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Exploring Athletic Identity in Top Class English Youth Football:

A Cross Sectional Approach

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29 Abstract

30 This study aimed to explore levels of athletic identity in professional youth
31 footballers. One hundred and sixty eight elite youth footballers from the English
32 professional football leagues completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale
33 (AIMS). Multilevel modelling was used to examine the effect of playing level, living
34 arrangements, and year of apprentice on the total AIMS score and scores on its
35 subscales, social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity. ‘Individual football
36 club’ was included in the model as a random factor. Football club explained 30% of
37 the variance in exclusivity among players ($p = .022$). Mean social identity was
38 significantly higher for those players in the first year of their apprentice compared to
39 those in their second year ($p = .025$). All other effects were not statistically significant
40 ($p > .05$). The implications for practitioners and further research are discussed.

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42 *Keywords:* sport psychology, career transition, talent development, deselection

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51 To excel in elite professional football, players typically form a strong bond
52 with their chosen sport. After participating at beginner level (e.g., youth sport), most

53 individuals choose to specialize in a sport in which they are most skilled (Bloom,
54 1985; Côté, 1999). Family, friends, coaches, teachers, and in some cases, media
55 influences, often support the goal of advancement in that sport and consequently,
56 young players may begin to form an athletic identity (Wiechman & Williams,
57 1997). This has been defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the
58 athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993, p 237).

59 Where athletic identity has been seen to be strong, but not exclusive to the
60 athletic role, long lasting psychological benefits to the athlete have been seen, such as
61 more social interactions, more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation
62 in North American student-athletes (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993; Horton &
63 Mack, 2000). Those who place too strong an emphasis on their athletic identity
64 become somewhat one-dimensional, for example, they may solely see themselves as a
65 sports person. (.;). As a result athletes may experience psychological or behavioural
66 disturbance such as overtraining or anxiety when unable to train e.g., through injury
67 (Coen & Ogles, 1993; Higgins, 1987; Horton & Mack, 2000; Showers, 1992 and
68 Sparkes, 1998, 2000). Such negative effects may also occur during transitional
69 processes such as retirement or de-selection (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). In
70 addition, such athletes may experience a lack of post career planning skills and
71 activities compounding the effects of transition or de-selection (Blann 1986; Marcia,
72 1966; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996). Athletes who are somewhat one-
73 dimensional may also have severely restricted the development of other roles within
74 the self such as spouse, brother or friend (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

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Introduction

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

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

93 Identity foreclosure has been indirectly reported in youth team football where
94 players routinely sacrifice social and educational aspects of their lives to focus on
95 their major and often only goal in life: that of becoming a professional footballer
96 (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Parker, 2000). However, 85% of those young players who
97 embark on a professional football career will fail to achieve their goal (Lally, 2007).
98 The high failure rates in the transition from youth to professional football in England
99 advocates that it is pertinent to explore the level of athletic identity in such a
100 population as those players who fail to make a professional career may be at risk of
101 negative psychological effects and difficult transitional experiences if their career is

127 Cornelius, 2001) were administered by the researcher after training at each club.
128 Evidence for the test-retest reliability over a two-week period ($r = .89$) and internal
129 consistency ($\alpha = .81$ to $.93$) of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) has
130 been obtained (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van
131 Raalte & Mahar, 1993). It must be noted that internal consistency has yet to be
132 gained for the three subscales and so any findings from these should be viewed with
133 caution. The current version of AIMS is a 7-item questionnaire (Brewer & Cornelius
134 2001), where responses are made on a 7-point likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly
135 disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores on the AIMS range from 7 to 49, with
136 higher scores indicative of higher levels of athletic identity. The total AIMS score is
137 typically used to differentiate between independent variables, e.g., sporting levels
138 (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). AIMS is comprised of three subscales: social
139 identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual views him/herself as occupying the
140 role of an athlete and includes AIMS items 1-3); exclusivity (i.e., the degree to which
141 an individual's self-worth is established through participating in the athletic role and
142 includes items 4-5); and negative affectivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual
143 experiences negative emotions from unwanted sporting outcomes and includes items
144 6-7).

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

152 **Statistical Methods**

153 All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19 (SPSS
154 Inc., Chicago, IL). The central tendency and dispersion of the AIMS scores and each
155 of the subscales (social identity, exclusivity, and negativity affectivity) for the sample
156 data were described as the mean and standard deviation. Inferences about the effects
157 of playing level, year of apprenticeship, and living arrangements on AIMS and the
158 three subscales were made using multilevel mixed effects models. Football club was
159 specified in each model as a random factor and playing level, year of apprenticeship,
160 and living arrangements were specified as fixed factors. The statistical significance of
161 each random effect was established using the Wald test, using a one-tailed p value.
162 The residuals for each model exhibited substantial negative skewness, which was
163 rectified by cubed transformation of the observed data. Two-tailed statistical
164 significance was accepted as $p < .05$.

165 **Results**

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

174 Multilevel modelling showed that 'football club' accounted for 6% of the
175 variability in negative affectivity (Wald $Z = 1.1$, $p = .14$) and 12% in AIMS (Wald Z

176 = 1.5, $p = .061$), although the 30% explained variance in exclusivity was the only
177 outcome variable that reached statistical significance (Wald $Z = 2.0$, $p = .022$). Very
178 little variability between clubs existed for social identity and this was set to zero by
179 the multilevel model.

180 Mean AIMS ($F = 0.5$, $p = .68$), social identity ($F = 0.5$, $p = .67$), exclusivity (F
181 $= 0.8$, $p = .53$), and negative affectivity ($F = 0.04$, $p = .99$) were not significantly
182 different in the four leagues. Whether or not players lived at home or away also did
183 not have any significant effect on AIMS ($F = 1.3$, $p = .25$), social identity ($F = 1.3$, $p =$
184 $.26$), exclusivity ($F = 2.5$, $p = .12$), or negative affectivity ($F = 0.26$, $p = .61$). Mean
185 social identity was 0.7 points higher for those players in the first year of their
186 apprenticeship compared to those in the second year ($F = 5.1$, $p = .025$). Year of
187 apprenticeship, however, did not have any significant effect on AIMS ($F = 2.0$, $p =$
188 $.16$), exclusivity ($F = 1.0$, $p = .33$), or negative affectivity ($F = 0.007$, $p = .94$). Two-way
189 and three-way interactions between factors were entered into all multilevel models;
190 however, these were not retained because none were statistically significant ($p > .05$).

191 **Discussion**

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

196 With regard to 'individual football club', there were no significant differences
197 reported for overall Athletic Identity. This may be because despite differences in the
198 requirements for football academies and centres of excellence within England and
199 across Europe, most have a similar organisational structure which typically requires
200 heavy investment in facilities and staff (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, &

201 Richardson, 2010; Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). It is also accepted that
202 the common overriding aim of youth development programmes at any football club is
203 to produce suitably skilled players for the first team (Bourke, 2002; Holt & Mitchell,
204 2006; Relvas et al., 2010). As a result it appears all players develop largely similar
205 levels of Athletic Identity. With regard to the exclusivity subscale being significantly
206 different between clubs it may be postulated that individual staff, organisational
207 culture, working practices and the general environment within each club may be the
208 overriding factor in exclusivity development. When the findings were analysed as a
209 function of the level of play no significant differences were found for total AIMS
210 score nor any subscale. This contradicts reports from other sporting domains and
211 associated performance levels. Horton & Mack (2000) reported a significant
212 relationship between athletic identity and personal best times in marathon runners.
213 Lamont-Mills & Christensen (2006) also reported significant differences for AIMS
214 total amongst elite, recreational and non-participant. Brewer & Cornelius (2001) also
215 reported significant differences ($p < .05$) in total AIMS score between athletes and
216 non athletes with athletes reporting higher levels of AI. With regard to the present
217 study this ranking has been made on the first team level of play and may not fully
218 reflect the status of the structure, staffing and environment at each football club. For
219 example a lower league club may have a well resourced and successful academy
220 system.

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

226 Mitchell, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Parker, 2000; Roderick, 2006). The findings
227 suggest such notions are not magnified or reduced as a result of living arrangements.

228 When respondents were viewed in terms of them being a year one or a year
229 two apprentice, it was those in year one who reported significantly higher levels of
230 social identity. It would appear that those players in the first year of their
231 apprenticeship see themselves more as a footballer than those in their second year.
232 Such findings support previous work on the saliency of athletic identity and its
233 dependence on factors such as current athletic circumstance (Grove, Fish & Eklund,
234 2004; Lavallee, Gordon & Groves, 1997). It could be suggested that year one
235 apprentices more deeply occupy the role of being a footballer due to them making the
236 transition from school boy to a full time regime (League Football Education, 2010). It
237 is possible, that by the time the year one apprentices enter their second year, and they
238 may have been exposed to the reality of low progression levels amounting to 15 %
239 (Lally, 2007) and the subsequent realisation that they might not make the grade of
240 professional footballer. Such a decrease in social identity in year two players may be
241 the result of some form of divestment from athletic identity as a defence mechanism
242 to protect their ego (Snyder, 1988). Such an assumption cannot be substantiated by
243 AIMS alone and would need more qualitative methods (e.g., Biddle, Markland,
244 Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001) to be employed to explore how athletic
245 identity is created through gaining a deeper understanding of the day to day lived
246 experiences of youth team footballers.

247 AIMS itself does not account for the processes in the development of athletic
248 identity (e.g., the role of the coaching team, family and general lived experiences of
249 youth team footballers). Other possible theoretical and methodological perspectives
250 may provide a greater understanding of the development of athletic identity and

251 identity in its broadest sense. Erikson's (1968) eight stages of psychosocial
252 development model has been tentatively referenced in the athletic identity literature
253 (e.g., Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) as being a potential theoretical framework in
254 understanding the development of athletic identity. Erikson views identity as a fluid
255 and transitional phenomenon, which develops through a series of crises and
256 resolutions throughout life and has both positive and negative elements that shape
257 who we are and what we become. The career path from entry into football through to
258 school-boy, apprenticeship and eventually professional carries similar notions of
259 crises and resolutions as player's progress in their careers. It is therefore
260 recommended that further research in this area should seek to adopt this broader
261 framework to further understand how athletic identity develops.

262 It is hoped that this exploratory study can allow for further investigation into
263 Athletic Identity within elite youth footballers and the developments of more
264 normative data. However there are some limitations within this study and beyond.
265 Further work on the validation of the AIMS subscales needs to be undertaken to
266 ensure their validity and use by researchers and practitioners alike. AIMS does not
267 provide contextual information relating to variables such as working environment and
268 the influence of coaches, although it may be useful as a screening tool for new and
269 existing players. More longitudinal studies and observations are also required to
270 explore changes in athletic identity over time (e.g., specific points of the season or
271 regularly over the whole two year apprenticeship) to better understand where specific
272 player support may be best placed.

273 Further research should be undertaken to explore the environment created by
274 individual clubs and more specifically by coaches who appear to affect levels of
275 exclusivity and social identity in this population. The current findings may be of use

276 to professionals such as coaches, sport psychologists and education and welfare
277 officers in identifying youth team football players who are potentially more at risk of
278 identity foreclosure and associated negative experiences during critical moments such
279 as transition. The development of athletic identity and subsequent association with the
280 role of being a youth team footballer appears to be more influenced by the year of
281 apprenticeship and the environment created within each club more so than a function
282 of the clubs playing level or players living arrangements. Players in year one of an
283 apprenticeship perceive themselves more as footballers (social identity), than their
284 year two counterparts. Strategies to promote similar identification in year two
285 apprentices may need to be implemented in order to maintain factors such motivation
286 and performance levels which may ultimately affect chances of career progression.

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411 **Table 1.** Mean (SD) athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity,
 412 exclusivity and negative affectivity for youth football players according to which
 413 English professional league they play in.

	Playing level			
	League 2 (<i>n</i> = 44)	League 1 (<i>n</i> = 44)	Championshi P (<i>n</i> = 44)	Premiership (<i>n</i> = 36)
Total AIMS	39.4 (6.6)	40.2 (5.3)	40.4 (4.0)	42.0 (4.4)
Social identity	16.4 (2.8)	16.7 (2.0)	16.5 (1.7)	17.0 (2.3)
Exclusivity	10.6 (2.7)	11.5 (2.3)	11.5 (1.9)	12.5 (1.6)
Negative affectivity	12.4 (2.0)	12.2 (2.3)	12.3 (1.7)	12.5 (1.8)

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415 **Table 2.** Mean (SD) athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity,
 416 exclusivity and negative affectivity for 168 professional youth football players
 417 according to whether they were living at home or away, or whether they were in the
 418 first or second year of their apprenticeship.

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

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