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**Developmental Experiences of Elite Female Youth Soccer Players**

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## Abstract

To advance the literature on talent development within elite female athletes, this study investigated the developmental experiences of elite youth female football players. We adopted an interpretive approach where four players (M age = 16.75) were initially interviewed to gain a retrospective understanding of their development as football players. Subsequent fieldwork and further interviews were used to gain a current and prospective understanding of their development as players. Data were subjected to an inductive analysis, composite sequence analysis and a collaborative member checking process to co-construct a sequential, developmental understanding of the players' experiences within elite youth football. The findings suggested that the football experience of fathers and / or older brothers played a significant role in the players' development. Football fathers were able to provide advice and guidance specific to the needs of their daughter-player at different age ranges whilst at the same time reinforcing the importance of coach-player relationships. Football brothers acted as either positive or negative models for their sister-players and served as a source of information about key career choices. Friends inside (termed football friends) and outside (termed non-football friends) football played a significant role in helping players to lead the disciplined lifestyle required of an elite youth football player. Finally, findings suggest that self-regulation and adaptive volitional behaviours appear to be key intra-individual factors associated with talent development in female football. These findings are considered in the light of previous talent development literature alongside directions for future research.

Keywords: elite youth female soccer; talent development; composite sequence analysis

1 For females, the growth of football participation worldwide has been dramatic over the  
2 past ten years with football now the number one participation sport for females in a  
3 number of countries including England, Norway and the USA (Hong, 2003).  
4 Worldwide, there are now 2.9 million registered youth female players, equating to a  
5 32% increase since 2000. With the success of the recent UEFA Women's European  
6 Championships in 2009 and the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2011, women's football  
7 is now in a unique position where its' profile can be raised on an international level.  
8 This undoubtedly offers the opportunity for the development on a global scale.

9 The growth of female football has led to an increased focus on female player  
10 development within different countries. In England, for example, the Football  
11 Association's (FA) 'Women's and Girl's Football Strategy 2008 – 2012' focuses on the  
12 development of female football at all levels of participation and at different levels of  
13 involvement (e.g. players, coaches and officials). Within their strategy, the FA state that  
14 there is a need to develop better female players, increase and retain female participation,  
15 raise standards and behaviour, and increase awareness and positive perception of the  
16 women's and girls' game. Unfortunately, within talent development in general, there is  
17 a lack of widespread evidence – based practice (Bailey et al. 2009) and the translation  
18 of sport science research to practice has generally been found wanting (Bishop, 2008;  
19 Ford, Yates & Williams, 2010).

20 Whilst there has been sociological debate about the development of female  
21 football on a worldwide scale (e.g. Hong, 2003) that demonstrated an appreciation of  
22 the growth and importance of female football, there remains a lack of research with  
23 youth female football players that has targeted an understanding of their  
24 developmental experiences from a longitudinal perspective (Gledhill & Harwood, 2011;  
25 Van Yperen, 2009). This has particular importance for two key reasons. First, child,

1 adolescent and adult experiences are quantitatively and qualitatively different (Wiese-  
2 Bjornstal, LaVoi & Omli, 2009). This suggests that to understand the experience of a  
3 female youth player, researchers must examine this experience from their perspective.  
4 Further, because only a minority of talented young female football players can progress  
5 onto being elite level adult players, our understanding of such developmental  
6 experiences could play a vital role in helping football organisations to enhance the  
7 female game by learning from those who have lived that experience. Second, in sport  
8 psychology research in general, male athletes are disproportionately represented when  
9 considered alongside female players, suggesting a greater depth of investigation with  
10 female players is required (Conroy, Kaye & Schantz, 2008). Given the male-dominated  
11 structure of professional sport, the needs of females athletes are often misunderstood  
12 (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Many of the major posits of talent development in football  
13 research are based on findings from predominantly male populations (Gledhill &  
14 Harwood, 2011), with conclusions being transposed into female football. This is  
15 particularly apparent with the major conceptual framework associated with talent  
16 development in football (Holt & Dunn, 2004) where the key findings are based on the  
17 experiences of male youth football players. This makes the generalizability of findings  
18 into female football difficult due to developmental differences between males and  
19 females (Gill, 2001).

20 Whilst the body of research into youth sport has undergone recent expansion  
21 (e.g. Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox & Mandigo, 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo  
22 & Fox, 2009), still little is known about the developmental experiences of youth football  
23 players from the player's perspective. Further research that is sensitive to different  
24 stages in the developmental process and with individuals from a range of talent  
25 development systems is needed (Holt & Dunn, 2004).

1           When considering a developmental approach to sport psychology, researchers  
2   often explore patterns of development in psychosocial factors affecting sport  
3   participation. The term ‘development’ is seen to refer to the nurturing and enhancement  
4   of football players (Holt & Dunn, 2004). A developmental approach focuses on internal  
5   affective and psychological processes which influence social relational interactions  
6   whilst also appreciating an individual’s progressing maturational phases. Inevitably,  
7   throughout a player’s developmental process, there will be multiple social agents  
8   (Ullrich – French & Smith, 2009) that act upon the athlete that will influence their  
9   development, both as young football players and as young people. Previous football-  
10   specific literature has examined social and motivational predictors of sport participation  
11   (e.g. Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009), the influence of coaching behaviours (e.g. Weiss,  
12   Amorose & Wilko, 2009), and parenting styles (e.g. Sapieja, Dunn & Holt, 2009);  
13   however there are few links made specifically to the talent development of elite female  
14   football players. In addition, there is currently little understanding from a developmental  
15   perspective or relating to if or how their perceived influence changes throughout the  
16   course of a female football player’s career.

17           Given the lack of literature that adopts a developmental approach, the aim of the  
18   current study is to gain a richer insight into the developmental experiences of elite youth  
19   female football players by adopting a qualitative approach that is supplemented by a  
20   composite sequence analysis. When combined, these approaches can serve to provide a  
21   rich developmental understanding of developmental experiences of female youth  
22   football players. This is will be achieved by addressing the following key research  
23   questions: a) What are the developmental experiences of elite youth female football  
24   players; b) How do these experiences change throughout their playing career; c) What  
25   are the key factors that players feel have helped them to become an elite youth player;

and d) How do players feel these key factors have influenced their developmental experiences?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

We used purposive sampling which involved the selection of a sample of female football players ( $N=4$ ;  $M$  age at time of first interview = 16.75 years,  $SD = 0.5$ ) for whom the research questions were relevant (Patton, 2002). Given the focus of the study, the sampling criteria were that players had to play for a youth international team, international college representative team or a team in the Women's Premier League (WPL - the highest level of female football in the UK at the time of the first interview), thus making them a clear representative sample (cf. Barker et al. 2010). Players reported a mean playing experience of 8.13 years ( $SD = 0.48$ ) which included attaining the following levels of performance: youth international level ( $n=3$ ), international colleges representative team ( $n=4$ ) and WPL ( $n=4$ ). Players represented different club teams and two players transferred club teams (by entering the newly formed Women's Super League) during the study. Access was gained to players through the lead author's professional acquaintances within football. All players were from a divorced-remarried parental structure and lived with their biological mothers and step-fathers. All players and their families were from a white Caucasian background. Each player received a participant information letter and informed consent form that was appropriately completed prior to the study commencing.

#### ***Data collection***

This study took place over a 20-month period. We adopted an interpretive qualitative

approach where players were encouraged to provide the lead researcher with ‘their story’ of their developmental experiences in football. This provided an interpretive form of understanding to gain a rich understanding of their lived experiences. Given the prospective element of the study, the interpretive approach allowed us to study these players’ stories as they unfolded over time (Smith, 2010). An important reflection here is that ‘data’ refers to information gained from all meetings<sup>1</sup> with players. This data included transcriptions of audio recordings of interviews, information from a reflexive audio diary and field notes made by the lead researcher during, or shortly after, meetings (c.f. Douglas & Carless, 2009).

### ***Interviews***

In total, 10 formal interviews (three each with Beth and Lisa pre-season 1, post-season 1 and post-season 2; two each with Amanda and Michelle who were unable to attend formal interviews post-season 1) took place over the course of the study (mean duration = 52.2 minutes, SD = 9.81). Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher who has 15 years’ experience coaching football to both male and female players as well as eight years’ experience providing sport science support to youth athletes. Data was collected as part of the lead author’s PhD thesis examining psychosocial factors associated with talent development in female football. No players in the current study had previously been coached or supported by either of the researchers conducting the study. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. During each interview, clarification probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) were used to clarify meaning and add depth to the understanding of the players’ experience (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2009). During

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘meeting’ refers to formal interviews, attending games, informal face – to – face discussions and telephone conversations.



1 interviews, the lead researcher discriminated between those instances where the order  
2 and connections between experiences appeared clearly from the athletes' accounts and  
3 those instances where this was less clear (cf. Nieuwenhuys, Vos, Pijpstra & Bakker,  
4 2011) as the quality and clarity of players' expressions potentially influences the  
5 sequential structuring of experiences. In instances where the order or sequence of events  
6 was unclear, probe questions were further adopted to ensure accurate sequential  
7 structuring.

8         The interview guide was based on a systematic review of football specific  
9 literature (Gledhill & Harwood, 2011) and was separated into the following areas:  
10 General background in football / rapport building questions (e.g., How did you get  
11 started in football?); family (e.g., Have your family helped you to develop as a player?);  
12 peers (e.g., Do your peers influence your development as a player?); coaches (e.g. What  
13 do you think are the qualities of a good football coach?), psychological skills use (e.g.,  
14 Do you use any particular psychological skills to help develop your football?);  
15 perceived football competence (e.g., What do you think makes you a good football  
16 player?); and perceived personal qualities (e.g., What personal qualities do you think  
17 you possess that have helped you to become a good football player?). The initial  
18 retrospective interviews served to allow players to reflect on their career to date to  
19 provide their stories in an open – ended manner using their own words (cf. Douglas &  
20 Carless, 2009). Questions were centred on the different age groups that players  
21 progressed through within football. The interview guide was provided to players prior  
22 to the interview so that they had time to consider the focus and nature of the interview  
23 with a view to increasing the richness of data collected (cf. Christensen, 2009).

24         Follow-up interviews served to investigate the current aspects of the players'  
25 careers and their development during the course of the study (e.g., Are there any

changes happening in your career now; How do you feel you are currently developing as a player?). The prospective aspect of the interviews pertained to the players' future career development (e.g., what do you think you will need to do to be able to progress from this point? What help / advice do you get from [significant people around you] that helps you to develop as a player? How do you feel this help / advice is contributing to your development?).

### ***Fieldwork***

Alongside interviews, the lead researcher used informal data collection methods during fieldwork to allow the players to feel more at ease leading to greater rapport development (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007), to reduce the influences of recall bias, and to allow for the developmental tracking of players. During the 20 month period, the lead researcher had a number of open ended informal discussions with participants. These discussions included a variety of topics that were raised by the players (e.g., progression between international age groups, breakdown in coach –athlete relationships, changing playing position, team manager resigning). Furthermore, the lead researcher also attended 19 league and youth international football matches in which the players were participating. This yielded further informal pre- and post-match discussions surrounding a range of developmental topics; from pre-match discussions about 'how things were going', to post-match discussions surrounding feedback from coaches or feedback and comments from fathers.

### ***Data analysis***

Data was initially analysed using the two stage method of inductive content analysis (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russel, 1993). This method adopted a line by line analysis to provide an initial descriptive understanding of the themes that emerged from the data.

Philosophically, we adopted an interpretive approach whereby the developmental experiences of these players could be interpreted using their words, subjective meanings and representations.

A composite sequence analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was adopted whereby the developmental experiences given by players were placed into a sequential framework of chronologically structured events (cf. Nieuwenhuys et al. 2011) providing a plausible *developmental* understanding of the female players' experiences.

Next, as part of a collaborative member checking process, each participant was provided with the interpretations of the lead researcher and asked to critically comment on these interpretations and the sequencing in which they occurred, thereby creating a developmental reality co-constructed with these particular players (Chase, 2005).

## **Results and Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to explore the developmental experiences of elite female youth football players, and the key factors that players feel have helped them to become an elite youth player. A unique feature of this study was that we investigated elite youth female football players whilst they were developing which allowed us to interpret temporal changes and their perceived importance. Therefore, in order to bring these key developmental factors, processes and associated experiences to life and to locate them in the developmental timeline of a female player, we present the results of the CSA first, before more specific attention is paid to each theme individually.

### ***Composite sequence analysis (CSA)***

The CSA (see figure 1) of events found that between ages 6-10, the brother and father of the developing player were important for initiating play in football. In addition, the father was important for encouraging play in football and peers were important for

1 facilitating play in football. Between the ages of 10 – 12, competition against male  
2 counter parts was important for developing football specific attributes. Ages 12 – 14  
3 offered the female players the opportunity to enter organised female-only football and  
4 provided them with the opportunity to “stand out” amongst other female players.  
5 However, players also thought that they developed the least in their formal football  
6 development during this period. This was related to being no longer allowed to compete  
7 against male players in matches, even though they did still play against male players in  
8 unsupervised games. Between the ages of 14 – 17, involvement in organised female  
9 football (consistently with junior squads of WPL teams) was seen as important as this  
10 provided the opportunity to stand out against other female players, thus providing  
11 opportunity for entry to international level. During these ages, the increased  
12 commitment, discipline and sacrificing a “normal teenage life” was central to continued  
13 development and ‘non – football friends’ were important in assisting this process  
14 outside football. Between 17 – 19 years, further increased commitment was noted  
15 through sacrificing elements of what players referred to as a “normal late teens / early  
16 adult life” (such as refraining from having a boyfriend / girlfriend, and from drinking  
17 alcohol). Players also noted an increased attention to, value of, and actioning of, the  
18 technical advice provided by coaches, experienced fathers and experienced brothers.  
19 Finally, this was the age range where players began to use different psychological skills  
20 (e.g. self-talk, goal-setting, imagery) more frequently. Throughout all age ranges, the  
21 father and brother acted as role models, a source of football inspiration and important  
22 providers of informational support. Furthermore, emotional and tangible support from  
23 family members was viewed as central to continued involvement and development as a  
24 player. Enjoyment and perceived competence were important for initiating and  
25 continued participation, with perceived competence also being seen as a factor in

improving as a football player. Finally, social support from peers was an important factor in maintaining participation.

The following sections will now elucidate these key developmental themes, using block quotes of the players' voice that convey the meaning of the players' experiences (cf. Barker et al. 2010; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Pseudonyms are attached to player comments to maintain confidentiality. Integrated are discussions in the context of prior literature, and future research and applied implications.

### ***Football-fathers***

A meaningful developmental influence from the earliest age of playing football (6 years) and throughout the playing career was each player's biological father (*football fathers*). Corroborating previous football-specific findings from elite youth male players (e.g., Holt & Dunn, 2004), the football-father provided tangible support in the form of transport and finances. Michelle and Lisa pointed out that their fathers "took them everywhere" to play football, whereas Beth pointed out that her father provided finances for kit, such as buying her new boots. All players highlighted that their fathers watched a lot of their football which they felt was a sign that their fathers were interested in their development and this fostered positive father – child relationships.

To our knowledge, a finding unique to this study was that each football-father had a current or previous role within professional football either as a player, or a coach, or both. Most meaningful from a talent development perspective was that, as a result of their fathers' experiences in football, players had access to high quality informational support. Informational support provides individuals with advice or guidance about possible solutions to problems (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Each player reported this as significant in their development and told a story about how their father had helped them

1 to develop as a player. Michelle had an interesting relationship as her father was also  
2 her football coach when she was younger.

3 “My dad coached weekends when I was growing up and he took me with  
4 him...It was quite nice being coached by my dad as I was growing up.  
5 Sometimes you’ll get coaches that don’t really know how to handle you, but  
6 because he was my dad as well, he knew how to handle me. He knew what I  
7 wanted from football; he knew how I learnt things best so all that really helped  
8 me learn as a player”

9 Lisa discussed how she respected her father’s playing experience and how his  
10 understanding of his daughter helped to contribute to her development as a football  
11 player:

12 “...he was always taking me to the park and having a kick about with me and  
13 then I found out that he was quite a good player in his day. He was at  
14 [professional clubs] but then had to retire because of injury. He knows his stuff  
15 to be fair and he is always my worst critic but it’s good cos he knows me and  
16 knows how I work, so if I’ve played bad and come off the pitch in a mood, he  
17 knows how to deal with me and talks to me about stuff I can do to improve.”

18 After moving to a new club (at the highest level of women’s football in England), Beth  
19 discussed how her father has helped to develop her and also provides an insight into  
20 how her father’s behaviour has changed towards her during the more recent stages of  
21 her career:

22 “My dad is always honest with me about how I’m going. It’s really important to  
23 me as obviously he knows a lot about football being a former player and now  
24 coaching, and for him to talk to me about what I need to do is only going to push  
25 me on further. As I’ve got older the type of advice he gives me has got more

1 technical... Now that I'm playing at a higher level, I've learned more about the  
2 game and we can now talk much more in – depth about it and it's like me and  
3 my dad are talking about how I can improve now rather than my dad just telling  
4 me what I've done right or wrong and how I can improve. My dad always like  
5 asks me now what the coach has said to me in my reviews too...I know how  
6 hard it is going to be to get into the [senior international team], so my dad is  
7 always helping me understand what's been said and encouraging me to listen to  
8 what my coach has said. It's good with my dad now cos I don't ever get a lie out  
9 of him now about football. ”

10 This provides an important extension to previous football parenting literature  
11 which highlighted that more competent parents of female football players were able to  
12 have effective performance-related discussions with their children post competition  
13 (Holt & Black, 2007). As these players' careers progressed, they perceived their fathers  
14 to increase the quality of informational support given to match the requirements of the  
15 player and players placed great emphasis on this because of the professional  
16 experiences of their fathers. In attempt to explain player-level benefits of this, based on  
17 the fact that these football fathers were essentially *coach-fathers*, we examined the  
18 sports coaching (e.g. Ford et al., 2010), pedagogy (e.g. Hubball & Robertson, 2004) and  
19 parenting literature. From this, we surmised that these coach-fathers were enhancing the  
20 development of their *daughter-players* by creating an effective learning environment  
21 using techniques acquired through their playing experience and / or coach education.  
22 Due to the positive father-daughter relationships reported by players we argue that the  
23 developmental impact of fathers was greater given the motivational influence that  
24 parents exert (Gershgoren, Tenenbaum, Gershgoren & Eklund, 2011).

1           The informational support from the father occasionally differed from the advice  
2   that was being provided by the coach. Given the experience and knowledge of the  
3   fathers in this study, this sometimes became a source of internal conflict for the players  
4   as they were unsure of which advice to follow. Importantly, the football fathers  
5   encouraged the players to follow the advice provided by the coaches rather than their  
6   own as the advice of the coach would tie in with the needs of the team. For example,  
7   during a conversation after a game where Michelle had immediately gone to speak to  
8   her father about her performance, I asked Michelle how she felt about her dad speaking  
9   to her about her performance after games. She offered the following observations:

10           “As I’ve got older and moved to [current team] my dad still talks to me about  
11           how I can improve cos he still watches all of my games when he isn’t coaching.  
12           I always take my dad’s advice on-board but whenever my dad says something  
13           different to my coach, he will always be like ‘take your coach’s advice because  
14           you play for them, you don’t play for me now’. This helped me to understand a  
15           bit more about why I needed to listen to my coach and sorta made me value  
16           what they said more.”

17   Speculatively, we assume that this parenting style is grounded in the fathers’ experience  
18   within professional football. We maintain that this football experience has provided  
19   these football fathers with a more empathic understanding of the importance of the  
20   coach – player relationship (Becker, 2009) and the influence that they (as football  
21   parents) could have on the dyadic coach – player relationship (Jowett & Timson-  
22   Katchis, 2005). However this assumption can merely be accepted as informed  
23   speculation in the absence of data from these football fathers. In addition, given the  
24   positive tone conveyed by players exposed to this paternal football background and



1 experience, we cannot assume that such facilitative father-daughter dyads will exist  
2 where fathers lack such specificity of football knowledge and experience.

3 Notwithstanding this lack of data from parents with differing backgrounds, our  
4 results demonstrate important examples of football parenting perceived as facilitative by  
5 developing players. Previous soccer-specific literature (e.g., Holt & Mitchell, 2006) has  
6 noted how parents can be a potential obstacle to talent development in football if  
7 inappropriate parenting behaviours are adopted. Therefore, the behaviours of the  
8 football-fathers in the current study could serve to enhance current parent education  
9 literature for other football parents with a view to enhancing player development.

10 A final point of consideration here is that all of the players in the current study  
11 were from divorced-remarried parenting structures. Although players were not asked if  
12 they felt this had impacted on their development as players, literature investigating the  
13 impact of divorce on children has suggested that they can develop and utilise more self-  
14 regulation and coping strategies (Mo-Yee, 2002). As self-regulation and coping  
15 strategies have been cited in football specific research as distinguishing factors in  
16 football success (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Jonker Eleferink-Gemser & Visscher, 2010),  
17 examining the impact of parental structure on player development in football is a  
18 noteworthy future direction.

### 19 ***Football-brothers***

20 Players in the current study all perceived their siblings as playing significant roles in  
21 their development as players. All of the players in the current study had at least one  
22 older brother that had played football from county representative squad level to full  
23 professional status (*a football brother*) and was important from the ages of 6-10 in  
24 helping them become interested in football. For example, Beth, Lisa and Amanda all  
25 reported that their older brother was the first one to invite them to go and have a “kick

about” and they found this initial involvement enjoyable. Lisa also linked in that her brother had helped with her initial socialisation into football which helped her to cope with the nature of football players:

“It all started with my brother really. When I was younger, like 9, I used to go out there with my brother and we’d go play with some of the lads from school and their brothers and because of that I started playing in my local boys team at U10. After that I went into the U12 boys’ team and then started at current club’s junior team]. I just really enjoyed getting out there and playing with them, it gave me a right buzz.”

As players got older and had aspirations of elite football, the older brother of the female players had significant modelling effects either as a positive or negative model.

Contrary to previous sibling literature that suggests younger siblings may attempt to de-identify with older siblings (e.g., Sulloway, 1996), it was clear that players viewed their older sibling as a football role model and wanted to emulate (Azmitia & Messer, 1993) or surpass their brother’s achievements. Unlike sibling conflict literature (e.g. Haggan, 2002), this desire to surpass the older sibling did not result in conflict. In fact, players perceived this desire to progress as strengthening the sibling bond. This was due to the older sibling’s wish to help their younger sibling to succeed. In order to develop, players received advice about the brother’s experiences and learned from these (cf. Azmitia & Messer, 1993). When invited to talk openly about how her brother had influenced her as a football player, Michelle offered the following observations about the lessons she had learned from her football brother as a negative role model:

“He had all the talent in the world and he was at [a professional club] from a really young age but he let it all go to his head. He thought he’d made it when he was 16 when really he should have known that you haven’t made until you’re

1 like...David Beckham. He made lots of wrong choices like not looking after  
2 himself, going out drinking with his friends a lot and never really listening to his  
3 coach. My brother always thought that he knew better than everyone else. When  
4 I saw him get kicked out of [professional club], I saw how he reacted and now  
5 he'll advise me on his mistakes and that has helped shape my career”

6 Beth provided an alternative perspective regarding the positive role model effect of her  
7 football brother:

8 “He was a model pro. You can’t question what he achieved in football. I learnt a  
9 lot from him about diet, nutrition and generally looking after yourself... If you  
10 don’t look after yourself, you’ll never make it as a footballer. Because of that,  
11 I’m not bothered about going out drinking and stuff and I really try to look after  
12 myself.”

13 Amanda provided a different context to the role of the football-brother. She discussed  
14 how deliberate play with her older brother had developed her as a player through  
15 exposure to position specific requirements and, ultimately, how this impacted on her  
16 early career:

17 “well, he always played right hand side of midfield, so I’ve ended up playing  
18 there too now. We took turns crossing the ball for each other all of the time. I  
19 used to be the person he’d aim for but then we’d swap over. Then we’d like act  
20 as defenders for each other and we’d race for the ball and stuff, so that was great  
21 for me because I’m really small so when I started playing football, I’m not being  
22 big headed like, but I was already really fast – I never liked [brother’s name]  
23 beating me to the ball even though he always did! I was already good at running  
24 past people with the ball, could do tricks to get past people and I could cross a

1 ball whilst I was running. Cos I was playing against some people who struggled  
2 to kick a ball, I really stood out.”

3 These preliminary findings expand current understanding (e.g. Holt et al., 2009) to  
4 demonstrate part of the mechanism by which the older siblings exerted their effect. In  
5 addition, findings have added to current sport literature (e.g. Davis & Meyer, 2008)  
6 from same sex siblings by mirroring emotional and informational support related  
7 findings in siblings of different sex. However, as all of the players in the study were the  
8 youngest child in birth order, the findings do not allow for discussion of birth order  
9 effects.

#### 10 ***Peer experiences***

11 Peers emerged as a positive motivational influence on players in terms of both  
12 maintained involvement in football and as a resource for player development. Extending  
13 earlier literature (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009), players discussed the notion of  
14 *football friends* (friends that were also team – mates) and *non – football friends* (friends  
15 that were from outside football, such as school friends). In doing so, players  
16 differentiated between the relative roles of these distinct groups on talent development.  
17 Players received emotional support from football friends, particularly during times of  
18 difficulty, such as bullying, injury or being dropped from the team. For example,  
19 football friends provided social support that served to change Michelle’s perceptions  
20 and understanding of female involvement in football and how peers at the age of 12  
21 helped her to recover from being bullied for playing football:

22 “You know, as I was growing up I got bullied quite a lot because I played  
23 football. All the lads were like ‘ah, you play football, you’re a man’...and my  
24 first football team basically told my dad that I wasn’t going to play because I  
25 was a girl, even though we were only 11 so I could play on the same team as the

1 boys. I was like ‘my god, am I the only girl that plays football?’ I would say the  
2 main people that helped me get past that were my team mates. I got to my new  
3 club and it was all girls and it was like ‘I’m not the only girl that plays football!’  
4 and they had all been through the same thing as me, you know the bullying and  
5 stuff, so they were the biggest support for me because they understood it when  
6 they’d been through it”.

7 Whilst similar findings are evident in female physical activity settings (e.g. King,  
8 Tergerson & Wilson, 2008), to our knowledge this is the first finding of its type that has  
9 demonstrated how social support has indirectly led to progression to elite level female  
10 football.

11 Between the ages of 12-14, female players participated in deliberate play (Côté,  
12 Baker, & Abernethy, 2003; 2007) against male players as this enhanced their enjoyment  
13 of football during a time when they felt a lack of development from playing against  
14 female players. Players saw this ‘friendly’ competition against male players as essential  
15 for development particularly because of the increased demands of playing against males  
16 and how this helped developed physical strength and perceptual skills (cf. Berry,  
17 Abernathy & Côté, 2008). Although from a small sample of elite youth female football  
18 players, the importance placed by female football players on the competition against  
19 male players is a pertinent finding in this study as it underscores the importance of  
20 tailoring female football to the needs of elite players during the sampling and  
21 specialising years. This has contemporary importance in the current structure and  
22 organisation of child and youth football in countries where age restrictions for mixed-  
23 sex competitions are currently in place. For example, in England, recent Football  
24 Association rule changes (rule C4 (a) (vii)) stipulate that female and male players can  
25 only compete against each other up to U13 level– the female players in this study saw

1 such limits as disadvantaging their development as players. Other countries in  
2 Scandinavia and Central Europe have fewer restrictions which could influence the  
3 development of their players.

4 All of the participants discussed how peers, both football friends and non –  
5 football friends, helped them to lead a disciplined lifestyle. These included encouraging  
6 players to maintain their disciplined lifestyle and arranging activities that would allow  
7 players to socialise without any issues that could negatively affect football. Beth  
8 discussed how her friends had contributed to supporting her involvement in football and  
9 how this has changed as she has progressed as a footballer:

10 “My friends when I was younger always used to talk to me about football and  
11 stuff and like why I played it and things like that and they always seemed quite  
12 interested cos they knew I was good at it. When I think back, that was quite  
13 important because it made me think about why I played it and what I needed to  
14 do to keep playing. As we got older, and they started going out and stuff, they  
15 were never like ‘oh just miss training and come get drunk with us’ so not having  
16 that pressure helped me to avoid the temptation, instead they’d like say ‘oh, shall  
17 we organise a night we can go bowling or go to the pictures when you’re not  
18 busy with football?’, which was important cos sometimes you do sort of like feel  
19 that you have to miss out on being a teenager if you’re going to be a good  
20 football player... As I’ve gone further up in football, like at youth international  
21 on the Women’s Super League, some of my friends give me some banter about  
22 never seeing me... but that’s good for me cos it shows that they still wanna be  
23 around me and they still make plans to see me.”

24 These findings suggest that non – football friends brought a sense of ‘normality’ into  
25 the teenage lives of the players that helped them to focus on non-football matters. This

1 fostered a 'time-out' period from football when a rest was needed. In addition, players  
2 reported that non – football friends would help them maintain a disciplined lifestyle by  
3 changing the plans of the social group to accommodate the player's needs. In one of the  
4 later discussions after she had started regularly representing [senior team], when asked  
5 about the role of her friends outside football, Michelle offered the following:

6 "My friends realise how important my football is to me so...they're not always  
7 like lets go out Friday, Saturday night or whatever, they're always like you go  
8 training get yourself sorted out and then we'll arrange a time to go to the cinema  
9 or something. They respect that I have to balance my life quite a lot, so they  
10 make time for me rather than trying to get me to do the things that I shouldn't  
11 really be doing."

12 These initial findings provide suggestions regarding the differing roles of both football-  
13 and non-football peers in talent development and warrants further in – depth qualitative  
14 investigation.

### 15 ***Early access to competition***

16 All players retrospectively reported the importance of early access to competition as an  
17 essential part of the developmental experience. Of particular importance to them was  
18 playing football against boys up until the age of 12. Below, Beth explains her  
19 perception of the experiences:

20 "Yeah, it was really good playing against boys at that age because it gave me  
21 that competitive edge. You know, boys don't want to lose to the girls because  
22 boys can't lose to girls, and girls don't want to lose to the boys because they  
23 want to prove that they can play football as well so that's where I got my  
24 competitive edge and it just grew from there. Playing against boys who were  
25 bigger and stronger was better for me cos it developed me physically I think, but

1 also because the standard of girls football at that age was never as good as the  
2 boys so yeah, I found it really beneficial playing against boys”.

3 As noted by Amanda however, she thought it was important in her development  
4 to play with male players in unsupervised games “I was as good as, if not better than a  
5 lot of the boys I played against, but the FA said we’re not allowed [to carry on playing  
6 against boys after the age of 12] ... I just carried on playing against lads outside the  
7 organised games because they were so much better than any of the girls I played  
8 against.”

### 9 ***Coach***

10 The data presented provided a female youth specific insight into the perceptions of the  
11 roles of coaches and understanding player – coach relationships. Fasting and Pfister  
12 (2000) reported that elite female players viewed female coaches more positively than  
13 male coaches due to a greater understanding of the needs of female players on the part  
14 of female coaches. In this study, male coaches were often reported to have unrealistic  
15 performance-related expectations. Michelle reported:

16 “I think there is a big difference between working with male and female  
17 coaches. I think male coaches in general treat women’s football the same way as  
18 they treat men’s football and they don’t realise that women physically can’t do  
19 the things that men can sometimes. When I’m coached by women, I find they  
20 treat us as women and women footballers rather than expecting us to be men!  
21 The male coaches tend to expect us to do things faster because that’s what  
22 they’re used to with men and when we can’t they just tell us to do it better or do  
23 it faster and my head just goes straight down because you don’t know what they  
24 expect to you to do.”



1 However, three players preferred working with the male coaches due to greater  
2 perceived technical coaching competence. Beth discussed some of the differences she  
3 has experienced and how they have affected her development:

4 “It’s like, I know technically male and female coaches should be as good as each  
5 other as they have to do the same coaching badges and stuff, but I just think that  
6 the male coaches that I’ve worked with are so much better in some ways. Like  
7 my coach now, he pays so much attention to detail in everything, he knows each  
8 of the different players individually and knows each of our individual needs and  
9 because of that we get so much more out of working with him. I’ve never really  
10 had that with a female coach.”

11 Furthermore, some players in the current study did not report the same  
12 communication problems reported by Fasting and Pfister (2000). Beth provides an  
13 insight into her experiences:

14 “I don’t really feel comfortable talking to women managers...but with male  
15 managers I feel like I can talk about anything. Like with my club manager now,  
16 he is always there for me, he always wants the best for me and he will do  
17 anything to make sure that his players are happy; I’ve never really had that with  
18 a female manager. At international level, it is harder to form relationships with  
19 the manager as well because you don’t see them as often and you don’t know  
20 them as well, so I’ve always found it easier to form relationships with my club  
21 manager.”

22 The positive experiences with male coaches reported in this study could be explained by  
23 the positive relationship that female players developed with other significant males in  
24 their life (e.g., football fathers, football brothers) and how the players had become  
25 accustomed to talking to males about their football performance. However, when the

1 communication pathway was reversed with the coach providing information to the  
2 player, each player reported negative coach interaction due to inappropriate  
3 communication styles (cf. Holt, Tamminen, Tink & Black, 2009). These findings  
4 suggest a need for further coach education relating specifically to the needs of female  
5 youth football players.

### 6 *Self-reflection and volitional behaviour*

7 During the course of the study, Beth's career progressed the furthest. She regularly  
8 represented a senior team in the highest level of women's football in the UK and  
9 amassed the highest number of international caps. Towards the end of the first season,  
10 all players were asked what they thought they needed to do to be able to progress in  
11 their football career. Interestingly, Amanda, Lisa and Michelle's responses were limited  
12 to statements such as "keep working hard and hope I get the call" or "listen to my  
13 coaches and see where I can go from there". During one of the fieldwork sessions, Beth  
14 provided a response that demonstrated she had volitionally taken a reflective stance on  
15 her own football performance and had identified strengths and areas for improvement  
16 that she was trying to work on:

17 "...because I really want to move into the senior international team now, I've  
18 started watching the senior internationals and the senior players in my team a lot  
19 more now to try to figure out what it is they have that I don't. I know it's a team  
20 game, but when you want to play for [international team] it's almost like you're  
21 competing against your team mates as well. I've noticed that I need to work more  
22 on my left foot because [senior international player currently playing in Beth's  
23 position] is miles better than me with both feet. My right is really good but when I  
24 come inside, I need to be better with my left so that I have a better range of  
25 passing."

In addition to reflecting on her football performance, Beth also reported using goal,- setting strategies and psychological skills training techniques (specifically self-talk, affirmations and imagery) as coping strategies and for performance enhancement. As self-reflection and volitional behaviour are key aspects of self-regulation, we considered self-regulation literature to interpret the potential impact of Beth's behaviours.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The current study has provided an account of the developmental experiences of elite female youth football players and has placed these experiences in a CSA of events bound by age ranges. A key strength of this research has been its ability to highlight links between elite female talent development and positive youth development by suggesting a reciprocal, cyclic link between these two areas, as well as mechanisms behind the link. Specifically, we have illuminated the role of *non – football friends* in helping developing female players to maintain the disciplined lifestyle required for talent development in football. Moreover, the importance of informational support provided by *football brothers* and *football fathers* have been brought to the fore; as have the mechanisms by which football fathers can positively influence the talent development of their daughters through the interaction of high level informational support and understanding the needs of their daughter – players. Finally, we have interpreted self-regulative characteristics including self-reflection as factors that can potentially differentiate the rate of development of female players at youth elite level. From these initial findings stem several important research and practice implications. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size, homogeneous nature of the sample, and the family structure (i.e., having a father and / or brother with playing / coaching experience in high level football) of the players investigated potentially limits generalizability. Therefore, it would be prudent to study those young female players

1 who do not have access or exposure to similar environmental factors and conditions.  
2 Secondly, given some of the clear developmental stages and transitions that these young  
3 female players experienced, there is an opportunity for research to target the demands of  
4 each specific transition with greater scrutiny. For example, prospective longitudinal  
5 research with players from 10-14 years old may help to understand their challenges and  
6 resources in more depth (e.g., how young females cope when they are no longer able to  
7 compete with boys in mixed teams; in order to inform this policy). Thirdly, by using the  
8 visual progressions of the CSA and relevant quotes from participants, the content and  
9 messages of educational workshops for parents, adolescent players and coaches may be  
10 strengthened. Managing friendships, a disciplined and committed lifestyle, and self-  
11 reflection are a few key educational themes reinforced by this research.

12 In sum, we feel that this research provides the starting point for a thoughtful  
13 dialogue between scholars, practitioners, clubs and federations to inform the  
14 development of female youth football players.

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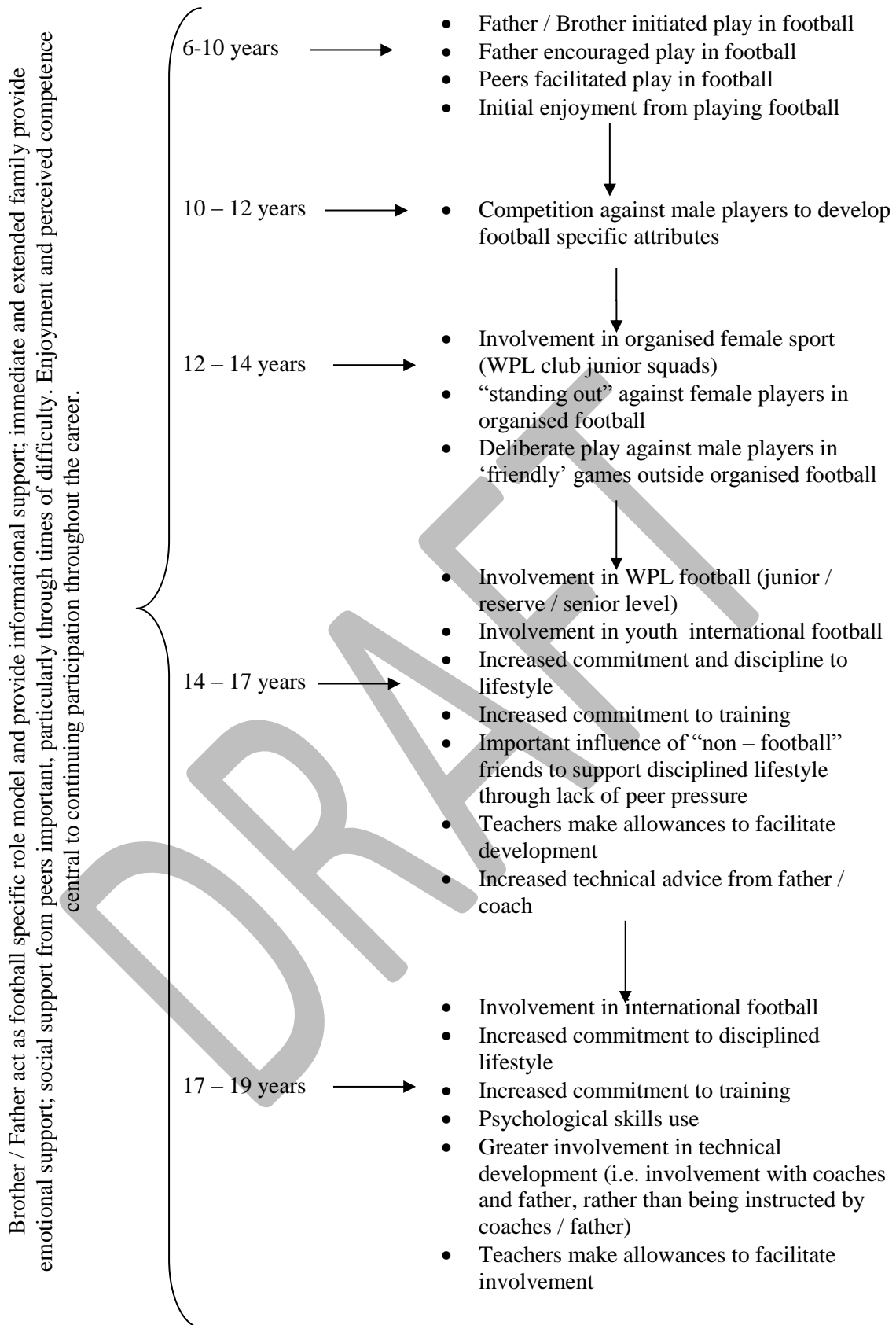


Figure 1. Composite Sequence Analysis of factors positively influencing the development of elite female youth football players.