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Practitioner Perspectives on the Barriers Associated with the Youth to Senior Transition in  
Elite Youth Soccer Academy Players

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### **Abstract**

There are concerns surrounding the lack of players making the transition from youth to professional status within English professional soccer. Stakeholders, such as coaches, have been largely overlooked by researchers often focussing on player experiences. We aimed to explore soccer practitioner perceptions of the debilitating factors associated with youth to senior progression. Practitioners were chosen as they inform the working practices and are the cultural architects of the environment in which players operate. Interviews were conducted with 18 ( $N = 18$ ), male ( $n = 17$ ) and female ( $n = 1$ ) soccer practitioners. These included coaches ( $n = 6$ ), academy managers ( $n = 8$ ) and staff involved with education and welfare ( $n = 4$ ). Data were thematically analysed where four themes were identified (cultural climate, working practices, occupational hazards and social challenges). The analysis provided a clear picture of the transition landscape faced by players seeking to make the youth-to-senior transition through the eyes of soccer practitioners. The findings present a novel viewpoint to facilitate reflection around their own practice when managing youth to senior transitions. Further research is needed to triangulate player experiences and operational aspects of facilitating transitions which could lead to the creation of best practice guidance.

*Keywords:* career transitions, culture, youth soccer, working practices, sport coaching

### **Introduction**

In English professional soccer, around 90% of youth players embarking on a professional career fail to achieve this status (Anderson & Miller, 2011). Fundamentally, concerns in England centre on the small number of young players successfully making the youth to senior team transition. Talent identification and development systems are resource intensive requiring substantial financial investment (Rongen, McKenna, Cobley & Till, 2018). Despite this, there is a perception that young academy players are written off before they have the opportunity to reach their potential with coaches not fully understanding their players' needs (Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012; Mills Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2014). Moreover, there are suggestions that talent identification and development in soccer often belies speculative or subjective processes (Christensen, 2009). Perhaps understandably, therefore, there are significant concerns that soccer talent development programmes in England are largely inefficient, given the scale of investment in staffing, facilities and players (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013).

These longstanding concerns have manifested an increase in scholarly activity examining factors influencing talent development in soccer, with the more recent emphasis being on psychosocial, behavioural and environmental characteristics that might facilitate talent development and career progression, including youth to senior transitions (e.g., Gledhill, Harwood & Forsdyke, 2017; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills et al., 2012). Commonly, characteristics such as discipline, commitment, resilience, self-regulation, and self-awareness appear within the literature as key psychosocial skills and characteristics which may facilitate youth to senior transition into professional soccer environments (e.g., Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills et al., 2012). These are viewed as important for talent development as they can increase the chances of players making appropriate lifestyle decisions, engaging in appropriate training and practice behaviours, and, consequently, may support improved technical and tactical performance levels (e.g., Gledhill et al., 2017).

Alongside the growth of literature examining psychosocial characteristics important for talent development, there has been concerns raised over the increased professionalisation of soccer at a younger age and the potential detrimental impact this may have (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010). Fundamental to this increased professionalisation has been early entry into academy environments, which places significant demands on young players and is viewed as their first entry into the soccer 'profession'. Players can be formally associated with a soccer club's Academy from nine years old and train between 2-4 times per week as well as undertake competition on a weekend (Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). The latest regulations for academy staffing and infrastructure come in the form of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) (EPPP, 2010) which requires clubs to promote technical excellence and ensure financial viability. To achieve this, academies are regularly and independently audited and evaluated with the aim of continual reflection and improvement. The EPPP aims to address all aspects of player development across three distinct phases; Foundation (9-12 years old), Youth Development (13-16 years old) and Professional Development (17-21 years old). A key purpose and function of the EPPP is to support players in their transitions between these different phases.

A transition is 'an event or non-event which results in a change in assumption about oneself [identity] and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships' (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). According to Wylleman, Lavallee and Alferman (1999), athlete transitions may include key achievements (e.g. securing a professional contract) and / or failures (e.g. deselection). Stambulova (1994) described sport career transitions as a series of critical life events that have to be coped with or adjusted to. More recently, a more lifelong approach to career transitions has acknowledged that they are multifaceted and intertwined with other aspects of an athlete's life to include athletic, individual, psychosocial, academic and financial dimensions (Wylleman & Rosier, 2016).

Whilst in terms of highlighting the different levels and stages that occur at different times in an athlete's career development, arguably it doesn't capture the non-normative transitions such as injury, de-selection, or failure to attain a contract (Nesti Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012). Whilst the notion of career transitions lends itself to a more lifespan perspective to understanding the sporting careers, Nesti et al. (2012) suggested that the term 'critical moments' is also a pertinent term to consider. This describes the range of events experienced by professional footballers on a *daily* basis and such moments may be perceived as positive or negative by the individual facing them. Positive situations may include gaining a professional contract, winning a cup competition, or playing consistently well, whereas negative situations include deselection, contractual release, injury, non-selection for matches, and family and relationship difficulties (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Contextualising the work of Wylleman and Lavalley (2004) within professional soccer, Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2012) presented a model of within-career transitions from youth to senior soccer which identified a need for what they termed the critical *post academy* phase considered to be a junior-to-senior transition. This seen to be one of the key stages in the development of elite young soccer players (Røynesdal, Toering, & Gustafsson, 2018) Here, players (typically) receive a one or two-year professional contract but are not necessarily housed within the first team squad. Richardson and colleagues (2013) contend that players are often not prepared for this element of their career and the associated diminishing levels of social support which may elicit notions of isolation, and increased uncertainty. Youth-to-senior transitions are considered to be the hardest transition which athletes face (Stambulova, 2009; Drew, Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2019) and have received attention in specific sports such as; ice hockey (Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017), event riding (Pummell, Harwood & Lavalley, 2008), track and field (Hollings, Mallett & Hulme, 2014) and professional soccer (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015, Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016;

Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). In one soccer-specific study examining player and practitioner perspectives, Morris, Tod and Oliver (2015) reflected that players will go through a period of adaptation, which requires a corresponding set of characteristics and resources, which have been developed through a number of preceding transitions, in order to become successful senior players.

Whilst offering valuable insight, research into career transitions within English professional soccer has been largely limited to players' perspectives (Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). This situation is reflected more broadly in soccer talent development literature where coaches and other support staff account for less than 1% of the research population over the past 15 years (Gledhill et al. 2017). Limiting our understanding to player-level data means that the important perspectives of key individuals, such as coaches, impacting on a player's career have not yet been fully explored or understood. Including those beyond coaches, such as those operating in education & welfare, helps to capture the wider cultural and subcultural perspectives (Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti, & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Martin, Wilson, Morton, Close & Murphy, 2017). Understanding practitioner perspectives of the challenges faced by developing soccer players seeking to make successful career transitions will serve to create debate and underscore potential solutions to these challenges.

Despite providing information pertaining to how transitions might be made most successful for players, less emphasis has been placed on understanding the debilitating factors associated with the youth-to-senior transition (Drew et al., 2019). A more detailed understanding of these perceived debilitating factors could then serve to support and develop existing practical suggestions for coaches and other key stakeholders, to facilitate players' successful career transitions.

With the high failure rate in the youth to senior transitions in soccer, combined with the underrepresentation of coaches and other practitioners in existing research, understanding

staff perspectives on the challenges faced by aspiring young soccer players is warranted. These practitioners work with such players on a daily basis, create the organisational structures, working practices and cultures within professional soccer clubs as well as recruit and select players with the most potential to make successful transitions from youth to senior. Consequently, practitioners should have relevant knowledge and experience to offer vital insight into this topic area. This study also heads calls from a recent meta-analysis on the youth-to-senior transition for more sport specific studies (Drew et al., 2019). As a result, this study aims explore practitioner perceptions of the debilitating factors associated with youth to senior progression in elite English male youth soccer.

### **Methods**

This study was informed by a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology, which are underpinned by an interpretive paradigm in the belief that reality is based on subjective experiences influenced by social forces (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). We understand knowledge to be constructed through social interaction between researchers and interviewees (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Thus, the findings presented in this manuscript represent our interpretations of the practitioners' perceptions. I (first author) acknowledge my own understandings of the soccer industry having had around 16 years' experience in this context. I kept a reflexive journal to record evaluations, assumptions and emotions in a self-aware manner (Didymus, 2017). This presented a useful resource to return to during the analysis process.

### **Participants**

Following institutional ethical approval, a range of practitioners were invited to contribute to this study, we recruited practitioners ( $N = 18$ ; male  $n = 17$ ; female  $n = 1$ ;  $M$  age = 34.6 years) from professional soccer teams ( $N=10$ ) in England. Practitioners worked with teams from each of the four professional leagues (Premier league ( $n = 1$ ), Championship



( $n=3$ ), League One ( $n=3$ ), League Two ( $n=3$ ). The participants had been employed by their respective professional men's soccer clubs on a full-time basis for a mean duration of 11.6 years and therefore were considered to have a good insight into player development. The sample comprised of; academy managers all with a minimum of UEFA A coaching qualifications ( $n = 8$ ), youth team coaches working with Under 18's groups all with a minimum of UEFA B coaching qualification ( $n = 6$ ), education and welfare with associated bachelors degrees and in two cases a nationally recognised teaching qualification ( $n = 3$ ), and one head of player recruitment with a UEFA A coaching qualification ( $n = 1$ ).

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate a more natural discourse of participant perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A guide was developed based on relevant literature (Morris, Tod and Eubank, 2017; Morris, Tod and Oliver, 2016, Richardson, et al., 2013 Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004) as well as the research team's suggestions, based on contextual knowledge and applied understanding of English soccer, around capturing the required information to meet the study aims. The questions were designed to be as open ended as possible to allow for maximum voluntary contribution and detail (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). As such, the interview guide contained questions relating to the challenges facing youth players upon the youth to senior transition (e.g. What do you think are the challenges faces by youth team players making the transition from to professional?).

Interviews were conducted face to face in each of the respective soccer club's training facilities in locations such as the staff offices, canteen, changing rooms, classrooms and media rooms. The mean interview length across the 18 undertaken was  $57 \pm 8$  minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

We employed a six-stage process of thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke & Wheat, 2016): *Familiarisation with data*: Before beginning the data analysis the audio files and transcripts were reviewed numerous times to ensure deep immersion with each interview and participant (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). *Generating initial codes*: After a line by line review process of the soccer practitioners' responses, initial codes were created. *Searching for themes*: Those that related to a common topic were collapsed into groups of greater generalities forming themes such as 'Culture'. *Reviewing themes*: At this stage an initial thematic map was created to test and review the emerging themes. This was primarily undertaken by the first author who then worked with the research team to engage in critical discussion. *Defining and naming themes*: The members of the research team acted as critical friends challenging the interpretations by myself and offering alternative perspectives on participants' accounts, uncovering potential bias and reinforcing my initial interactions (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). This led to further refinement of the thematic map. *Producing the report*: Before writing, final decisions on titles, definitions and quotes were agreed as a result of our ongoing critical reflection. This activity produced some minor changes to titles, definitions and quotes used within the final write-up to with the main aim of adding further clarity for the reader. An example of this was the theme around Occupational Hazards and the lower order theme of Injury. This ensured that there was a clarity for the reader to see how injury was viewed by practitioners, i.e. as an occupational hazard. Another example was the decision to ensure all practitioner roles were represented in the final write up to reflect as wide a range of views as possible.

### **Establishing Rigor**

Firstly, I and the research team have significant experience of engagement in professional soccer settings. This provided a good understanding of the context, jargon and cultural norms which facilitated rapport with the coaches and other practitioners (Martin et al. 2017). In

addition, being something of an insider could facilitate honest engagement from the participants by minimising interaction effects of a researcher being perceived as an ‘outsider’ (Buroway, 1998). Secondly, initial reports containing early interpretations of the data collected were given to each participant who were encouraged to review and reflect on their accounts and my interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Such reflections were obtained via phone calls, text messages and face to face meetings. The purpose of this member reflection exercise was to generate new data and identify any gaps in the results and share interpretations of findings via further social interaction between researcher and participant. Finally, each stage of analysis and interpretations was shared with the research team who acted as critical friends through a process of peer-debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2017).

## Results

To help visually demonstrate the themes, a thematic map was created (See Figure 1). Within the results section verbatim quotes are presented. Following this, the results will be discussed.

**\*\*INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE\*\***

Four main themes were identified from the data analysis process: ‘Cultural Climate’, ‘Working Practices’, ‘Occupational Hazards’ and ‘Social Challenges’

### *Cultural Climate*

This theme is based around issues associated with the dominant cultural climate within English progression soccer which are often hypermasculine overlaid with authority and dominance alongside notions of ‘how it is around here’. Soccer practitioners perceived that players faced a range of challenges from within the soccer clubs themselves during the transitional period from youth to senior teams. *Isolation* was seen as a barrier for some players when first entering the already harsh environment, integrating into a new squad and

making connections with colleagues. One Academy Manager spoke about the isolation faced upon entering a first team squad:

“A kid went up too early [had the opportunity to enter a first team environment] and it sort of knocked him back. And it wasn’t the technical or playing side that knocked him back it was the social side, he felt excluded, not totally excluded but you couldn’t really join in because you’re not really into talking about your car you mortgage, your marriage, your sex life, you’re a 17-year old kid for Christ’s sake.”

(Academy Manager)

A *hierarchy* was seen to exist where soccer practitioners often felt that new first year professionals were still seen as youth players and were treated as if they were at the bottom rung of a ladder, only adding to potential loneliness and isolation.

“I think you’ve got to grow up very quickly, be subjected to all the banter, like a new fish if you like...I think they don’t give you much of a chance they think of you more of a hindrance than because you’re a first year and you haven’t done it and you’re rubbish and all that.” (Coach).

One Academy Manager cited the move from a developmental environment to a *performance environment* was one of the biggest challenges to new professionals:

“The change of environment is probably the biggest thing, they’re going into an environment where they’ve got to win games. Which although that’s part of the academy set up it’s not the only thing we look at players on. We try and develop players as well but yeah they go into an environment where players are playing to win and it’s difficult and quite challenging for them”. (Academy Manager)

One youth coach summed up his own experience of making the transition from youth to the harsh environment within professional soccer: “*It was just nothing like I’d ever experienced*

*and you know the difference between the keenness of it I mean the ruthlessness of it the severity of it was just so much of a shock". (Coach)*

One Academy Manager conceded that younger players in senior squads have *limited playing opportunities* due to the pressure for first teams to secure positive results, the hire and fire norm for coaches' existences and the availability of more senior, proven, professionals to include within matchday squads. Inevitably it was perceived that newly made senior players could become despondent

"They're not going to get in the first team; therefore, either they become despondent because they're not in the first team or, secondly, they're released because the first team manager wants new players in that are experienced that can actually get a trophy". (Academy Manager)

The pressure faced by first team managers to win games and the short-term outlook in professional sport were also seen as a factors in managers selecting more experienced players to play which further limits playing opportunities.

"The idea is to get good players into the first team, but if your manager is in a position where he's been given 2 years to get promoted and he's not going to get a promotion if he puts players in that are coming through, then you're not going to get players through to the first team, you know, and therefore, I think, in some cases, it's not the fact that managers don't want to put them in...it's the fact that they're under so much pressure that they just can't put them in and, if they do put them in, they're taking a risk and the risk is lose three matches and you might be on your bike [sacked] so it's not easy actually for kids to come through". (Academy Manager)

Practitioners felt that players who were vying for a professional contract faced challenges during transition into a professional environment with regard to a newfound status. Players in

first team squads may be more exposed increased notions of *fame and wealth*, which may cause distraction when competing for a first team place in an already hard environment:

“If they’re travelling with the first team the cameras are there. If they get on [as a substitute] they might have an interview then all of a sudden they might have a bit more money in their pocket so the pitfalls are there; the booze, the women, the gambling” (Coach).

An Education and Welfare officer also cited newfound wealth offered a potential distraction from the pursuit of a career in professional soccer.

“They’re well off. You know, they’re on good money and they’re on the same money that players from 20 years ago when they played for the first team were on if that makes sense? So, it’s obviously the revenue from TV has changed that dramatically and you only have to look in the car parks, not just saying this club because I’ve been all round the country ... I think the danger is, players misconstrue wealth as achievement.” (Education and Welfare Officer)

In summary, upon entering a senior environment, players were faced with a multitude of interrelated challenges associated with the cultural climate which could debilitate the chances of a successful youth-to-senior transition. The cultural climate was seen to be a debilitating factor which included notions of pressure to win, competing for a place against other ‘higher ranking’ professionals, social isolation and for some, [false] perceptions of having made it already.

### *Working Practices*

This theme surrounds practitioner perspectives on the challenges of normal working practices on successful player transition. These were associated with increased physical demands and a lack of further development. Moving up into a first team environment presented players with barriers in terms of adapting to an *increased training intensity*.

“Their bodies can’t handle the demands of being a professional. They might be the best player but if the body can’t stick with the demands of the game cos the demands of the game have gone sky high. So, what’s that tell you? The demands of the game have gone stupid in terms of how much ground people cover in terms of high paced runs all this sort of stuff. The composition of their bodies hasn’t not changed so you’re gonna get more injuries”. (Coach)

Once players had gained a professional contract, practitioners felt that there was *a lack of post academy coaching* of players which, when in competition with seasoned professionals, hindered progression into a starting eleven. According to youth practitioners, when young professionals enter the first team environment their development essentially stops. “*We had four first team professionals last year and only one has been kept on, three got bombed [released from the soccer club] but out of a full year those kids only did one session extra.*” (Academy Manager). Another Academy Manager felt that young professionals didn’t receive further developmental training because of the intense focus on more senior first team players in preparation for matches.

“They get in at 18 or 19, have two or three games, do quite well but their development stops because they’ve not been coached. They’ll be a body for the first team manager, you know, now and again they’ll train once a day with the first team and he’s concentrating on his first team squad.” (Academy Manager)

In summary, players faced an increase in intensity of training when moving to senior squads which may put them at a further disadvantage when attempting to secure a place in a professional squad. The change from a development to a more performance orientated environment was seen to hinder appropriate development opportunities for players making the youth to senior transition.

*Occupational Hazards*

*Injury* was seen to be an unavoidable debilitating factor to successful youth-to-senior transition. Injuries were viewed to be part and parcel of the job, with the main challenges faced being both the physical aspects and also psychological implications of e.g. the worry of not being seen and judged by coaches which may also contribute to notions of isolation. One Coach explained the difficulties that players face when injured: “*Yeah they’re not getting seen, they’re losing fitness, they’re losing condition, and they think they’re gonna lose their opportunity*” (Coach). Another Coach spoke about how injury can ultimately end a player’s chances of career progression through ‘giving up’;

“Yeah there was a lad we had last year he got an injury in his first year was out for quite a long time. Came back, got back to playing and kept picking little niggles up where he was out for a couple of weeks, played a game out for a couple of weeks and basically from the start of his second year he sort of give up and left not long after the Christmas of his second year.” (Coach)

In summary, whilst presenting an acknowledgement that injury was a challenge, practitioners offered no support mechanisms to mediate this and injury appeared to be seen as something that was likely to happen and it was something that players had to deal with. Injuries may be the result of players experiencing an increase in training load within the senior environment. This presented challenges to practitioners working in both youth and senior environments to bridge the gap.

### *Social Challenges*

This theme was associated with aspects from players’ social lives, that were perceived to have a negative influence on successful youth to senior transition. *Friends and Girlfriends* were seen to contribute to distraction from being a footballer which may decrease chances of selection for a professional contract. Here, practitioners offered anecdotal accounts of players they have worked with “*I’ve seen lads go off the rails, lads nailed onto being professional*



*soccer players who went off the rails because of girls distracting them*” (Academy Manager).

Another Academy Manager highlighted the potential negative influence of peers on a player’s behaviour. “*You know, with many influences nowadays, the peer group is so important to them that they’d smoke, they’d drink, they’d do drugs because all their friends are doing it*”. (Academy Manager).

The perceived negative influence of *parents* was seen as limiting factor in the development of players through being ‘overpowering’:

“I think sometimes some parents can be a little bit over overpowering. They play the game for their lads, they speak for them if you have a meeting it’s always dad that talks and sometimes the lad sits there and says nothing.” (Coach)

One coach suggested such actions by *overpowering parents* may actually disadvantage a player by giving them a ‘label’ that they may become something of a nuisance to staff.

“Parents that tell you how to do your job and they think they help by sending in an email we will automatically do something about it but really it puts the kid on the radar and we think he might possibly be a problem.” (Coach).

The challenges of *living away from home* were cited as a potential source of strain for players through not having support mechanism readily available. One Academy Manager commented:

“They leave here 3 or 4 o’ clock, they’re in someone else’s house they’ve got a PlayStation or a lap top and you do whatever but there’s not that much to do, maybe you go the cinema or whatever. So, if things aren’t going particularly well then you’ve a lot of time to sort of perhaps focus on negatives whereas that kids at home can maybe brush of a little bit easier.” (Academy Manager).

Similar views were reiterated by an academy coach who cited reduced amount of social support as a result a of living away from home;

“I think some people need support from their family or friends. And I mean having apprentices from London in the past you are aware that psychologically you’re a long way from home and it is a long way to go back so I would just say that the social support side of things knowing that there was somebody there if you need to.”

(Coach)

In summary, a complex mix of social issues such as the influence of parents and friends had the potential to negatively affect a player’s ability to be a candidate to make the transition from youth to senior status which may include a lack of social support, contributing to a further sense of isolation and distraction from others.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore practitioner perceptions of the challenges associated with youth to senior progression in elite youth soccer. We constructed four themes that soccer practitioners perceive to be the key debilitating factors associated with the youth to senior progression: Cultural Climate, Working Practices, Occupational Hazards, Social Issues. In the following sections, we shall consider these themes in light of existing research and their potential implications for practice, so that they might be used to better support young players in their career transitions.

Within the cultural climate theme, five subthemes were created; Isolation, Hierarchy, Limited Playing Opportunities, Harsh Environment and Fame & Wealth. Soccer clubs have been previously described as espousing notions of power, dominance, authority and insecurity (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006). Within our study, coaches interpreted this cultural norm as a potential barrier to successful youth-to-senior transition. In their sociocultural model of elite player development Richardson, Relvas and Littlewood (2012) cited the post academy phase of development as being isolating, lonely and uncertain with the potential impact of social isolation, lack of development and continued non-selection may result in

psychological difficulty in players such as loss of confidence or a sense of disorientation. This study adds further empirical support from the UK soccer perspective. Furthermore, the notion of players becoming despondent due to *lack of playing time* has been seen in professional environments with established first team players and now seen in emerging players who have recently made the youth-to-senior transition. Based on over 10 years' experience in sport psychology practice within first team settings within Premier League, Nesti (2013) suggested lack of playing time may lead to de-motivation, despair and a feeling of not being in control. The practitioners within this study suggested such feelings would be no different exposure to their new, harsher surroundings and cultural climate.

From a culturally orientated perspective, our findings resonate with the work of Parker (2001) who highlighted that cars, clothes and general consumption all contributed to the creation of a hypermasculine identity in young players. Such socially constructed cultural norms may begin to detract players away from their footballing endeavours and have been popularised recently in the mainstream media (Calvin, 2017). Twenty years on the work of Parker (2001) it seems that these challenges are still prevalent within the modern game. With specific regard to *wealth*, the average annual salary of a Premier League player is now in excess of £2.6M (Sporting Intelligence, 2017) with the UK national average salary at £28,600 (Office for National Statistics, 2017) which is approximately 1% of a Premier League salary. Furthermore, a UK national lottery winner will typically receive around £1.8M which is widely considered 'life changing'. As a result, it is no surprise that such a salary within a culture of consumption, may influence behaviour. This novel finding presents a challenge to soccer clubs, coaches and other key stakeholders how to educate and support players in dealing with fame and wealth as their players are well paid and potentially thrust into a culture of consumption.

With regard to ‘Working Practices’, two subthemes were identified; Lack of effective Post Academy Coaching and Increased Training Intensity. With regard to a *lack of post academy* coaching, Dowling, Reeves, Littlewood and Nesti (2018), explored under-21 coaches’ perceptions of developing individual players within teams where one of the most challenging tasks coaches faced the need to offer support to all players in squads where there was a mixture of new and more senior professionals. In effect, coaches see this somewhat transient phase as a challenge to their working lives in providing bespoke and effecting coaching interventions which is identified and supported in our study using a range of practitioners. Such findings support the notion that coach education and research in the area would add to an understanding of the needs of players and the development of effective coaching practices in this phase. Regarding players facing the challenge of an *increased training intensity*, there is support within the literature to suggest that those with more favourable physical and physiological capacities (e.g. sprinting, jumping, agility, tallness, mass) will have a greater chance of being selected for a professional contract (Dodd & Newans, 2018). Such a perceived disparity in expectations between youth and professional levels in this study may suggest there is more work to be undertaken in the physical development of youth players to firstly quantify such gaps and secondly to devise appropriate strength and conditioning programmes to support physiological development to an extent that it is not a challenge to successful youth-to-senior transition.

When considering the theme of ‘Injury’, the main theme perceived by coaches was the threat of injury. Although not directly within elite youth soccer, research suggests that many athletes do not return to their preinjury level of activity and are less likely to return to a preinjury level of performance than their recreational counterparts (Ardern, Taylor, Feller & Webster, 2012; Colvin, Walsh, Koval, McLaurin, Tejwani, & Egol, 2009). It is also noted that *injury* carries high personal impact, which had been seen in ACL injuries (Núñez, Sastre,

Núñez, Lozano, Nicodemo, & Segur, 2012). In their systematic review of psychosocial outcomes of sport injury rehabilitation, Forsdyke, Smith, Jones and Gledhill (2016) reported that despite being physically able to return, athletes may not be psychologically ready and may even report performance related anxiety and fear when nearing a return to play. The findings from this study suggest that youth settings may not appropriately prepare players for more senior settings and young professionals entering a more demanding environment may be at greater risk of injury compared to their more seasons professional counterparts. Injury cannot be wholly avoided and so this presents soccer practitioners with challenges around how best to support players during injury.

With regard to ‘Social challenges’, three themes were identified; ‘Friends / girlfriends’, ‘Living away from home’ and ‘Overpowering parents’. Practitioners suggested that *friends and / or girlfriends* may distract players from the primary focus of becoming a professional footballer. Such perspectives are in contradiction to the views around healthy psychosocial development. The work of Erikson (1968) suggested young people must form relationships with others thus widening their social experience which in turn aids the development of self and personal identity. It appears that coaches, in this context, are wary of any outside influence which might distract their players from their footballing development but in reality, such restriction may be a negative influence on not only their soccer development but their wider personal and social development. Practitioners reported that players may become home sick or simply not enjoy living away, partly due to a lack of social support. Social support and social support seeking behaviours have been seen as a vital part of successful talent development (Gledhill, Harwood & Forsdyke, 2017; Holt & Dunn, 2004). Our findings suggest that players’ vital sources of social support from family or friends may be compromised by living away from home.

*Parents* being overpowering and interfering was viewed negatively by coaches especially when parents were perceived to dare to complain or question a coach. Soccer practitioners also perceived such actions *may* have a negative influence over player selection. This new finding challenges the notion of the role parents play in facilitating the psychosocial development of talent young people. Supportive parents have been seen to aid the development of talent in other sports (Clarke, Harwood & Cushion, 2016; Knight, Berrow & Harwood, 2017). Guidance on how sports organisations may facilitate the positive impact of parents has been provided by Harwood and Knight (2015) who advocate the idea of stage specific education and support provision to parents in order parents gain more understanding, confidence, and expertise in their roles. This finding presents opportunities for coach education on how to work effectively with parents to maximise the positive impact they may have.

From the data and subsequent analysis, a complex and often interlinked range of social, operational and cultural factors surrounding professional soccer can present challenges to a player's ability to experience a successful and sustainable youth-to senior-transition. The findings suggest that soccer practitioners working in this area of development would benefit from the creation of best practice guidance.

### **Applied Implications**

The findings of this study present several applied implications for practitioners in the field of talent development in elite youth soccer. Whilst we note that the barriers are multifaceted, there are several suggestions which may support successful youth-to-senior transitions. With regard to the cultural climate being a potential barrier, the findings of this study would suggest soccer clubs should seek to facilitate additional playing time, this may be undertaken through loan systems to other teams, friendlies, development leagues and making use of the range of competitions available to clubs. To help counter a sense of isolation in players,

soccer practitioners are challenged to find ways to integrate younger players. This could be through the use of a buddy system with senior professionals who could offer advice and guidance. Such practice advocated elsewhere in the transition literature (see Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015). Strategies such as this may also help to mediate a sense of hierarchy and facilitate a greater sense of relatedness within young players. With regard to an increased training intensity being cited as a barrier, those involved in the conditioning of young players are challenged to provide a training stimulus similar to the domains of senior teams in their athletes in preparation for the youth-to-senior transition. Alternatively, additional conditioning sessions once the transition has been made to help bridge the gap between the demands of youth and senior teams could be implemented. Such practices may also help to protect against the risk of injury which was cited as another barrier by practitioners. With regard to social challenges and more specifically parents, there needs to be more work to help support parents of talented players which could be facilitated through more effective communication between parent and coach to facilitate effective dialogue related to a player's progress (Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, & Nalepa, 2016) and parent education programmes to support the development of 'optimal' sport parenting practices (Thrower, Spray & Harwood, 2017). Coaches and other practitioners are also encouraged to support the implementation of life skills into their coaching curricular in a bid to support wider psychosocial development such as effective communication, self-awareness and accessing social support away from the soccer environment (Pierce, Kendellen, Camire & Gould, 2018). Such activity may support players who live away from home or are feeling a sense of isolation. Such recommendations may have implications for coach education in these areas.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study is not without limitation and there are questions remaining that would need further enquiry when exploring the youth to senior transition. Firstly, an overview of how

such transitions are managed from an operational perspective within soccer is somewhat lacking in the literature, this study has presented the views of 18 practitioners and may not represent the views and practices of all practitioners working within soccer. Such information would be a useful addition and it would allow researchers and practitioners alike to understand the potentially different practices that soccer clubs employ. It is also important to acknowledge that the view of soccer practitioners, all English, were based on western cultural ideals and drawn from predominantly male participants. Thus, these may not fully reflect the views of all soccer practitioners. Soccer is considered culturally unique; consequently, other sports are likely to have different structures and pathways for transition. Such a study would allow for the identification of common practices employed to support youth-to-senior transitions leading to identification and creation of best practice guidelines. Secondly, given the conflicting views of the role of social support and the influences of parents on player progression, further research is needed to create best practice guidance on how to support both coaches and parents in creating effective environments in which to foster talent from technical, physical and psychosocial aspects. Thirdly, research must take a multidisciplinary view of talent development in order to effectively support elite youth soccer players. For example, making a player more physically robust may decrease injury rate but may not decrease a sense of isolation when in a locker room full of adults. Finally, the present study only focusses on one key transition (youth to senior), however a player may experience a range of transitional episodes during their trajectory to professional status which may elicit different challenges and potential solutions. Further investigation of the in-career transitions from both coach and player perspectives is warranted.

### **Conclusion**

The study offers an original and rigorous insight into soccer practitioners' perspectives of the barriers associated with successful youth to senior transitions in elite soccer. By obtaining the



perspectives of those that work with players and create the systems by which players make transitions, we have been able to offer a clear context specific picture of the transition landscape. The study also answers recent research calls to diversify soccer research populations (Gledhill et al., 2017) by including a range of soccer practitioners working full time in this environment. The results point to a range of barriers of which some are associated with cultural, operational and social aspects often reproduced by soccer practitioners themselves, such as lack of playing time and exposure to a harsh environment. If productivity rates of such environments are to increase, researchers could towards a consensus of specific best practice guidance that clubs adhere to.

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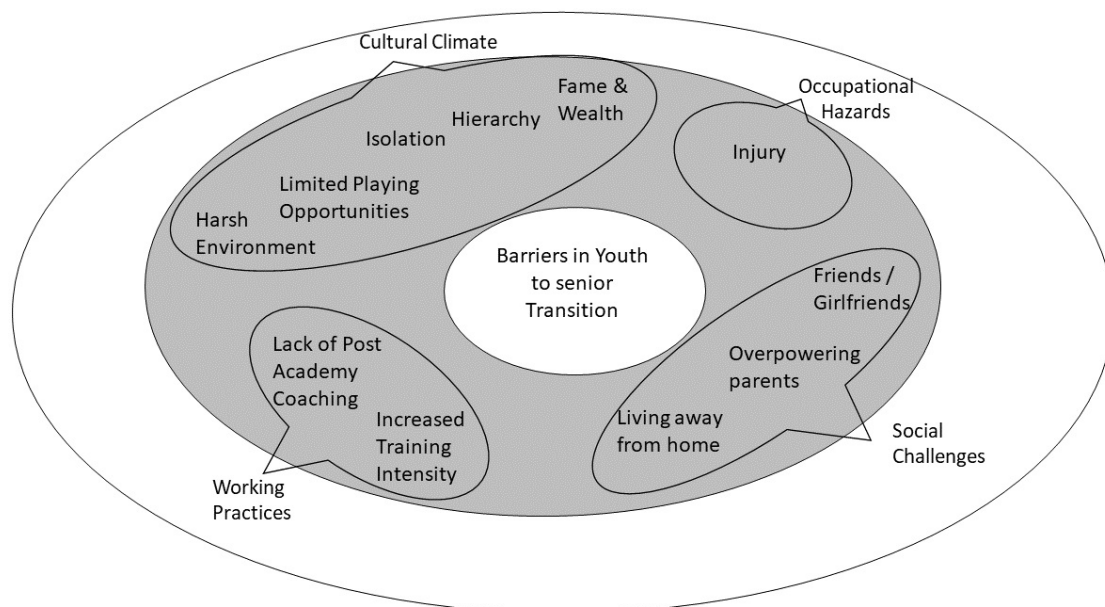


Figure One: Soccer Practitioner Perspectives on the Barriers in Youth to Senior transition within Professional Soccer