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

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

Whilst there has been sociological debate about the development of female
football on a worldwide scale (e.g. Hong, 2003) that demonstrated an appreciation of
the growth and importance of female football, there remains a lack of research with
youth female football players that has that has targeted an understanding of their
developmental experiences from a longitudinal perspective (Gledhill & Harwood, 2011;
Van Yperen, 2009). This has particular importance for two key reasons. First, child,
adolescent and adult experiences are quantitatively and qualitatively different (Wiese-Bjornstal, LaVoi & Omli, 2009). This suggests that to understand the experience of a female youth player, researchers must examine this experience from their perspective. Further, because only a minority of talented young female football players can progress onto being elite level adult players, our understanding of such developmental experiences could play a vital role in helping football organisations to enhance the female game by learning from those who have lived that experience. Second, in sport psychology research in general, male athletes are disproportionately represented when considered alongside female players, suggesting a greater depth of investigation with female players is required (Conroy, Kaye & Schantz, 2008). Given the male-dominated structure of professional sport, the needs of females athletes are often misunderstood (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Many of the major posits of talent development in football research are based on findings from predominantly male populations (Gledhill & Harwood, 2011), with conclusions being transposed into female football. This is particularly apparent with the major conceptual framework associated with talent development in football (Holt & Dunn, 2004) where the key findings are based on the experiences of male youth football players. This makes the generalizability of findings into female football difficult due to developmental differences between males and females (Gill, 2001).

Whilst the body of research into youth sport has undergone recent expansion (e.g. Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox & Mandigo, 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo & Fox, 2009), still little is known about the developmental experiences of youth football players from the player’s perspective. Further research that is sensitive to different stages in the developmental process and with individuals from a range of talent development systems is needed (Holt & Dunn, 2004).
When considering a developmental approach to sport psychology, researchers often explore patterns of development in psychosocial factors affecting sport participation. The term ‘development’ is seen to refer to the nurturing and enhancement of football players (Holt & Dunn, 2004). A developmental approach focuses on internal affective and psychological processes which influence social relational interactions whilst also appreciating an individual’s progressing maturational phases. Inevitably, throughout a player’s developmental process, there will be multiple social agents (Ullrich–French & Smith, 2009) that act upon the athlete that will influence their development, both as young football players and as young people. Previous football-specific literature has examined social and motivational predictors of sport participation (e.g. Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009), the influence of coaching behaviours (e.g. Weiss, Amorose & Wilko, 2009), and parenting styles (e.g. Sapieja, Dunn & Holt, 2009); however there are few links made specifically to the talent development of elite female football players. In addition, there is currently little understanding from a developmental perspective or relating to if or how their perceived influence changes throughout the course of a female football player’s career.

Given the lack of literature that adopts a developmental approach, the aim of the current study is to gain a richer insight into the developmental experiences of elite youth female football players by adopting a qualitative approach that is supplemented by a composite sequence analysis. When combined, these approaches can serve to provide a rich developmental understanding of developmental experiences of female youth football players. This is will be achieved by addressing the following key research questions: a) What are the developmental experiences of elite youth female football players; b) How do these experiences change throughout their playing career; c) What 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\(^1\) 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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\(^1\) The term ‘meeting’ refers to formal interviews, attending games, informal face – to – face discussions and telephone conversations.
interviews, the lead researcher discriminated between those instances where the order and connections between experiences appeared clearly from the athletes’ accounts and those instances where this was less clear (cf. Nieuwenhuys, Vos, Pijpstra & Bakker, 2011) as the quality and clarity of players’ expressions potentially influences the sequential structuring of experiences. In instances where the order or sequence of events was unclear, probe questions were further adopted to ensure accurate sequential structuring.

The interview guide was based on a systematic review of football specific literature (Gledhill & Harwood, 2011) and was separated into the following areas:

General background in football / rapport building questions (e.g., How did you get started in football?); family (e.g., Have your family helped you to develop as a player?); peers (e.g., Do your peers influence your development as a player?); coaches (e.g. What do you think are the qualities of a good football coach?), psychological skills use (e.g., Do you use any particular psychological skills to help develop your football?); perceived football competence (e.g., What do you think makes you a good football player?); and perceived personal qualities (e.g., What personal qualities do you think you possess that have helped you to become a good football player?). The initial retrospective interviews served to allow players to reflect on their career to date to provide their stories in an open – ended manner using their own words (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2009). Questions were centred on the different age groups that players progressed through within football. The interview guide was provided to players prior to the interview so that they had time to consider the focus and nature of the interview with a view to increasing the richness of data collected (cf. Christensen, 2009).

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

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

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

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

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

“My dad is always honest with me about how I’m going. It’s really important to me as obviously he knows a lot about football being a former player and now coaching, and for him to talk to me about what I need to do is only going to push me on further. As I’ve got older the type of advice he gives me has got more
technical… Now that I’m playing at a higher level, I’ve learned more about the
game and we can now talk much more in – depth about it and it’s like me and
my dad are talking about how I can improve now rather than my dad just telling
me what I’ve done right or wrong and how I can improve. My dad always like
asks me now what the coach has said to me in my reviews too…I know how
hard it is going to be to get into the [senior international team], so my dad is
always helping me understand what’s been said and encouraging me to listen to
what my coach has said. It’s good with my dad now cos I don’t ever get a lie out
of him now about football. ”

This provides an important extension to previous football parenting literature
which highlighted that more competent parents of female football players were able to
have effective performance-related discussions with their children post competition
(Holt & Black, 2007). As these players’ careers progressed, they perceived their fathers
to increase the quality of informational support given to match the requirements of the
player and players placed great emphasis on this because of the professional
experiences of their fathers. In attempt to explain player-level benefits of this, based on
the fact that these football fathers were essentially coach-fathers, we examined the
sports coaching (e.g. Ford et al., 2010), pedagogy (e.g. Hubball & Robertson, 2004) and
parenting literature. From this, we surmised that these coach-fathers were enhancing the
development of their daughter-players by creating an effective learning environment
using techniques acquired through their playing experience and / or coach education.

Due to the positive father-daughter relationships reported by players we argue that the
developmental impact of fathers was greater given the motivational influence that
parents exert (Gershgoren, Tenenbaum, Gershgoren & Eklund, 2011).
The informational support from the father occasionally differed from the advice that was being provided by the coach. Given the experience and knowledge of the fathers in this study, this sometimes became a source of internal conflict for the players as they were unsure of which advice to follow. Importantly, the football fathers encouraged the players to follow the advice provided by the coaches rather than their own as the advice of the coach would tie in with the needs of the team. For example, during a conversation after a game where Michelle had immediately gone to speak to her father about her performance, I asked Michelle how she felt about her dad speaking to her about her performance after games. She offered the following observations:

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

Speculatively, we assume that this parenting style is grounded in the fathers’ experience within professional football. We maintain that this football experience has provided these football fathers with a more empathic understanding of the importance of the coach – player relationship (Becker, 2009) and the influence that they (as football parents) could have on the dyadic coach – player relationship (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). However this assumption can merely be accepted as informed speculation in the absence of data from these football fathers. In addition, given the positive tone conveyed by players exposed to this paternal football background and
experience, we cannot assume that such facilitative father-daughter dyads will exist where fathers lack such specificity of football knowledge and experience.

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

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

**Football-brothers**

Players in the current study all perceived their siblings as playing significant roles in their development as players. All of the players in the current study had at least one older brother that had played football from county representative squad level to full professional status (*a football brother*) and was important from the ages of 6-10 in helping them become interested in football. For example, Beth, Lisa and Amanda all 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
like…David Beckham. He made lots of wrong choices like not looking after himself, going out drinking with his friends a lot and never really listening to his coach. My brother always thought that he knew better than everyone else. When I saw him get kicked out of [professional club], I saw how he reacted and now he’ll advise me on his mistakes and that has helped shape my career”

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

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

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

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

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

**Peer experiences**

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

“You know, as I was growing up I got bullied quite a lot because I played
football. All the lads were like ‘ah, you play football, you’re a man’...and my
first football team basically told my dad that I wasn’t going to play because I
was a girl, even though we were only 11 so I could play on the same team as the
boys. I was like ‘my god, am I the only girl that plays football?’ I would say the main people that helped me get past that were my team mates. I got to my new club and it was all girls and it was like ‘I’m not the only girl that plays football!’ and they had all been through the same thing as me, you know the bullying and stuff, so they were the biggest support for me because they understood it when they’d been through it”.

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

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

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

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

These findings suggest that non-football friends brought a sense of ‘normality’ into the teenage lives of the players that helped them to focus on non-football matters. This
fostered a ‘time–out’ period from football when a rest was needed. In addition, players reported that non–football friends would help them maintain a disciplined lifestyle by changing the plans of the social group to accommodate the player’s needs. In one of the later discussions after she had started regularly representing [senior team], when asked about the role of her friends outside football, Michelle offered the following:

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

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

*Early access to competition*

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

“Yeah, it was really good playing against boys at that age because it gave me that competitive edge. You know, boys don’t want to lose to the girls because boys can’t lose to girls, and girls don’t want to lose to the boys because they want to prove that they can play football as well so that’s where I got my competitive edge and it just grew from there. Playing against boys who were bigger and stronger was better for me cos it developed me physically I think, but
also because the standard of girls football at that age was never as good as the boys so yeah, I found it really beneficial playing against boys”.

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

**Coach**

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

“I think there is a big difference between working with male and female coaches. I think male coaches in general treat women’s football the same way as they treat men’s football and they don’t realise that women physically can’t do the things that men can sometimes. When I’m coached by women, I find they treat us as women and women footballers rather than expecting us to be men! The male coaches tend to expect us to do things faster because that’s what they’re used to with men and when we can’t they just tell us to do it better or do it faster and my head just goes straight down because you don’t know what they expect to you to do.”
However, three players preferred working with the male coaches due to greater perceived technical coaching competence. Beth discussed some of the differences she has experienced and how they have affected her development:

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

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

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

The positive experiences with male coaches reported in this study could be explained by the positive relationship that female players developed with other significant males in their life (e.g., football fathers, football brothers) and how the players had become accustomed to talking to males about their football performance. However, when the
communication pathway was reversed with the coach providing information to the player, each player reported negative coach interaction due to inappropriate communication styles (cf. Holt, Tamminen, Tink & Black, 2009). These findings suggest a need for further coach education relating specifically to the needs of female youth football players.

**Self-reflection and volitional behaviour**

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

“…because I really want to move into the senior international team now, I’ve started watching the senior internationals and the senior players in my team a lot more now to try to figure out what it is they have that I don’t. I know it’s a team game, but when you want to play for [international team] it’s almost like you’re competing against your team mates as well. I’ve noticed that I need to work more on my left foot because [senior international player currently playing in Beth’s position] is miles better than me with both feet. My right is really good but when I come inside, I need to be better with my left so that I have a better range of 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
who do not have access or exposure to similar environmental factors and conditions.

Secondly, given some of the clear developmental stages and transitions that these young female players experienced, there is an opportunity for research to target the demands of each specific transition with greater scrutiny. For example, prospective longitudinal research with players from 10-14 years old may help to understand their challenges and resources in more depth (e.g., how young females cope when they are no longer able to compete with boys in mixed teams; in order to inform this policy). Thirdly, by using the visual progressions of the CSA and relevant quotes from participants, the content and messages of educational workshops for parents, adolescent players and coaches may be strengthened. Managing friendships, a disciplined and committed lifestyle, and self-reflection are a few key educational themes reinforced by this research.

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


Brother / Father act as football specific role model and provide informational support; immediate and extended family provide emotional support; social support from peers important, particularly through times of difficulty. Enjoyment and perceived competence central to continuing participation throughout the career.

6-10 years
- Father / Brother initiated play in football
- Father encouraged play in football
- Peers facilitated play in football
- Initial enjoyment from playing football

10 – 12 years
- Competition against male players to develop football specific attributes

12 – 14 years
- Involvement in organised female sport (WPL club junior squads)
- “standing out” against female players in organised football
- Deliberate play against male players in ‘friendly’ games outside organised football

14 – 17 years
- Involvement in WPL football (junior / reserve / senior level)
- Involvement in youth international football
- Increased commitment and discipline to lifestyle
- Increased commitment to training
- Important influence of “non–football” friends to support disciplined lifestyle through lack of peer pressure
- Teachers make allowances to facilitate development
- Increased technical advice from father / coach

17 – 19 years
- Involvement in International football
- Increased commitment to disciplined lifestyle
- Increased commitment to training
- Psychological skills use
- Greater involvement in technical development (i.e. involvement with coaches and father, rather than being instructed by coaches / father)
- Teachers make allowances to facilitate involvement

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