

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

Michael McGreary

Liverpool John Moores University

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, 5 Primrose Hill, Liverpool, L3 2EX

[michael.mcgreary@northlindsey.ac.uk](mailto:michael.mcgreary@northlindsey.ac.uk)

\*corresponding author

Robert Morris

University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA

[Robert.morris@stir.ac.uk](mailto:Robert.morris@stir.ac.uk)

Martin Eubank

Liverpool John Moores University

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, 5 Primrose Hill, Liverpool, L3 2EX

[m.r.eubank@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.eubank@ljmu.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

In the United Kingdom (UK), professional female football has grown exponentially in recent years, including with the advent of the Women's Super League. Given this growth, the present study aimed to (a) to explore the junior-to-senior transition in the UK female football players (i.e., perceived demands, barriers, resources, and coping strategies); (b) to analyse how changes in the UK female football context (i.e., increased professionalization) influenced players' perception of the transition. Six professional female soccer players from two groups took part in the study; senior athlete (N=3) and transitional athletes (N=3). To acquire a holistic understanding, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all athletes. Results highlighted transitional athletes appeared to have a different JST experience compared to the senior group, with the difference in experience attributed to the increased professionalization of female football. In particular, demands associated with being a dual career athlete and greater difficulty balancing the competing demands. As a result, transitional athletes also engaged in more coping strategies. This study provides valuable findings in relation to the JST in professional female football and the context of the increasing professionalization of female football in the UK.

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

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

### **Junior to Senior Transition Research**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Dual Career Research**

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

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

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



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

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

## **Method**

### **Organisation and Participants**

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

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

### **Interview Schedule**

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

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

## **Procedure**

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

## **Data Analysis and Research Credibility**

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

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

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

## **Results**

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

### **Perceived Transition Demands**

### *Senior Athletes (SA)*

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

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

And,

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Transitional Athletes (TA)***

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

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

And,

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

With the development squad I could socialize, go home and train. With the first team you are training in the day and then have to go home and catch up with University work and there is little time for socialization, which does make it difficult (TA 3).

This finding was less salient from interviews with senior athletes, who did not discuss maintaining a satisfactory social life as a main transitional demand. Some senior athletes instead reported that by maintaining a social life it helped with other demands "friends helped me out, some close friends would travel with me, helped break my journey up" (SA 1).

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

### **Perceived Transition Barriers**

### ***Senior Group***

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

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

**(SA 3).**

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

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

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

### ***Transitional Group***

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

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

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

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

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

## **Perceived Coping Resources and Strategies**

### ***Senior Athletes***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Transitional Athletes***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Discussion**

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

### **Differences Between Groups**

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

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

### **Strengths and Practical Implications**

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

### **Limitations and Future Research**

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

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

## **Conclusion**

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

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