

**IDENTITY IN ELITE YOUTH PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL**

**TOM MITCHELL**

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## Abstract

The concepts of Athletic Identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and identity (Erikson, 1950, 1968) both carry notions of having a clear sense of self definition. Applied practitioners in elite professional football settings (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Harwood, 2008; Nesti & Littlewood, 2010; Nesti, 2013) have championed the notion that individuals who possess a clear sense of self, (generally) cope with the demanding nature of first team football, and the daily challenges that arise from their chosen profession (i.e., injury, de-selection). Conversely, a small number of researchers have consistently argued that professional football club culture may not support the development of a clear sense of identity in (young) players, as it has been described as espousing notions of power, dominance, authority and insecurity (see e.g. Parker, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001; Roderick, 2006, 2006a). The present thesis explores the role of identity, the impact of football club culture on its formation, and its importance in the career trajectory of youth team footballers.

Across three distinct studies, this thesis explores the concepts of Athletic Identity, identity, and the creation of club culture within youth and professional football. Study one used a cross sectional approach, within and across levels of play along with distinct situational, demographic variables to assess any differentiating factors in Athletic Identity in 168 (N = 168) youth team footballers. Football club explained 30% of the variance in exclusivity among players ( $p = .022$ ). Mean social identity was significantly higher for those players in the first year of their apprenticeship compared to the second year ( $p = .025$ ). The range of variance for exclusivity amongst players suggested it was the cultural climate created at each individual football club that impacted this subscale of Athletic Identity. Study Two used a qualitative approach with the aim of critically exploring the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, organisational culture and environmental conditions. These facets are influenced by practitioners within youth development programmes, all of which contribute to shaping a player's identity (Erikson, 1968). A total of 19 youth development practitioners were interviewed during data collection. Practitioners provided an explicit and clear blueprint of the ideal player characteristics required for successful upward transition, including, self belief, dedication and self awareness, which are synonymous with notions of identity. Finally, Study three used a case study approach to critically examine how players' experiences of a professional football environment and culture served to shape their identity and allows them to cope with critical moments. A Championship football club served as the case study in which 4 players were interviewed 3 times over the course of one season. Findings were represented as narrative stories of each player. Findings suggested that having a clear sense of identity provided players with a platform for resilience and perseverance throughout a range of critical moments.

In summary, it is vital that appropriate internal (club) and external (affiliated organisations) strategies are developed and integrated into practice to ensure that players develop a clear sense of identity and meaning. It is essential that this transcends the professional football domain for players to have the best possible platform for career progression and career termination.

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## Contents page

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page Number</b>
Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	2
Researcher Profile	8
<b>Chapter One</b>	
1.1 Introduction	11
1.2 Literature Review	13
1.3 Cultural and Historical context	13
1.4 Professional football culture	16
1.5 Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP)	27
1.6 Career Transitions and Critical Moments	31
1.7 Approaches to understanding identity	38
1.7.1 Athletic Identity	39
1.7.2 Social and Role identity	48
1.7.3 Identity: An Eriksonian approach	50
1.8 Summary	56
1.9 Mapping of the research journey	57
<b>Chapter Two – Athletic Identity in Professional Football</b>	
2.1 Introduction	60
2.2 Method	63
2.2.1 Participants	63
2.2.2 Materials and Procedure	55
2.2.3 Statistical Methods	64
2.3 Results	64
2.4 Discussion	67
2.5 Conclusion	72
2.6 Recommendations	73
<b>Chapter Three – Identity formation in English Football</b>	
3.1 Introduction	76
3.2 Methodology	78
3.2.1 Participants	78
3.2.2 Procedure	79
3.2.3 Data Collection	79
3.2.4 Pilot Interview	83
3.2.5 Data Preparation	83
3.2.6 Data Analysis	85

3.2.7	Strategies for ensuring validity, credibility, rigor and trustworthiness	88
3.3	Results and Discussion	90
3.3.1	Ideal player characteristics for successful transition from youth to professional	79
3.3.1.1	Physical and technical attributes	92
3.3.1.2	Psychosocial Competencies	94
3.1.2	Summary of Ideal Player Characteristics	104
3.3.3	Practitioner perspectives on the development of ideal player characteristics	105
3.3.3.1	Organisational factors contributing to Identity formation	92
3.3.3.2	Non organisational factors contributing to Identity formation	112
3.3.4	Summary of practitioner perspectives of development of ideal player characteristics	114
3.3.5	Practitioner Perspectives on the challenges to players (and their identity) during transition to first team environments.	115
3.3.5.1	Non organisational challenges to player identity	117
3.3.5.2	Organisational challenges to player identity	119
3.3.6	Summary of practitioner perspectives on the challenges to players and their identity during transition to first team environments	123
3.4	Discussion	124
3.5	Conclusions	127

## **Chapter Four - The Role of Identity in Critical Moments within Professional Football Environments**

4.1	Introduction	131
4.2	Method	133
4.2.1	The Case	135
4.2.2	Co-actors	135
4.2.3	Data Collection	136
4.2.4	Fieldwork Diary	137
4.2.5	Interviews	138
4.2.6	Data Analysis	141
4.2.7	Trustworthiness	141
4.2.8	Data Representation	142
4.3	Results	144
4.3.1	Ryan's story: A tale of uncertainty	144
4.3.2	Jason's Story: Feelings of betrayal	155
4.3.3	Kevin's Story: A 'lost' player	160
4.3.4	Robbi's Story: Spirituality and freedom	166
4.4	Discussion	174
4.5	Conclusion	178

## **Chapter Five - Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

5.1	Aims of the thesis	181
5.2	Practical Implications	183
5.3	Theoretical Implications	187
5.5	Suggestions for future research	207
5.6	Conclusions	204

<b>References</b>		205
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<b>Appendices</b>		235
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A: Informed consent forms

B: Interview Schedule Study two

C: Interview Schedule Study three

### List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Key Performance Indicators for Academies	28
Figure 1.2	Typical Category one club structure	30
Figure 1.3	Development model on transitions	35
Figure 5.1	Trust vs Mistrust in professional football	193
Figure 5.2	Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt professional football	194
Figure 5.3	Initiative vs Guilt in professional football	195
Figure 5.4	Industry vs Inferiority in professional football	196
Figure 5.5	Identity vs Role Confusion in professional football	197
Figure 5.6	Intimacy vs Isolation in professional football	198
Figure 5.7	Generatively vs Stagnation in professional football	199
Figure 5.8	Ego Integrity vs Despair in professional football	200

### List of Tables

Table 1.1	Socio-cultural model of elite player development in professional soccer	37
Table 1.2	A timeline for the development and use AIMS	41
Table 1.3	Eight stages of Psychosocial development	52
Table 2.1	Mean (SD) Athletic Identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for youth football players according to which English professional league they play in.	66
Table 2.2	Mean (SD) Athletic Identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for 168 professional youth football players according to whether they were living at home or away, or whether they were in the first or second year of their apprentice.	66
Table 3.1	Practitioner Codes	84
Table 3.2	League Codes	84

Table 3.3	Ideal player characteristics	92
Table 3.4	Practitioner perceptions on the development of ideal characteristics	106
Table 3.5	Challenges to player Identity during transition	116
Table 4.1	Sages in Professional Development	136
Table 5.1	Eight stages of Psychosocial development	189

## **List of Abbreviations**

EDS: Elite Development Squad (or Under 21's)

EPPP: Elite Player Performance Plan

FA: The Football Association

EPL: English Premier League

FFE & VTS: The Footballers' Further Education and Vocational Training Society Limited

FIFA: Federation Internationale de Football Association

PFA: The Professional Footballers Association

UEFA: Union of European Football Association

YDS: Youth Development System

## **Glossary of Terms**

A range of contextual and environmental specific terms are used frequently throughout the thesis and are defined below:

**Home-grown:** A football player that is either located within and/or has player progressed through a professional football club's Youth Development System/Football Academy. Such a player may also be referred to as an indigenous player.

**Football Scholar:** A player that enters the Football Scholarship scheme within a professional football club's Academy system on a full-time basis after finishing compulsory education.

**Football Academy:** Football Professional football clubs that enter into the Football Association Academy Premier League are required to have a Football Academy, which is a developmental training system that caters for players aged from 9 to 19 years of age.

Charter for Quality: A document produced by the Football Association's Technical Quality Department in 1997 that outlines the required infrastructure, regulations and procedures for a club to operate a fully licensed Football Academy.

Elite: Any individual and/or group of players located within the context of a top-level professional football club and Football Academy system.



## **Researcher Profile**

As social readers are part of the social work they study, they influence it and are affected by it (Littlewood, 2005). Others in the field of ethnographic research suggest the research should explore the relationship between ‘self’ and the ‘other’ and therefore indicate their biographic positioning in relation to the research process (Foley, 2002).

I have always had a keen interest in both playing and watching football. My step dad took me to training and matches for my local side from the age of around 9. I was never near the standard to enter a professional football environment so it was never been a dream lost. I played at an amateur level until I was 30. Throughout my teens and early 20’s I regularly accompanied my step dad who, in a work capacity, travelled to football matches up and down the country most Saturdays, so it is safe to say I’ve seen quite a few matches and have a good understanding of the basic technical and tactical aspects of the game. I went through the normal state school system doing GCSEs and A-Levels in sixth form. After completing an undergraduate dissertation on the ‘Aerobic capacity of university level football players’, I lost interest in the physiological aspect of player development probably due to seeing the lack of career opportunities and research access in professional football at the time. It must be noted, here that my research methods training was predominantly quantitative which may have influenced my liking for physiology. I became more interested in the types of people that footballers were and how they achieved excellence in their field. I undertook an MSc with the thesis focussing on the environmental conditions and psychosocial competencies associated with successful talent development in soccer. During this period of my education, I received training on qualitative aspects of research methods. Although never having a career intention, shortly after completing

the MSc I began working in a local FE college where part of my duties were to teach the educational element of the apprenticeship programme at a professional football club, the same one I used for the MSc studies. Here I engaged with the club scholars for around 1.5 days per week in a classroom setting and really started to see the difficulties they faced in trying to make it as a professional. I did this for five years, totalling around 1500 hours of interaction, and saw players enter, progress, but more often than not, exit into a work where their football skills didn't transfer well. I gained a great deal of insight into football club culture and it posed questions surrounding such a culture and how it shapes players lives. A short time after I finished teaching on this programme, and moving into a more HE orientated role, I enquired at a university well respected in the area of football research and eventually enrolled onto the present thesis.

# **Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The present thesis explores the role of identity, the impact of football club culture on its formation, and its importance in the career trajectory of youth team footballers. Erikson (1968) observed the most important task for an individual during the period of adolescence is self-identification. The concepts of Athletic Identity (Brewer et al. 1993) and identity (Erikson, 1950, 1968) both carry notions of having a clear sense of self-definition. This is comprised of goals, values and beliefs that an individual finds expressive and is unequivocally committed to. Identity has also been viewed as central to an individual's psychological development (Maslow, 1962). Indeed Maslow believed that a strong, clear sense of self would allow an individual to pursue what he perceived as the universal human tendency to strive for growth, autonomy, and the excellence of self-actualization. A number of applied practitioners (see e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Harwood, 2008; Nesti & Littlewood, 2010; Nesti, 2013) in elite professional football settings have championed the notion that individuals who possess a clear sense of self, [generally] cope with the demanding nature of first team football, and the daily challenges that arise from their chosen profession (i.e., injury, de-selection). Further, this work has suggested that researchers give greater attention to the study of identity from alternative conceptual and methodological perspectives, as opposed to the dominant cognitive-behavioural approach that has dominated literature within the sport psychology domain. The present thesis adds to this call and presents a range of unique and novel research studies that aim to better understand identity within the context of elite youth professional football.

A number of researchers have consistently argued that professional football club culture may not support the development of a clear sense of identity in young players, as it has often been described as one that espouses notions of power, dominance, authority and insecurity (see e.g. Parker, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001; Roderick, 2006, 2006a). With regard to youth team football, there is only one case study available to researchers; Parker's seminal ethnographic research on (trainee) masculinity at *Colby Town Football Club*. This is now over 20 years old and although it did not focus on the concept of identity, it provided valuable insights into the development of a hyper-masculine self in players through their need to conform to a range of formal and non formal cultural norms, traditions and working practices. Despite this work, it is felt that there is a need to add more depth and breadth to our understanding of the lived experiences of youth team footballers, especially to understand *who* these players are, and how their identity is connected and influenced by involvement in professional football club settings.

In light of these issues, the aim of the present thesis is to explore the concept of identity in professional football with a specific focus on the transition from youth to professional environment. To achieve the dominant research question, a series of inter-related research objectives will be addressed:

1. To investigate the concept of Athletic Identity in youth team footballers and determine whether a range of demographic variables (e.g., year of apprenticeships, living arrangements and level of play) influence levels of Athletic Identity. (*This will be addressed in Study One*).

2. To explore the perceptions of practitioners (e.g., academy managers and coaches) employed within professional football clubs on the importance of identity in youth team footballers. (*This will be addressed in Study Two*).
3. To examine the strategies used by professional football clubs in creating an organisational culture to develop identity in players. (*This will be addressed in Study Two*).
4. To explore a range of players perceptions of the development and importance of identity at distinct phases of the football career. (*This will be addressed in Study Three*).

## **1.2 Literature Review**

The following review of literature aims to provide the context and background material to the series of research studies, namely the historical features of youth development in England and theoretical concepts surrounding identity. This will include Athletic Identity, identity and the role of football club culture.

## **1.3 Cultural and Historical context of youth development in English football**

This section will provide an overview of youth development structure and organisation from its early stages to the present model highlighting key legislative and organisational milestones. Up until 1960 it was illegal for a football club to recruit under 17's as full time professional employees. However, according to Monk and Russell (2000), young players were often recruited as 'ground staff' or 'office boys'

undertaking manual and often menial activities such as cleaning equipment or maintaining the stadium. Such a lack of structure may lead to a situation where educational needs were not addressed. As a result, in 1960, the Football Association took the first steps to formalise the employment of young players by introducing the ‘apprentice player’ who was able to join a football club at the age of 15. The guidelines did not explicitly require educational provision but did state that apprentices should be able to explore education activities as part of their apprenticeship. At this time football clubs were able to sign 15 apprentices (Harding, 1991). The implication of having no education requirement meant that young boys were being employed to solely focus on a football career which was uncertain, if unsuccessful they had limited transferable skills to enter new employment.

The establishment of the Footballers Further Education and Vocational Training Scheme (FFE & VTS) in 1978 signalled further formalisation of the football apprenticeship. However the schemes varied in their structure but all would typically include some form of manual labour seen in the pre 1960’s period. With the economic recession of the late 1970’s came a decline in the number of apprentices e.g. the 24 Division Four clubs had a total of just 33 apprentices. The saviour came in the form of the Conservatives youth training scheme (YTS) in 1983 which was employed by the football industry in 1984. The YTS provided the necessary framework from which football could work from as well as much needed revenue from central government. In 1987 the FFE and VTS received ‘Approved Training Organisation’ status which lead to an increase in the number of apprentices and required football clubs to allow one day a week ‘day release’ at a local college for apprentices to study Leisure and Tourism related programmes. This also saw a decreased in their amount of manual

and menial tasks once expected by youth trainees. Towards the latter stages of the 1990's FFE and VTS expected YT's (a term still commonly used in today) to take GNVQ or A-Level in Leisure Tourism and Sport depending on GCSE grades and would also help fund further educational pursuits beyond playing careers (Monk & Russell, 2000). This new regime allowed players to receive the benefits of an education beyond the scope of a football development programme and allowed for some integration with others outside the football world. It also offered some security in terms of having a formal qualification to help them seek and obtain employment if deselected.

From 2006, at the age of 16, the most technically gifted players and / or the ones who show most promise were rewarded with a two-year full time 'apprenticeship' and access to the Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (ASE) programme. This signalled a more rigorous and structured system for the apprenticeship programme including maximum squad sized and more detailed auditing. According to LFE (2010) '*players may also be recruited from outside the Academy or Centre of Excellence from local leagues via a clubs scouting system*'. Monk and Olsson (2006) reported a range of 18:18 to 9:22 players recruited from within their own development programme i.e. U16's and below. Previously and pre ASE, Hoey (2003) reported only half of U15's progressed onto an apprenticeship. This internal labour market has arisen possibly due to the amount of information about players (e.g. from sport scientists and local scouts) which would already be available to coaches and youth development managers over players in local leagues.



Players can be formally associated with a football clubs Academy or Centre of Excellence from the age of 9 and train at the academy between 2-4 times per week as well as competition on a weekend (Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). The current form of the football apprenticeship is the Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (ASE) which was introduced in 2004. It is comprised of a 104 week programme to include; 'Football Development' (training and competition); 'Work Based Learning' (Vocational NVQ to recognise skills knowledge and abilities in football) and Technical / Academic programmes (A-level standard programmes and Level 2 Certificate in Coaching Football) (LFE, 2014). The non football aspects of the programme typically amount to around 12 hours per week with the remaining time being taken up by training and competition. Players typically expect to earn £45 per week if in the football league and £90 per week if in the premier league. The number of players registered to the ASE programme stands at 1400 (LFE, 2014).

#### **1.4 Professional football culture**

Whilst the concept of identity has a focus on the individual, we must not ignore the case for understanding the individual person in context. This section aims to provide a critical appraisal on the current state of knowledge on the cultural constraints that players and staff work under within a professional football club setting.

Jones (2010) defined organisational culture as 'the shared set of values and norms that controls organisational members' interactions with each other and with people outside the organization" (p. 179). Culture may manifest itself in many

different ways through logos, mission statements, language, events that convey meaning to the organisation which all have the capacity to shape those individuals within the culture. For example, a football club may have a club crest, colours and mottos displayed at their training ground. Despite this, empirical research on the daily activities, trials and tribulations, cultural norms of modern youth team footballers and the culture they operate in is sparse thus limiting our understating of identity in this context. Only one study appears to have been published exploring the organisational culture and tensions in professional football. Ogbonna and Harris (2015) reported issues relating to control, lack of togetherness, tensions between individual player needs and club requirements for media exposure. Although insightful, it focussed on the management of the club as a business and didn't centre on first team culture and subcultures.

Access into the closed and insular world of professional football clubs is limited to outsiders who include researchers, members of the media and the public alike. Football clubs have been previously described as 'jealously guarded worlds'. They are quite suspicious of social researchers and of press and broadcasting journalists whose interests lie in anything other than the straight report or the novelty item' (Tomlinson, 1983 p. 151). The public rarely see the inside of changing rooms nor half time team talks but merely see immaculate pitches, full stadia and the nicely positioned media advertising boards behind the manager in and after match interview or at the scheduled training ground press conference. There are, however snippets of insight into this relatively unknown world through sociological realms of research and the wider media alike. Television documentaries have shown some elements of the brutality of life at a football club through half time 'bolloking' and training ground

drills but have rarely focused on the daily experience led by players themselves; see e.g. *Orient for a Fiver* (2005) and *Football Dreams* (2007). One of those which have provided some deep insight is Hunter Davies' *The Glory Game* (1972) in which Davies undertook an extended period of unrivalled total access at Tottenham Hotspur FC in the 1971-1972 season. Within this account Davies provides a vivid account of life as a professional footballer and although the job provides affluence and celebrity status it is in fact a life of fear, insecurity, loneliness, tedium and rejection. Whilst many academics and football fans alike may find such information essential reading *Tottenham Hotspur* didn't. After publication and a sensationalisation in *The People* a 'legal row' ensued but was quickly revoked (Davies, 1972, p. 12-13). Nevertheless this type of access and associated publications has not been replicated to this extent. *The Glory Game* is now deemed a classic text by many. Parker (1998) was not without problems with access and had stated it took 'the best part of a whole year to find a way into a club' (Parker, 1998 p.10).

From a sociological research approach, Roderick (2006) undertook in depth interviews and fieldwork with [then] current and ex professional players across the four major English professional leagues providing a vivid account of a range of career experiences. In a similar fashion to Davies, Roderick describes the footballer's careers as short, insecure, physically demanding and played out under constant scrutiny. Parker (1995, 1998, 2000, & 2001) carried out ethnographic research at one professional football club within their youth team carrying out interviews, and generally spending time with players throughout all aspects of their apprenticeship during the 1993-1994 season. In his concluding comments Parker (1995) is in agreement with Davies (1972) and Roderick (2006) that in football; "It's about

opinions, authoritarian attitudes and domination. It's about discipline tradition, superiority..." (p.123). This is exemplified by Cushion and Jones (2006) who analysed the discourse between a youth team coach and their players after a game. It contained aggression, swearing, and individual berating whilst offering players no opportunity to provide reason for their actions during the match.

Gearing (1999) described football clubs as *institutions* which exhibit dominant masculine form characterised by power, authority and competitive aggression (Parker, 1995 p. 60). Gearing (1999), building on the work of Goffman (1959), described football clubs as "peculiar and unique institutions which stamp a certain character on young men as they pass from adolescence and early adulthood" (p. 48). The notion of football clubs as 'total' institutions was characterised by their high capacity to structure the daily lives [and ultimately identity] of their members. This would be through training, eating, travelling and competing as a team under the guidance of coaches and other staff. Gearing describes football clubs as being similar to that of prisons or army barracks where its members lead a semi enclosed, formally managed way of life with its own paramount reality.

In Parker's (1995, 2000 & 2001) ethnographic work the coaches at *Colby town* exerted their authority by subjecting players to individual and team public reprimands often as a result of poor performance in training or competition. In the case of *Albion*, Cushion and Jones (2006) depict such abusive language, harshness and personal castigation as being common place at every training session and describes this a form of 'symbolic violence'. Such authoritarianism, through discourse often in the form of

'bollockings', was seen as a tool for which to keep players within a realm of obedience and reinforced the social order. (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Such authoritarian actions and discourse have been viewed (by coaches) as a requirement in order to fully develop players and prepare them for life as a professional (Parker, 1996; Roderick, 2006). Through his field notes, Parker (1995) was able to articulate the demands of coaches who wanted 'aggression' from players and for them to be 'nasty'. Graham Rix, then at Chelsea FC, spoke of young players; "you've got to be a hard tough bastard.....and in your heart and your stomach you've got to be tough as nails" (Channel 4, 2007). In their research with elite coaches, Cushion and Jones (2006) participants cite tradition (culture) and previous experience as justification for authoritarian behaviours, for example, one coach explains his practice comes from tradition; "threatening people is the traditional way of doing it.....It's not sort of management and staff, its management and quite school boyish, 'do as your told stuff'. (p. 151).

The power and authority exhibited by youth coaches on their players was also exhibited away from training and competition through the array of menial tasks given to them including cleaning professionals' boots, putting clean kit out and cleaning shower facilities (Parker, 2001). Players who met [or conformed to] the formal and informal criteria were often rewarded, coaches were seen to have their 'favourites' and displayed this by awarding certain players roles within the team such as vice-captain and warm-up leader. In addition some players were seen to be exempt from the more menial tasks such as cleaning showers. Cushion and Jones (2006) reported coaches viewed acceptance of the social order established by coaches was viewed a legitimate and valued behaviour with players being rewarded or labelled as a 'good

player'. This phenomena has been described to an extreme where Parker (1996) reported that players positioned themselves as being possible a candidate for a professional contract by living out everything that the coaches wanted and fully accepted their values. The benefit of such conformity has been seen in the physical education domain with reports of coaches displaying a positive bias to those who are 'conforming, co-operative and orderly' (Martinek, 1983, p. 65). Parker (2001) spoke of subservience and an ability to conform to formal and non formal norms as being some of the requirements associated with a successful transition to professional status. Such norms included the official activities such as the menial jobs, punctuality and performance levels but also un-official norms such as conforming to a hyper masculine culture and a disregard for education. Similar notions have been supported in professional and elite level youth football, where youth players talked about being more interested in football than school (and quite possibly career planning) and established professionals couldn't see the relevance of education (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006).

A strong sense of dedication to the role of footballer is promoted at professional football clubs through coaches telling players to think about nothing apart from football (Parker, 2000; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). Parker's (2000) ethnographic account of the lives of a squad of youth team football apprentices from 'Colby Town' provided a vivid account of the educational aspect of their modern apprenticeships. Parker described the classroom environment at a local college as being dominated by male sub cultural practice which overshadowed the aims of sessions "Aside from the occasional references to set work, sexuality and sexual promiscuity were the main topics of conversation" (p. 69). Players were described as

also creating their own 'educational agenda'. Accounts from tutors led to the apprentices being labelled as 'uncooperative individuals, who because they had no respect for anyone but themselves, deliberately set out to be 'trouble makers and wind-up merchants in class.

With regard to the lives of youth team footballers the requirement to undertake 'jobs' and wholly obedient appears to do little for development of personal growth of in young players; One apprentice; Nick '*It's so regimental....there's that many rules, you're not left alone to grow up or be called a man, you're treated just like a kid*' (Parker, 1995, p. 116). In Parker's study, life outside the training group also did little to assist in the psychosocial development of players from adolescence into adulthood. With little money as a result of low apprentice wages the players were limited with what activities they could undertake in their spare time often resulting in relaxing in rooms, watching television or playing darts at the accommodations provided by the football clubs. Players provided accounts of severe boredom associated with too much spare time (Parker, 1995, p.117). Such accounts do not carry notions of developmental activities or opportunities for young players and instead seem to promote further narrowing of the self, which may have negative consequences upon injury or de-selection.

Whilst Parkers work provides much information about the lives of these individual away from the confines of the training ground all the players lived away from home. As a result we do not know if similar notions extended boredom are experienced by those living at home with family, siblings and peers around them. As

not all youth team footballers live away in rented accommodation, it would be useful to gain an insight into the experiences of this sub population. There is little information from players who remain within the parental home throughout their apprenticeship and as a result there is a need for accurate and rigorous information with the aim of assessing any possible differences in the lived experience of those who stay at home. Regardless of individual living arrangements such narrowing of experience in young players may not provide the best basis for which to progress into the volatile world of professional football nor into a real world of every day society (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Through interviews with recently de-selected former youth team footballers it was clear that the impact of being released from a football club had severe effects on their identity. One player spoke of his experience; *“I felt as though I didn’t know who I was anymore because football was my life and I didn’t have that anymore. It was difficult time in my life”* (Brown & Potrac, 2009, p. 151). Such conditioning may well serve footballers well to some extent in terms of focus, commitment and dedication to training and competition however during the highly frequent critical moments such as; berating, injury or transition, the opposite may be true. Additionally some critical moments may occur on a regular basis and so may frequently challenge the identity of a player. Finally, the need to conform to a range of implicit and explicit norms within a football context may promote total fusion with this context and as such it seems easy to lose oneself in this.

Gearing, (1999) cites football clubs in being implicit in the delaying of footballers healthy psychosocial development into adulthood through their ‘protective and encompassing nature’. There are player accounts of such delays for example a newspaper interview with the then Arsenal and England player Tony Adams stated “I



can't paint footballers all the same but a lot of us never grow up. You come straight out of school into a macho lads' environment. You don't have to learn about life" (Ridley, 1997). Paul Gascgoine also described being a footballer left little need to mature and develop; "Yep it's good, you can just be a baby being a footballer" (Cutting Edge, 1996). Both accounts depict some form of 'maintained adolescence' (Petitpas, 1978) which may be institutionally derived through long standing cultural norms. This is reflected by a former youth footballers' description of the difficulties faced with trying to move on from his release from a professional football club. "... *I can't see my life outside of professional football and I can't see my life away from football. It's all I know. I've built it [being a footballer] up all my life*" (Brown & Potac, 2009, p. 154). This quote suggests the player has gained a clear sense of safety and security from his time at a professional football club but upon release those perceptions of safety and security have now gone.

Pain and Harwood (2004) noted that the ruthless nature of football increased player's fears of being stigmatised. In this regard, Cushion and Jones (2006) found that some players actually engage in some form of 'output restriction' in order to maintain good relationships with peers and not be labelled as 'busy', which it is argued may marginalise them even further from their peers. This may be in the form of not asking questions or volunteering for an extra duty. Traditionally male dominated activities such as heterosexual promiscuity, drinking and smoking were undertaken by players in a bid to replicate actions seen in their professional peers as well as other working class adolescent cultures (Canaan, 1996). One player saw such actions as a form of conformity to a norm. "If I go out with a pack [of cigarettes], everyone's '*Oh give us one of them*' – *I think it's just the image really...they're not*

*enjoying it...*” (Parker, 2001 p.70). This suggests that footballers willingly and sometime begrudgingly conform to club norms. This may pose specific challenges to players in terms of wanting to be part of the team but not staying true to themselves, beliefs or values.

A strong sense of affiliation to the role of ‘footballer’ has been reported to be promoted at professional football clubs through coaches telling players to think about nothing apart from football (Parker, 2000; Brown & Potrac, 2009). McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) reported one Scottish youth team football player as saying ‘Any time I had to think, I was just thinking about football’. To live, breath and eat football has been strongly encouraged within youth development environments and it is perceived to evoke increased levels of dedication and commitment to reaching professional status (Holt & Dunn, 2004, Holt & Mitchell, 2006). According to (Nesti, 2004, Nesti & Littlewood, 2010) such narrow sense of self may inhibit a players ability to make the best use of their talents and cope with the range of critical moments professional football offers.

The volatile climate and authoritarian coach-athlete relationships are likely to have an effect on players’ psychosocial development, to date there is little objective empirical knowledge available to practitioners such as coaches, education and welfare officers (EWO’s) and sport psychologists about this. With regard to football clubs ‘stamping a certain character in young men’ (Gearing 1999) this may have an effect on identity formation (see Erikson, 1968). Youth team footballers recently de-selected have reflected on their experiences of their total involvement in football “*My whole*

*life was structured around football, all my influences, all the people I dealt with, adults and children, were all involved football. It's fair to say that my life revolved around football*" (Brown & Potrac, 2009, p. 148). Roderick (2006) describes football as 'all consuming, and physically demanding career and that it is inevitable that self-identity is essentially determined by it' (p. 17).

Roderick (2006) describes players' involvement in football as not just an activity they do but something that they are. Such identity formation as a result of occupation is not unknown as Glaeser (2000) notes that the ways in which the self derives *meaning* from work are associated with the activities of the process of work, the end products of work, the prestige associated with the work of a particular occupation, the prestige of the social context within which work occurs. Erikson's work on identity suggests this *meaning* from work may stem back to school age and in the context of football may stem from early engagement with an Academy setting. Erikson suggests school can emphasise a "a strict sense of duty in doing what one is supposed to do as opposed to making it an extension of the natural tendency in childhood to find out by playing"(p. 126). When applied to a football club setting it appears that they indeed promote such a strict sense of duty in their players during training, competition and culture. Erikson notes such effects as potentially negative in that children may become entirely dependent on prescribed duties. The danger to identity development is that the child or adolescent may begin to only accept 'work' as their criterion of worthiness. Erikson refers to Marx (1955) notion of 'craft idiocy' (i.e. becoming a slave to and of ones skills at the expense of wider social experiences). In the case of a young aspiring footballer, they may begin to consolidate their identity around their technical capacities elicited at their academy. When this

description is further placed in the context of professional football and youth team football it is unsurprising that footballers are somewhat ‘conditioned’ as a result of this occupation (See e.g. Brown & Potrac, 2009).

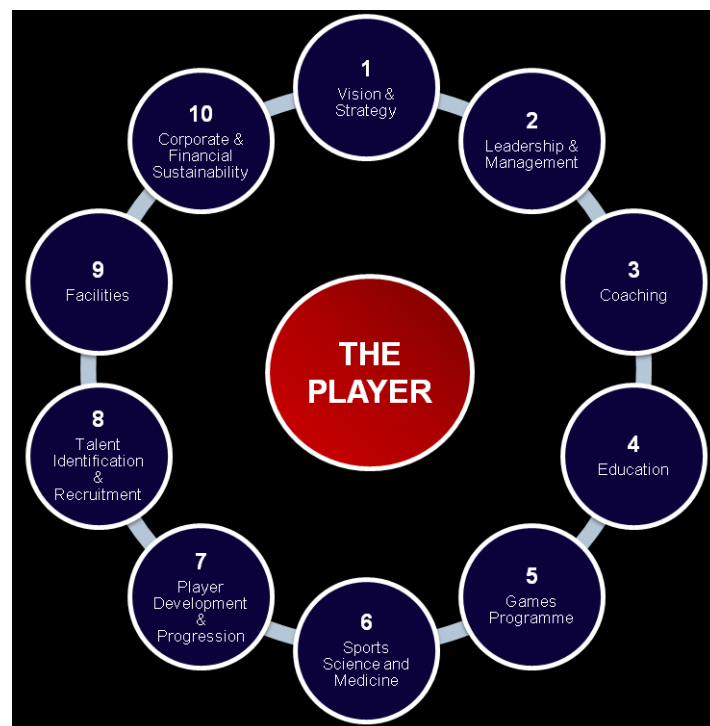
The range of institutional norms, whether explicit implicit, are highly complex. There is in fact very little insight into the daily working lives of footballers but for a handful of researchers who have managed to gain access. With specific regard to youth football only Parker has provided a truly meaningful insight which was only based at one football club. Such requirements to conform are likely to shape the identity (see Erikson, 1968) of each and every player at some point. Players need to possess high levels of resilience to come through this and still demonstrate their technical ability in training and competition. There needs to be more work of a similar nature capturing a broader range of clubs to assess and inter club variation in working conditions and subsequent effect of players. Only then can we see a broader cross section of football clubs.

### **1.5 Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP)**

The latest regulations for academy staffing and infrastructure structure come in the form of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which came into play at the start of the 2012-13 football season. According to the Premier League (2011) the long term plan promotes the development of a world leading academy system. It aims to deliver an environment that promotes excellence, nurtures talent and systematically converts this talent into professional players capable of playing first team football at the club

that develops them. The EPPP requires clubs to promote technical excellence and ensure financial viability now and in the future. To achieve this, the modernised academy system will be regularly and independently audited and evaluated with the aim of continual reflection and improvement. The EPPP address all aspects of player development across three distinct phases; Foundation (5-9 years old), Youth Development (12-16 years old) and Professional Development (17-21 years old).

Clubs are independently audited against 10 key performance indicators associated with player development (See Figure 1.1).

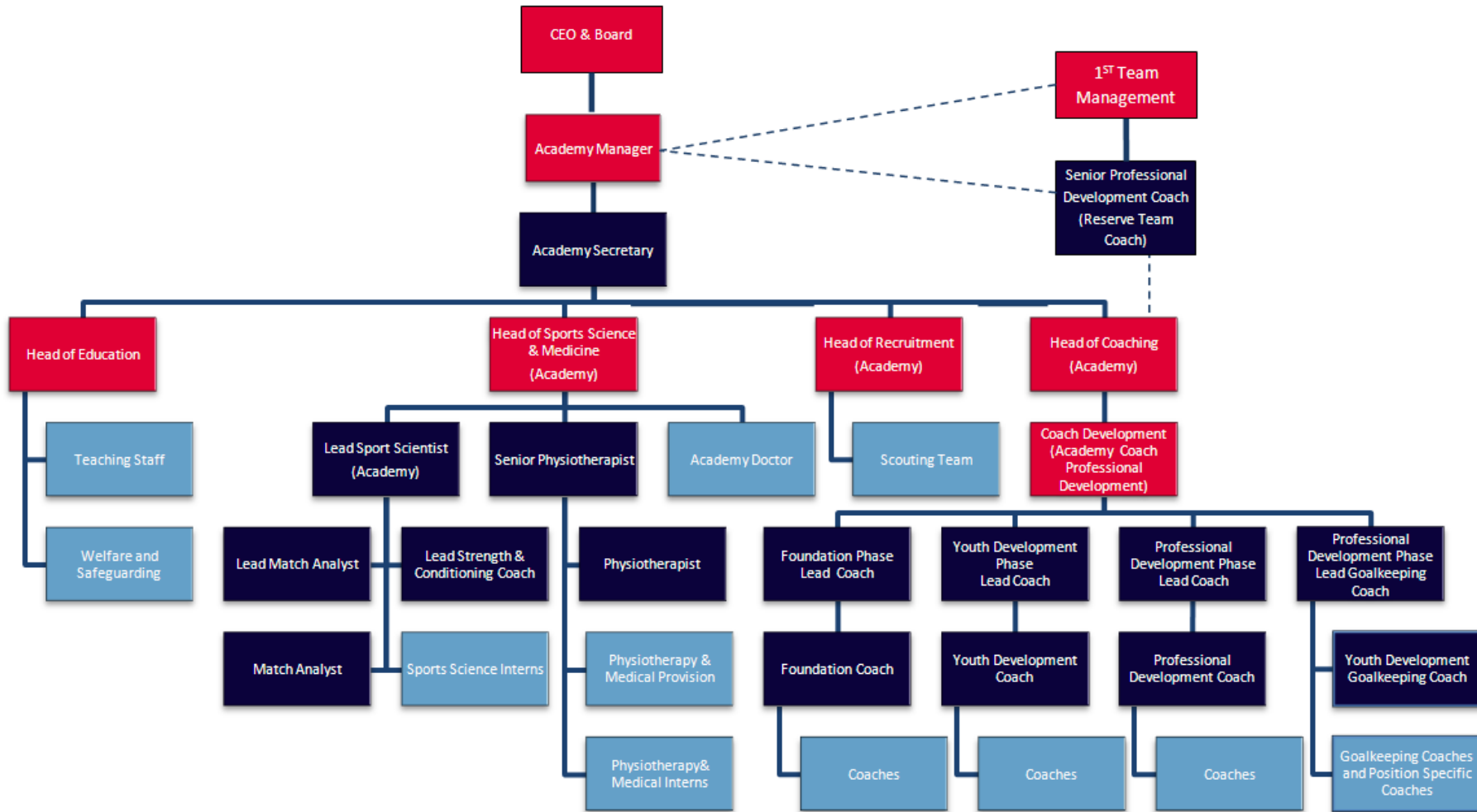


**Figure 1.1.** Key Performance Indicators for Academies. Adapted from the Premier League 2011, p. 28)

Such auditing of clubs against KPI's (Key Performance Indicator's) results in clubs being awarded a grading from one to four which in turn affects the funding

provided to the clubs. The grading for each category is based up staffing, facilities, access to coaching, financial scrutiny amongst others with clear operational implications for each category. For example a category one club will provide more access to coaching time and be expected to produce players of Premier League quality whereas category four club will only be able to recruit players from the age of 17 which are of the quality play professional football.

For each category in the EPPP there are specific staffing requirements which will inevitably have their own financial implications on clubs who would need to either employ more staff or even be forced to make redundancies. Figure 2.1 shows a category one exemplar staff chart.



**Figure 1.2:** Typical Category one club structure. Adapted from the Premier League (2011, p.84)

At this point it must be noted that the above structure, a Category One, contains no sport psychologist. Nesti and Sulley (2015) cite a range of challenges including the culture of the club and finances. The seemingly institutionalised and highly traditional culture of football has also been seen as something of a barrier to applied sport psychology practice. Using a mixed methods approach Pain and Harwood (2004) highlights integration of sport psychologists into a football environment, knowledge of soccer, role clarity and negative perceptions of coaches as some of the barriers to effective practice or even employment. Coaches in this study also highlighted the term 'sport psychologist' as having negative connotations and that sport psychology is 'just common sense'. This has been seen elsewhere in the wider domain of sport psychology (Ravizza, 1988, 1990).

## **1.6 Career Transitions and Critical Moments**

The aim of this section is to present both theoretical and empirical understandings of the career paths into and out of elite competitive sport can be characterised by specific phases known as transitions which may include key achievements e.g. securing a professional contract and / or failures e.g. deselection (Wylleman, Lavallee & Alferman, 1999). Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as 'an event or non event which results in a change in assumption about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships' (p. 5).

In an attempt to align and rationalise athletic career transitions, researchers initially drew from two main sociological theories; Thanatology and Gerontology; Thanatology is the study of social death and dying (Kubler-Ross, 1969) which may



imply the ending of a sports career is comparable to a form of death. Models that have been derived from Thanatology include the Social Death model (Kalish, 1996) which implies ending a sports career may be comparable to a loss of social functioning and an increase in isolation and ostracism. Ball (1976) reported that the common reaction of team mates leaving the sport is to ignore them once they have left. Some researchers see career termination as a singular event where meeting 'the end' has negative consequences in a variety of sporting domains (e.g., cycling, diving, netball, shooting, swimming, basketball, athletics, rowing) has a negative impact on the lives of athletes (Werthner & Orlick, 1982, Allison & Meyer, 1988; Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997). This suggests retirement is not a singular event. With such contradictory findings, it can be suggested that Thanatology does not fully represent the issues surrounding exit from elite competitive sport.

Gerontology is the study of the aging process and the associated processes. When athlete's careers are terminated for whatever reason they may experience 'Stages of Death' which may include isolation, anger, depression and eventually acceptance of their termination (Kulber-Ross, 1969). Models derived from such theory include; Activity theory (Havighurt & Albrecht, 1953) and Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) which both suggest people's should take on new roles or activities after career termination in order to maintain a homeostatic level of activity throughout a lifespan. Again this theory depicts retirement from elite competitive sport as a singular, often sudden, event. There is little empirical evidence to support the application of Gerontology and its associated models to athletic retirement from elite competitive sport. Lerch (1981) tested continuity theory on a sample of professional baseball players and found no links between continuity factors and post retirement

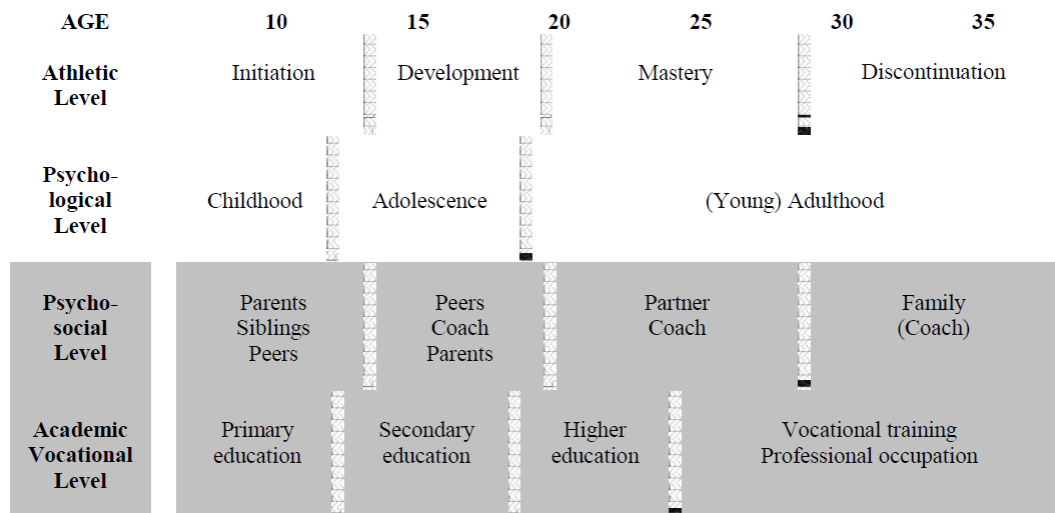
adjustment. Similar findings have also been reported in American Football players (Reynolds, 1981). The lack of supporting evidence for the use of Gerontology may be due to several issues; Athletes typically retire at an early age, move into another occupation and the termination may not always be a negative event (Coakley, 1983, Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). Such theoretical frameworks have, however, stimulated further research in sports career transitions.

Unfortunately there are some inherent shortcomings with the application of such models to elite sports competitors as the theories themselves were derived from non-sport populations and so do not take into account the unique cultures and sub cultures that exist in elite competitive sport. They also suggest that career termination is a single, negative event in one's life and do not take into account the lifespan development of athlete nor help explain the processes athletes go through during career terminations (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). In their systematic review Park, Lavallee and Tod (2014) cited 126 studies exploring transition out of elite sport which covered topics such as transition process and available support resources for athletes.

During the late 1970's and 1980's models focusing on the *processes* of transitions rather than the previous perspective of termination as a negative, singular event. Contrary to previous research Coakley (1983) suggested career termination may even be an opportunity for social rebirth and has been supported by others who all cited positive effects of career termination as, for example, a chance to explore other avenues in life such as family , education or business (Ogilvie, 1986, 1993; Wertner & Orlick, 1986, Allison & Meyer, 1998). One of the most predominant

models was Schlossberg's (1981) model of Human Adaptation to Transition. Here three main factors were considered during transition. (1) The characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (2) The individual's perceptions of the transition (3) the characteristics of the pre and post transition environments. This model provided researchers with a more rounded and applicable underpinning to their endeavours to understand the career transition process of athletes. A further model based on similar concepts was proposed by Stambulova (1994) who viewed sports careers as a series of critical life events that have to be coped with or adjusted to. The extent to the success of the transition depended on the type of transition, the sport and the personality/experience of athletes. The transitions identified by Stambulova (1994) were, (1) the beginning of the sports specialisation; (b) the transition to intensive training in the chosen sport; (c) the transition to high achievement in adult sports; (d) the transition from amateur to professional sports; (e) the transition from culmination to the end of the sports career; and (f) the end of the sports career.

Later research in this area moved to a more lifelong approach that acknowledged transitions as multifaceted in the sense that they intertwine with other aspects of an athlete's life to acknowledge transitions associated with athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic dimensions. For example, it may be that an athlete is concurrently making a transition from mastery to perfection, adolescence to adulthood and secondary to higher education (Wylleman et al., 2004). Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) proposed a developmental model to acknowledge the complexities of an athlete's transitional experience (See Figure 1.3).



**Figure 1.3:** A development model on transitions faced by athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic / vocational level (Adapted from Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, p.8)

The top layer represents the stages and transitions athletes face in their athletic development, including the three stages identified by Bloom (1985), and a discontinuation stage to reflect the transition out of competitive sport. The second layer reflects the developmental stages and transitions occurring at psychological level, including childhood, adolescence, and (young) adulthood. The third layer is representative of the changes that can occur in the athlete’s psychosocial development relative to an individual’s athletic involvement, including the athletic family, peer relationships, coach-athlete relationships, marital relationships and other interpersonal relationships significant to athletes. The final layer reflects the stages and transitions at an academic and vocational level, including the transition into primary education/elementary school, the stage of secondary education/high school, the transition into higher education (college / university), and finally the transition into

vocational training and/or an professional occupation (which may however also occur at an earlier age). Whilst the model is useful in terms of highlighting the different levels and stages that occur at different times in an athlete's career development, it may also be argued that it fails to capture the non-normative transitions or critical moments, i.e., injury & de-selection, failure to attain a contract, (Nesti et al., 2012).

The most current thinking in this area has focussed on in-career transitions and critical moments. In their study of 10 young event riders during their transition from club to regional level, Pummell, Harwood and Lavallee (2008) identified five categories associated with successful in-career transitions (motivation for the transition, perceptions of the transition, sources of stress, support for athletic development, post transition changes). They recommended that systems be put in place by the organisation, parents and practitioners to ensure the in-career transitions are made as smooth as possible (e.g. anxiety managements and goal setting). Based on the work of Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) and contextualised within professional football, Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2012) presented a model of within-career transitions from youth to professional. In developing Wylleman and Lavallee's work, they identified a need for what they termed the critical *post academy* phase. Here, players (typically) receive a one or two year professional contract, but are not necessarily housed within the first team squad. They argue that players are often not prepared for this element of their career with diminishing levels of social support (see Table 1.1). This extends the work on career transitions beyond much of the existing research in this area and provides a platform for further research and understanding of within-career transitions in this area. In turn, this should provide support practitioners a viewpoint from which to base support interventions during critical moments.

Table 1.1 Sociocultural model of elite player development in professional soccer at Academy, post-Academy and first team level. Adapted from Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood, 2012, p.149

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

In their critique of the transition based research, Nesti et al. (2012) suggested that the term ‘critical moments’ may also more suitable term to describe the range of events experiences by professional footballers on a *daily* basis, describing them as “frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the anxiety associated with an important change in our identity” (p. 23). Such moments may be positive or negative situation which are interpreted by the individual facing them. Positive situations may include gaining a professional contract, winning a cup competition, playing consistently well, whereas negative situations include deselection [and possible subsequent exit from the football club], injury, non selection for matches, and family and relationship difficulties (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Little

is known about the daily existence of life in professional football and the effect that critical moments have on player transition.

### **1.7 Approaches to understanding Identity**

Identity has been defined and understood in a variety of ways in a variety of domains. This sections aims to explore our understanding of this concept and present a range of perspectives than can be used to understand its importance. Varying uses of the concept of identity can be found in such diverse academic disciplines as mathematics, biology, chemistry, art, history, psychology and sociology (e.g. see Bosma et al., 1994). Psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists have, in particular, used it as a means of understanding selfhood or individuality (See Yardley & Honess, 1987; Lapsley & Power, 1988; Kroger, 1993; Archer, 1994).

Identity is a social-psychological construct that reflects social influences through imitation and identification processes and self construction in the creation of what is important to the self and to others. The active self constructive aspects of identity is founded upon cognitive operations that organize, structure, and construct / reconstruct knowledge of the self. Identity is a self regulatory system which functions to direct attention, filter or process information, manage impressions, and select appropriate behaviours.

According to Adams and Marshall (1996), The five most commonly documented functions of identity include: providing the structure for *understanding* who one is; providing *meaning and direction* through commitments, values, and

goals; providing a sense of *personal control* and free will; striving for *consistency, coherence, and harmony* between values, beliefs, and commitments; enabling the *recognition of potential* through a sense of future, possibilities, and alternative choices.

### **1.7.1 Athletic Identity**

Athletic Identity, is the most common and current concept used within the sport psychology domain and has been defined in many ways, but all such definitions include; (a) “the strength and exclusivity of an individual’s identification with the athlete role” (Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993, p.2); (b) “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993, p 237; and (c) “the degree athletes identify with the athletic role” (Hurst, Hale, Smith, & Collins 2000, p.432). An example of this may be a person who describes themselves as being ‘a footballer’ rather than ‘a person who plays football’.

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) is used to measure Athletic Identity. Evidence for the test-retest reliability ( $r = .89$ ) and internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$  to  $.93$ ) of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) have been obtained (Brewer et al. 1993; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte & Mahar, 1993). The current version of AIMS is a 7-item questionnaire (Brewer & Cornelius 2001), where responses are made on a 7-point likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores on the AIMS range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of Athletic Identity. The AIMS is comprised of three subscales; social identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual views him/herself as occupying the role of an athlete and includes AIMS items 1-3);



exclusivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual's self worth is established through participating in the athletic role and includes items 4-5); and negative affectivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual experiences negative emotions from unwanted sporting outcomes and includes items 6-7).

Table 1.2 provides a timeline for the development and use of AIMS, and the proceeding section offers a critical appraisal of the work in this area to date.

**Table 1.2:** A timeline for the development and use AIMS.

Authors	Year	Subjects	Variable (s)	Results
Brewer, Van Raatle & Linder	1990	College student non-athletes	Development of the scale	Valid and Reliable scale
Brewer, Van Raatle & Linder	1991	College student non-athletes	Development of the scale	Valid and Reliable scale
Brewer, Van Raatle & Linder	1993	College student non-athletes	Hypothetical Injury and mood disturbance	Relationship between high AIMS and mood disturbance
Brewer	1993	Intercollegiate Athletes	Injury and mood disturbance	Relationship between high AIMS, injury and mood disturbance
Good, Brewer, Petipas, Van Raale & Mahar	1993	Athletes and non athletes	Identity foreclosure	Non-athletes develop less identity foreclosure
Hale & Wakles	1994	Intercollegiate athletes	Sport performance drug use	Higher AIMS = increased potential for sport, performance drug use
Martin, Adams-Mushett and Smith	1995	Swimmers with disabilities	Exploration of AI	High levels of AI in some swimmers. Largely inconclusive.
Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer	1996	Intercollegiate athletes	Career Maturity	Females has higher career maturity
Weichman & Williams	1997	Intercollegiate athletes	Career Maturity	High AIMS score = unrealistic sport career expectations.
Brewer, Van Raatle, & Peptipas	2000	Intercollegiate athletes	Academic Performance	High AIMS score not related to academic performance.
Horton and Mack	2000	Adult Marathon Runners	Sport Performance	High AIMS related to faster times
Brewer & Cornelius	2001	Intercollegiate athletes and non athletes	Validation	A new 7 item AIMS reported to be valid and reliable.
Krylowicz	2002	Intercollegiate athletes	Sport Performance	High AIMS related to higher playing status
Tasiemski, Kennedy, Gardner and Blaikley	2004	People with spinal chord injuries	Opportunities and barriers for participation	AIMS scores varied according to athletic status and hours of sport participation.

Lamont-Mills and Christensen	2006	Elite, recreational and non-participating adults	Level of play	Higher AIMS scores associated with high levels of play
Masten, Tusak, Faganel	2006	National, international and world class athletes	AI and Trait anxiety	Higher negative affectivity associated with high levels of state and trait anxiety
Vissek, Hurst, Maxwell and Watson II	2008	American and Chinese public	Comparison	AIMS is suitable for Chinese populations
Grossbard, Geisner, Mastroleo, Kilmer, Turrisi, Larimer	2009	College student athletes	Alcohol consumption	High AI associated with increased levels of alcohol consumption
Hurst, Hale, Smith, Collins	2010	Experienced vs inexperienced bodybuilders	Level of competition	Higher AIMS score associated with more experienced bodybuilders
Mitchell, Nesti, Richardson, Eubank, Midgley, Littlewood	2014	Elite youth football players	Level of play, living arrangements, year of apprenticeship, individual club	High AIMS score not associated with level of play. Strong association with individual club

Individuals with a strong Athletic Identity have been seen to spend more time with team mates and coaches who could further strengthen their Athletic Identity (Horton & Mack, 2000). Where Athletic Identity has been seen to be strong, but not exclusive to the athletic role, long lasting psychological benefits to the athlete have been seen such as more social interactions, more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993).

A strong and exclusive Athletic Identity can have a positive effect of athletic performance (Werthner & Orlick, 1986, Horton & Mack, 2000). However there are also some inconsistencies in the reported literature with regard to Athletic Identity and sport participation levels. Two studies using student athletes (Good et al., 1993) and national badminton players (Matheson et al., 1994) suggest that levels of Athletic Identity increase with associated increases in levels of sports competition, whereas others have found no specific differences across different levels of sport participation (Brown, 1998, Tusak, Fagnal & Bednarik, 2005). The apparent lack of consistency of findings may be as a result of inadequate participation level definition. Most of these studies define sports participation based upon the institutional ranking, often American National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and not necessarily the individual athlete's or teams abilities (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). In their study, Lamont-Mills and Christensen (2006) used three distinct sports participation groupings across 19 different sports elite (N = 51), recreational (N = 118) and non-participation (N = 45). Using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993) and associated statistical analyses they found significant differences in overall AIMS scores for all three groups, suggesting those who operated at higher levels of participation associated with the athletic role more than

those who were recreation or non participants. Similar findings have been reported in marathon runners, where significant relationships ( $p = < 0.05$ ) between Athletic Identity and personal best times (Horton & Mack, 2000) have been observed. Brewer, Raatle and Linder (1993) reported significant ( $p = < 0.05$ ) differences in AIMS scores in their sample of  $n = 243$ . Psychology students categorized as non-athletes (19.67 males, 15.75 females), recreational (34.76 males, 30.39 females), Intramural (46.79, males, 40.43 females) and Intercollegiate (54.59 males, 53.35 females). This may be due to increased dedication to training and competition, as well as being perceived as athletes by others.

High levels of Athletic Identity have been associated with higher levels of motivation. Baysden et al. (1997) examined the relationship between Athletic Identity and the motivational variables of burnout, goal orientation, and commitment. One hundred collegiate athletes from a football team ( $n = 64$  males) and wrestling team ( $n = 36$ ; 35 males and 1 female) participated in the study and completed the AIMS, an adapted version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ), and Sport Commitment Model Survey (SCMS). Baysden et al. (1997) reported significant correlation between AIMS scores and scores on the following subscales and scales: depersonalization and personal accomplishment of the MBI; ego orientation of the TEOSQ; and sport commitment, sport enjoyment, and involvement opportunities for the SCMS. These results are consistent with the previous research of Curry and Weiss (1989), Brewer, et al. (1993)

Those who place too strong a centrality to their Athletic Identity may experience psychological and physical negativity, such as overtraining, and anxiety when not training, e.g. through injury (Coen & Ogles, 1993, Horton & Mack, 2000). These negative experiences may occur during transitional processes such as de-selection or retirement (Brewer, Van Raate & Linder, 1993). In their systematic review, Park, Lavallee and Tod (2012) reported 34 studies that had correlations with a strong Athletic Identity being negatively associated with the quality of athletic transition. Athletes who are somewhat one dimensional may have severely restricted the development of other roles within the self, such as spouse, brother or father (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Danish (1983) suggested that the rigorous demands of training and competition frequently require athletes to narrow their focus in order to achieve optimal performance levels. Athletes with strong Athletic Identity place increased value on success, failure and feedback compared to those who have lower levels of Athletic Identity (Brewer, Van Raate & Linder, 1993). One negative consequence of a strong Athletic Identity and heavy investment in a chosen sporting career may leave athletes and subsequent former athletes rather one-dimensional (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and this may lead to abnormal behaviours such as overtraining, becoming anxious when not training, and drug abuse, all three of which have been seen in studies of marathon runners (Coen & Ogles, 1993, Horton & Mack, 2000).

Marcia (1966) reported that athletes with high levels of athletic identity might also be less likely to explore educational, career and social avenues due to their heavy investment in sport. College student athletes, especially those from revenue producing sports (e.g. American Football and Basketball) have been found to have less

developed career plans and career planning skills than their non athletic counterparts (Blann, 1985). This may be the result of the isolation that college athletic systems bring from mainstream college activities, resulting in a lack of dependant decision-making style. Murphy, Petitpas and Brewer (1996) reported that important decisions (e.g. career planning) are often deferred to others. It may also be postulated that individuals may even become anxious about post-career planning, a phenomena called *zeteophobia* (Krumboltz, 1992). One reason for a lack of career planning is that student athletes lack the time and interest to do career planning, or view it as a threat to their athletic identity and their dream of becoming a professional athlete (Ballie & Danish, 1992; Good et al., 1993; Petitpas, 1978).

The level of athletic identity can influence an athlete's ability to cope with setbacks in their career, such as retirement, injury or de-selection (Baillie & Danish, 1992, Brewer et al (1993). Crook and Roberston (1991) reported that athletes with high levels of athletic identity may not develop appropriate strategies to cope with difficulties faced during their careers. In a sample of former Olympic standard Canadian athletes, Wertner and Orlick (1986) found that 78% faced difficult transitions when retiring from sport, with 32% describing the experience as being incredibly difficult or even traumatic. Grove, Lavalley and Gordon (1997) reported significant correlations ( $p = < 0.001$ ) between both emotional and social adjustment to retirement in 48 retired ( $M 3.44 \pm SD 2.10$  years ago) Australian national or state sports peoples from a range of sports. They also reported significant ( $p = < 0.001$ ) relationships between athletic identity and pre retirement and post retirement career planning anxiety (*zeteophobia*). Similar findings have been reported by Lavalley, Gordon and Grove (1997) from a sample of 15 former athletes, where Athletic

Identity was significantly ( $p = < 0.05$ ) related to the degree of emotional adjustment required (from micro narrative ratings). They suggested the findings could possibly be the result of high levels of commitment to the athletic role at the expense of other roles and goals, and that the athlete's social support may solely revolve around their sporting lives (e.g., through coaches and playing colleagues).

Though an individual's identity may contain numerous dimensions, or roles, such as spouse, brother, friend, athlete, it is possible for one in particular to become dominant and a lens through which the others are viewed (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Turner, Oakes Haslam & Garty, 1994; Stryker & Burke, 2000). High levels of Athletic Identity and over commitment to the athlete role have also been seen to restrict the development of a multidimensional self concept (Horton & Mack, 2000). In sporting terms people may see the footballer before the person and this has previously been referred to as 'role person merger' in wider sociological literature (Turner, 1978). Horton and Mack (2000) distributed the 10-item AIMS to 236 marathon runners and labelled them 'High AI' (67<sup>th</sup> percentile) or 'Low AI' (33<sup>rd</sup> percentile). The high Athletic Identity group rated the role of athlete (marathon runner) as significantly ( $p = < 0.08$ , Bonferroni adjustment) more important to other life roles than the low Athletic Identity group.

Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, and Mahar (1993) investigated the relationship between Athletic Identity, sport participation, and Identity Foreclosure in students at various colleges and universities in the northeast region of the United States and included intercollegiate athletes ( $n = 166$ ), intramural athletes ( $n = 90$ ), and



student non-athletes ( $n = 246$ ). Sports participation was found to have an influence on the degree of Athletic Identity and Identity Foreclosure. Non-athletes were significantly ( $p = < 0.05$ ) less foreclosed with their identity than their intramural and intercollegiate counterparts. In Gymnastics, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) reported strong and exclusive associations between the role of being a Gymnast over being someone who does Gymnastics. One participant spoke of her 'indoctrination' into Gymnastics. "If you start gym where you're 5, what are you? You're a gymnast, this is how gymnasts walk, this is how gymnasts stand, and this is how gymnasts behave....". These people *were* Gymnasts and to an extent were foreclosed.

### **1.7.2 Social and Role Identity**

Identity has been conceptualised in many different ways with least four different identities having been noted in the literature being; personal, social, relational (role), and implicit identities (Thoits, 1983; Turner, 1987; Hetts, Sukana, & Pelham, 1999; Burke, 2001; Freeman, 2003; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003). Among other factors, it is thought that identities are selectively activated by situational cues. All contribute to our overall self esteem and sense of worthiness, and threats against one's identity can be compensated for by affirmation in other identities (Steele, 1988; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981, 1982), social identities emerge from identifications with self relevant groups (e.g. a professional sport, political, religious, national etc.) and social categories (gender, age, ethnicity etc.). In their description, Hogg, Terry & White (1995) suggest that people have a repertoire of

discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self concept. Each membership is represented in an individual's mind as a social identity, which, in turn, prescribes one's thoughts and behaviours in that group. Social identities are created through processes of self stereotyping by means of which people assume, as part of their own selves, characteristics linked to the stereotypes of their groups, for example, that of professional footballer. In that sense, the attractiveness of a group plays a central role in the identification processes (Kelman, 1958). The current research seeks to examine factors that might be relevant in the identification process within the context of professional football.

It is noted that role identities are associated with roles that are defined and socially shared, and implicitly or explicitly sanctioned behavioural expectancies associated with particular social positions (statuses). For example, the position of professional football player. Theorists in this area view the self, not as an autonomous psychological entity, but as a multifaceted social construct that emerges from peoples roles in society (Stryker, 1968, 1980). Within role identity, the self is seen to be a product of social integration (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902). Every social institution (starting with the family) is hierarchically structured (Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Shils, 1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955) and statuses are positions in the structure of social institutions. It could be argued that in the case of professional football, this could be; youth team player, 1<sup>st</sup> year professional through to senior professional and coach. Roles and behaviours expected to be implemented by those who occupy different positions (status), for example a coach or senior professional footballer. Relational or role identities develop from the internalization into the self of the roles (which are initially external behavioural expectancies) assumed

throughout our lifetime (Borricaud, 1977; McCall, 1987; Wiley & Alexander, 1987). We see ourselves as possessing the characteristics of the roles we perform. In short, role identities are derived from the internalization of socially shared (and desired) behavioural expectancies. For example, a coach creating the social climate at a football club. In essence, theorists who advocate social and role identity perspectives acknowledge the impact of social networks on peoples self concept (Serpe, 1987)

One critique of social identity theory is that researchers tend to emphasize the fluidity of identity, highlighting how identities change with social context. On the other hand, social identities such as partisan and ethnic identity demonstrate remarkable stability over time when assessed in surveys on social and political topics (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1992; Converse & Markus, 1979; Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Sears, 1983; Sears & Henry, 1999). There is a discrepancy between social identity researchers' view of identities as highly fluid and the remarkable stability of identities observed. Questions about the relative stability of social identities hold particular interest for e.g. political scientists. A highly fluid and contingent view of Identity clashes with the political reality of newly emergent independence and social movements around the world, which argue for the rights of women, diverse ethnic and racial groups, and gays and lesbians. The sustained commitment that underlies the actions of individuals in such movements seems at odds with the notion of identities as highly contingent and changeable.

Whist social and role identity theoretical standpoints resonate with the career path of professional footballer there are also some discernible differences. With regard to professional football, it would appear that the identity is somewhat fixed and

most players are somewhat moulded into a particular acceptable way of being from early entry into the academy system, which may stay with them for long periods of time regardless of social situation (See e.g. McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006; Brown & Potrac, 2009). This is partially evidenced by numerous stories of players struggling to cope with non-selection, injury and adjustment to retirement. Such examples include; Paul Gascoigne (Alcohol) (Daily Mail, 2014), Leon Mackenzie (Depression) (Daily Mail, 2011), David James (Financial) Give Me Sport, 2015).

### **1.7.3 Identity: An Eriksonian approach**

From a different, but nevertheless related perspective, scholars often refer to the writings of Erik Erikson (1968) for inspiration and theoretical guidance when exploring the notion of identity. The term identity is derived traditional psychological roots i.e. (Erikson, 1968). This concept has been adopted to a limited extent in the current sport psychology literature which is largely focussed on cognitive behavioural approaches (Nesti, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Erikson's' (1968) Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development has been tentatively referenced in the Athletic Identity literature (e.g. Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) as being a useful perspective in understanding the development of Athletic Identity. Erikson's (1950, 1968) work on identity provided a theoretical framework in the form of his eight stages of Psychosocial Development where the eight stages represent key developmental crises that must be resolved in order to develop with a strong sense of identity. The eight basic conflicts through psychosocial development are seen in the table below (Table 1.3).

**Table 1.3.** Eight stages of Psychosocial development Adapted from Erikson (1968)

Stage	Basic Conflict	Important Events	Outcome
<b>Infancy (birth to 18 months)</b>	Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.
<b>Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)</b>	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toilet Training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.  Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.
<b>Preschool (3 to 5 years)</b>	Initiative vs. Guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose.  Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.
<b>School Age (6 to 11 years)</b>	Industry vs. Inferiority	School	Children need to cope with new social and academic demands.  Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.
<b>Adolescence (12 to 18 years)</b>	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Social Relationships	Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity.  Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.
<b>Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)</b>	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Relationships	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people.  Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.
<b>Middle</b>	Generativity vs.	Work and	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or

<b>Adulthood (40 to 65 years)</b>	Stagnation	Parenthood	<p>creating a positive change that benefits other people.</p> <p>Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.</p>
<b>Maturity(65 to death)</b>	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on Life	<p>Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment.</p> <p>Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.</p>

Erikson viewed identity as a fluid and transitional phenomena, which develops through a series of crises and resolutions throughout life and has both positive and negative elements that shape *who* we are and *what* we become. This is different from the work on social identity as Erikson views a person to be somewhat fixed, which if a healthy sense of self is evident, would allow an individual to cope and manage the many demands of life. Although no direct empirical research supports this notion in sport, it is perhaps a fitting theoretical standpoint for practitioners when considering the range of critical moments (or crises) faced by youth team football players within a professional football club environment. Erikson wrote about identity as being:

*“...a sort of deep enthusiastic bliss of bitter willingness to do and suffer anything...and which although it is a mere mood or emotion to which I can give no form in words, authenticates itself to me as the deepest principle of all active and theoretical determination which I possess...”* (p. 19)

Using a Humanistic approach, Balague (1999), spoke of her work as a sport psychologist with sports performers and the importance of identity and meaning, which was deemed as central to performance. From her applied experiences, Balague (1999) stressed the importance of the need for athletes to have a clear identity and self definition in order to be in a position to achieve their goals. She stressed this was extremely important to young athletes to have a clear sense of self and identify any extra resources they may need to support their progression before they are needed should a crisis arise.

Within professional football settings, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) suggest identity as a concept be further explored to help frame our understanding of the lived experiences of youth and professional footballers alike, especially during critical

moments such as deselection, transfers or injury. There is little knowledge available to the academic community on this concept in elite youth professional football. When applied to Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development it is the fourth stage which relates to a crisis of Industry vs. Inferiority. This is where, in the case of the youth team footballer, their skills and abilities within football will receive positive recognition from coaches and parents and form initial foundations of who one is and what one will become. The fifth stage is related to a crisis of Identity vs. Confusion and is the period of development where the teen forms their identity through a combination of their biological maturity, societal expectation, and their experience of life so far and the relationships they have made (Kroger, 1996, p. 7). It is these limited experiences of general life as a youth team footballer that help to shape to *who* and *what* these people become.

Marcia (1966) explored the notion of Identity Foreclosure which occurs when individuals prematurely make a commitment to an occupation or ideology. A 'foreclosed' individual may appear to have the benefits of a strong identity with regard to being e.g. a footballer but this strength is less able to cope with external forces e.g. injury or deselection. Foreclosed self-identities start to explain some of the negative experiences of athlete's such as during injury or retirement (Cohen & Ogles, 1993, Horton & Mack, 2000). Such individuals may not have fulfilled a range of life experience, and according to Petitpas (1978) will have conceded to the demands of their environment and adopted a socially accepted role identity, allowing for a [false] sense of safety and security at the expense of their personal growth. Erikson suggests that in order to develop a healthy, strong identity both exploration of and a commitment to avenues of expression that hold meaning and value. This means by the



time adolescence arrives the individual should have had a wide range of experiences and be in a position to discard the ones that hold least value, only then can identity formation occur for the individual (Kroger, 1996). This humanistic approach links well to that of Erikson's (1968) work on identity. With regard to youth team footballers who find themselves in this stage of Psychosocial development it may be postulated that they have not had the opportunity of wide and varied experiences in life as a result of long term regular highly focused rigour of training and competition from as early as eight years of age (The FA, 2010). By the age of 16 such players will typically experience even further specialisation by becoming full time youth team footballers further negating opportunities for wider experiences beyond that of being a football player.

### **1.8 Literature Review Summary**

The account of the cultural climate within professional football clubs has been articulated along with the impact on players who are attempting to progress to professional status. Understanding the culture that exists within professional football may help those working in football academies develop more bespoke support programmes when working with players. More specifically this information may relate to coaches, academy managers, head of recruitment and support staff. Despite the information presented, we are still limited to the amount of knowledge about identity in elite youth football programmes. There are also limitations in our knowledge about psycho-social development of players and how football clubs, by nature, impact upon this.

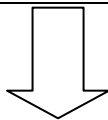
## **1.9 Mapping the Research Journey: Clarification of the research aims and structure of the thesis**

The research aims to explore both player and practitioner perspectives on the impact of organisational culture, working practices, and philosophies that impact on identity in youth team footballers. Secondly, the research explores mainstream psychological theory to understanding Identity and offer considerations for applied sport psychologists working in this area. In order to achieve these overriding aims the research encompasses three studies. The schematic below offers an overview of the research journey, a brief outline of the nature of each study, aims and methodological approaches. Between the studies within the thesis, an overview of the previous studies, implications and how they inform the following study will be provided.

**Chapter 2: Study One;** Athletic Identity in Elite Level English Youth Football: A Cross Sectional Approach

**Specific Aim** - To gain a critical understanding of the level of Athletic Identity in elite youth team footballers

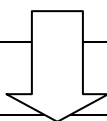
**Methodology** – This study followed conventional data collection techniques in sport psychology in the form of a psychometric scale. The Athletic Identity measurement scale (Brewer *et al*, 1993) to measure levels of Athletic Identity (Social Identity, Exclusivity and Negative Affectively) in 168 elite youth team footballers'. In a cross sectional approach, within and across levels of play along with distinct situational, demographic variables were explored to assess any differentiating factors in Athletic Identity



**Chapter 3: Study Two;** Identity in youth team players within elite level English professional football: Practitioner Perspectives

**Specific Aim** – To critically explore the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, organisational cultures and environmental conditions created by practitioners within youth development programmes all of which contribute to players' identity (Erikson, 1968).

**Methodology** – 10 professional football clubs spanning the four major levels of play were used in this study. A total of 19 youth development practitioners were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews and subsequent content analysis procedures were employed to create lower order themes, higher order themes and general dimensions.



**Chapter 4: Study three;** Identity in Professional Football: A Case Study of one Professional Football Club

**Specific aim** – To better understand how players experiences of a professional football environment and culture has served to shape their identity and how allows them to cope with critical moments

**Methodology** – a championship football club served as the case study. More specifically four players (two youth team players, one development squad player and one senior professional) were chosen to be interviewed three times over the course of one season. Interviews and subsequent content analysis procedures were employed to create lower order themes, higher order themes and general dimensions. Findings were represented as stories of each player.

**Chapter Two:  
Athletic Identity in  
Youth Team  
Football**

## **2.1 Introduction**

To excel in elite professional football, players typically form a strong bond with their chosen sport. After participating at beginner level (e.g., youth sport), most individuals choose to specialize in a sport in which they are most skilled (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Family, friends, coaches, teachers, and in some cases, media influences, often support the goal of advancement in that sport and consequently, young players may begin to form an Athletic Identity (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). This has been defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993, p.237).

Where Athletic Identity has been seen to be strong, but not exclusive to the athletic role, long lasting psychological benefits to the athlete have been seen, such as more social interactions, more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation in North American student-athletes (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000). Those who place too strong an emphasis on their Athletic Identity become somewhat one-dimensional, for example, they may solely see themselves as a sports person. As a result athletes may experience psychological or behavioural disturbance such as overtraining or anxiety when unable to train e.g., through injury (Coen & Ogles, 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000 and Sparkes, 1998, 2000). Such negative effects may also occur during transitional processes such as retirement or deselection (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). In addition, such athletes may experience a lack of post career planning skills and activities compounding the effects of transition or deselection (Blann 1985; Marcia, 1966; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996). Athletes who are somewhat one-dimensional may also have severely restricted the

development of other roles within the self such as spouse, brother or friend (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

Youth team footballers spend a high percentage of their time in training and competition. To live, breathe and eat football has been strongly encouraged within youth development environments and it is perceived to evoke increased levels of dedication and commitment to reaching professional status (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) reported one Scottish youth team football player as saying “*Any time I had to think, I was just thinking about football*” (p. 378). As a result, it is reasonable to suggest that if players are exposed to formalised training and competition from as young as 5 years old (Football Association, 2010), some individuals may be at risk of developing an overly strong Athletic Identity by the age of 18 years.

This has previously been referred to as identity foreclosure (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archers, & Orlofsky, 1993; Petitpas, 1978). According to Marcia (1966) foreclosure occurs when individuals prematurely make a commitment to an occupation or ideology (e.g. a career in football). A foreclosed individual may appear to gain the benefits of a strong identity with regard to being a footballer, but is less able to cope with external forces such as injury, transition or deselection.

Identity foreclosure has been indirectly reported in youth team football where players routinely sacrifice social and educational aspects of their lives to focus on

their major and often only goal in life: that of becoming a professional footballer (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Parker, 2000). However, 85% of those young players who embark on a professional football career will fail to achieve their goal (Lally, 2007). The high failure rates in the transition from youth to professional football in England advocates that it is pertinent to explore the level of Athletic Identity in such a population as those players who fail to make a professional career may be at risk of negative psychological effects and difficult transitional experiences if their career is prematurely terminated (Brown & Potrac, 2009). With regard to player performance, Nesti (2004) and Nesti and Littlewood (2010) suggest such identity foreclosure may inhibit players' abilities to make the best use of their talents and hinder their capability to cope with daily challenges such as continual scrutiny, injury, or being dropped from the starting line-up throughout their youth and possible professional careers.

There is a lack of empirical research on Athletic Identity in elite youth team football players. Coaches and support staff may benefit from such information especially during critical moments, such as transition, as it may help to identify those most at risk of psychological disturbance and offer bespoke support mechanisms. The aim of this study is to gain a critical understanding of the level of Athletic Identity in elite youth team footballers using level of play, individual club, year of apprenticeship and living arrangements to explore any differentiating factors that affect levels of Athletic Identity within this population.

## **2.2 Method**

### **2.2.1 Participants**

A total of 168 youth team football players aged 16-18 years spread across the four major English professional leagues were recruited for this study. Within each club, players currently signed to a two year apprenticeship were eligible to participate. Professional football clubs were targeted and contacted through a range of methods including e-mail, letter and telephone. The aim of this process was to secure access to three clubs from each of the four major English professional leagues.

### **2.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

Packs containing participant information sheets, informed consent, demographic questionnaire and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) were administered by the researcher after training at each club. Evidence for the test-retest reliability over a two week period ( $r = .89$ ) and internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$  to  $.93$ ) of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) has been obtained (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte & Mahar, 1993). It must be noted that internal consistency has yet to be gained for the three subscales and so any findings from these should be viewed with caution. The current version of AIMS is a 7-item questionnaire (Brewer & Cornelius 2001), where responses are made on a 7-point likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores on the AIMS range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of Athletic Identity. The total AIMS score is typically used to differentiate between independent variables, e.g., sporting levels (Lamont-Mills &



Christensen, 2006). AIMS is comprised of three subscales: social identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual views him/herself as occupying the role of an athlete and includes AIMS items 1-3); exclusivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual's self worth is established through participating in the athletic role and includes items 4-5); and negative affectivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual experiences negative emotions from unwanted sporting outcomes and includes items 6-7).

A self-report supplementary questionnaire was also administered to capture demographic data about each participant, including questions relating to level of play (based on the first team at the football club), year of apprenticeship (year 1 or 2 of the apprenticeship) and living arrangements (living at home or away from home). Variables were chosen as they represent key differentiating factors within and across a youth team squads. The aim of gaining demographic data was to identify potential factors which may influence levels of Athletic Identity.

### **2.2.3 Statistical Methods**

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The central tendency and dispersion of the AIMS scores and each of the subscales (social identity, exclusivity, and negativity affectivity) for the sample data were described as the mean and standard deviation. Inferences about the effects of playing level, year of apprenticeship, and living arrangements on AIMS and the three subscales were made using multilevel mixed effects models. Football club was specified in each model as a random factor and playing level, year of apprenticeship,

and living arrangements were specified as fixed factors. The statistical significance of each random effect was established using the Wald test, using a one-tailed p value. The residuals for each model exhibited substantial negative skewness, which was rectified by cubed transformation of the observed data. Two-tailed statistical significance was accepted as  $p < .05$ .

### 2.3 Results

There were 168 individual respondents from 12 football clubs from the four English professional leagues: Premier League ( $n = 36$ ), Championship ( $n = 44$ ), League 1 ( $n = 44$ ) and League 2 ( $n = 44$ ). The respondents consisted of year one apprentices ( $n = 83$ ), year two apprentices ( $n = 85$ ), those living at home ( $n = 101$ ) and those living away from home ( $n = 67$ ). Descriptive statistics for the four outcome variables for all the players and also according to playing level, whether or not the players were living at home or away, and year of apprentice are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 2.1.** Mean (SD) Athletic Identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for youth football players according to which English professional league they play in.

	Playing level				
	Whole sample ( $n = 168$ )	League 2 ( $n = 44$ )	League 1 ( $n = 44$ )	Championship ( $n = 44$ )	Premiership ( $n = 36$ )
Total AIMS	40.5 (5.2)	39.4 (6.6)	40.2 (5.3)	40.4 (4.0)	42.0 (4.4)
Social identity	16.4 (2.2)	16.4 (2.8)	16.7 (2.0)	16.5 (1.7)	17.0 (2.3)
Exclusivity	11.5 (2.3)	10.6 (2.7)	11.5 (2.3)	11.5 (1.9)	12.5 (1.6)

Negative affectivity	12.3 (1.9)	12.4 (2.0)	12.2 (2.3)	12.3 (1.7)	12.5 (1.8)
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**Table 2.2.** Mean (SD) Athletic Identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for 168 professional youth football players according to whether they were living at home or away, or whether they were in the first or second year of their apprenticeship.

	Living arrangements		Year of apprenticeship	
	Home ( <i>n</i> = 101)	Away ( <i>n</i> = 67)	Year 1 ( <i>n</i> = 83)	Year 2 ( <i>n</i> = 85)
Total AIMS	40.0 (5.4)	41.1 (4.9)	41.1 (4.3)	39.8 (6.0)
Social identity	16.5 (2.3)	16.8 (2.1)	17.1 (2.0)	16.2 (2.4)
Exclusivity	11.1 (2.5)	12.0 (1.8)	11.7 (2.0)	11.3 (2.5)
Negative affectivity	12.4 (1.8)	12.2 (2.2)	12.4 (1.6)	12.3 (2.2)

Multilevel modelling showed that ‘football club’ accounted for 6% of the variability in negative affectivity (Wald  $Z = 1.1$ ,  $p = .14$ ) and 12% in AIMS (Wald  $Z = 1.5$ ,  $p = .061$ ), although the 30% explained variance in exclusivity was the only outcome variable that reached statistical significance (Wald  $Z = 2.0$ ,  $p = .022$ ). Very little variability between clubs existed for social identity and this was set to zero by the multilevel model.

Mean AIMS ( $F = 0.5$ ,  $p = .68$ ), social identity ( $F = 0.5$ ,  $p = .67$ ), exclusivity ( $F = 0.8$ ,  $p = .53$ ), and negative affectivity ( $F = 0.04$ ,  $p = .99$ ) were not significantly different in the four leagues. Whether or not players lived at home or away also did not have any significant effect on AIMS ( $F = 1.3$ ,  $p = .25$ ), social identity ( $F = 1.3$ ,  $p = .26$ ), exclusivity ( $F = 2.5$ ,  $p = .12$ ), or negative affectivity ( $F = 0.26$ ,  $p = .61$ ). Mean social identity was 0.7 points higher for those players in the first year of their apprenticeship compared to those in the second year ( $F = 5.1$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Year of

apprenticeship, however, did not have any significant effect on AIMS ( $F = 2.0$ ,  $p = .16$ ), exclusivity ( $F = 1.0$ ,  $p = .33$ ), or negative affectivity ( $F = 0.007$ ,  $p = .94$ ). Two-way and three-way interactions between factors were entered into all multilevel models; however, these were not retained because none were statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ).

## **2.4 Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore Athletic Identity in a sample of youth team footballers and assess any differences in Athletic Identity across a range of demographic variables namely, level of play, individual club, year of apprenticeship (year one or year two) and living arrangements (living at home or away from home).

When comparing the descriptive data to existing knowledge on Athletic Identity, there is little difference between the current population and normative data. When compared to Brewer and Cornelius (2001) reference values based on male student athletes, the current population mean score of 40.5 (5.2) was in the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile. This is unsurprising as the current sample is of a similar age and also on a programme of high level sport and education. This suggests that elite youth footballers are no different in their perceptions of themselves in the athletic role than their North American counterparts. When compared to Horton and Mack's (2001) study of 236 marathon runners, the scores were also similar, 40.5 (5.2) in the present study versus 40.92 (9.7) in marathon runners. However, the scores in the present study were lower than those seen in elite male skiers with disabilities, 48.1 (9.4), and elite swimmers with disabilities, 44.3 (11.5) (Martin, Adams-Mushhett & Smith, 1995, Groff & Zabriskie 2006). This suggests that if such players do become professional, it could be postulated that their Athletic Identity may increase in line with their career

progression. However, there is currently no research available which has tracked any Athletic Identity development over time.

With regard to the AIMS subscales, there are few studies that have actually employed them. However, one study (Lamont-Mills & Christiansen, 2006) reported the subscale scores for 23 elite male sports participants with elite being defined as representing their country at national or international level. When comparing the current sample with their study, elite youth football players scored lower on social identity 16.87 (3.48) *vs* 16.4 (2.2), and exclusivity 15.43 (4.78) *vs* 11.5 (2.3), but higher for negative affectivity 9.87 (2.74) *vs* 12.3 (1.9). This suggests that elite youth footballers feel they would be more negatively affected than other sports people if they were not able to participate. Further research explicitly exploring the perceived negative effects of not being able to participate in football would need to be undertaken to further understand the reasons for such a finding.

With regard to 'individual football club', there were no significant differences reported for overall Athletic Identity. This may be because despite differences in the requirements for football academies and centres of excellence within England and across Europe, most have a similar organisational structure which typically requires heavy investment in facilities and staff (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010; Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). It is also accepted that the common overriding aim of youth development programmes at any football club is to produce suitably skilled players for the first team (Bourke, 2002; Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Relvas et al., 2010). As a result it appears all players develop largely similar levels of Athletic Identity. With regard to the exclusivity subscale being significantly

different between clubs it may be postulated that individual staff, organisational culture, working practices and the general environment within each club may be the overriding factor in exclusivity development. However such data should be viewed with caution as it cannot prove a causal link between the environment at each club and its subsequent affect on exclusivity.

When the findings were analysed as a function of the level of play no significant differences were found for total AIMS score nor any subscale. This contradicts reports from other sporting domains and associated performance levels. Horton and Mack (2000) reported a significant relationship between Athletic Identity and personal best times in marathon runners. Lamont-Mills and Christensen (2006) also reported significant differences for AIMS total amongst elite, recreational and non-participant. Brewer and Cornelius (2001) also reported significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) in total AIMS score between athletes and non athletes with athletes reporting higher levels of AI. With regard to the present study this ranking has been made on the first team level of play and may not fully reflect the status of the structure, staffing and environment at each football club. For example a lower league club may have a well resourced and successful academy system.

Living arrangement showed no effect on Athletic Identity or any subscales suggesting that players away from family or at their familial home. High levels of discipline, resilience and mental toughness have been championed as essential prerequisites in the development of talent in youth team football players and their associated athletic identities (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt &

Mitchell, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Parker, 2000; Roderick, 2006, Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti & Allen-Collinson, 2014). The findings suggest such notions are not magnified or reduced as a result of living arrangements.

When respondents were viewed in terms of them being a year one or a year two apprentice, it was those in year one who reported significantly higher levels of social identity. It would appear that those players in the first year of their apprenticeship see themselves more as a footballer than those in their second year. Such findings support previous work on the saliency of Athletic Identity and its dependence on factors such as current athletic circumstance (Grove, Fish & Eklund, 2004; Lavallee, Gordon & Groves, 1997). It could be suggested that year one apprentices more deeply occupy the role of being a footballer due to them making the transition from school boy to a full time regime (League Football Education, 2010). It is possible, that by the time the year one apprentices enter their second year, and they may have been exposed to the reality of low progression levels amounting to 15 % (Lally, 2007) and the subsequent realisation that they might not make the grade of professional footballer. Such a decrease in social identity in year two players may be the result of some form of divestment from Athletic Identity as a defence mechanism to protect their ego (Snyder, 1988). Such an assumption cannot be substantiated by AIMS alone and would need more qualitative methods (e.g., Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001) to be employed to explore how Athletic Identity is created through gaining a deeper understanding of the day to day lived experiences of youth team footballers.

To further enhance our understanding of identity in this population, other theoretical and methodological perspectives may provide a greater understanding of the development of Athletic Identity and identity in its broadest sense. Erikson's (1968) eight stages of psychosocial development model has been tentatively referenced in the Athletic Identity literature (e.g., Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) as being a potential theoretical framework in understanding the development of Athletic Identity. Erikson views identity as a fluid and transitional phenomenon, which develops through a series of crises and resolutions throughout life and has both positive and negative elements that shape who we are and what we become. The career path from entry into football through to schoolboy, apprenticeship and eventually professional carries similar notions of crises and resolutions as player's progress in their careers. It is therefore recommended that further research in this area should seek to adopt this broader framework to further understand how Athletic Identity develops.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

It is hoped that this exploratory study can allow for further investigation into Athletic Identity within elite youth footballers and the development of more normative data for this hard to reach population. The research does extend the potential applicability of AIMS beyond North American student-athletes as seen in Table 1.1. However, there are some limitations within this study and beyond. Further work on the validation of the AIMS subscales needs to be undertaken to ensure their validity and use by researchers and practitioners alike. The current finding should be viewed with some caution due to the sample sizes being relatively small when



compared to others, for example Brewer and Cornelius's (2001) validation paper that included a sample size of 1337 ( $N = 1337$ ) and there is an increase the likelihood of a type 1 error. Despite this, AIMS may be useful as a screening tool for new and existing player if studies using larger sample sizes are used. As the current study merely provided a snap shot of Athletic Identity in this population, longitudinal studies and observations are required to explore changes in Athletic Identity over time (e.g., specific points of the season or regularly over the whole two year apprenticeship) to better understand where specific player support may be best placed.

## **2.6 Recommendations**

Further research should be undertaken to explore the environment created by individual clubs, and more specifically by coaches, who appear to affect levels of exclusivity and social identity in this population. The current findings may be of use to professionals such as coaches, sport psychologists and education and welfare officers in identifying youth team football players who are potentially more at risk of Identity Foreclosure and the associated negative experiences during critical moments and transition. The development of Athletic Identity and subsequent association with the role of being a youth team footballer appears to be more influenced by the year of apprenticeship and the environment created within each club, more so than as a function of the clubs playing level or players living arrangements. However this is somewhat speculative given the sample size and broader nature of psychometric scales. Players in year one of an apprenticeship perceive themselves more as footballers (Social Identity), than their year two counterparts. Strategies to promote similar identification in year two apprentices may need to be implemented in order to

maintain motivation and performance levels which may ultimately affect chances of career progression. Finally more research into club culture is required to provide a critical understanding of the effect of club culture on Athletic Identity.

# **Chapter Three: Identity Formation in Youth Team Football**

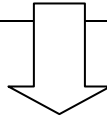
**Chapter 2: Study One;** Athletic Identity in Elite Level English Youth Football: A Cross Sectional Approach

**Specific Aim** - To gain a critical understanding of the level of Athletic Identity in elite youth team footballers

**Methodology** – This study followed conventional data collection techniques in sport psychology in the form of a psychometric scale. The Athletic Identity measurement scale (Brewer *et al*, 1993) to measure levels of Athletic Identity (Social Identity, Exclusivity and Negative Affectively) in 168 elite youth team footballers. In a cross sectional approach, within and across levels of play along with distinct situational, demographic variables we explored to assess any differentiating factors in Athletic Identity

**Findings** – Football club explained 30% of the variance in exclusivity among players ( $P = .022$ ). Mean social identity was significantly higher for those players in the first year of their apprenticeship compared to the second year ( $P = .025$ ).

**Implications** – The range of variance for exclusivity amongst players suggested it is the cultural climate created at each individual football club that impacts upon this subscale of Athletic Identity. The quantitative nature of the study does not provide context for the results and therefore, more qualitatively driven methods need to be employed to gain further understanding. Athletic Identity, measured by AIMS, may not allow us to fully understand the psycho-social development of players in elite football environments. Alternative theory needs to be explored to allow us to explain [athletic] identity development in this context.



**Chapter 3: Study Two;** Identity in youth team players within elite level English professional football: Practitioner Perspectives

**Specific Aim** – To critically explore the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, and environmental conditions created by practitioners within youth development programmes all of which contribute to players' identity (Erikson, 1968).

**Methodology** – 10 professional football clubs spanning the four major levels of play were used in this study. A total of 19 youth development practitioners were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews and subsequent content analysis procedures were employed to create lower order themes, higher order themes and general dimensions.

### **3.1 Introduction**

The importance of developing a ‘strong, flexible, clear sense of self’ in order to make the best of one’s talents has previously been reported (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010) and this notion is associated with the concept of identity (Erikson, 1968). Nesti (2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) and Balague (1999) stressed the importance of the need for athletes to have a clear sense of identity and self definition in order to be in a position to achieve their goals. Balague further suggested that it was extremely important for young athletes to have a clear sense of self and identify resources required to support progression before crises or critical moments arise. In the case of youth footballers, these critical moments could be associated with deselection, injury or receiving a berating from coaches in front of their peers (Nesti, Littlewood, O’Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012). The sense of self that Balague is referring to is connected to the concept of identity and links more specifically to Identity Achievement (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Marcia describes identity achievement as when an individual has come through a series of crises and resolutions, typically through adolescence, and has seriously considered several occupational choices making decisions on their own terms for themselves. In this case, the pursuit of a career in professional football.

Despite high levels of research, media and public attention paid to professional football, there is little in the way of academic work published that provides a critical understanding of identity in football. There is also a dearth of research relating to the day to day experiences of those who work within the industry

that are likely to shape, reinforce and challenge ones identity. A range of autobiographies, biographies and media accounts of current and former professional's lives are available, however they do not carry the academic rigor and systematic analysis that academic research affords. In fact, such sources of information rarely provide an insight into the daily working practices, environmental conditions and organisational cultures, but instead tend to focus upon non-performance related aspects of players lives that may sell books or newspapers and don't provide meaningful in depth accounts of *who* these player are. One would argue that it is the daily experiences, associated environmental conditions and organisational cultures that may contribute to the identity of a footballer. From what little research exists, it is suggested that the environment within professional football clubs is often one that possesses occupational features such as fear, dominance, authoritarianism, insecurity, loneliness, tedium and rejection (see Davies, 1972; Roderick, 2006; Parker, 1995, 2001).

With a paucity of research in this area, it is pertinent to gain an insight of such daily experiences from those who create the environment, organise the daily training routines and provide many experiences to youth team footballers. Here we are referring to, but not exclusively; practitioners such as Academy Managers, Coaches, Education and Welfare Officers and Physiotherapists. It is postulated that such insights will advance our understanding of identity in this very unique and hard to reach population, and if indeed football clubs do promote a strong, flexible, clear sense of self seen to be required to make the best of one's talents. The beneficiaries of such information would typically be the support staff within football clubs that would include Sport Psychologists and Heads of Education and Welfare in supporting

players through daily critical moments and transitional experiences in their pursuit of a career in professional football.

Study one used a psychometric scale (AIMS) which located significant differences across club (for Exclusivity) and between year groups (for Social Identity). In view of the findings and recommendation of study one and the background research, the aim of this study is to critically explore the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, and environmental conditions created by practitioners within youth development programmes all of which contribute to players' Identity.

## **3.2 Methodology**

### **3.2.1 Participants**

A range of practitioners involved in the development of talent in youth team football were recruited for the study. Access to participants was gained through a network of personal and professional contacts with the author and the supervisory team.

A total of 10 (N = 10) football clubs took part in the study during the 2011 / 12 competitive playing season. At the time of the interviews there were one in the Premier League (n = 1), four from the Championship (n = 4), three from League One (n = 3) and two from League two (n = 2) with 19 (N = 19) practitioners being interviewed. Of the 19 practitioners there were 8 Heads of youth (n = 8), 6 Youth team coaches (n = 6), two Heads of Education and Welfare (n = 2), one Education and

Welfare officer (n = 1) and 1 Centre of Excellence Physiotherapist (n = 1). All the participants were employed by their respective football clubs on a full time basis and we therefore considered to have a deep insight into the working nature of professional football clubs.

### **3.2.2 Procedure**

Prior to the interviews each participant received a participant information sheet containing contact details of the author, methodological procedures and an informed consent form (See Appendix). The informed consent form described the purpose of the study and expectations of the interviewees', it also gave participants the opportunity to ask and questions and resolve any queries. Interviews were only carried out after receipt of a completed a standard informed consent form. Participants were assured of complete and total confidentiality of their remarks. All interviews took place at the respective football club training ground in-season. Locations within the training ground included staff office, canteen, changing room, classroom and media room, all selected by the interviewee.

### **3.2.3 Data Collection**

This study saw a shift in philosophical positioning of both the research and the researcher. I embraced assumptions of *constructivist inquiry* (Manning, 1997). Due to the nature and scale of this study, semi structured interviews were conducted during the data collection phase. Fontana and Dean (1994, p. 366) identify that semi-structured interviews are a useful methodological tool as they are “used in an attempt to understand the complete behaviours of members of society without imposing any



prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry". In addition, the direction of the interview can be associated with different research questions (Bryman, 2001). In order to discover the realities that are relevant to the subjects setting, the researcher may conduct interviews following a line of situational questioning to reveal the values, experiences, understandings, relationships and / or interactions present in the given sample (Mason, 2002).

The process of data collection was in the form of semi-structured open ended interviews. This format moves from surface talk to a rich discussion of thoughts and feelings (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Interview guides were used to aid the standardisation of the interviews across all participants and to minimise any bias. The interview guides were deductively developed (Biddle, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001) and were assessed and evaluated via regular meetings with the supervisory team for validity, aptness and clearness (Maykut & Morehouse, 1985). The interview guide contained questions relating to three main areas; Ideal player characteristics, organisational strategies to promote such characteristics and finally challenge to players during transition to first team environments. Keeping in congruence with Erikson's (1968) work on the eight stages of psychosocial development, questions focussed on the development of player's values, attitudes and ascribed meanings. They also explored whether or not these developed over time, which aligns to the chronological ordering of the eight stages. Erikson (1968) recognised that cultural attributes, societal opportunities and deviations inform each person's psychological system and so questions related to the players lived experiences were also asked.

The term interview guide is used here, as according to Patton (1990) an interview guide contains a series of topics or broad interview questions, which the researcher is free to explore and probe. In addition to this, several brainstorming sessions with the supervisory team were carried out for the purpose of idea generation. Phrases, themes, concepts and questions were recorded without judging their validity or worth to the study (Sibbet, 1981). To develop the ideas recorded from the brainstorming sessions, ideas were examined for similarities and grouped accordingly on a separate sheet of paper. The groups were then given a title theme and supplemented with some potential questions, probes and cues (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The decision to use an interview guide rather than a more structured *interview schedule* was to allow any unexpected topics to arise and be developed for deeper understanding with the participants.

To assure depth in responses, Rubin and Rubin's (1995) guidelines were used. Three types of questions are suggested: main questions, probe questions and follow-up questions. Firstly, the main questions initiated and guided the interview and subjects the interviewer wished to cover. Probe questions were employed to deepen the understanding of issues and augment the richness of the data collected. They also served to clarify issues and detail. Probe questions were seen as extremely important in gaining a deep understanding of all the interviewees' experiences and perceptions. Such questions were seen to bring depth and richness to the data. Patton (1990) identified three types of probes: (1) *Detail-oriented* probes. These types of probes are to 'fill out' the picture of the subject/concept we are trying to understand. Such

questions include; how old were you? when was this? or what did you do then? (2) *Elaboration Probes*. This type of probe may not even come from a direct question; yet persuade the interviewee to tell us more. Such non-verbal probes may be a; nodding of the head, an occasional 'uh-huh'. Some verbal probes will include questions such as; 'Tell me more' or 'can we go back to that?' (3) *Clarification probes*. These probes are used when the interviewer is unsure of an issue, or what the interviewee means. Probes were then generally used for clarification and included; 'I'm not sure I understand', 'can you tell me what you mean?' or 'Can you tell me a little more about that?'

Follow-up questions were used to pursue new issues or fresh lines enquiry emerging from the participants' responses. Leading questions were avoided at all times to aid authenticity and originality of responses. Open-ended questions were used to help the participants to recreate past experiences or events. Throughout all the interviews the interviewer ensured all issues and concepts were fully understood and not left to a superficial understanding open to interpretation. Based on Spradley's (1979) recommendations, open and wide questioned were asked during the opening stages of the interview to give participants the opportunity for familiarisation with the interview process and to achieve and a relaxed atmosphere for later questions. Patton (1990) also gave suggestions on the ordering of questions by suggesting delaying more threatening questions covering potentially difficult subjects until a degree of rapport is achieved.

### **3.2.4 Pilot interview**

A pilot interview was carried out prior to data collection with a 37 year old football coach working for a local Championship football club's Centre of Excellence. The purpose of the pilot interview was to: (1) to refine interview skills, such as when to use probes, creating rapport and being a good listener, (2) to develop the interview guide itself. After the interview, thoughts and feelings of how well the interview went and the suitability of questions were written and reflected upon. (3) to develop data analysis skills that would be used for this study, e.g. transcription and coding (to be discussed later). Any minor changes were then introduced regarding clarity of questions and the issue of cues and follow up questions. Only when it was felt that the interview guides were suitable for use in this study, the process of data collection was initiated.

### **3.2.5 Data Preparation - Transcription**

As interviews were the main source of data for this study, complete transcriptions from the audiotape interview were needed. The interviews yielded 226 pages of text which amounted to just over 126,000 words after transcription. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) provided guidelines for the transcription process. All interviews were typed using a word processing program. This allowed for easy editing, the provision of a back up copy and easily made multiple copies. Transcription was an ongoing process, as interviews were conducted transcriptions were made. This was a purposeful act as data analysis in qualitative study is an emergent process as ideas from early transcriptions would guide later data collection efforts (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). However no formal data analysis took place until all the interviews and

transcriptions had taken place. Practitioners were coded in relation to their role within the football club and the level of play, for example AMCHa referred to Academy Manager, Championship Club. The ‘a’ referred to a league where more than one club was interviewed, in this case a, b, c and so on were used to distinguish the club. For clarity, generic terms were used for roles (e.g., Academy Manager or Head of youth was taken as Academy manager). See table 3.1 and 3.2 for practitioner and league codes respectively.

**Table 3.1** Practitioner Codes

Role	Code
Head of youth / Academy Manager	HOY
Youth Coach / U18’s Coach	YC
Physiotherapist	AP
Education and Welfare Officer	EWO
Head of Education and Welfare	HEW

**Table 3.2** League Codes

Level	Code
Premier League	PL
Championship	CH
League One	L1
League Two	L1

When the interviewer was speaking their initials were used, this would indicate who was talking at any point of the interview. Some grammatical changes were introduced to improve the overall flow of the text. Any additional notes were placed in brackets [ ] to separate them from the text itself. This was used to clarify certain points for the interviewer or highlight interesting points. In the present study the some interviews were around 30 minutes, however the longest interviews were around 120 minutes.

### **3.2.6 Data Analysis**

The purpose of analysing the data was to make sense of the data accumulated from the interviews. Content analysis procedures were employed, hypotheses were not generated prior to research and so the relevant variables were not pre determined and important data to analyse emerged from the data itself ensuring flexibility of analysis (see Patton, 2002; Scanlan et al., 1989; Schwant, 1997; Meyer & Wenger, 1998; Patton, 2002).

An inductive approach to data analysis is a key characteristic of qualitative research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Firstly, the data was broken down into separate pieces of text, each one containing one idea, concept or piece of information that could be treated on its own for analysis. Each piece of text has previously been labelled as a ‘meaningful unit’ and been defined as a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information (Tesch, 1990). Each piece of data was given a ‘tag’ to describe the topic of the text segment. As all data was broken down and tagged, it was examined for similarities and differences to develop a number of categories in which each tagged text segment

was placed (Biddle et al., 2001). Each category was given a title that captured the substance of the topic and clearly identified the cluster of tags (Miles & Huberman, 1984). As the analysis proceeded other categories emerged relating to different subjects covered in the interviews. Throughout the data analysis concepts were either placed in existing categories or placed in a newly created category if the content was unique to the previously analysed data. The categories that concerned similar issues, events and examples were grouped under into 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes of data (Biddle et al., 2001; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). With regard to interpreting the data, the methods used have been clearly documented and supported through the body of literature.

Here I shall now reflect upon my role in the interpretive process. In that respect, Gadamer (2004, p. 67) states that:

When we try to understand a text, we do not try to capture the author's attitude of mind but if this is the terminology we are to see, we try to recapture the perspective with which he has formed his views

When placed in the context of the present study, this suggests that knowledge of the context of which the co actors existed was vital to interpret what was being said *in context*. Schwandt (2004, p. 139) states that:

In order to understand the part (the specific sentence, utterance, or act), the inquirer must grasp the whole (the complete intentions, beliefs and desires or the text, institutional context, practice, form of life, language game and so on) and vice versa.

Although some may argue that research of this nature should be solely inductive (Biddle et al., 2001), it was impossible to expect someone with such experience as myself to achieve this. Such positions require the researcher to have an awareness of

how their requisite personal knowledge (also referred to contextual understanding) influences the research process (Krane et al., 1997). I felt my experiential knowledge of the football industry aided the research process and served to support rapport, trust and respect. Having delivered education programmes to scholars for 5 years, undertaken sport science support for a further 8 years and conducted my MSc thesis research in professional football environments, I had the relevant experience of this setting. In that sense I felt that I was able to offer a valid interpretation of the co-actors responses. An example of this may have been experiential understanding of the power relations that exist within football clubs or simply the league positioning and looming relegation in some clubs upon my visit.

The second process is termed as axial coding and attempts to re assemble the data broken down from open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process, categories and sub-categories were further refined to give more purposeful and precise explanations. The main feature of this process was to refine the categories into concepts in terms of property and dimension. Each category and sub category was linked with the development of relational statements. Smith (1990) gives three characteristics of the categorization process: (1) *Coding experience*; the more experience one has in coding, the easier it will become to identify pieces of information relating to different topics and arrange them into manageable units. (2) *Inductive inference*; here the emphasis is on the inductive nature of qualitative study in that there were no pre-determined categories or patterns prior to data collection. (3) *Similarity*; the categories are judged by their similarity to ensure that each data is similar in each category and yet different from data in other categories.



The analytical process remained flexible to enable any modification of categories and sub categories until a comprehensive and saturated list was established from all the data collected (Tesch, 1990). Another method known, as the constant comparative method was used to aid the coding of the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This involved comparing each unit of text to all other units of meaning and subsequently groups with other units of similar meaning. If no units of similar meaning were found then a new category was formed. This was done until all the data was categorized. To further refine the categories, each category was given a rule of inclusion, which acted as a 'propositional statement' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was done after the first few categories were being formed. The purpose of writing a rule of inclusion was to convey the meaning of the data under a category name and began to reveal issues surrounding the data collected. The next stage was deductive in nature. Here the data analysis process attempted to integrate data with the existing theory and refine labels for categories that were in agreement with those already within the previous literature (Polkinghorne, 1989). A flexible approach to categorisation was employed to avoid later forcing the data into potentially inadequate categories

### **3.2.7 Strategies for ensuring validity, credibility, rigor and trustworthiness**

Morrow (2005) suggests that qualitative research of varying natures consists of comment elements of quality see as good practice. This section aims to demonstrate

how such good practice has been considered in this study to increase validity, credibility, rigor and trustworthiness.

*Adequacy of the data* – Morrow (2005) provided guidelines on the number of participants used in the qualitative study. She suggested anything from 12-30 could be suggested. Nineteen practitioners, therefore seems an appropriate number. She also suggested interviews may last from 45-90 minutes.

*Diagrams* - Diagrams were constructed to visually explore the relationships between categories and their sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Notes were made after each session of analysis to constantly review the process and ensuring its smooth running (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such methods were employed to make the transition from descriptive modes of thinking to a conceptual field.

*Peer Scrutiny* – Shenton (2004) suggests that opportunities for peer scrutiny should be welcomed in order to refine the final research project write up. In adherence to this suggestion, elements of this research have been presented at two international conferences where questions from the audience and informal discussion with peers has allowed for reflection on the final analysis.

*Saturation* - data analysis was only seen to be complete when no new relevant information was being uncovered through the data analysis process and ‘saturation’ point was reached. This often referred to as ‘redundancy’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Critical Reflection* - Much qualitative research had been criticised for being too biased to the author's thoughts and opinions (Maykut & Morehouse, 1985). In an attempt to combat this, regular debriefing meetings with the supervisory team during the period of data analysis provided a 'second opinion' by acting as a 'devils advocate' and offering an alternative perspective to initial findings. This was in a bid to establish trustworthiness and credibility (Sparkes, 1998; Shenton, 2004).

*Member Checking* - was seen as one of the most important methods to increase the credibility of the study this occurred both within the interviews themselves and also afterwards. This involved asking the research participants to authenticate their interviews once transcribed. All participants received a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to verify its accuracy and the interpretations made from it. Participants were also asked to verify they had been represented fairly.

Through reading guidance from various scholars on notions of quality, it is felt that this study demonstrates clear regard for such guidance and should therefore be considered trustworthy.

### **3.3 Results and Discussion**

The results and discussion section that follows aims to capture the dominant issues that emerged from the content analysis. The approach adopted is one of an integrated results and discussion section to represent and synthesise the findings to the relevant

conceptual and theoretical material associated with the data. The content analysis tables that feature within this section consist of the three major areas of discussion during the interviews; ideal characteristics for successful transition to professional, development of ideal player's characteristics and challenges to players during transition. Due to the amount of raw data and for reasons of clarity, the raw data itself was removed from each content analysis table (See Appendix). Data is presented within each content analysis table, followed by a critical discussion and specific verbatim citations are subsequently reintegrated into the text to provide more contextual meaning to the themes and to demonstrate the depth and richness of the data (Scanlan, 1989).

### **3.3.1 Ideal player characteristics for successful transition from youth to professional**

Two general dimensions emerged from the thematic analysis of the practitioner interviews, namely **Physical & technical attributes** and **Psychosocial Competencies**. The following table illustrates the development of these general dimensions.

**Table 3.3** Ideal player characteristics

First-order category	Second-order category	General Dimension
<b>Physical Size</b>		Physical & technical attributes
<b>Pace and Power</b>	→	
<b>Ability to execute skills</b>		
<b>Spirit</b>		Psychosocial Competencies
<b>Deep self-belief</b>		
<b>Self-awareness</b>	Character	
<b>Dedication</b>		
<b>Mental Toughness</b>		
<b>Stable and Humble character</b>		
<b>Take personal responsibility</b>		
<b>Be the best at everything</b>		
<b>Have own agenda</b>	Attitude	
<b>Willingly meet organisational rules</b>		
<b>Willingness to sacrifice</b>		

### 3.3.1.1 Physical & technical attributes:

With regard to size, pace, power and the ability to execute technical skills were seen as most vital in enhance chances of career progression. The technical ability of players was the most common response from practitioners: “...for me it’s nearly all based on their technical ability...” (YCL1a). The requirement for high levels of technical ability is consistent with the body of literature separating elite players from their sub-elite counterparts. Riley, Williams, Nevill and Franks (2000) found significant differences in elite and sub-elite players in terms of their technical ability via a soccer specific slalom dribble test, speed (15, 25 & 30 m sprint), and power (vertical jump). The authors further classed elite players as having signed for a

professional club with sub-elite being playing locally in competitive leagues. Within their conclusions, they noted that the predictive capacity for such tests in a youth team environment has not yet been explored but they may supplement and objectivise the technical knowhow of soccer experts such as coaches.

Another youth coach more specifically stated one of the most important characteristics of successful players was that they simply their technical ability in match situations:

*“Tuesday morning players are no good to you. They’re fantastic Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and then on Friday, but when Saturday comes round they just can’t hack it, and I’ve seen a lot of them over 20 years and it’s pure and simply that when it’s 3.00pm that’s when the whistle blows, that’s when you’ve got ... and all the preparation in the world that you do during the week and your self-preparation is for one thing and one thing only and that’s 3.00pm on Saturday afternoon...”* (YCCHd)

This quote exemplifies the demanding nature of coaches as noted in the research of Davies (1972), Roderick, (2006) and Parker (1995, 2001). The requirement to display technical attributes, especially, in match situations has been seen in other studies using youth team footballers. This in itself may pose challenging for players by creating pressurised situations within the development programme. For example Bourke (2002) reported that Irish players feeling a pressure to perform in English youth teams. Such pressure to perform is likely to match that of a first team environment where anything less than win is likely to reap pressure on playing and coaching staff alike. When professional contracts are at stake it is those who can

perform under such pressure may be more likely to progress into first team environments.

### **3.3.1.2 Psychosocial Competencies**

This general dimension yielded thirteen 1<sup>st</sup> order categories which resonates with the notion of identity which has been defined as; ‘a clearly delineated self definition comprised of those goals, values, beliefs which a person finds personally expressive and to which he or she is unequivocally committed’ (Waterman, 1984; p. 331). In relation to football, the practitioners described a range of specific cultural and contextual characteristics and behaviours that they felt defined the identity of a footballer likely to make the progression to the first team environment. This general dimension was separated into two second order categories; Character and Attitude.

Character and [professional] attitude have been seen as vital in terms of career progression (Parker, 1996; Roderick, 2006). With regard to attitude, Roderick (2006) suggests positive comments to players regarding having a good professional attitude ‘might be interpreted as a benchmark of progress’ (p. 34). Parker, 1996 cited a good professional attitude consisted of a players ‘keen and hardy enthusiasm for the game, a forceful will to won, an acceptance of workplace subservience, an ability to conform and a commitment to social and professional cohesion’ (p. 200). Such attributes appear to still be held in high regard nearly 20 years on.

#### *Character*

A good 'character' was cited as important factors in coping with the daily experiences of football club life. One Head of Youth provided the following example;

*"The one thing that really does define a player at 19 or 20 is really their character [identity]... if they haven't got that, then they'll fail, it's just my opinion you know you've got to have that resilience to be able to react to criticism in a positive manner to react to disappointment to take on board that there might be people that you are ahead who are gonna go past and come through you because they are developing. How do you handle being dropped how do you handle not playing as well as you should do?" (HOYL1c)*

Through the accounts of other practitioners Character is multifaceted, highly complex but all linked to notions of resilience and stability.

Players who were deemed more likely to progress were seen to stand out from other players in situations such as training, although no tangible examples were provided, practitioners could 'see' something in the best players which carried spiritual notions. On the whole, practitioners found it difficult to articulate. A Head of Youth told of a former youth team footballer who had gone on to be an established Premier League player:

*"...[FORMER SCHOLAR] had fire in his belly, everyone knew when he was training with us and even when he went to train with the first team the session went up a level. Just by one person...." (HOYL1c)*

The sport psychology literature does not support such descriptions of excellence, however this is likely to be as a result of sport psychologists' preference for positivist and reductionist paradigms to support their research aims. A more fitting term may be *Spirit*. Reflecting on 10 years of applied work in the English Premier League Nesti,



(2007) noted a first team manager looked for character and spirit when recruiting new players and that these were ‘clearly evident in their eyes’. Such ‘spirit’ seems no different in the selection of youth players for professional contracts. Aside from more academic accounts we regularly see media interviews with managers or pundits talking about a spirited performance or spirited fight back. Unfortunately spirit has been largely ignored as an area of research in the traditional sport psychology domain. From more Humanistic Psychology perspectives, Erikson (1968) viewed ones spirit as being evident that humans can find meaning (purpose) in life and as such the players in the above quote have possibly found football a truly meaningful purpose.

Practitioners championed the importance of *selfawareness* with regard to negotiating the wider football cultural climate within a football club:

*“The ones that are more calculated and work things out are the ones who have got a better chance you know that put it into perspective and that’s a big thing as well for kids cos sometimes [in a football club] the littlest things are like the end of world”. (YCL1c)*

This is associated with the notions of identity (Erikson, 1968) and self knowledge (Corlett, 1996) and has also seen empirical support in football (See e.g. Nesti, 2010). *Self awareness* has been championed by academy coaches as a central requirement in enhancing chances of career progression in young players (Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012). The authors suggested coaches felt that such self-awareness ensured players were reflective and more ‘coachable’. However, in the present study, the wider range of practitioners felt self-awareness was more important in negotiating the

cultural climate within professional football clubs and not simply related to reflective practice and capacity to learn. MacNamara, Button and Collins's (2010) study of elite performers also cited the need to have continued realist expectations of oneself which is associated with self awareness.

Practitioners were very clear that players had to heavily narrow their focus to training, competition and other areas of their development which that resonated with carries notions of identity foreclosure (Petitpas, 1978). For example the youth coach at club 1 coach suggested that: "... *if you're really serious about being a professional and you're really tuned into what you wanna do you've got to live eat and sleep it....*"(YCL1c).

The above quote carries notions of *dedication* and supports findings of other research in this area (see e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Roderick (2006) goes further to state that football is not something players do it is something that they are and that being a professional footballer is embodied. It appears that the same may be true for youth team footballers attempting to enter professional environments. It is argued that a lack of a clear sense of identity is unproductive, dangerous and ineffective and players may lose sense of who they are, their values and beliefs. This undermines their capacity to face up and make decisions about their future which in turn may lead to of powerlessness and ultimately decreased in motivation (Nesti, 2013).

*Mental toughness* was often cited by practitioner, for example a Head of Recruitment at a Premier club explained the pressure necessitated the need to be mentally strong: “*They have got to be mentally strong because every day there is an expectancy to win, to perform, to be the best, because that is [Club Name], it is about winning trophies and being the best*” (HORPL). Mental Toughness, often associated with the term resilience, has received a great deal of attention in sport from researchers and commentators, despite the lack of a clear definition (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). One definition suggests that mentally tough athletes possessed ‘a high level of *self belief* and an unshakeable faith that they can control their own destiny, these individuals can remain relatively unaffected by competition and adversit’. Clough, Earle and Sewell (2002, p.38). Mental toughness resonates notions of identity; self knowledge and courage such as wide range of experience, forming successful relationships, gaining meaning from exploration and free choice (see Erikson, 1968 and Corlett, 1996). If players know who they are, they are better placed by having a solid psychological foundation to cope with the volatile nature of professional football.

To date, there is little research focusing specifically on football at elite or youth development level on this topic area. One of the few studies to explore mental toughness in football took a novel research approach. Thelwell, Watson and Greenlees (2006) asked six professional footballers to define mental toughness as it meant to them as professionals, secondly they asked a larger sample of 43 to rank the importance of the factors associated with mental toughness. Ten attributes for the mentally tough player included self belief, being able to react positively to challenge, focus, control external life factors and enjoy pressure.

## *Attitude*

The importance of a good attitude was supported by an Education and Welfare Officer; *“I have worked here and sort of taught for 12 years and attitude is key regardless cos they’re all similar in terms of their ability”*. (HOWEL1c).

The need to be an individual and selfish, and have one’s *own agenda* is seen as important ingredients in the ideal player:

*“...they’re [the best players] sort of more focused on their aim for themselves and, when things happen that are nothing to do with them like the team, it doesn’t interest them because they’re only bothered about themselves.”* (YCL1c)

A sense of ‘*stability*’ and ‘*humility*’ mixed with almost ‘*arrogance*’ were also seen as important factors to be present in an aspiring player’s psychosocial make-up:

*“...we’ve just had one of the lads who’s just scored the winner for the under 19s” ... you know, he’s got a bit of cockiness [arrogance] about him but then when he came into the classroom yesterday and we had a bit of banter about it he was trying to change the subject. The best players have that.”* (EWOP1)

This complex mix of intense focus, arrogance, selfishness and humility requires explanation beyond that of the sport psychology domain. It is difficult to conceptualise one who is both humble and arrogant at the same time when they are most commonly seen as polar opposites. In the positive psychology domain, when interviewing nearly 100 highly creative and successful people, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) wrote of such people as often being labelled as arrogant, insensitive, ruthless or selfish. However, these seemingly negative characteristics were the result of

complete immersion in their respective field rather than personality traits. In fact, such people may be humble and friendly if they had the time to spare. Csikszentmihalyi also wrote of potential candidates for his work declining to take part, due to their total immersion. Such immersion was seen as a requirement to learn a domain deeply enough to make a change in it. It is feasible to suggest that practitioners want their football players to be no different than those described through the work of Csikszentmihalyi.

Being strong enough to have one's *own agenda* was also seen to provide a sound base from which to overtake peers in the pecking order for a professional contract.

*“...a kid who wants to go and do some extra training, but all the rest of the lads are going to go, oh, goody two shoes, and all this sort of stuff. Well you've got to say, 'Sod that' ”.* (HOYCHc).

Pain and Harwood (2004) noted that the ruthless nature of football increased player's fears of being stigmatised and so this may be what the quote above refers to. In this regard, Cushion and Jones (2006a) found that some players actually engage in some form of 'output restriction' in order to maintain good relationships with peers and not be labelled as 'busy' [someone who is well prepared to an almost meticulous level], which it is argued may marginalise them from their peers. This may be in the form of not asking questions or volunteering for an extra duty. From the interview responses it

appears that those who are willing to risk such marginalisation may in fact be more likely to catch the eye of the coach.

One youth coach suggested players must take *responsibility* for their work ethic and conduct and that hard work and discomfort is part of being a footballer. In match situations practitioners wanted to see players take responsibility for their actions. One Youth Coach provided the following example;

*“If things are going wrong they’ll still drop in and try and get the ball not hide and always be wanting it. And eventually they’ll get better and they’ll be seen to be getting better. Whereas some kids will probably hide from it if they’re having a bad time, I don’t wanna know, I don’t want the ball I’ll hide.”*  
(YCCHb).

Such willingness to place oneself in potentially uncomfortable situations and being strong enough to take control of one’s destiny resonates with Nesti, (2004, 2007, a,b,c) and Corlett, (1996). Using an existential perspective, Nesti noted suffering, sacrifice and anxiety were normal in elite sport and part of the fabric of professional football and that ‘moments of discomfort, anguish and angst are part of the human condition which should be accepted and welcomed’ (Nesti, 2007 p.164). Such notions are in stark contrast with the current sport psychology paradigms who would typically suggest such discomfort or anxiety is a negative feeling which needs removing and it is therefore essentially to explore work from the parent discipline of psychology. Kierkegaard (1980/1884) went so far as to suggest it is the best teacher on the way to psychological health. The coach in the above quote suggests not ‘hiding’ will be beneficial to a players development as they are likely learn and grow from faces such challenges. Taking personal responsibility has been seen as a

desirable attribute in other studies within talent development in football. From interviewing players and coaches, Holt and Dunn (2004) and Holt and Mitchell (2006) reported the need to be able to take personal responsibility as an important factor in increasing ones chances of on training a professional contact.

Meeting institutional norms and explicitly displaying characteristics that coaches want to see were seen as an important behaviours that players must display. In order to maximise progression, adopting behaviours that staff wish to see was often promoted:

*“They have to be someone that they [coaching staff] think ‘oh he’s a good lad or he’s a good player’ you know you have to do that”. (HOEYWL1c)*

Holt and Dunn, (2004) and Holt and Mitchell, (2006) note ‘playing up’ to coaches and ‘obeying orders’ as essentially requirements to ensure a career advantage in similar populations.

This also meant hiding feelings that staff may perceive as ‘weak’:

*“The biggest weakness of all that players can show in this environment is psychological weakness. So there’s no way they’re going to go to their coach and say, “Listen, I’m homesick.” Because he’ll say, “Okay, well go and tell \*\*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\*” [Education and Welfare Officers] Or, “I have a problem with my girlfriend”. “Okay, well go and tell \*\*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\*” [Education and Welfare Officers].” That’s the reality of it and sometimes I know it’s a psychological trait with masculinity, men tend to be all [macho] ... especially young teenage boys where the peer pressure’s massive and the banter can be ruthless. They tend to keep it to themselves and probably won’t admit there’s a problem”. (EWOPL).*

Playing up to staff carries notions of Goffman’s (1959) self representation where he believed that when an individual comes in contact with other people, that individual

will attempt to control or guide the impression that others might make of him by changing or fixing his or her setting, appearance and manner, in this case young footballers meeting institution norms. This also has links to identity literature (see Erikson, 1968) in that crisis and resolutions are made on the way to identity achievement and true authenticity. The crisis and resolution here is having the courage to negotiate the challenging cultural climate, and more importantly accepting this is part of the 'game'. In a first team environment Roderick (2006) wrote of the coach's desire for players with a 'good attitude'. Roderick (2006a) provided an example of a player who earned a contract renewal partly on the basis that he trained all summer alone to ensure he was as fit as he could possibly be for the new season. In essence he had displayed a 'good attitude' for which he was rewarded. At youth level, Parker (1995) described players who meet the formal and informal criteria were also rewarded, coaches were seen to have their 'favourites' and displayed this by awarding certain players roles within the team such as vice captain and warm-up leader. In addition some players were seen to be exempt from the more menial tasks such as cleaning showers. Playing up to staff has previously been seen in youth players. Holt and Mitchell (2006) provide empirical data to support notions of compliance in their study of youth team football players at a [then] League Two football club. Players told of how they worked hard to satisfy the demands of their coaches and perceived doing 'the extras' such as extra running to be beneficial to being perceived by coaches as dedicated to being a professional footballer. However this has yet to be investigated within youth team environments.



### **3.1.2 Summary of Ideal Player Characteristics**

Practitioners were very clear on a range of characteristics and preferred behaviours that young, aspiring footballers must possess to enhance chances of transition to a professional environment despite on occasion finding this difficult to articulate. This was most apparent when talking about the types of people that typically do well and progress in a football environment. It was coaches, often ex players themselves, who appeared to have the most difficulty in their articulation whereas support staff, often graduates, who integrate with players on a more personal level more often were able to offer clearer insight into ideal player characteristics. The general difficulties in explanation may be due to a lack of, deep immersion in football culture, an appropriate theoretical underpinning (Nesti, 2007b) to the existing sport psychology and talent development literature which is then missing from coach education programmes and other CPD activities undertaken.

The work of Erikson may allow us to better understand the types of people who become professional footballers. If players have the physical pre requisites and a clear sense of identity, then it seems they may be able to better cope with the environment they are in and ultimately have the best possible chance of making the professional grade. Erikson's work on identity along with the more existential perspectives surrounding spirit and meaning such as Nesti (2004, 2007) has largely been ignored in the sport psychology domain and so such difficulties in explaining player identity and spirit is somewhat unsurprising.

More research needs to be undertaken with support staff such as Education and Welfare officers, Sport Scientists and Physiotherapists to gain more outside-inside accounts of ideal player's characteristics. It would also be pragmatic to gain insight from players themselves to gain more understanding of their perceptions of the ideal characteristics and behaviours they need (or need to display) in order to maximise chances of career progression.

### **3.3.3 Practitioner perspectives on the development of ideal player characteristics**

The analysis of practitioner perspective on the development of ideal characteristics can be seen in table 3.4. Such analysis yielded three general dimensions: *Organisational strategies to promote physical, technical and tactical attributes*; *Organisational strategies contributing to player Identify and Non-organisational factors contributing to player identity*.

**Table 3.4:** Practitioner perceptions on the development of ideal characteristics

First-order category	Second-order category	General Dimension
Hard Work Environment		
High Levels of Discipline and Professionalism	Power and Authority	Organisational factors contributing to Identity formation
Additional responsibilities beyond playing (Jobs)		
Formalised feedback Mechanisms on performance	Promoting Psychosocial development	
Treatment of players as individuals		
Staff try to develop 'good' people with 'good' values		
Employ a Sport Psychologist		
Parental Influence	→	Non organisational factors in contributing to Identity formation
Characteristics are pre-determined	→	
Culture / Society	→	

### 3.3.3.1 Organisational factors contributing to Identity formation

This general dimension reflects clubs formalised strategies to develop scholars into candidates for a professional contract. Here a paradox emerged between factors that promote identity achievement (see e.g. Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966), whereas other factors seemingly restricted identity development to a foreclosed state (Petitpas, 1978).

A *hard work* and *disciplined* environment was seen essential in promoting high levels of *professionalism* and conformity whilst developing character and attitude in preparation for entry into a first team environment.

One youth coach exemplified this when describing a rules system set by the Head of Youth

*“He does promote rules that encourage behaviour. With the discipline you’ve got the shaving. He has a three strike system..... basically if you don’t shave, one of the lads didn’t shave yesterday so he’s got a strike and if you get three strikes you don’t play the game on Saturday”. (YCL1a).*

There appears to be no performance related function to shaving oneself, however it may be symbolic of looking healthy and fit for work and lead to being selected or impress upon a coach that one has a good professional attitude and is fit for work. One Head of Youth attempted to explain his thoughts on coaches using their experiential knowledge to shape their practice:

*“I’ve worked with as coaches have worked with and always seen excellence in their working lives, you know ‘cross that ball in from the left hand side’ bang yep brilliant again again again. Sometimes you cross that ball in from the left hand side and it might not be what your working on you might be working on something in the middle. So they’ll say ‘he’s not good enough you do it’. You can’t generalise but quite often they’ve not got patience or understanding that these kids aren’t of that level yet”. (HOYCHb)*

The above quote suggests that traditional notions of authoritarianism and professionalism seen in previous, studies of this nature remain prevalent in youth development systems (See Parker, 1995, 2001). Similar observations have been supported previously where Cushion and Jones, (2006) used ethnographic methods to undertake extended observations in one professional football club academy highlighting severe authoritarian and often aggressive behaviour of coaches towards

players. In this and other studies (Parker, 1996, 2001) such authoritarianism is seen to have two key functions; maintaining the coach's role as leader and developing 'character' in players.

Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (2006) presented a holistic conceptualisation of coach learning, citing a complex mix of formal, non-formal, informal, directed and self directed learning experiences within a football context. Gilbert, Cote and Mallett (2006) reported coaches typically having 13 years of experience as an athlete themselves. Although this research was not specifically undertaken with football coaches it can be suggested that many coaches, who are in fact former players may have developed a set of values and an ethos from their experiences as players which follow traditionally revered notions of discipline, authority, character and high standards professionalism over research informed practice from sport psychology and organisational psychology domains.

Such a revering attitude to professionalism by coaches has been seen elsewhere (see Parker, 1995, 2001 and Roderick, 2006) with coaches who are generally considered to be one of the most influential people that players integrate with throughout their development and subsequent playing careers. Roderick (2006) cites a good professional attitude is seen as essential in maintaining the coaches perceptions of player that were worthy of a first team start.

One of the methods to develop a ‘good professional attitude’ to include; discipline, dedication and responsibility, was to provide players with *additional duties* in the form of menial tasks, often in support of the first team. Such jobs were held in the highest regard:

*“I mean they’ve got to learn to do things on their own and accepting this is their responsibility to do. And if they do that they won’t let their team mates down. Just an example if I’ve got somebody doing the home team changing rooms, if that’s not right he’s holding the other lads up cos he’s got to finish that of before they can go. And that is his responsibility and he’s doesn’t have to do anything else we’ve got lads whose job it is to blow footballs up and that to make sure they’re at the right pressure cos the first team go crackers if they’re not you know, are the bibs washed are they clean if the first team wanna put em on. It’s a massive responsibility within our football club.”*  
(HOYL2a)

As well as the clear examples of the types of *jobs* provided, the above quote suggests that coaches expect players to learn to do things on their own and that it is a player’s responsibility to do this. This contradicts the traditional definitions of training whose definitions include words such as ‘systematic’ and ‘purposeful’ (Buckley & Caple, 2000). Expecting players to pick things up and find out for themselves does not appear to be consistent training definitions of training. This might be a reflection of a lack of understanding of pedagogical strategies for teaching and training within coach education programmes as well as the experiential knowledge so valued by the coaches. Rather than providing a character building experience, the overriding function of jobs reinforced traditional notions of authority, power and conformity by effectively dis-individualising the players into one singular group which in conflict with treating players as individuals. This has been seen to come in the form of

‘togetherness’ – jobs, training, competition, eating, changing and schooling. However such lack of opportunity for individual expression is effectively promoted through the coach’s power, regimes and dominance over their players (Smart, 2002). Such activities may well also promote a narrowing of the self and thus stifle identity achievement (Marcia, 1966) by being kept in the realm of obedience. Such actions therefore do not appear to promote responsibility, self awareness nor autonomy but more conformity and wilful compliance.

A number of practitioners also felt those who were responsible and able to carry out such duties were more likely to be able to carry out instructions on a match day: “*Have they got the discipline to clean their boots, to clean the footballs. If they’ve got that they’ve got the discipline to track runners or mark somebody from a set play.*” (YCCHd). These views seem to somewhat unfounded, and not supported through definitions of what training actually is. Cleaning boots is not ‘job orientated’, it doesn’t provide ‘acquisition of knowledge’ nor does it ‘provide skills related to the profession’ which are all cited as characteristics of training (Buckley & Caple, 2000). As a result the purpose and relevance of such practices as part of a football development plan must be questioned.

With regard to identity formation, the range of jobs and other tasks that young players were expected to carry out there is a danger some players may become entirely dependent on such ‘prescribed duties’ from which to derive meaning (Erikson, 1968, pp 127). Identity, as a result of occupation, is not unknown as Glaeser (2000) notes that the ways in which the self derives *meaning from work* are associated

with the activities of the process of work, the end products of work, the prestige associated with the work of a particular occupation and the prestige of the social context within which work occurs. Erikson's work in identity suggests this *meaning from work* (in the context of football) may stem from early engagement with an Academy setting from as early as 9 years old. Erikson (1968) suggests school (and in this case a youth development programme) can emphasise a 'a strict sense of duty in doing what one is supposed to do as opposed to making it an extension of the natural tendency in childhood to find out by playing' (p. 126).

When applied to a football club setting it appears that coaches indeed promote such a strict sense of duty in their players during training, the assignment of jobs and competition. The danger to identity formation is that the player may begin to only accept their work as their criterion of worthiness and as a result become of product of their environment. This may be dangerous given the high attrition rate as well as during critical moments such as injury, deselection and transition where player may not be required to clean boots or wash bibs. Erikson refers to Marx's (1955) notion of 'craft idiocy' that is described as becoming a slave to and of ones skills at the expense of wider social experiences such as husband, father or son. In the case of a young aspiring footballer, they may begin to consolidate their identity around their ability to clean boots, pump balls up and generally display a good attitude as well as technical capacities elicited at their academy. When this description is further placed in the context of professional football and youth team football it is unsurprising that footballers are somewhat 'conditioned' as a result of this occupation (Goffman, 1968).



With regard to *developing good people*, this was carried out through the clubs' education programme; "There's *an education programme there which allows em to go get a load of qualifications and to make em better human beings*". HOYCHc. Despite this, practitioners were unable to provide examples of formalised strategies to develop and maintain players' individuality. There were, instead, references to the education programmes common at each football club. It may be a reflection of a lack of understanding the psychological and social development of players and in reality it is the traditional notions of hard work, discipline and professionalism (see Parker, 1995 and Roderick 2006) that still prevail.

### **3.3.3.2 Non- organisational factors contributing to Identity formation**

The non organisational factors related to other influences of player identity that were not in the control of the football club but were seen to still play a part in the development of player identity. Whilst practitioners employed a range of strategies to try to elicit ideal player characteristics, they were also very aware that *parents* played a part in developing the characteristics of the player: "...*we see players who've got really good standards, really good values. You know, really focused, really professional, really disciplined; you meet the parents and it's no surprise that they've got those values*". (EWOPL).

The role of the parents has been noted as essential elsewhere in the talent development literature (e.g. Bloom, 1985 and Cote, 1999) both cited the role of the parents in providing tangible and intangible support such as transport and social support receptively. In Blooms interviews with parents of talented athletes and those from other domains the recurring theme of parents instilling discipline and hard work

in every aspect of their children's lives was present. Whether it is doing homework, tidying bedrooms or to training regimes the continuity often ensured high levels of applications to their endeavours and provided the basis of their attitudes and values. More recently, Harwood and Knight's (2014) position paper on parenting expertise cites a range of actions that parents adopt to support their children in talent development programmes. Some of the activities suggested went beyond the findings of Bloom and others in that parents actively initiate appropriate opportunities for their children. This was supported by Holt and Knight (2015) who suggested that optimal parental involvement in tennis related to both parent and child having shared and communicated goals. This resonates with the quote above re staff in football settings seeing similarities in players and parents values.

When searching more widely the importance of values has received some support from the existential psychology domain. Nesti (2004) stresses the importance of values to sports performers and that sport psychologists should work to develop mature and sound values to allow performers to deal with the range of anxiety sources in sport. This presents a new research area for sport psychology to consider given in light of such accounts from experience, applied practitioners. Practitioners also felt that ideal characteristics were also *pre determined* in players:

*“I think you get a mental toughness from very early. It's very hard for a kid whose shy as anything at 12 and at 18 you want him to be mentally tough and come on. I think there is an inner strength”* (HOEWL1c).

Practitioner views may be reflective of a lack of understanding of psychological and psycho-social development which may be in turn lacking in coach development programmes and CPD they undertake. According to Erikson (1968), ones identity is shaped during the life cycle from birth, though infancy and most importantly adolescence, where identity is either achieved or diffused. Parents are inherent in caring and nurturing their children giving guidance, experiences, punishment and love which help to shape the identity and values of the child.

It could be proposed that players who have what are deemed to be compatible values instilled in them from an early age are better equipped to deal with the high levels of discipline and professionalism required at a professional football club. When this is aligned to high levels of physical and technical ability it is these players who are more authentic in these situation are the one likely to make the professional grade.

### **3.3.4 Summary of practitioner perspectives of development of ideal player characteristics**

A range of formal and non-formal practices were reported by practitioners in an attempt to develop the ideal player characteristics and subsequent identities. A traditional training regime of physical, technical and tactical components was supplemented by a variety of menial tasks which support the functioning of the football club first team and training ground operations. There were few strategies

employed to specifically promote the psychosocial characteristics in players that coaches had cited in Table 3.3

The content analysis suggested that practitioners want players with a strong clear flexible sense of self which agrees with previous literature on talent development (see Balguc, 1999, Nesti & Littlewood, 2009) but at the same time create a hard work, disciplined, professional environment in an attempt to create ‘professional’ players. Such strategies are not theoretically grounded in psychology development nor pedagogy and emerge as a result of more experiential learning from coaches. The strategies cited in this section may have a confounding effect on some players by increasing their risk of Identity Foreclosure (Marcia, 1966; Pepitias, 1978) and craft idiocy (Marx, 1955) which in turn may inhibit player ability to deal with the range of critical moments such as transition. As a result it can be concluded that traditional notions of discipline, authority and professionalism prevail over more systematic and theoretically driven efforts to develop psychosocial aspects of players.

### **3.3.5 Practitioner Perspectives on the challenges to players (and their identity) during transition to first team environments.**

This content analysis table focussed on the practitioner perspectives focussed on perceived challenges to player identity as a result of being in a football environment which in turn may lead to reductions in performance. The analysis of practitioner perspectives on the challenges players face in the transition from youth to professional can be seen in table 3.4. Such analysis yielded two general dimensions: *Non-*

*organisational challenges to player identity and organisational challenges to player identity.*

**Table 3.5** Challenges to player Identity during transition

First Order Category	Second Order Category	General Dimensions
Newfound Wealth	Status	Non-organisational Challenges to player identity
Fame		
Girl Friends / Friends		
Overpowering Parents pressurise or distract player focus	Social	
Living at home (as a negative)		
Living away from home (as a negative)		
Some players think they've made it after getting a professional contract	Lack of self awareness	
Development of a pecking order during scholarship reduces motivation		
Loneliness and isolation within first team squad	Football Culture	
Pressure to win may limited chances of first team starts		
Exposure to a newly harsh Environment		
Lack of further development post 18		
Newly intense training schedule	Working practices	Organisational challenges to player identity
Lack of Sport psych training during a player's development disadvantages players on transition		
Injury	Occupational Hazards	

### 3.3.5.1 Non-organisational Challenges to player identity

Practitioners felt that players who were vying for a professional contract faced a range of challenges to their identity during transition into a professional environment. Players in first team squads whether youth or professional may be more exposed to public attention which may cause distraction:

*“If they are travelling with the first team the cameras are there. If they get on they might have an interview then all of a sudden they might have a bit more money in their pocket so the pitfalls are there; the booze the women the gambling”* (YCCHb).

An Education and Welfare officer also cited wealth a potential distraction from the pursuit of a career in professional football. *“I think the danger is, they’re paid too much money at a young age, they can lose focus about what they’re here to do”*. (EWOPL). Waterman’s (1984) definition of identity appears to resonate well here. Those with the strongest sense of identity may be the more ‘unequivocally committed’ to being a footballer and be able to resist such distraction and not have their identity challenged as much as those who may be foreclosed in the role of footballer.

*Girlfriends* were also seen to contribute to distraction from being a footballer and such distractions may decrease chances of selection for a professional contract. *“I’ve seen lads go off the rails, lads nailed onto being professional football players who went off the rails because of girls distracting them”*. (HOYL1a). Such examples are in contradiction to the work of Erikson (1968) who during the stage of adolescence the crisis related to identity vs role confusion; here one needs to form

relationships with others thus widening their social experience which in turn aids the development of self and personal identity. It also appears that coaches are wary of any outside influence which might distract their players from their footballing development but in reality such restriction may be a negative influence on not only their football development but the development of their identity.

*Parents* were also seen as a potential limiting factor in the development of players through being ‘overpowering’:

*“I think sometimes some parents can be a little bit over overpowering. They play the game for their lads, they speak for them if you have a meeting it’s always dad that talks and sometimes the lad sits there and says nothing.”*  
(HOYL1b)

One coach suggested such actions by parents may actually disadvantage a player by giving them a label that they may become something of a nuisance to staff.

*“...parents that tell you how to do your job and they think they help by sending in a email we will automatically do something about it but really it puts the kid on the radar and we think he might possibly be a problem.”*  
(YCL1b).

However this view is not in agreement with the body of literature in this area and may be more reflective of the continued traditional characterises that pervades professional football environments. Supportive parents have been seen to aid the development of talent in other sports (see Bloom, 1985; Cote, 1999) however it seems the relationship between the coaches and parents *may* have a negative influence over player selection. This also resonates with Purdy, Potrac and Jones’s (2008) work on

social power in rowing. Using Bourdieu's (1988) concept of capital in the context of an elite rowing program, Purdy, Potrac and Jones's (2008) described the power struggles between coaches and one rower who contemplated rejecting the program to train himself prior to a major sporting event. Coaches felt their regime (i.e. symbolic capital) was being devalued and undermined. In response the coaches attempted to alienate and devalue the rower's social and physical capital as an elite athlete. It was also noted that rowers who actively engaged in the program and accepted the contextual norms were afforded more time and investment than others who displayed less engagement. Within the context of the parent-coach relationship in football development systems it may be proposed that if parents are challenging the coaches working practices and operational decision making with the players (i.e. social power) then it may be little surprise that their response may be to re exert their social power by labelling players a nuisance. Ultimately this may limit the future opportunities of players as they may not be seen as a 'good lad' or have a 'good professional attitude'.

### **3.3.5.2 Organisational challenges to player identity**

Players faced a range of challenges from within the football clubs themselves during the transitional period from youth to professional. Notions of loneliness, isolation and a sense of disorientation emerged from the data. One Head of Youth spoke about the social exclusion faced upon entering a first team squad:

*"...a kid went up too early [had the opportunity to enter a first team environment] and it sort of knocked him back. And it weren't the technical or playing side that knocked him back it was the social side, he felt excluded, not totally excluded but you couldn't really join in because you're not really into talking about your car you mortgage, your marriage, your sex life, you're a 17 year old kid for Christ sake."* (HOYCHb)



A hierarchy was seen to exist where practitioners often felt that new first year professionals were still seen as youth players and were treated as if they were at the bottom rung of a ladder, only adding to potential loneliness and isolation:

*“...I think you’ve got to grow up very quickly, be subjected to all the banter, like a new fish if you like....I think they don’t give you much of a chance they think of you more of a hindrance than because you’re a first year and you haven’t done it and you’re rubbish and all that..”* (YCL1b).

This scenario is in contrast to many aspects of what has been described by youth development practitioners as strategies to develop candidates for first team environments. This suggests that some of the practices employed in academies may not fully prepare players for first team environments. For example the function of menial tasks such as jobs which promote camaraderie do not seem to have a function in a first team environment that may often be lonely for a new player.

One Head of Youth cited the move from development to performance environments was one of the biggest challenges to new professionals:

*“One the change of environment is probably the biggest thing they’re going into an environment where they’ve got to win games. Which although that’s part of the academy set up it’s not the only thing we look at players on. We try and develop players as well but yeah they go into an environment where players are playing to win and it’s difficult and quite challenging for them”.* (HOYL1a)

One youth coach summed up his experience of making the transition from youth to professional: “...*it was just nothing like I’d ever experienced and you know the difference between the keenness of it I mean the ruthlessness of it the severity of it was just so much of a shock*”. (YCL1c)

The potential impact of such social isolation, lack of development and continued non selection may result in psychological difficulty in players such as loss of confidence or a sense of disorientation. Erikson, (1968) and Gleaser (2000) wrote of the potential dangers of deriving meaning from work and prescribed duties which may have stemmed from being in a youth team environment. First year professionals who may have little in the way of ‘jobs’ to do may actually have their *meaning* taken away. The ability to clean boots, pump balls up or even make a contribution on the pitch may be something by which to be labelled a ‘good lad’, may not be there leaving a player with difficulties in defining themselves in their new environment. Marcia (1966) has defined this confusion or disorientation as identity moratorium while Erikson (1968) labelled it identity confusion. Erikson wrote that “all men are in a false position in society until they have realised their possibilities...” (p. 143). In the case of youth team footballers such realisation may never occur and due to range of cultural and operational challenges imposed on them. Marcia described people identity confusion as having a ‘bewildered appearance’ and ‘unresolved questions’.

Once players had gained a professional contract, practitioners felt that there was *little further development* of players which, when in competition with seasoned professionals, hindered progression into a starting eleven. According to youth practitioners, when young professionals enter the first team environment their development essentially stops: “ *...we had four first team pros last year and only one has been kept on, four got bombed but out [released from the football club] of a full year those kids only did one session extra.*” (HOYCHb).

Another Head of Youth felt that young professionals didn't received further developmental training because of the intense focus on the first team players in preparation for matches.

*“They get in at 18/19, have two or three games, do quite well but their development stops because they've not been coached. They'll be a body for the first team manager, you know, now and again they'll train once a day with a first team and he's concentrating on his first team squad”.* (HOYCHc)

With the lack of further technical development and limited chances of a starting place it is likely to challenge the players' sense of self and purpose previously built upon their ability to play football. One Head of youth acknowledged this may present challenges to the player's motivation;

*“They're not going to get in the first team; therefore, either they become despondent because they're not in the first team or, secondly, they're released because the first team manager wants new players in that are experienced that can actually get a trophy”.* (HOYL2b)

The notion of players becoming despondent due to *lack of playing time* has been seen in professional environment with established first team players. Based on over 10 year experience in sport psychology practice within the premier league Nesti (2013) suggest lack of playing time may lead to de-motivation, despair and a feeling of not being in control. It can be postulated that youth players or young professionals in this context with have their identity severely challenged through exposure to their new surrounding and cultural constraints.

### **3.3.6 Summary of practitioner perspectives on the challenges to players and their identity during transition to first team environments.**

From the data and subsequent analysis that a range of social, operational, occupational and cultural factors surrounding professional football can greatly challenge a player's identity through the critical period of transition from youth to professional and that having a clear sense of self may be a useful tool in coping with potential sources of stress and anxiety.

Coaches are aware of the many cultural factors that may distract players from being a dedicated professional. Despite this, there appeared to be limited formal support strategies in place to reduce this. Young professionals are thrust into a new environment in a 'sink or swim' ethos, which is a somewhat antiquated method in comparison to advancement in other areas such as sport science, rehabilitation, performance analysis and strength and conditioning. Instead the players with the strongest sense of self may be best placed to continue to push themselves and work

hard to pursue their career and, more importantly, negotiate the cultural climate within a first team environment.

### **3.4 Discussion**

The aim of this study was to critically explore the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, organisational cultures and environmental conditions created by practitioners within youth development programmes all of which contribute to players' identity. This study presented a clear shift in theoretical framework from study one (Athletic Identity) in an attempt to capture the wider contextual and developmental variables which contribute to identity Erikson (1968). We have been made aware that a strong, flexible, clear sense of identity in order to make the best of one's talents has previously been reported to allow athletes to be in the best possible position to achieve their goals (Nesti & Littlewood, 2009, Nesti (2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c and Balague, 1999). In this regard, the results indicate that practitioners are extremely clear, almost to a prescriptive level, about the psycho-social facets (identity) players must have in order to give them the best possible chance of being selected for a professional contract. In spite of this, explicit recognition of the importance of such qualities, none of the interviewees spoke of any formal assessments within the development process to develop such player characteristics.

The study identified characteristics such as identity, spirit, meaning and values, yet these have not received as much attention in the sport psychology literature as

much as e.g. anxiety or confidence. The level of knowledge in this area has come from accounts of applied practitioners (See e.g. Ravizza, 1990, Corlett, 2006, Nesti, 2010) who all talk about these facets and their importance in performance. . Somewhat paradoxical characteristic's such as confidence and humility were seen to be pre requisites within the most promising players. This transcends the current cognitive behavioural literature that dominates the sport psychology research but does resonate with characteristics from talented people in other domains (see Csikszentmialyi, 1997).

The ability to fit into football cultures appears to be just as important as technical and tactical ability carrying notions of conformity and survival seen in other literature in football (see Parker, 1995 and Roderick, 2006). Nesti, 2004, Nesti, 2013, Nesti & Littlewood, (2009) cite a clear and flexible self definition is a key pre-requisite for players in order to provide a solid psychological base from which to perform and deal with repeated failure and challenge that professional football brings. The ideal characteristics cited are consistent with someone who has reached identity achievement (Marcia, 1966).

Practitioners adopted few formal or informal strategies to develop such ideal characteristics. In reality traditional aspects of football culture such as dominance and control prevailed rather than being grounded in psychological theory. There were few strategies associated with notions of identity, self knowledge and courage such as wide range of experience, forming successful relationships, gaining meaning from exploration and free choice (see Erikson, 1968 and Corlett, 1996). There were no

formalised strategies to develop; spirit, deep self belief, stable and humble characters despite these being explicitly cited as some of the ideal characteristics. This suggests that the current levels of psychological support services and knowledge within professional football clubs is sub optimal. Instead it is the traditional notions of dominance, power and authority that remain prevalent in the form of a strict disciplinary codes, authoritarianism and power. Practitioners ensured they were in control of players for the maximum amount of time possible and exerted a form of disciplinary power previously seen in the penal system which effectively controlled behaviour (Foucault, 1979). This was through thorough training regimes and the assignment of a range of menial jobs. It appears that those who were able to meet all of the coaches demands (i.e. conform the most) were most likely to be labelled a 'good lad' or have a 'good attitude' and as a result be more likely to be selected for other squads within the football club.

Finally the organisational culture within football clubs themselves presented challenges to player identity. Socially, young players face exclusion from dressing room talk, as they simply have little in common with established first team professionals. They may not be selected for matches and receive little in the way of further technical development. This may lead to a sense of disorientation and isolation which carries notions of identity diffusion as they may not be able to represent themselves as they feel fit. Players who are somewhat foreclosed or display symptoms of craft idiocy may not be able to derive their meaning from their skills and therefore leave them in a state of bewilderment and disorientation

This study is not without limitation. Firstly, the coaches lack of understanding of the term identity may have led them to talk more about Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDE's), which have been identified in the literature with elite performers from various backgrounds (MacNamara, Holmes & Collins, 2006, 2008; MacNamara Button & Collins, 2010). This may have been a result of the interview guide purposely avoiding the term identity in an attempt to simplify the questions for coaches. The result is more of a clear and extensive list of psychological characteristics associated with excellence interspersed with some deeper notions of Eriksonian identity.

To combat this challenge, it would be useful to undertake further research into player accounts of perceptions of themselves, which may elicit more information about the person and how players perceive and understand themselves. This could be done longitudinally over the career span, or with elite performers who have progressed through the transitions associated with the present study. It would also be useful to ascertain coaches understanding of the term identity and of the importance of *healthy* psychosocial development. This could be cross referenced with content in coach education programmes to assess if there is adequate training in this area.

### **3.5 Conclusions**

This study shows that practitioners of some football clubs want a player with a strong sense of identity, but appear to do very little to promote and develop players' sense of self (Marcia, 1966) and more likely promote Craft Idiots (Marx, 1955). Coaches use disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) to promote conformity in players and ensure they meet formal and informal norms. This does not provide an optimal basis for players to



best display their talent and only those with the strongest sense of self are likely to succeed. The effect of this is that football clubs themselves may release players who are technically proficient but are not able to cope with the demands of the culture. Support staff such as sport psychologists should work to develop strategies to promote self knowledge and identity in players to give them a solid psychological foundation to cope with the volatile nature of professional football.

**Chapter Four:  
Identity in Critical  
Moments within  
Professional  
Football  
Environments**

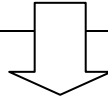
**Chapter 3: Study Two;** Identity in youth team players within elite level English professional football: Practitioner Perspectives

**Specific Aim** – To critically explore the perceptions of practitioners in relation to; ideal player characteristics, working practices, organisational cultures and environmental conditions created by practitioners within youth development programmes all of which contribute to players’ identity (Erikson, 1968).

**Methodology** – 10 professional football clubs spanning the four major levels of play were used in this study. A total of 19 youth development practitioners were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews and subsequent content analysis procedures were employed to create lower order themes, higher order themes and general dimensions.

**Findings** – Practitioners provided an explicit and clear blueprint of the ideal player characteristics required for successful upward transition including; self belief, dedication self awareness which were all synonymous with notions of identity. However when questioned on developmental strategies to elicit such favourable characteristics, practitioners provided little information. Instead traditional notions of power and authority via a hard work end heavily disciplined regime (See e.g. Parker, 2001 and Roderick, 2006) prevailed. They also cited a range of external factors such as parents as being implicit in developing player characteristics.

**Implications** – There needs to be a greater understanding of coach development both from the coach perspectives and also from the CPD content they receive. They may not be best placed to employ strategies to develop identity in players. The perspectives of players themselves needs to be explored further and whether they feel the culture in a professional football club acts a socializing agent but also a barrier to progression.



**Chapter 4: Study three;** Identity in Professional Football: A Case Study of one Professional Football Club

**Specific aim** – To better understand how players experiences of a professional football environment and culture has served to shape their identity and how allows them to cope with critical moments

**Methodology** – a championship football club served as the case study. More specifically 4 players (two youth team players, one development squad player and one senior professional) were chosen to be interviewed three times over the course of one season. Interviews and subsequent content analysis procedures were employed to create lower order themes, higher order themes and general dimensions. Findings were represented as stories of each player.

## 4.1 Introduction

The uncertain and often volatile nature of English professional football at both first team and Academy levels presents players with a range of positive and negative situations over a competitive season (Roderick, 2006; Nesti, et al., 2012). The frequency and impact of the challenges means that much of the current literature related to transition may not be fully reflect the working lives of professional footballers, as it largely revolves around retirement or career ending injuries (see Grove et al., 1997; Sparkes, 1998; Waylleman, 1999). In their critique of the transition based research, Nesti et al. (2012) suggested that the term ‘critical moments’ may be more suitable term to describe the range of events experiences by professional footballers, describing them as “frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the anxiety associated with an important change in our identity” (p. 23). It must be noted, that these may be positive or negative situation which are interpreted by the individual facing them. Positive situations may include gaining a professional contract, winning a cup competition, playing consistently well, whereas negative situations include deselection [and possible subsequent exit from the football club], injury, non-selection for matches, and family and relationship difficulties (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Despite our understanding of the working nature of professional football (Roderick, 2006), the general experiences of youth team footballers (Parker, 2001),

and applied sport psychologists accounts of working with professional players (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), our knowledge of the role that identity plays in helping players face critical moments in football is limited. Nesti et al. (2012) and Nesti (2013) provide case studies of elite professional players through experience of working in first team environments within Premier League football clubs. These accounts provide valuable insight into some of these critical moments and how sport psychology practitioners may work with players to help them overcome such situations. Although these insights provide depth and unique contextual accounts, they are limited in terms of quantity, amounting to six accounts of such players. Indeed, whilst this is useful in providing rich contextual insights the work life experiences of elite players, there has continued to be a paucity of research on the experiences of those players located outside the Premier League and within a youth development domain. Moreover, it is contended that a range of practitioners would be better informed of these deeply personal and unique perspectives compared to a singular perspective from (e.g., a sport psychologist).

The findings from Study Two showed that practitioners were highly prescriptive in what they wanted from players in terms of their identity, citing factors such as heightened levels of self awareness, taking personal responsibility, emotional stability and mental toughness. These characteristics are congruent with identity achievement (Marcia, 1965; Erikson, 1968). In terms of strategies to promote these desired characteristics, a paradox emerged as more traditional, cultural notions of power, dominance, history and authority within football (see Parker, 2001) prevailed over evidence-based, to include training courses or empirical research, relating to identity formation (See e.g. Erikson, 1968). Effectively, the experiential knowledge of

youth development practitioners and the deeply established cultures (i.e., power, tradition and domination) within a professional football environment served as the blueprint for developing players over evidence based practice.

With regard to the findings from study two which explore the viewpoint from youth development practitioners on how to develop players for a career in professional football, it is now logical to gain the perspective from players themselves and how their experiences of a professional football environment has served to shape their identity. Moreover, how their identity allows them to cope (or not) with the critical moments experienced during their career trajectory.

## **4.2 Method**

This study adopted a case study approach. Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000) provide a comprehensive look at case study methodology both in method and theory. Initially they suggest that in many ways all research is case study as there is always a single unit or set of units in relation to which data is analysed / interpreted. If a case is a single unit then one case study can be seen to be a poor basis for generalization. Indeed the case may not be a single person; it can be whatever bounded system is of interest. For example, an institution, a collection or a population can be the case (Stake, 2000). Case study is seen as being different from experimental study in that in that in experimental study the researcher ‘creates’ the cases studied, whereas case study researchers construct cases out of naturally occurring social situations. The term ‘case study’ also carries implications as to the type of data

collected and how such data is analysed. Frequently this implies the collection of unstructured data and qualitative analysis of the data. Furthermore, case study relates to the purpose of the research conducted.

The popular aim of case study research is to illustrate the case in its exclusivity and not to employ it as a base for wider generalisations. Stake (1994) previously argued for what he calls 'intrinsic case study' where the investigation of particular cases are carried out for their own sake as they are of sufficient interest to readers to take some intrinsic value. Stake (2000) also argues case study method is useful in the study of human affairs as they are attention holding and down-to-earth and are not suitable for generalization. Any generalizations may come from the reader as the research may be in harmony with his or her own experiences (termed as natural generalization) and this can in turn facilitate the reader's own learning. Stake's (2000) ideas of natural generalization imply that in intrinsic case studies the readers of such reports must themselves determine whether the findings are applicable to cases other than that covered by the researcher. The issue of talent development in soccer is thought to carry sufficient interest to warrant such a research investigation using case study methodology to be performed.

#### **4.2.1 The Case**

Sprotbrough United was a Championship Football Club. The first team had previously spent time in the Premier League, but were an established Championship side with average gates of around 12000 spectators. Their academy has squads with age groups from U9s to U18s, as well as an elite development squad comprising of 23 players, 17

full time staff and 36 part time staff and 6 interns. The Academy has a budget of around £1 million per annum and had recently been awarded a category 2 status by the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). Football club academies can be graded 1-4 with reduced staffing requirements, budgets and funding being associated with a larger score (FA, 2011).

The level of engagement within the club amounted to one to two days a week for an entire season between August 2012 to June 2013. I was granted access to all academy staff, players and facilities. My level of access was pre arranged on a weekly basis.

#### **4.2.2 Co-actors**

Four players were originally targeted to be interviewed several times over the season to capture the critical moments they faced during a season (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). The aim was to focus on the experience of these four players over one season to gain an understanding of their subjective experiences. The sample consisted of two Year Two Football Scholars, an elite development squad (EDS) player, and an established professional. A more detailed description of each player will be presented in the results. Table 4.1 shows the different stages of professional development within elite football. Interviews took place on a one-to-one basis. Each player's story is presented individually, in a collective case study approach (Stake, 1998) with a general discussion and synthesis with the literature.



**Table 4.1** Stages in Professional Development in elite football. Adapted from The Premier League (2011, p. 15)

<b>Stages of Professional development</b>			
Foundation Phase	Youth Development Phase	Professional Development Phase	Senior Professional
U5 to U11	U12 to U16	U17 to U21	21-35+
		Ryan (Year One Apprentice)	Robbi (Professional for over 10 years)
		Jason (Year Two Apprentice)	
		Kevin (in the Elite Development Squad)	

### 4.2.3 Data Collection

To triangulate the player, person and workplace, two methodological approaches were employed within this study. Both approaches encompassed ethnographic principles. Ethnography is a commonly used term but does not have a truly universal definition. It is often associated with terminology such as ‘naturalistic inquiry’, ‘field work’ and ‘case study’. The underpinning principles of ethnography allow a more long term and immersed exploration of the daily practices within one specific culture, in this case a professional football club academy. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), ethnographers do the following:

1. Provide accounts of peoples actions in every day contexts, in this case a professional football club academy

2. Gather data from a range of sources including documentary evidence, observation and informal conversations.
3. Focus on small samples to facilitate in-depth study.
4. Interpret the meanings and functions of actions and institutional practices.

There is no single best way to represent reality and it was felt that the exploratory nature of ethnographic research was most appropriate to meet the aims of the study.

This study continued to adopt a *constructivist* approach. Prolonged engagement was a key differentiator from Study Two and has been previously defined as ‘as lengthy and intense contact with the phenomena (or respondents) in the field to assess possible sources of distortion and especially to identify saliences in the situation.’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1997, p.77). My prolonged engagement of between one and two days a week, over an entire competitive playing season, provided an in-depth understanding of the situational context and challenges that players (and other social actors) operated. By the end of the season, I was comfortable that I had a thorough and detailed cultural and contextual understanding of the inner workings of the chosen football club.

#### **4.2.4 Fieldwork Diary**

Marshall and Rossman (1995, p. 80) state that “observation is a fundamental and critical method in all qualitative enquiry. It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings”. In line with a range of other qualitative based studies (see Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Parker, 1996, 2001), a fieldwork diary was kept throughout the research period which. This was a tool that captured the informal chats, observations and reflections of the engagement with the club, as well as being a

general reflective tool upon my experiences with the football club. Informal conversations were also conducted with various key members of staff including; the academy manager, assistant academy manager, head of sport science, sport psychologist and development squad coach, to capture and understanding of the every changing nature of club life over the season. Field notes cannot capture everything and must be selective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The main intention was to use field notes to capture; (a) the goings on and interaction between coaches and players, (b) reflections of the culture within the club and (c) reflections and some early interpretations of the outcomes of interviews. Acting upon guidance from Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) field notes were written up soon as possible after leaving the football club. Typed field notes were immediately shared with the supervisory team via a cloud based storage system (Dropbox) so we could talk about the notes during the regular supervisory meetings. The reason for timeliness of note taking was one of memory. The longer the time lag between observing and writing the greater the chance of forgetting events or key details. There were also practical considerations for not taking a pen or laptop into the club. These reasons were twofold; firstly, it was felt best to avoid writing notes in the company of coaches, sport science staff, or players, as it may arouse suspicion from those who may not understand the purpose of the researcher's presence (see Olesen & Whittikar, 1968). Secondly, in an attempt to build rapport and gain authentic views from staff (whenever the time came to probe them on one topic or another), it was not felt appropriate to be taking notes (Calvey 2005).

#### **4.2.5 Interviews**

As guided by Sparkes' (1998), a series of interviews designed to explore, capture and understand the participants' biographical data were undertaken. The interviews also followed guidance from Denzin (1989) who described the biographical method as a study using life documents that describe turning points in an individual's life. For the purpose of this study such 'life documents' were accounts of critical moments faced by players over a competitive season. The broader methodological approach to this study is grounded on interactionism, with a view to making sense of the problematic and/or positive lived experiences of ordinary people available to the reader, as they are seen by the person experiencing such problems (Denzin, 1989). Additionally Mohr (1997) described interpretive interactionism is a 'multiperspectival qualitative research method that attempts to study the whole person in his or her historic, sociocultural, and biological contexts by using concepts from a variety of disciplines' (p. 272). The adoption of such an approach allowed for a better understanding of people within the cultural context of their workplace (a professional football club), and enabled a more personal examination of how their identity affected their perception, and subsequent interpretation, of workplace events.

The interviewer is also central to the process and both parties need to describe the meaning of the dialogue and each other's interpretations of it (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1993). By nature, these interviews were open ended with the exception of the first interview, which was aimed at gaining an understanding of the person (their identity), their life history, and football career to date. As suggested by Wolcott (1995), the first interview started with something of a grand tour of the person, where interviewees were invited to talk about their life history to date from both personal and professional perspectives. The researcher adopted the role of an active listener to

make a more effective speaker out of the person talking (Wolcott, 1995). Throughout the interviews that took place, my role as an active listener led me to share my experience of working with other players in the role of an Education Officer where I previously delivered educational aspects of their scholarship programme. This allowed me to demonstrate some 'insider knowledge' and create a more trusting and empathetic relationship (Denzin, 1989).

Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim before the next interview took place. This allowed for some reflection upon the interview itself and to maintain my immersion in the data collection and make notes for the next interview. Such notes contained points of clarity to be revisited and also explore any topics in more depth. For example, revisiting the religious practices and consequent career influence on one player. The subsequent interviews over the season were based on the previous interviews and also the player's accounts of their experiences throughout the season. Players were asked to describe their recent experience, then they were prompted to talk about what such experience meant to them, whether it was positive or negative, and how they felt it challenged or shaped their identity. For example, between interviews it was conceivable that players may have experienced injury, deselection from the team or even sold to another club. The interviews typically ran early, middle and end of season, with the aim of capturing; preparation for the coming season, in-season, and reflections of the season respectively.

The interview guide (see Appendix) included questions such as; Can you tell me what's been happening since we last spoke? How has this made you feel? How

have you coped with this? The aims of such questioning was to elicit data from the players based on their experiences of events since the previous interview rather than me probing for specific, pre determined data. As with the broader aims of the PhD, the questions were generated from readings on identity (see e.g. Erikson, 1968), Organisational Culture (see e.g. Parent & Slack, 2006) and Critical Moments (see e.g. Nesti et al. 2012).

#### **4.2.6 Data Analysis**

The data analysis did not take place at any particular point in time (e.g., after the data collection process). Instead it happened through the entire process with a mixture of field notes and interviews (Sparkes, 2000). In a more formal context, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to the procedural notions of content analysis (see Patton, 1982; Scanlan et al., 1989a; Schwant, 1997; Meyer & Wenger, 1998; Patton, 2002) using the same methods as described in Study Two.

#### **4.2.7 Trustworthiness**

To aid the analysis and promote trustworthiness, a range of techniques were employed. Notes were made after each session of analysis to constantly review the process and ensuring its smooth running (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such methods were employed to make the transition from descriptive modes of thinking to a conceptual field.

*Saturation* - data analysis was only seen to be complete when no new relevant information was being uncovered through the data analysis process and ‘saturation’ point was reached, a process that is often referred to as ‘redundancy’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Critical Reflection* - Much qualitative research has been criticised for being too biased to the author’s thoughts and opinions (Maykut & Morehouse, 1985). In an attempt to combat this, regular meetings with the supervisory team during the period of data analysis provided a ‘second opinion’ by acting as a ‘devil’s advocate’ (Sparkes, 1998) and offering an alternative perspective to the initial findings.

*Member Checking* - was seen as one of the most important methods to increase the credibility of the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This involved asking the research participants to authenticate their interviews once transcribed. All participants received a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to verify its accuracy and the interpretations made from it. Participants were also asked to verify they had been represented fairly. All participants confirmed that their transcription was an accurate reflection of what they had said.

#### **4.2.8 Data Representation**

As evidence of my developing growing confidence as a researcher I tried to adopt an eclectic writing style to represent the stories of the players and my experience of prolonged engagement with the case study football club. One of the main reasons for this was to try to bring my voice to the foreground, rather than the author removed

norm of writing in the third person. I wanted to write stories and felt these were more an appropriate method to represent the players' tales. This was not an unconsidered decision, I was trained to write in the third person on my physiology-heavy positivist training in Sport and Exercise Science meant that such a style was new to me. I went through a crisis of representation, of sorts. As Tierney (2002) describes, there is a need for appropriate training, guidance and support. Such crises in representation have been addressed by a number of scholars (See e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2000, 2002; Tierney, 2002), which proved invaluable in the development of my writing for this final study.

Data is presented in several ways to help communicate player interview data, field notes and my own personal reflections. A conventional approach to this qualitative case study was adopted in the sense that I included direct quotes that were based on the main themes emerging from each person's interviews. Secondly, field note data and my reflections were developed into short stories, containing incidents or key events (critical moments) that I experienced over the 2012-13 season. The aim of this representational strategy was to try to communicate to the reader the reality of what I saw in a clear, direct and meaningful manner. According to Smith and Sparkes (2009), stories help constitute meaning and lived experiences and undertake the communication of them. Such a narrative approach may help us to understand the experience of the individual, the player in the context of their workplace, and how the traditional cultures of the workplace influence the experience of being a professional football player. The narrative aims to capture the lived experiences of the players and gain and understanding of the cultural climate and conditions in professional football



and how these changed across time, space and with different social actors. Allowing my voice to be present in the foreground provided an opportunity to speak directly to the reader and demonstrate my interpretations of experiences within the football club. Writing, drafting and re writing of stories surrounding players' experiences of critical moments through the season of engagement allowed me to reflect, to develop deeper analysis, and ultimately a greater understanding of the cultural conditions in professional football and how these directly and indirectly shape players daily lived experiences.

This research approach was chosen for a two main reasons; Firstly, such methodologies allow for a more inductive approach ensuing that the lived experience of the individual is paramount (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney & Robinson, 2002). Secondly, the creation of storied allowed me to construct player realities according to the 'situatedness' of their lives, and such an approach would seek to communicate my interpretations of how elements around the players (e.g. culture, traditions, co-workers, family) impact on their perceptions of the lived experience (Henrikson, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010).

### **4.3 Results**

This section presents the four case studies. The background to each player is presented along with direct quotes from player interviews. There is also the inclusion of short stories and discussion surrounding critical moments faced by players over a competitive playing season. Identity is central to each story and for the purposes of this study, identity is defined as '*a clearly delineated self definition comprised of*

*those goals, values, beliefs which a person finds personally expressive and to which he or she is unequivocally committed'* (Waterman, 1984; p. 331). Erikson suggests that in order to develop a healthy, strong identity both exploration of and a commitment to avenues of expression that hold meaning and value.

#### **4.3.1 Ryan's story: A tale of uncertainty**

This case study will attempt to provide an insight into Ryan, his critical moments throughout the 2012-2013 season and how he draws upon his identity to help him cope with challenges related to notions of *uncertainty* about gaining a professional contract. There will be a continual synthesis to the theoretical and empirical literature in this area to help explain the events that unfold.

#### **Introductions**

*Ryan is a second year scholar and plays in central midfield, he looks like any other 18 year old and from my experience just like any other youth team player I've ever come across. He carries a bit of a swagger, has the latest hair cut and has that all too common socks and sandals look. Upon meeting him he looks me in the eye, shakes my hand and we sit down to talk in the education room. The shaking of the hand and eye contact appears natural, but I think it's been well drilled into players by now that this is how you address someone. At this point he doesn't know why he's been told to talk to me, all he knows that he is meeting 'someone from a university' and he needs to talk to them. He's shown willing, not so much from a research perspective (!) but more likely to show the coaches and other staff he is a good lad and willing to help people out. We walk to the education room which has PCs round the perimeter, desks in the middle and a smartboard at the front. A typical classroom set up. The windows overlook the training pitches and there are posters of recent graduates from the academy entering into professional football, coaching in America or enrolling on undergraduate programmes in England. I suppose it's there to remind players that they can be successful without gaining a professional contract. We sit across from each other at a desk, and begin to talk....*

Ryan's dad exposed him to a range of sporting pursuits from an early age, he was taken to martial arts classes from the age of seven, played football from the age of eight. At the age of nine, after one season in Sunday league he was signed by Cantley Crusaders (a Championship team), where he stayed until he was 16. In terms of support for his footballing pursuits, Ryan cites his parents as being key; *“mum comes and watches me. But my dad is heavily involved; he gives me a lot of advice and just helps me.”* Ryan's father also helped him in pre-season in adhering to an off-season fitness regime that he feels has contributed to his hard working attitude now;

*“They [parents] have always drilled it into me that I'll get what I want if I work hard for it. Like pre-season, my dad doesn't let me have days off when I should be running, he makes sure I am running and it has just been drilled into me from a really young age.”*

Ryan sees this has had benefits in the earlier stages of his football development, not only in terms of physical results, but also the reinforcement that hard work brings rewards:

*“Like under 13s my dad just turned around one day and went ‘come on I'm going to take you out jogging’ and I was just a bit shocked at first and then like he'd just do it twice a week and when I got back into the pre-season, when I went into under 14s, I realised how like much different I felt, when we were doing a few runs and stuff like that I was way in front of everybody else and then, ever since then, I never like just relax all the time in pre-season, I make sure I get the running done so I get the benefits when I get back.”*

Such parental influence is in line with much of the literature in this area (see Bloom, 1985; Cote, 1999). Ryan now cites his *determination* and a *never give up attitude* in training and completion as one of his major strengths; *“I want to be a professional footballer when I get older, like if I keep working as hard as I am now I believe that I will get there.”* It is interesting to note that Ryan cites this approach to his development as coming from his upbringing, rather than exposure to a football culture

and its associated norms and values. It would seem to align more to notions of identity formation being a lifelong process from birth (Erikson, 1968).

Ryan takes pride in his additional responsibilities in terms of doing jobs and sees the importance of working hard in all aspects of his scholarship, including 'jobs' around the training ground, such as cleaning the changing room floors:

*"I do them for the coach obviously because they need it doing well, but I do it obviously because if I do it well then it reflects well on me, because the coaches can see that I am putting hard work into everything around the club, just as well as obviously working hard on the pitch as well".*

Although such 'extra duties' are not part of the ASE apprenticeship programme (LFE, 2014) it seems that the club feels that providing players with menial tasks is an important addition to their football development and education aspects of the ASE programme. Such menial tasks are not entirely supported by theory or empirical evidence are more reflective of the traditional notions of power, authority and discipline (Parker, 2001; Roderick 2006). Another argument could be that such tasks are put in place in an attempt to develop 'craft knowledge' (Schön, 1983). In this case the football club may be putting such jobs in place in an attempt to develop personal responsibility and a sense of duty in players., Ryan fully accepts that doing extra duties are part of creating the image he needs to portray to coaches in order to establish himself as a contender for a professional contract. This has been discussed by Parker (2001) and is associated with the notion of self-representation in displaying someone who is obedient and takes personal responsibility seriously (Goffman, 1959). Such actions also align with the notion of conformity and taking personal responsibility, which again have been cited within the literature as necessary characteristics to

enhance (the player's) chances of upward progression (see e.g. Parker, 2001; Mitchell & Holt, 2006). Being everything the coaches wish a player to be is seen as a key criterion for upward progression, and it appears Ryan is all too aware of this and modifies his attitudes and behaviour in line with the perceived cultural norms and traditions of the club environment.

### **Critical moments during the 2012-13 season**

The following section will present an account of three critical moments cited by Ryan as important periods or events that shaped his season.

#### **A dip in form (November, 2012)**

This is the second interview with Ryan and he has been selected for most EDS games over the season so far. This is typically considered a good sign when players are given the opportunity to 'play up' in other squads within a football club. However, in this new environment Ryan suffered a loss of form:

*“There were a few weeks when I wasn't playing, I just didn't feel like I could play like I know I can and obviously that were [was] affecting my confidence and stuff like that and when it affects your confidence you're not going to play on top of your game. I would go home and I were still thinking about it. I were just trying to put my finger on it of why I was playing like this.”*

Ryan went to see the EDS manager and asked for advice.

*“So I went and spoke to them [EDS coaches] and I didn't really want to admit that it were that, but then they said 'We think it is because you're temperament like, you're getting angry over like minor things on the pitch and stuff like that'. Then that's when I've like sorted it out really and like I'm just a lot more calm and everything.”*

Although Ryan didn't offer any exact strategies suggested by the coaches, he has managed to face up to his current situation which shows his level of self awareness,

he is able to face the existential anxiety that is present when choices are to be made (Kierkegaard, 1944 [1844]) and have the courage (Corlett, 1996) to ask the coaches for help. This in turn may present him in a more positive light amongst the staff as he is clearly taking responsibility for his actions by seeking support; *“I’ve obviously shown to them that I know that something’s not right at the moment, so I’m trying to sort it.”* The notion of taking personal responsibility has also been discussed by Holt and Mitchell (2006), who found this feature was one of a range of psychosocial competencies seen as essential for the enhancement of upward progression to first team environments. Being self aware allows people to take control and take responsibility through making considered actions to overcome challenge. The benefits are twofold. He is able to seek help, and he is also seen by the coaches as someone who is self aware and willing to seek help. According to existential principles a person continuously making decisions as to dealing with stressors (facing the circumstance and learning from the experience) allows for growth and development which may typically provoke anxiety. Facing this anxiety and growing requires existential courage (Maddi, 1986; Corlett, 1996).

One question that arises from this is, what about those who are not self aware aren’t easily able to take such responsibility and seek the help they need? Players are at risk of not developing to their full potential if they ‘go with the flow’ and stay within their comfort zone. Nesti (2013) wrote of such situations in first team environments where some players feel a sense of powerlessness and may give up the fight and not face the inevitable discomfort of facing such challenges.

In a youth team setting, the role for support staff, in this example, would be to help players increase their self knowledge and support them making considered

choices in their careers which will ultimately lead to growth. In the case of Ryan he appears to have such self knowledge and has made a considered choice to ask the coaches for assistance. From his life story account it seems more likely his identity has been shaped more of a result of his parents than long term exposure to football club culture. He clearly has an understanding of how to 'play the game' and represent himself in the best light to his coaches.

### **Good signs and hope (Early April 2013)**

Ryan feels he has had a good season so far and feels he is doing well. *"I've played every game, I've been available for, I've played in most 21s [EDS] as well but they're more off the bench those games..... I've been doing well I think."* His positive feeling has been reinforced by feedback from coaches within the academy and also from the first team manager.

*"The Gaffa [first team manager] had a lot to do with it, to put me and another lad in 21s [EDS] because he said he was impressed with us and he wanted us playing most games for them and he told Bunny [interim EDS manager] where he wanted us to be starting, so that's how it's come about. So I did well in them games."*

This demonstrates the influence of the first team manager on squads that are not formally under their control. It also highlights a need to impress oneself on the first team manager at every given opportunity. Playing for EDS has given Ryan an accelerated rate of development over his peers who remained in the youth team.

*"You're playing against better players, like you're playing against professionals who are coming back from injury and stuff like that, so that's good because obviously they're more experienced and obviously if I'm going to play in the Championship with the first team then I'm going to play against experienced players."*

Such feedback and positive reflections have given Ryan hope of a further upward progression in the form of a professional contract and breaking into the first team.

*“I just felt like maybe I could kick on, like my next step obviously after 21s [EDS] is first team, so obviously I was hoping maybe I could kick on and try and get into there, obviously that hasn’t happened but hopefully if I get a professional contract then I can do that next season.”*

The notion of *hope* has been previously reported in the context of youth football (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Hope theory arises from the perception that ones goals can be attained. Snyder, Rand and Sigmon (2002) developed hope theory by asking people about their goal directed thoughts. They reported that, in order to reach their goals, people must view themselves as capable of generating workable routes to desired goals. (e.g., “I’ll find a way to get a professional contract”). Ryan’s hope appears to be considered and realistic, due his clear sense of self, he is able to draw upon and interpret his current development into realistic ambition.

### **Decision time (Late April 2013)**

*I enter the training ground and go to the staff offices as normal. Brett takes me out of the office, down a stairwell that looks like it’s used by fans on a match day, through some double doors into a corridor. I can hear some rap music coming from the gym area. I wait outside but Brett barges in. “Ryan! Tom’s here to see you go and have a talk to him”. This is met with a less than favourable response of; “Fuck sake do I av to?” Ryan seems really unhappy to be interviewed this time but of course he begrudgingly agrees to continue to show willingness and enthusiasm for anything staff ask of him. Ryan shows me to the kitchen area next to the gym. Walking past the gym door I see Phil [assistant sport scientist] and around 9 or 10 scholars doing a gym based circuit session. It looks like some of the elite development squad are in as well. Phil waves and shouts ‘Big fuckin day today mate’. ‘Oh right’ I respond with a smile, although I have no idea what he is talking about. I went in to the kitchen area, closed the door, still hearing the dull bass coming from the gym*



*music station. Ryan is slumped in a chair opposite me, he has his head down, his knees are shaking. It was like he was waiting to walk the plank. It starts to become clear what this big day is. It is the day that players are told if they are to receive a professional playing contract. Ryan's body language oozes stress, tension, anxiety and dread. This is the day that Ryan, as well as his family, friends and significant others have been waiting for, this is his defining moment which may reinforce or shatter his identity. He is currently a footballer, but in around 20 minutes time he may not be. My first thought is to immediately end the interview but then, no, let's try and capture this. I can't imagine a more stressful time in my whole professional life, let alone try and imagine what he's going through. We talk a little bit about how he is feeling and what he might do if he wasn't offered a contract, but Ryan is clearly uncomfortable with talking to me due to the impending meeting with the academy manager. We ended the interview after around 15 minutes. We left the kitchen area, Ryan went back into the gym to wait to be called into the academy manager's office. I really feel for Ryan, there's also a sense of guilt on my part for even interviewing him in this first place. I really hope Ryan gets something here....or should I say what if he doesn't?*

Although working for something throughout your life lends itself to a more narrow sense of identity, this is not the case for Ryan. He seems fully aware that he may not gain a professional playing contract and has made preliminary arrangements should he not receive a contract. This would appear to demonstrate his awareness that the chances of receiving a professional contract are small and that he had considered other career options:

*"I've got an agent so I've spoke to him and he says that obviously he's got clubs lined up for me if I weren't to get one. And then I've been looking at the likes of college courses and stuff like that just in case as well."*

Such preparatory activities are not seen elsewhere in the current body of literature regarding athletic career planning. Findings from North American student athletes generally find the opposite. College student athletes, especially those from revenue producing sports (e.g., American Football and Basketball) have been found to have less developed career plans and career planning skills than their non-athletic

counterparts, which may be the result of the isolation that the college athletic systems bring from mainstream college activities, resulting in a lack of dependant decision-making style (Blann, 1985). Ryan does not appear like this, he seems self aware, reasoned and has the courage to plan for alternative career paths. Again his self awareness seems to resonate more from his upbringing and not from long term exposure to a football environment.

### **The aftermath**

*About a week later I returned to Sprotbrough United, My plan was to see Ryan. I didn't know whether he had been offered a professional contract or not. I purposely didn't ask the staff as I wanted to find out from Ryan himself. As ever I was greeted by Brett and led me down the concrete stairs to the gym area where the youth team were having a strength and conditioning circuit delivered by Phil. We exchanged pleasantries and Phil instructed Ryan to "go talk to Tom for a bit". And it was an instruction. Ryan looked up and to my surprise smiled and said 'hi mate how's it going? I knew straight away, his whole demeanour was different to last time, he was almost walking on air, head up shoulder back, not a sign of the dread seen in our previous encounter. He was a different person. The sense of relief coming from Ryan was vivid. He was totally revived and full of energy to take on the next challenge.*

Ryan described the experience of being told about the contract.

*"I were nervous, very nervous when I were [was] walking up to the room and then once I'd got in, they didn't waste no time telling me and obviously as soon as they'd told me I weren't [wasn't] nervous no more, I just like I say was relieved and just happy".*

Relief was mentioned frequently within the interview; *"I was more relieved than anything, just obviously that gives me another year."* In this context, it appears that the relief is from the *uncertainly* of gaining a professional contract and some continued *hope* that his dream may one day become a reality. It also represents the

notion that players can't have long term planning strategies in place. For Ryan he can only look at the next 12 months of employment. In first team settings, Roderick (2006a) described the professional football industry as 'always been marked by a competitive labour market, and players quickly grasp the limited tenure of contracts, the constant surplus of talented labour, and their vulnerability to injury and ageing' (p. 1). Addressing feelings of *uncertainty* is an ever-present dimension of the working lives of footballers, and in this case, it appears this is the same or even more in the foreground before the professional stage of footballing career. In this example, the uncertainty provides the source of anxiety he must face when deciding on his next moves. Having now gained a professional playing contract, and the associated year of stability, Ryan is fully aware that he must keep up his speed of development and application.

*"It's opened up a lot of doors because I've finally got like the professional contract, it's not just like schoolboy stuff or even scholarship anymore, it's actually you're a professional now, obviously, but I've still got to keep sticking at what I'm doing and just keep pushing on, that's all I keep thinking to myself is push on, just keep that, don't stop until obviously you are where you want to be".*

He is also aware that there is change in culture in terms of receiving feedback from coaches: *"Obviously they're [coaches] not going to pussyfoot around or anything anymore, they're going to tell you how it is from now on. Which obviously I'm looking forward to."* The experience of playing up for the EDS in his first and second year of his scholarship has ensured Ryan is clearly aware of the environment he is about to enter and he is also aware that he has not made it just yet.

*"I'm at the bottom of the ladder and I need to climb up to get into that first team environment, because obviously I'm young. So I need to prove to them, to the staff upstairs, that I'm obviously able to deal with the professional game."*

The need to keep pushing and proving himself all over again along with his analogy of being at the bottom of a ladder once again carries notions of uncertainty and continued scrutiny seen in professional football environments by Roderick (2006, 2006a) and is now seen in modern day youth development programmes. It also presents some concerns that his motives are still focussed on external factors rather than creating personal meaning such as a desire to improve, self fulfilment and meeting personal goals. It is one's identity that facilitates the creation of meaning over simply going with the flow and conforming which strengthens the suggestion that football clubs should seek to develop player identity.

This case study has shown that even early on in a playing career, years before a professional playing contract is offered, *uncertainty* and a need to *prove one's worth* to the staff at the football club prevails. Ryan has gained a professional playing contract, something he admits he has been working towards *his whole life*. This has ultimately reinforced his sense of self. He is considered and reasoned in his approach, through having a strong sense of self that he has drawn upon to help him manage the critical moments presented here. According to existential principles, a person continuously making decisions as to dealing with stressors (facing the circumstance and learning from the experience) provides existential anxiety. Facing this allows for growth and development.

N.B. At the time of writing Ryan is playing regularly for the development squad, has been on loan at a lower league football club but has yet to make a first team appearance.

### 4.3.2 Jason's Story: Feelings of betrayal

This case study focuses on Jason who is a second year scholar and plays at right back. This is his third season at Sprotbrough after being released from Bentley Rovers (Championship) having been there from the ages of 10 to 16 years old. The case study will focus on Jason's second year and reflections of his release from the football club whom he is still training with.

*I'm introduced to the Jason who is finishing off a conditioning session with Phil (assistant academy sport scientist). Jason seems keen to meet me, he shakes my hand and looks me in the eye and gives a confident 'hi mate how's it going'. It seems word has got round that I'm speaking to players so he seems quite familiar with me as I've been coming in for a while now. It was Brett who recommended him to me as he'll be a 'good one [to interview]'. I think I know the outcome of this one already....Jason takes me to the kitchenette near the gym where I've had a few chats with other players. First impressions are the Jason is very intelligent, articulate and confident.*

Jason is a son of two parents who are both in professional roles and comes from a suburban area that he describes as a 'decent area'. He embraced moving nearly 100 miles from home and felt that this had contributed to his development as a person.

*"I'm a lot more responsible. It might be because I'm getting older. I get treated as more of an adult now by my parents and my family. I'm not just a big brother anymore. I help out with stuff. I drive and that helps as well. I just feel as a person I've come a long way. Obviously, I have to deal with my own money as well. That's something that's helped me mature and become more adult I think."*

With regard to Eriksons (1968) 8 stages of Psychosocial Development, Jason would appear to be in the fifth stage; Identity vs Role confusion. This is the most important

as it represents the transition from childhood to adulthood. By moving away Jason has become more independent by learning new roles and skills, such as looking after himself, due to living away from home.

### **Uncertainty**

After an impressive first season as a scholar Jason was promoted to the EDS but soon felt the ruthlessness of the increased professionalization of his football development: *“I think I did the first three or four for 21s [EDS] and then I had a bad performance. I was back in by November [after 6 weeks]”*. According to Jason one poor performance appears to have led to him being relegated back to the under 18s which highlights the vociferous demand for demonstrating ones worth in the workplace from all players, especially as they progress through the squads within the football club. It seems unsurprising that Jason was affected by this; *“It knocked me originally because the first time I didn’t go [with the EDS]. A lot of the lads went, it was straight after the performance I wasn’t great.”* Jason also felt that one poor performance, as a second year, could have an impact upon him getting a professional contract; *“I didn’t feel as confident. I felt a bit sort of have I just messed it all up? Cause I had a great chance to sort of really kick on”*. Being dropped from the EDS for 6 weeks has clearly had an impact on Jason. Nesti (2013) noted that deselection can potentially lead to diminished motivation and in worst cases total despair. Although these observations were within elite first team settings we can now see similar disruptions in youth team

players. Questioning whether he has ‘messed it up’ also carries notions of *uncertainty* that Roderick (2006, 2006a) reported in his sociologically based research in professional football. We can now see that *uncertainty* is apparent even before a professional playing career has begun. Playing in a new squad brings a new need to prove worth to the coaches to ensure players are seen as valuable to the club.

### **Release and disorientation**

I met Jason around March time and he told me that he has been released from the club but that they were allowing him to continue training to keep fit and to ensure he completed his BTEC National certificate which forms part of the scholarship programme for which the academy gets funding for. We talked about the process of release and his perceptions of the process:

*“I went up there and he [Academy Manager] said the main reason why I didn’t get one [a professional contract] is because they spoke to people around the club and they didn’t think I’d be able to be a championship right back within the next two or three years, which is a valid excuse in a way. It’s better than them saying something like “We think we’ve got other players who can do your job.” I’d rather they gave me an excuse that was just to do with me and they have, to be fair, but at the same time it was just like shit and it ended, that was it. It was what do I do now? Immediate reaction was, well, what happens now? I just don’t know what to do. And I was absolutely gutted.”*

Jason cited a level of *uncertainty* at how the decision came about, in essence not fully knowing how and why he was released from the club. He had played all but one game for the youth team which he missed as he was with the development squad.

*“...when he [Academy Manager] said it’s [the decision] from around the club and that, I think the first team manager might have had a bit of an input. He hasn’t seen me play that much, but if he doesn’t think I’m going to be a championship right back then ... I mean if he doesn’t want to give me a pro then I’m not going to get a pro. He calls the shots.”*

Reflecting on the release two weeks previously Jason felt he had displayed everything the coaches had wanted in terms of character and attitude and hoped this would help with in terms of obtaining references for future clubs:

*“I like to think I’ve got a good attitude about the club. I do my jobs well and I do jobs when I’m asked to. I do whatever I can ... I’m a good lad, and I think after all the effort that I’ve put in that way it can’t have hurt to say he’s got a good attitude. He’s a good lad.”*

This element of self-presentation, seems paramount in professional football environments and has been previously seen in first team environments (Roderick, 2006), it is also interesting to note that of all facets he had he hoped the ones that has impressed upon the coaches most are not technical or tactical but more related to character and attitude. Jason appears to be drawing upon his perception of himself as a good lad as a mechanism to cope with this uncertainty. My reflection on this situation was as follows:

*It appears Jason is hoping for some form of affirmation from staff that he is a good lad and does have a professional attitude; it seems that gaining this is vital for him to be able to accept the release. I think players are implicitly told that the a professional attitude and the right character are essential for career progression and it is clear that Jason feels he has displayed these facets and somewhat defines himself by them at the expense of personal meaning [i.e. what he might really feel]. Jason’s body language, facial expression and tone suggest he feels somewhat let down by the football club and doesn’t fully understand the real reasons as to why he hasn’t been offered a professional contract. I sense he doesn’t really value the reasons provided nor feel they were sufficient to help him understand. The lack of clarity in the feedback combined with the lack of information as to who had the final decision leads me to think it’s no surprise he’s somewhat bewildered. Who are the specific*



*people around the club? How and why don't they think he'll make it in the next 2 to 3 years? Could the poor game in November for the EDS really have been the event that made staff feel he wasn't worthy? Jason simply doesn't know as he hasn't been given sufficient information upon release or seemingly throughout the programme. Being released must be tough enough for a young person but not to be given clear reasoned judgements seems even worse...*

In one of the only published studies exploring release from a football club as a scholar, Brown and Potrac (2009) wrote of players feeling suffering a loss of identity and have a sense of betrayal by the club upon release. They also expressed opinions relating to clubs not providing clear and reasoned information nor support to help them manage such a dramatic self change, which Athens (1995) described as a dramatic and abrupt personal transformation of self. Jason's story presents a fifth player to add to Brown and Potrac's (2009) four player study. With the large numbers of players being released year-on-year this is area is in need of much greater attention. There needs to be a greater amount of understanding about how ex-players rebuild their identity after football.

NB: At the time of writing Jason has enrolled on a football scholarship programme in the United States and studying for a degree in sport science.

### **4.3.3 Kevin's Story: A lost player**

Kevin, 19, is an EDS player. He is a right full back and in his first season with a professional contract and has been at Sprotbrough from the age of nine. Kevin has football in his family, his father was a professional player at Sheffield Wednesday.

Kevin feels his best assets are a hard working and committed attitude which he feels come from his family:

*“I think I've just had it punched into me by family. My mum's always strived for success and my mum's always been in a high job. It's in the family where my mum ... she's not always had a good job. She had to go through university at a hard time when we had no money and she wanted that best job she could get, which she's now a successful social worker and a manager, and where she is now she wouldn't have got if she didn't take the risks and work hard. It's the same with my dad. He got injured in football. He had to go through everything again to where he is now, again, successful. My sister, she went through uni. She's just finished uni. She got a first in chemistry and she's looking to be a teacher now. It runs through the family. We're all striving for success.... I guess that attitude is punched in by my family.”*

He also feels he is disciplined as a result of his upbringing:

*“There's points where my mum has shouted at me for going out playing football when I need to do my homework and stuff like that, but I guess that's where you thank your mum and eventually you realise what that were for, and that discipline. I take that discipline into today, whether it's going in the gym and doing some work, what I need to do, that discipline comes from my family.”*

Here Kevin cites his parents and being greatly influential in shaping his attitude to *perseverance*, *discipline* and hard work. With regard to Kevin's current position as a development squad player, he feels this discipline has had a direct, positive impact on his football development so far in terms of emitting the perception he is hard working through him undertaking a range of jobs within the football club.

*Last year a couple of players got dropped because they were slack. They were lazy. That's why I think a couple didn't get contracts last year because they were lazy. You wouldn't believe it. When I first started as a scholar a couple of people were tossing jobs off and thought “just do them tomorrow”, and then it started getting regular and people notice it who you wouldn't think notice it. Cleaners notice that you haven't cleaned something, but you get given individual jobs so that the managers can see who has been slacking, so you've got to do them. There's no hiding. It goes down on your CV, whatever you do... I fitted straight in. I'd always do my jobs without fail. In fact I'd get them out of the way. I'd do*

*them straightaway; get them out of the way. They're all done properly. No one can say owt with me and I can get on with my football.*

Again it appears that self representation is key in professional football over technical and tactical skills on a football pitch. When asked whether being the academy system could change a person he felt that it couldn't and in a sense what you are does not come from being in a football environment: *"I haven't seen it yet, it [last season's academy squad] were that pure divide of slackers and non slackers, and no one really changed from my point of view"*. This suggests that some of the ideal player characteristics may be in place prior to entering a football environment and may be shaped primarily by prior experience including upbringing. Such findings resonate with notions of identity formation where Erikson (1968) wrote about ones identity being fluid and developed through a series of crises and resolution from birth to death. Such work poses questions to the football industry about the rationale for the use of strategies to 'shape' young players in a bid to develop facets such as character and attitude.

### **Critical moments during the 2012-13 season**

#### **A change in manager means starting all over again**

After the sacking of the first team manager, Mat Griffiths, the assistant manager Adam Squire has been promoted to manager.

*"In the last few weeks under Mat Griffiths I felt I could be developing, I seemed to be in there nearly every day and I thought 'This is time for me to push on, maybe he's started to take an eye to me', I was training really well. And then he got the sack and in my heart I felt a bit of disappointment because*

*I'd just started impressing and no offence to the current [manager], well I haven't been offensive at all, but the current Gaffa, I don't really think I've seen eye-to-eye with him throughout my scholarship. So a little bit disappointed that we weren't given a fresh start with a new manager”.*

It is apparent that Kevin would have preferred a new manager rather than someone effectively promoted from within. He is aware that not seeing eye-to-eye with the new manager may lead to a lack of trust before he's had a real chance to impress which in turn creates a level of *uncertainty* in Kevin. It is unsurprising that Kevin feels somewhat disappointed here, it is also likely that at such a key stage in his career such a change in dynamic would great some anxiety within himself due to the renewed *uncertainty* this situation presents.

### **Unsuccessful loan spell (February, 2013)**

Kevin has recently returned from a loan spell at Bessacarr Rangers in the Evo Stick league, 5 leagues below Sprotbrough United. Although, traditionally this has proved to be a successful strategy by clubs to help players gain experience, it proved to be a negative experience.

*“ I haven't really been playing which has been disappointing, it's the whole point of me going out on loan was to play, but unfortunately due to the manager's situation he's decided not to put me in there so it's been a bit of a pointless experience if I'm honest.”*

It could be suggested that a player from a large professional football going on loan to a lower league club would be expected to play. To add to this Kevin's experience around the players at his new club was also a negative one with feelings of isolation and jealousy from other players:

*“A couple didn’t talk to you, but a loan is different because obviously I’m here full time, I’m here with lads every day and I’m only there for part of the time. And you coming from a bigger club down to that level, they are thinking, ‘Shit I’ve got to step my game up here otherwise he’s just going to kick me out of this spot’, so there has been a couple of players in my position who were a bit [ignorant], that I never really talked to in the whole time I’ve been there.”*

Once again moving to a new club, not playing and not speaking to players during training would be a lonely experience which could potentially lead to an increased sense of *uncertainly* and sense of belonging in Kevin.

### **Returning from loan, pressure and uncertainty (February, 2013)**

*I go to see Kevin around March time and he seems tense; on reflecting on the season so far Kevin is seemingly despondent and a little distant. I think the uncertainty brought by changing position, the new manager coming and the unsuccessful loan spell is getting to him...*

Kevin’s reflections were as follows:

*I can’t say I’ve had any highs this season, to be honest. It’s been a bit of a disappointing season. All I have got to hope is that they offer me another contract... We’ve not been told, well rumour is that we’re not going to be told until end of the season when they know what league they are going to be in, whether it’s championship or league one. So it could be a bit of a wait. I’d be gutted to be honest because you’d like to know as soon as possible, if they tell you now you know where you stand, you can go find another club. But you just have got to get on with it haven’t you, there’s nothing that my agent can do to persuade them [the coaches] otherwise; it’s a waiting game.*

The reference to ‘having to get on with it’, as a feature of *attitude*, appears to stem from his upbringing of hard work and dedication that he has gained from his parents. This may well see him through this difficult moment and keep his drive up which in turn could positively influence his actions. The *uncertainly* that the current poses to

Kevin has the possibility to severely challenge his identity, values and beliefs. Being partly out of control of his own destiny is likely to be another source of anxiety he has to face up to (May, 1975). Through his work with elite professionals, Nesti (2013) suggested that sport psychologists dealing with uncertainty and a perceived loss of control ensure that they support players in thinking about their identity, who they are and what is important to them. This will help players build themselves back up, make rationalised choices and take back some control. This may be in renewing ones outlook on a given situation, more application or trying new strategies to force ones way into the manager's plans. However, it appears that Kevin has resorted to himself and his belief that hard work gets you to where you need to be.

**Getting told.** (March, 2013)

*I make another visit to the training ground to see Kevin. As I enter the staff offices you can tell there is level of tension around the place. The first team are perilously close the relegation zone which affects the whole environment, even at academy level. It is also decision time for youth and EDS players alike. I walk into Brett's office and he's sat next to Kevin looking intensely at a lap top. 'Hi guys' I say, they both look up and acknowledge me but are straight back down to the lap top. They are working on a DVD of footage for Kevin to send to clubs and agents. He's been released from the club. He's in a positive frame of mind looking at his body language. During the talk it transpires that he was told whilst he was injured! How ruthless can you get? It seems that there is little empathy nor understanding of the impact such a decision can have on a player, it seems very much business like with now time for sentiment, not even with a player that has been with the club his entire 'career'.*

Despite revealing the bad news Kevin remains somewhat philosophical about his situation which is a reflection on who he is, his identity as a mentally tough, hard working professional; *"There's two ways you go about it, either you come into the*

*club, you work hard, you get back fit and you move on, or there's where you sulk about, or not, get your injury sorted and carry on."* He is also positive about the future;

*"I think that a lot of people might have just thought 'I'm not going to recover from injury and I'm not going to get another club' and then pack it in and go down a different route. But I want to stick to it, I'm positive in what I do."*

Again, Kevin's belief that hard work can lead to success is present and this informs his attitude to keep going. Kevin clearly wants to carry on, he believes he has a chance and believes in himself which gives him the positive to persist. By facing challenges, Wong (1998, 2000) argued that we become fully self aware and life can take a new, profound and positive meaning.

N.B. at the time of writing, Kevin is at Scawsby Town in the The Evo-Stik League Northern Premier League for the 2013-14 season. This is the club he had previously had an unsuccessful loan spell.

#### **4.3.4 Robbi's Story: Spirituality and freedom**

*Robbi is a long standing first team player. He is a central defender, club captain, has been at the club for 9 years and is a general fans' favourite. This meeting was a little tricky to set up as Robbi is the club captain and is in high demand. Whenever I've requested to see a first team player Brett has always mentioned Robbi as a good candidate. I wasn't really sure why. When I first met Robbi I was waiting in the sport science office, he came in shortly after training and shook everyone's hand in the office. It was like a hero had walked into the office. Everyone was immediately all smiles when he came in. Robbi raised the tone of the office with his aura.*

Robbie cites his passion for football came a young age:

*“...from three [years old] actually, kicking a ball around the garden, in the house. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. It’s been my main goal really from growing up from four, five. Obviously you don’t think of being a footballer at four, five, you just see people on telly don’t you. And you try and copy them. And, yes, it’s just been a part of my life from four I would say, five. Everyday I’ve always had a ball”.*

### **Nearly losing it before it started**

Robbi initially signed for Deneby Boys (Championship) from the age of 8. He had short spells on trial at Cantley (Premier League) and Rossington (Championship) but really preferred to play in local district sides with peers. After a period with the England under 15s and whilst being under the gaze of Rossington United scouts, Robbi suffered a metatarsal injury. Subsequently Leeds never signed Robbi on as an apprentice and he went back to local football. Robbi’s first critical moment of his career was a foot injury and subsequent loss of fitness which led to losing the chance of an apprenticeship at Rossington United.

*“I was out of football for four months; put a bit of weight on. I was out with my mates and that messed me up with Rossington because when I come back I was so unfit. And they said I had lost my enthusiasm, which I did for a year. From doing it from four till then it probably took its toll on me. It didn’t feel like it at the time but looking back I was more interested in going out with my mates. And there was that eight month period where it could’ve cost me a lot of things.”*

Luckily High Green Town watched him playing and offered him a scholarship (then YTS). Then came another, somewhat prolonged, period of challenge,

*“My first week of pre-season at High Green was a culture shock, a massive culture shock. The first day we did a five, six mile run. I’d never done anything like that. I had to stop after two miles. I just couldn’t do it. So, that first year was a real culture shock getting fit.....but it was a good learning curve I must say.”*



Robbi made his debut at the age of 16, three months into his time at High Green despite it taking “two or three years” to get up to a standard he was happy with which allowed him to display his talents for 90 minutes on a Saturday.

From the age of 16 to 23 years old Robbi played 164 times for High Green. Robbi cites his mental toughness as one of his biggest assets and feels this has always been within him:

*“Everyone thought I was going to quit because it was so hard for us. I grinded through it and knuckled down and just realised that this is how it’s going to be. This is professional [football]; it’s an adult game now. I grew instantly really. But I always had a winning mentality, that’s one of my biggest assets. I was always a fighter as a kid because I was quite small and I had to fight on the pitch and obviously on a school playground as well.”*

According to Erikson’s (1968) 8 stages of psychosocial development, Robbi is in the 5<sup>th</sup> stage, Identity vs Role confusion. Here, according to Bee (1992), what should happen at the end of this stage is a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of one’s appropriate role. During this stage the body image of the person changes. Erikson claims that the person may feel uncomfortable for a while until they can adapt and “grow into” the changes, in this case, the role of being a professional footballer.

From here he signed for Sprotbrough United and has been at the club for the past 10 seasons. When reflecting on where this facet of his identity has come from Robbi made particular reference to his schooling: *“You’ve got to be top dog. You don’t want people... especially the school I went to, it was rough. Yes, you had to be mentally strong at our school. There was a lot of bullying and intimidation I would say.”*

He did cite the fact that he felt he felt he has something of an ‘anger management problem’ which he felt helped him in a football career.

*“I won’t say there’s anyone with anger problems in our household, I had it [problems with anger management] growing up. I think it was just purely from obviously people seeing the ability I had even at a young age. We live in a country where nobody likes successful people. Even from a young age there’s a lot of jealousy. So, I think that caused a lot of anger in me because I just wanted to prove people wrong. There was no way I was not going to be a footballer. And the more people discouraged me to do it I rebelled against that as if to say, well, I’ll prove you wrong”.*

Robbi felt that this area of his identity was something he was born with rather than something he had developed over time. This adds further debate to the organisational practices football clubs impose on players in a bid to develop such revered facets of character and attitude. Such practices may include subjecting players to menial tasks, for example, mopping the changing rooms of the first team seen in the finding from study two and e.g. Parker, (2001).

## **Religion**

Robbi discovered Christianity around 5 years ago after picking up a bible in a hotel room on an away trip. He feels that it his relatively newfound faith has helped him with his anger and played a part in the later stages of his career.

*“I became a Christian and it’s opened my eyes to a lot of things. And it has been my life really for the last five years. It’s helped me because I used to get down after matches if we lost. But I have faith now, nothing really affects us anymore in terms of inside this building [the cultural climate] or as a footballer.”*

Apart from his wife and children, Robbi feels that his religion is the biggest part of his life and undertakes community work on a regular basis. I sense something was

missing from Robbi's life prior to discovering religion. When referring to the impact on his playing career Robbi spoke of the freedom he feels he now has:

*“When I first became a Christian everyone that was here then saw a massive difference in me, because I used to argue with everyone. And, as I say, I've stopped doing a lot of things that I used to do definitely. But it's helped me in my football, it's given me a lot of freedom I never had, massive freedom to go out and enjoy it.”*

Religion has given Robbi newfound meaning, he continually referred to freedom in his life. Freedom, from an existential perspective, Existential freedom is not the same thing as freedom in the political sense. Frankl (1959), in the story of his experience in the concentration camps, provides a powerful overview of this distinction. While all his political or social freedoms were taken away, he gives credit for his survival to his psychological freedom. This psychological freedom allowed him to find and embrace meaning in the midst of what appeared to be meaningless suffering.

It could be postulated that Robbi may have been leading a somewhat *unauthentic* life prior to him finding his faith living in a work according to the influences and dictates of others suppressing any feelings of normal anxiety. Heidegger's (1962) account of the responsibility we have for being-in-the-world promotes facing the uncomfortable feeling of anxiety by being *authentic*. Robbi's religion may have allowed him to do just that. Robbi has multiple meanings in his life and is clear that his religion brings new meaning which is reflected in his change in behaviour. His identity is not exclusively attached to the role of being a footballer which results in not conforming to many aspects club life.

*“I won't go drinking with the lads on nights out. I'll go out with my missus to the Christmas do but I don't drink and swear things like that now, which I think our*

*manager here has found quite strange because that's the culture of football and I used to be the biggest. So, yes, a lot of things have changed. I live my life to serve people now in the community. I know it's not everyone's belief, but that's my belief now".*

Robbi cited he is no longer embedded in the culture within professional football and is in effect free to make his own choices in his life. He feels more in control of his destiny.

### **Critical moments during the 12-13 season**

#### **New manager (December, 2012)**

During this second meeting, Robbi is a little subdued at first and it transpired that a recent change in manager has led to him not being selected for recent matches:

*"So his first day in charge he made me train with the kids while everyone else [trained with the first team], and then made out it was for some reason, but I knew why it was, again he was alright the day after, he got told off by the owner [whom Robbi has a long standing, excellent relationship with] and, but what can you do, you can't, I just trained that day and went home".*

The paranoia associated with professional football (Roderick, 2006) and insecurities in football management seemed to be the reason why the new manager had taken a disliking to Robbi:

*"I've had a few accusations this year of trying to take their jobs and stuff, so that's one of the main reasons I've not played....I've been here nine years now, a testimonial and obviously the old manager, when he was getting sent [sacked], everyone wanted me to take over. I mean I'd never, I'm not interested in management one bit but obviously it caused potential damage, so I know that's one of the reasons I haven't played. The new manager has come in, I've only started two games under him, both cup games, got man of the match in both."*

Despite this Robbi is somewhat empathetic with the new manager's decision which is probably from his years as a professional;

*"I know where they are coming from, they are sat in the chair and the pressure is on, and if they are not doing well and the fans are ringing the club saying they want me in charge and that, he hears that, fans will sing, we beat Toll Bar, last game, 3-1, I think it was and all the fans were singing my name and stuff"*

Despite this Robbi is very clear that he does not trust the manager to act in his best interests, his links in the local community and the press has presented him with information to support his feelings:

*"I've got good relationships with the press around me, they've told me certain things, so I don't trust him but I don't hold it against him because I know what the industry is like, he'll be paranoid of me and that's just human nature, but I see it from his point of view why he's like that. Instead of me getting 'Whoah', I see it from his point of view and I just get on with it, just get on with it, I don't hold no grudges."*

Robbi has coped with this critical moment as he feels he has a higher worth through his religion which almost separates him from being a footballer; *"There's a bigger picture in my life, so I think I might have struggled without that, I'd have lost it. I'd have lost it four or five years ago."* Robbi cited his religion as playing a part in keeping him stable and resilient to the pressures of a first team football environment.

*"Yeah my identity used to be football, football was my god as they say, it isn't no more, I can take it or leave it. Like where probably 95% of footballers and managers, it's life and death football for them, so when they lose it they are straight down, when they win a massive high and then when they're sacked it's pressure, pressure of management and players and I've been there, so I know what it was like, but as I say I don't deal with that side anymore."*

The meaning that religion gives Robbi has allowed him to be more objective in his thinking. Nesti (2011) cited freedom as being closely linked to identity, anxiety and

authenticity. Nesti (2011) uses the concept of freedom and responsibility especially at times when players are experience critical moments such as this. Through his wider meaning (religion) and clear sense of self and purpose Robbi is in a good position to face this normal anxiety, in this context, has required courage (Corlett, 1996). This courage takes the forms of *not* ‘losing it’ when it is very east to do so! It may have been easier to become angry or depressed in this situation; but Robbi appears to possess a more multifaceted identity which gives him perspective, resilience, calmness and wider outlook in this context. Robbi’s religious outlook has given him newfound meaning which in turn has developed his identity further as he travels through his life. Similar notions of this have been seen in accounts by sport psychologist working in elite sport e.g. Baseball (Rotella, 1990) and Football (Nesti, 2010) who both suggest that top performers do have a multifaceted sense of self which is needed to operate at the highest level.

### **Returning to the side (April, 2013)**

Due to injuries at the football club Robbi has found himself back in the side playing seven consecutive games. *“I’ve just gone in with freedom in my head, took out all the negative thoughts; turned them into positives. Because there was a time, I suppose for a week you start questioning yourself, is it worth it?”* Once again Robbi cited his inner strength as being key to him returning to the side *“Well it’s a human strength, perseverance, and that’s all it is, and determination, so you just keep persevering as a player, especially the older you get.”* Despite returning to the side Robbi is fully aware that once ‘preferred’ players are fit he is likely to be out the side. It is feasible to suggest such *uncertainty* would cause some form of normal anxiety

and self doubt. Once again Robbi has talked of his freedom of choice as helping him though this:

*“I know whether I play well or not I’m not going to play for four, five, six weeks possibly, so I go in there with absolute freedom and just to go and run around and treat it as my last game really for the club and that’s how I’ve approached them. And as I’ve said I’ve played well in both of them”*

N.B. At the time of writing Robbi has made one appearance in the 13-14 season.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

The accounts of the four players attempting to negotiate their way through a competitive season highlights the complexity and uniqueness of their work life experiences at different periods of their careers. Commonalties emerged amongst the players lived experiences, in that their working lives were characterised by notions of *uncertainty* and *hope*. It also highlights the many personal challenges that the organisational culture within the football club present (e.g., continued uncertainty, pressure to perform and ruthlessness of decision making). We can now see that the youth and professional football environment alike are riddled with notions of *uncertainty* that individuals must face in order to stand any chance of progression and success, or indeed cope with the many downsides and disappointments within a footballing career. Through the narrative accounts of each player, they have shown that they are able to deal with each challenge they are faced with and it seems that this ability is key to enhancing career progression.

Players who are more able to face such (existential) anxiety related to uncertainty may be able to make a more informed decision relating to a range of situations that they will experience in the environment (e.g., loan spells or moving to the development squad). Nesti (2004) further suggests that anxiety in sport is *inevitable, uncomfortable* and even a *painful* feeling that "...accompanies something that we simultaneously fear and yet desire" (p. 59). For example, Ryan's account of training with the first team is consistent with previous descriptions of a first team environment (See Pain & Harwood, 2009; Parker, 2001 and Roderick, 2006). The opportunity to train with the first team could be perceived as a daunting experience that brings some form of anxiety, whilst also presenting an opportunity to showcase one's talent. Through having a clear sense of self, Ryan displayed the courage to remain calm and composed in order to demonstrate his skills in such close proximity to the gatekeepers of his professional career. Demonstrating ability, when it counts, was seen as a desirable facet in players by the coaches interviewed for Study Two. It would be easier for Ryan to crumble under the pressure of the situation rather than face it. Corlett (1996) suggests courage can only be present through experience, in this case being a footballer, and through a commitment to understanding oneself and one's general principles. Again this is linked to the theoretical framework of identity (Erikson, 1968), courage (Corlett, 1996) and spirit (Nesti, 2007). It is felt that more work needs to be undertaken exploring the development of identity in the aspiring professionals, as well as the environment which influences the development of such identities. From the responses in the present study, all the players cited their upbringing and early life experiences as being influential in their current attitudes to their work. If player identity and its development is better understood, it may be possible to tailor sport psychology support to younger players and also ensure active



involvement from parents in the process to aid the psychosocial development of young players into rounded, flexible people.

The narratives suggest that having a clear sense of identity provided a solid base for players in their quest for a career in professional football. All the players suggested that they were able to return to this during times of difficulty. For example, they return to their values of hard work and discipline, which was especially seen in Kevin. According to Nesti (2007), it is ones values and beliefs that define ones identity, rather than personality type or psychological skills. By fully knowing who you are, it is in these situations that players can become themselves once again and regain some power to make more informed choices and decisions regarding the critical moments that they will inevitably experience during their careers. Knowing who you are, often referred to as ones identity, is strongly advocated by Nesti (2013) and Nesti and Littlewood (2011). During their applied work in English professional football they suggested that encouraging players to explore who they are, their values, beliefs and aspirations allows the individual to have some control over their decisions when dealing with the inevitable discomforts surrounding engagement in professional football. In the professional football world, the quick moving, controlling and ruthless environment may not promote such opportunities (to ensure players fully know who they are) and it is often more comfortable to go with the flow and discard their identity. Such a loss of identity is unproductive, dangerous and ineffective, and players may lose sense of who they are, their values and beliefs undermining their capacity to face up and make decisions about their future which in turn may lead to self disgust and feelings of powerlessness (Nesti, 2013). A practical example of this would be a player essentially becoming a slave to the system, a docile body. Indeed,

May argued that it is only by returning to the self in these situations that individuals (players) can become themselves once again, and regain some power. The renewal of self identity can be a difficult task and requires persistence, patience and courage (May, 1975).

This would further suggest that sport psychologists working in professional and youth team environments should work on allowing players to understand their values and beliefs, and ultimately their identity. The role of a sport psychologist in this case could be to help them increase their self knowledge (Corlett, 1996), value and belief systems to enable the individual to find who they are, face their challenges and grow. The development of identity can be a difficult task and requires persistence, patience and courage (May, 1975), which given the extreme traditions and occupational practices within professional football, may be a very difficult task due to the authoritarian and somewhat stifling nature of the working environment.

The willingness to place oneself in potentially uncomfortable situations and being courageous enough to take control of one's destiny resonates with Nesti, (2004, 2007, a,b,c) and Corlett, (1996) and has been seen in stories of Ryan, Jason, Kevin and Robbi. When compared to the findings from Study Two, the interviewees also cited that players with the best chance of progression must have their own agenda and be selfish in their pursuit of a professional contract. Using an existential perspective, Nesti noted suffering, sacrifice and anxiety were normal in elite sport and part of the fabric of professional football in the sense that 'moments of discomfort, anguish and angst are part of the human condition which should be accepted and welcomed'

(Nesti, 2007, p.164). Within the present study these manifest themselves as uncertainty, again a theme seen in all four case studies. Such notions are in stark contrast with the current sport psychology research and paradigms that typically suggest such discomfort or anxiety is a negative feeling that needs removing. Furthermore it is suggested that researchers should embrace and explore the work from the parent discipline of psychology, the work of Erikson, Kierkegaard, May and others that allow us a deeper, richer and more theoretically sound understanding of identity, personal meanings and growth.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This study explored the role of identity in a range of critical moments that a number of football players, at different stages of their career experienced within their daily existence within professional football that subsequently shaped their identities. All four case studies revealed that players experiences of life within a professional football club was surrounded by notions of *occupational uncertainty* and a need to display a heavily prescribed form of *character* and *attitude*. This resonates with the findings from Study Two where coaches often cited the need for a certain type of person in terms of, as they described, character and attitude. Players also exhibited a sense of *hope* towards their situation, which was often based on very little solid grounding from the club in terms of e.g. security and performance feedback. It appears that the lived experiences of (some) players in this occupation have remained consistent for over 40 years. The distinct occupational features that Study Two, and previous research from the likes of Hunter, Parker, Nesti and Roderick, resonate very sharply with the findings in the present study and the wider context of the PhD thesis.

This would appear to suggest those new players entering the system might be subject to *archaic* norms and sub-cultures that they have to understand and manage during their journey within the industry. Moreover, it emerged that players felt that they must have a clear sense of *identity* and display characteristics such as perseverance and courage in order to negotiate a career pathway in the industry, and/or within the cultural fabric that existed in this football club.

Accounts such as these allow us to gain a clear understanding of the range of critical moments faced by players in a professional football club. Nesti (2007) suggested that it is through real times of hardship such as the range of *critical moments* seen in the present study, that we see qualities such as these. The study also presents a need to explore topics such as *religion, values, beliefs, perseverance, resilience* and *morals* in the context of elite sport performance. These notions however have often been superficially mentioned, or overlooked in the current sport psychology literature, and form an area for further qualitative inquiry. The insights into players lived experiences suggests a need to gain a greater understanding of such experiences with a greater number of players, at different levels of play, at different clubs, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and over the long term career of a player in order to provide support staff with a greater level of understanding of the rigorous demands of professional football environments.

# **Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

This chapter aims to provide a detailed critical synthesis of the research studies within the thesis and outline their implications. In addition, the limitations of the research and future suggestions for empirical inquiry will also be presented.

## **5.1 Aims of the Thesis**

The aims of the thesis were to explore the concept of identity in a youth development context in professional football, whilst also attempting to examine the influence of the environment on player identity. Although there have been many studies on the psychological characteristics associated with excellence (see Hemery, 1986; Ungerleider and Golding, 1991; Ungerleider and Goulding, 1992; Vernacchia et al., 2000; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002), little is known about the concept of identity in the context of elite youth footballers. Furthermore, there is little research that has focussed on this concept with respect to players that are experiencing a within-career transition from Academy to professional status, nor the working practices associated with maximising the number of players making such a transition.

The purpose of study one was to use an exploratory approach to understanding Athletic Identity in a sample of youth team footballers and to assess any differences in Athletic Identity amongst the group. The concept of Athletic Identity (Brewer et al., 1993) provided the conceptual framework in which identity was examined. This guided the investigation into understanding how players may be shaped by long term exposure to a football environment. The study used a validated psychometric scale in the form of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), as well as capturing additional demographic data (i.e., level of play [Premier League, Championship,

League 1, 2], year of apprenticeship and living arrangements), in order to gain an understanding of how these factors may influence Athletic Identity

The purpose of the study two was to examine the perspectives of key stakeholders on the ideal player characteristics (identity) and the ideal occupational conditions to develop identity in youth team footballers. Practitioners, namely; Academy Managers, Coaches and Education & Welfare Officers, working in clubs across the four professional leagues were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The study was interested in the stakeholders' conceptualisation of player identity as a component of performance excellence and how they attempted to develop identity through their working practices.

Finally, study three shifted focus to the players themselves and aimed to better understand their perceptions of how the environmental conditions have (and continue to) shape and influence identity formation. Moreover, the study examined how equipped players felt to cope with and manage the range of critical moments they faced throughout an entire football season. This study used a case study approach at one professional football club that was in the Championship (second tier of the English professional football league pyramid) to gain a critical understanding of player identity from the perspective of the players. In addition to the conventional interview approach, the researcher also used a fieldwork diary to capture observations, information and researcher-player discussions over the period of engagement with the football club. Four players, each at a different stage of their career trajectory, were interviewed in an unstructured format 3 times over the 2012-2013 competitive playing

season. The distinct career stages were; year one apprentice, year two apprentice, development squad player and established professional (See Table.4.1). These stages were selected as they are perceived to be key transitional periods in a player's career that all carry release and exit as their next career transition.

## **5.2 Practical Implications**

There are several practical implications that have emerged from the data collected across the three studies. The following section will explore such implications; Firstly, we now have a greater knowledge of levels of Athletic Identity within a range of football clubs along with different demographic variables. Study one showed that living arrangements did not appear to have an affect on levels of Athletic Identity, which has clear implications to clubs when deciding on the suitability of living arrangements for their newly acquired players. The year of apprenticeship (year one or year two) resulted in a small statistically significant difference between players, with year two's reporting lower levels on the social identity subscale. This suggests a potential drop off in the way players perceive themselves as footballers as they progress from year one to year two. However, requires further exploration with larger sample sizes and possible tracking of career progression to see if this had any influence on being offered a professional contract or not. Furthermore, this has potential applied implications for support staff (i.e., HoEW, sport psychologists) to monitor levels of Athletic Identity over long periods of time i.e. throughout the time a player is with a respective club. In this sense, AIMS could be a useful monitoring tool for profiling and assessing the effectiveness of interventions surrounding Athletic identity, personal development and commitment to the pursuit of a career in



professional football. Despite players in the current sample not reporting overly high or low levels of Athletic Identity when compared to similar populations, the use of AIMS in football development programmes may allow practitioners, such as sport psychologists, to identify any players who are more at risk of suffering the negative effects of an overtly strong Athletic Identity. Specifically, these may be in times of stress when they may be unable to train (Coen & Ogles, 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000; and Sparkes, 1998, 2000), especially during more critical moments of a football career such as injury or de-selection. Such negative effects were seen in some of the players in study three. For example, Jason felt 'lost' when he was suddenly dropped from the elite development squad. Coaches in study two appeared to actively promote an overtly strong Athletic Identity through encouraging players to think of little else apart from football.

The findings from study two provided support for the above suggestion by aiming to understand player identity and the environmental conditions that players are exposed to within a variety of professional football clubs in England. As a result, we now have a deeper and contextually richer understanding that a strong, flexible sense of self is a highly desirable characteristic in young players. This agrees with the work of others, notably from Nesti and Littlewood (2010), who reflected on extensive interactions as sport psychologists with youth and professional footballers alike. Taking personal responsibility, being stable, humble and resilient all resonate with notions of identity achievement. In that sense Erikson, (1968) wrote of meaning and purpose, desire and unequivocal commitment as being facets of identity achievement.

A second practical implication is that the working environments and cultures (of the associated clubs in the study) within some youth development programmes may not create the necessary conditions (challenging yet supportive) for players to develop a clear sense of self from youth to professional squads. None of the data suggested that the football clubs employed meaningful strategies to support personal development/growth and it appears that the older players may have simply matured over time, possibly through parenthood or exploring other meaningful passions including religion, as evidenced in study three. The danger is that, not ‘growing up’ may ultimately lead to a stifling of identity. Moreover, it is possible that this may undermine a player’s capacity to face up and make decisions about their future. This in turn may lead to a sense of powerlessness, and ultimately decreases in motivation (Nesti, 2013). The practical implication of this would be to actively ensure players have a sense of ownership of their development, have a range of experience and develop trust with staff. Support staff such as sport psychologists may facilitate this through using reflection, clear goal setting and even liaise with coaches on specific sessions within their applied practice. In addition, it is suggested that the practitioners who create the daily working schedule also have a responsibility to ensure that the environment fosters these features. Many of the coaches and support staff in study two, were in fact former professional players, and they may well have been exposed to a similar authoritative coaching style when they were players. In turn, they may have developed an ethos from their experiences as players, which follows the traditional notions of discipline, authority, character and high standards of professionalism (see Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006). Within study two and three, such dominance manifested itself as; cleaning boots, cleaning facilities, pumping balls up, and being very strict on discipline and professionalism. Notions of power and

dominance were also seen in the narratives from players in study three. For example, players spoke of operating in an uncertain environment that was characterised by little feedback from staff that didn't keep players informed over decisions such as selection, non-selection and performances. As a result, practitioners should reflect upon the environment they create and question whether or not they have a balance between challenge and support. This resonates with the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) who argue that all of us wish to enjoy the feelings that accompany doing something really well and that we have freely chosen to do. Often practitioners create an overpowering and uncertain atmosphere, which may work to stifle self determination. This supports the need for a clear sense of self is an important characteristic for career progression (Nesti and Littlewood, 2010).

The third practical implication would be to provide further education and training on how organisational culture can play a key role in developing players and supporting them in their journey through a professional football club. In addition, opportunities to enhance the understanding of coaches on the psycho-social development of players, with special reference to identity, is also suggested. Practitioners who were interviewed were not aware that their practices, on the whole, did not support the development of a clear sense of identity, nor create a stable, challenging environment where players could thrive. More explicitly, the environment within the study was one that displayed notions of authority, dominance and power, which in turn presented daily anxieties and insecurities amongst players, in addition to critical moments faced such as injury and non selection in study three. This is supported in the professional football context (see Roderick, 2006), but is now seen in youth and elite development squad players in studies two and three. Similar findings

have also been reported by Morris, Tod and Oliver (2014) who suggested that clubs who operate in this manner may have limited success in supporting players in making the transition from youth to professional status. The study compared two premier league football academies against Stambulova's (2003) youth to senior transition model and found that the more closely aligned organisation had a better success rate in supporting players to professional status. A way forward from this is for clubs to work on creating a professional, research led, culture of performance. Nesti (2010) provides a comprehensive account of being a sport psychology practitioner in elite football where creating and developing the culture was central to his practice.

These practical implications reinforce previous suggestions in the thesis, in that in order for players to operate in such a volatile climate, they must develop a flexible and clear sense of self (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). This presents opportunities for support staff, such as sport psychologists, to employ strategies to not only develop, but support the maintenance of players' sense of self and meaning they ascribe to being a professional footballer. In a practical sense, this can be undertaken through one to one sport psychology sessions with players during non training times with the aim of developing a clear sense of self, direction and control. In doing so, it is likely that players might be more able to deal with the continual scrutiny and insecurities that exist in professional football.

### **5.3 Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical implications of the findings from this study are similar to that of the previous study. In that sense, it is argued that there needs to be further consideration of mainstream psychological theory, such as Erikson, to support our

understanding of players in the context of a professional football environment. Erikson's work on identity talks of the life cycle being a series of crises and resolutions that must be negotiated. Table 5.1 and subsequent figures provides a contextualised account of the various stages of 'being a footballer' within Erikson's life cycle. In light of the findings within this thesis, the titles of each stage along with the suggested ages that each stage falls in have been removed. Although the basic conflicts seen in professional football resonate with Erikson's work, they do not appear to 'fit' in with the chronology applied by Erikson. For example, Robbi, in study three did not experience trust that Erikson suggests should be apparent in under two's. In terms of application to professional football, it could be postulated that all the crises need to be resolved, but not necessarily in the order prescribed by Erikson. Despite this lack of chronological fit, Erikson's eight stages are of use to help understand and theorise some of the critical moments faced by footballers entering into professional environments.

**Table 5.1:** Eight stages of psychosocial development contextualised into professional football

<b>Basic Conflict</b>	<b>Important Events</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Football Life Cycle</b>
Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection.  A lack of this will lead to mistrust.	<i>This is not always apparent in football settings. For example Robbi did not trust the new manager's reasoning's for sending him to train with the youth team (See study 3)</i>
Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toilet Training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.  Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.	<i>Personal control power over ones destiny was not seen in study three. Both Kevin and Jason felt powerless and at the mercy of the coaches.</i>
Initiative vs. Guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose.  Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.	Children taken to football training / satellite centres (The FA, 2010)  <i>All players in study three cited playing some form football from an early age</i>
Industry vs.	School	Children need to cope with new	Players who are deemed good at football receive positive reinforcement from coaches, peers, parents, school friends

Inferiority		<p>social and academic demands.</p> <p>Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.</p>	<p>strengthening their bond with football (See e.g. Bloom, 1985).</p> <p><i>All players in study three cited that three received positive reinforcement from parents, teachers and coaches which reinforced their identification with the role of being a footballer.</i></p>
Identity vs. Role Confusion	Social Relationships	<p>Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity.</p> <p>Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.</p>	<p>Bond with football becomes stronger an almost exclusive part of the self</p> <p>Players need to form relationships with coaches, players and other staff which further strengthens the bond.</p> <p>(See e.g. Walleman, Lavallo &amp; Alferman, 1999; Cote, 2002)</p> <p><i>Coaches in study two spoke of creating a hard working and disciplined environment with punishments for non-conformity. Such conformity may lead to a stifling of the self</i></p> <p><i>Players in study three cited that they wholly conformed to norms and cultures within the football club and are therefore at risk of losing a sense of self during this process.</i></p>
Intimacy vs. Isolation	Relationships	<p>Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people.</p> <p>Success leads to strong</p>	<p>Lack of a wide social circle may impede the chances of developing intimate, loving relationships with others</p> <p>There are relationships with coaches that must be maintained</p>

		relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.	<i>The constant uncertainty as seen in study 3 can lead to loneliness and isolation, for example, Ryan experience of an unsuccessful loan</i>
Generativity vs. Stagnation	Work and Parenthood	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people.  Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.	Difficulties during retirement seen in many players such e.g. Paul Gascoigne (Alcohol), Kenny Sansom (Financial), David James (Bankruptcy),  <i>Players in study three spoke of a lack of planning for post career and not knowing what they would do without football</i>
Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on Life	Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment.  Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.	Continued evidence of players suffering negative effects of leaving professional football  <i>Robbi in study three, at the latter end of his career reflected on it as being purposeful and could see a future beyond his playing days through his community work</i>

Note: Mapping against the findings within the thesis can be seen in *italics*



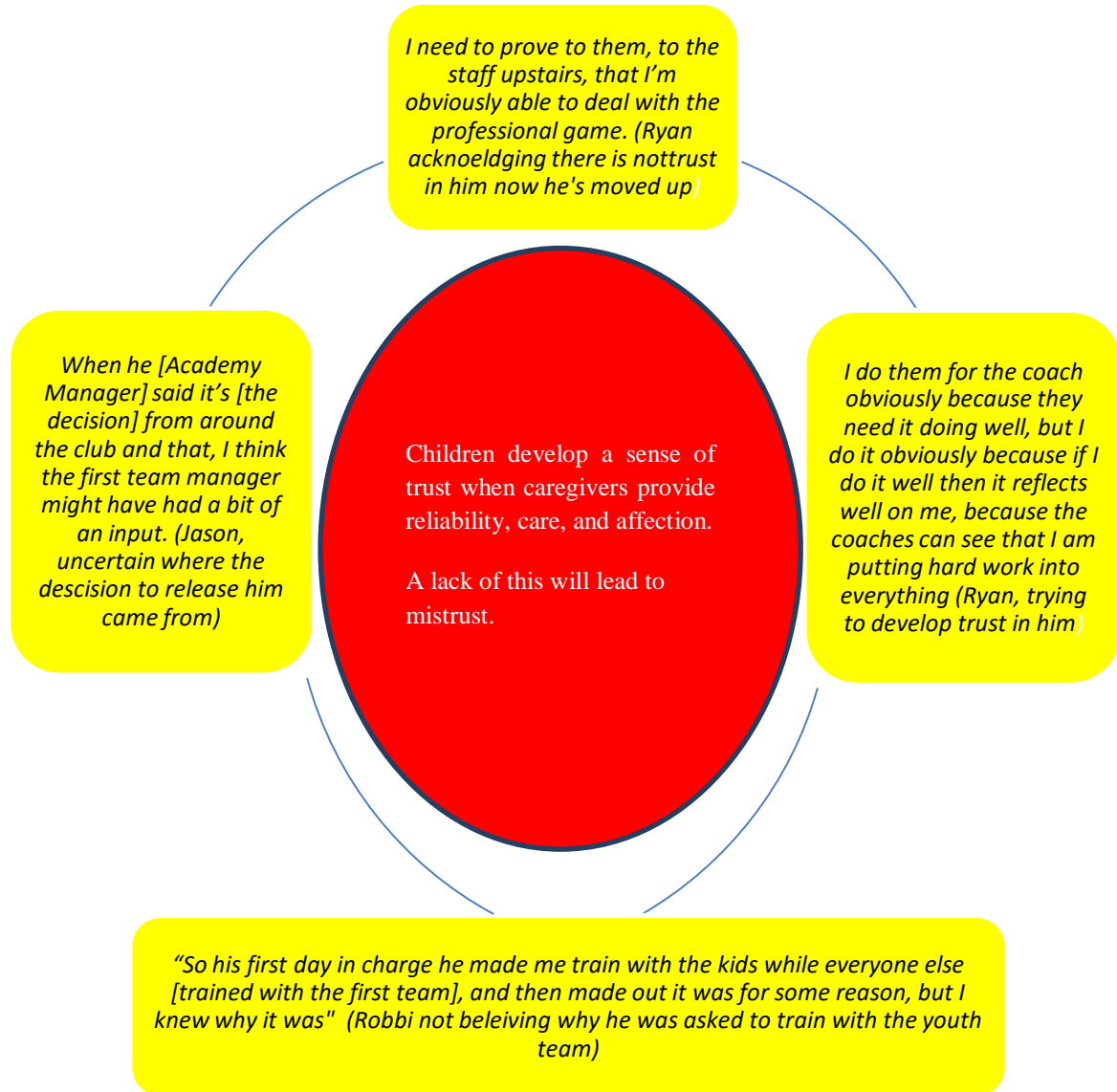
The figures below present a more detailed account of each stage stage of psycho-social deveopment with some direct quotes from studies two and three. It is hoped that these can provide a more visual account of the role of identity within the context of the current research. Boxes shaded in blue are direct quotes from study two and boxes shaded in yellow are direct quotes from study three.

## Stage of Psychosocial development: Infancy

*NOTE: notions relating to this stage have been seen in players upon release at 18 years old*

### Crisis: Trust vs Mistrust

#### Important events: Feeding



#### Summary:

Players don't feel they are trusted which may lead to insecurity

Players don't often believe the reason for decisions made which affect them such as through release or non-selection

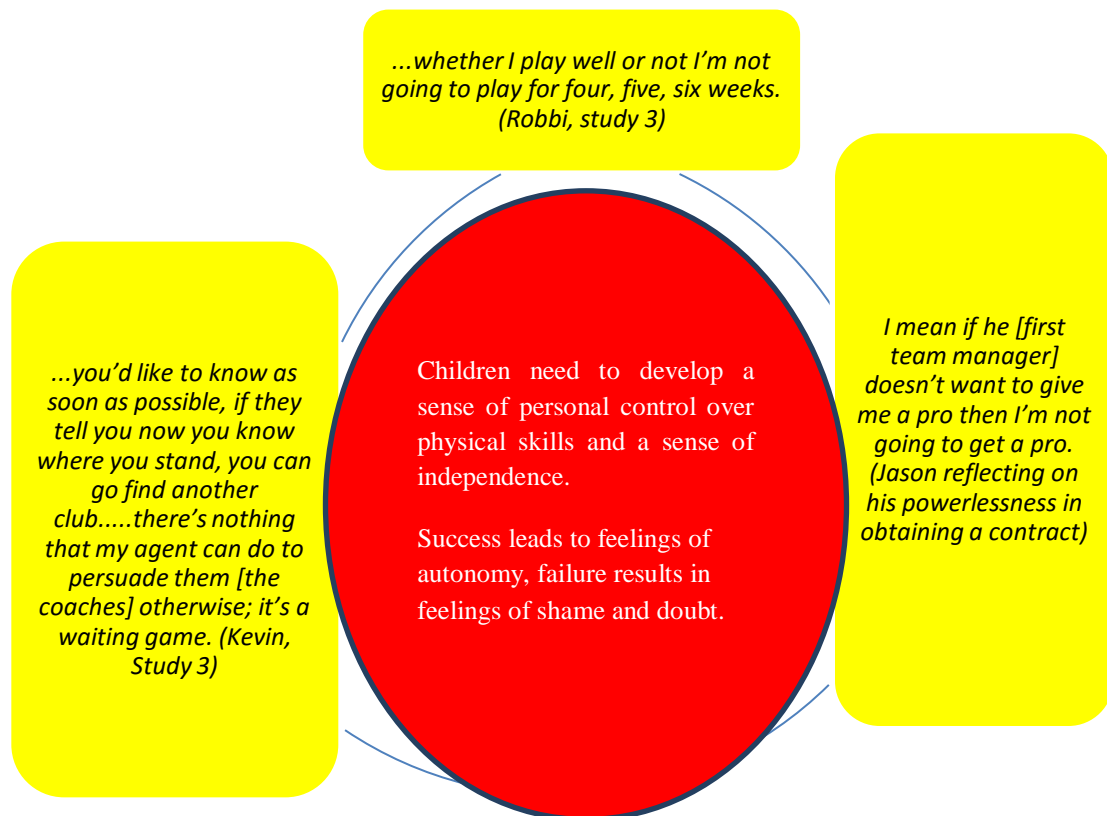
**Figure 5.1:** Trust vs Mistrust contextualised into professional football

## Stage of Psychosocial development: Early Childhood

*NOTE: notions relating to this stage have been seen in players upon release at 18 years old*

### Crisis: Autonomy vs Shame and doubt

#### Important events: Toilet Training



#### Summary:

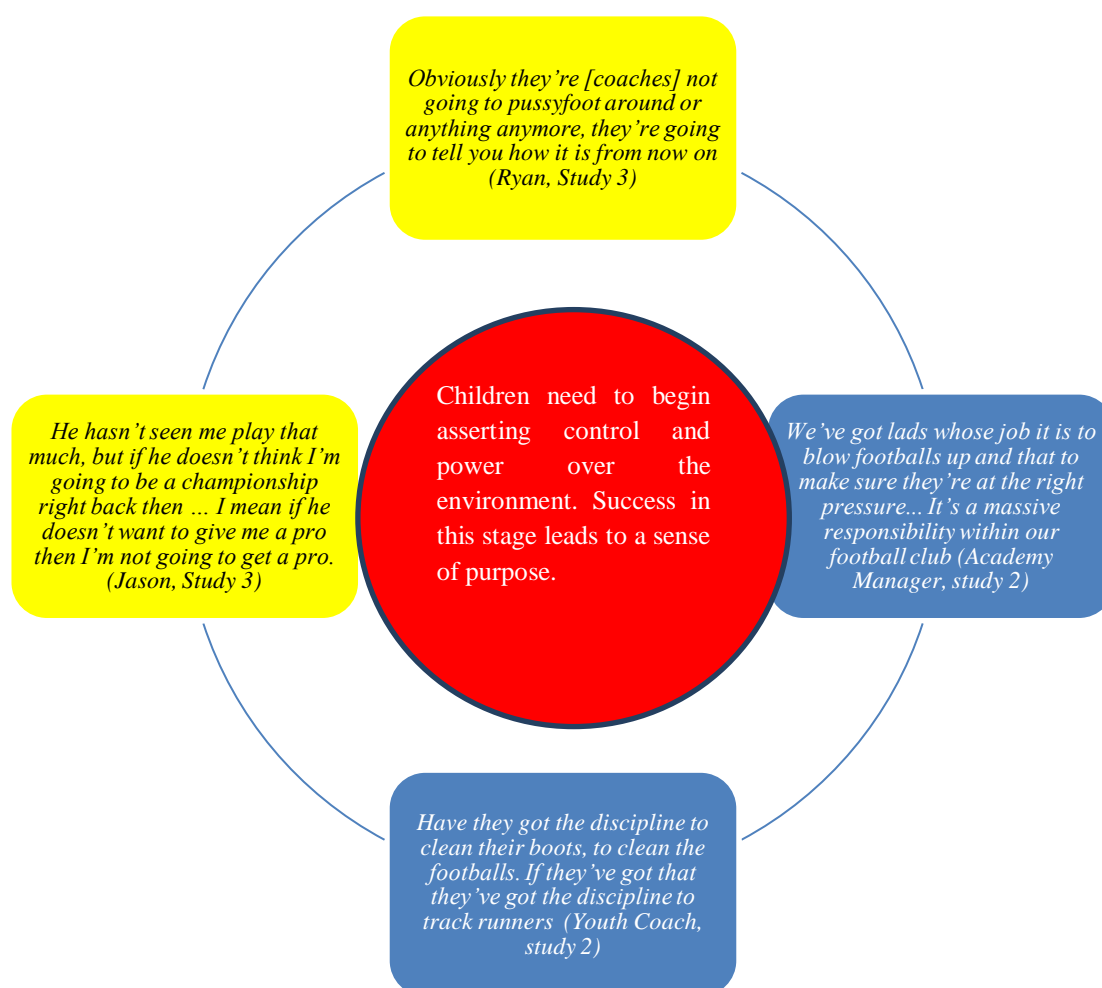
Players don't feel they have total control over their progress and do not easily gain a sense of independence.

**Figure 5.2** Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt contextualised into professional football

**Stage of Psychosocial development:**

**Crisis: Initiative vs Guilt**

**Important events: Exploration**



**Summary:**

Players in an academy setting are not given the chance to explore a wide range of experience and so may never find a resolution.

Coaches actively overpower players through directing their activities through assigning 'jobs' or having a direct, controlling influence.

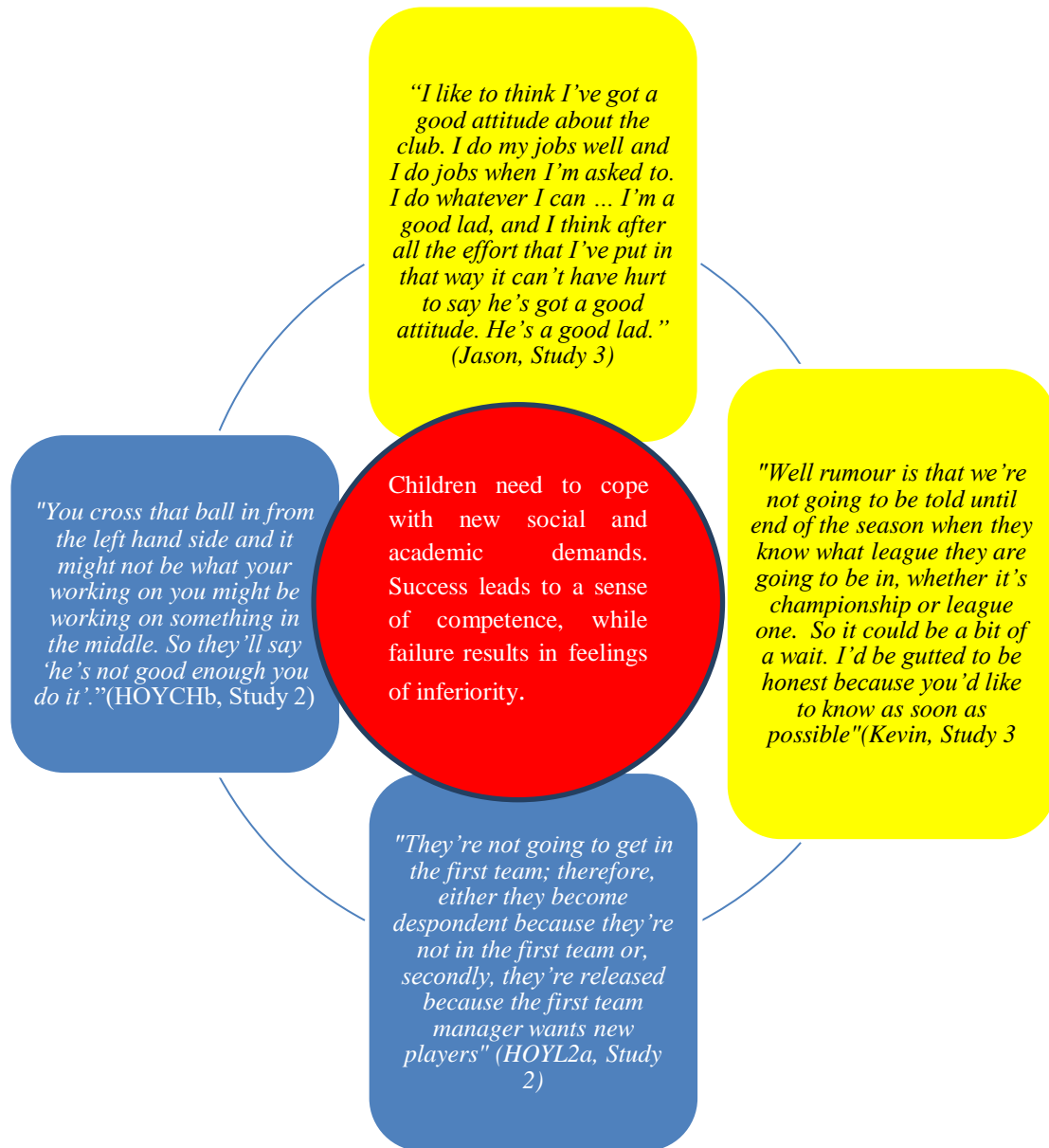
Players may never gain a sense of control and ultimately purpose.

**Figure 5.3:** Initiative vs Guilt contextualised into professional football

**Stage of Psychosocial development:**

**Crisis: Industry vs Inferiority**

**Important events: School / Football academy**



**Summary:**

Players operate in an uncertain climate within professional football.

Players continually seek to develop successful relationships with and approval from coaches as seen with Jason's comments about hoping to be seen as a 'good lad'.

Players can feel a sense of uncertainty in their working lives for example not knowing when or if they will be offered a professional playing contract.

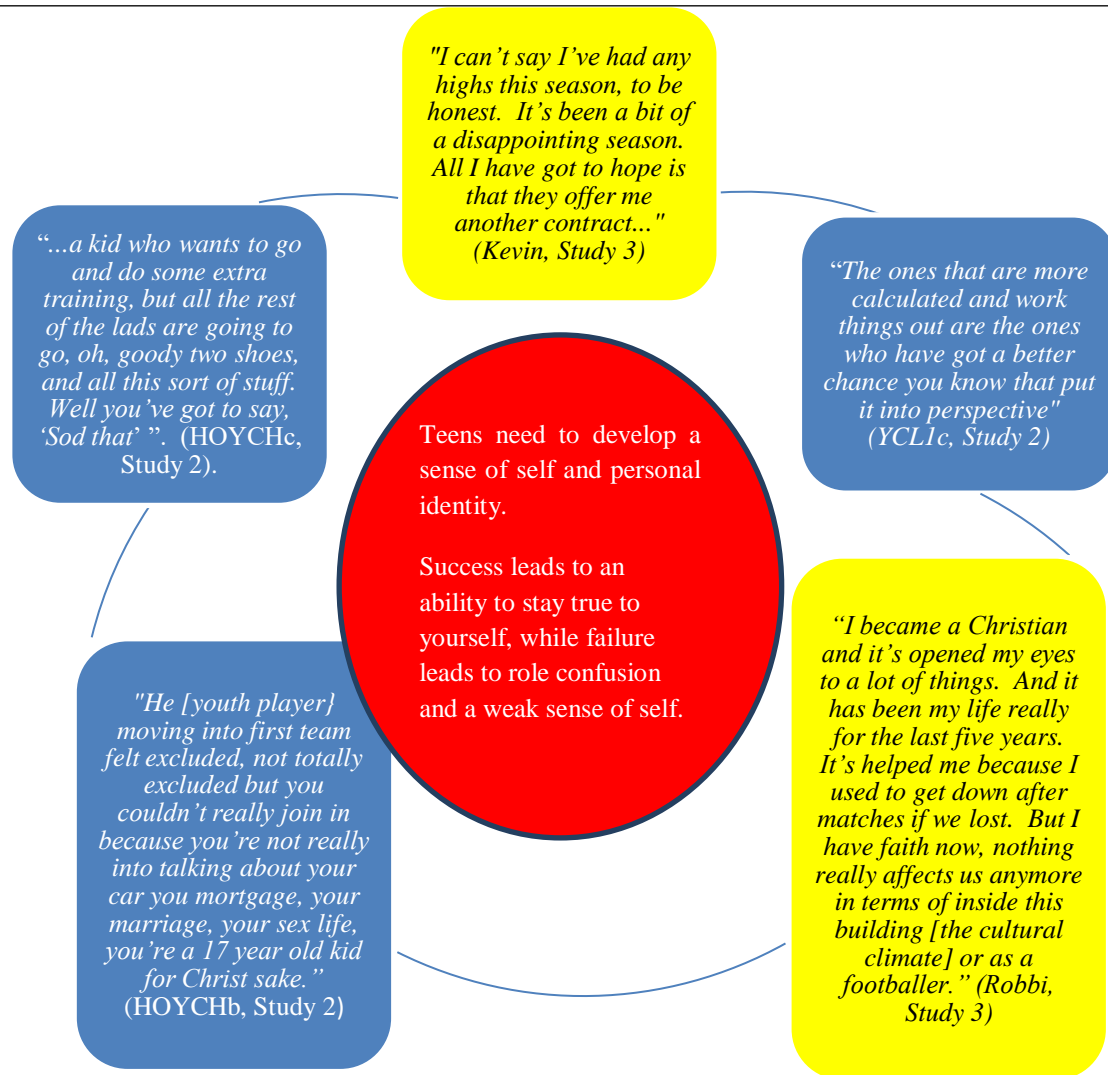
Some coaching practices may increase feelings of uncertainty and inferiority.

**Figure 5.4:** Industry vs Inferiority contextualised into professional football

**Stage of Psychosocial development:**

**Crisis: Identity vs Role Confusion**

**Important events: Social Relationships**



**Summary:**

Coaches are explicit that a clear sense of self will give players an advantage over others.

Examples of this are players wanting to undertake extra training and having a broad perspective of their development.

Some players do have a clear sense of self and can operate with relative freedom whereas others players may not which may hinder their progression through despondency or loss of drive.

The working environment may challenge a players sense of self e.g. isolation when moving into first team environments

**Figure 5.5:** Identity vs Role Confusion contextualised into professional football

## Stage of Psychosocial development:

### Crisis: Intimacy vs Isolation

#### Important events: Relationships



#### Summary:

Coaching staff often want players to think about nothing else other than football which could negatively affect the chances of players developing meaningful relationships outside the sport.

Players strive to create such workplace relationships through undertaking 'jobs' which may reflect on them in a positive light. Meaningful relationships e.g. with religion, may help to support a clear sense of self

Successful and meaningful relationships are hard to grow in the uncertain world of professional football, especially during the progression from youth to professional. E.g. a lack of relationship with the first team manager will seriously hinder chances of progression

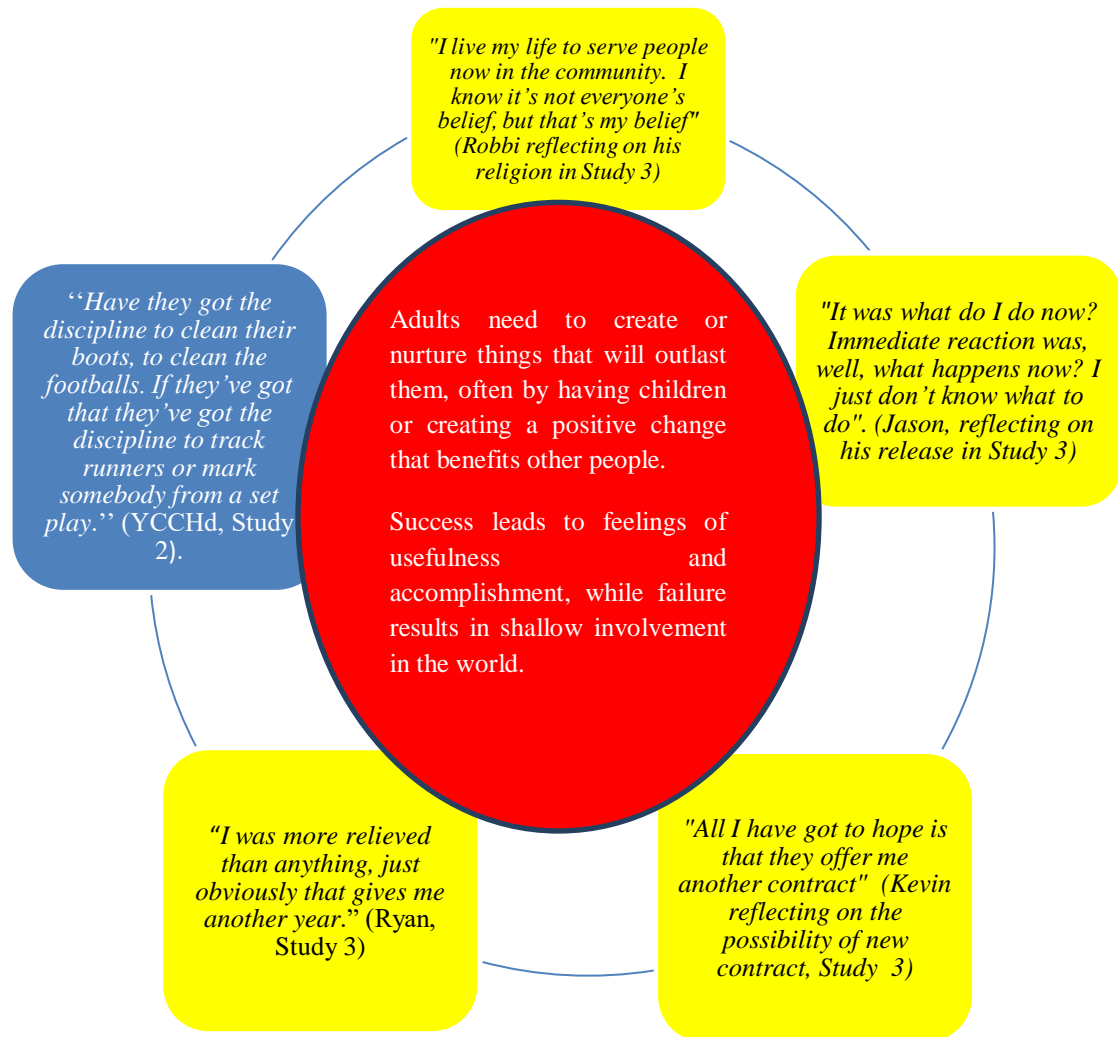
**Figure 5.6:** Intimacy vs Isolation contextualised into professional football

## Stage of Psychosocial development:

*NOTE: notions relating to this stage have been seen in players upon release at 18 years old*

### Crisis: Generatively vs Stagnation

#### Important events: Work and parenthood



#### Summary:

Coaches create an environment which is very much about 'now' which makes making future plans a challenge.

Players don't often have any plans for life beyond gain the next contract.

Release and a form of enforced retirement can occur at any point e.g. not being offered a professional contract at 18 years old.

**Figure 5.7:** Generatively vs Stagnation contextualised into professional football



**Stage of Psychosocial development:**

*NOTE: notions relating to this stage have been seen in players upon release at 18 years old*

**Crisis: Ego Integrity vs Despair**

**Important events: Reflection on life**



**Summary:**

Of the two players who experienced release, both were somewhat disappointed and displayed a sense of bitterness towards their now previous employers.

Kevin did react positively and was keen to rebuild and keep going.

**Figure 5.8:** Ego Integrity vs Despair contextualised into professional football

## **5.5 Suggestions for further Research**

The findings from the thesis present a range of opportunities for further research in this area. With regard to future studies using the concept of Athletic Identity and its related measurement tool AIMS, the current findings would suggest that there is a need to undertake more longitudinal research designs with much larger sample sizes and further validity checks, such as confirmatory factor analysis in this population. This would allow researchers to further understand the key points in players' careers where Athletic Identity may become overtly strong, or begin to reduce. Longitudinal designs may also allow us to differentiate successful and non-successful career progression in players. Such designs may also allow researchers to gain a critical understanding of levels of Athletic Identity that may be related to psychological distress, during critical moments in their careers. It would also be useful for researchers to track players post-release from an apprenticeship scheme to explore how players re-adjust to normal life, or monitor effectiveness of any post release support programmes a club may have in place. Cross-sectional studies could also provide more information to practitioners by exploring wider age ranges, for example U9's through to U18's in an attempt to see if there are any fluctuations in Athletic Identity at difference ages. As previously suggested, the use of AIMS does have some methodological limitations relating to lack of clarity over its dimensionality. It is strongly recommended that AIMS be used with caution and in conjunction with more qualitative methods of understanding, such as one to one consultations with a sport psychologist.

With regards to now having a deeper understanding of ideal player characteristics for talent progression to support the work of Holt and Dunn, (2004), Holt and Mitchell, (2006) and Mills et al. (2012), there are both research and applied

implications. Firstly, it would be useful for researchers to explore opportunities to use such findings as part of a recruitment strategy. In essence, the question is; do these desirable characteristics actually equate to players progressing into first team environments? Whether that is part of an interview process, or through the creation of a scale for young players entering academy systems, it may provide a useful avenue of research from a recruitment perspective. This may lead to a further refinement of a psychosocial blueprint of a successful player, and in turn, allow for more focussed and bespoke support for recruitment of players.

With a further understanding of the seemingly mis-matched processes in place to develop ideal player characteristics these findings add to a paucity of information available to research and applied practitioners alike. To date, only the work of Parker (1996) and Littlewood (2005) exists that provides a full and vivid account of the daily lives of players in the context of psychosocial development. More ethnographic and auto-ethnographic accounts of the working environment in youth and professional environments in the context of identity, would allow us to more fully understand the conditioning effect of long-term exposure to professional football environments (Gearing, 1999). Research using the concept of power and power relations would also allow a greater understanding of the role of power in shaping the construction of player identities within the environment. The work of Foucault and his sociological perspectives on power relations have been tentatively used in other sport related research (see Dennison, 2007; Purdy, 2008) to explore the coach-athlete dynamic. However, this has yet to be used in research with football as a focus. This work may provide the basis for furthering our understanding of the effect of power and dominance on player identity.

With regard to coaches, it would be pertinent to explore the developmental pathways that exist, and the respective education and training provision that is in place. Indeed, it would be useful to examine if these practitioners feel that they are indoctrinated into football culture and the norms and values that permeate this environment. There are few studies in existence that have explored the development pathways of elite level coaches (see Potrac, Jones and Armour, 2002). The ones that do exist actually relate more to coach behaviour, rather than *how* and *why* these behaviours are shaped. Subsequent studies and the respective findings could then be applied to coach education programmes to raise awareness that the knowledge gained from talent development research is as valuable as the experiential knowledge they have developed.

With regard to the case study approach in Study three, it is suggested that there needs to be more case studies examining player experiences at different levels of careers. This would further our understanding of how players experience the daily challenges of professional football. To date, only Nesti et al. (2012) and Nesti (2013) provide case studies of elite, professional players through experience of working at first team environments within Premier League football clubs. The present thesis has added to the amount of case studies available and extended this knowledge to include youth and elite development squad players. Although the study was longitudinal in nature, it would be useful to follow players for much longer periods of time to capture how their identity develops and provides a platform for their ability to cope with the critical moments, (e.g. coping with the uncertainty and scrutiny faced on a daily basis or career transitions) they will inevitably face, it would also add greater context to support the use of Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development in professional football settings. With regard to career transitions, this would include transitions from

schoolboy to apprentice, through to elite development and finally to professional status using the now modified model based on Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development (See Table 5.1). Conversely, at any point 'exit' could also occur and it would be useful to gain a critical insight into the long term effect of release has on players and their subsequent identity reconstruction as they re enter normal life.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The thesis examined the role of identity in elite youth professional football. More explicitly, this focussed on players in the context of the environmental conditions they face on a daily basis. Study one demonstrated that distinct situational variables had a significant impact upon aspects of Exclusivity, but very little effect on Athletic Identity as a whole. Specific 'football club's elicited significant and different levels of Social Identity in their players, which could stimulate further qualitative research into the environmental conditions created at different football clubs. Study two demonstrated the perceived importance of a strong, flexible sense of identity to enhance chances of career progression. Of the 16 player characteristics that were identified by practitioners (e.g. coaches or academy managers), 13 resonated with notions of identity. The findings from study also suggest that the environmental conditions created by such practitioners do not promote the sense of identity that was described as being important to career progression. Instead, traditional cultural notions of power, dominance and authority were most prevalent in the professional football environment, which promote a stifling of the self, and high levels of conformity, over creativity and growth. The study also showed that players may not progress through Erikson's eight stages of psycho-social development as

chronologically as the model suggests. Despite this, if players do not resolve each stage, they may be more at risk of psychological distress through times of challenge and uncertainty (i.e., injury and/or de-selection). Study three further reinforced the need for a strong flexible sense of identity where players cited their own values, standards and belief in themselves as being central to dealing with the range of critical moments that occurs over a full competitive playing season. No player felt cited such values as being created or reinforced by the football club.

The findings in this thesis are unique and novel and suggest that a player's sense of identity is central to their capacity to deal the range of cultural and organisation challenges that present themselves in professional football. It also suggests that professional football itself can stifle a clear sense of self, due to long-standing cultural markers, such as power and dominance. This presents opportunities for support staff to challenge the environment and also offer support to players in helping them develop a strong sense of identity.

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# Appendices

**Appendix A**

**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**CONSENT FORM**



*An Exploration of player identity in youth level English professional football*

*Tom Mitchell, Faculty of Science, School of Sport and Exercise Science*

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential
4. I agree to take part in the above study
5. I agree to the use of audio / video recording to be used during any interviews or observations

6. I agree confirm my consent for my spoken words to be used  
for publication in the form of anonymised direct quotes

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

*(if different from researcher)*

## **Appendix B: Interview Schedule – Study 2**

The purpose of this interview guide is to gain a critical understanding of coaches perceptions of the effect on working environment, club culture and their own past experience affect Identity in elite youth team footballers. Secondly the guide contextualisation of findings from study one: Why is there a difference in AIMS from Y1 to Y2? Why is there a difference in AIMS between those living at home and those living away?

### **Phase One – Introduction, Familiarisation & Life History**

The aim of this phase is to gain a critical understanding of how staff past experience and career that has influence their identity and their working practice as a coach

- What is your current role? (time in this role)
- How you arrived at this club? – playing career, previous clubs etc
- Have there been any individuals or instances that you feel have shaped you as a coach? Are there any standout people you have taken influence from?

### **Phase Two - Organisational Culture** (Williams, Riley and Franks, 1999, Parker 1991, Potrac 2002)

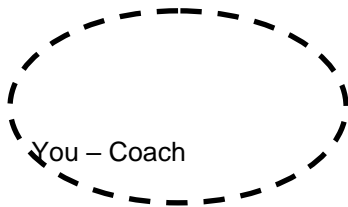
- What are the aims of the youth system at the club?
- How would you describe your coaching style / philosophy and how has this developed during your coaching career?
- How does the environment within the club facilitate this style/approach?
- How do you treat / interact with players?
- How does the structure influence / maximise player progression and who are the main stakeholders involved in this process?
- Can you describe the 'culture' of your club?
- Are there differences in culture between the Academy and professional env? (Describe, etc...)
- How does the culture at your club compare to other clubs that you have worked at?
- How is the culture created? Why is it like this? Why does it need to be like this?
- How does this influence player development? In what way? Why?
- :

### **Phase Three – Identity and Social Support** (Erikson 1967, Brewer, 200, Bloom 1985, Cote 1999, Holt and Mitchell 2006)

- Can you describe the players that you have within your squad – who are they? What are they about? What are they made of? What types of *individuals* are they? What underpins what and how they are these people?
- Does their identity / make up change over time – **YEAR ONE TO YEAR TWO**
- Do you shape players into 'who' they are?
- What difficulties do players face when progressing from youth to pro, especially in term of challenges to who they now feel they are/should be (identity)?
- Differences between successful and unsuccessful players and identity?
- Do you think that player's conform to behaviours, values, attitudes that exist within the club/environment? Where does this come from? What do you do about this?
- Does living at **HOME VS LIVING AWAY FROM HOME** influence the development of players?
- What are your views on the role of the **PARENTS** in supporting player Identity formation development
- What support systems are there for players to aid their development as palyers and people? Is the people part important? Does this help create better players?

### Closure

- Summary
- Thanks



Club – The Environment

Them - Players

### Appendix C: Interview Schedule – Study three

Identity development across the football career and the influence of organisational culture – player perspectives

#### Interview one (Introduction + identity)

(Erikson, 1968, Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, Bloom, 1985)

- Career progress so far, previous clubs, age, position etc. (DIAGNOSTIC)
- *Who* the person is, what type of person they are – values, beliefs for success – *how have these been shaped??*



- Family background, childhood -*linked back to identity formation*
- Early engagement with football – other sports? Why football? – *linked back to identity formation.*
- To what extent has engagement in football development shaped you as a person?
- How have others treated you when you have been labelled a footballer –e.g. coaches, teachers, friends - *linked back to identity formation.*
- Are you 100 % footballer? 50/50 footballer parent? (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 + dispel AI lit)

TO WHAT EXTEND HAS ENGAGEMENT IN FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT SHAPED YOU AS A PERSON?

HOW DOES ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND WORKING PRACTICES HELP OR HINDER PLAYERS

**Interview two** (Transition, culture and Identity)

(Erikson, 1968, Potrac, 2009, Slack, 2006, Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006; Nesti and Littlewood, 2009)

- Describe getting a youth contract – challenges, what made them successful where others failed, what did the coaches look for, support mechanism, conformity
- Not getting a youth contract -
- Describe getting a pro contract and the transition into the professional game – challenges, what made them successful, support, conformity
- Not getting a pro -
- Staying pro – challenges, what made them stay in the game, support, conformity
- Retirement or other exit

TO WHAT EXTEND HAS ENGAGEMENT IN FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT SHAPED YOU AS A PERSON?

HOW DOES ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND WORKING PRACTICES HELP OR HINDER PLAYERS

### **Interview three** (Challenges and support)

(Parker, 2001; McGillivray and McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006, Brown and Potrac, 2009; Nesti, 2010)

- What challenges do you face as a player on a daily, weekly or longer-term basis?

#### EXAMPLES TO HELP CREATE DIALOGUE

Injury, Self-presentation, meeting norms, Conformity, Meeting expectation, Constant scrutiny, Post career planning, Isolation, authenticity

- How did / do *you* overcome or deal with them? What is it about *you* that allows / allowed you to deal with them? Why can't others deal with them?
- How do football clubs help to deal with such challenges?
- What support do you receive as a player to help you deal with such challenges?

TO WHAT EXTEND HAS ENGAGEMENT IN FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT SHAPED YOU AS A PERSON??

HOW DOES ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND WORKING PRACTICES HELP OR HINDER PLAYERS