

From Youth Team to First Team: An Investigation into the Transition Experiences of Young  
Professional Athletes in Soccer

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* on 4 Mar 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1612197x.2016.1152992>.

### **Abstract**

Using Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) and Stambulova (2003) models of transition as conceptual frameworks for the current study, we aimed to explore United Kingdom (UK) professional soccer players' ( $N = 5$ ) experiences going through a youth-to-senior career transition to first team level, and assess the immediate changes that occur during the move. Few studies have assessed this process, and no studies have focused on assessing the changes that may occur between pre and post transition. Data collection lasted 1 month with players interviewed twice, 2 weeks before, and 2 weeks after their transition to the first team. Data were abductively thematically content analyzed. Prior to transition, players reported high motivation to be successful, but also feeling anxious about the transition to senior sport. Post-transition, players felt more confident about their ability to succeed in senior sport and maintained high levels of motivation to succeed. Family, friends, coaches, and teammates provided emotional, technical, and tangible support to the players throughout the transition, but were also sources of stress for athletes moving to senior sport. These findings suggest ways to assist transitioning athletes, such as the use of buddy systems with senior players.

*Key words:* within-career transitions; elite sport; talent development

From Youth Team to First Team: An Investigation into the Transition Experiences of Young Professional Athletes in Soccer

Although talent development is a complex phenomenon, there are a number of stages that athletes go through before becoming successful (Bloom, 1985). Bloom (1985) identified that talented individuals will go through: (a) the *early years* where they are introduced to the activity by their parents, who then encourage play and enjoyment before the child becomes engrossed; (b) the *middle years*, where the child becomes increasingly dedicated to their activity, and increases the amount of practice they put in (possibly to the detriment of other activities); and (c) the *later years*, when the individual becomes determined to achieve expert status and is committed to their activity and will invest much more time and effort to achieve this expert status.

Bloom's (1985) work, which involved a range of talented individuals including musicians, artists, scientists, and sports people, led to sport specific studies which identified the specific stages athletes go through to achieve success. Côté and colleagues (1999, 2007) identified three stages of development related to sport development: (a) the *sampling stage* (age 6-12), which corresponds with the early years in Bloom's (1985) model, where athletes will try a number of different sports, and there is deliberate play (i.e., there are no rules); (b) the *specialising years*, which corresponds with the middle years in Bloom's (1985) model, when athletes' play becomes more structured, and they spend more time on their chosen sport; and (c) the *investment stage*, which corresponds with the later years in Bloom's (1985) model when athletes become motivated to achieve success in sport and invest a majority of time on developing their skills.

In addition to moving through the stages of talent development, throughout an elite sport career athletes have to survive numerous transitions (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011). Sharf (1997) defined transition as an adjustment or

event that goes beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life. Transitions can be normative (i.e., predictable), or non-normative (i.e., unpredictable; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Wylleman, et al., 2011). Within sport, common normative transitions include the move from youth-to-senior levels and retirement (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Wylleman, et al., 2011).

Models (e.g., Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004) outlining the normative transitions athletes may go through in their athletic career have been developed. For example, Wylleman and Lavalée's model (2004) adopts a holistic approach, outlining that transitions outside of sport can influence athletes' development (e.g., psychological, social, and academic / vocational transitions). This model takes a career-long perspective, from initiation in sport at a young age, through to termination of a sporting career in (generally) the early 30's, and outlines that athletes may experience overlaps in transitions (e.g., when transitioning into senior sport, athletes may also be starting higher education).

Other models (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003) describe the transition process, during which people negotiate various internal and external demands using internal and external resources. Alfermann and Stambulova's (2007) and Stambulova's (2003) models were specific to sport and the authors suggested that when athletes' resources match or exceed those required to overcome the demands, they transition successfully. Some models (e.g., Stambulova, 2003) also highlight the value of interventions to help athletes in transition, suggesting when and what type of intervention may be required throughout the process. For example, Stambulova (2003) highlighted crisis-prevention, crisis-coping, and negative consequence-coping interventions to help athletes at various points in transition. Other interventions have been proposed specifically to help football players' development in professional football. For example Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen & Christensen (2014) developed and implemented an ecological-inspired program within a professional football club in Denmark. Within this intervention, athletes were educated on the

challenges and adversities they may face as they prepared to move to professional football, and ways they may overcome some of these.

Expanding upon these models, Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) suggested that, in addition to the process of transition athletes will go through, there were four factors, known as the 4S's that influence transitions. These factors included situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). Situation refers to the characteristics of the event, or non-event, that causes the transition to happen. For example, was it the individual athlete who instigated the transition by withdrawing from the team, or someone else (e.g., a coach) who made the decision to release a player before their selection for the first team? Situation also suggests that factors like concurrent stressors and duration of transition (e.g., does the transition last two weeks or many months) can influence the outcomes. Self refers to the personal characteristics and psychological resources that people may have and how these influence transition. For example, what assets (e.g., commitment and values) and deficits (e.g., a lack of knowledge) does the person have, and what does that mean in terms of how they process transition? Support refers to who and what is around to assist individuals through transition. This support can be from the family unit, friendships, networks, and institutions. Goodman et al. (2006) suggest that through transition there should be a circle of support, with the support network in place to assist people in various ways. Finally, strategies refer to the different ways people respond to transition. Goodman et al. (2006) suggest that there are three types of coping: (a) responses that modify the situation (i.e., did, or did not, the person act to negate the effects of transition?), (b) responses that control the meaning of the problem to that person (i.e., reframing the issue to cognitively neutralize its effect), and (c) responses that help the individual manage stress after its occurrence (i.e., self-care and relaxation to help manage stress).

Despite these models, within sport there has been a lack of research on transitions other than retirement (e.g., Alfermann, 1995; Swain, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Expanding knowledge, however, about within-career transitions will help justify directing appropriate resources to assist athletic development (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalée, 2004). One salient within-career transition is the movement from youth-to-senior level because evidence suggests that a minority of athletes may negotiate this change successfully. For example, Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnick, De Knop, and Wylleman (2004) found that only 17% of athletes were able to cope effectively with the transition from elite youth to elite senior status. Understanding the relevant issues regarding this transition will assist athletes, coaches, and sporting bodies in ensuring individuals are able to continue their participation or cope in helpful ways should they cease participation.

Consistent with transition frameworks (e.g., Stambulova, 2003), much of the youth-to-senior transition literature (e.g., Finn & McKenna, 2010) has outlined that this is a complex process with a number of facets that can challenge and excite athletes in equal measures. For example, Pummell, Harwood, and Lavalée (2008) revealed that external pressures from family members and friends made the transition stressful. This observation conforms to the work of Lee and MacLean (1997) and Fletcher and Hanton (2003), who suggested that some of the main sources of stress athletes might encounter includes other people applying pressure for the athletes to deliver high performance levels. Riders also reported self-imposed pressure to succeed in their career. This self-imposed pressure may lead to athletes experiencing the maladaptive consequences of perfectionism (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2005). Successful riders were willing to invest time and effort to become successful, and missed school activities and social events with friends.

Previous research, however (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008), has employed retrospective cross-sectional designs, which may be subject to recall bias (Patton, 2002). Transition

outcomes may influence athlete's recollections of their experiences. Prospective and longitudinal designs will lessen the influence of recall bias (Bruner et al., 2008), and will also assess how athletes' perceptions change pre and post transition. Further, athletes may be most likely to react emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in the period immediately before and after the transition to senior sport because it is at the forefront of their minds. Research which focuses on this acute period in transition may highlight immediate and sudden changes that athletes may experience, which may, along with other intervention based research within football (e.g., Larsen et al., 2014) help inform intervention strategies, such as Stambulova's (2011) crisis-coping interventions.

The range of sports examined to date has been limited, and research on a greater variety of sports may broaden knowledge, because transition experiences may differ across context (Bruner et al., 2008). Furthermore, athletes' experiences may vary depending upon the exigencies of the sporting environment and culture in which they operate. Previous research (e.g., Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen & Christensen, 2013) has suggested that the environment in which athletes function is primarily a function of the relationship between players and support staff (e.g., coaches, assistants, and managers). These relationships are also driven by the organizational values. There are various reasons, therefore, why researching United Kingdom (UK) professional soccer may yield applied benefits as well as adding to knowledge. There is a large amount of money invested in soccer youth development within the UK, and there are a number of associated demands placed upon young players (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010). Despite this investment, there is a lack of research that focuses on the process and development athletes go through as they move from youth-to-senior football. This transition in football can be an extremely difficult for the players, as they will be moving from an environment which is supportive and protective of players' development to one which is brutal and driven by

success, not player development (Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013). Morris, Tod, and Oliver (2015) similarly highlighted that the process can be difficult for players moving to senior sport, as they are put under pressure from other stakeholders (including coaches, parents, and support staff) to perform well on a consistent basis when they move to senior sport. Players' perception of the process and the acute changes they may experience as they move up to senior sport, however, are yet to be fully examined in the literature focusing on professional football. Also, it is beneficial to clubs to help their academy players successfully transition. The current study may assist clubs by providing knowledge of the youth-to-senior transition, which can inform attempts to optimize player development and reduce talent loss.

The aims of this study were to expand the theoretical knowledge on the youth-to-senior sport transition by exploring UK soccer players' experiences of moving from youth to first team level, and assess the short-term acute process of approaching the transition event and reactions post-transition. To achieve these aims, the current study assessed the factors associated with the youth-to-senior transition and the acute responses that occurred during this process.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The 5 male players interviewed underwent a transition from being full time youth soccer players to full time first team players at an elite professional soccer club. At the time of the interview, participants were aged between 17 and 19 years. Participants had played for the clubs' youth team for between 1 and 6 years, and between 3 and 7 years at elite youth level. Similar to Holt and Sparkes (2001), participants were recruited using a total population, purposeful sampling technique (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) to identify information-rich cases that yield insights and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon that may be transferrable to other, similar, contexts (Patton, 2002). To be included in the study, participants had to be



contracted to play soccer for the club's youth team and have accepted a contract to play with the same club's first team. We used this inclusion criterion to capture the participants' experiences as they were going through the transition, rather than adopting a more limited retrospective approach, and to avoid including participants who had not been offered a contract or who had not accepted an offer because they may represent a different type of player. All participants in the club who fulfilled this criterion were invited to, and did, take part in the study. Such an inclusion criteria contributed to a total population sample, meaning there was data saturation of the context. Additional participants from other clubs were not included in the data because they may have transitioned differently due to the context and the structure of the club in which they were a player. The inclusion of additional participants may have meant there was contamination of the data from other contexts, which could mean readers of the study may not be able to draw appropriate conclusions from, and transfer the data to, their own context appropriately (see Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interview schedules for each of the two interviews were based on previous theoretical frameworks (e.g., Stambulova, 2003) and empirical literature on the youth-to-senior transition (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008). To ensure that the schedules would help generate data that would answer the research questions we pilot tested them with two professional soccer players. We made minor changes to the interview schedules based on the pilot work to make some of the questions more open-ended. These changes allowed both the interviewer and the interviewee to explore general views or opinions about the transition in detail, and promote a deep and constructed understanding of the players' transition perceptions and experiences. The interview schedules are available in Appendices A and B, and both covered: (a) introduction and background questions, (b) the transition, and (c) support and coping strategies.

**Procedure**

Once we gained ethical approval for the study, written consent was received from the manager of the club involved, who gave permission for us to invite the 5 players he highlighted as fulfilling the inclusion criterion to take part in the study. After the study purposes, right to withdraw, confidentiality procedures, risks, and safeguards were explained to participants, they completed an informed consent form, and a time was arranged for face-to-face interviews to take place. Interviews ( $N = 10$ ) lasted between 30 and 48 minutes in length. In the current study, we interviewed athletes two weeks prior to, and two weeks after, they had moved up to senior sport, with the point of transition being when athletes had their first ever training session with the senior team as an official first team player. For these players, their first training session with the senior team occurred immediately after their summer break. Players were considered as a senior level player at the point where the players were training fully at senior level every day.

**Data Analysis and Research Rigor**

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the first author to create a permanent record of the discussions. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), abductive (a combination of inductive and deductive) thematic content analysis of the data took place, which highlighted key themes, and commonalities and differences between the interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of analysis included: (a) becoming familiar with the data (reading and re-reading the data and noting down initial ideas), (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes (collecting codes and gathering relevant data together), (d) reviewing themes to check they were identifiable within the whole dataset, (e) defining and naming the themes, and (f) producing the report. The pre-transition interviews were analyzed before the post-transition interviews were analyzed in a similar fashion. Data from interviews

one and two were then compared with each other to highlight similarities and changes that occurred pre and post-transition.

In keeping with Patton (2002), below we outline the relevant criteria that we would like our work to be judged by and indicate what we did to ensure we meet these criteria. The relevant criteria that we would like our work to be judged by includes naturalistic generalizability (the ability of work to resonate and stimulate curiosity among readers), width (the comprehensiveness of the data collection and analysis methods), credibility (the believability of the data), and transparency (the clear outline of procedures used to collect and analyze the data, Patton, 2002; Smith & Caddick, 2012).

To help ensure naturalistic generalizability, we were transparent with our methods, and have included thick descriptions of the participants and the data collection process (Smith & Caddick, 2012). To increase the width of the data, we have included a number of quotations illustrating the research findings, and have explained our interpretation of the data. This presentation allows readers to understand why we interpreted the data the way we have, which Smith and Caddick (2012) argued helps them to appreciate and associate with the conclusions. To help increase credibility and transparency, the first author regularly met with other sport psychologists with a background in qualitative research and transitions in sport to discuss data collection, data analysis, and the findings. These sessions involved the two sport psychologists, acting as critical friends, scrutinizing: (a) the breadth of the interview sample, (b) the process of sorting, choosing, organizing, and analyzing the data, and (c) the first authors' data interpretations. The critical friends provided a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon alternative explanations and data interpretations (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

## **Results**

To highlight the factors associated with transition and athletes' acute responses in their move to senior soccer, we structured the results section around the key themes that represent the commonalities and differences in players' experiences across the two interviews. These themes include: (a) motivation for the transition, (b) confidence and anxiety, (c) stressors, and (d) social support. With each quote, we have highlighted what player said it and whether or not the quote came from the interview pre or post transition.

### **Motivation for the Transition**

Players highlighted motivation as an important factor in both interviews, pre and post-transition. Pre-transition, players were internally motivated to move up to senior sport; influenced by their love of playing soccer and desire to compete to fulfil this love. Comments such as "its football I want to do" (player 1) and "football is everything to me" (player 3) reaffirmed this love of the game and the intense desire to play. One player (player 2) also said:

Football is my life, and I can't imagine not moving up to the first team squad and being successful. I have to do it; because football makes me happy and this is the one thing I have always wanted to do.

Players' actions epitomized this internal motivation for the transition. The players reported a dedicated work ethic and wanted to make the most of the opportunities presented to them. For example, one player (player 5; pre-transition) said "to be successful we need to work hard, but the guys here are all motivated to do that because we want to be in the first team 'cause we love playing football." Another commented that there was a need to make voluntary sacrifices to transition to the first team. Despite wanting to go on holiday with his girlfriend, a participant (player 1; pre-transition) said he could not go on holiday with her as he "need[ed] to go and train to get myself [himself] fit ready for next season." Other sacrifices included missing social events or nights out with friends, but players deemed these sacrifices

worthwhile. Player 5, pre-transition, said: “. . . we all want to be in the first team, we want to do well for each other and ourselves . . . if we have to make the sacrifices . . . well . . . the benefits are much more and we are motivated to get there.”

Post-transition, athletes were still exuding strong internal motivation to be successful in senior sport. For example, one athlete (player 4) commented that, “I need to keep working hard, because I still have to get into the starting eleven and I really want to do that to achieve one of my personal goals.” Post-transition, athletes’ internal motivation also appeared focused on becoming a starter in the first team, rather than just being in the squad, which many had suggested prior to the move. One player (player 3) commented:

I now want to be a first team player. . . now I am here; I love playing even more and want to get into the starting team. Football is definitely what I want to do now, and I am extremely motivated to do the work to get there.

In addition to the intrinsic motivation the athletes had, both prior to and post-transition the players were also motivated by external factors and rewards available to them. For example, prior to moving to senior sport the players were motivated by the increase in wage they perceived they would receive. Pre-transition, one player (player 3) commented, “we will get more money in when we move up, wont we . . . that ability to be able to afford things is important to me, as I want to be able to support my family.” Others commented that external recognition and success motivated them (e.g., selection for the first team or winning professional competitions). Pre-transition, one player (player 4) mentioned:

Getting into the first team and winning competitions is certainly something I want to do. To be known as someone who makes over three or four hundred appearances and wins lots of competitions like David Beckham or Ryan Giggs is something I certainly want!

These beliefs carried on post-transition, with one athlete (player 1) commenting, “I now know the wages I get paid and I can afford to support my family a bit more. I want to keep being able to do this as well for as long as I play.” Moving on to a larger club was now also a motivation for some athletes. A player (player 1; post-transition) motivated by this type of success commented, “I never thought about it much prior to getting in the first team, but now I know they aren’t that much better than me, I want to get a move to the [English] Premiership and play well there.”

### **Anxiety and Confidence**

Other factors athletes highlighted as influencing transition were their levels of anxiety and confidence. Prior to transition, athletes highlighted that they were experiencing anxieties about moving to senior sport. Post-transition, athletes were experiencing reduced anxiety and increased confidence about their abilities. Prior to moving to senior sport, all players thought that first team soccer was of a much better standard than their current level. They perceived that the play was faster and a lot more intense, and many commented that it was a “big step up” from youth to first team. Furthermore, players mentioned that the first team players were a lot fitter and that, as players moving into that environment, they would need to do a lot of work to get up to that fitness level. One player (player 4; pre-transition) said:

It’s much better isn’t it? Like the players are much fitter, they are technically better, and football is played at a much quicker pace. It is a big step up from our current level, and we will need to work hard to get up to speed.

Players also mentioned that they were uncertain if they were ready, both physically and psychologically, to move up to the first team and were unsure if they had done enough fitness work over the summer to be ready for first team training. One player (player 2; pre-transition) said “because it’s a big step up, I’m not sure if I am fit enough yet even though I done a lot of work over summer.” There was also evidence that players felt they had greater responsibility

as soccer players. One participant (player 3; pre-transition) reaffirmed this, stating, “if you’ve got that bit about you and you want to improve yourself it’s your job to go and do it, they won’t babysit you the whole way through it.” Finally, prior to transition the players perceived their transition to the first team in both a positive and negative light, with many commenting that they were “excited” (player 1) and “delighted” (player 5) to be given the opportunity to move up to senior sport, but “nervous” (player 2) and “worried” (player 5) about how they would cope.

Post-transition, many of the athletes commentated that they were not finding being in the first team as difficult as they anticipated, and they suggested that they felt physically and mentally equal to other players in senior sport. Additionally, the players mentioned that they were not finding the first team players technically better than they were and that the soccer was not as fast as they had anticipated. Player 1 (post-transition) epitomized this, commenting:

The boys in the first team aren’t anywhere near as good as I thought they would be. I thought they would be miles better than me and the rest of the young boys and the football much quicker, but actually they are only really slightly better.

Although there was not the anticipated step up in the standard of play, the excitement and delight at being in the first team remained for the players. Some players suggested that they felt more excited because they had a better chance of being successful now they knew the standard of play. One participant (player 5; post-transition) said “I am really excited now, because I know I can compete with these boys for a first team place, and I see no reason why I can’t be playing in the first team in a couple of months.”

### **Stressors**

Another factor athletes associated with transition was stress. Athletes identified that, both pre and post-transition, they experienced stress from pressure they put themselves under,

and from family, friends, and the organization. Pre-transition, all players identified that they put a lot of pressure on themselves to perform well. One player (player 4) said, “I put a lot of pressure on myself to perform well . . . every day. If I don’t perform well, I’m my biggest critic and really get on at myself for it. Sometimes I probably push myself too much.”

Post-transition, athletes still put pressure on themselves to be successful in training and matches. There also appeared to be an increase in the standards they expected of themselves, with one (player 5) commenting, “I expect more from myself now, I expect to perform better and better every day and put a lot of pressure on myself to do that.” One player (player 1) also commented that he was determined to keep improving so that he performed perfectly every time he played, saying, “I want to be perform perfectly every time I play, and when I don’t, I work harder the following week to improve so I can do just that.”

Both pre and post-transition the players identified that they were under pressure from their family and friends outside of their sport. One player (player 3; post-transition) felt that his father was his biggest critic and would be the first to tell him if he made a mistake, saying “...if I get things wrong, he will tell me, and he will tell me where I need to improve in the future.” Another player (player 2; pre-transition) commented that there were occasions when he did not want to talk to his father about soccer, such as after training, but his father insisted on doing the opposite, which was an added pressure. He said: “I’m sure it is like other people when they go to work . . . they don’t want to come home and then get moaned at by their mum or dad. But dad moans at me about football sometimes.”

Players also commented on the pressures put on them by their friends, with some players mentioning that they were constantly under pressure to go out for a night out with their friends, for example. One player (player 2; pre-transition) commented: “my friends always want me to go for nights out, or spend time with them, and that’s difficult to deal with ‘cause you do want to spend time with them, but also you want to win!” Another (player 5;



post-transition) commented that his friends were putting pressure on him to play soccer with his friends in friendly matches, but that his club had banned him from this kind of activity because of the risk of injury. He said, “the guys want me to play football with them, and they keep going on about it . . . so they get disappointed when I say no because the club has told me not to.”

Prior to transition players did not highlight many institutional stressors, but believed the organization was supportive. One player (player one) said, “the club do a lot for you, the manager is really supportive and talks us through things, especially when we make a mistake.” Post-transition, players believed they had experienced pressure in the form of greater amounts of negative critique from their fellow players and manager. A player (player five) highlighted this, saying:

There’s no doubt we get criticized more in the first team. When we were in the youth team it was a bit like “aww, you made a mistake, but never mind you will get better,” whereas here it’s much more “you made a mistake, don’t do it again” and if you do do it again, you get continually criticized for that which puts you under pressure.

Post-transition, a further institutional pressure related specifically to playing position. One player (player four) played in a different position to the one he had played in at youth level. He felt more pressure to succeed, because the manager had placed him there, saying, “because the manager has put faith in me to play in a new position, I feel like I can’t let him down now and need to be successful.”

### **Social Support**

Athletes listed many sources of social support that helped them move up to senior sport. The type and level of support appeared consistent both prior to and post-transition. The support athletes received came from the same people who put them under pressure, as discussed previously, including the players’ family, friends, teammates (including the club

captain), coaches, and managers. Support was also forthcoming from other sources within the club, such as sport science staff (e.g., physiotherapists), who helped to prepare the players to move up. One player (player two; pre-transition) said, “family, friends, the guys (teammates), the gaffer (manager), and the other coaches . . . they all provide support.” Another player (player five; pre-transition) commented “the physio supports us as well. Like he listens to us moan and talk through our difficulties quite a lot.”

Family and friends provided emotional and tangible support. Some players commented that family members helped them emotionally when they had had a disappointing day or played poorly. The father of one player (player four) exemplified tangible support by taking his son on the four hour drive to training and matches every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening. Pre-transition, this player commented:

My parents have really helped me, just being there for me whenever I have had a rough day or the likes, you know? And like, my dad, he used to take me to training every couple of days . . . it was every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, he took me to [place name], which was a four hour drive each way.

Support from fellow players took the form of emotional and technical support. All the players mentioned that the club captain had helped with mistakes they had made and had suggested ways they could improve their performance. Other players who helped participants with the transition included fellow first team players in the same playing position. One player (player two; post-transition), talking about this support, commented, “the captain has really helped, especially when I make mistakes, he takes me aside and offers alternatives or ways I could improve.” Another (player three; pre-transition) said:

The boys who already play in the first team in the same position as me have been a really big help, they are able to help with the tactics we are playing, and what I need to do to improve that.

The support provided by the management team mainly took the form of technical support related to soccer, giving advice, and ensuring that the players had a good work ethic and undertook quality training. In addition, the management also provided emotional support by regularly encouraging players to give their all in training and matches with one player (player four; post-transition) commenting, “The gaffer (manager) gives me a lot of advice about the technical stuff and how to improve my game, but he also encourages me a lot.” In preparation for the transition to the first team, players suggested that the youth level manager also offered support, with player two (pre-transition) suggesting he “gave advice” to many of the players about “what to expect when they moved up to the first team.”

Within the club, people such as sport science staff (e.g., physiotherapists) provided emotional and tangible support, aimed at ensuring the players were in peak physical and mental condition. One player (player four; post-transition) emphasized this support mentioning, “the physio and sport science guys are a big help. The physio in particular helps, because when we go for a massage, we talk to him about things like how we are feeling as well.”

Although the people providing support did not appear to change pre and post-transition, the people considered most important by the athletes did change. Prior to transition, the players considered their parents most influential in their development. However, post-transition players identified the manager as the most important person in their development. One comment by a player (player two) that exemplified this subtheme was:

Before moving up, my parents were really important to me, and they still are! But the gaffer is the one I listen to [most] now, he has to be. If I don’t listen to him, I’m not going to get picked for the first team am I?

This quote clearly highlights the change that has occurred even in the short period of time pre and post-transition, identifying that a change in social relationships may take place at this time.

### **Discussion**

The aims of this study were to expand the theoretical knowledge available on the youth-to-senior sport transition by exploring soccer players' experiences of moving from youth to first team levels, and assess the short-term immediate process of approaching the transition event and acute reactions post-transition. To achieve these aims, the current study assessed the factors associated with the youth-to-senior transition and the acute responses that occurred during this process. The results highlighted that (a) motivation for the transition, (b) confidence and anxiety, (c) stressors, and (d) social support were factors associated with transition, and that athletes' perception of these factors changed throughout the move from youth-to-senior soccer.

The players reported being dedicated to their sport and working hard in training and matches. This theme supports Mallett and Hanrahan (2004) who emphasized the importance of the sport being an essential and intrinsic part of the athletes' life if they wish to be a successful athlete. Stambulova's (2003) model of transition and Goodman et al. (2006) also highlighted that the self, including personal characteristics and psychological resources (e.g., motivation) can be a resource which helps them through transition, and the results of the current study indicate that athletes moving up to senior professional soccer do have a high motivation to succeed (e.g., players discussed soccer being their life and nothing else being important). Advancing previous knowledge, the current study also highlights that the motivation that athletes have can change as they move from youth-to-senior soccer. The results suggested that when the athletes moved up to senior sport, they become motivated to

be a successful first team starter, rather than being content with being in the squad which was their motivation prior to moving up.

The indication that athletes' motives may change pre and post-transition appears to match the changes in their anxiety and confidence levels. Participants in the present study alleged that prior to moving up to the first team they perceived the soccer would be of a much better standard than what they had experienced at youth level. Post-transition, however, the athletes did not feel the step up in standard was as difficult as they had expected, and they were less anxious and more confident about their own skill levels, perhaps interpretable via Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy model. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory offers reasons why athletes may have experienced lowered anxiety levels and heightened confidence; people's self-efficacy improves from mastery experiences. In the current study, athletes gained mastery experiences from performing well in the senior team, and their confidence and anxiety levels may have adapted as a result. Heightened self-efficacy has also been linked to increased effort, motivation, and persistence (Bandura, 1977), and in the current study, there appear heightened motivation (e.g., the motivation, post transition, not just to get into the first team, but to be a successful senior squad member, and move to better teams). These results add to existing knowledge by highlighting changes in motivation that may occur pre and post the move to senior sport.

The youth team at the club studied were very successful (they had won the league in the season previous to this study taking place and a number of elite professional youth competitions over the preceding 10 years prior to this study), with the first team being less successful (they were regularly involved in relegation play-offs to maintain their status as a top league team, and had won very few competitions during the clubs' history). This knowledge helps to rule out the alternative hypothesis that the changes in motivation, anxiety, and confidence levels may be associated with moving up to a more successful team. Rather

than moving to a more successful team, these players were moving into a team that was less likely to win major competitions, yet their motivation increased after they had moved to senior sport, meaning this change was more likely to be because of the transition itself.

The current findings are useful in identifying specific sources of stress within the professional soccer environment that potentially adversely affect young players' abilities to transition successfully. These specific sources include internal stressors (youth athletes putting pressure on themselves) and external stressors (family, friends, and the club).

According to the model of human adaption to transition, the level of stress associated with a transition can influence the outcomes (Schlossberg, 1981). From striving for a more expert status when moving into the first team, the players put pressure on themselves to perform better after transition. Their determination to perform better is consistent with researchers' previous findings (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008) who suggested that athletes placed high demands on themselves to perform well. Côté and colleagues (1999, 2007) have also highlighted that, as athletes move up to senior sport, there is a focus on training to optimize performance, which may increase this pressure on athletes to place high demands on themselves. Adding to this knowledge, the results of the current study suggested that when moving up to senior sport, young athletes actually expected more from themselves than they had previously. Athletes highlighted that each day they were in the senior team they expected to perform better, with some even commenting that they expected to perform "perfectly", and when they did not they worked harder the following week to improve their performances. Although research has explored perfectionism in sport previously (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2005), there has been no link made with the youth-to-senior transition in sport. Perfectionism in sport has been associated with various maladjustments, such as higher levels of anxiety and lowered self-esteem, with athletes reporting that they were concerned about their mistakes, doubted their actions, and perceived their parents as being critical of them (Flett & Hewitt,

2005). If, as the current study suggests, some athletes are perfectionists as they move up to senior sport, they may be susceptible to experiencing these doubts, and early intervention to support them could be helpful in learning to deal with their tendencies. Future research will yield useful knowledge by exploring perfectionism in the youth-to-senior transition.

Sources of stress for the players in the present study also included friends, family, and institutional pressures. In the current study, the athletes highlighted that there were occasions where their parents became overinvolved in their sport, offering advice and criticizing them when they would rather not talk or discuss their soccer performances. Knight, Boden, and Holt (2009) distinguished between the supportive and technical involvement of parents in their child's sporting experience. Rather than parents becoming over-involved and putting pressure on the player to perform, youth athletes would rather receive comments of support about their attitude, gamesmanship, and effort. There was evidence in the current study of parental pressure from a technical perspective (e.g., a father trying to provide technical advice) which supports such previous work (e.g., Lee & MacLean, 1997). Additionally, Fletcher and Hanton (2003) found that institutional pressures can negatively influence athletic performance and development, and the present study identified institutional pressures from a number of sources within the club, such as the manager. Players only identified these stressors post-transition in the current study, however, suggesting that they did not feel as much pressure from the manager to perform in youth sport as they now did in senior sport. This finding adds to existing knowledge on the youth-to-senior transition in sport because it highlights that while players perceived they had the technical or physical capabilities to match the increase in playing standard, they also believe they were under more pressure from those around them to perform. This knowledge can help educate youth athletes on the expectations that they may experience when they move to senior sport and help them to develop coping mechanisms to manage and alleviate any negative consequences they experience as a result.

Although players experienced pressure and stress from significant others involved in the transition (e.g., friends and family), they also perceived that these same people provided support. The support the players received was emotional, technical, and tangible and came from numerous sources including friends, family, fellow professional players, coaching staff, and sport science staff. Pummell et al. (2008) and Bruner et al. (2008) found that the emotional support friends and family gave was crucial in aiding the athletes' development. Schlossberg (1981) and Goodman et al. (2006) also identified support systems (including family relationships) can have a positive effect on transitions. Based upon Goodman et al. (2006) 4S's model, which outlines support as an important aspect in transition, it is possible that the athletes in the current study had a circle of support which provided them with appropriate support when required as they move up to senior sport.

Adding to this knowledge, the current study offered the initial suggestion as to how quickly the types of support athletes perceive as being important can change across the transition event. Wylleman et al., (2011) suggested that during transition there might be a number of changes in the support network in place to support athletes. Results of the current study suggest that, as athletes move from youth-to-senior sport this process may happen almost instantaneously. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008) athletes in the current study suggested their parents were important to them, but post-transition the coach became the most influential person in their sport. Such knowledge may allow parents and coaches appreciate the roles they have during transition, and how quickly these roles can change as athletes develop. For example, parents could be educated on the development process and the fact that as athletes move to senior sport they may no longer be as influential on their career from a technical perspective, but that they can still support them by providing encouragement and emotional support.



The current study also advanced knowledge by suggesting that those who put pressure on athletes can also be a source of support. For example, parents can be a source of support for athletes in transition, but could also put a lot of pressure on their children to be successful. In addition to helping athletes understand the expectations placed upon them as they move to senior sport discussed earlier, the findings of the current study could be used to support stakeholders understanding of their role in transition, and how they can help athletes better as they transition. If stakeholders are encouraged to provide suitable support on a regular basis, athletes may experience reduced levels of stress and anxiety, which are common in the transition from youth-to-senior sport and can have a negative effect. Goodman et al. (2006) suggested in their model that the situation, including whether or not people are experiencing additional stressors in other areas of their life, may influence how they react to transition. In the current study, in addition to the transition itself, the athletes appear to be experiencing stress in other areas of their life, which, with appropriate support in place, can be reduced.

Advancing theoretical knowledge on the youth-to-senior transition, but in contrast to the work of Lavalley, Kremer, Moran, and Williams (2004), there was no evidence of increased rivalry from fellow players on the team. Existing players in the same position were supportive of those moving up to senior sport. Although the players who have just moved up may be trying to dislodge senior players from the team, existing athletes offered advice when required to the youth athletes. This support can be a valuable feature of team sports and based upon the current study, to support the development of youth players, senior players could be encouraged to offer advice and support where required. Additionally, offering youth players sessions where they get advice from senior players (perhaps via the implementation of a 'buddy system', where senior players are allocated youth players to mentor), may also help to make best use of this perceived support.

In the current study, we have examined a single context in-depth and described it in a way to help with knowledge transferability to other contexts. Patton (2002) suggested that such qualitative research may allow readers to extrapolate similarities and differences from others experiences, and gain a greater understanding of their own situation. Nevertheless, the potential cultural and environmental differences that exist within professional soccer organizations would offer future investigators additional opportunities to replicate this research, and the resultant examinations would be of interest to those who work in professional soccer. There is also a need for cross-cultural studies to determine whether the experiences of within-career transitions are consistent among different individual cultures. For example, the experiences of athletes from different cultural backgrounds, such as players in foreign professional soccer environments, may reveal more difficult transition experiences than that encountered by “home based” players.

The players identified various resources they could access from people around them, highlighting how these influenced their transition. Traditionally, research on transition focuses heavily on the individual athlete and underemphasizes the individual-context relationship. More recent work has recognised the influence of the person-in-context relationship on transition (Rosso, 2010; 2014; 2015; Rosso & McGrath, 2013). Social capital represents one approach to theorising about the athlete’s responses to transition. Social capital refers to “the ability of individuals and groups to gain resources by means of membership in social networks encompassing players, their immediate social environments, and the institutions responsible for players’ development” (Rosso, 2010b, p. 72). The current athletes recognised that their transition experiences had been influenced by the social resources they had access to from those around them, and discussed how changes in their social networks (moving from the youth to senior teams) resulted in differences in both the people who provided social resources and the types of assistance they provided. The notion of social

capital has not been applied to professional football and represents a future research avenue. Such research will help position professional football players and their transition experiences within the contexts in which they are attempting to succeed.

Future research could also look to examine the process of transition in relation to other models of transition, including the 4S's model that Goodman et al (2006) introduced. The current study provides initial evidence that a number of the factors highlighted in these models are indeed influential during the transition process, and if more support for these models is gleaned, better interventions, based upon research and transition models, can be put in place to assist athletes in transition.

Additionally, we also advanced knowledge by conducting interviews pre and post transition. By conducting interviews before and after the transition, we were able to highlight and identify changes that took place, especially in relation to motivation, anxiety and confidence, stressors, and social support. Such work can assist interventions focused on the potential factors prevalent in transition. This pre and post approach could be extended (e.g., following players a year before and after transition) which would further enrich the within-career transition knowledge base. Such studies, conducted on the youth-to-senior transition as in the current study, or the return/comeback to elite sport after a voluntary or involuntary break (e.g., returning after maternity-leave) may add to existing knowledge by identifying changes that occur around the transition period. Also, the role of expectation in the transition process could also be explored in future research. The current study does not highlight how youth players' expectations of senior sport when at youth level, influences how they experience and manage transition. Studies that highlight whether or not greater expectations of senior sport result in better or worse transitions to the top level may help to explore this phenomenon. This knowledge may help those supporting athletes in transition assist youth

athletes have a more accurate understanding of senior sport, and what to expect when moving up.

The present study identified that the within-career transition experiences of strongly motivated athletes can give rise to a number of psychological challenges, where self and other imposed pressure to become successful are common. Due to the number of challenges encountered, it is possible that many players making within-career transitions will be unsuccessful and then have to deal with the consequences of failure. The present study is among the first to target within-career transitions in elite first team soccer, work that is essential in understanding the transitional experiences of young players that will help their development of other young soccer players in the future.

## References

- Alfermann, D. (1995). Career transitions of elite athletes: Drop-out and retirement. In R. Vanfraechem-Raway, & Y. Vanden Auweele (Eds.) *Proceedings of the IXth European Congress of Sport Psychology* (pp.828-833). Brussels, Belgium: ATM.
- Alfermann, D., & Stambulova, N. (2007). Career transitions and career termination. In G. Tenenbaum & R.C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp.712-736). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing Talent in Young People*. New York: Ballentine.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bruner, M. W., Munroe-Chandler, K. J., & Spink, K. S. (2008). Entry into elite sport: A preliminary investigation into the transition experiences of rookie athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 20, 236-252. doi: 10.1080/10413200701867745
- Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 395-41.
- Côté, J., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2007). Youth involvement in sport. In P.R.E. Crocker (Ed.), *Introduction to sport psychology: A Canadian perspective* (pp. 266-294). Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Finn J., & McKenna J. (2010). Coping with academy-to-first-team transitions in elite English male team sports: The Coaches' perspective. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 5, 257-79. doi: 10.1260/1747-9541.5.2.257
- Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2003). Sources of organizational stress in elite sports performers. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17, 175–195.

Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2005). The Perils of Perfectionism in Sports and Exercise.

*Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 14-18. doi: 10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00326.x

Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. New York: Springer.

Holt, N. & Sparkes, A. (2001) An ethnographic study of cohesiveness in a college soccer team over a season. *The Sport Psychologist*, 15, 237-259.

Knight, C. J., Boden, C. M., & Holt, N. L. (2010). Junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 22, 377-391. doi: 10.1080/10413200.2010.495324

Larsen, C. H., Alfermann, D., Henriksen, K., & Christensen, M. K. (2013). Successful talent development in soccer: The characteristics of the environment. *Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology*, 2(3), 190-206. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031958>

Larsen, C. H., Henriksen, K., Alfermann, D., & Christensen, M. K. (2014). Preparing footballers for the next step: An intervention program from an ecological perspective. *Sport Psychologist*, 28, 91-102. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2013-0015>

Lavallee, D., Kremer, J., Morgan, A. P., & Williams, M. (2004). *Sport Psychology: Contemporary Themes*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lee, M., & MacLean, S. (1997). Sources of Parental Pressure Among Age Group Swimmers. *European Journal of Physical Education*, 2, 167-177, doi: 10.1080/1740898970020204

Mallett, C. J., & Hanrahan, S. J. (2004). Elite athletes why does the "fire" burn so brightly? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 183-200. doi: 10.1016/S1469-0292(02)00043-2

- Morris, R., Tod, D., & Oliver, E. (2015). An analysis of organizational structure and transition outcomes in the youth-to-senior professional soccer transition. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 27, 216-234. doi: 10.1080/10413200.2014.980015
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pummell, B., Harwood, C., & Lavallee, D. (2008). Jumping to the next level: A qualitative examination of within career transition in adolescent event riders. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9, 427-447. doi: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2007.07.004
- Richardson, D., Relvas, H. & Littlewood, M. (2013). Sociological and cultural influences on player development. In A. Mark Williams (Ed.), *Science and Soccer – Developing Elite Performers* (3rd ed., pp.139-153). New York: Routledge.
- Relvas, H., Littlewood, M., Nesti, M., Gilbourne, D., & Richardson, D. (2010). Organizational structures and working practices in elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the relationship between youth and professional domains. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 10, 165-187. doi: 10.1080/16184740903559891
- Rosso, E. (2010). Taking the next step: social capital and the development of elite women's football players in South Australia. *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, 1(2), 71-86.
- Rosso, E. (2014). *Taking the Next Step: Social Capital and Athlete Development*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing.
- Rosso, E. (2015). The 'inverse relationship' between social capital and sport: a qualitative exploration of the influence of social networks on the development of athletes. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 6(1), 57-76. doi: 10.1080/18377122.2014.997861

- Rosso, E., & McGrath, R. (2013). Beyond recreation: Personal social networks and social capital in the transition of young players from recreational football to formal football clubs. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(4), 451-468. doi: 10.1177/1012690212444409
- Schlossberg, N. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 9, 2-18. doi: 10.1177/001100008100900202
- Sharf, R. S. (1997). *Applying career development theory to counseling*. Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publications.
- Smith, B. & Caddick, N. (2012). Qualitative methods in sport: a concise overview for guiding social scientific sport research. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science*, 1(1), 60-73. doi: 10.1080/21640599.2012.701373
- Sparkes, A. & Smith, B. (2013). *Qualitative research in sport, exercise & health sciences. From process to product*. London: Routledge.
- Stambulova, N. B. (1994). Developmental sports career investigations in Russia: A post-Perestroika analysis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 8, 221-237.
- Stambulova, N. B. (2003). Symptoms of a Crisis-transition: A Grounded Theory Study. In N. Hassmen (ed.), *Svensk Idrottspsykologisk Förening* (pp. 97-109). Örebro, Sweden: Örebro University Press.
- Stambulova, N. (2011). The Mobilization Model of Counseling Athletes in Crisis-Transitions: An Educational Intervention Tool. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 2, 156-170.
- Swain, D. A. (1991). Withdrawal from sports and Schlossberg's model of transitions. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, 152-160.
- Vanden Auweele, Y., De Martelaer, K., Rzewnicki, R., De Knop, P., & Wylleman, P. (2004). Parents and coaches: A help or harm? Affective outcomes for children in sport. In Y. Vanden Auweele (Ed.) *Ethics in Youth Sport*. Leuven, Belgium: Lannoocampus.



Werthner, P., & Orlick, T. (1986). Retirement experiences of successful Olympic athletes.

*International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 17, 337-363.

Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport: European

perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 7-20. doi: 10.1016/S1469-

0292(02)00049-3

Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by

athletes. In M. Weiss (Ed.), *Developmental sport psychology* (pp. 507-527).

Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Wylleman, P., De Knop, P., & Reints, A. (2011). Transitions in competitive sports. In N. L.

Holt & M. Talbot (Eds.), *Lifelong Engagement in Sport and Physical Activity* (pp. 63-

76). New York, NY: Routledge.

## Appendix A

## First Interview Schedule

## 1. Personal background -

- How old are you?
- Have you participated in any other sports apart from football?

## 2. Background in football -

- Can you tell me about your background in football?
- How long have you played professional football for?
- Who got you involved in football?

## 3. The transition -

- Were you surprised that you were selected to move up to the first team?
- What emotions have you experienced since you found out you are going to be training with the first team?
- Do you anticipate any challenges / changes associated with moving up to the first team
  - 
  - in training?
  - in competitions?
  - in relationships with management team?
  - in relationships with team members and competitors?
  - in lifestyle / regime of life (football interfering with life outside football)?

## 4. What / who has helped you prepare for the upcoming transition?

## 5. What / who has created a hindrance in your prepare for the upcoming transition?

## 6. Have you used any strategies to help you cope with the upcoming transition and the challenges associated with the transition?

## Appendix B

## Second Interview Schedule

## 1. Introduction -

- reminder of the purpose of the study
- reminder of the assurances given in the first interview that all interview / conversation will be treated as confidential

## 2. The transition -

- What emotions have you experienced since moving up to train with the first team?
- Do you feel as though you have settled in well to training with the first team? Why?
- Do you anticipate any future challenges which are associated with moving up to the first team -
  - in training?
  - in competitions?
  - in relationships with management team?
  - in relationships with team members and competitors?
  - in lifestyle / regime of life (football interfering with life outside football)?

## 3. What / who has helped you presently throughout your transition to training with the first team?

## 4. What / who has hindered you throughout the current transition?

## 5. Are you using any strategies to help you cope with the present transition and the challenges associated with the transition?