolation and loneliness.
Middle Adulthood (40 – 64 years)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	During this stage, adults feel the need to create and nurture things that will outlast them. This is often done through parenthood and/or work, where one can create and sustain positive change that also benefits other individuals. Usefulness and accomplishment are a result here if successful, whereas feelings of failure are felt if meaningful involvement in the world isn't reached.
Maturity (65 – death)	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	Older adults spend time reflecting on their life, and want to look back with a sense of fulfilment. Success here leads to feelings of wisdom and recognition of leading a full life, whereas uncertainty about whether they have succeeded can lead to feelings of regret and despair.

Erikson's model gives a succinct overview of changes that occur to one's identity as they move from birth through childhood and adolescence to adulthood. As social psychology has developed and progressed, the suitability of Erikson's theory to current social conditions has been questioned, with concerns over whether the eight proposed stages still align with the continuous and rapid social changes seen in modern society (Côté & Levine, 2002, 1988; Schachter, 2005). Erikson's model tends to concentrate on the individual, and largely on personal development and integration,

rather than considering the postmodern individual, which Schachter (2005) refers to as typically being embedded in multiple contexts with multiple affiliations to different, and often contradicting, social groups.

Whilst important to acknowledge and consider different views of this model, with regards to the current research and its focus on transitions within sport, the stages of this model have proven beneficial in understanding identity in athletes. This is due to its focus on understanding the individual and their stages of personal development. An example of this, is the research where it was suggested that the adolescence and young adult stages of Erikson's model can provide further insight into the experiences of young male footballers as they manage the transition to senior playing level. Developing a strong and clear sense of self is recognised by practitioners and researchers as crucial for male footballers to survive in the challenging, and lonely, academy environment (Relvas et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). As such, understanding the identity development process and how this alters depending on an individual's maturation and social, cognitive and physical development is vital.

1.5.1. Athletic Identity

In addition to understanding one's overall sense of self, for those who can be described as, or are recognised to be, 'an athlete', there is the need to acknowledge athletic identity. Athletic identity is universally known as the *"degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role"* (Brewer et al., 1993, *p.16*), and can impact upon an athlete's development and performance throughout their sporting journey. Brewer and colleagues (1993) reported some of the first comprehensive efforts to evidence and conceptualise athletic identity. As such their definition and understandings of the concept are widely accepted across sports and practitioners.

Due to its social and cognitive impact on athletes, their behaviours and their performance, since the 1990's, athletic identity has become a well-researched construct across different sports and sporting organisations (Edison et al., 2021; Giannone et al., 2017; Cabrita et al., 2014). Obtaining and maintaining a strong athletic identity has been identified as having both facilitative and debilitative influences on an athlete. The longer and more involved one is with a sport the more committed they become to it, resulting in a more prevalent athletic identity. This has typically been found to be positively linked to better athletic performances (Horton & Mack, 2000). In addition, those athletes with a stronger athletic identity are more likely to neglect other parts of their lives (and therefore other parts of their identity) to fulfil their athletic role. Conversely, a strong athletic identity can impede the development of a more rounded, multi-dimensional view of the self. This is especially pertinent for youth athletes, as developmental psychology suggests that late childhood to early adulthood is a critical period for identity development (Houle et al., 2010). As such, the intense focus on developing an athletic career during earlier stages of identity formation can result in narrower identities and limiting future career developments to sport contexts (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Griffith & Johnson, 2002). In summary, it appears to be widely recognised that maintaining a strong athletic identity can produce problems when adjusting to common sport-related transitions, such as dealing with injury, de-selection and life after sport (Good et al., 1993; Lavallee et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014).

With regard to the relationship between athletic identity and the JtST, athletic identity is seen to be positively associated with athletic performance and a successful transition from junior to senior competition levels (Ahmadabadi et al., 2014; Franck et al., 2020). Athletes with a higher athletic identity are often viewed as being those

who prioritise their training and sport commitments, investing substantial efforts in their athletic development (Stambulova et al., 2015; Stambulova, 2009). As such, athletic identity is seen as a desirable quality amongst athletes by sporting organisations and is often thought to be an indicator of whether an athlete is able to succeed at the highest level. Longitudinal research designs have allowed researchers to follow more closely the impact that athletic identity (and its development) can have on an athlete's experience of the JtST. Franck and colleagues (2018) investigated adjustment patterns in Swedish athletes as they transitioned from junior to senior competition levels. Athletic identity was viewed to be an essential internal resource to help athletes cope with the changes between junior and senior environments. Participants who were deemed to have a greater athletic identity were highly motivated to succeed in the senior environment and were viewed to be better able to cope with the change in demands and expectations at senior level. The results also indicated that key factors to a sustainable adjustment pattern were strong internal resources and adjustment covering several spheres of sport and life.

Further to this, the development of both holistic and athletic identities have been identified in talent development research as crucial elements of successful academies (not only within football, but across sports such as sailing, kayaking and swimming) (Henriksen et al., 2010; 2011; Ryom et al., 2020). These researchers have identified that across junior environments the encouragement from coaches, support staff and parents for athletes to develop an understanding of both their (more holistic) identity and athletic identities have served as a function that assists in developing junior athletes for success at senior level. Developing a more holistic understanding of identity has been thought to allow academy male footballers to better respond to periods of adversity, challenging transitions or decisions and to develop better psycho-

social skills that can help survive in a professional academy (Larsen et al., 2020). Further to this, the nurturing of an athletic identity (as part of a well-rounded identity) can then provide athletes with the motivation and desire to succeed specifically when competing with other, potentially more senior players, for new contracts, opportunities and performances (Mathorner et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2021). Taking this into consideration, it is not only the presence of athletic identity, but the nurturing and development of both holistic and athletic identities that can underpin a junior athlete's successful development to increase their chances of survival (and success) at senior level. Research in the female game is yet to explore these areas in depth, with no research identifying the influence of talent development and identity in women's football. An understanding of the benefits of this development and understanding would further progress both researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the role of (holistic) identity and athletic identity in the JtST within women's football.

1.6. Psycho-Social Considerations of Talent Development

In the world of competitive sport, athletes, coaches and researchers are continually striving to develop their knowledge and understanding of how to develop and cultivate their skills in order to give an athlete the edge over their competitors (Brown and Fletcher, 2017). Although there has been much research alluding to the impact and importance of psycho-social factors (Cook et al., 2021; Iso-Ahola, 1995; Podlog & Eklund, 2007; Ruiz-Tendero & Martín, 2017), a specific definition of these psycho-social has remained allusive. Research in health has identified that the term 'psychosocial' has been used increasingly without giving a. precise definition, and therefore the usefulness of the term is in danger of being degraded (Macleod & Smith,

2003; Martikainen et al., 2002). As such when considering psycho-social factors and their influence, it is vital that researchers identify what they consider psycho-social to mean. Gledhill and colleagues (2017, p3), in their systematic review, deemed that psycho-social considerations related to 'the linking of individual psychological characteristics with social influences and to the ways in which these may shape or guide behaviours.' Further to this Gledhill et al. (2017) suggested that social influences (such as teammates, peers and parents) interact with individual psychological characteristics to shape or guide behaviours (such as lifestyle choices) which may go on to effect talent development (and ultimately a successful playing career) in football.

For a number of years researchers have been trying to identify the different factors that can influence performance, and athlete successes. Researchers and practitioners alike are keen to understand behaviours and psycho-social reactions which may be used as predictors of success, but may also be able to be developed in younger athletes to increase chances of success at senior level. Drew and colleagues (2019) identified psychological factors in their meta-analysis of transition research which facilitate athlete success when moving from junior to senior environments. A range of psychological traits were identified but of note were; high- adaptability, determination and commitment to work hard, team-orientated, good coachability and being team-orientated (both with regards to team-mates and with coaching and support staff).

As interest into psycho-social factors and their impact on athlete development has increased, research has become increasingly sport and environment specific. Research within professional senior and academy level football has steadily increased, informing both academy and practitioner approaches to player development (Larsen et al., 2020; Ryom et al., 2021). Holt and Dunn (2004) reported discipline,

commitment, resilience and social support to be the four major competencies central to success in elite youth (men's) football. Furthermore, within male professional football, task-oriented motivation levels (Zuber et al., 2015), an ability to cope with pressure and realistically evaluate performance (Saward et al., 2019) and high perfectionistic strivings (Larkin et al., 2016) have all been noted to have a positive impact on player success. In order to support the holistic development of male players, there has been a call for academy environments to spend less time on deliberate practice and play, and more on supporting psychological skills that can support players through the turbulence of the JtST (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012; Morley et al., 2014). In response, researchers have started to examine psycho-social factors that can support both team and individual development. Larsen and colleagues (2014) have reinforced the need for the development of psycho-social skills in talent development environments (such as communication and individual and team reflection and regulation), at a whole club level to allow for success in the within-career transition to professional football playing level.

Whilst research into psycho-social factors within male football has typically been more dominant, this is not to say that there is none within the female game. Balazs (1975) examined personal and psychological predictors of leadership behaviour in female soccer athletes, placing importance on early goal-setting and the ability to follow through on these goals no matter what, a deep desire to excel and a strong concept of self. Furthermore, leadership behaviours have also been perceived to be an important component of athletic success (Glenn & Horn 1993), with psycho-social factors and personal characteristics able to identify leadership behaviour, which links to athletic success in female soccer athletes. More recently, researchers have focused on psycho-social factors in relation to athlete development, and the differences

between professional and amateur players. Amateur players have been found to place higher value on stress control and to place more importance on performance evaluations and stress control, compared to professional players who place higher value on motivation, team cohesion and mental ability to perform (Ruiz-Esteban et al., 2020). This provides further insight into the changes that a player experiences during the JtST, as their priorities and values may begin to shift to accommodate the challenges and expectations of the senior environment. Such insights provide a foundation for beginning to understand how female athletes can be better prepared for the JtST whilst in the academy environment, and provides a rationale for further exploring experiences of female footballers, to examine whether these changes follow the same patterns as their male counterparts.

Building on calls for more female specific talent development research (as mentioned above), Gledhill and Harwood (2019) investigated female players' perceptions of talent development. The research concluded that female footballers are aware of the importance that psycho-social factors have on their success (and maintenance of it), but that clubs still had a lot of work to do to support the development of these characteristics within both their senior and academy environments. To date, this is the only research investigating player perceptions of the psycho-social considerations of success, and their current development, with professional women's football. Furthermore, this research is the first to make suggestions on how to move forward with the development of psycho-social factors specific to the professional women's football culture and environment. Whilst a promising development in female football research, many coaches and practitioners are still relying upon more widely published and accessible research based on male football to inform their current knowledge and practices. An increase in female

specific research would not only add to the understanding of the psycho-social factors within professional women's football, but would allow identification of how these factors are developed within the academy environment, thus informing practice, approaches and development pathways for female footballers.

1.7. Summary of Literature Review

Within this literature review I have introduced the professionalisation process that women's football has undergone in recent years, and how this is currently influencing the academy structures and development pathways. Secondly, an outline of how transition literature has evolved and developed has been provided. To begin, a broad overview of the transitions athletes may face throughout their career has been given, before narrowing down to review sport specific research and transition models. Following this, the review focused upon the JtST transition, underlining both athlete, coach and practitioner experiences of the transition, with specific focus given to literature in professional football environments. Finally, research focused upon identity and psycho-social factors were reviewed, with a focus upon how these elements can influence an athlete's preparedness and experience of the JtST.

The literature review acknowledges the contributions that existing research has made to understanding experiences of the JtST, alongside providing crucial insights into how to better prepare athletes for and support them through the transition process. Critical reflection of this research however emphasises the limited knowledge base when it comes to professional women's football. In light of these gaps in the literature, there is a need for research which considers the uniqueness of the current footballing landscape, with specific regards to the pseudo-professional academy environment, is

needed. For the purpose of this research, the term pseudo-professional is used in relation to the female academy environment, and is used to indicate the contrast between the assumption of a professional academy environment and the actual environment. Scope for future research is outlined and discussed with regards to the current thesis. As with most athlete transition research, there is the requirement to better understand the athlete's day to day existence during transitional periods. Within the female football environment, there is a need for the player voice to be given more representation within research. Understanding how the players themselves experience cultural and organisational phenomena, and the impact that these have on transition experiences and success, is a crucial for the progression of transition research in women's football.

1.8. Clarifying Research Aims and Objectives

The following research aims to develop an understanding of the cultural and psycho-social constructs of women's football and identify how these can influence player experiences of career transitions. This research will capture the complexity of women's professional football and explore how these complexities specifically affect and influence the JtST. Ivarsson et al. (2015) have identified that in addition to there being very little research directly on the cultural factors within women's football, very few studies have examined the direct impact of these factors on career transitions. Expanding the knowledge of career transitions and developmental factors within women's football will lead to direct and future implications for football players, coaches and practitioners. Alongside this as a deeper understanding of the psycho-social and cultural elements that female footballers encounter will be developed.

The research will be longitudinally conducted within a WSL academy, with the main researcher working within the club in a researcher-practitioner role. The longitudinal nature of this research, combined with the embedded position of the researcher are unique facets of the project. The opportunity to become part of a football club's culture whilst conducting research is rare (Champ et al., 2018), with such research within women's professional football having never been published. This research affords the researcher the chance to connect with the participants and experience the culture in ways that has only previously been reported in cricket (Devaney et al., 2018). Two aims have evolved spanning three research studies. These aims, along with how they will be identified within the research, are outlined below.

Aim One - To identify the key psycho-social and cultural issues that are associated with women's professional football.

Study One

Study One aims to begin to identify the psycho-social and cultural factors that are present within professional women's football, and will specifically explore how these influence the players experiences of their environment on a day to say basis. This research will be informed by both players and staff perceptions and experiences, thus providing diverse insights into the presence of specific psycho-social and cultural issues within the environment. The research also aims to identify how these issues have developed alongside the professionalisation of women's football and will explore implications for future players and practitioners.

Aim Two: To examine how the psycho-social and cultural issues associated with women's professional football affect player experiences and preparations for the transition from junior to senior level.

Specific Study Two Aim: To provide a wider insight into the academy environment, identifying the key day-to-day experiences of the players and staff and how this influences the Junior to Senior Transition.

Study Two

Whilst Study One focused on a more general identification of the psycho-social and cultural issues present across professional women's football, Study Two aims to identify how these issues specifically affect players who are preparing to make the transition to senior playing level. As such, this study aims to examine the psycho-social and cultural factors present within the U21's academy environment, and considers the impact that these have on the development environment. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the impact that these issues have on how the players prepare for JtST. As such, Study Two utilises participant observations, informal interviews (with players, coaches and support staff), field notes and researcher-practitioner reflections for data collection.

Specific Study Three Aim: To build on Study Two to identify accounts of the different Junior to Senior Transitions that occur and highlight recurring experiences that players on these journeys have.

Study Three

Study Three will build on the findings from Study Two, and will look to specifically identify the varying JtST experiences of the U21's players. Whilst Study Two will provide a wider account of the U21's environment and considerations that must be made when working and supporting players who are preparing for the JtST, Study Three aims to give a richer, more in-depth insight into the transitions that take

place at the U21's level. The study aims to identify the different experiences that players have when beginning their transition journeys, and clearly outline how the aforementioned psycho-social and cultural issues influence these journeys. Similar data collection techniques will be used to those used in Study Two as data collection for these two studies will be completed simultaneously as part of the ethnographic methodology.

CHAPTER TWO - METHODOLOGY

2.1. A Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research allows researchers to understand complex human behaviour in sport contexts and gives an insight into the ongoing interactions and reactions within sporting environments (Martens, 1987, p.31). Furthermore, within sport psychology, qualitative research increases situational understanding and affords researchers the ability to "*describe, interpret, verify and evaluate phenomena of interest*" (Strean, 1998, p.335). As a thesis aiming to uncover and examine key cultural and psycho-social factors present in professional women's football, specifically those associated with the junior to senior transition (JtST), it seems appropriate to adopt qualitative methodologies. Given the numerous and diverse approaches to qualitative research, the following chapter outlines the specific data collection approach for each research study. As such, the following section discusses a qualitative research approach, the researcher's philosophical positioning and introduces the research setting.

Qualitative methods have become more widely used in social sciences as the discipline has developed and become more established. Throughout their use in sociology, mainstream psychology and sport psychology, a singular definition of qualitative research has proved elusive. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 25) provide a clear definition, which describes qualitative research as a "*...multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them*."

Kane and colleagues (2014) add to this, inferring that the value of qualitative research is in its ability to reveal the breadth and detailed nature of the phenomena that is being studied, creating an avenue for examining athlete's lives in rich detail

Qualitative research commits to viewing phenomena from the perspective of those being studied, and as such provides context specific understandings of particular experiences/settings/individuals (Kay, 2016). Moreover, by getting and staying close, metaphorically and physically, to their data qualitative researchers are prompted to continually test their "hunches, presuppositions and hypotheses" as the research develops (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p6.). Taking into consideration the aims of the current research, a qualitative methodology allows us to unearth the cultural and psycho-social factors present in the environment from those directly experiencing them (i.e., players and support staff), but also allows these factors to be explored and observed over time. Furthermore, the use of these methods allows for a development of knowledge over time and utilising methods that allow attention to be paid to emerging categories and theories rather than a sole reliance on predetermined concepts and ideas (Veltri et al., 2014).

The nature of the qualitative approach supports the way in which the thesis longitudinally focuses on first, identifying the key psycho-social and cultural factors present in professional women's football, before examining how these factors affect player experiences and preparations for the JtST. Throughout the three studies, the concepts and ideas collated and analysed by the researcher were constantly challenged and scrutinised as a result of the philosophical positioning of the researcher, the ethnographic methodology and the practitioner-researcher (P-R) role adopted by the researcher. The impact (and importance) of each of these are discussed in the

following sections of this chapter. Aspects of this chapter have been written in the first person to indicate the interwoven positioning of the researcher into the environment from which this thesis has been constructed (Champ et al.., 2019; Dowling et al., 2018; Krane & Baird, 2005).

2.2. The Philosophical Positioning of the Researcher

As the use of qualitative research increased over the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars encouraged researchers to consider the philosophical and/or epistemological underpinnings of their work (Biddle et al., 2001; Sparkes, 1998; Krane et al., 1997). Congruence between epistemological, ontological and theoretical views strengthens the qualitative inquiry process and allow researchers to select the most appropriate methods to achieve their research aims (Mayan, 2016). Furthermore, the inclusion of the researchers positioning, and outlining how he/she influences the methods used in research demonstrates methodological coherence (Poucher et al., 2020). It was important when writing this thesis that my philosophical positioning was clearly outlined. I acknowledge that throughout data collection and analysis my views of the world can impact not only how I position myself mentally, but also physically, within the research setting. As a result, due to my direct involvement in the research setting, with the research participants and as a research-practitioner, I feel I should be transparent with how I view the world.

After taking time to research and reflect on the different theoretical paradigms and positions (e.g., which did you reflect upon?), I recognised that my view of the world was best represented by the critical realist viewpoint. Critical realism is often recognised as sitting between the positivist and interpretivist paradigms, maintaining

a realist ontology (i.e., the nature of reality) combined with a subjectivist epistemology (i.e., the nature of knowledge and how we gain knowledge) (Downwood, 2005). More clearly outlined, a critical realist upholds that while we as individuals are not able to ever fully comprehend the real world and how it exists, we are able to create a fluid knowledge of our environment, that adapts based on social and contextual understandings of our experiences (Bhaskar, 1975). Collectively, critical realists understand that there is no single or correct way to understand the world. With many upholding the view that individuals with expert knowledge (through their own personal experience of specific areas and events), should be listened to and learned from (Maxwell, 2012). As such, adopting this approach felt pertinent and in line with my thoughts, views and perceptions.

Critical realists openly and clearly include participant meanings, beliefs, intentions and perspectives in their research, taking a view that these are all essential parts of the events and processes that are reported (Maxwell, 2015). In relation to the current thesis, I feel that by adopting a critical realist stance, the data and findings presented honestly represent the real and lived events that the participants experienced across the duration of the research. Furthermore, Vincent and O'Mahoney (2018) infer that the critical realist researcher's task is to offer a new view, where previously unobserved phenomena become the basis of new understandings. The use of existing theory as a starting point for empirical research is something previously questioned by critical realists (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016), as this can result in a biased commitment to specific content during the data collection process. I feel I must acknowledge that whilst my research has been initially guided by theory (specifically transition and identity theories), in keeping with the critical realist stance I understand that these theories may be supported, modified or rejected in order to better explain the context

of women's football and the JtST. Although against the traditional process of critical realist researchers, I felt that inclusion of these existing theories was necessary to identify gaps in the transition literature, and to provide rationale for the current thesis. These existing theories provided a foundation for me (as the researcher), and for the reader to understand current knowledge and perceptions of transition in sport. I do not believe that the use of theory caused me to show bias or to focus more on experiences or phenomena that supports these theories.

2.3. The Use of Ethnography

Whilst the specific methods used for each research study will be outlined in the respective methods sections of each empirical chapter, I felt that it was important to provide an overview of the methodology used throughout the thesis. When considering the research questions and aims of the thesis, an ethnographic research design was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology. Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings, using methods which capture the culture and behaviours of a specific group for the perspective of the group members themselves (Brewer, 2003). Using an ethnographic approach allowed for a more intertwined approach, as data collection for each of the studies was simultaneous as opposed to in succession. This allowed for the longitudinal data collection to follow the participants' experiences within a number of different social settings, events and phenomena, across three competitive seasons. Furthermore, through its emergent and inductive nature, ethnography has an untapped potential to "enrich researchers' understanding of sport cultures, concomitant behaviours and mental states of athletes" (Krane & Baird, 2005, p. 11). Such a richness of experience could not have been captured and explored

through three shorter, separate data collection processes, primarily due to the time it takes to become accepted into an environment and build relationships with participants (Hammersley, 2018).

There has been a steady increase in the use of ethnographic based methods in education, social science and health studies in the last 50 years (Gibson & Atkinson, 2018). Early examples of ethnographic work in sport include: Frankenburg's (1957) investigation of the connection between football, village activities and friendship; Archetti's (1999) cultural perceptions of masculinity across football, polo and the tango; and Gmelch's (1972, 2001) research into professional baseball cultures. The rise of ethnographic studies in sport has allowed researchers to present an insider's perspective of more traditionally elusive environments, usually accessible only to those playing an active role in them (Donnelly & Young, 1988). Moreover, these findings are not only theoretical but practical, as a closer view of routines, practices, actions and behaviours is presented, which facilitates the crafting of solutions to social and environmental problems (Gobo & Cellini, 2020). Most recently, ethnographic approaches have been used to build an understanding of lifestyle concerns in professional cricket (Devaney et al., 2018), the emergence of destructive organisational cultures in Olympic sports (Feddersen et al., 2020), and to further understand the psychological development of professional youth male footballers (Champ et al., 2018).

Ethnographic research is primarily concerned with the weaving together of multiple data sources and sustained involvement in an environment to understand a particular phenomenon (Lillis, 2008). Triangulating research from a range of data collection methods acts as a means to generate a more complex, detailed

understanding of lived experiences in sport settings (Culver et al., 2012). I hope that through my active involvement with the football environment, spending time with the athletes and staff in formal and informal settings and sharing experiences together I will be able to create rapport with the participants similar to that of Burke and colleagues (2008). Here the primary researcher spent time building trust and rapport with participants through sharing the highs and lows of high-altitude climbing together, with the researcher involved in many day-to-day tasks, sharing mealtimes and overcoming challenges as a team. The researcher went beyond that of simply entering an environment to collect data but became fully immersed into the environment and accepted by participants to produce more intricate, detailed research findings. This is something that I aimed to replicate when working in the football environment.

Lastly, when considering the suitability of ethnography with regards to the aims of the thesis, I felt that it was the most appropriate methodology to use due to the expectations it places on the researcher to become involved and immersed in the environment. As outlined by Gibson and Atkinson (2018, p.15), ethnography requires the researcher to be firstly "personally, affectively, cognitively and socially open with and among people" and secondly, demands co-presence, where the researcher thinks, feels, interacts and works besides the participants in the practice of everyday life. I felt that in order to answer the research questions and aims of the thesis, that ethnography was the best, if not only methodology, to allow me to work to gain the closeness to the participants and their environment that I needed.

2.4. Undertaking a Practitioner-Researcher Role

The adoption of a practitioner-researcher (P-R) approach has long been recognised as a means by which practitioners can challenge and develop their own knowledge and philosophies whilst working in a practical environment (McLeod, 1999). The integrated nature of practitioner-research provides evidence on which professional practice and service delivery can be based, thus creating the opportunity to understand, influence and (possibly) change organisational structures and settings (Coghlan, 2007). The embeddedness of the approach in this thesis allows for a detailed understanding of the lived world in which athletes, coaches and support staff co-exist; giving the research an unprecedented insight into the applied world whilst still being grounded in theory (Fox et al., 2007). As such, adopting a P-R approach for this research felt critical, due to the need for the researcher to connect with the club setting and adequately monitor the experiences, decisions and behaviours of the participants.

Although relatively new within sport psychology research, P-R approaches have been well utilised and represented in other fields. Health settings (McVey et al., 2015), counselling psychology (see Moran, 2011 for examples in psychotherapy) and teaching environments (Abukari & Abubaka, 2018) have all benefitted from the use of such methods to allow for a better translation of research into practice and vice-versa. Within sport, practitioner research has been utilised with the purpose of illuminating little understood cultures, facilitating culture change and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions (Gibson & Atkinson, 2018; Fullagar et al., 2019,). Within the field of sport psychology both practitioners and researchers have (continually) called for a bridging of the notable and problematic gap between research and sport psychology consultancy (Hassmén et al., 2016; Holt & Knight, 2014; Hutter

et al., 2016). Through bridging this gap, practitioners working in sporting environments can begin to work using research informed practice. Research will be seen to benefit and be of use to practitioners when evolving applied environments, rather than being a separate entity that practitioners struggle to incorporate into their daily practices and decision-making (Jordet et al., 2019).

The importance of practitioners and researchers coming together to promote embedded research with the aim of finding better working systems has been documented in professional male football (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005). Furthermore, football is recognised as a frustratingly exclusive sport, in which outsiders (in this case researchers) struggle to gain meaningful insights, spending most of their time trying to gain entry and build relationships rather than gathering knowledge and understanding (Nesti, 2010, Reeves et al., 2018). Taking this into consideration, adopting a P-R position for the current research felt critical in order for me, as the main researcher, to collect data with the depth and detail necessary to answer the research questions and aims. Over the duration of the PhD, I occupied a dual role as a full-time P-R. In my role as a practitioner, I was responsible for providing the players with psychology and lifestyle support and working as part of a multi-disciplinary team (MDT), whilst also collecting data using ethnographic methods. My time away from the club, in the research role, was spent analysing the various data sources I had collected, researching relevant topics and existing literature, reflecting on the dual role and writing up my findings.

Balancing the two roles simultaneously provided both opportunity and challenges. The opportunity came with being able to analyse data and produce findings that would give an insight into an environment in a way that I feel could never be

reached through a singular researcher position. As a result, the recommendations and implications of this research could be based upon the actual workings and foundations of the organisation in which they are taken from. This makes them therefore more likely to be successfully implemented or used to create positive change (where necessary and appropriate). Similarly, the use of theory not only to explain surface-level behaviours and processes, but also to explore and understand deep-rooted, systemic practices and procedures is something that also is possible through the use of a longitudinal, P-R role (Fox et al., 2007).

Alongside recognising the opportunities, it was important when assuming the dual P-R position that I was aware of the challenges and practical problems that could arise (and how I might resolve these) whilst managing the two roles simultaneously. Fraser (1997) discusses the importance of identifying your professional responsibilities as a practitioner and a researcher separately, and to be prepared for what you might do when these conflict with one another. As such, throughout the research process I sought to be open and honest about the requirements of the research role with participants and allowed them to be partners in the evaluation process; encouraging discussions about what I had found and how this might translate into the thesis. This transparency, I feel, allowed participants to be more comfortable with my researcher role, as they understood how the two could work alongside one another and allowed them to see the value of the project.

2.5. An Introduction to the Researcher

It feels pertinent at this point, after identifying the importance of the P-R role, and the impact that this can have on the interpretation of the data, to introduce myself.

To allow the reader to see beyond my philosophical positioning and role in the football club, and to understand my history, my background, and experiences that have shaped me into the P-R that created this thesis.

Sport has been a constant in my life, from my youth when I would spend any free time attending after school sports clubs and Saturdays going from one training session to another. I tried many sports, I loved many sports, but I never felt as though I was an athlete. I attended dance and gymnastics at a young age, before settling into cross country running and equestrian. I competed in both activities at a recreational level, but never saw these as a career opportunity. I admired those who did, looking at them with envy. This was partially because they were allowed to miss lessons in school when they had training camps or competitions, but mostly because I longed for that feeling of belonging to something. I had a desire to be involved in these tight-knit, elusive communities that athletes spoke about on television, and that coaches and support staff spoke about in talks and interviews. I was jealous of the early morning training sessions, I yearned to be invited to the special talks from nutritionists and strength and conditioning coaches that came into college to support those who had 'proven themselves' as junior athletes. Simply, I wanted to be 'one of the team'.

Whilst never being an athlete, I still had (and have) that hunger to win, to perform under pressure and to the best of my ability, whether that be in education and academia, in extracurricular activities (such as sports clubs, music lessons with my sister and spending time with friends) or during those ever-tense family games nights. That desire and want to win, that need to win, I feel is ingrained within me, even though I have never experienced it as an athlete. Looking back now, I feel as though this is what has given me the ability in my applied work to better understand the

pressure and drive to win from athletes and sports organisations, despite never having experienced it as an athlete.

Throughout my university education however, I worried that I would never be successful as a practitioner in sport as I had never been an athlete myself. I compared myself to fellow students who still competed or had recently retired, and worried that I would never be chosen to work in a sporting environment as I didn't have first-hand experience of how they worked. In particular, during my MSc my fellow students gravitated towards placement opportunities in sports that they had previously performed in or had close links to. This was a big cause for concern for me, it left me feeling as though I would be left behind the rest of my cohort, as I wouldn't be chosen to work in a sporting environment over someone who had experience of it as an athlete. This provided me with fuel to work harder, to reach out to more people and to demonstrate my ability as a trainee practitioner. It was during this year, amongst the feelings of worry, between the comparisons I was making between myself and fellow students, that I found my love for women's football.

Working in women's football was unexpected. As a sport that at the top level can be seen to be elusive and secretive in many ways, I thought it would be impossible for me to break into. I am incredibly happy to be proved wrong. My role as a practitioner both excites and challenges me daily, and it's somewhere that I feel I truly belong. Ironically, not being a past player has fundamentally helped me to build relationships and engage with staff and players - it appears nothing breaks the ice better than trying to watch someone that can't kick a ball properly, try to score a penalty blindfolded. It slowly became clear to me that my worth (as a psychologist) was not decided, nor proven, through my knowledge of women's football, but actually

through my knowledge and ability to work as a psychologist (to work, relate and engage with people). Alongside my development as an applied practitioner, I continued to excel in my academic career. As my Master's degree came to an end, the combination of applied work and research was something that I was keen to continue. My appetite for challenge and for professional development drew me towards the notion of completing a PhD; and the opportunity to share the world of professional women's football with researchers and practitioners. As I write this chapter, I am still excited and humbled at the opportunity I have to raise awareness and knowledge of women's football, and the journey that it, the players and the staff have been on and their opportunities for the future. I do not think that the love I now have for 'the beautiful game' will ever go away.

2.6. An Introduction to the Research Setting

Within this section I will outline the research setting, giving an insight into the structures and processes that take place for the players and staff that have been ongoing for the duration of the research project. Furthermore, I will identify changes that have taken place that I feel have impacted on data collection and my role within the club. I will also briefly discuss how the participants (and the environment) have evolved over the three-year duration that I have been involved with the club.

The professionalisation, and subsequent growth, of the WSL and Championship leagues has not only changed the lives, experiences and expectations of those playing at first team level, but has also had significant changes at academy level. The U21 teams are now known as WSL Academies, with support from the FA (as well as partnerships with other organisations such as the Talented Athlete

Scholarship Scheme, TASS), being provided to ensure each academy can adhere to a full-time training programme. All academy teams are now involved in league and cup titles which attempt to replicate those in the senior leagues, giving the players a taste of the pressures and competitions that they will experience should they successfully transition into a senior environment. Alongside this, the full-time programme looks to provide holistic development, with each club being linked to a local college/s who commit to supporting the player's commitment to football; allowing timetables to be adjusted to suit earlier training times and weekday games, and changes to assignments to be made if players have been invited to travel with the first team or attend international camps.

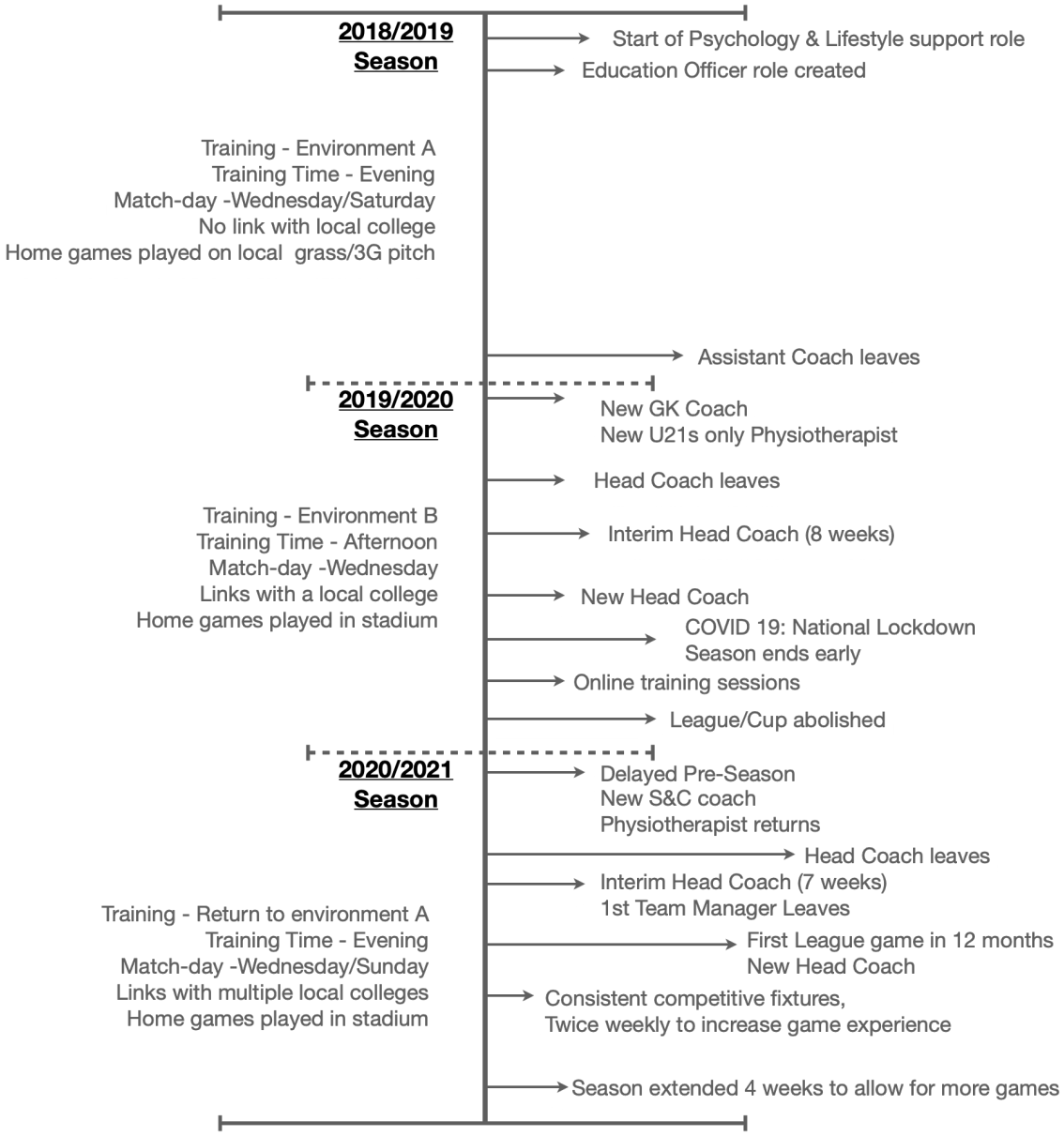
The focus on replicating a full-time programme that works hand in hand with college timetables brought around much change to the U21s environment. The biggest change being that games were moved from being played on weekends (as is standard in youth and senior teams), to being played on Wednesday afternoons, with all academy players being released from college. Alongside this, training was encouraged to be schedule on weekdays rather than weekends to allow players to have two full days off from education and football. Training sessions were to be scheduled in the afternoons, rather than late in the evenings to allow for adequate rest and recovery. These changes were introduced in the 2019/2020 season, with academies being given two seasons to make the adjustments to training schedules, make links with local colleges and find the appropriate training grounds for the sessions. By the 2020/21 season, the FA hoped to see each of the WSL Academies settled and thriving under the new settings. This fell in line with the FA's Gameplan for Growth; scheduled for review in 2021.

Looking specifically to the environment that the research was collected from, there were a number of changes in training and game location, staffing and training schedule across the three seasons that I collected data. The environment and staff team that existed at the end of the research was very different to that at the start, with both players and staff members experiencing a number of changes. Throughout these changes there was one constant, in that the academy team never trained at the same location as the first team. The influence that these changes may have had on the experiences of the players and the work that the multi-disciplinary staff team were able to carry out should be recognised, and it is for this reason that I feel they should be outlined briefly now. The figure below outlines in brief the major changes that have occurred, and that, as the main researcher, I feel will have influenced the experiences of the players.

The purpose of this figure is to illustrate the number of changes that the players experienced across the three seasons that I was working at the club. Where relevant, they will be discussed in further detail in the later chapters of the research. In addition to these changes, the players were also working to balance college, university, apprenticeships and additional employment in their spare time. In the first season I began working solely as a practitioner becoming integrated and established in the environment, before transitioning into the researcher-practitioner role around half-way through the season. The staff and players were made aware of my roles at the start of the season and were explicitly informed of the transition to the dual role once ethical approval was gained. It was at this time-point that the athletes and staff provided consent to participate in the longitudinal research.

Figure 4.

A timeline to show the changes across each season during data collection.



Note: Environment A – The club academy training environment in which the boy's academy (U9s-U23s) trained full-time, and the girls' teams (U14s -U20s) trained in the evening.

Environment B – The clubs partner school and college (U20s players were encouraged to attend here but it was not mandatory).

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY ONE.

3. 1. Introduction

The recent developments in women's football, especially that of teams in the WSL league, has resulted in more pressure on academy and development teams to grow and keep up with the demands of performance and engagement (Bell, 2019). In turn, academies are increasingly focused on how to develop players who can successfully transition into a professional first team environment. Understanding how transitions occur and how different people experience them, has been at the forefront of social and counselling psychology for a number of decades. Schlossberg (1981) explored how transitions occur throughout one's life, continually bringing a range of different challenges and experiences for each who face them. Alongside this, Schlossberg also identified how transitions often bring sensations of crisis, adaptation, coping and stress to those experiencing them. With respect to transitions within professional sports, Wylleman and colleagues' (2004) investigated a holistic, lifespan perspective of transitions, recognising that athletes face a number of different transitions throughout many aspects of their life, not just within their sporting career. This led to the creation of the Development Model of Transitions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, Wylleman et al., 2013), which has since become one of the most recognised transition models for sport practitioners and researchers (see Figure 1). This model has allowed for a better understanding of transitions which can occur simultaneously within and outside of the sporting domain, and a subsequent identification of how players may be supported through periods of multiple transitions.

The move to senior playing level is impacted not only by performance related factors, such as readiness for elite competitions and demonstrating competence, but

also factors away from performance such as building relationships and continuing personal development (Bruner et al., 2008). Young male footballers often report feelings of anxiety and isolation in the period before the junior to senior transition (JtST) as they have devoted their whole athletic career, and most of their lives, to trying to create a successful career in football (Franck et al., 2018). This can lead to feelings of loneliness as the player tries to manage the demands of the transition alongside their own personal emotional response to the experience. Cook and colleagues' (2014) reported the importance of creating a challenging but supportive environment at male academy level that facilitates player learning and encourages independence, whilst also allowing players to recognise the importance of mental toughness and resourcefulness; factors coaches identified as being crucial to surviving in the male first team.

As research in the men's game provides insights on how cultural elements of the sport can influence experiences and preparation for career transitions (Richardson et al., 2013), the next stage is for research in the women's game to develop to this level. There is a need to understand the culture of women's football in order to be able to effectively support players and understand how these cultural factors influence the transition of young female players from the JtST. This is especially so as the professional status of women's football continues to grow from season to season.

In this chapter, experiences of the transition from junior, academy level through to senior, first team level are explored, and factors that affect this transition within women's football are highlighted. We aim to develop a better understanding of the cultural and environmental constructs of women's football and identify how these can influence the players' experiences of career transitions. In addition, the research

will capture the complexity of women's professional football and explore how these complexities affect and influence the JtST. Expanding on the current knowledge of career transitions and developmental factors within women's football will lead to a number of direct and future implications for football players, coaches and practitioners, as a deeper understanding of the challenges that female footballers encounter will be developed. Specifically, Study One aims to identify the key psycho-social and cultural issues that are associated with women's professional football.

3. 2. Methodology

3. 2. 1. Participants

The participant sample was made up of nine individuals, six staff members and three players. The six staff members were recruited due to having a current presence in the environment the researcher was working in, and all worked with the academy team (typically known as the U21s) alongside the researcher. These six staff made up the whole U21's staff team. As such no further staff members were asked to participate in the research, as the six were deemed to have the best ability to recount first-hand experiences of working within women's football. Being located within the academy the staff are responsible for the development of players moving through the academy to the full-time professional programme and of the current transition process for players to the first team. The three players were selected due to fitting the criteria of having previously transitioned to the first team within the last three seasons, and were the only players currently playing in the first team to fit this criteria. This time frame was considered as long enough for the players to speak reflectively and retrospectively about their experiences, but recently enough that the transition took place during the

evolution of the women's game towards a more professionalised environment. As such the players were well placed to recount their experiences of the JtST as they progressed to a full-time career in women's football.

3. 2. 2. A Qualitative Methodology

When deciding which methodologies would be most suitable for this research, qualitative methods seemed the most suitable choice. This is due to the ability they have to allow researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon, or group of phenomena, with regards to participants experiences, constructs and beliefs (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Qualitative research seeks to report findings which reflect the realness of environments and knowledge through the eyes of the participants (Levitt et al., 2018), whilst seeking to understand, represent and explain what are usually thought to be complex social phenomena (Pyett, 2003). As such qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews for this part of the research, were thought to be the most suitable approach to allow the researcher to explore the true perspectives and experiences of the staff and players working within professional women's football.

Semi-structured interviews are seen as a mechanism for researchers to gather rich data from a purposive sample of individuals who have detailed experience of a particular phenomenon (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016), in this case the JtST in women's football. The structure of the interview guide was informed by previous research by Relvas et al. (2010), and questions were developed deductively alongside literature related to the JtST in men's football (Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2017; Richardson et al.,

2013; Røynesdal, Toering, & Gustafsson, 2018). The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1 of the Appendices list.

Alongside being informed by previous, relevant research, the interview guide and data collection process was continually reflected upon and evaluated by the researcher and supervisory team. This happened through informal meetings, where sense-checking and questioning processes allowed the researcher to ensure that the data collected was a true representation of the environment and events that the participants were discussing. As such, these processes also support a rigorous data collection process, with the true capturing of the data also ensuring credibility (Tracy, 2010). Further, through connections made with the participants prior to the interviews (due to the practitioner-researcher role), but also through discussions with the supervisory team where the researcher reflected on their own experiences and involvements in some of the events discussed, the research follows processes for trustworthiness (McGannon & Smith. 2019). Specifically, the certainty from the researcher and participants that the data collected represents emotions, behaviours and events that continue to exist with the academy environment and junior-to-senior transition reflects the trustworthiness of both the methodology and the collected data itself (Reay et al., 2019).

Seven of the semi-structured interviews took place at one of the club's training grounds. At the request of the participants, two of the interviews took place at the university where the researcher is based. All of the interviews were conducted in private a room chosen by the participant. The interviews took place over an eight-week period. Consent was obtained and all interviews were recorded in line with the ethical guidelines given by both the researcher's university and the club's research

guidelines. Each recording was saved using an anonymous code name (i.e., S1-S6) for staff members and for players (i.e., P1-P3), into a password protected file to ensure anonymity for both the individual participants and the club. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity within the write up of the results each participant was given a pseudonym.

3. 2. 3. Data Analysis

All transcripts were transcribed verbatim initially, with the researcher going back through each one to remove any additional words and colloquialisms such as 'like' or 'erm' that did not impact on the meaning of the overall quotes. Any individual or club names, locations or information that could lead to an individual being identified were removed from the typed transcripts. Once all transcripts were typed up and anonymised, data analysis began.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the transcripts. This method was chosen by the researcher as the process of producing codes and themes allowed continual reflexivity, which allowed the researcher to be fully cognisant of their philosophical positioning throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Before analysis began, the researcher read through each interview transcript twice to ensure familiarity with the data with regards to the participants individually, but also as a whole group. This led the researcher to be fully immersed in the data, with a deeper knowledge of the transcripts before analysis began (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). Following this the researcher began to code each transcript individually, before looking at the nine transcripts together to create themes that encompassed these codes, with each theme clearly linking to a central concept or idea

that linked the material together. This approach is in line with the recommendations made by Braun and colleagues (2019) around how to carry out thematic analysis in a way that lets the researcher connect with participants and their experiences at a deeper, more meaningful level.

3. 3 . Results and Discussion

The following section outlines the predominant findings of the research thus far. Findings are presented with the intention of enabling the reader to seek resonance with the participants as individuals, and to connect with their thoughts, views and beliefs. As such, and prior to presenting the main findings, it seems appropriate to provide the reader with a short description of each participant. This description provides a level of depth and character to each participant, thus allowing the reader to understand each participant's position within the club, and consider how their role has been impacted as a result of the professionalisation of the women's game. The current climate and culture of women's football, as described by the participants, will then be outlined. This in turn allows the reader to understand some of the day-to-day challenges and experiences that staff and players face within the academy and first team environments. Following this, the main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis are presented and discussed. Three main themes emerged following. the analysis; '*The Transition Process', 'Challenges to Identity'* and *'Requirements to be a Successful First Team Player'*. Throughout this section, direct quotes provide an authentic athlete voice to the analysis and help to contextualise the data themes. This section illustrates the key psychological, social and cultural factors evidenced within

the current environment of women's football and more explicitly recounts these factors with respect to the JtST

3. 3. 1. Participant Biographies

Gemma, Education Officer (EO)

Gemma, the education officer has a playing history of over 15 years, with experience playing at first team level in the WSL1 and WSL2 leagues, prior to the recent professionalisation of the women's game. She has also played in the new WSL and championship leagues. Alongside her playing career Gemma '*has always had a job that ran alongside [football], due to the nature of playing and not having enough money to survive on*'. Gemma initially worked as a teacher (having graduated from university with a teaching degree), before moving to work for The FA. At the time of interviewing, she had been an Education Officer for 16 months, taking on the role due to it being a '*pioneering role in the game*' and feeling that her understanding of the experiences (from playing herself) helps her with respect to her relational interactions with the girls. Currently Gemma continues to play at championship level, works part-time for The FA and part-time as the club's education officer. As a former teacher and player, Gemma possesses personal experience of the demands on female footballers attempting to balance their football career alongside vocational pursuits.

Paul, Strength and Conditioning Coach (S&C)

Paul completed a Masters degree in Strength and Conditioning (awarded in September 2018) and started to work for the academy team. Paul is responsible for the provision of strength and conditioning for players, both individually and as a whole team. The

role involves creating and overseeing personal performance plans, fitness testing, performance measurement and general well-being analysis (sleep quality, quantity, recovery methods etc.). Paul had played a variety of sports throughout his life including football, but he never played professionally; his parents encouraged him to sample different sports throughout his childhood. This current role is Paul's first role working within professional football, and although working predominantly with the academy team, he has gained experience working on a part-time basis for the women's first team alongside the full-time programme at the academy as part of a multi-level team of physical performance coaches. Alongside this role he works as an S&C coach at the local university. At the time of interviewing Paul had been in this role for 13 months.

Matt, Academy Head Coach and Technical Director (HC)

The academy coach played at a men's Premier League academy until the age of 18, at which point he became injured which prevented him from playing professionally. During his time as a player, he gained coaching qualifications and coached at a lower development level. After the termination of his playing contract, Matt managed two-part time jobs that spanned the boys' and girls' academies. He progressed to a full-time role as the assistant manager for the women's first team, alongside a combined technical director and coaching role at the women's Regional Talent Centre (RTC) for the same club. After six years Matt sought a new challenge which led him to taking up his current role as academy head coach and Technical Director of the RTC. At the time of interviewing, Matt had been in the role for 18 months. Throughout his 10-year career working in professional football Matt has also maintained a private coaching

business which he still sees as his full-time job. Matt has successfully obtained his UEFA A license and is working towards his UEFA Pro License.

Paula, Physiotherapist (Phy)

Paula's first experience of working in football was in a men's first team environment, before then transitioning to work at an academy because she felt that that academy environment had got a bit more to offer in terms of stability, opportunities to work with a wider range of players, a larger staff team and more opportunity to progress. This move subsequently led to Paula being appointed as head of the physiotherapy department in a male academy setting. After seven years working in male football Paula made the move to women's football. Paula was appointed as a physiotherapist for a WSL senior team, before moving her current role at a different club as the U21s physiotherapist. Initially Paula found the move from male to female football challenging due to the different structures and (limited) resources available to the women's game, but after a couple of months decided the female game is where she wants to work and develop her career. Paula has had no experience playing football at either a competitive or recreational level, and has worked in her current role as sole physiotherapist for the U21s and as part of the RTC medical team for three months.

Debbie, Academy Manager (AM)

Debbie has over 30 years experience both working and playing football. Debbie has first-hand experience of playing, coaching and managing. Starting as a semi-professional player as what was then WSL 2, Debbie was appointed to a coaching role alongside her playing role. After 15 years playing, Debbie took up coaching roles with other local clubs and university teams. Debbie then progressed to working as a Technical Director at an RTC and a development officer for her local county FA,

before being appointed as the academy Manager (her current role). Debbie has been in the role for 15 months and sees the role as an opportunity to drive the environment forward, hoping to provide support for the development of both staff and players.

Jake, Goalkeeping Coach (GK)

Jake played academy football until the age of 16 when he took a step back to focus on his education as he realised he would not go on to play professional football. Jake's first job working in football was at the same club that he had played. Aged 20, and after having a taste for the working world he realised that he missed the football world. He then embarked on a coaching career within his old club's community programme and travelled as a coach with summer schools. Following this, Jake progressed to work as a coach at the academy. At this point Jake transitioned into a goalkeeper coaching role, which led to numerous roles where he established his experience and his first involvement with the women's game Jake worked for a season at a lower league women's club, before transitioning to the into his current role with the U21s team. Jake has been working in this position for 4 months, alongside still working for the boys' academy at the same club.

Harriet, Player (P)

Harriet started playing football recreationally kicking a football about at home with her dad, before joining her first team at the age of 11 years old. Harriet stayed at this club and RTC for one season, before transferring to another RTC and remaining there until she reached development level. At 16 years of age she moved to a different development team, as her current team did not have a senior first team to transition into. She played in this team for approximately a season and a half before beginning the transition to the first team. She has played consistently as a full-time professional

for three seasons and is currently on loan to a championship club. Alongside playing professional football Harriet is also working to complete a university degree full time. Harriet's first season signed to the first team coincided with her first year at university.

Sara, Player (P)

Sara has a substantial playing career. She began playing for a boys' grassroots team for approximately 10 years before moving to play for the RTC at the age of 14. She successfully transitioned through the different age groups in the RTC through to the development team and then successfully into the first team. Sara had an unconventional experience in the academy team, and actually played a game for the first team before she had played for the development team. Sara managed training in both development and first team sessions alongside finishing her last year at college, and signed her professional contract on her 18th birthday. Since signing, Sara has played at first team level for four seasons and is currently managing a full-time contract alongside completing a university degree full - time. Alongside this, Sara has consistently been selected for international representation since joining the RTC team aged 14.

Becky, Player (P)

Becky began her playing journey when she was signed to a grassroots club when she was only six years old. She played there for two years before signing to the RTC where she played for a further 9 years. Since signing (with the RTC) aged eight, Becky has played for the same club. Since her U15s years she has been intermittently called up for international duty. Becky transitioned into the development team where she remained for two seasons. Becky is currently in her first season at first team level. Becky has yet to sign a professional contract and is currently focused on trying to

break through. She is yet to be chosen for the starting 11. Becky is currently training full time with the first team attending every training session and game, alongside managing her first year at university.

As highlighted, the staff have come from a variety of different sporting backgrounds and have each taken a different pathway to their current role. Four of the six had experience of playing football and felt that this led them to work within the sport. All of the players transitioned from the U21s team to the first team in the last 4 years, and so have transitioned since the professionalisation of the WSL.

With the participants backgrounds now being outlined, it seems fitting to highlight the environment of women's football from the participant's descriptions.

3. 3. 2. Current Women's Football Environment

All of the participants made reference to the current developments and climate of women's football. The first phase of each interview specifically asked players to comment on the ongoing changes taking place in professional women's football. Each participant recounted how they felt these changes had impacted the environment and culture in which they worked or played in. Across staff and players, the growth and progression of the game was widely recognised, with the success of the international team and the WSL league being particularly pertinent in having a positive impact on women's football at club level. Harriet (P) describes how the international success has had an effect on attendance at club level football:

> ...when we (England) got the bronze [FIFA World Cup, 2015], and people realised 'oh we're actually quite a good nation for football', then I think

> people have started watching it, and people have become more aware of it, and then they go and watch those players at clubs, the club benefits from that etc. so there is definitely a domino effect.

Sara (P) further highlighted this impact, including how the media have increased the attention that the WSL has been getting:

> I think the media, and the focus has been massive, obviously that's linked to the seniors doing well, every major tournament they've gone to it's got a little bit better, especially this year [2019], the real push from the media is really noticeable.

All of the players commented on how the success of international and national football has changed the environment that they play in as young professional players. The experiences that the players have when they play for their WSL teams now represent a (more) professionalised football career, a relatively new opportunity in women's football. This was echoed by Paula (Phy) who has worked with both male and female professional teams:

> I think the realisation (the moment) that things had changed was the continental cup final [2016]; 40,000 attendees, the FA cup final [2017]; 48,000 attendees… the players are suddenly playing at Wembley, it's amazing! Alright, so the stands aren't filled out as much and the tickets are £6 rather than £76 but it's getting a fan base; it's getting more people involved, people are bringing their kids and there are young girls watching the sport.

All participants viewed the impact that the international team has had on the public's perception of women's football as positive. Furthermore, it was noted that without the success of the international teams, and the buy-in from the media, the women's game may not have progressed (so positively). However, the participants all recognised that the high profile of women's football (mainly international and first team) in the media, was not a true representation of women's football at a development level. There are stark contrasts between what each WSL team is able to access and use in terms of facilities, resources and the level of (athlete) support available. Staff inferred that the investment in resources and facilities depended on the buy-in and support from their male counterparts. Specifically, Paul (S&C) alluded to the fragility of many of the women's teams and their reliance on the men's teams, "all it takes is one CEO from the men's game to say, 'you know what we've lost 3 million, we're quitting this'." Participants highlighted that much change is still required as male academies still receive more financial backing, possess more resources and tend to have more coaching and support staff. This is highlighted by Sara (P) when recounting the different day-to-day training experiences of her male counterparts:

> As a boy (in an academy) you are treated as if you are professional, the staff are there to help you, whereas in the women's game you're lucky to have the staff. There's not a lot (of staff) to go around. There's no funding for you… You have to get taxis everywhere or you get the train in; you travel however you can, and that's a big thing… The boys have grown up for years and years where they are just used to demanding things and getting it given to them… In the women's game you've been brought up just getting on with it and doing your own thing.

It was collectively recognised that female teams tended to be second best to men's teams, with female teams of both senior and development level having to constantly fight to be treated as professionals, often losing out to younger male teams. Paula (Phy) stated that, "the boys always had priority over training pitches. If it was wintery, snowy or icy conditions we couldn't train because the boys would have priority over the pitches that were available so that meant we were stopped." Furthermore, the staff highlighted how development pathways and support in the women's team were limited due to the lack of time spent with the teams. Despite the limited development support, it was acknowledged by all participants that the female game is progressing (positively) and growing to give players the opportunity to carve out a career in women's football:

> I'm an 18-year-old (player) and hopefully I am going to start getting paid at Christmas. 4 or 5 years ago I think an 18-year-old wouldn't think they'd be getting paid (to play football), or if they were it would be they'd have to have another job as well… it would have been a completely different mindset (back) then. (Becky, P)

While the opportunity for young players to have a full-time career in first team football is now available, it is imperative that the culture and the environment of both first team and development football is monitored to allow the sport to progress at all levels. It is important to recognise that while women's football is progressing on both a national and international platform, for those working and playing in the environment there are still areas that need to be improved and developed.

3. 3. 3. The Transition Process

The process of transitions, and how athletes experience them, has been discussed and debated throughout sport literature for many years, with each transition recognised as a critical period of an athlete's development (Wylleman et al., 2004). With each transition an athlete must overcome a number of different challenges and demands that they may not have been faced with before. Wylleman and Lavallee's Developmental Model of Transitions (Figure 1) (2004) gives a clear outline of how each different transition can bring an unfamiliar environment, with new challenges and expectations for the athlete to deal with. This is especially so for the JtST, which is thought to be unlike any transition an athlete may have encountered before (Stambulova, 2010). As each participant discussed the move from junior to senior playing level, the gap between the academy and first team environment was evident.

The first team environment was described as one where players should be able to consistently perform at a high level, without the need for continuous support and encouragement from coaches and staff. With the step up to the senior level requiring not only an increase in playing level, but in physical fitness, psychological strength and independence. This echoes the challenges that Richardson and colleagues (2013) outlined when male players step up to the first team. A significant contrast between the transition between the two sports however was highlighted. Within male football the Developing Mastery phase (as noted by Richardson and colleagues, 2013) exists to allow players to become familiar with the step up in demands (Figure 2), whereas in female football no such phase exists. Female players are required to transition straight out of the development (academy) environment and into the mastery (first team) environment, with no opportunity to experience a phased approach to their

development whereby the players could be exposed to similar high-demand and meaningfully competitive environments in a more considered and developmental way.

The staff outlined that when making the transition (from junior to senior environments) players need to be prepared to continually fight for their place in the team, something which is not experienced at a developmental level. The desire to win is seen to be something that every player must show relentlessly, even in training, and has been well documented in male football research (Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti, & Benstead, 2012). This more outcome-orientated environment, with little tolerance for mistakes and underperformance, has until now, not been captured in female football research. Gemma (EO) compares the two environments well:

> At this (academy) level it is very much developmental, in terms of people getting more minutes and when you get to the first team it's brutal. It's all about the competition and winning… there is pressure on you to perform; there is pressure on you to win games and that pressure is felt by the coach as well... it's about you being able to deal with that as well and deal with that pressure.

Gemma explains that at an academy level, a more developmental approach is adopted where each player is (more) likely to be awarded equal playing time, in contrast to the first team where only those who have shown that they can continually perform under pressure are selected to play.

At present, the development and first teams train at different locations. The staff identified how this separation has made it difficult for the academy environment to develop players who can survive the demands of the first team environment. Paula (Phy) stated "it's like we're here at the academy doing our thing, they're there doing

their ‘first team thing’, and there isn’t really that connection”. This description of environments echoes that of Relvas and colleagues’ (2010) who identified the physical and cultural distance between many developmental youth environments and professional environments in male football. The staff and players identified a disconnect between the two environments, and sensed that this makes it difficult to create a succinct, informed and coherent development pathway.

Amongst discussing how to bridge the gap between the development and first team environment, staff members continually referred to the importance of having consistent communication and interaction between staff. This was thought to be crucial in order to ensure that the players are primed and prepared to make the transition. Paul (S&C) explains this:

> The academy (staff and players) has got a lot of pressure on them; the first team have got a lot of pressure on them so if you can’t work together as an actual development team with a structure, you’re not going to be giving the athlete the best chance… It is just communication. It (what is expected of first team players) has to be communicated across. I think that’s just the one (good communication) you have to have.

The staff members were congruent with their thoughts around this and maintained that without communication between the two environments a player could not be best equipped to survive the transition. If not well prepared, a player would be unlikely to make the transition on their first attempt. This would lead to the player having to drop back to the development environment and wait to be offered a second transition opportunity. This supports previous research suggesting that if an athlete is unaware of the change in demands and expectations that come with the step up into a

senior playing environment, a player can have a negative experience of the transition, and in some cases be unsuccessful in moving into the senior team (Morris, Tod and Oliver, 2015). Alongside this, staff members reinforced the need to have consistency and fluidity between staff at each level to allow the transition to be smoother. Staff in both environments need to be aware of who is being prepared for the transition, what the expectations on these players are and how they need to be developed for expectation to be realised, and to ultimately move to the senior level. The better informed and aware both athletes and support staff are about the transition, the more likely the athlete is to have a smoother, more successful experience (Stambulova, 2010). Jake (GK) described the importance of working together:

> That [informative] relationship with the first team has to be there, there has to be some sort of crossover in my opinion… you need to have that crossover [of information about the senior environment] for players to know what the expectations are and where they're going into … we don't just work in blocks alone.

Both players and staff were in agreement that in order for a transition to be successful, both staff and players at each level needed to know the changes and the demands that players are faced with when entering the first team. The importance of communication and a clear pathway between junior and senior environments has been researched across different sports with regard to successfully supporting athletes in their transition to senior playing level (Jones et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2016;). All participants recognised that communication and interaction between the academy and first team environments needed to be improved, in order to allow for a better development pathway to be created. Moreover, Sara (P) was concerned that clubs did

little to explicitly promote the progression of home-trained academy players to the first team environment, “there’s yet to be a lot of investment bridging that gap [JtST] and that’s one of the main things. Some clubs have really good academies that dominate at youth level but their actual ability to produce players that become first team regulars is really lacking.” Similar to Relvas et al. (2010) it was recognised that in order for increasing numbers of players to be able to successfully make the transition from junior to senior playing level, the differences and distance (i.e., both cultural and physical) between academy and first team environments need to be minimised.

The players described their initial experiences of the JtST as uncertain, chaotic and confusing. Each player reported finding it difficult to break through and to be accepted into the first team when first making the transition. Making mistakes and being subsequently scrutinised and almost ridiculed by older, (allegedly) more skilled players were uncomfortable processes that each of the players experienced. Harriet (P) describes her experiences:

> I think the first teamers didn’t have the patience for us [junior players] … Some did but others made it quite difficult. If any of us made a mistake it was the end of the world… In terms of the technical and tactical aspects, we were 17 years old, we just didn’t have the experience behind us and some of them did make it quite tough. Sometimes we would dread going into training.

An environment bereft of social support can be challenging and unwelcoming for a young player transitioning into a new team (Relvas et al., 2010). Two players revealed that even when being chosen regularly in the starting line-up, they only felt they had

truly transitioned once they had been accepted socially by their team-mates, and feelings of nerves and isolation had started to diminish. Sara suggested that, for her, this acceptance had only just happened, *four years* after her transition initially began. Receiving social support from new teammates has been found to be crucial for players to feel accepted and comfortable within their new playing environment (Morris et al., 2017). Without this support feelings of dread and anxiety, such as those outlined above, are likely to manifest until acceptance into the team has been explicitly shown (Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). Such feelings of dread and anxiety ultimately players felt impacted upon their performances during their time with the first team, making the transition even more difficult and uncomfortable.

The move that players make from a development and process dominant world to a more professional, outcome orientated environment is recognised as one of the most difficult that a player will ever have to make (Richardson et al., 2012). Having little opportunity to prepare and practice for this transition can often make for a very uncomfortable journey (Drew, Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2019). Participants described how the first team environment exposed players to an array of experiences, both on and off the pitch, that they had not previously experienced in their playing career. These included being given an insight into contract negotiations/termination conversations, changing room norms such as sharing showers, being more aggressive in team talks and being held more accountable in front of (and by) the team for mistakes or sub-parr performances. Matt (HC) elaborates further on more performance-related factors:

> When you go to that [senior] level it's more results based, and you have to be ready for failure at times. You've got to be ready for setbacks… you

> might not play every week; you have to get used to being on the bench… You're fighting for a contract whether that's just within yourself or with someone else; you're proving to a manager that you should be there… and you're realising there's setbacks and dealing with them… so there's a lot of pressure and expectations going on at that age [18-21 years]

Matt (HC) makes reference to the change in pressures and setbacks that a player will have to cope with and perform under in the first team environment. The description of the JtST in the women's game echoes that of Finn and Mckenna's (2010) research, which depicts this transition to be the most stressful for male players. This is due to the transition often arising at a particular time period where the individual is facing profound shifts in more than one area of their lives. This aligns with Wylleman and Lavallee's transitional model (Figure 1) (2004). and illustrates how athletes often face a significant transition in their education/vocation journey alongside their transition to senior sport. This is commonly experienced by female footballers as they (typically) manage a second career alongside their playing commitments. This contrasts with the men's game, as players tend to drop their education at 18 years of age, once they get a professional contract. Secondly, female players move straight from a developmental (junior) level to a mastery (senior) level, as suggested in the above model. There is no opportunity to experience the developing-mastery phase as there is in the men's game (Richardson et al., 2013). All of the participants were required to manage their transition to the first team alongside educational commitments. Harriet (P) who had to manage a move to university alongside the demands of transition to the first team explains:

> I found it hard balancing going in [to training] every single day for the first time in my career... and I was obviously knackered… then going home and having to work out all this university malarkey! It was actually quite tough trying to manage everything.

The staff and players revealed that managing dual careers at first team level was extremely difficult, yet necessary due to the low salaries that players get due to limited funding. The participants acknowledged the stark differences between the salaries available to themselves and their male counterparts, both as staff and players. Despite this, the players stated that football always had to be seen as the priority, which often left little time for university or other employment. The struggle of trying to maintain an external second career is one that further adds to the demands placed on female footballers trying to carve out a professional playing career (Wisniewski, 2016). As a result, the requirement in women's football to manage a dual career adds further challenges to what is already recognised to be an uncomfortable and lonely period of development.

3. 3. 4. Challenges to Identity.

It is imperative to consider the impact that the move to senior playing level can have on an individual's identity (Richardson et al., 2013). A sense of identity disruption, such as that that comes with periods of isolation and a loss of intimacy among teammates can lead players to experience a turmoil of negative emotions, which can cause significant distress to a player's psychological well-being (Brown & Potrac, 2009). When discussing their experience of the transition the players described long periods of isolation, amongst finding it difficult to feel as though they identified

with either of the teams that they were supposed to be a part of. The players revealed that as they began to train with the senior team, they often felt disconnected from their academy team, and felt awkward when they returned to the academy environment to play games. Alongside this, the players felt they did not identify as a first team player, as they had not had the opportunity to fully connect with the players at that level, resulting in a feeling of not belonging. Two players summarise this:

> For a good year, well even longer, when I went up to the first team I was training full time and I still didn't really feel like they were my teammates, it took me a good few years to be able to think this is my team, I felt like an U17 training up for years (Harriet).

> I was the first to make myself inferior. These [players] were my idols and I think it was obviously difficult as a young person to think well one week I'm training with the U17s and they're my team, they were the first team to help me find out where I belonged… and in the first team you were always given the academy name and you were always the kid! I'm still the kid now having been there for four years! (Sara).

To give these experiences some theoretical context, Ericsson's Theory of Identity and Psychosocial Development (1968) depicts different stages of development that individuals experience throughout their life, and links each of these with a psychosocial crisis. At aged 18 an individual moves from stage five, where identity vs. role confusion is prominent into stage six, where intimacy vs. isolation is experienced. It is during the end of stage five and the beginning of stage six that individuals are likely to make the transition to senior playing level. Challenges to an athlete's identity, such as transitioning into a senior playing team, can create confusion

and cause the individual to re-examine themselves and try to find out exactly who they are and want to be. These stages align with the Developmental Model of Transitions (Figure 1, Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), which indicates significant changes in social groups, support systems and environments; all of which impact upon an athlete's identity and psycho-social development. This move from junior to senior environment can result in periods of loneliness and isolation for the athlete, as they attempt to form bonds with their new teammates. Moreover, athletes making this transition have described themselves as feeling stuck in-between two teams, as they struggle to maintain relationships with their old teammates, and find it difficult to build relationships with their new team (Dowling et al., 2018). This unsuccessful formation can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness and in prolonged cases even depression. The participants discussed the impact that the transition to first team can have on younger players as they try to form a new identity and association with their new teammates. Becky (P) describes the isolation they felt during their transition period:

> I got told you're a first teamer now, you're nothing to do with the academy. You'll just drop down when you're needed. So, it's a horrible situation… you go and see your teammates in the academy and you've missed out on loads because you've not been there.

Becky admitted that even though she'd been told [by the first team coach] that she was now a full-time first teamer she still struggled with not being in the academy. She still identified the academy players as being her teammates. Becky still felt intimacy and comradeship with the players she had now "left behind", which in turn made it difficult for her to form a sense of belonging to her new team. Mitchell, Nesti, Richardson, Midgley, Eubank and Littlewood (2014) stated that excelling in professional football

is linked to an athlete's ability to form a strong personal bond between their identity and their sporting team. This suggests that whist a player struggles to identify with their new teammates, they may struggle to perform at their best. This in turn could prolong deselection and lead players to feel more isolated and question their sense of self. Over time this may increase the likelihood of an identity crisis (Kroger, 1996).

Champ and colleagues (2018) have explored how within professional male academies, limited identity-related resources are offered at both club and cultural levels, which longitudinally has a detrimental impact on player's well-being and long-term psychological development. As these players attempt to successfully make the transition into a senior team, they often find that they feel unprepared in knowing how to deal with the turmoil and challenges of the new environment. The Identity Capital Model (ICM, Cóte, 2016) explores this further, and integrates sociological understandings of identity to understand how athletes can draw upon different experiences to form different layers of their identity. The different layers of identity can then be drawn upon as athletes deal with different events and experiences within their athletic career (Cote, Mizokami, Roberts, & Nakama, 2016).

Each of the players interviewed in the present research had experience of international duty. Sara (P) explains how it has benefitted their playing career:

> I'm definitely very grateful for having been on international because I think the difference between if I'd have just been at the club is huge… it kind of scares me to think about where I might be if I hadn't been on international set up… the exposure that you're given to every different type of football across the world and how they prepare, your education in

> football is progressed so much in International, I think I would be quite a bit behind where I am if I had not had that experience of it.

The players indicated how the experience of international duty allowed them to build resources, through overcoming different experiences and challenges that, in turn, allowed them to deal better with the transition into the first team environment. This was something that did not go unnoticed by the staff. Debbie (AM) in particular discussed this in detail, "one' [player] probably dealt with it [transition to senior team] better because she's been in the international environment… to go [and be successful in the first team] they have to be adaptable and adapt to change". This further highlights the gap between the development and first team environments, as addressed earlier in the results section, and suggests that the opportunity to experience international level football provides players with vital skills, experiences and resources needed to make the transition to senior football.

The ICM has largely been used within sport research to explore SPP development of professional identities; where experiences from working in a range of sports and environments are used to inform decision-making (Williams & Anderson, 2012). Collins and colleagues (2013) recognised that the ICM is commonly used with neophyte practitioners to encourage them to draw upon past experiences to assist them with making decisions in a new environment. Players admitted to using the learned experiences accrued from international duty to help them survive in the first team. Harriet explained, "I think that international experience impacts massively, when you go to camps it's all the [professional] behaviours that they teach you… Like having a professional attitude, being on time, working hard at all times no matter what the score is… You're trying to implement those then into your club and trying to affect those

around you". The consideration that athletes may use similar processes as those seen in practitioner research to develop their athletic identity and develop multiple tools that they may draw upon when faced with new challenges, is a concept not yet explored in women's football. These findings add a new dimension to the understanding of how different playing experiences, especially those outside of the player's development environment, can allow the building of personal resources, skills and strategies that players can use to navigate and survive challenging times in their career.

3. 3. 5. Requirements to be a Successful First Team Player

An array of psycho-social factors that contributed to a player's success at first team level were prominent in the data set. Players commented on the importance of 'resilience', 'the ability to cope with and perform under pressure' and showing 'motivation' and 'commitment'. The need to be more than just tactically and technically proficient was widely acknowledged, with both staff and players placing significant importance on the development of psychological skills. Players were identified as needing to be able to stay driven and motivated throughout the season, no matter how well the team may be doing overall. Gemma (EO) summarised this:

> So I think technically and tactically you need to be sound but the bigger things for me and I think this is where you get the players that stand out and really excel, are the psychological aspects; resilience, the ability to bounce back, to deal with failure, coping mechanisms when things aren't going right. That element for me in terms of being psychologically strong if a major factor.

Alongside recognising the psycho-social factors needed to be a successful first team player, the importance of these factors in the JtST was also discussed at length. Both staff and players were of the view that without a range of psychological skills, a successful transition to first team would not be possible. Players were listed as needing to be mentally tough, with the ability to continue to work hard and perform well even after making significant mistakes being crucial. The psycho-social factors identified as being necessary for players to succeed at first team level here are similar to those seen to be important in the men's game (Gledhill et al., 2017). However, research is yet to clearly identify psycho-social factors that support female players successful transition into senior football.

The requirement to develop these characteristics is something which has been overlooked in women's football, despite the importance of such psycho-social factors on first team success being recognised (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019). Participants stated that there was a need for RTC and academy programmes to incorporate the development and assessment of psychological skills, with a clearer understanding of each player and their strengths and weaknesses being needed in order to support (personal) development further. Paul (S&C) reiterates this "I think it's the same all the way through a players development, having the right mental attitude and that psychological strength is not just something you can just switch on, you've got to continually develop those things". The challenges in developing players to be mentally and psychologically ready for the first team is thought to be difficult due to the step up to first team being so large. This is due to the lack of a formalised development programme for 18–23 year-olds, with players having to move straight from a supportive, development environment at the U21's team straight into a senior, professional environment. Paula (Phy) revealed "it's really hard to prepare the U21

players for that step up when the academy is so different… the expectations, the pressures and demands, and the performance level all changes massively." This again further illustrates not only the physical but the psychological and cultural difference between the two playing environments discussed throughout this research. The need to begin developing psycho-social factors throughout the earlier ages of the players career is reiterated by both staff and players. Developing psycho-social factors throughout a player's athletic journey develops skills and characteristics that not only develop players holistically as an individual, but also ensures that they are well equipped to deal with the transition to the first team.

The importance of resilience (described as bouncing back from mistakes, dealing with adversity and performing well under-pressure, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), were discussed throughout the interviews. The need for players to develop resilience before reaching a first team environment was highlighted as crucial. Harriet (P) identifies:

> Making that transition [junior to senior] you realise you're going to have to be mentally strong. You're not always going to have it your own way, especially when you move to first team. You'll be used to playing, used to having everything easy… when you move to first team you will make a lot more mistakes than you do in development, you won't get played and that could be for up to two years. It's up to the player to be mentally strong and able to continue learning even though you might not play.

Harriet recognised the importance of resilience for being able to work through the variety of adversities that a player faces when transitioning from junior to senior playing level. The capability to grow and develop whilst under pressure to perform is

crucial for athletes who want to make it to elite sport (Bryan, O'Shea & Macintyre, 2019). The players suggested that the development of mental strength was something that they had to cultivate themselves, that it was their interpretation of their environment and experiences as a junior player that enabled them to develop these skills. In addition, discussing that they cannot rely on the development environment alone to enable the cultivation of these skills. This further supports the participants recognition that more focus is needed on developing these psycho-social factors throughout the player pathway, and not only once the transition to senior playing level has begun.

3. 4. Concluding Thoughts

This research has used the perceptions and lived experiences of coaches and senior players to begin to outline the cultural and psycho-social factors that currently exist with professional women's football. These factors have been discussed in relation to their impact on the JtST and how it is currently prepared for and navigated. Supporting the research of Roderick (2006), the difference between the development and senior environments was reported to be vast, with transitioning players often finding it difficult to adjust not only physically but psychologically and socially. This jump is thought to be increased due to the lack of synergy and communication between the two environments. Players reported feeling distressed and unprepared for the transition process, creating psychological distress that is also linked to transitions in the men's game (Morris et al., 2016). However, despite similarities in emotional experiences, both staff and players recognised that both the environment and development pathways are very different to those in the male game. The Developing

Mastery phase as introduced by Richardson and colleagues' (2013) does not exist in the women's game. This leaves female players with very little opportunity to experience a professional playing environment prior to first team playing level due to the supportive nature of the development environment. Both players and staff outlined that while this makes the transition to senior football challenging, it does afford players the opportunity to experience a more holistic development programme. Moreover, this was recognised to be crucial to female players and their success, due to the requirement of the players to balance a dual career, something that is not expected of male players.

In addition, the loss of identity experienced during the transition to senior female football mirrors that reported in the men's game (Mitchell et al., 2014). The players recognised the importance of being called for international duty, and expressed how these experiences had developed their identities further, giving them more resources to cope with the challenges at senior playing level. Both staff and players recognised a variety of psycho-social factors to be contributors to success, with specific importance being laid upon resilience and determination to succeed in the face of adversities. Furthermore, the need to create an environment that both develops and challenges the players was alluded to, resonating with the research conducted by Cook and colleagues' (2014). The participants revealed that while there is a knowledge around the psycho-social factors that can contribute to success at senior level, there needs to be a better understanding of how to introduce and work upon these factors within the development environment. Lastly, the players again referred to the importance of experiencing the challenging, high-performance environments at international camps and performances. It was suggested that without these experiences

they felt they would have been unlikely to have succeeded as they in transitioning to the senior playing level.

Thus far, an overview of the cultural and psycho-social factors present within professional women's football have been created, and the perceptions of staff and first team players have been explored. These factors have been outlined with reference to the impact they may have on the JtST, and the challenges and demands that players are faced with when experiencing this transition.

CHAPTER FOUR – STUDIES TWO AND THREE

4.1. Introduction

With women's football undergoing such significant transformations in the last decade, the lived realities of female footballers have changed dramatically. The most notable of these is that football can now be considered a viable, full-time career opportunity for elite women footballers in England (Culvin, 2021). The 2021/22 season encompasses a historical broadcasting deal which sees a minimum of 35 games being broadcast on Sky and 18 across BBC One and Two across the season (BBC Sport, 2020). As a result, exposure and accessibility of the women's game is being taken to new heights (Petty & Pope, 2019).

Players, clubs and members of staff (typically head coaches) are being propelled into the world of social media and broadcasting engagement, with advertisements and sponsorships bringing the game into more frequent focus. The Women's Super League (WSL) responded to the need for more focus and attention at the development level (to successfully transition more junior players into the senior environment), by putting in place a two-year development programme. At the end of which all of the original 11 WSL professional teams (plus the teams who were promoted to the WSL during this time) had professional club academies (Gameplan for Growth, The FA, 2019). Despite this, the transition from junior to senior professional playing level is not straightforward (Frank & Stambulova, 2018; Stambulova, 2009).

Across both the female and male game, football is acknowledged as a career characterised by its short-term nature, lacking long-term security with regards to both

individual contract lengths and overall career duration (Culvin, 2020; Roderick, 2021). Moreover, players are often familiar with ever-present insecurities such as failure, rejection, and unemployment, which feature alongside choosing such an (often) perilous career (Brown & Potrac, 2009, Wood et al., 2017). These considerations, combined with the limited financial compensation available in the women's game, means that many female players must still consider how the demands of a second career or education can exist alongside the demands of a playing career (Dunn & Welford, 2014; Sleeman & Ronkainen, 2020).

Subsequently, young sporting women must (still) invest in other identities, alongside their athletic identity. In contrast, young male athletes are often encouraged to solely chase their sporting dreams, something which has been identified as one of the cultural errors within the male system (Ryba et al., 2015; Skrubbeltrang et al., 2020). For athletes who pursue a dual career, balancing the transition to elite sport alongside academic study or vocational training can be extremely challenging (Harrison et al., 2020; Vickers et al., 2021). Players not only face athletic and academic/vocational demands, but are likely to simultaneously experience changes at psychological, psychosocial and financial levels (De Brandt, 2017; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2019, 2004). This means that alongside managing a JtST, which has been acknowledged as one of the most difficult within-career transitions, players are also having to manage a range of different transitions that require different coping mechanisms and resources.

During this multi-transitional period (which can span a number of years), athletes have to navigate continual periods of uncertainty, loneliness and isolation (Morris et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2009). Researchers and

practitioners working in professional football recognise the importance of having players who can cope with the turbulence and volatility of the move to first team football. Players must be able to manage the feelings of solitude, angst and challenges to identity, whilst concurrently demonstrating maturity, a commitment to overcoming challenges and an understanding of their identity (Morris et al, 2016; Stambulova, 2017, 2010).

Research into the male game has begun to identify how the academy environment can be nurtured and developed, to allow the systems to better support players to deal with these challenges, moving successfully through the footballing pathway and into the bright lights of the first team (Larsen et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2018). Recommendations into how systems and organisations can evolve to better support the JtST, and to provide more holistic talent development have been made. This is, however, yet to be seen in the female game, with the development pathway so different to that of the males that recommendations made for male clubs should not be simply taken and copied into the female pathway. An understanding of the female pathway, alongside an evaluation of the nature of the approach to the JtST is needed in order to begin to understand how to grow and improve.

In this chapter (Studies Two and Three), the psychosocial and cultural factors present at the developmental, academy level of professional women's football are explored. These factors will be outlined and discussed regarding the overall academy environment, with the chapter will then focusing specifically on how these factors influence the transition experiences of the players in the academy environment. The research will examine the different transition options that players may have and how the psychosocial and cultural factors can impact experiences of these. Currently,

research used to inform the women's game is largely dominated by experiences within the male game, despite development pathways, transition experience and resources available to players being significantly different to those in the female game (Woodhouse et al., 2019). This research aims to provide an account of transition experiences in the women's game and to develop an understanding of the challenges that female players face when moving from the developmental, academy environment to a performance based, senior environment.

Expanding on the results presented in Chapter Three (Study One) the following studies will provide a more nuanced view of the academy environment, followed by the different developmental journeys of the academy players. Whilst the data collection for this phase of the research took place simultaneously, using an ethnographic methodology, the results are presented as two separate sections. The separation of the results sections allows the representation and write-up of the results to be more focused, allows the reader to develop an understanding of the environment and the player's journeys as they evolve. Study Two aims to provide a wider insight into the academy environment, identifying the key day-to-day experiences of the players and staff and how this influences the Junior to Senior Transition (JtST). Study Three builds on Study Two, aiming to identify accounts of the different JtSTs that occur and highlight recurring experiences that players on these journeys have.

4.2. Methodology

4.2.1. Research Design

Ethnography offers the opportunity for researchers to understand a culture of a particular group by understanding the group members' behaviours, values, emotions and mental states (Tedlock, 2000). Furthermore, ethnographers focus on understanding the day-to-day, lived experienced of their participants and attempt to assign theoretical meaning to such experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, Wolcott, 1995). Taking this into consideration, and recognising the need to utilise methods that would allow for the exploration and understanding of social behaviours and interactions, an ethnographic design was selected.

In order for an ethnography to be successful it must fit the following criteria as defined by Atkinson (2007): 1. People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher; 2. Data is gathered from a range of sources; 3. Data collection is, for the most part, unstructured; 4. Generally the focus is on a small scale, single setting or specific group to allow in-depth study; and 5. Analysis of data involves interpretation of meaning, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices. Throughout the sections of this chapter, I will look to provide detail around my behaviours as a Practitioner-Researcher (P-R), and the data collection and data analysis processes that I undertook to keep in line with these principles. These moments and thoughts will appear on the page as 'I' and look to allow the reader to follow my voice as I moved through the data collection and analysis process and reflected upon my experiences.

The following sections of this chapter outline the process of entering the research setting, introducing the P-R role, the different data collection methods and

how these were utilised, the timeline of data collection and the data analysis and representation processes.

4.2.2. Entering the Research Setting

When conducting field research, particularly from a P-R position, consideration must be given to the processes by which one enters the field, establishes rapport with the people living there and works to become a member of the group (Angrosino, 2007). Having already been accepted into the environment as a practitioner, I had to be aware of how I underwent the shift to P-R and how I would be present in the environment throughout the data collection process. I thought about how I wanted to be perceived in the environment, and how I would sit on the research-practitioner continuum. To do this I had to consider factors such as, physically how I would position myself with the staff and the whole team, what would my approach when communicating with both players and staff be and even simply, how would I introduce myself to new individuals in the environment?

Crang and Cook (2007) stated that the language used by ethnographers can be influential in how participants perceive them and can alter whether participants 'buy into' (and are accepting of) the researcher role. In this regard, I was conscious of my own 'language' when entering the research setting. Specifically, I was conscious of the need to avoid complex academic/research-oriented language. From my prior involvement as a practitioner, I was aware that this was the first time that both the staff and players had participated in this type of academic research and so I was sure to be very open and transparent about the research and data collection process as well as

trying to explain my research topic and subsequent involvement and interest in their journey in a readily understandable and culturally digestible format.

The dual P-R role allows the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the cultural context of an environment (i.e., the academy; Ryba et al., 2013). An advantage of already being seen as a 'member of the group' due to my previous practitioner role at the academy meant that gaining access was relatively easy, as the groundwork required for gaining trust and rapport was already established (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, I was mindful not to use my 'accepted' status as a way to get participants to engage in the research process. I laid out clear research boundaries and ensured that throughout the data collection process the participants were aware of my dual role and knew that any conversations, events or critical moments they requested stay confidential would not be involved in the research.

In addition to all participants completing the required consent and participant information forms, all individuals (both staff and players) attended a group presentation which outlined the research process and what it meant for participants to ensure everyone understood the P-R role that I was going to be taking on. The presentation provided everyone connected and/or impacted by the research an opportunity to gain clarity on my dual role, the research and to ask any questions prior to the data collection process began. Being open about my role and the research topic from the outset also enabled the research process to feel less daunting, especially to the younger players, as they were able to see research as something that could live alongside their normal training routines, with someone who they knew and trusted as the researcher.

Whilst explaining how the researcher-cum-practitioner role would work harmoniously, I was conscious that I needed to be aware of feeling too 'at home' due to my familiarity with the environment, and that I maintained a critical, analytical perspective of the research setting (Hammersley, 2018). I presented the research, and my role as researcher, as an opportunity for the academy to be given its own voice. The challenges, experiences and development of the players could be investigated and presented to other practitioners and organisations, with hopes of it informing future developments in the women's game. It was with this notion, alongside already being accepted into the environment as a practitioner that I was able to honestly convey the aims of the research. Moreover, demonstrating my hopes for its potential to change perceptions and understandings of the issues that academy female players face.

4.2.3. Data Collection Process

An ethnographic methodology requires the researcher to collect data using as variety of different data collection methods. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the social environment and perceptions of the members of the social group to be gathered (Krane & Baird, 2005). Seeing, doing and feeling first-hand is deemed to be the best way to believing, knowing and theorising about members of another culture (Atkinson, 2012). Whilst considering the need to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture and environments, I was cautious of becoming too submerged in the research setting. I needed to be able to step back to take notes, make observations and record critical moments without disturbing the behaviours and actions of the participants. Furthermore, it is important that data collection in the field

is flexible, evolving and developing as the research progresses (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I was also conscious of the need to be able to quickly move into 'practitioner mode' as necessitated by players or other staff, with little to no warning. As such, I chose methods that, when required, would allow me to drop and pick them back up later, or even once a session had finished altogether, such as voice notes and reflections.

Throughout my time as a P-R I would spend three days at the club per week; two afternoons attending training sessions and a game day (this was of course impacted during the initial COVID months, where data collection happened via online or telephone calls). Typically, I would spend around 20 hours per week at the club during the season (August-May), with the rest of my time away from the club as a researcher going through the data I had collected. This period lasted for 25 months (inclusive of the COVID months) and amounted to 218 days immersed into the academy environment. I collected approximately 27 hours of voice notes, 325 pages of typed and analysed voice notes (key quotes/sections were transcribed and analysed with regards to on-going themes, relevant theory and research and my thoughts/analysis) and 150 pages (one and a half notebooks) of observations, field notes and written reflections.

4.2.3.1. Observations and Field-Notes

Observation allows the researcher to examine participants' lives in-situ, as it happens in real time, providing an insight into not only what people do but also how they do it (Atkinson, 2012). The close proximity with which I was able to co-exist alongside the participants and the sense of belonging that I felt to the environment and

organisation (as a result of the P-R role) allowed detailed and meticulous information to be collated about the behaviours, reactions and perceptions of the participants (Tedlock, 2000). I noted these observations down, alongside drawings or on top of session plans, set pieces or photographs of classroom sessions. This added detail, and in some cases acted as re-call triggers, to conversations I had, events I had observed and critical moments I felt had taken place for both players and staff.

Field notes and observations add a more physical, visual element to the data collection (Phoenix, 2010), and allowed the data to be presented in different ways. Taking field notes allowed me to be reminded of specific aspects of the environment or session that I used to inform future discussions with participants or as a cue to revisit upon these further after the session had ended. Media photos of training sessions and games, performance analysis slides, headshots that were taken when players transitioned into the first team etcetera were used as conversation points with players to discuss emotions and behaviours that surrounded the events in the photos. Notes around these interactions and events could then be added directly to the photographs to bring the data to life when reviewed and analysed.

During the collection of the observation and field notes I paid particular attention to 'how' and 'when' I physically took notes. I was cautious not be seen as 'scribbling away' as I spoke to players and staff, or to make them feel that they could not talk freely to me as they were worried of what notes I might take. I often took notes on the move, for example, walking from the gym to the training pitch, or when moving from the changing room to the dug-out on a game day. If I was able to make written notes without drawing attention to myself I would do this, but if not I would quickly type notes on my phone or make a voice recording. At the first opportunity

after the game or session finished I would then write these up with the rest of my notes so that they were all in one place. These written notes were all dated and time-stamped, allowing them to be triangulated with the other methods of data collection during analysis.

4.2.3.2. Voice Notes

Alongside collecting observation and field notes during sessions as events happened, I also collected voice notes. These were collected post training sessions, where I could speak freely about my thoughts and analyse events and conversations that had occurred. I recorded these as I travelled home from each training session and game. I travelled alone and so was able to speak freely and honestly, taking time to make initial links to theories and research, and to compare and contrast to events and players that I had made notes around in the past. I was sure to record these voice notes as soon as possible after a session to prevent details from being forgotten and changed or altered subconsciously (Emerson et al., 2001). Recording these voice notes encouraged me to consider and acknowledge any prejudices or biases that I might have shown when interacting with participants, and allowed me to reflect honestly on these considering how they might have altered my behaviours (Wolcott, 1995).

The voice notes were transcribed as they were recorded using a mobile app, and then checked and uploaded to my laptop no more than a week after they were initially recorded (usually within 48 hours). They were revisited throughout the data collection process, with key themes or events highlighted and annotated. This informed discussions with the supervisory team who were positioned outside of the data collection environment. These discussions then shaped and refined future data

collection, ensuring I continued to challenge and develop themes that started to reoccur throughout the collection process.

In addition to adding depth to the other data collection processes, the voice notes also allowed me to review the methods that I was using and identify if (and when) any changes needed to be made. I utilised the guidance of Cloke (2005) to establish five areas guiding questions to support my reflections at the end of each month. These were as follows; 1. How did the participants react to your research/data collection this week? 2. Are the initial findings matching your expectations? 3. Are the methods you are using sufficient? Is there a need to make any changes? 4. How is the research taking shape? 5. Are you attending to more things/events/participants than others and is this beneficial? These questions ensured that as data collection progressed, I did not become over familiar with the environment and the transitions that were taking place. Answering these questions meant that I not only described the events of the session, but reflected upon them and considered what this might mean for my next day, week, month and so on of data collection.

4.2.3.3. Informal Interviews and Impromptu Conversations

Interviews, specifically ethnographic or conversation style interviews provide both the participant and the researcher the flexibility to co-create both what is being said and how things are said (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of data collection, broad open-ended questions were utilised, which allowed the researcher to initiate discussions and cover a wide range of topics. This allowed issues or topics raised by participants to be followed up and become the focus of the conversation (Holloway, 2005). When speaking with players and staff I encouraged them to direct the

conversation, asking questions only to try and discuss events or phenomena further. I tried to create a space where players felt that they could tell their story, attributing their own meaning to events, emotions and behaviours. My prior position in the environment enabled these conversations to begin early and continue throughout the data collection process. Where other researchers may have had to take months to individually gain the trust of the players and staff members before having these conversations, through being transparent and honest about the research and data collection process alongside my practitioner role I was able to hold these conversations from the beginning.

I viewed the informal conversations as opportunities to add context and authenticity to other data (such as observations and the questionnaire responses), unlocking opportunities for conversations that otherwise may have been missed (Swain & Spire, 2020). The conversations were typically held face-to-face during training sessions and game days (however, some were online when required due to lockdown restriction, mostly between March and August 2020). Where possible, and when it did not interrupt the flow of the conversation, I would make notes during the conversations, recording key points and phrases that were used. If making notes was not possible, due to the spontaneity of the conversation or for fear of disrupting the flow, once the conversation ended I would find a suitable, private place to go and make written or recorded notes about the conversation. Where required I would follow up with the participants to revisit the topics and themes that we discussed, and create written timelines to show how events (and reactions to events) were experienced.

4.2.3.4. Practitioner Reflections

In addition to collecting data relating to the participants experiences I felt it was important to keep a log of my own experiences and thought processes as a P-R. Reflection is beneficial for focusing on both practitioner skills and practices, enabling a deeper understanding of research theories and applying these to real-world settings and events (Anderson et al., 2004; Cropley et al., 2007). Within professional sport, the use of reflective practice by athletes, practitioners, researchers and coaches has increased with Knowles and colleagues (2004), advocating that reflection allows individuals to consider their own practice and behaviours and how it is received by others. This was especially important considering my dual position within the research environment. It was vital that participants did not feel that my research hindered my ability as a practitioner, and vice versa, as any sense that my role was being compromised would have challenged my credibility as a researcher but also the ability to fulfil my role as a practitioner within the club.

During the period of data collection, I wrote a personal 'reflection log' which I kept separate to the data collection methods. Within this log I made short reflections twice a week. At the end of the month, I worked through each of the entries, drawing out main themes, reflecting upon the month as a whole and considered how I would approach the next month. I felt that it was essential that I considered my positioning as both a researcher and a practitioner. As suggested by Cloke (2005), within each entry I considered my physical positioning within the environment, alongside how this affected what I attended to that session and what this meant for the research. Furthermore, I also reflected upon how the encounters I had made me feel, and whether I found myself focusing more on those that could be beneficial to the research

or whether I wanted to attend to them all. The reflections allowed me to identify what I subconsciously attended to more during the data collection process, and challenge and evolve from these potential biases.

4.2.4. Timescale of Data Collection

In order for ethnographers to collect the rich, meaningful data synonymous with the research methods, they must dedicate and devote time to being in the field, closely exploring various sources of data (Wolcott, 1990). Furthermore, researchers should be prepared for their roles and positions within the environment to change throughout the long-term data collection processes (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Long-term immersion/engagement in the field setting is essential. Ethnographers must be aware of balancing involvement in the culture/environment (required to gain a sympathetic understanding of the participants) whilst remaining cognitively and emotionally detached (in order to objectively identify themes, patterns and structures; Elias, 1987; Atkinson, 2016). Previous long-term immersion (through ethnography) in sport cultures and settings have given readers an insight into normalising gender transgression in bodybuilding (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009), a female sport psychologist working in a male football academy (Champ et al., 2019) and an overview of performance lifestyle support in English cricket (Devaney et al., 2018). These illustrate how long-term immersion (a minimum of two years) within a sporting setting has allowed for understandings of cultural norms, organisational processes and social behaviours and expectations to be investigated and explored.

One of both the greatest benefits and challenges of ethnographic research is that the researcher and research team determine the data collection processes and the

time-period in which this is done. Whilst this leaves the researcher with control and flexibility over the data collection process, it also means it can be tough to know when enough data has been collected, and if what is collected is detailed enough (Krane & Baird, 2005). Through on-going conversations and evaluations with the research team throughout the process, I ensured I was using my time in the club most effectively, achieving both practitioner and researcher role requirements. It was decided that I would spend two-three days per week at the club. This time encompassed meetings with players, classroom sessions, attending training sessions (two per week) and games (one per week), multi-disciplinary team meetings (MDT, including academy manager, coaches, sports science staff and the education officer) and writing up practitioner notes. This schedule also left enough time when attending to solely focus on the researcher role, (e.g., observing, catching up on field notes, making private voice notes, if required). Specifically, I was a consistent figure at the club, which enabled data collection to continue from pre-season, throughout the competitive season and during the off-season, supporting players and working with the MDT to review the previous season and plan for the next. This allowed a steady data collection process, which continued for approximately two and a half years, encompassing three seasons.

4.2.5. Data Analysis and Representation

When considering the overall ethnography process, it became clear that data analysis would be intertwined and evolve with the data collection process. Crang and Cook (2007) recognised that analysis of this type of data is a far more informal process, where data is pieced together, gaining focus and direction as the research

unfolds. The analysis process becomes a continuous cycle of collecting, analysing and reflecting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Consequently, allowing new lines of inquiry to emerge throughout the process, but also offering the opportunity to revisit and add in any further information that increases description and understanding of key events (Atkinson, 2016). I thought that this would be valuable when collecting data in the second and third season. It was here I was able to compare similar events and time points with those in the first season, and compare and contrast player experiences. This was advantageous when looking to identify patterns across player development journeys, and link together similar transition experiences and behaviours.

Data analysis is typically recognised to begin from day one (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, Wolcott, 2010), and continue throughout the data collection process. This is something that I found to be necessary, both so that I could evaluate and alter the data collection processes if needed, but also to ensure I could keep on top of the ever-growing amount of data that I was collecting. As the research continued, I began to feel as though I had a vast amount of data to analyse, that followed very little structure. As such, I felt that I needed to create a process that allowed the data to become more structured and manageable. This in turn allowed it to be clearly linked with previous research and theory later in the analysis process, contributing to the meaningfulness and rigor of the research (Burke, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2019). Whilst conscious that I needed to reduce the data, it was vital that the participants meanings, beliefs, intentions and perspectives were still at the forefront of the research (Maxwell, 2015). As such, I ensured my analysis could be continually adapted and added to, to preserve social and contextual understanding of the data (Bhaksar, 1975).

I worked through the data chronologically bi-monthly, triangulating the information from each collection method in the order that it was collated. I began by revisiting the voice note transcripts, collating the main themes, key events or moments and topics or phrases that reoccurred across players and different training sessions/games. As I worked through the data and themes (main and sub-order) began to emerge I began to keep lists of the details of these, and as they become more established began to link back to the findings of Study One, and to research and theory that I was already aware of. I also made sure to identify what I felt might be events/behaviours/experiences I wanted to revisit or to enquire further about to gather more information. An example of this would be when I was speaking to a player about how they wanted to challenge themselves to speak up more and be more socially integrated when they went up to first team in pre-season. I made notes to remind myself to make time to speak to this player, getting insights not only into whether they felt this was successful, but the impact it had on and off the pitch. Each main theme, sub-theme and theme to revisit was colour co-ordinated, allowing me to quickly scan large volumes of text and locate data. Once I had worked through to initially annotate and analyse the voice recording transcripts, reflective notes and informal/impromptu conversation notes I began to consider how I could condense this seemingly never-ending mound of data.

Following the initial analysis of data, I considered how I could represent the findings in a more comprehensive, manageable way. For each season I created a timeline which provided a month-by-month breakdown of the data. I took what I felt to be key events, behaviours and conversations with each participant, the MDT and team as a whole (such as games, workshops etc.) from the analyses transcripts and put these into the monthly columns (e.g., January, February etc.). Each player had their

own row on the timeline so that I could easily follow their journey across the seasons that they were with the club. Each monthly block also had space for a row of coloured squares, which co-ordinated to the colours for each main and sub theme from the initial data analysis process. This meant that I could quickly re/locate data that related to certain themes.

For the MDT and whole team timeline I marked down key events, then made additional notes as to how they impacted my work as a researcher and as a practitioner. This also helped me to remember their impact on the data collection (if there was one). I was cautious of trying to include everything into the table and specific participant journeys, and I made notes of the times and dates of any events or interactions from the original data that I might want to revisit. This left me with a table for each season filled with main and sub order themes, critical moments, interactions and situations for each player throughout the season. For the players experiencing the JtST I was then able to create a chronological timeline of their journey. This timeline was again analysed in line with the themes that had been identified, alongside relevant research and theory that could help to explain and rationalise their transition experience. Upon completing the final timeline, I had collated, organised and represented the pile of (really) messy, unstructured data in a way that was both manageable and meaningful. The next consideration was how to represent these journeys and experiences in ways that would do justice to the emotions, behaviours and challenges that the participants encountered.

When considering how to represent the results, I considered the aim of ethnographic research, and how this may influence how I choose to write up my findings. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) infer that ethnographic research should

produce rich descriptions and explanations of specific phenomena that allows the reader to relate to the findings even if they have never experienced similar phenomena themselves. Consequently, it was necessary to adopt a method that could illustrate not only the experiences of players making the JtST, but also the overall academy environment and the impact that this environment has on those existing within it. Furthermore, extending how the psycho-social and cultural issues identified in Study One impacted upon the players both individually and as a team. The use of Creative Non-Fiction (CNF: Cheney, 2001) and vignettes are popular with ethnographic researchers as they can tell stories using facts whilst simultaneously navigating the reader through the 'emotional vibrancy', creating a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Cheney, 2001). This means that more people can understand and relate to the stories being told, and in some cases see similarities in their own environments and practices (Spalding & Phillips, 2007).

When writing ethnographic research it is crucial to ensure that the data representation allows the volume and detail of the data collected to be utilised, without making the write-up too confusing or arduous for the reader. Creative Non-Fiction allows the researcher to show a collection of research findings and links to multiple theoretical links in one passage (Ely et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, Smith and colleagues (2015) determined that CNF is often highly accessible to people beyond the academic world, with the representation of findings enhancing knowledge translation and dissemination. These considerations made CNF extremely desirable as a data representation method, in order to best represent the research findings and enable the data to be written in a way that reached a broader audience (inc., academic researchers, practitioners and the participants themselves).

When considering the write-up process there are a number of different recommendations to produce a meaningful and impactful CNF (Ellis, 2004; Frank, 2010; Gearity, 2014; Richardson, 2000). I have chosen to focus on four criteria which were repeatedly illustrated as important in guiding research. The criterion are as follows; 1. *Purpose*, each CNF must have a clear and important point that must be communicated to the reader and linked to theoretical and practical research; 2. *Show rather than tell,* rich, vivid descriptions should be used to create images and conjure up the reader's emotions; 3. *Use dialogue,* use conversations and interactions to show the emotions, behaviours and reactions to encourage the reader to resonate with the participant's experiences even if they have not lived through them themselves; and 4. *Be selective,* it is not possible to recount the whole story, write selectively and focus on clearly communicating the key sections of the narrative to the reader.

The following narratives aim to inform you, as the reader, of the behaviours, actions and events that I observed during my time as a P-R at Oakvale FC. Whilst each of the narratives look to inform the reader of the factors and challenges present within the club environment, they also include my reactions, and at times my involvement and behaviours surrounding an event or player journey. These reactions and evaluations will be presented within the vignette text and will have a different font style (not in italics) and will be surrounded by parentheses (). This involvement is there to add depth and widen perspectives of the events that take place, rather than to guide or suggest that the reader should interpret the narratives in a certain way.

For the first results section (Study Two), CNF is used to provide in-depth, encompassing accounts of the academy environment. The second results section (Study Three) uses CNF to describe player experiences of the different JtST pathways

and presents the lived experiences of these transitions. As the approach suggests the vignettes are a work of non-fiction, however they are informed by real life events. Each of the CNFs follow a composite character, created for the purpose of the vignette. These characters have been informed and based upon multiple real player and participant experiences that have been deconstructed and analysed in the data analysis process. Once the key themes and player journeys had been identified and represented (in the final season timelines) it was then time to begin developing each of the creative non-fictions.

Whilst the overall setting and background events (the predictable football events such as game day, player review meetings, international break etc.) were pre-determined due to the research setting the creation of the composite characters required more focus. I followed the guidelines of Orr and colleagues (2021), who mandate that the character development should come first, followed by the specific plot development before a period of critical reflection on the non-fiction. This creative reflection was done individually (by me) after each composite creation, and then as a research team we evaluation each of the composites, both as individual stories but also as a collection of composites. Critically reflecting as a group allowed the research team to question and challenge the rationale for each composite character, alongside ensuring the overall themes and findings that the creative non-fictions presented as a group were clear and identifiable.

4.3. Study Two Results and Discussion

Before introducing each of the vignettes I (as the P-R) feel that it is important to give a brief introduction to the WSL academy the research has taken place. This

provides further context of the club environment (in addition to that presented in Section 2.6 – An Introduction to the Research Setting), and allows the reader to clearly picture the wider setting in which each of the vignettes is positioned. This deeper level of understanding allows for further immersion into each of the vignettes, meaning that the reader is able to fully visualise and resonate with the events and behaviours that the CNFs focus on (Cavallerio, 2021). The academy environment will be referred to throughout the subsequent results sections as Oakvale FC and is introduced in the next paragraph.

Oakvale FC Womens has six teams ranging from U10 to first team level, with first team players on full time contracts and a full-time training schedule. The academy (U21s team) has been part of the revamped WSL academy league since its initiation in the 2018/2019 season. The WSL academy teams play within a league and a cup competition with knockout rounds. This is to shadow the structure that the WSL and Championship leagues follow at first team. In contrast to the games played on a weekend by the first team, the academy games are played on a Wednesday. This has been implemented by The FA to ensure each WSL academy follows a full-time, dual career structure which affords players at least one weekend day off from both college and football each week. All players entering the academy at the age of 16 are initially registered for a two-year period. Additionally, those players are automatically enrolled onto a two-year diploma resulting in a qualification, which gives the players additional UCAS points should they wish to apply for university. Players are encouraged to complete this diploma but are not required to as part of their registration with the academy. If players choose to transfer to a different WSL academy their qualification can be continued with their new club. After this period players are registered on a season-to-season basis, with review meetings typically held in March. This ensures

that meetings do not clash with the exam period for players completing A Level or BTEC qualifications.

The four vignettes that follow reflect data collected across three seasons (2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021). Although each vignette represents only a brief snapshot in time, they each signify key themes that were consistent throughout the data collection period (25 months) at Oakvale Academy. Each vignette is written from my point of view (as the P-R), with reflective thoughts that I had at the time of the events interspersed throughout. These thoughts indicate to the reader how I considered and evaluated the events that I was observing (and conversations that I was participating in) and have been written in parentheses so they can be clearly identified by the reader.

4.3.1. Football or Education? Perfecting the balancing act.

Ella is a 17-year-old player in her first year at college and has been at Oakvale FC since the start of the U14s. More recently she has been training with the first team. She has been named as a substitute for a small number of first team home games but is yet to make her debut. Ella is regularly called up for U19 England camps and has been identified (by both club and international staff) as a player who is likely to make it as a WSL player. In addition to being recognised as an impressive player, Ella is also studying four A-Levels (Business, Maths, Psychology and Biology). The vignette begins with a pivotal decision around Ella's first team future driven by her education commitments.

I made my way down the corridor of the academy, towards the classroom for our weekly Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) meeting. As I walked through the double doors I heard steps behind me, 'Al! Hold on!!' I turned round to see our education officer Louisa jogging towards me. 'Have you heard about Ella?' Louisa asked, as I settled into my seat looking out at some of the younger boy's teams training on the grass. 'No? Everything okay?' 'Yeah, fine it's just the decision has been made for her to come back down [from the first team] to train with the U21s full-time, and I'm not too sure how she's going to take it…' I snap my attention back into the room, looking at Louisa as she continues. 'She's just missing far too much college being up at the first team full-time, and she's starting to properly fall behind with her education… All of her PE sessions are on a Friday and that's one of the most important days with the first team. It's one of the most intense sessions and it's all about match day prep… but it just doesn't work for her at the minute with college. She's going to be in a mess come May if she stays up there now'. 'Right okay… Who made that decision then?' I ask, (Coaches have a habit of just telling players they're going back to the 20s without actually explaining or rationalising the decision, if Ella hasn't been given much information, she's going to digest this change with much more frustration and anger. This also makes my job much more difficult, trying to help players piece together the decision rational has become a regular thing, more detective/damage control than sport psychologist…) *'Well,' Louisa starts, 'I was speaking to her college and they said she's been missing a lot and they were a bit worried, and so then I spoke to Josie (the U21s head coach) …' 'Ahh why are my ears burning!!' Josie laughed as she entered the room, followed by the rest of the U21s staff. 'I was just updating on Ella' Louisa laughed. 'Oh right, yeah great, let's get everyone in and settled and we'll start with her'.*

*'Okay right' Josie settles into her chair, balancing the coffees she has brought from the canteen on a tray and handing them round the room, 'Ella. Ella will be coming back down to train full-time with us as of next week. Louisa and I met with the first team coach last week to discuss and because of the COVID bubbles, she can't train across the first team and U21s so she's coming back to us because her education is more important at the minute. She's getting slammed with her A-Levels and we just need to protect her a little bit... She's been told by Louisa and up at the first team, Al, can you check in with her when she's back please and check how she's feeling about it all? 'What is she doing at college?' Matt the goal-keeping coach asks, 'Maths, Physics, Business and PE' Louisa replies. 'Jesus CHRIST' Matt splutters as he takes a sip of his coffee, 'Brainbox or what… Imagine one of the lads across in the U21s trying to manage that, be mad'. The whole MDT takes a pause, considering this. (*The idea is laughable. The boys wouldn't even consider, never mind be expected to manage their education as well as their football. It's all fine for the boys to drop everything to focus on football, but the girls? No. they're constantly being overstretched, trying to manage different environments and the challenges that come with each*).*

*Louisa brings us back into the room, 'Yeah exactly, and she's predicted all A grades as well, so we need to make it possible for her, especially with this being her first year (in the academy environment), she wants to be in a good position for universities et cetera. if she goes that way'. 'What about Anna?' I ask. (*Anna is a player the same age as Ella, who moved up to the first team at the same time. Having players together might seem great, for social support and team cohesion, but in reality? As soon as one gets dropped back down and the other allowed to stay it becomes ugly*). 'Err...' Louisa starts. 'Anna is staying at the first team' Josie interjects, 'They want*

her up there cause she's in the match day squads more often now. She's dropped an A-Level so she can stay there and not fall behind'. I sensed that this was something that had been heavily discussed already, I caught Louisa's eye and quickly made the choice not to pick it up further, 'Okay cool' I replied, 'I'll pick up with Ella'. (AKA, try to limit Ella's assumptions that she's been dropped down due to her under-performing, rather than because of her education which is no doubt what she will assume. Education is often seen to be an 'easy way out' for the coaches when discussing why players have been returned to the U20's).

It's the start of a new training week, and I duck through the gym on the way to the pitch, trying to stay out of the rain for as long as possible. I walk towards the cluster of physio beds, where there's a group of the U21 players crowded around one of the player's phones, laughing at a video. Sitting a couple of beds away, looking out through the open doors towards the pitches is Ella. Facing away from the group of players, she's taken one boot off and is pulling her sock down. 'Hey stranger', I call from behind her, 'All good?' I ask as I move beside her. 'Yeah fine' she smiles, moving her boots and indicating I can sit down, 'Just need a plaster, these new boots are killer'. 'They look absolutely tiny!' I laugh, picking the boot up and holding it to her foot, 'No wonder you've got blisters! You sure you've got the right size?' She laughs, 'I'm not that dopey! How's things with you anyway?' she asks, 'Not too bad thanks, how about you? Nice to see you…' 'Yeah' she replies, looking down and watching her legs swing backwards and forwards. 'Not sure nice is the word I would use… It's just so annoying. It would be absolutely fine if it wasn't for PE you know. It's just because I've got all my practical on Friday, and that's the best training day for me to be a part of as well. I said I can catch up on work on the weekends though.' 'Even if you're in the match day squads?' I asked gently. 'Well no…' she smiles down at her boot,

*'Maybe not then, it doesn't matter anyway the decision was made before the meeting with me, nothing I said would've changed it.' (*This confirms my thoughts. The decision has been made for Ella, rather than giving her the opportunity to discuss how she could work to fit both college and football into her timetable. I can understand the player frustrations, one minute they're being told to have more independence, to approach the coaches to discuss their decisions and futures like senior players, and the then next there those opportunities are being dragged away from them*).*

She takes a big sigh, and I feel there is more. I wait. 'Right, it's just, I know Louisa is only trying to help, but I just feel like she wants everyone to love education as much as her, but not everyone does. I want to do good in my A Levels, but I want to go as far as I can in football as well and this was helping me to do that. I just know if she hadn't said anything to the first team, or to Josie, I would probably still be there. Anna is still there, isn't she? It's just dead annoying.' I pause, waiting for her to finish… 'Like I know A Levels are important and I want to do well but I want to focus on first team straight after and maybe go to uni a bit later. That [football] feels more important now.' She takes a deep breath, 'Sorry rant over'. We laugh. 'Feel better now?' I smile. 'Yeah – I do actually'.

The physio comes over with a plaster, seeing our deep conversation she hands it to Ella and quickly retreats back to another player. 'Okay, education aside, how do you feel about being back here then?' She stops opening the plaster and looks at me with her eyebrows raised. She concentrates her attention back to the plaster and mutters, 'Well it's annoying isn't it. I was just feeling settled and now I'm back down here... it's fine because I know I can play here every week, but I don't want to fall behind from first team level and just have to start again after I finish my exams'. 'Is

*that what they've said?' I question, 'Yeah!' she laughs, 'Which I just don't really understand one bit, but there we go. I suppose we'll see if they actually take me back won't we…' (*Again, reinforcing little faith in the messages and promises from the first team. This is what makes it so difficult to be able to prepare players on the pitch but also psycho-socially for future transitions. It is so hard to know when, and even if, it will happen again and if they players, or us as staff, will be primed*). She pulls her socks back up and ties her boot, tightly, in a double knot. 'Oh well, just another day in paradise at Oakvale FC isn't it… Thanks for checking on me though Al'. 'Anytime, let's catch up at the end of the week' I call, as she makes her way out onto the pitch, coat zipped right up, and shoulders hunched. I watch her as I lean against the physio bed; she grabs her GPS unit and starts stretching, alone, away from the group of girls who are ready and waiting for the night's session to begin.*

Analysis and Discussion

The change in Ella's training environment, from first team back down to the U21s environment, was driven by education demands rather than her ability to perform in a senior environment. Unlike male players of the same age (and at the same stage in their playing careers), Ella's education and footballing commitments are kept separate, requiring Ella (with the support of the education officer) to navigate her own education pathway. In contrast to the male game, where players are offered an education or apprenticeship pathway that fits around their footballing aspirations (Larsen et al., 2014; 2020), Ella is required to continually work to balance the two environments, often having to catch-up with education outside of her training and playing. This intense dual career pursuit has become routine for female players at

academy level. Female players must ensure they are prepared for a dual career (Harrison et al., 2019), with most players still looking to balance their playing career with university degrees or a second employed role (Dunn & Welford, 2014; Sleeman & Ronkainen, 2020).

The transition from the first team back to the U20's is typically driven from a struggle to keep up with the senior players/athletes' physicality and technical ability, with moving back down offering the athlete a chance to work on their shortfalls and prove themselves worthy of another chance in the first team (Dowling et al., 2018). The decision for a player to return to the academy environment traditionally comes from the first team head coach and staff, however in the WSL academy environment this decision can be identified and driven by other members of staff, in this case the education officer. This lack of control and autonomy makes it all the more frustrating for Ella as she attempts to manage expectations for next season. Furthermore, Ella is further frustrated by the decision for Anna to remain at first team due to her dropping an A-Level to give her more time to manage her education alongside her football aspirations. This reinforces the surprise shown by the staff members of having a player who is showing potential in both her academic and footballing pursuits. There is no educational norm, or expected standard, within the academies, some players will do the bare minimum to allow them to focus solely on achieving senior success, whilst others will strive to achieve academic success alongside their football. This makes supporting players, and making these decisions, a completely individualised process. As such, in this instance Ella feels punished for pursuing an academic career that is often not seen in football, feeling as though if she had pursued an education such as Anna's (which is more flexible to the senior team demands), she would have been afforded the same opportunities to prove herself.

When driven solely by performance-based decisions, transitions can be abrupt and unexpected, leaving an athlete little time to adjust back into their environments (Dowling 2020, McCready et al., 2019). In the female game, where there is a shared focus on education and football development (at academy level), transitions between teams must be better prepared and planned for, and so are often informed and influenced by multiple members of the MDT, rather than just the performance staff. The purpose of transitioning Ella back into the U21s was both to protect her future dual career options and ensure that she could cope with the demands of college education. Research has shown that athlete's second careers are typically driven and informed by their sporting careers, with many athletes pursuing careers in coaching, punditry or support staff roles after retirement (Culvin, 2021; Sleeman & Ronkainen, 2020). This affords athletes to continue to relate (at some level) to their identity as an athlete, which can soften the challenges that often come with retiring from professional sport (Knights et al., 2019). Currently across the WSL and championship senior players range from being contracted full time as players to being contracted part-time and considering playing as their second career (Clarkson et al., 2022; Woodhouse et al., 2019). As such, players at development level must be prepared for their early senior playing years (and potentially whole playing career) to exist in a part-time capacity.

Ella is currently studying for four A-Levels, in subjects outside of sport and coaching, to allow her multiple career options. This affords her to be flexible with her dual career options rather than being limited to only being able to draw upon her athlete experiences. Whilst this offers opportunities to develop multiple identities alongside a range of skills and professional competencies (Cartigny et al., 2021), it also means that Ella is required to manage a number of external demands alongside

those within football. Managing multiple different environments, identities and demands can be psychological and socially demanding for individuals (Knight et al., 2018; Rossi & Hallman., 2022). Thus, emphasising the need for female academy players to be supported not only with their football development and aspirations, but equally with their educational and vocational needs.

4.3.2. 'No one's actually here until they're 21 though, are they?'

Nineteen year-old Molly is an U21s player who is currently considering her options for next season. The vignette takes place during a standard training session in March, following the completion of each of the player's review meeting. This is where the head coach informs players whether they have been offered a position at the club for next season, or whether they are being de-registered; released. Previously a regular at international (U15 and U17) training and competition camps, Molly has spent a lot of time training with the first team during her three seasons at the club. More recently Molly has spent most of her time in the U21s environment as there are a number of first team players already competing to play in her position. Molly has had good experiences with the first team previously, but was frustrated to find out that she was returning to the U21s.

In recent conversations Molly has admitted that she feels there was little communication as to why she was returning (or for how long), with her development opportunities being cut short. In addition, Molly is in her second and final year at college, feeling under pressure to make decisions about her future in both education

and football. The vignette begins around a fortnight after Molly was offered a contract to stay with the U21s for another season, with no mention of a potential senior contract or a plan for her involvement in the senior training sessions next season.

*I locked my car and headed towards the canteen, hoping I wasn't too late to grab a drink before it closed up for the night. Arriving whilst the sun was still up seemed to do wonders for everyone's moods. The other coaches unpacking their coaching kit from their cars shouted across their orders, anticipating where I was going. I laughed, walking away from them as I heard a call behind me 'Hey Al! One sec!' I turn to see Molly jogging towards me, she doesn't speak again until she is close enough to speak more quietly, 'Can we grab a quick chat before I start to warm-up please?' 'Sure thing kid, I'm just going to get drinks, want to walk and talk?' I respond. 'Err actually', she swivels her head and once she's confirmed there's no-one close, 'can we go inside, and have like, a proper chat and that?' (*This is unusual for Molly, she is generally very happy to stand and chat on the side of the pitch or as we walk to and from the changing rooms. I sense that this is an important conversation for her. Something that she doesn't want to be questioned on by other players or members of staff*). She visibly relaxes when I answer 'of course we can, let's go in here', directing her into the main academy building where I know we can grab a private room, and where it is unlikely that any of the U21s staff will pass us on our way. (*In instances like this, it is essential to act quickly, grabbing the opportunity to speak to players with both hands. These conversations usually centre around reactions to critical moments, and whilst they may seem to the player like off-the-cuff discussions, they usually turn into safe but rare interactions where they get the chance to speak openly and honestly).

*As we got settled into one of the meeting rooms, Molly making sure to close the door behind her, pushing it twice guaranteeing it was shut. (*I'm intrigued by her behaviour and wonder what this was all about. I make a mental note to make sure that Molly navigates the conversation herself, allowing her the opportunity to guide me through everything she wants to discuss*). Through our previous interactions I was aware that Molly had been getting frustrated recently with the lack of communication from both the first team head coach and the U21s coach. She had tried to be as pro-active as possible in getting feedback from them about her prospects for next season and beyond, wanting to know how she could improve her chances of becoming a senior, professional footballer. There had been a number of occasions now where she had organised to speak with the first team coach to get feedback and advice, and they had rearranged or tried to get her to speak to the U21s staff instead. Just last week the coach had told her she would have to ring her back, and had promptly forgotten, leaving Molly feeling frustrated and rejected. In her review meeting last week with the U21s head coach Molly was offered a season long contract to stay with the U21s. During this meeting Molly asked what her prospects were with regards to training with the first team. She was told that whilst it was likely she would be invited to train with them across the season she would be registered as an U21s player, and that's what she should focus on for now. Since the meetings, a couple of players in similar positions to Molly had been vocal during training about looking for opportunities to play senior football (elsewhere) next season. (*Whilst this was always commonplace towards the end of the season, this season it was all players who had previously had first team experience. This made it more surprising to both players and staff, as if because they had been at first team, they should be more likely to stay*).*

*I perched on one of the tables in the meeting room, whilst Molly took off her bag and coat, settling into the chair. She slipped off her sliders and made herself comfortable; we were here for the long haul... 'I've been thinking about next season,' she started, 'I know that I've been offered a contract here and they've said that they might start bringing me up properly to first team, but if they were going to do that, they would have offered me a proper contract not just the 21's again'. She paused, I waited. 'Like, if I knew that I was going to be up there regularly then yeah okay, but I'm not, am I? They've just said that to get me to sign for another season. I've been here three years yeah, and I just feel like if I'm not going to be in that first team environment for at least, well, like most of the training sessions then I would rather just concentrate on going to uni and playing senior somewhere else. Lower league or something, you know?' I sense she's looking for me to agree. (*I am reluctant to do that. I ask Molly to think about what her true thoughts are, rather than telling Molly what to do, as is commonplace in the development environment, I was her to navigate her own thoughts without being influenced by what I think might be best*).*

'Okay… have you spoken to our [first team] head coach about this?' I ask. 'Yeah, well I tried to, she just says that those opportunities will come if I keep working hard, but I know she's just saying that to keep me here. I was speaking to my dad about uni, and I just want to know what I'm doing and that's going to fit. I don't want to choose a uni thinking I'll be staying here, and then have to change clubs next year cause I'm still not breaking through and have to deal with that halfway through uni. Like I could move out and go to a uni further away and play for a club there couldn't I?' 'You could yeah,' I respond, 'that would be a lot of change at once though Molly, moving out, university and a new club'. 'It would be yeah, maybe it's what I need though, I feel like I'm just losing motivation everyday here'.

Her phone, which is face down on the table, buzzes and instead of flipping it to see who it is, like she normally would, she ignores it, shoving it straight into her pocket. (This reinforces to me how important Molly feels this conversation is, usually she would happily multi-task, talking to me whilst tapping away. This is a huge, defining decision and Molly knows it*). Carrying on, 'there's players here that are younger than me, that are training properly with the first team, they'll be focusing on those players next season, you watch. If they were going to take me, I think they'd have done it by now'. She looks directly at me, eyebrows raised, waiting. 'You don't know that for certain though, do you Mol? Anything could happen, you're only 19, remember this is U21's…' She snorts, 'Yeah but no one is in the 21's until they're actually 21 are they though Al? They're either up with the first team just coming down to play games, or they've gone to play senior somewhere else.' I know she is thinking about players who were in her position last season and are now playing regularly for their senior championship teams. 'Do you think that senior football is better for you to develop over being here, in a WSL academy though?' (*I'm not sure what her response to this might be, and I'm not sure what my thoughts would be if she asked me, but it felt important to ask her, to get her to consider every angle. I feel as though I'm one of the few people who might be able to get Molly to think this way, without her feeling as though she was being driven to a certain decision*). 'Yeah, I do. Even if the training there is the same, or even a little bit less quality, you're playing against adults, they're going to be stronger and faster, and that pushes you to develop in a different way. I'm not going to get stronger on the ball if I'm going up against little 16-year-olds for another season, am I? I know you're just trying to make me think about it all Al, but I just don't see myself getting better doing another season with 16-year-olds.' She inhales deeply, shrugs, and looks at me with a weak smile.* (Something

tells me I'm going to have quite a few conversations like this over the coming weeks…).

Analysis and Discussion

Alongside considering her options for a career in senior football, Molly is at an important point with her education. As she nears the end of her college education, she is considering not only whether to attend university, but also where to study (i.e., stay living at home/move further away). Molly is preparing to face multiple transitions with regards to her athletic and vocational careers. This resonates with Wylleman and Lavallee's Holistic Athletic Career Model (HACM, 2004, 2019), which explores the different transitions that an athlete might face throughout their career. The model suggests that as an athlete transitions into adulthood (around the age of 18/19), they can face different transitions alongside one another. This is especially so for Molly, as she considers transitioning into senior football alongside transitioning into higher education.

Previous research has suggested that experiencing multiple transitions simultaneously, especially career-related transitions (Mateu et al., 2020; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), can be psycho-socially demanding for athletes. The turbulence and isolation that often comes with transitioning into a new environment can cause athletes to feel as though they do not have enough resources (internal and external) to cope with the transition itself (Stambulova, 2017). This can lead athletes to experience a crisis-transition (Stambulova et al., 2021). Molly, however, considers the benefits of experiencing the two transitions hand-in-hand, suggesting that she would rather experience them at the same time, than transition to a new club part-way through her

university degree. It is possible that this thought pattern is a consequence of the Regional Training Centre (RTC) and youth international structure. Molly has become accustomed to transitioning every two years into a new playing team (e.g., U14 to U16 and U16 to U21 at club level, U15 to U17 to U19 at international level). Each of these RTC transitions mimic the education pathway, where students spend two years studying for their GCSE's (whilst simultaneously in the U16's), before transitioning into a sixth form/college environment where they spend 2/3 years studying for A-Levels or BTEC qualifications (at the same time transitioning into the U21's). As such, it is possible that Molly has succumbed to feeling she should also be progressing with her football journey, as she has done previously in line with the two-year education pattern.

Since the development of the HACM, Ronkainen and colleagues have considered the impact that financial support and changes in financial circumstances can have on athletes. This led to the adding of a financial layer to the original HACM (Ronkainen et al., 2019). The additional layer indicates that as athletes reach adulthood, there is often a shift in the athlete's sources of income and financial support. Alongside the transitions into new senior environments and vocations, athletes often experience the desire to become more independent, breaking away from their parents/support systems that they often depend on as younger athletes (López-Flores et al., 2021). This can be demonstrated with Molly's desire to move out and go to university away from home, where she would be more independent. As with previous research into psycho-social development, the transition into adulthood often encompasses individual desires to become more self-sufficient (Harwood et al., 2019).

Moreover, during this period of their development athletes who may view themselves in the early stages of professionalisation show a want to no longer having to rely on support systems for finances, travel to and from training and games and a shift in who they turn to for emotional support. Athletes are often reluctant to turn to parents/carers for further financial and social support, rather they want to showcase an element of independence that comes as a result of being newly professional (Vickers & Morris, 2022). Whilst Molly expresses that she would be happy to stay living at home if she were to be offered a senior contract, if that does not happen, she is motivated to seek development and independence through other pathways (such as going to university and playing in a senior team in a lower league). This is further reinforced by the acknowledgement that within her team, 'no one is in the 21's until they're actually 21', suggesting that players before her have also transitioned out of the team at similar ages to herself.

In addition to concurrent transitions (in many different domains i.e., performance/educational/psycho-social) influencing Molly's thoughts, she also alludes to her current development trepidations now that she has transitioned back into the U21's. When considering the best environment for her development, Molly is fearful that being back with the younger players will negatively impact her progress. Within the male game, players in similar positions to Molly's are often sent out on loan. This allows them to not only become familiar with playing senior football but also to overcome the challenges that come with transitioning into new teams, the performance pressures and to player identity (Kent et al., 2022). The loan process typically allows a phased approach to development. Players are able to progress from the academy environment, developing in a lower league senior team, until (all being well) they are returned to their desired first-team environment (Abbott & Clifford,

2021). The option of a loan period is rare in the women's environment due factors such as: *i*) there being fewer teams/leagues in which players can be sent out to on loan, *ii*) the short-term nature of contracts in the female game compared to the men's, and *iii*) the range of full-time to part-time timetables across leagues making it difficult for players to move between clubs (Clarkson et al., 2020). Players, as a result, feel that the academy environment begins to lack opportunity, and with little to no offering of a new environment or new challenge from their clubs at a systemic level, players will begin to make their own judgements and decisions about their development pathways.

With less opportunity for development, and new challenges available to female academy players, those in similar positions to Molly (who are no longer involved in the first team environment) find themselves seeking new challenges, such as lower league senior environments. In essence, players begin to seek opportunities to develop themselves, of their own volition, rather than relying on the strategic intent and pathways within their club. This suggests a lack of trust from the players in the development pathway, feeling that they themselves are better equipped to manage their futures. As such, players leave the WSL academy environments before the age of 21, following the assumption that those who do not 'make it' into the WSL environment by the age of 18/19 are unlikely to do so. Players drop down to lower league senior teams, with aspirations of transitioning back up into the WSL environment. This process results in far fewer young players being consistent figures in the senior environment thus widening the gap between the youth and senior teams even further, as senior teams become predominantly made up of experienced players who have been established in the first team for a number of years. This makes it even harder for youth players to them break into (or even imagine breaking in to) the senior environment.

4.3.3. 'That's just what it's like when you play football and want to win. It's not personal.' The aftermath of in-game communication.

Following a disappointing draw in their recent league game, this vignette outlines a conversation with one of the more senior players, who often helps lead the team alongside the captain. Amelia, an 18-year-old player who has previous first team experience is often called upon by staff members to give her thoughts about performances, suggest ideas of how to move forward and improve in training and (as recognised from conversations with others) is highly regarded by both the staff and players in her team. Having spent time at the first team, Amelia is familiar and comfortable within the senior environment and has previously voiced to me that she feels more comfortable playing with adults than she does with the younger players in the U21's team.

In addition, through my observations Amelia has recently become visibly frustrated with the younger players during training sessions, becoming much more vocal in team talks with the captain often turning to her for support and guidance. I have a good relationship with Amelia, we've had many conversations in the past and she has never been shy in asking for advice when she felt she needed it. Although respectful to the head-coach, Amelia has confided to me that she feels she does not have a particularly good relationship with either the current U21s or first team head coach and is conscious that this is something she places value on and would like in her 'next team'.

Why are the last 5 minutes of a game always the slowest? I sat in the stands, hands stuffed into my pockets, sat between the GK (goalkeeper) and physical

*performance coaches, both of their faces pulled into frowns. The team had just conceded in the 85th minute to take the score to 2-2. I watched the behaviours of the players, looking to see who were taking on leadership roles and who looked more like rabbits in headlights. There were five U16s players playing up a level due to having a large number of the U21s players injured, and their inexperience had shown. 'HEY come on! Don't switch off!!' Mine and the two coaches' heads swivelled in unison to follow the voice. Amelia was running back, head over her shoulder, commanding the younger players around her to follow her movements. One of the younger players turned and started to follow the ball, switching positions. 'What the F**k! No! Get back and stay in position!!' One of the opposition takes a low shot which glides past the younger player, the keeper scrambles and by some miracle stops the ball. We all let out a breath we had unconsciously been holding. Amelia congratulates the keeper, both of them shaking their heads, huddled together speaking frantically. The play continues for a minute before the referee blows their whistle. 'Thank god for that' sighs the GK coach, as he stands, pulls on his jacket and heads down towards the keeper.*

The players of each team congratulate one another, and a few huddle together in small groups discussing the games events. I stand up, watching the different reactions and behaviours of the players. Amelia finishes her conversation with the GK (her closest friend in the team) and walks purposefully towards the referee and two assistants. She smiles as the referee gives her 'thank-yous' and then turns, heading straight towards the changing room. Her head is down, not welcoming any of the players from either team to start a conversation. Again, reinforcing the gap between the older and younger players to me, as the younger players look unbothered, staying out on the pitch to talk to the opposing team. A couple of the older girls walk closely

behind her. The head coach keeps her post-game talks brief, regardless of the score or the performance, and so I wait between the changing rooms and the car park to say goodbye to the players. After a handful have come out, Amy, the physio, staggers out, dragging her assorted bags behind her. I walk to meet her, taking one of her bags from her shoulder. We walk towards her car, 'Did you see Amelia on your way through?' I ask. 'No, she shot off straight away' Amy replies, 'I don't think she even took her boots off you know'. I help to pack all the kit into Amy's car, making a mental note to catch up with her [Amelia] next time I see her.

*When I arrive early at training a couple of days later Amelia is already there, sat on the benches under the heaters on the other side of the training pitch. She glances up as I start to make my way onto the pitch and waves. I start to head across to her. As I get closer, she takes her hood down and her headphones out, I take this as my invitation to sit down. (*It took time to build my relationship with Amelia, and as a result I know when a good time was to approach for a chat, and alternatively when I may be shut out from her thoughts. Her acknowledging my presence was a sign of openness to conversation*). 'Hey' I smile as we do the standard fist-pump greeting, 'Can we catch up?' 'Yeah, yeah, of course, always got time for you Al', she smiles, moving her bag from the seat next to her. We sit facing outwards, watching some of the younger age coaches setting up their session for the evening, alongside playing a game of crossbar challenge. One of the 16's coaches hits the bar on his first go, running off to do a celebration; 'children' laughs Amelia, 'tell me about it, they're as bad as you lot' I smile. (*Although she had shown she was open to the conversation, I sense I may have to be the driver of this one to begin with*). 'So' turning the conversation onto Amelia, 'how are you feeling after the game?' 'Ah Al, my head just proper fell off you know' she admitted. 'It's just so annoying because okay, yeah, I*

know we're an "inexperienced team", she does little quotation marks with her hands, a gesture to how the head-coach had described them before the game on Wednesday, 'but it's just like, you can't even call some of them (the younger players) out on stuff without them getting offended. People are so sensitive, and I know sometimes in the moment things can come across a bit savage, but that's just what it's like when you play football and you want to win. It's not personal. If they want to play at actual senior level they need to get used to it'. (Again, emphasising the gap between players that I had started to observe myself).

I pause, considering my next question. 'Do you find it hard, going from first team back to here?' 'Yeah' Amelia confesses, 'because like, you get used to it at a senior level, even just like the banter and stuff, and if you do something wrong the players will tell you more than the coach. I mean unless it's something massive, but if it's little or during play it'll be a player calling you out on the pitch and everyone just gets on with it, but here if you say it they can't hack it. You're the bad guy. It's just a bit silly. I want to play with adults and people who aren't going to go home and cry if you call them out for doing something wrong, or try to tell them a better way to do something.' (Amelia has opened-up more than I originally thought, as if she has been waiting for someone to ask these questions*). 'Is that having an effect on what you're thinking for next season?' I prompt, sensing that this is what she is waiting to say. 'Yeah, kind of yeah, because if I'm thinking would I rather be here or go and play senior somewhere new, maybe even go a league down I think I would rather do that, because it's only going to get worse next year when more U16s come up. I'm literally like the last 19 turning 20-year old. I don't know, I'll just have to see…' she turns her head, sitting up and looking straight at me for the first time.* I get the sense this is something that has been playing on her mind for a while.

Analysis and Discussion

Transition literature indicates that athletes transitioning from a junior to senior environment (and back again) not only struggle with the change and development in performance level, but also with subsequent psycho-social changes that result from the yo-yoing between environments (Franck & Stambulova, 2018; McGreary et al., 2021). New, younger players can be seen as either a threat or as not worthy of being in the first team environment, which can lead them to feeling isolated and lonely whilst proving themselves to their new teammates (Gustafsson et al., 2016). Moreover, as highlighted in Chapter Three (Study One) of this thesis, senior players are often used to junior players fluctuating in and out of the environment across a season, and so do not feel it is worth accepting them fully as senior players until they have become a more regular presence. This yo-yo movement, and involvement in two contrasting environments can be unsettling for junior players. As alluded to by Amelia, once a player becomes more comfortable in the first team environment, matching behaviours with their senior counterparts, they can find themselves bringing these behaviours back into the junior environment. This can often negatively impact relationships with junior teammates, leaving Amelia struggling to know where she belongs whilst in the transition period, which can take months (and in some instances seasons) to be carried out (Dowling et al., 2018).

Considering the research exploring the difficulty that athletes face when transitioning into a senior environment (Drew et al., 2019, Swainston et al., 2020), by comparison Amelia has had a positive experience. Rather, Amelia has found it more difficult transitioning back into the junior environment (under 21's), after becoming

used to behaviours and communication styles of the adult players. The vignette discloses differences in both on and off pitch communication and how these disparities can make spending time across the two environments difficult to adjust to. Already being one of the older players in the team, Amelia has found that her experiences with the senior team have reinforced her readiness for professional, senior football. Alongside the technical and tactical challenges, she notes how she feels more socially comfortable in an older team. This is in line with Eriksen's Psychosocial Theory of Development, (1969) which suggests that as adolescent individuals reach adulthood they prefer to be surrounded by adult individuals, as they are more likely to be given more control and ownership of their decisions alongside more independence.

Furthermore, when on the pitch Amelia recognises the benefit of having more player-driven communication, a characteristic synonymous with a senior environment (Larsen et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2016). Whilst this means that her experience within first team football has been largely positive, it has resulted in Amelia feeling progressively separated from her U21's teammates. This can (and as the vignette shows has) started to cause conflicts amongst the team, resulting in a visible gap growing between the younger, more inexperienced players and those who are looking towards senior, professional contracts.

To draw parallel with the male game, whilst players still describe similar challenges and isolation when transitioning to new teams (Chamorro et al., 2019; Taylor & Bruner 2012), the male transition pathway provides increased opportunities for players to move into new environments and establish themselves into different teams (Rye et al., 2022). Richardson and colleagues (2013) demonstrate this pathway with their Sociocultural Model of Elite Player Development. This model identifies the

opportunity that male players have to transition into a 'post-academy' team, where players are positioned to focus on 'developing mastery'. This affords players to be situated alongside those in similar positions to themselves, who are focused on reaching professional, first-team football. Moreover, the coaching staff should be more aware of their role in developing individuals for the first team whilst managing their respective under 23s team. The post-academy phase, within the men's game, allows players to become familiar (and comfortable) with being in a (more) meaningful competitive, senior environment (Richardson et al., 2012). It is during this phase (in the men's game) that players are often sent out on loan to other senior teams, further challenging the players ability to cope and perform at senior level within a more meaningful competitive environment. As such, this phase aims to develop and prime players to be prepared for the merciless nature of first team professional football, that they will face should they be successful in their senior careers. By comparison, the female environment and Amelia's journey to professional football does not afford her the same development experiences. In contrast to Richardson and colleagues' model, the female game currently does not have a 'post-academy' phase, thus reducing the opportunity that players have to develop alongside a team of players in similar situations to themselves

As shown by Amelia, players who show potential spend time moving between two contrasting environments; the more nurturing, developmental environment and the challenging, senior environment. As this continues to be drawn out, periods of frustration, challenges to belonging and identity confusion begin to arise more often. Moreover, whilst in the male game loan periods are common to develop senior experience (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021), for this to happen in the female game the player must first prove her worth to the first team (in order to earn her a professional

contract which will in turn allow her to be loaned out). This leaves a void between the academy and first team environments which players feel they have to navigate themselves. Consequently, players often become stuck in a yo-yo period, where they train with the first team whilst playing for the academy team. The time-period of this stage is often undefined and can leave players struggling with being exposed to two very different environments (Swainston et al., 2021) as exhibited by Amelia. As such, the vignette explores the frustrations and challenges that players face when at the beginning of transition to senior football, with players such as Amelia often opting to remain aligned with the senior environment despite it causing periods of conflict and periods of isolation within the junior environment.

4.3.4. Developing more than just players, the demands of an U21's coach.

The start of each season at Oakvale FC begins with a player induction evening, where U21s players and staff are brought together to present plans for pre-season and the competitive season (once it begins), introduce any environment changes (such as location, timetabling or new staff) and set the scene for the season ahead. The parents of the U18 players are always invited to attend, and this invitation is typically well received. The following vignette highlights Sophie's (the U21's head coach) induction evening presentation. Sophie has been in the role for around eight months, joining mid-way through the last season after the previous head coach left abruptly. Sophie has worked to develop a good relationship with the first team head coach and has been open with the players about wanting to create a more succinct pathway to the first team. In addition, Sophie has voiced how important she feels it is to work within a multi-disciplinary environment, where all staff contribute to the positive development

of players both on and off the pitch. The vignette takes note of how the U21's staff, particularly the head coach, are challenged not only to develop the players as footballers, but also as young adults who are still developing socially and psychologically.

I settled back into my sofa, laptop balanced on my knee, trying not to spill my drink all over the keyboard. Never again will I complain about standing in the wind and the rain. Everyone, including me, is so ready to be back on the side of the pitch having actual in-person communication. As if reading my mind Sophie began 'Right hi everybody, it's lovely to see everyone together, staff players, parents... Well somewhat together, it's nice to see all your faces, let us leave it there. Okay, so as you know, the start of season induction looks a little different this year for obvious reasons, however you will be very glad to know that after tonight we will FINALLY be back in person. Clearly, training will look a little different from last time we were all together in order to keep us safe, but we will go through that a little later. To kick us off, Louisa – can you take us through education, transport and how that's all going to look this season please?' Louisa briefly introduces how the additional diploma that all the girls aged 16-18 are enrolled on will run now that the teaching sessions are online and discusses some brief changes to transport routes (from certain colleges to training and then back home) to include new players.

'Okay great' Sophie brings everyone's attention back. The players sit up, parents reappear back into the small tiles on the screen, ready to listen to Sophie and her plans for the upcoming season. 'So then, this season, with this team, I feel we can harness something really, really great. We've got a strong team of players, we've got a strong staff team and I know just how ready we are to all get back out on the grass

*and to get things going properly. I want to make one thing clear though, yes- we are developing players for the first team, of course we are, but we are also working to develop those who are able to manage and succeed at having dual careers, we've got players taking A Levels, players at university, players who are working and we are supporting and developing you all. We want to develop young adults with a depth of talents and abilities. (*The use of "we feel" is powerful here, acknowledging the whole staff team and how we all want what is best for the players*).*

Some of you will go on to play football as your careers, some for Championship and WSL, and no doubt, some for your own countries too one day. But our programme and our support is more than that. I want you to know that. I think what I want to say is, I want us to be more than just creating a mini first team, I want Oakvale FC to help you achieve all of your dreams, football ones or not. What I'm saying is dream big, start small, but most of all you need to start, and the U21's will help you start.'

Sophie takes a breath, a moment to take a drink, and after her bold introduction, it feels almost like a dramatic pause. 'What I want, is for when players transition out of the academy is for all of you to still be in love with football, whether you transition out to a first team, or to something else not playing football. I want you to still have loved your time here and love football no matter what. As well as that though, I want you to feel you have grown and become a better person, a better young adult; ready to take on whatever your path throws at you. You all are capable of being great individuals and we will be supporting you to do that. Yes, we want to win games, and we will, but we want to help you to develop holistically.'

*At this point a picture appears in front of each of our screens, of a lion cub, surrounded by adult lions. 'Players, you're the cub here in my eyes, you're keen, young, and enthusiastic. The older lions, they're me and the other staff, they're your parents and they're your teachers or anyone else who helps you to develop. Those who inspire you and drive you forward. Think about how they can help you to develop and grow from that cub this season and the season after or for however long you're with us. Lion's hunt for success and that's what I want you to do, but that success doesn't need to be first team. (*She's really making sure that this caters to all the players, regardless of football aspiration and ability*). The lions can help the cub to support and help drive the cub forward, but fundamentally, the cub needs to have the right attitude, effort and energy to make it. I'm rambling a bit now… but I hope that makes sense, and you're feeling ready to absolutely attack this season and everything that comes with it.'*

Sophie wraps up the rest of the evening, outlining some other details about training, how games are likely to work whilst elements of restrictions remain in place and details about the first session back in a couple of weeks. As she answers the last few questions from parents and players, and everyone starts to log off she asks 'Al, can you just stay on for a sec please?' We wait for each of the players to call their goodbyes and once she was sure everyone had signed off she asked 'How was that? Alright, was it alright?' (I sensed she was looking for reassurance, this was the first time she had addressed both parents and players in one sitting. It was nice to be asked, although it would have been more effective to ask me before the event if she was worried about her approach – rather than after…). *'Yeah, I think you framed it really nicely, it should have spoken to all the players no matter what their goals might be, were you worried about it?' 'Worried about getting the right image across yeah' she*

replied. 'I batted back 'what do you mean?' 'Well, it's not as straightforward as just developing players, is it? It can't be, you've got to take those players and support them just as much as you support those that want to be physios, or psychologists or bloody paramedics' she laughs. 'Supporting them with that, as well with everything else that 16, 17, year olds go through, its hard you know, there's so much going on and then oh yeah trying to prepare a team to win games. It's not just coaching football is it, you've got a responsibility to be so much more than that'.

Analysis and Discussion

The current academy environment not only looks to support players in reaching their aspirations within football, but also looks to develop these individuals more holistically, supporting them through the challenges and maturation that comes with adolescence and young adulthood. This age period has been identified as critical for identity development and formation (Crocetti, 2017; Eriksen, 1969). A premature narrowing of athletic identity can cause identity crises, an inability to cope with challenges to identity and mental health challenges (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). An importance is now placed on supporting players with dual careers, higher and further education options and wider lifestyle support (Harrison et al., 2020; Vickers et al., 2022). This shift is reflected in Sophie's messages delivered within her season introduction. These messages reflect the adjustment in coaches (and support staff) roles, to having a responsibility to ensure that players/athletes that do not make it to senior and professional sport are well-equipped to navigate life after sport. The nature of supporting individuals regardless of whether their aspirations lie within first team

football is an underlying message throughout Sophie's meeting and her approach to the season.

As indicated to in earlier vignettes, the WSL academy teams currently have players ranging from 16 to 21 years old. This age gap leaves the coaching and support teams working with players who are not only at different levels of physical maturation and game intelligence, but also psycho-social maturity and emotional intelligence. Consequently, coaches are challenged to create environments where individuals can be nurtured and developed for professional careers, alongside navigating how to holistically develop young adults. This can leave coaches frustrated and confused, with uncertainty around their roles and responsibilities (Dowling et al., 2018). As such, multi-disciplinary roles (such as education officers and lifestyle/psychology) roles are often drawn upon, to ensure that players are well-rounded in their development (Platts, 2012). Sophie recognises this, giving Louisa (education officer) the space to inform the players of the relevance of a training schedule that tries to support and enable education. Furthermore, in seeking reinforcement that her messages were clear after the end of the presentation, the importance that Sophie places on creating an environment that supports all players is emphasised.

Currently within the WSL academies, it is not possible for coaches and support staff to focus solely on developing WSL senior team players. As a result, the availability of first team careers and the newer availability of full-time careers is slim. In contrast to the men's game, where most players who reach the U21/23's level will go on to have careers at championship or lower league clubs this is not the case for female academy footballers. Most of those who come through the academy will transition out at academy level to play recreationally, or to focus on educational or

vocational pursuits. These limited opportunities, combined with the lack of educational and welfare support available (most clubs have someone in this role, but they are often not full-time, or are employed primarily to work with the male academies), result in the coaches and available support staff having to support players beyond their footballing development.

As a result, coaches and staff members with the challenge of trying to develop players beyond the scope of their employed role, which can result in frustrations, role uncertainty and the focus being taken away from football development. This vignette begins to outline the challenges that staff members are currently facing at academy level and identifies the need for growth and expansion. Whether that be an increase in resources and staff members available to support player development, or the identification of the need for another step in the development pathway, there is no doubt that the pressures on the academy head coaches need to be alleviated in order to allow their focus on developing players to become at the forefront of their efforts.

4.4. Study Three Results and Discussion

The results and subsequent analysis outlined in the following section highlight, via the use of vignettes, the different developmental journeys that the players at Oakvale Academy followed. Study Three builds upon the results presented in Study Two by providing specific details, events and interactions that players encounter during the transition they face as they near the end of their academy careers. The following vignettes capture three distinct journeys experienced by the players. Six vignettes are presented, each detailing one of three wider journeys, with all players who were involved in the ethnography being identified as taking one of these routes out of the junior environment: journey A – successful transition into a senior environment with football as a primary career ($n = 3$), journey B – successful transition into a senior environment, with football as a dual/secondary career ($n = 2$), and journey C – complete retirement from football ($n = 1$).

As with Study Two, the six vignettes have been informed from data collection taken across three competitive seasons (2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021). The analysis and write-up process also mirrors that used to create the vignettes in Study Two, with the vignettes being written from my point of view (the researcher-practitioner), with my personal thoughts/reflections being added in in parentheses throughout.

4.4.1. The Successful Transition into a Senior Environment, With Football as Primary Career (Journey A)

4.4.1.1. Player Agents – Friend or Foe?

Lily is a 17-year-old goal-keeper who, alongside being the academy's first keeper, is also the first team's third keeper, training three/four times a week in the senior environment. Lily has attended a number of home and away games for the senior team over the season (when the first or second keeper has been unavailable). In addition, she has been a regular choice for international camps (previously U15s and now U17s). Recently she has been dropped as first choice international goalkeeper and now fluctuates between second and third choice. Being dropped initially caused Lily to worry and become apprehensive about her future international career, but recently has motivated Lily to increase her involvement with the senior team. Lily is well integrated with both the academy and senior team, feeling equally comfortable in each environment. Having positive relationships with the goal-keeping coaches at both levels has allowed Lily to feel that she can develop and enjoy being in both environments simultaneously during her time at Oakvale. In recent weeks, as the end of the season approaches (approximately two months away), Lily has confided in me that she is keen to officially kickstart her senior career (sign a senior, paid contract), and has been getting frustrated at the lack of guidance and information given to her about opportunities for next season. Whilst the opportunity to be formally contracted as the club's third keeper (for the senior team) has been hinted, there has been no official confirmation of this.

The players spread out ahead of me, fanning out onto the pitch that they would be playing on in just over an hours time. Some of the players huddled together in twos

and threes, laughing and looking relaxed about the upcoming game., Others keep their headphones in and walk more purposefully to the other side of the pitch. (I always find it interesting to watch the players pre-game habits, to notice similarities in some, differences in others. Typically, the players who had experience with the first team, took more time to explore the pitch, taking themselves away from the social chatter and focusing on what was to come).

*I stood away from the coaches who were discussing tactics for the upcoming game and noticed Lily walking from one goal towards the other, slightly changing her path so that she met me. 'Nice pitch this isn't it?' she started, scuffing her trainers across the top of the grass. As she stopped in front of me, stood just slightly to the right, watching the coaches moving magnets on the tactic board behind me. 'Yeah, much nicer than where you played last week!' I acknowledged., 'Couldn't get much worse', she laughed, before turning straight to look at me. 'I got myself an agent' she stated matter-of-factly, taking me slightly by surprise. (*Admitting she had recruited an agent was not that surprising… I was aware that some players in similar positions to Lily had spoken with agents recently, but the abruptness and timing of Lily's statement surprised me. Why had she chosen this moment to tell me? It wasn't something that I felt would directly impact her game, and there were plenty of other opportunities for her to speak to me about this at training or after the game).

'*Okay, choosing an agent is a big decision Lil, how did you decide who to speak to?' I asked. 'Well' she started, 'I've been speaking to the goal-keepers at the first team, and (1st keeper) recommended him, and he brought her to Liverpool and has helped her negotiate that new contract, so I thought someone who has worked with goal-keepers would probably be good. If he works for her then I thought he would*

*probably be quite good for me too, cause she's had a good career now hasn't she?'. 'Yeah, I think there's definitely benefits to having someone who knows the game, who can support and help you make decisions as a senior player. What's made you decide now is the time for you?' I asked. 'Well, I know that (other player) used her agent to help her sign for (championship club) for next season, and more players in the U21s in other clubs have them now and I think it will help me, but…' 'But?' 'Well, it's just a bit weird cause I'm not 18 yet so everything has been done with me, him and my dad. It can't be just me; so the agent is sending out clips and stuff but I wouldn't be approached or offered a contract until I turn 18, which is in a couple of weeks. So we're just getting everything sorted in advance. Dad is meeting with him today after he finishes work, but I won't find out what they say until I get home tonight'. (*The penny drops and I realise why Lily is choosing now to tell me this. The meeting must be playing on her mind and she knows she will need to wait until the game is finished to find out what the main points of the meeting were. It seems un-natural to me for players not to be involved in discussions that could influence or change their future careers).

'*My dad is just sending over some clips that we've got and going through the contacts that the agent has to see what might work' 'Would you not like to be involved in that though?' I countered. 'Well yeah, but I just want him to send them out to anywhere that he thinks I might have a chance with. I don't mind if it's near home and I stay living here or if I have to move, I just want to be moving into senior football and these [Oakvale] haven't said anything about me being signed here have they… so I want to see what else is out there and I think an agent is the best way to do that'. 'Have you spoken to any of the coaches here about it' I asked, (*Oh, if only Lily could have heard how un-complimentary the head coach had been about agents who work with

U21's female players, she couldn't believe that players were now sourcing agents themselves at such young ages. I know this was definitely something that she would challenge Lily with). '*Not yet, just cause I know what she'll say. She'll try to put me off and say that agents just try to sign you with any club and get your money and don't think about you'. 'Is that an unreasonable thing to say?' I asked. 'No' Lily considered, 'I know that some agents might do that, but my Dad is going to be there to help me with stuff. I just think that if they can help me to get to senior football that can't be a bad thing, can it? That's what is going to help me progress, and to help me get back to first choice at England. The first keeper is on loan to (senior team) now isn't she, senior football is the step for me next season. I know it is.'* (This seems a rushed process. Players at this stage are keen to progress their careers, often jumping at any opportunity to jumpstart their senior careers, which requires making life-defining decisions that may be driven by parents, agents and other parties, rather than in line with their own values and identity. I'm really starting to question if the support and education available to players, around how to manage their careers, and career expectations, is keeping up with the rate at which the women's game is changing. My gut feeling says that it's most definitely not).

Analysis and Discussion

As Lily comes towards what she hopes is the end of her academy playing career, she is seeking to add extra resources to help her succeed in her mission to secure a professional senior contract. Similarly, to those in comparable positions to her on the male side of the game, seeking an agent is an easy, accessible way to add knowledge and connections when pursuing a new contract (potentially with a new

club). Lily has sought an agent with the single goal of securing a professional contract next season, with both her and her parents hoping that this individual can make this happen.

The contracting of agents for players in the WSL and championship is a relatively new phenomena but is even more so for players in academy teams. This shift comes as football is becoming more competitive, with higher wage negotiations and more risk factors. Culvin (2021) identified the nature of women's football to be precarious and challenging, with agents being able to play a role in facilitating a professional playing career. Players, such as Lily, are seeking to equip themselves with as much assistance as possible to secure their next playing opportunity and break into the senior game. Through using agents that their team-mates have or finding those with experience supporting players in their position, younger players pin their future playing hopes on individuals who they often have little relationship or even contact with.

Prior research highlights the fickle and un-regulated nature of sporting agents (Egilsson et al., 2017), with interest moving quickly as athletes slide from being successful and the focus of much attention, to dropping out of the spotlight due to deselection and injury. Similarly, McKay and colleagues (2021) make reference to the impact international experience has on agent interest, again with those in the international spotlight also being targets for agents. These quick changes, both playing experiences and the impact it can have on agent relations can be exceptionally difficult for youth footballers to navigate. Champ and colleagues (2019) identify how male youth footballers often have to work through these processes alone, with little help from club or family.

Due to the increased focus and pressures on the development pathway and the nature of the JtST in the women's game currently (from U21/academy to senior/first team), as shown with Lily, some players are contracting agents to help with senior/first team contract negotiations at a much younger age. As a result, communication is predominantly between the agent and Lily's father. Whilst this allows Lily to be supported and advised whilst still in the infancy of her career, it means that she is missing out on direct communication and first-hand experience of navigating contracts and discussions with agents/clubs which affect her future. This reinforces the elements of the pseudo-professional academy environment discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, where elements echo that of professional, senior standards (e.g., agents), but still are fundamentally rooted in an environment that is still developing (e.g., conversations driven by parents and not being the norm, a lack of autonomy over their own futures).

Typically, when male players are reaching the stage in their career where they are looking to break through into senior teams (if thought to be worth investing in), their clubs will send them out on loan (Kent et al, 2022). This allows the players to experience new, senior environments, consequently becoming familiar with the on and off pitch demands and challenges that come with the move, boosting physical and psycho-social development and experiencing factors only present in a first team setting. Simultaneously, players begin to also see first-hand the true competitive and meaningful nature of the football environment. Players are now part of teams fighting for points and positions in leagues, being held accountable to performances by crowds (both in person and on social media) and have the opportunity to be rewarded will financial bonuses based on individual performances. In addition, loan contracts also provide the players main club the opportunity to see them perform in an environment

more similar to their first team, and to understand where they need to develop in order to 'survive' (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021).

The opportunity to go out on loan, whilst often forthcoming in the men's academy teams, is not yet as established in the women's game. As such, Lily is answering her own frustrations around future experiences and opportunities herself through the hiring of an agent, hoping that consequently she will gain the first team experience that may in the male game have been afforded through a loan contract. Lily sees her agent as a key driving force for gaining a successful, professional career in football, and feels that this should be prioritised over potentially a dual career, or staying in the academy to continue her development. This reinforces conclusions from earlier in the thesis, specifically that due to the time spent by female players in the academy environment, players feel as though they need to be breaking through into the senior team at a younger age. This is further reinforced by the limited opportunities across the two professional leagues (WSL and Championship) for younger players to experience first team environments.

4.4.1.2. 'All the players at international, they're going to be in the WSL in a couple of years' The Importance of International Duty.

Laura and Georgia are two outfield players who have been regularly training with the first team since they left the U16s and were registered to the academy team. This means that they have spent very little time training within the academy environment, rather they attend first team training around their college commitments and play games for the U21s each week. As such, as a practitioner I have less face-to-face contact time with these players compared to those who train regularly with the

U21s. Despite this, I have built positive relationships with both players and make time to catch-up with each of them when appropriate on game days and via online/video calls.

Both players have, to date, described having positive relationships with both the senior staff and players, but have acknowledged that they are happy to have each another in the environment with them. The vignette takes place after a first team training session which I had attended to allow myself to see the U21s players during training, and to familiarise myself better with the environment, the expectations of the senior players and the demands of being in a senior team. Both Laura and Georgia were due to head away to international qualifiers (for England U17s) the following week, and I was keen to check in with each of them before they left to travel.

*I walk from the staff office and into the canteen, thinking about the training session I had just observed. (*Whilst not a regular attendee at first team training, I found real value in observing sessions when I could, as it helped me to understand the expectations and demands on the players that were transitioning in from the U21s environment*). Still in thought, I picked up my labelled lunch and headed outside to sit in the sun... 'Al, over here, come sit with us!' I look up as I come out into the sun, squinting my eyes and saw Laura and Georgia sat opposite one another on the grass, smiling towards me. 'Didn't realise you were gonna be here today,' Laura mumbled as she tucked into her lunch. 'Yeah!' Georgia exclaimed 'I only realised half-way through the session it was you!' I laughed, 'Well, I had to speak to a couple of the first team staff about some things and also thought it'd be good to see you guys before you go across to England. Next week, right? Looking forward to it?' They looked at one another and smiled, and I could sense that they were excited 'Yeah, always! It feels*

like a good time to put everything we've been doing here into practice, doesn't it?' Laura started, 'Cause we've been here what like 5 months? Right?' 'Err yeah think so, yeah? Something like that' Georgia confirmed. Laura continued 'Yeah anyway, we've been here and we've been learning, but camp is where we get to prove ourselves in games and see what the other players our age are like, so we can see where we fit. We're going to be knackered when we get back though, they're so full on'. Georgia, the quieter of the two players, nodded as she ate. Laura continued, 'Like, it's good playing for the U21s every week but it isn't always hard, is it? Not as hard as international. International is like here [first team].' Georgia mused over this, 'It's just different isn't it… we know we're going to get played in the U21s games. Which is good but, because some of the players at Oakvale, and as well in the teams we play against are dead young, it's just difficult. The standard can drop so much game to game, but at international level you know they're all your age but also, they're the best, they're going to be at first team like us, so they hold us accountable, same as the first team do here'.

*I watched the two of them as they continued to discuss the upcoming camp, both of them excited as they discussed the opportunity to play more 'challenging' games whilst recounting the players that they'd be training / playing with and which teams they played for. (*I stayed quiet here, letting their discussion continue. I carried on eating, patiently waiting for them to call me back to the conversation. It was interesting to hear their honest thoughts, without my asking specific questions, I almost felt privileged to have been asked to sit and be able to listen to their insights, I didn't want to cut them short).

Once they'd run through what felt like all the players likely to be at their camp Laura turned to me 'All the players at international Al, they're going to be in the WSL in a couple of years or at least out on loan, so playing with them, competing with them now is good practice and it's what it's like at first team fighting for your place in every session. Isn't it G?'... 'You can compare yourself to the players too, see where you stand and where you need to develop. They're the players we're competing against for contracts, it doesn't feel like we're competing with many at the U21s' Georgia added. 'Almost makes not playing games here worthwhile…' Laura laughed. 'Yeah, but I would rather be here and not playing unless someone is injured or has Covid, than at U21s the whole time' Georgia concluded. 'Oh god, yeah definitely, plus it's exciting getting to go to another country isn't it… Bonjour, je m'appelle Laura et j'aime le football!' We laughed. (I think about their evaluations of the different environments, considering the outlet that international duty provides for these two players). *Georgia rolls her eyes before falling quiet as she finishes adding water to her protein shake and passing the leftover water to Laura to do the same. The conversation shifts to current Netflix choices, leaving me to muse over what felt like a very meaningful conversation.*

Analysis and Discussion

Both Laura and Georgia are recognised by the first team as players who have potential, who have proved they can survive in the first team training environment, as such, have become regular members of the first team's day-to-day schedule. This regular involvement in the first team suggests that the players have not only proved themselves on the pitch, but also psycho-socially to be able to manage the pressures,

expectations and behavioural norms that exist within the senior environment. Laura and Georgia have been identified as having a close, social bond with one another. Previous transition research has identified that when athletes experience similar transition experiences, challenges and achievements alongside other athletes they feel much more supported and better able to cope with the transition into senior or higher-level environments (Bruner et al., 2008; Drew et al., 2019).

In this environment, the observed friendship makes moving between the two environments easier. Laura and Georgia typically attend the same training sessions, and so with experience the same events, reactions and interactions. This enables each of the two to not only work through arduous sessions together, but also to provide comfort and support if one has a day where they feel isolated, confronted or challenged. The social bond portrayed between the two players provides an element of familiarity and emotional support, which as such enables both players to feel more supported and psychologically safer whilst navigating this new challenge. Research in the male game identifies a similar finding, with players transitioning from the U23's into the first team feeling much more confident and supported when transitioning in a small group than when alone (Swainston et al., 2020).

The two players are aware that the next step in their development is to look at transferring what they have learnt and overcome in the first team environment into competitive games. Whilst they have the opportunity to play games with the academy team, they feel that (as a whole) that specific environment now challenges them less, giving them reduced opportunity to put their training efforts into practice. Literature in the male game echoes the players' conclusions, and the need to identify more meaningful competitive environments that will more likely mirror the development

opportunities required for players to progress to a professional football career (Headrick et al., 2015). Moreover, Bullough and Mills (2014) outline how competitive fixtures are the only way in which 'youngsters can develop and gain experience'. Laura and Georgia's points resonate with this research, as they identify that whilst they have found their involvement with the first team invaluable to their development, they need to be able to translate this into high pressure, challenging games if they are to continue to improve.

The limited playing opportunities that have been afforded to Laura and Georgia at the first team and their perception of the level of competition at the academy has left them with a hunger to be challenged, to experience fighting for their place in a squad and to be able to measure themselves against players of a similar age. They feel the call-up to international duty affords these opportunities. There is currently little published (psycho-social based) research focusing specifically on the club to international transition in male football (McKay et al., 2021), with no published papers to date looking at the psycho-social factors/considerations of the international experience within the female game. The feelings that the two players describe resonate with that of Webb and colleagues (2020) research into loan experiences. Webb concludes that loan contracts allow players to experience professional team pressures, such as fighting for points, promotion and titles, being brought into a game to have an impact and being challenged/compared against other players in the team. Within the women's game however these opportunities are far rarer, leaving international duty to be where Laura and Georgia look to boost not only their international careers, and their 1st team career and investment.

The international experience at this level provides a similar experience and opportunity to those in the male game, who at this stage in their career (showing prospect but not breaking into the starting line-up) would likely be sent on loan. This resonates with the findings in Study One (Chapter Three) of this thesis, where players highlight the importance of international duty in allowing players to become prepared to deal with a professional, first team environment. The international experience offers Laura and Georgia an environment which allows for them to explore new roles, skills and responsibilities that they hope to then be able to transfer when they come back to the first team. It is these competitive experiences and pressurised environments that they hope will showcase their talent and subsequent eligibility for that elusive first team contract, rather than their weekly performances at academy level.

4.4.1.3. The Essential Skill: The Ability to Read Between the Coaches Lines

The next vignette outlines an interaction with 19-year-old Jess, a (different) goalkeeper who has been with Oakvale since U12s (approximately eight years). This season Jess has been training across both the academy and first team environments and has been receiving positive feedback from the senior goal-keeping coach. She is yet to be selected to travel to any of the first team games and has confided in me that she hopes that this might happen before the end of the current season (it is currently February with 3 months until the end of the season). Further to this, Jess has begun to consider what her future at the club looks like, she is aware that she has been in the academy team for three seasons now and is one of the oldest in the team. Additionally, it has recently been confirmed that the U16s keeper has been asked to move up and train with the academy team for the rest of the season, prior to her moving permanently

next season. It is widely known amongst players and staff at the club that this goal-keeper (U16s) is very talented and that the first-team manager feels positively about her and her future at the club. Jess and I have had conversations around how this may change the goal-keeper dynamic, with Jess expressing apprehension at most likely having to share playing time (something she has not done so far this/last season). Knowledge of the addition of the U16s keeper has motivated Jess to start having more active conversations with both the academy and first team staff, around the plans for her development and potential to spend more time in the first team environment next season.

*Rummaging in my pockets to find my car keys, I walk from the gym where I had been checking in with a player after her rehab and made my way towards the car. Needing to grab an extra layer before training started, I looked up from emptying my pockets to see Jess, crouched down, easy to miss, working to get some leftover mud from the bottom of her boots. I walk over to her, and she glances up, without stopping her cleaning motion. 'Hi.' She mumbles, before looking back down and continuing to drag the brush over her boots up, down, up, down. Not breaking rhythm. (*This one is going to require some encouragement, I think about running to my car and coming back, to give myself a little more time to formulate a conversation plan, but I don't want to risk Jess walking onto the pitch whilst I'm gone).

'*How's it going kid?*' *I ask, side stepping to move closer to the wall so that I can lean on it, indicating my desire to stop and chat. 'Mmmm yeah okay I guess' Jess replies, still repeating her brush strokes. 'You sure? Seems like there's some frustration going into that brushing there?' Jess smiles in response, setting the brushes aside and faces me, taking up a similar leaning position. 'Okay, so not okay, I'm dead*

*annoyed to be honest, I just feel like I'm getting nothing from first team, like it's dead inconsistent. The goalkeeper coach says I'm doing really well and he's happy with me, wants to keep me in the squad and all that. Yet… here I am, not being offered anything new for next season and I just don't know where I stand. I've got no information. I feel like I'm stuck not really here or there'. 'Okay', I contemplate, 'You've been up with the first team quite recently though, haven't you? Or have I got that wrong?' (*I'm aware that Jess has recently had a meeting with the first team staff, but heard this through the grapevine rather than Jess herself. I am cautious not to infer that there have been any staff discussions about her future at the club going on in the background). '*Yeah- I have yeah, doesn't make anything any clearer though' she admits, with a sigh, bending down to pick up her boots.*

Jess stands and repositions herself against the wall. I take this as an opportunity to dig a little deeper. 'And has anything been said there? About next season or even just any feedback about your training et cetera.?' 'Yeah, so, I had a meeting there with the GK coach earlier this week, the head coach was supposed to be in it. She told me she would be, but then just never showed up. Says a lot doesn't it…. And also, if I hadn't asked and asked for that meeting it wouldn't have happened. I would still just be plodding along. But yeah, I asked about like next season and what that looks like cause if it's not happening here for me, I'd rather just know, you know?' (I sympathise with Jess here, she's not the first player this season to have felt that there's not been clear communication about future plans).

'Yeah, so anyway, they said how good I've been, didn't really give me anything to work on, but then I don't understand then why I'm now back at the U21's? I just don't really get told anything, I don't know if I'm here, there or nowhere! Just feels

*like they only want me when someone's injured or something and then I just get dropped like, like…' she pauses, 'a big bag of potatoes!' I burst out laughing, and she laughs too, instantly lightening the mood. 'It's daft I know, but I just want to know what I'm doing you know?'. 'That's not daft at all' I counter, 'it's perfectly normal to want that reassurance, but I think it's just a little bit different at first team, there's not as much back and forth between coaches and players' I offer. 'Yeah, there's nothing at all, you get told if you're wrong. My god do you get told. If you're doing alright though, it's just ignored or not mentioned at all really'. (*Again, another example of the culture of poor communication that seems to have embedded itself into the environment and showing no sign of leaving...*).*

Jess pauses, her focus shifting from me to just over my shoulder. 'Alright kid? What's happening?' I hear from behind me, the academy GK coach pulls up beside us. Jess stands up and bends down to pick up her boots before then pulling up her socks. She stands, looking the coach straight in the eye. 'Yeah- alright yeah, have you spoke to first team about next season and what I'm doing?' I just still dunno what's going on really'. 'You know what I haven't been told anything recently kid, I thought you were having a meeting though?' he responds. Jess glances at me, quickly, something I would have missed if I hadn't of been looking at her. 'Yeah, yeah I did, didn't get any proper answers though, just the usual yeah you're sound, we like you, keep going'. (I can sense that this isn't the answer she was hoping for, and her body language reflects this. Frustratingly I know that this conversation is over, making a note to pick up with Jess again to follow on.) '*Alright cool, I'm gonna go warm up. Thanks, Al, yeah.' 'No bother' I shout as she jogs away.*

The coach and I turn, starting to walk slowly, following Jess' path. 'Were you in that meeting she had this week?' I ask. 'Nah' the coach replies, 'Although I did speak to the first team GK coach after it, and she said that Jess should know what she's doing now; back here for a bit and look at getting her back in in a couple of weeks. There's not a contract for her up at first team next season at the minute either, but she should know this. Apparently, she's been told clearly so I don't know where the confusion is. There's got to be someone either not listening or not saying things clearly somewhere, cause its just different messages. I'm dead out the loop as well, no one tells me anything other than when she's in sessions and when she's not. How am I meant to develop keepers for first team if I don't know what the first team keepers are doing or what they're looking for. Joke really.' 'Mmmm' I agree, 'yeah communication is key isn't it. Ah one sec, forgot what I came across here for half an hour ago.' I spin, and jog back towards my car to once again grab my coat, I can't seem to go anywhere at the moment without bumping into someone who's worrying about the end of the season.

Analysis and Discussion

Communication of expectations and clear understanding of the pathway ahead have been widely acknowledged to be essential components of a successful transition (Stambulova et al., 2021; 2014). With Franck and colleagues (2019, 2020) evidencing this within the JtST and suggesting that to successfully transition, athletes must understand throughout the transition how far they are along the transition timeline and what challenges they may face next. The more informed an athlete is, the more prepared they are which consequently leads to a greater likelihood of a successful

transition. Taking this into account, it is possible to understand the origins of Jess's frustrations. Whilst receiving positive feedback, and seemingly performing well in both the first and academy teams, Jess demonstrates confusion at her being dropped back down to the academy environment. Moreover, she feels that decisions around this shift and her future at the club are not being clearly communicated, leaving her to feel as though she is navigating the transition alone. In addition to this, communication between the staff in the two teams does not appear to match the messages that Jess has been given, which if left unresolved could cause greater confusion both for staff at the academy level, and for Jess.

Whilst being moved between academy and first team environments is not uncommon for players when embarking upon the JtST (Dowling et al., 2018), it is possible to manage these transitions and environments to prevent the athlete from feeling their progression is being hindered (as Jess feels in this instance). Talent development research identifies the importance of ensuring that environments are well connected (so that junior athletes can see what they're working towards), that communication of future planning and expectations is clear and that there is a strong and cohesive organisational culture maintained throughout the development pathway (Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2011). For Jess, the environment that she is currently in is lacking in these factors, as such making her feel as though her development is being paused and even hindered. Whilst there must be the recognition from athletes that the JtST is often not a single, linear transition, through lack of communication Jess feels as though she has been left without connection or clarity from the first team environment and staff. This is further enhanced through the conversation with her academy GK coach, who echoes this sense of lack of transparency in messages (from a staff perspective).

For male academy players in similar positions, research has identified the main avenue of feeling in control of their development and future career to be seeking loan or U23's experience, with the hope of gaining progressive experiences and a bespoke personal development plan (Swainston et al., 2020). Whilst Jess similarly identifies a lack of playing time, the opportunity for loan however (as already recognised) is unavailable. Swainston goes on to indicate how successful transitioning players reflected on the need to be more patient, accepting of the lengthy transition process and to consider how the club has previously handled the JtST, as this would have given an accurate insight into what their transition would look like. The uncertainty and lack of clarity that Jess feels is similar to those published in research, however when considering the process that male academy players often follow to gain senior contracts or senior team involvement, it is unlikely due to financial resource, the league structure of the women's game (there being far fewer teams to send players out on loan to) and the current development pathway that Jess will follow a similar process. Further to this, a better communication strategy is needed, with focus around how messages are conveyed not only to Jess but also to academy staff from the first team, to ensure consistency and transparency in messaging to prevent further confusion (Relvas et al., 2010). Thus, allowing better understanding of the transition pathway for Jess.

4.4.2. Successful Junior to Senior Transition, With Football as Dual/Secondary Career (Journey B)

4.4.2.1. Enough is Enough, Taking Your Football Future into Your Own Hands

The next vignette outlines an interaction with a player who has since gone on to manage a playing career alongside studying for a university degree. At the time of the conversation Danielle was 19 and in her first year studying Sport and Exercise Sciences. She is in her third season at the academy and has recently spent some time training up with the first team before returning to the academy squad. Initially, Danielle was summoned to the first team due to senior player becoming injured, and the coach wanted to fill the player gap. When the senior player then returned to training Danielle continued to train with the seniors once or twice a week, depending on her university schedule. Recently, Danielle was told by the academy coach (in a development meeting with myself and the assistant coach also present), that she would no longer be going to train with the seniors. This came as a shock to Danielle, with little rationale or reasoning to be offered other than she was not needed anymore, and since then Danielle has been visually frustrated, with less patience and social engagement than usual during training.

*'Do you want anything Al?' one of the players calls as they make their way down the aisle of the coach, past me and towards the service station. 'No thanks! Brought all my snacks with me of course'. The passing players laugh, it's a running joke that I never buy anything from the service station when we stop on our away game journeys. (*This is something which I almost now feel a responsibility to keep up, a part of the away journey that remains consistent and the players enjoy, no matter the length of the journey or the mood of the team post-game.)

The rest of the players filter off the bus, with the staff leaving what I thought was just me on the bus. I turn back to my laptop, scanning my 'to-do list' that I've made to work through for the duration of the journey as I hear footsteps behind me. 'What's the snacks today Al?' Danielle asks, as she picks up my laptop cover from the seat beside me, sits down and places the cover on her knees. 'Protein bar and banana bread! Are you onto these?' Turning to grab the bar out of my bag on the seat behind me and dropping it onto my laptop cover. 'I'm not!' Danielle replied, 'Out of 10?' 'Ooo' I pause taking a moment, 'Strong eight I think!', Danielle looks impressed, 'Straight in with a high score!' she exclaims. I laugh, 'I know, I'm serious about these… What's going on kid? Not like you to miss out on a Starbucks opportunity' (Danielle regularly has a Starbucks cup in her hand, always telling staff about limited edition drinks and new coffee blends to try, so I know that if she is staying on the coach there's something she wants to chat through).

'No... I know! I got one earlier to be fair but I actually wanted to speak to you, and just thought now might be good?' 'Yeah of course, what's up?' I replied. 'Well' she takes a breath turning my laptop cover over in her hands, 'I've decided I think I want to leave before the end of the season, I've spoken to a couple of clubs in the championship, and they've said they'll have me in to trial and see how things go, and if they want me and I like it I'm going to go rather than stay here.' She pauses, I let her, and take a couple of seconds for her to take a breath. 'Okay' I say gently, 'What's made you decide this now?' 'Well… I was up at first team wasn't I and now I just got dumped back down here, but there wasn't even like a reason that I know of or a reason why, they just decided they didn't really want me or whatever, and they're taking up younger players now instead. I get it, like they're a different position to me or they're just better whatever, but tell me so I'm not waiting around if you don't want me. I

spoke to the head coach as well, I wanted some help with looking for different clubs and seeing who she recommended and she just blanked me, like it's like she'd trying to sabotage me or something. Like you're not gonna be in first team here but you're not going anywhere else. Just in case we need you.' (This is a strong statement, with a lot of emotions behind it. I feel as though Danielle has really taken the move back down to the academy to heart and feels she has been left to deal with it herself, without supporting communication from the academy coaches here or up at the first team).

'*Yeah, I dunno, she continues. I just feel like I've been used a bit, I don't know if that's silly.' 'I don't think it's silly at all' I counter quickly (*I want to make sure that Danielle knows that her feelings are valid, and knowing other players who have expressed similar feelings, I know that this is a familiar feeling amongst players considering leaving the club. The difficulty comes in providing Danielle with support without alluding to other players who have asked me to keep their feelings private). *'Whatever you're feeling is completely valid Danielle, let's just make sure you can get the information you want so you can decide what you're doing and what your future is. Have you spoken to (our) coach?' I ask. 'Yeah, she just says she doesn't really know what first team's thoughts are and that I should try asking them again, I haven't told her about the other clubs though, so don't say anything just yet whilst I figure it all out'. 'Okay, I won't, but it might be helpful in terms of you finding a new club, getting contacts and all that stuff.' 'Yeah- it probably would' she agrees, 'But I think that if they (the first team) find out, they'll say what they can just to get me to stay just in case someone else gets injured and then they're like "Oh shit, we need another player for this training session, go get Danielle up". That's not what I want, I'm just sick of it. I would rather go now and figure out uni and football stuff all together'.*

*The coach doors open, and the players fall up the stairs, arms full of snacks. One of the players closest to Danielle passes her a Starbucks cup, the lid balanced on top as it overflows with whipped cream, 'Here you go princess'. Danielle looks down and smiles, standing up and passing me back my laptop cover. (*Our conversation has been cut short, but I know there's no way it can continue. There is so little time to speak to anyone one-on-one on game days, unless it's directly to do with the game. I know it will be a few days before I can pick up with Danielle again. I feel frustrated.) *'I'll keep you updated anyway,' Danielle says quietly. 'Definitely' I reply, 'We'll figure it out Danielle.' She smiles and nods, as she turns to walk back down the aisle*

Analysis and Discussion

As with the vignettes above giving insight into Journey A, experiences of Journey B (a successful transition, as a secondary/dual career) also place importance on communication and players' perceptions of where they belong. The professional male football environments cultural climate tends to be built upon a hierarchical basis (Mitchell et al., 2020). This hierarchy ensures that focus and resource is given to ensure that the team at the top (the senior team) thrives. As such, and as discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, the movement up and down the hierarchy levels can cause challenges. For those moving down the hierarchy (such as Danielle), players can often be left feeling lost and unsure as to their future. Whilst Mitchell's research has been conducted in the male game, Danielle exhibits similar frustration with her move back down into the academy team. She is comfortable when dropping back down into the academy environment (both socially and physically) but feels frustrated and bereft of support due to a lack of communication at both the academy and senior level.

The impact of communication between staff and players is a factor that has been examined in research. Cronin and colleagues (2020) examined the challenges for coaches and wider multi-disciplinary staff to create caring environments for players in a premier league club. Within this, consistent and honest communication was found to be one of the methods by which a player could most easily feel cared for by the staff around them. Further to this when exploring more widely the concept of care, individuals feel cared for when they feel that someone takes an interest in their development, their achievements and feel that their needs are recognised and responded to (Noddings, 1999, 2005). In explaining her feelings, Danielle demonstrates that she feels that no-one cares for and/or about her. Whilst she understands the environment and the transition pathway that she is in, she feels negatively towards the club due to lack of communication, honesty and support that she is receiving. This has been challenged further in the lack of support she feels she has received in finding a new club. After seeking advice from the first team coaching staff Danielle describes feelings of not being wanted but also not being supported in her decision to leave.

This lack of communication exhibited by coaches, and the feeling of not being supported in finding a new club resonates with research by Champ and colleagues (2019). Champ described how male academy players felt isolated and frustrated as they were told they needed to find new clubs after their contracts were not renewed. Male players, however, are typically surrounded by more security in finding a professional, full-time club that supports their re-location due to the higher number of professional leagues (and subsequently clubs) in the UK. Furthermore, male players are supported by a number of other personnel in the club such as a team of player care officers and well-being and welfare officers/co-ordinators who are able to provide

additional support for players as they navigate these periods. Aside from the WSL, leagues in the women's game are not full-time, professional leagues with most players balancing multiple careers. Danielle must consider not only her footballing aspirations but also her university education, and consider which variation of training programme (full-time, part-time, day or night training sessions) will compliment her other commitments.

The need for Danielle to consider her football career around her university commitments further reinforces the differences between the environment in which the JtST occurs within women's football as opposed to in men's football. Within the male game the Performance-Mastery environment is solely focused on a footballing career (Richardson et al., 2012). Due to the age of the players in WSL academies (where education is mandatory until 18 years old), the academy environment must be dual career focused. This consequently can cause challenges when players make the transition out of the academy, especially if this transition does not coincide with the education transition that occurs naturally at the age of 18. Further to this, despite male players typically not focusing on dual careers once they reach the Performance-Mastery phase, boys academies are better equipped to provide support to players seeking a dual-career. Education and player care officers are present in the boy's side to provide support to players in exactly Danielle's situation. This additional support exists alongside education opportunities being supported on an in-club basis, meaning that scholarships, apprenticeships and even some university education can be provided from within the club. This is something that at this moment does not exist in the female game.

Danielle has begun to make decisions about her education independently of the club, previously choosing a university close to home in order to be able to continue playing at the same club. With the age of the academy environment spanning to 20 years, decisions are not always made on player futures concurrently with the end of college education. In Danielle's case, the transition out of the club has occurred after this and so now her university location must be taken into consideration when exploring playing opportunities. Whilst there is the recognition that preparing for and maintaining a dual career is imperative (especially for those looking to play in the current championship and lower women's leagues), for players such as Danielle who are torn between hoping for WSL success in the future or Championship success more imminently, the maintenance of a dual career can be another added stressor to an already formidable time period.

4.4.2.2. 'We all play football at the same time in the same place, but we're just a group of people, not really a team' The Importance of the Off-Pitch Bond.

The following vignette involves Beth (19 years old), a player who has recently been informed that she will not be re-signed as an academy player for the next competitive season. Following this, she has attended one training session a week with a Northern League senior team alongside attending training sessions at Oakvale. At the end of last week, the new senior team indicated that they would like Beth to train with them for the rest of the season, with a view to signing her at the end of this season.

In the last month Beth has spent time speaking to me about her future in football, considering the type of career she would like to have. Beth initially enrolled into the college that is linked with the academy programme, however after studying

there for a year she decided to move to a college closer to her home, changing her subjects from sports focused to business focused. Now coming to the end of her first year in her new college, Beth is seriously considering a career in business. She has indicated in our most recent conversation that she would like to go to university, admitting she is more focused on this than building and maintaining a playing career. The vignette picks up as Beth considers whether she should stay at the academy for the rest of the season or to transition into the new senior team now.

*'Ooo switch that light on as you come up please Al, freezing up here now!' Beth calls down as I make my way up towards her in the stands at the side of the training pitch. I sit down next to her, 'here you go, thought you might need an extra layer' I say as I pass down her big coat, which she immediately wraps around her legs, tucking her feet up onto one of the seats in front of us. 'Oh, cheers I was looking for that before!' We settle in to watch the start of the game between the two teams made up of a mix of the U21's and the U16s. These games were always competitive, no one wanted to be the loser in any game, but especially not when playing against their friends and usual teammates. Beth sat out due to an old ankle injury flaring up, in a hope to keep her fit for the upcoming game at the weekend. (*We were the only two currently sat in the stands, which was rare, usually during these games those not playing would come and sit together, analysing their teammates performances and commentating on the coaches' refereeing skills. This could be a good opportunity to catch up with Beth and see where she was with her decision making).

'How's training with the senior team going, Beth?' (I jump straight in, we've spoken about this team before so it's not unusual for me to ask her so directly, and I don't feel that there would be any benefit in asking more general questions first).

‘*Yeah, it’s going well thanks, everyone seems really nice up there and I feel like I fit in well. I’d fit in well if I was signed to play there next season. I’m enjoying being part of an older team, I think it fits me better now.’ ‘Do you feel like it’s developing your football too?’ I ask. ‘Yeah… I think so, well I don’t know really haven’t been just there have I so it’s hard to tell’ she pauses, considering her answer. ‘I feel like I just need that senior environment, to be around older people, training there might not be as technical or tactical next season compared to if I was to go to another WSL academy, but I don’t want another academy; I want a senior team now, I know that’. (*She says this with conviction, nodding as if to reaffirm her thoughts further. I wonder her reasoning behind this, wanting to know more).

‘What’s influenced that decision then, something you want more of from there or less of from here?’ I ask. ‘Hmm, that is a good question’, she laughs, ‘you know what it is, I didn’t even really realise until I went there, but I just need to be with older players now, I think. I prefer being around adults and being pushed to be older, rather than being younger like here with the 16, 17-year-olds, does that make sense?’. ‘I think so’ I respond ‘Can you give me an example?’ Beth nods, ‘yeah okay so… let me think… yeah, yeah okay so it’s like, even just when we’re getting ready and stuff, you try to have a joke or banter the team in the changing rooms and they just don’t get it or they can’t relate. It makes just having a general conversation quite difficult and then other than the fact that we all play football at the same time in the same place, but we’re just a group of people, not really a team.’ (This sentence feels really powerful, something that encapsulates Beth’s thoughts of the U21’s environment so neatly in such few words).

We sit and watch the game in front of us for a couple of moments, before Beth continues. 'Right so like last week I was talking about going out and what we were all doing at the weekend, and most of them just looked at me with blank faces, like not a clue what I was talking about or where I was going'. It's just life and stuff it's so much harder to have a conversation' (I can see where Beth is coming from, there is a large age range within this U21s group and even just from observing I have begun to notice differences in maturation, social behaviours and factors such as openness and communication).

'So, at the senior team it's not like that?' Beth smiles, sitting up and turning to me, an animated expression on her face, excitement in her eyes. 'No! They go out and they have conversations about driving and being at university or living by themselves and it's just, obviously football I still love it, I want to do it, but there's players younger than me at the first team now. I know I'm not going to be going up there or I'd have been there already. And that's fine because I'm excited about looking at unis and stuff and doing that. So, then I'm thinking, well it's totally up to me where I go now. I get to pick! I want to pick somewhere I'm going to enjoy, where I'm going to be doing similar life things to the people I play with. I'm ready for that, that's just as important to me now as the playing.'

Analysis and Discussion

Upon her release, Beth had the option of resigning for another WSL academy or to begin looking at senior teams in a different league. Within this conversation, Beth's motivations for focusing on more senior environments are revealed. The large age range of players in the WSL Academies (16 to 20) means that within a single team,

players physical, emotional and psychological maturation can span a wide range. Beth highlights the differences in some psycho-social factors, such as responses to pressures, communication, and managing different lifestyles within the academy and senior environments she has experienced. These differences have become a method by which Beth has been able to evaluate her belonging to each environment and determine which she feels best suited to. At the age of 19, Beth has started to move into young adulthood and as such is at a different stage of identity formation and psycho-social maturity than the younger players at the ages of 16-17 (Crocetti, 2017). This could explain why Beth is starting to feel more socially and psychologically comfortable with the senior team, compared to the U20s team she is currently in. Within this younger team the age ranges from 16-20, and encompasses predominantly players aged 16-18, who as Beth alludes to exhibit behaviours which she feels are more synonymous with adolescents than the adult path that she is now embarking upon.

Further to this, as players mature in age, they are also continually developing their identities which can have an impact on what individuals seek when building relationships and in social environments. Erikson's (1968) Identity Model suggests that as individuals enter the Young Adulthood stage (aged around 18), they begin to become more confident in their identity, in their roles and character and begin to seek stronger, more meaningful relationships. This contrasts with the challenges faced in the earlier stage of adolescence, where individuals are often working through role confusion and begin developing their own sense of self and personal identity where they can. Applying this model, Beth is likely to be experiencing the Young Adulthood stage, feeling more confident in her identity, her role clarity and as a result seeking stronger social relationships from her team-mates. From her description, Beth explores

feeling more aligned with her new, senior team, than with the academy, where her team-mates are younger and at different stages of their psycho-social maturation. Her reflections suggest that she feels she would benefit more by being surrounded by players who are at more similar levels; not only their social and psychological developments, but also at similar stages of their careers.

In addition to considering her being in a similar stage of identity development and psycho-social maturation to the players in the senior team, Beth is also likely to be more closely aligned with her dual career focuses. Beth is at a stage in her education where she is transitioning out of college education, and likely to be transitioning into university, an apprenticeship or a paid vocation. This is a further incentive for Beth to transition into a senior team, to be surrounded by individuals who like her are balancing their football alongside something other than a college education. This will be a contrast to if she were to stay at the WSL Academy, where she would be one of the few who were still in the team and not attending college. As explored earlier in the thesis, the management and expectation to secure a dual career is still an expectation for many female players in the UK (Harrison et al., 2022). As Beth considers prioritising her university degree, she must consider how she can ensure her football and education can work in tandem. This is something that players in a lower league, senior team will be familiar with and so will likely be a more appealing dual career to Beth than attempting to manage a full-time academy programme.

Needing to consider a dual career means that players currently in the WSL must consider their transition into playing at a senior not only with their football career in mind, but also their education and vocation pathways. Whilst the academy players attend colleges which provide flexibility for afternoon training sessions and mid-week

games, this is typically not the case for university students or those who are employed on an apprenticeship/in a separate career. This means that despite the academy having players ranging from 16-20, it prioritises the timetable of those attending recommended colleges rather than those in full/part-time employment and paid professions/occupations. As a result, players often choose to transition (as Beth has done) into a senior team earlier on, to ensure more stability for when they transition to university or work in the following years. This means that players released before they reach the age of 20 are likely to leave the academy set-up, even though they could continue their development (and in some cases the possibility of breaking in the WSL) in the dual career academies if they wished.

4.4.3. Transitioning out of Football (Journey C)

4.4.3.1. Deselection – A Curse or a Blessing in Disguise?

Faye, a 19-year-old player who has been with the club since U12s, has been informed that she will not be continuing with the club next season. After approximately 18 months of injuries and struggling to maintain periods of fitness for longer than a couple of months, it was decided that if Faye were to continue her football journey that she would be better suited to playing in a lower league senior team. According to the head coach and assistant academy coaches, when this news was delivered in a meeting with Faye she took it well, seeming calm and unsurprised. At the end of a training session, around a week after she had been advised of the news the assistant coach noticed that Faye was withdrawn, and upon striking up a conversation Faye began crying; identifying that she felt lost and unsure what the next year would look like without football. The assistant coach informed me of this the next

day and mentioned that the player would like to speak to me when I was next at training. The following vignette outlines my interaction with Faye, which takes place after a psychology workshop that has just finished with all the players at the start of the next training week.

I reflected on what I felt was a positive group session on team mindset. There had been some great conversation, everyone had got involved and the team seemed to go away with a real focus for the next few weeks (before we would revisit the topic again). Faye hovered towards the back of the classroom, not exiting the classroom rowdily with the rest of the team as they fell over themselves to be the first to the coffee machine. The room was now calm and quiet. Faye collected the pens and sheets of paper that some of the players had left behind and then perched on the edge of a table facing me. I mirrored her movements, perching opposite her. (This felt the most natural way to set up for the coming conversation, I didn't want to sit and be too far away from her, but also didn't want to stand and hover, making it seem like I had somewhere else to be). '*So, I'm guessing he (the assistant coach) told you about Thursday?' 'I got a little bit of info from his side yeah, but why don't you tell me a little more?' I replied, shifting my weight and settling into my position.*

*'Well' Faye started, 'I actually feel a lot better about it now. I think a few extra days off over the weekend and giving it time to settle the last couple of weeks have helped, cause, well, I was dead upset when they told me I was not going to be resigning. I went home and just cried for ages, but I do think maybe it's actually for the best… (*This seems like a completely different person to the one who the assistant coach described over the phone last week. I had expected tears and concern, not cool, calm and collected). *'Like I was saying to my mum, I never would have chosen to*

*leave, if I had been re-signed, I would have just stayed, without even thinking about it and been here for another year and probably not really got anywhere… and then it would have been even harder to leave!! It's like… it's a, a what's that saying, when its good but you didn't think it would be?' 'A blessing in disguise?' I offer. 'Yes! That's the one, a blessing in disguise… Yeah- like, I've been here for so long, I've been here the whole time I've been at high school and through college as well. For my mum and dad as well, like they love coming to games and stuff. It's all just routine for us Monday, Tuesday, Thursday nights always training. If they'd (the club) asked me I defo would have just re-signed but now I feel a bit, I don't know (*It seems that Faye is almost apprehensive to go on, to admit how she feels. I feel like she might not have said this out loud before…) *glad? I'm not sure if that's weird. I'm excited to have some time and try new things.'*

*Faye continues, seemingly on a roll. 'Yeah, I guess like last week and after they told me I was in shock maybe, and I was panicking, thinking "shit! what am I going to do?" ...I've always just done football. It's always been here and I love it. I've never done anything else really, well like school but that doesn't count. I'll always love it, but I'm ready for other things now too… I think. I want to go and try new things anyway, and just have a bit of a rest. I'm tired from training all the time. I just want a nap!' We laugh; I smile at Faye and wait to see if she continues. 'Like, it's alright if I don't go on and play football isn't it; it doesn't mean that this has been a big waste of time?' I smile and see a glimmer of the player who I feel is still a little wary of this big, upcoming change. 'Have you enjoyed playing football, Faye?' 'Of course, I loved it' Faye replies, 'Well then' I continue, 'In my opinion it's definitely not been a big waste of time'. (*It feels as though Faye has been doing a lot of thinking, of reflecting and maybe even feeling some relief, at having the decision made for her.

Whilst now apparently happy with the outcome and motivated to develop her wider identity I am aware that this could be her way of processing the loss of something so important in her life).

Analysis and Discussion

Faye has invested much of her life into her footballing career. She is not only dealing with the change that comes from de-selection, and subsequently the end of her paying football, but also with how this might impact her wider support network, open-up new opportunities and widen her identity by exploring or embarking upon new hobbies and experiences. The transition out of sport can, like many other athlete transitions, cause an element of shock to an athlete (Stambulova, 2007). An unexpected deselection which leads to retirement can be very difficult for athletes to prepare for and manage, and, ultimately can result in an athlete in crisis (Stambulova, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2014). Initially, Faye recalls a sense of loss and identity confusion, whilst she processes the decision and starts to worry about what her future might look like. Over time, however, Faye begins to see this decision as a positive, something that could allow her new experiences and opportunities that she previously would not have had. Whilst challenging initially, deselection and subsequent retirement referred to as something which, if supported and managed positively, can cause a 're-birth' or 'individual awakening' (Coakley, 1983).

Research has found sport to be all-consuming and to some level, addictive (Cosh et al., 2021). Cosh and colleagues ascertain that whilst athletes are immersed into this identity it can be seen as a privilege, but once the transition out of sport begins, athletes often report a sense of relief and calm. Faye illustrates this positive transition

when reflecting on how she would have been unlikely to make the decision to retire herself, she is now glad that this decision was made. Faye's initial reaction, the sense of loss that she describes and the fear of isolation and unknowing, resonates with research which identifies the loss and challenge to athletic identity that comes with retirement (Lavallee et al., 1999; Lavallee & Andersen, 2000). Research has long acknowledged the influence that athletic identity can have on emotional response to retirement, social adjustments, and anxiety and planning around retirement (Grove et al., 1999). Faye's feeling and thoughts resonate with such findings, however the time in which the deselection occurs provides an opportunity to focus on a future away from sport, and to view this future as exciting. Faye looks towards her potential university career, and the time and prospects she has to develop new aspects of her identity as a positive.

Whilst for many female footballers, the need to consider a dual career (due to financial resource, pseudo-professional environments and short career timelines) is considered arduous (Harrison et al., 2021), for Faye it has provided a positive outlet. Through having the opportunity to maintain and develop new social circles, to find new challenges and to focus new goals on the prospect of leaving football, and subsequently her athletic identity, appears more exciting than undesirable. This resonates with previous research which signals the influence of dual careers and consequently new social memberships to allow the finding of a new structure for athletes, and to support coping with retirement (Haslam et al., 2021; Menke & Germany, 2019). Fundamentally, whilst initially challenging for Faye, the deselection decision along with the dual career maintained by all WSL academy players has allowed new identify possibilities to be opened to Faye, which enabled her initial grief

(from the reduction in her athletic identity) to be much more manageable, and ultimately turned into a positive.

4.5. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this chapter (and second phase of research) was to build on the factors introduced by the participants in Study One, and for the reader to immerse themselves further into the WSL academy environment whilst understanding further the experiences, expectations and demands the players face. Study Two aimed to provide a wider insight into the academy environment, identifying some of the key day-to-day experiences of the players and staff. Study Three has built on this and aimed to provide accounts of the different JtST transitions that were occurring and identify recurring experiences that players encountered. The studies utilised long-term, ethnographic methods, which allowed for a range of in-depth, detailed findings to be collated. Further, these methods allowed for a better understanding of the WSL academy environment, the staff and the players and the culture that they both work within (Atkinson, 2012).

These findings were represented in both studies through creative non-fiction vignettes. These vignettes allowed real life experiences of the players to be showcased in a way that resonated with the reader (Cheney, 2001; Smith et al., 2015), whilst still accurately reporting the data collected. This method was chosen to allow the reader to connect with the characters/players, recognising emotions and challenges that may be similar to those experienced in their own lives. Following each individual vignette, the analysis section offered an attempt to further explore the meaning of the events, whilst also posing connections, similarities and challenges to previous literature,

specifically that focusing on athlete transitions and experiences of male academy players.

The vignettes provided in Study Two offer an insight into the day-to-day experiences and challenges of the WSL academy environment, player and staff behaviours, expectations and the expectations that come from players, and staff at both academy and first team level. Of the four vignettes presented, not all directly relate to the JtST, however the research team and I felt these aspects were crucial to describing the journey through the WSL academy for those players who hope to break through into the senior team. Of particular significance is the dual career environment, with players, coaches and staff all working to ensure that players can balance their football ambitions alongside their education. This need provides stark contrast to that of the academy environments in the male game, where players of this age sit in the 'Mastery-Performance Phase', with all focus on breaking away from the academy environment and into the first team (Richardson et al., 2012). This is an environment that does not exist in the women's game, therefore changing the demands, expectations and experiences of the academy environment. Players must work to continually balance the demands of their education with the demands of transitioning from development into professional football, with no opportunity to experience a practice environment.

Further to this, it is crucial to recognise the age range of the WSL academy and the impact that this can have on players who physically and mentally feel ready to transition into the senior team. There is a large age range for the WSL academy teams (16 to 21), players experience a range of different educational and developmental transitions whilst remaining in the academy team (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This, combined with players working through a range of different identity challenges and

developments as they consider their playing futures can cause individuals to feel isolated and unsure of their futures ((Morris et al., 2016, 2015). Similarly, in the male game players want to avoid being seen to be losing out to younger competing players, wrestling with the decision of staying and potentially breaking through next season or searching for new opportunities (Dowling et al., 2018; Champ et al., 2018). In addition, the range in not only ages, but also maturity and development of players impacts upon how coaches and staff support academy players. With players at the beginning of their WSL academy journey requiring different support to one nearing the end. The challenge of balancing this, whilst still trying to develop and cultivate a successful playing team is also explored in the vignettes presented in Study Two.

Study Three looked to identify the different JtST that were experienced by the Oakvale academy players and highlighted these to the reader again through vignettes. These vignettes were clustered into being part of one of three journeys, to further highlight the differences in pathways that players were on. Journey A represented a successful transition into a senior environment, with football as a primary career, Journey B a successful transition again but with football as a dual/secondary career and finally Journey C retirement from football. These journeys illustrate the pathways that players were taking out of the academy environment and allow the reader to make connections between the players in this study and others who may have followed similar pathways or experiences in their JtST.

Of the three vignettes presented in Journey A, the characters all illustrated a common desire, to be able to find an environment that allowed them to gain experience of more meaningful competitive football. The players all indicated that they felt ready and eager to begin experiencing an environment that required them to fight for their

position in the team that was striving for points, league positions and to play a part in team successes. The vignettes highlighted how those looking to play football as their career all expressed their motivation and want to be in teams and club settings that allowed them to truly fight for their place, learn from senior players and play a higher level of football. Typically, when a player reaches this level in the male game if they show potential but are not deemed ready to transition straight into their senior team they may be sent out on loan. A loan agreement allows players not only the opportunity to experience a different club culture, and play with different players, but also gives them the opportunity to show to their parent club what they can do and prove their place in their desired senior team (Webb et al., 2020). Furthermore, these additional (more meaningful competitive) experiences are thought to be essential to ensuring players are able to adapt to the pressures associated with a professional football career (Headrick et al., 2015).

These opportunities are not currently available to players at WSL academy level, and as such players are left with limited opportunities to showcase their talent and fight for a professional contract. The three vignettes highlight the consequences of these desires, with players utilising agents, international duty and the opportunity to train with the first team wherever possible (even though they are aware of the non-existent game time) as methods to fight for their futures at the club. The players are looking for ways not only to maximise their development but are supplementing the fact that there are limited clubs and loan/transfer opportunities available at their current playing level.

Journey B continues to explore elements and behaviours around a successfully transition to a senior environment but with a different end focus. The two vignettes

created within this journey explore examples of where players might seek senior opportunities sooner, rather than remaining in the WSL environment until 21. These two vignettes, specifically Beth's, illustrate how factors outside of the direct football/performance focus can play a significant role in determining next steps in the transition journey. The importance of being on the same psycho-social development pathway is discussed, reinforcing the need for players to feel socially accepted and confident within their team (Swainston et al., 2021).

In addition, Journey B further reinforces the inexperience the WSL players have in managing transitions over a period of time, which might require movement to and from teams across a season (i.e., up and down from the junior to senior team). Both Danielle and Beth were working to manage their experiences, thoughts and feelings, and alluded to these feeling new and unlike past challenges in their playing careers. These behaviours reinforce the wide acknowledgment that the JtST is unlike any other that junior athletes are likely to face in their careers (Franck & Stambulova, 2019). With these vignettes highlighting the need for players to be better informed and prepared for the transition process as the women's football grows, with more opportunities arising for junior players.

As the final journey, Journey C identifies the process that a player may go through if they retire from football at this stage. It felt important to highlight what this transition may look like to the reader, and offer an opportunity to give an insight into how a player may manage this period. Whilst not directly Faye discussed overcoming feelings of dis-belief, subsequent challenges to identity and periods of feeling relief and excitement for the future. These are synonymous with other career end literature

(Keely et al., 2018) and reinforce that made earlier in a career the retirement process can be a manageable, overall positive experience.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter of this thesis will provide an overview of the research findings that have been presented and discussed in the previous chapters. Building on these individual research chapter discussions, this chapter will holistically discuss the thesis findings with regards to previous literature, specifically around transitions, psycho-social factors and identity. To conclude, theoretical and applied implications will be outlined, with specific focus given to recommendations for future practitioners and researchers.

5.2. Overview and Aims of the Thesis

The individual study findings within this thesis have been reported and explored in line with the overall aims and objectives of the research. The research aimed to give an overview of the WSL Academy environment, specifically examining the psycho-social and cultural factors that are present within the organisation, and their impact on those who exist in the environment (i.e., staff and players).

The specific aims of the research are outlined below:

Aim One, Study One: To identify the key psycho-social and cultural issues that are associated with women's professional football.

Aim Two: To examine how the psycho-social and cultural issues associated with women's professional football affect player experiences and preparations for the transition from junior to senior level.

Specific Study Two Aim: To provide a wider insight into the academy environment, identifying the key day-to-day experiences of the players and staff and how this influences the Junior to Senior Transition (JtST).

Specific Study Three Aim: Study Three extends the findings from Study Two and aims to examine accounts of the different JtST that occur and highlight the dominant (recurring) experiences of the transition.

5.3. A Reflection of the Research Setting and the Practitioner-Researcher's Experience

Whilst the focus of this chapter is to give an overview of the thesis, to discuss the main findings and identify future research and applied implications, I feel that it is important to initially reflect on the research setting and my personal experiences of the practitioner-researcher (P-R) role. Throughout the data collection and analysis process recognising my positioning and impact on the organisation, players and staff has been at the forefront of my mind, as such sharing reflections as the P-R feels appropriate. This will also provide an insight to the reader into the moments and behaviours of the players and staff before a final consideration of the main findings.

The research setting was one with which I was familiar due to my role as Performance Psychologist and Lifestyle Advisor at the organisation for 4 months prior to the research being conducted. Originally, I was due to begin my role as a practitioner at the same time as my research role, however there were delays in being able to start the PhD, so this was not possible. Upon reflection, I feel that this was a positive change as I was able to develop relationships, gain trust and prove my knowledge and capabilities as a practitioner, which I believe contributed to the participants' trust and engagement in the research.

Once able to begin the research, the shift that I made from practitioner to P-R was something that I was conscious of. I wanted to ensure that both the staff and players were comfortable with the process and understood what the data collection process would look like. This was done through speaking to staff and coaches in groups about the research, but then also making sure throughout the process I was open and transparent about the research, how the research would be used and the main themes/topics that were recurring during the data collection.

I had time to become more confident in myself in my new P-R role. Initially, I was nervous to have conversations with players, worrying that they may hold back or not come to me for conversations as they were worried that others might one day read their thoughts. I had to ensure that I communicated clear boundaries, where confidential conversations and information was respected and kept private. Over time, this became much easier, with it almost becoming a sub-conscious process that I followed throughout interactions or conversations where I could deem whether I was conversing as a practitioner or a P-R. This resonates with the insider-outsider dilemma (Coombs et al., 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Naaeke et al., 2011), where the ethnographic researcher wrestles internally with trying to remain an insider and gain as much information as possible, whilst simultaneously working ethically and respecting boundaries of the participants.

Initially I thought that I would be either a researcher or a practitioner in the environment, but upon early reflections I could see that I was continually a P-R, with the researcher role manifesting itself when suitable and possible. This meant that during data analysis there was a continual process of checking the reason behind including each conversation, voice or field or field note and observation; was this interesting and relevant to the research or was this just interesting as a practitioner?

This consideration established itself as an additional analysis step, where I considered why I had paid attention to this moment or behaviour and what it added to the data I had already collected. This was something that as the research continued, I became more confident doing live. Moreover, I could acknowledge my progression and development as a P-R, as I was almost able to begin analysis alongside the collection of the data, through initially deciding how or where this might fit into emerging themes and events. I was careful, however, to ensure that I did not exclude or ignore information that did not immediately fit into these emerging themes. I was aware that conversations and observations could seem irrelevant at the time but could become significant findings as the data evolved. It was here that conversations with the wider research team became crucial, their questioning and exploring of the data brought new questions and considerations that I otherwise may have missed due to personal biases.

The regular involvement that I had in the research setting allowed my data collection to progress quickly. All players and staff were already familiar with my presence and being involved in the setting before the research began meant that I could informally discuss what the research process might look like before it began. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, players and staff would regularly ask about the research, taking an interest and wanting to contribute to the findings. These interactions display the relevance that the organisation and individuals within it sense the research could have, hoping that it can help to inform practitioner and organisational processes and developments.

Despite interest in the research by players and staff, I was careful in my responses not to give away the recurring topics, or themes being discussed. This was in order to not only maintain confidentiality but also to ensure that my answers didn't skew or influence future conversations I may have with these individuals. Further to

this, having such an in-depth and live understanding of the research setting meant that I knew the norms and social expectations. This meant that I could ensure that I positioned myself within these and could be seen to be a researcher who wanted to help and support the players through data collection, rather than an outsider who (as recognised by Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), could cause participants to be potentially wary of the research process.

The challenges of working as a P-R were present throughout the ethnography process. These included knowing who to approach and, more importantly, when to approach them, when to guide conversations (to probe for further information), when to let the participant lead, and how to manage the expectations and behaviours of a P-R. It took time for me to understand how to navigate these, requiring a constant, conscious awareness of the role and its potential implications for players and staff. Through taking the time to converse with the research team, develop my research skills and methods, I identified best practice to ensure the data collected had richness and depth, and subsequently the ability to create detailed descriptions (such as those in Studies Two and Three). It is through these methods and narratives that a better understanding and attention can be given to the research setting and its participants. Moreover, producing findings (such as those in this and prior chapters) that both practitioners and researchers can find interesting and useful. An overview of these findings is presented in the next section.

5.4. Key Findings

A critical review of the thesis has resulted in, what I as the researcher, identify as the key findings that contribute to the further understanding of the JtST in professional women's football. These findings give a unique narrative to the JtST,

showcasing an insight into professional women's football that has not been demonstrated before. Focus is given to the impact on player experience, decision-making and behaviours of players during the JtST, how clubs and stakeholders manage, support and develop players, and the overall success of the JtST, whether that be as homegrown players or to a new senior team. In this chapter, the key findings are discussed in relation to past research, the overall impact that they may have on both future research and applied outcomes. The key findings presented aim to bridge the gap between research and practice, contributing to both practitioner and researcher interests.

5.4.1. The Multi-Purpose Nature of the WSL Academy: Is it Fit for Purpose?

Player development and education. Throughout each of the three studies, the organisational structure of the WSL Academy environment is described and explored. The FA's Inspiring Positive Change Strategy (2020) outlines The FA's ambitions to create an 'effective high-performance, inclusive, player-centred pathway' with the priority of preparing 'the future player to meet the needs of international and club football' (p. 4). In addition to this, the player pathways need to support each player, not only from an FA Four Corners perspective (i.e., Technical, Tactical, Physical and Psycho-Social), but from a dual career perspective. Whilst the overall ambition for WSL academies is well-defined, the difficulties that arise when trying to survive (and excel) as both performers and as young adults in education are clear.

Throughout Study One both players and staff acknowledged the range of challenges and difficulties that players in the WSL Academy environment were faced with. Players specifically recognised the challenges of trying to balance education commitments with the transition into the senior environment. In attempting to balance

the two, predominantly university alongside playing football, players felt that both their progression to the senior environment and their education suffered. This was a source of frustration for academy players, which was further exacerbated when identifying that male academy players are typically better supported through their education from a younger age. These players attend schools and colleges which are linked with their football clubs, affording flexibility across timetabling, attendance and examinations, and can access additional support from full-time education officers, well-being and player care staff and personal tutors within their clubs. As a consequence of the current WSL academy system, players in the early stages of the transition to the senior environment outlined missing out on training sessions and travelling to games due to having to attend lectures and complete assignments. In turn, this led them to feel that they had even more to prove than just their ability to play in a senior team. Players felt that having to balance education reinforced their 'kids' status' to the other senior players who played full-time.

Age, development and maturation. Building on this, the length of time players spent in the U21s team was discussed at length by participants, especially in Studies Two and Three. Players felt that the age-range of the team was too large, with different transitions (both on and off the pitch) experienced. These transitions were reflective of those in the Holistic Athletic Careers Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), with players at different stages of athletic, psycho-social, psychological and vocational development. As such, the WSL academy is made up of players at a range of different stages in their playing careers, but also in their educational, psycho-social, and emotional and physical maturation. Subsequently. this leaves coaches and support staff with the challenge of managing a large range of individuals at varying stages of development. Subsequently, many players feel that once reaching 18 that they have

achieved all that they can in the academy team, both in terms of their playing and psycho-social developments. Both staff and players identified these feelings to be due to the environmental constraints that leave staff unable to provide for the large range of individuals in one playing team.

Senior experience. To compare to the development pathway in the male game, Richardson and colleagues (2012) identified the U23s Academy environment as being the 'Developing Mastery' phase. Players use their time, as professionals, at this level to develop and evolve allowing them to survive (and eventually thrive) in the senior environment. The opportunity to gain experience and develop in an environment with the sole purpose of developing the player for senior football is not afforded to female players in the WSL development structure. As a result, there is a lack of opportunity to experience more meaningful, competitive environments that better match the expectations of the first team, inclusive of the heightened level of competition, more outcome orientated environments and less tolerance for failure.

Players across the three studies admit to feeling as though they can only truly prepare for these expectations (i.e., fighting for the opportunity to perform, full-time training programmes, multi-disciplinary support staff and winning bonuses, both financial and commercial) by starting to experience them, whether this be at international duty or in a senior team. Staff further explored this in Study One by discussing how players successfully making the transition to first team within the club all had experience of international camps, meaningful competitive tournaments and a professional, challenging environment which contributed to their preparedness for the senior environment and its demands.

Previous research by Headrick and colleagues (2015) identified that there comes a point where to develop the skills needed to succeed, male players need to

experience as many competitive fixtures and performances as possible. Without this experience, their development will become stalled as players miss out on the opportunity to translate their skills from training to competitive environments. These findings are similar to that of the staff and players with regard to the importance placed on experiencing more meaningful competitive environments, such as experiences which result in success and failure through progression in cup competitions or top-level competitive leagues. In contrast, the access to these environments in the male game is introduced at an earlier stage in the development pathway with more professional leagues and clubs and therefore opportunities available. These discussions across the three studies navigate the requirement WSL Academies have cater to the many differing needs of the players. This multi-purpose nature although accommodating to a wider range of individuals and players ultimately results in an environment that is lacking in being able to focus solely on developing players for a competitive, first team environment such as those in the WSL.

Alongside these findings, and with the intention of continuing to better understand and evolve current WSL academies, it is possible to make recommendations for future research and practitioners within this environment. With regards to research, further understanding which experiences and challenges better develop players to prepare them for not only their journey towards first team success, but also to educational and vocational balance. Whilst this research introduces and understanding of what the experiences of current players are, future research could further this but understanding what players need in order to be supported from a range of perspectives (i.e., performance, educational, lifestyle).

Further to this, the need to consider the impact that a more tailored, bespoke development pathway might have on the women's game. Currently the gap between

16 to 21 years is too large, especially with the consideration of aspects of growth and maturation. Consequently practitioners, within clubs but also more widely across leagues and governing bodies, must look to focus more clearly on engineering environments which allow players to develop to the standards needed to succeed in senior teams. Whilst increased competitive pressures, outcome orientated environments and team/player driven standards may manifest themselves naturally further down the pathway, the introduction of these earlier on creates many more opportunities for players and for individual development. Whilst mass modifications to the pathway take time and resource, practitioners should be considering what can be done with the current reserves to create more opportunity to experience high demands and competitive environments, whether this be through more league-wide tournaments and pressure inducing experiences, or through strategies within clubs that invite higher demands, player driven standards and a more meaningful performance leading to reward playing experience.

5.4.2. Managing the Yo-Yo Approach to the Junior to Senior Transition in WSL Academies

Existing simultaneously in both academy and senior environments. As with much of the research on the JtST (within football and a range of other professional sports), the players who participated in the three studies identified facing a number of challenges and unexpected setbacks on their path to the senior environment. Throughout the three studies, reflections and lived experiences of players moving through the JtST are presented and discussed. In Study One, players reflect on having successfully transitioned into the first team, whilst Studies Two and Three explore current lived experiences of players attempting to succeed in the transition process.

The issues and experiences are similar to those of research conducted in the male game (Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2015; Swainston et al., 2020). The players spent time 'yo-yoing' up and down between the two environments. The move back down to the U21's was often reflected upon as an abrupt, unexpected decision with little rationale or communication given. As such, players identified discomfort during this process, due to: psycho-social challenges, identity uncertainty, being unsure of where they belong, and having to quickly adapt physically and technically to different environments. As mentioned, these challenges are not unusual to the JtST, however the findings of this thesis highlight how the current culture of the U21s environment, based upon uncertainty, limited senior exposure and restricted communication, is exacerbating these issues for players.

The requirement for U21s players to not only work to manage the JtST, but also to manage their dual careers caused players angst, anxiety, and career challenges. In a WSL Academy it is mandatory for players to maintain a dual career, either in the form of education or a separate vocation (such as working or an apprenticeship, The FA 'Inspiring Positive Change Strategy', 2020). This means that when players are moving between the U21s and senior team, they are still trying to maintain and balance dual careers alongside the new addition of the senior opportunity. Players in Study One revealed they felt both their education and playing performances were disadvantaged during the time they were trying to manage their transition into the senior team.

In order to try to balance the two, players missed out on training and education sessions. As such, players continually felt as though they were playing catch-up to both their teammates and their college friends. Both players and staff regularly compared the experience to their male counterparts, who they felt were better

supported in their goals of achieving senior playing success and had better in-club resources to help facilitate the transition. Both players and staff identified the pseudo-professional nature of the WSL Academy and female leagues, with players hoping to secure a full-time playing contract but having to prepare themselves for the more realistic prospect of a dual career or a career outside of football.

Identity uncertainty and disruption. Alongside balancing the changes and demands when moving between environments, players also identified being faced with (and for those in the senior environment in Study One) overcoming identity challenges. Fluctuating (yo-yoing) between the two teams left transitioning players unsure of where they belonged and who they belonged to. When transitioning back down to the U20s environment, whether to just play games or for longer periods, players discussed feeling negatively received from players who remained in the U20s. This was typically seen both on and off the pitch, with transitioning players feeling unsure of how to re-integrate or even if they wanted to make the effort to do so.

Whilst this identity and belonging confusion is seen within the male game as an experience that should be expected, almost a rite of passage for those who want to succeed in the senior team (Relvas et al., 2010), this experience is still an unfamiliar factor for both players and staff in the women's game. Both staff and players identified being not only unsure with how to manage and support the yo-yo process, but also seemed unfamiliar with how to begin to limit the negative aspects of this experience. The findings in this thesis are the first to tangibly outline how and when female players begin to experience and need to manage this back-and-forth process. Moreover, also identifying the need to begin working with players and staff to create an understanding of how to communicate and prepare players for this yo-yo approach.

Once more integrated into the senior team players reflected that they felt although challenging, over time the senior environment gave them a clearer purpose, that they knew what they wanted and were working towards. The academy on the other hand felt stagnant, both socially and technically/tactically. This is despite the participants explaining that the senior environment still possesses the typical connotations for academy players, such as being seen as 'the kid', having to collect water bottles and bibs and being teased about their age and still living at home. Compared to the alternative of the academy environment this is something that leads to progression and development and so is preferred, whereas the U20s is both uncomfortable and stationary.

Practitioners should look to build on this research, to improve not only academy player experiences but the success with which they manage and perform in this transition period. This first can be done by addressing the communication gap between the two teams, it is not the movement between the teams that is causing the initial angst and confusion from the players, but more their misinformation (or complete lack of) about why they are moving seemingly randomly between the two teams. A more succinct feedback process from academy and/or senior staff to academy players would allow not only for players to understand their position in the transition, but also to identify areas to work on and improve whilst back at academy level, giving them more purpose and motivation and in turn reducing feelings of uncertainty and instability. Applied practitioners (including coaches and support staff, but specifically sport psychologists), can work with players to develop an understanding and create realistic expectations of this yo-yo period, to allow them to be prepared for the range of different outcomes that short-term and long-term they may be faced with.

5.4.3. A WSL Academy Coach; The Impossible Job?

Creating the perfect development environment. Transition research across sports identifies that any athlete journey moving towards successfully competing in a senior/professional environment will have its challenges, regardless of sporting abilities (Richardson et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2009). Within the JtST, those who approach the transition with a sense of readiness, understanding and acceptance are typically better equipped to deal with the transition and the psychological, social, physical, technical, and tactical challenges that come with their new environment (Drew et al., 2019; Ivarsson et al., 2015). Developing athletes/players successfully for senior success has been at the forefront of Henriksen's research for several years, identifying aspects of environments which are essential to the success of the JtST has allowed researchers and practitioners to have an understanding of what a successful talent development environment looks like (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010; 2011).

Across the three research studies in this thesis, not only is the environment described and explored, but it is also evaluated as having structures that are both facilitating and limiting depending on the player who is experiencing them. For example, mandating that all players embark and maintain a dual career is beneficial in the eyes of those players who may play lower league, semi-professional football however, hinders those who are trying to progress to the WSL league. Furthermore, whilst the WSL Academies have significantly developed and evolved in recent years, with more resource, more staff and more opportunities for players, the fundamental structure is still the same. Players are supported around their education and with the academy environment still encompassing a (limited) range of age groups, in turn

limiting opportunities for growth and development, due to the range of players in one environment needing to be supported.

The academy environment has evolved to cater to and support the range of individuals that sit within its team. As a result, the talent development processes can no longer focus solely on developing players for successful, senior careers as seen in male football academies (Larsen et al., 2020). Subsequently, as alluded to in Study One, the current system only really allows exceptionally gifted young athletes to break through into the senior environment, those who need more development and nurturing are likely to fall to playing at the lower senior levels (such as those in Journey B, Study Three) or stop playing football completely.

Fight or flight. Rather than working through more streamlined talent development processes, with clearer objectives and methods to move players successfully through the academy environment (as recommended by Larsen and colleagues, 2020), the U20s environment appears to rely on a more fight or flight system. The only way to get experience of a first team environment, and to test first-team-readiness, is for players to be (literally) thrown up into the first team and to see if they can survive. If they do, they will likely remain in the senior team, yo-yoing back down for academy games, until they are afforded a more permanent opportunity at the club.

Survival, however, does not always mean progression, and players often feel as though their development is not being supported, rather that they are there as a number to benefit the senior players training sessions. As mentioned in Study Three, for those few players who continue to play at academy level and can experience international competitions the senior team is a place that encourages and supports

development, but for many others (those in Journey B) this experience reaffirms that they are not at the level required.

The organisational structure and the limitations of the academy environment mean that a more sequential, coherent, development pathway is required, not just for U20s players but across the club. Those who are able to develop along the pathway as they mature; those who physically, technically, psychologically, socially and tactically can survive at senior level should be able to move (with organisational, strategic intent) along the transition pathway. Those who need more nurturing and developmental focus cannot. This not only affects the players who are needing to develop, increasing their frustrations, and reducing their desire to remain at the club, but also impacts upon the staff.

Staff focuses and frustrations. Academy staff, especially coaches, have an almost impossible job, looking to develop players with a huge range of potential, with stretched resources, time and multiple focuses and goals. The challenge of creating and delivering a training session which caters to international U19s players alongside those whose focus is to get into their local university team is a challenge that at this level should not exist. League-wide, the academy system needs to be evaluated further, with realistic aims and objectives for the staff and players to be outlined. Is the purpose of the WSL Academies solely to develop players for the first-team, or is it to develop well-rounded, dual-career young females who may or may not play senior, lower league football? At this moment in time Academies are stretching themselves to achieve both of these goals, and subsequently are not consistently accomplishing either.

When considering direction for future research, or recommendations for practice and developments, it is crucial to consider the overall aim of what the

academy environment in women's football should be. Developing a clearer understanding of this, with club wide aims, structures and guidelines will allow for the natural progression of the academy environment, with everyone within the environment then able to ensure that their strategies and methodologies support the overall intention of the environment they work within and the culture they are working to maintain.

Whilst it is clear for this level in the male game that academies are environments with the sole purpose of developing players who can bring success at a senior level, morally and ethically for this stage of the women's game the academy aim currently cannot be that exclusive. WSL academies presently focus on the development of well-rounded individuals who are able to succeed as players and/or alternative careers. Furthermore, regardless of whether the player exits the academy to pursue senior football aspirations or a separate career the individual should be advantaged and benefitted from the experience of a WSL player.

5.5. Limitations of the Research

The ethnographic methods of this research thesis mean that the participant sample spans players, coaches and support staff present in the academy over the three years of data collection. These participants did however all come from one club, and therefore one specific academy environment. As a result, it could be deemed that the sample size (N = 36) is small for longitudinal research and that the generalisability of the findings could be a concern. This is not an unusual acknowledgement with qualitative researchers recognising that the generalisability of ethnographic and longitudinal research can be called into question (Small, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). However, it should be acknowledged that aim of this research was not to

explore the JtST across the whole WSL Academies. The intention was to delve much deeper into lived experiences of the transition for players, coaches and support staff. As such, ethnography was chosen as the methodology due to the opportunities that are afforded to researchers that take on its methods. Within this thesis these included having more a meaningful understanding of day-to-day existences, developing real-time relationships, clearer character and personality understanding and first-hand experience of the club's cultures.

In focusing on one club environment, the data collection was able to develop an understanding of the JtST at a more meticulous, detailed level, with it being possible that the findings may resonate or replicate with other clubs and players within the WSL. Through using methods guided by the research team and recommendations from qualitative researchers the research followed trustworthy, credible data collection processes which ensured trustworthiness and methodological rigour (Gibson & Atkinson, 2018; Smith & McGannon, 2019). This in turn makes it plausible that individuals existing in similar environments, alongside psycho-social and cultural factors akin to those explored in this thesis, may have the same experiences as those documented in this research. Furthermore, to date there is no research within women's football that has explored the cultural and psycho-social factors and provided as much contextual and organisation detail as this research thesis. Therefore, in only focusing on one organisation, this thesis provides insights into behaviours, experiences, organisational and cultural norms and the transition pathway that can provide understanding and general context to what was before an unknown environment.

A final limitation to be considered would be the involvement of myself as the P-R in the research. Whilst the embedded nature of this role brings many positive considerations, such as the depth of access gained to an environment and the trust and

rapport built with participants (Tedlock, 2000), there are also some potential limitations. My practitioner role and therefore my relationship with some of the participants pre-existed my P-R role. Whilst this meant that I was able to quickly begin collecting meaningful and detailed data, it also meant that I was emotionally connected to the participants. This was difficult to separate, and as a result caused me, especially in the beginning, to be cautious in recording and analysing data that may not paint the environment, or particular participants in a positive light. Learning to separate myself more from the participants, and from my own personal lived experiences, was something I realised I had to develop over time. Arbour (2006) identified similar reflections, reinforcing that my chosen methodology was one that challenged a P-R. As the data collection progressed, I felt more capable of supporting athletes in my practitioner role as needed, but also separating myself to be able to accurately capture the environment and events that occurred.

5.6. Future Research and Practitioner Implications

The current research, the methodologies used, and the findings discussed indicate a range of opportunities for future research and applied practice, that can build upon the findings in this thesis. Specifically, implications regarding transitions, talent development, athlete support and P-R methods have been identified. Considerations for future research will be discussed first before practitioner implications are outlined.

The P-R position within this research allowed for not only a deeper, real-time understanding of the JtST, but for the intricacies of the organisational system and processes that exist within this system (the WSL Academy) to be explored. This research and the position of the researcher allowed a rare insider perspective, where lived experiences and live, natural responses to events and interactions could be

observed. As a result, the struggles and challenges that WSL academy players are facing can now be more clearly understood, with developments and changes to enhance support for these players.

Further research into the challenges and restrictions that staff face would be beneficial to allow improved understanding the changes that need to be made to resources, structures and organisations to further improve the development pathway for players. This thesis has begun to identify these, but primarily has focused on player journeys and experiences. Future research could be widened to improve the thoughts and experiences of those working in organisations such as The FA (who oversee the league and club development processes), to identify across the system changes and process that are being explored and implemented, and review their impact on the players and staff working through these challenges daily.

A second area of focus for future research is to further understand the impact and changes that the development and progression of women's football nationally is having on the organisations, clubs and staff within these environments. The recent European Championship (Summer, 2022) appeared to significantly increase media coverage, social media interest and ticket sales/attendance, with viewing and attendance records being broken at nearly every game. Whilst this has generated much positive interest and focus, it is not clear how this exponential growth over such a short period has affected teams and players, and the challenges that they face day-to-day.

This thesis has examined the psycho-social and cultural considerations and challenges that staff and players are facing as the game continues to advance. Future research should continue to explore the fundamental structure and professional changes that the game is undergoing at both junior and senior levels and use these findings and the findings of this thesis to explore changes and improvements that can

be made to the dev elopement pathway. This would allow researcher understanding of how the needs and culture of the game, both at club level and at a more holistic, stakeholder level, are continuing to evolve and adapt. Developing an understanding of these narratives, across the sport, will allow for not only a narrower focus into the evolving nature of the game, but for a pro-active approach to understanding where further support, resource and adaptations may be needed.

Alongside recognising areas for future research, the findings of this thesis also provide considerations not only for practitioners working in women's football but for anyone who may be supporting athletes through the JtST. The opportunity to gain insight into an environment beyond surface level through research is rare. The longitudinal, P-R approach taken in this thesis allows practitioners to see into the evolving, world of professional women's football at a new level. As a result, practitioner understanding of the challenges and experiences of female players can now begin to be better identified, with an understanding of the WSL academies also illustrated. The pseudo-professional nature of the WSL academies, alongside the range (and length) of time that players are spending within these academies are considerations that should be used to better inform practitioner work. Identifying the time that players have been in the academy, their relationships with other players and staff, and their experiences contribute to how prepared the player may be for the transition process and the support they may need.

Furthermore, practitioners can begin to understand the importance that players place on international duty, not just regarding the hope of representing their country, but also how they feel it furthers their club careers, filling the competitive gaps that are left by the WSL Academy structure. Understanding where these development gaps are within the academy systems, and what players feel they are missing with regard to

their professional development can assist organisations and clubs in the future to ensure the transition pathway is better connected, with the academy environment offering more professional, competitive experiences where possible.

In addition to exploring the transition process, this thesis explores the psycho-social factors related to the female football environment and how these influence the JtST. Players, although often nervous to enter a new team, felt better suited to senior teams and environments. Whilst the psycho-social challenges portrayed are still very similar to those reported in the men's game (isolation, anxiety, identity challenges), they are more influential not in the transition up to the first team but when players were transitioning back down into the academy teams.

Practitioners supporting athletes making similar transitions should use the findings from this thesis to inform supporting athletes to be better prepared for this element of the JtST. Moreover, clearer identification over who is responsible for providing this support (junior/academy staff or first/senior staff) will allow this support to be better implemented and will also help the player to understand their position on the transition pathway better. Understanding these factors, alongside having a more informed view of the JtST from this research, will allow practitioners to not only better understand the experiences of academy players, but also to develop strategies and support processes that allow more positive experiences of the transition for junior athletes.

5.7. Final Conclusion

This thesis explored the lived experiences of the JtST within a WSL Academy. Using an ethnographic methodology, the research focused on identifying psycho-social and cultural factors that exist within professional women's football. These have

been outlined in relation to the JtST, and the impact that they have on the day-to-day lives of players and staff. The existence of the researcher as a P-R has allowed for a depth of research to be conducted that has not been seen before in women's football. The role of the P-R, coupled with the longitudinal ethnography has allowed the behaviours, reactions, emotions and frustrations of those existing in the environment to be voiced, enabling a better understanding of the women's game to be presented. Further to this, the development pathway within the female game has been explored and outlined. Prior to this research thesis, the JtST within women's football had been unexplored, with assumptions made based on knowledge of the men's development pathways.

Conclusively, the research findings do not only indicate that the WSL Academy structure is struggling to maintain a multi-purpose environment, but that both players and staff are unclear in how best to achieve any of these purposes. Furthermore, the resource and focus on developing players who are prepared for a range of dual careers is in fact causing players to be ill-equipped for a senior career. Rather than benefitting the players with being better prepared to face unexpected, challenging times and providing them with a 'back-up' or dual career, the WSL academy environment is in fact struggling to support the players as individual characters, with different skillsets and aspirations. As a result, for the players who show the physical qualities and psycho-social characteristics needed to survive in the senior league, the WSL academy becomes an environment that pauses development once a certain level is reached. Players exposed to senior teams (whether they be that of their current club, or in a lower league), begin to feel more accepted and psycho-socially better suited to these environments than their familiar academy counterparts.

This research is not intended to tear down, or criticise those within the academy environment, working to support a range of different players and individuals. Rather, it is hoped that this research will outline where the challenges and gaps are, which in turn will encourage the clubs and wider stakeholders/organisations to invest into their development pathways. The JtST pathway currently relies heavily on international duty, an accommodating education or vocation environment and a player who is prepared to be patient with their yo-yo experiences. The introduction of dual-registration or loan contracts, which allow players to experience new competitive environments and develop technical, tactical and physical skills would improve the transition pathway. Further to this, investment into the WSL Academy set-up, with more of a focus on developing players solely for senior football would also improve not only the transition experience but also the number of those who may succeed in transition within the WSL system (rather than dropping to the Championship League).

Both the ethnographic methodology and the position of the P-R within this research thesis allow for original contributions to be made both to existing research and applied knowledge. Furthermore, the research calls for JtST research to examine transition experiences in their entirety as it happens, rather than in reflective snapshots. As outlined in an earlier section of this chapter, considerations for the future have been made, with opportunities for researchers, applied practitioners and stakeholders/governing bodies summarised. Moreover, this thesis provides a unique insight into the evolving world of professional women's football, highlighting both areas of significant positive developments alongside areas for future progress. Below is a bullet-point overview of the main recommendations for research, applied practice and stakeholders/governing bodies:

Research Recommendations:

Within Professional Women's Football

- Developing further understanding of the challenges and limitations that staff face whilst trying to support WSL Academy players. Identify processes and interventions that may help to develop resources, interventions and structures to better support both players and staff in achieving the academy aims.
- Further explore the support and preparation needed to better support players through managing a dual career, balancing education and vocation. There has been a small amount of research around these topics at senior level, but further research would allow for better support and knowledge of the demands of dual careers at academy level.

Outside Professional Women's Football

- Within sports with similar transition/development pathways, develop further understanding of the cultural and psycho-social factors identified in this thesis that may contribute to players/athletes wanting to remove themselves from academy teams to reach senior teams earlier in their development. and how they may influence players similarly in different sports. It would be beneficial to continue to use research to further identify what may retain athletes and how this translates across different sports with similar cultural and psycho-social components.
- To continue to build understanding of the identity challenges that players face during the junior to senior transition, acknowledging

similarities that exist to those found in this thesis and using these to inform research in different sports. Identity challenges and developments that evolve naturally for athletes at the ages of 16-18 have begun to be identified in this thesis, these can be explored further in future research in other professional sports.

Applied Recommendations:

- Working to develop a clearer and more succinct transition pathway, whereby players are better prepared for (and expect) the yo-yo phase of the JtST and are afforded more consistent, supportive feedback about their position on the transition pathway.
- Sport psychologists specifically can work with players to develop and understanding and create realistic expectations of the transition period, to allow them to be prepared for the range of different outcomes that short-term and long-term they may be faced with.
- Working with coaches and multi-disciplinary teams to look at developing team expectations, challenges and a culture that looks to support and challenge players in line with first team expectations. Developing an environment in house that facilitates and encourages challenge and pressure, rather than relying on international and external experiences to prepare players for success.

Stakeholder/Governing Bodies Recommendations:

- Exploring what the overall focus of the WSL Academies is/will be in the future and examining how league (and organisation) wide the
- Reviewing how the rapid and vast growth in women's football is impacting (both positively and negatively) the WSL academies and

identify how these will go on to affect the aspirations academy leagues, both in the short and long term. Use this to inform aims, strategies and support given at club/academy level.

- Re-introduce and re-define the organisational structure of the women's game, clearly considering the national and international published documents for growth, the changes as a result of the increased growth and attention and the objectives for each of the development ages and stages.

The nature of this thesis highlights the benefits of conducting such longitudinal research, indicating how research of this nature can provide crucial insight into player and staff lived experiences, encounters, challenges and behaviours. Finally, whilst this research thesis focuses solely on increasing understanding of the JtST in women's football, the findings will help sport psychologists to better understand the transition and the impact it can have of athletes striving for professional sporting careers.

EPILOGUE

After a thesis comprised of such detail, with longitudinal immersion through a practitioner researcher perspective, it felt appropriate to bring the thesis together, beyond that of the final chapter. The purpose of this section is to explore a more applied conclusion, where I (the practitioner-researcher) can highlight the findings and how they have and will continue to influence future work. To this end, the final section will be written in the first person, from my perspective as the practitioner-researcher.

Throughout the thesis there is an underlying notion that these methods, and consequently findings, are unearthing perspectives, behaviours and knowledge that are new to research. To briefly recap, the thesis unearthed and reflected upon the multi-purpose nature of the WSL Academy in its current format, reporting on the impact that this approach is currently having on players and staff within these environments. The dual career focus specifically was highlighted as although introduced to better support athletes holistically, something that often created barriers for those who showed talent and were wanted by the first team due to needing to attend school/college. This results in limited exposure to the first team environment and as such feelings that player development has slowed. A stagnant environment, or one that feels as such, was often the cause of players leaving the environment at the age of 18/19. When investigated further, this proved to be another key thread throughout the thesis. Players felt that their opportunities to develop and grow within the academy were limited, and so opted to leave the academy to seek playing time at a lower level (championship) senior team. This was with the hope of then developing in a mature, adult environment and potentially transitioning back up to the WSL league after gaining senior exposure. Challenges to identity supported players with this decision, as players felt that they

were better suited now to more professional and challenging environments, that were filled with adults rather than adolescents aged 16-18. Players sought to be able to exist in more results driven environments, where players were comfortable challenging one another and demanding high standards. Building on this, international duty was identified throughout to be a golden development opportunity for players showing promise, often filling the gaps (such as competitive exposure, intense training programs, high physical and mental demands and expectations) between the academy and senior environments.

Whilst highlighted within the thesis, with reinforcement throughout of its use to research (specifically football research), I feel that the new knowledge created from this thesis should be recognised further in line with the impact it can have in the applied world. Understanding of constructs such as identity, transitions (junior-to-senior but also the transition to adulthood, identity transitions, and environmental changes), talent development and advances to development pathways and processes can be taken from this thesis and used to inform and progress future work. This is something that is identified within the final chapter of the thesis, with regards to research, applied and stakeholder/governing body recommendations. Something that is not identified, or highlighted explicitly, is how I have started to use the research within my own practice, since collecting, analysing, and synthesising the data.

The purpose of this section is to identify how I have used, and will continue to use the key findings of this thesis in my practice:

- Since taking on a new role as a performance psychologist within a different WSL club (working with the senior team and overseeing the academy psychologist), I have used my findings, the experiences of players and staff

and my own conclusions to create a programme of support for players transitioning from the U21's to the senior team. This includes support not just from a psychological perspective, but includes conversations with coaches, conversations prior to the transition with strength and conditioning coaches to identify physical expectations, tailored nutrition plans and education plans to enable a holistic programme of development for transitioning players to make players as educated and informed as possible when preparing and making the transition. This is currently being used to provide an education of critical issues that players face to the multi-disciplinary team that is concerned with athlete development and supporting a successful junior to senior transition.

- Alongside looking at how these findings can influence and contribute to the work I am doing in my current role, I have also been keen to disseminate this information further within the field of women's football. I have begun to work on building a platform for this research to be shared and used to inform practice. I am currently working with figures at the FA to report my findings to individuals working at a strategic level within the FA, but also those who work as psychologists and performance lifestyle advisors to disseminate findings and influence player preparation and exposure as much as possible (even if this is just opening conversations around the transitions). I hope to continue to keep building this as am education programme, with the aim to circulate these findings even further to sports other than professional football.
- I am currently facilitating conversations with the FA highlighting the importance placed on international duty, highlighting and developing

awareness when supporting youth teams and identifying how international duty can support club level football, identity development and seeking senior opportunities. These conversations are highlighting how international duty is currently filling gaps as a consequence of a lack of organizational structure and a lack of meaningful competitive football beyond the age of 18 in the existing player pathway. As such, I hope to continue to work with the FA, collaborating to work on monitoring and filling these gaps.

- Working with UK coaching and the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS, TASS is a Sport England funded partnership between talented athletes, delivery sites and national governing bodies of sport) to educate coaches and support staff on supporting athletes through the junior to senior transition. One of TASS' main priorities is to improve knowledge, provisions and systemic pathways to better balance education and performance. I am working to develop, deliver and assess qualifications that aim to provide practitioners and support staff with knowledge of transition processes, areas for better support and awareness of the impact (both positive and negative) the transition can have in short and long-term athlete development.

Alongside recognising the research and applied implications that I hope this thesis and its findings may have both within women's football and wider professional sport, I think it is important to acknowledge and appreciate how the experiences and conclusions within this research continue to inform my practice, approaches and behaviours even after the thesis is written. It feels rare to be able to begin to influence (even if gradually) behaviours, protocols and systems directly from thesis experiences,

and so I am proud that I have been able to put my thesis to good personal use. I hope that this can extend, beyond that of my own world, role responsibilities and conversations and can positively influence others as researchers and practitioners both in and beyond professional football.

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APPENDICES LIST

Appendix 1.

Study One Semi-Structured Interview Guide

PHASE 1 - Introduction
Aim: To explain the aims of the interview, why this research is important and why they have been identified as a participant.
PHASE 2 - Football Background
Aim: The aim of this section is to allow the participant to feel comfortable. The first questions will explore the participant's background, their experiences, their careers in football and will encourage the participant to feel more relaxed and speak more openly throughout the interview (Smith and Sparkes, 2016) **Example Question: in as much depth as you feel comfortable, can you tell me about your football career so far?**
PHASE 3 - Progression and Professionalisation of Women's Football
Aim: This section aims to explore women's football in terms of how it has developed and explore the participants thoughts on this, how do they feel it has progressed, how will it continue to progress in the future and what impact does this have on the desmans and challenges placed on the players. This phase will gain an insight into how the club functions, the facilities, department, staff etc. (Themen, 2016, Woodward, 2017). **Example Question: How do you feel women's football has changed as a result of its recent professionalisation?**
PHASE 4 - The Importance of Culture and how the Professionalisation of Women's Football has Influenced the Culture of Women's Football
Aim: This phase investigates what we already know about football culture, and how important it is for a team to have its own organisational culture. Questions will examine the player's thoughts on what culture is and what constitutes the culture of women's football at a personal, team and organisational level (Maitland et al,, 2015, Eubank et al., 2017, Magill et al., 2017). **Example Question: What does the current environment of women's football look like? Can you describe it as best you can?**
PHASE 5 - The Key Psycho-Social and Cultural Factors of Women's Football
Aim: This section examine the presence/prevalence of psycho-social and cultural issues within football's football, and how they affect the perceptions, behaviours and values within the academy team, also taking looking at how do these influence players on a day to day basis? (Richardson et al., 2012, Gledhill et al., 2017). **Example Question: What attributes does a player need in order to be successful?**
PHASE 6 - The Transition from Academy Level to First-Team
Aim: This phase aims to explore the player progression from academy (junior) to professional (senior) playing level, how the environment changes; what are the new demands and experiences that come from being in the first team, what preparations and challenges do players face within this transition? (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004, Richardson et al., 2012, Morris et al., 2017). **Example Question: How do you think the environment that the players train in helps to support the transition from academy to first team?**
PHASE 7 - End of Interview
Aim: This final section offers the researcher an opportunity to summarise the interview and to allow for any additional responses from the participant. The researcher will the close the interview by thanking the participant for their time and valued participation.