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Appointed on responsibility, sacked on accountability: Understanding involuntary termination in football management. What can we learn from coaching studies?

Abstract

This conceptual review paper explores the decision practices that lead to the pervasive practice of short-term tenure and involuntary termination of managers' employment in professional soccer. The underlying assumptions are unsustainable; managers are hired on responsibility for performance and fired on accountability for results. Having critically appraised relevant literature to interpret and restate the problem, concepts associated with sport coaching provide a clearer and novel articulation of the decision factors in soccer organisations. An appreciation of expertise, goal management, role clutter, impression management and celebrity offers relevant insights. At an individual level, managers' attributions in relation to positive and negative outcomes may sow the seeds for subsequent dismissal. Managers would benefit from raising awareness of the distinction between responsibility and accountability, showing greater humility in claiming role impact, and demonstrating expertise in aspects of management for which they are directly responsible.

Introduction

What leads football clubs, across cultures, to 'hire and fire' senior managers with such
regularity? What are the decision-making factors that impact on the human resource
management of such organisations? There is a considerable and continuing academic
literature that deals with the issue of involuntary termination in relation to the employment of
managers/head coaches in professional soccer[i] (Nissen and Wagner, 2020). These studies
establish the veracity of the fragile tenure of managers, the impact of proxy measures of
managerial performance, and statistical evidence about the impact of manager replacement on
the performance of the team (Elaad et al, 2018; Wilson et al, 2019). The common
denominator is that managers/head coaches are held to be accountable for their team's
performance; in practice, of course, the yardstick is not the performance itself, but the actual
or potential consequence of the result or series of results. As a subsequent but brief review of
the literature will establish, instability is the norm (Poli et al, 2022). Indeed, managerial
turnover is not an unexpected effect; it is a pervasive and inevitable feature of the sub-culture
of professional football. The issue is not its prevalence – rather, the combination of factors
that lead organisations to take such decisions. Unless there has been some evident
malpractice, managers are not 'sacked in the morning', but the individuals in question are
removed from their duties, with subsequent negotiation about compensation for this action,
based on their contractual arrangements. This may be a one-sided process (notwithstanding
contract clauses and the role of agents), but it is not a 'sacking' – why not?

The fragility of managerial tenure is not in question. This can be established by
examining the existing length of tenure of current managers/head coaches in the top four
football leagues in England; the average length of tenure is 491 days (average median period
is 252 days) [ii]. The CIES Football Observatory (Poli et al, 2022) confirms the cross-cultural

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effect. The average tenure across 89 countries worldwide was 459 days (median 243 days): 20% of managers/coaches had been in position for more than 2 years, 39% for less than 6 months. In Europe the average period of tenure was 506 days; in the South American Confederation it was 303 days.[iii] Of course, the appointments were not all the result of involuntary termination. A cascading effect is produced when appointments to managerial vacancies are made from managers who leave existing positions in other clubs. The League Managers Association (2018) identified 65 managerial turnovers in season 2017-2018 in English League football, of which 83% were classed as 'dismissals'. The average tenure of those dismissed was 14.2 months. These data confirm a continuing trend. One English Premier League club has had 9 managers in a 10 year period; since 1992, five English Premier League and Football League clubs have had more than 30 managers (this includes caretaker appointments). As of February 2020, of 91 league clubs, 24 managers had served more than 2 years, 17 had served between 1 and 2 years, and 50 had been in post for less than a year.

This review paper argues that a fuller and more-nuanced understanding of the issues that impact on organisational decision making is necessary, and a greater insight into the dynamics of the actions taken can be achieved by drawing on the academic literature and concepts emanating from sport coaching studies. In particular, involuntary termination can be more readily appreciated in relation to the distinction between accountability and responsibility, the tacit nature of coaching expertise and its contextual particularity, role clutter, celebrity status, and risk management associated with goal threat. The purpose of the paper, therefore, is to provide a more comprehensive insight into the phenomenon of involuntary termination in these organisations. The objective is not to establish that the phenomenon exists – managerial positions in football are precarious. What is required is a better understanding of why this should be the case, and to offer a conceptual framework that

provides a vehicle with which managerial turnover can be understood, explained and evaluated.

Overview of supporting literature

The literature is wide-ranging, but with a heavy emphasis on the impact of mid-season replacement of managers and its effect on team performance, and an assumption of a causal association between managerial expertise/performance and the performance of the team (Bryson et al, 2021a; Wilson et al, 2019). The field is characterised by statistical treatments of the issues (e.g., Elaad et al, 2018; Flepp and Frank, 2021; Fry et al, 2021; Muehlheusser et al, 2018; Peeters et al, 2017). The match results, through which performance is inferred, are said to provide a relatively immediate and ongoing record of managerial effectiveness. The validity of the data may be questionable (Flint et al, 2014) but the ease of access invites scrutiny, analysis and interpretation. In addition, some of the manager's personal resources – playing history, international experience, prior managerial experience – are publicly available. These characteristics are assumed to be interrelated and invite comment and comparison in the absence of any substantive measure of managerial expertise (Bachan et al, 2008). The device employed by researchers is to use game outcome as a proxy measure of the manager's performance. This rests on a presumption that, in the world of professional football, result/outcome and final league position is 'what matters'. Given the triangulation between expectations, current performance and managerial dismissals (Frick, 2018), this is a reasonable assumption, but it is also the case, and an equally plausible rationale for the extent of statistics-based research, that match outcomes are simply accessible and susceptible to statistical analyses.

These statistical treatments calculate team performance against trends (e.g., win ratio, league position) or juxtapose a number of proxy measure of team resources (transfer worth, salaries) and evaluate team performance against expectations created by these measures (d'Addona and Kind, 2014; Bachan et al, 2008). The manager's job is at risk when the decision makers within the organisation decide that the team's performance does not match expectations (Fry et al, 2021). In addition, decision making in relation to forced turnover of managers is increasingly dependent on a lesser number of results (d'Addona and Kind, 2014; Bryson et al, 2021a). In a very interesting paper, Elaad et al (2018) used betting odds to determine whether the outcome of games was better or worse than expected; managerial change may be delayed when weighing the costs of compensation, the new manager's contract, the time for organisational adjustment, the time for new tactical/selection issues to impact, and the brevity of 'bounce'. Elaad and colleagues suggest that lack of success does not lead to dismissal but perceived 'failure' does. Bell et al (2013) give a good account of the scale of managerial turnovers and the financial implications of paying compensation. They identify a broader range of reasons for being 'sacked', including on-field performance, relationship between manager and the owner/Board/CEO, impact of a new owner's wishes about personnel, and intensity of media speculation. There is some evidence that reputation, experience and prior success may reduce the likelihood of dismissal (Bryson et al, 2021a; Desai, 2022; Semmelroth, 2022).

A smaller number of papers have provided theoretical explanations for turnover and/or level of impact. Using data from the National Hockey League in the USA, Rowe et al (2005) adduced ritual scapegoating theory, vicious circle theory and common-sense theory to explain the limited impact of managerial succession (also Frick, 2018). de Paola and Scoppa (2012) also refer to scapegoating as a 'convenience tool' with which football club directors/owners can appease supporters. Particularly useful is Hope's (2003) identification

of three factors: a honeymoon period, during which managers are unlikely to be dismissed; a threshold or 'trapdoor' below which 'sacking' is very likely, and the 'weight' of recent results.

A significant issue is whether the termination-replacement decision making process leads to improved team performance. The evidence is strong that replacing the manager does not lead to markedly improved results in the medium to long term. This has been demonstrated, for example, in Belgium (Balduck and Buelens, 2007), Spain (Lago-Peñas, 2011), Argentina (Flores et al, 2012), Holland (ter Weel, 2011), Italy (de Paola and Scoppa, 2012), Germany (Kleinknecht and Würtenberger, 2022), and England (Wilson et al, 2019). There is some evidence of a partial impact (Flepp and Frank, 2021). This is evident in home matches (Tena and Forrest, 2007), with more stable team selections (Muehlheusser et al, 2016) and when the club retains the services of the new coach (Bryson et al, 2021b). Flint et al (2014) support these findings but discuss the limitations in evaluating team performance. The evaluation of impact is made more difficult by the phenomenon of 'bounce back' (Hughes et al, 2010); what they term, "the illusion of a short term reprieve" (p.572). In other words, having dropped sufficiently in league position to occasion managerial termination, the average number of points won by a team will return to a more medium-term average. Kleinknecht and Würtenberger (2022) offer a partial explanation, suggesting that players respond to an 'external' appointment's initial lack of player information by making an increased effort. However, Kuper and Szymanski (2018) demonstrate that clubs that do not replace their manager experience the same 'bounce' as those who do (ter Weel, 2011).

Peeters et al. (2017), employing a complex set of assumptions about managerial ability from match results over a career, observe that "the industry as a whole is too eager to re-employ experienced managers" (p.5). Particularly in the lower half of a league and in

lower divisions, clubs hire 'substandard' (in comparison to an estimate about new entrants to the market) managers rather than take a chance on new entrants. Bridgewater (2011) found that 53% of managers are re-appointed to a 2nd club, and, of those, 71% are appointed to a 3rd.

The research literature reinforces the pervasiveness of the issue, attempts to provide a number of statistical tools with which to identify factors associated with managerial turnover, and questions the outcome of the replacement process. It is notable that the empirical evidence tends to focus on the major, and better resourced, leagues in the country in question. The preponderance of statistical approaches provides compelling evidence but fails to accommodate nuanced explanations or contextual particularity in relation to the manager's role and organisational responsibilities (Gammelsaeter, 2013; Kelly, 2017; Kelly and Waddington, 2006). There is a reasonable consensus on the absence of impact in replacing managers – and yet the 'merry-go-round' continues. Thus far there have been few attempts to draw the evidence together under a common conceptual umbrella that will shed light on the decision-making process. The paper now attempts to summarise briefly the problem and follows this with a set of insights using concepts associated with the study of sport coaching.

Summarising the problem

Many football clubs are sizeable businesses, albeit with particular relationships with their 'customers' and varied governance models (Hamil et al, 2004), and some confusion about their organisational aims and viability (Plumley et al, 2021). Nevertheless, in relations to the organisation's employment of managers, there are a number of common assumptions and inconsistencies in the study of involuntary termination in football, few of which are sustainable. Principal among these are (a) the assumption of a direct causal link between team and managerial performance, more specifically, that team performance is 'controllable'; (b)

although apparently dismissed for underperformance, managers' contracts are 'paid off'; (c) despite strong evidence to the contrary, clubs continue with the serial replacement of managers, and (d) positivist/statistical approaches to research have failed to address role-related features of the manager's employment. These issues are interrelated and we need briefly to unpick them.

The key assumption is that playing performance is appropriately captured by the result of a match and, second, that it is controllable. Football is a contested activity and the nature of the game, with an average of 2.66 goals scored per game in the English Premier League, means that the vagaries of a sporting contest can create a result that does not always reflect the preparation, resources or performance of one team in comparison to another. Fry et al (2021) suggest that the intensity of competition, low scoring pattern and an underestimated uncertainty may lead to over-confidence about relative performance. The range of significant but largely uncontrollable variables in game play – injury, officials' decision making, environmental conditions, players' application, and the efforts of the opposition – significantly loosen the association between performance and outcome. Nevertheless, it can reasonably be argued that, over an extended period of time, a club's resources, including player expertise and physical and tactical preparation and execution, will be reflected in the profile of results.

The terms responsibility and accountability are not without some conceptual confusion (McGrath and Whitty, 2018). In this context, the distinction relates to organisational outcomes. When making judgements about appointments, responsibility is an assumed historical causal relationship, through decision making and actions, for outcomes (i.e., team performance). Obligation is implied: football managers are perceived to 'take responsibility' for team performance (e.g., planning, team selection, preparation and training regimes, support staff appointments, player management, in-game management).

Accountability, on the other hand, is about being 'answerable' to the goals and expectations of the manager's current employer. Given that most appointments are of managers who have experienced involuntary termination, it would seem that, in the case of 'serial appointees', owners/CEOs apply a form of selective mitigation for previous responsibilities. Appeasement by scapegoating alleviates the need to address the question of whether the next manager 'will do any better', or why the previous manager was appointed. McGrath and Whitty (2018) note that managers transfer their responsibilities into accountabilities at a lower organisational level. Thus, owners/CEOs and Boards of Directors with responsibility for sound governance and performance of the organisation transfer their accountability to first-team managers.

The assumption that the manager can be directly associated with the outcome is not sustainable; it may be reasonable to hold the manager responsible only for preparation rather than outcome. The manager's response to emerging game momentum (substitutions, tactical changes) is an observable reflection of experience and expertise, although once again constrained by available resources. The (internal-to-the-club) evaluation of team performance, including a plethora of match statistics, is not publicly available, nor are specific match objectives. These can be inferred from team selection and apparent strategy; they may be superficially commented on by managers in post-match interviews or interpreted by experienced, but unaccountable, 'experts'. Nevertheless, given the role of playing resources, stakeholder interference, environment, serendipity and opposition, managers cannot be held directly responsible for a performance. However, they may be held 'accountable'. The manager is appointed on responsibility (perceived prior outcome achievement), but sacked on accountability.

The replacement of managers who 'quit' (e.g., move voluntarily to another post) has little or no impact but involuntary termination may be appropriate if intended to occasion a perception of response to an unsatisfactory situation and a potential short-term 'bounce'.

However, there is very limited evidence of a long-term effect (although the compelling evidence is that few managers experience a long-term tenure) and repeat termination for short-term reward, with its compensation requirements and organisational disruption is an inefficient use of resources (Ellul et al, 2022; Fry et al, 2021).

In perpetuating the 'merry-go-round' of appointments, there are a number of sub-cultural features. These include selecting managers on the basis of 'track record' overseas, placing considerable emphasis on playing career, recruitment based on 'trust and knowing people' (Parnell et al, 2021), moving directly from playing to managing, emphasising prior attachment to the club, appointing from a pool of managers with a record of serial employment termination, and appointing individuals from a 'stand in' or caretaker role. Kelly (2008) shows that many prospective managers believe that playing experience is sufficient background for entry to a managerial role. It might seem inconceivable that any significant measure of control or influence within such sizable financial institutions as major football clubs could be invested in (relatively) untrained or inexperienced individuals. Allowing a new manager a 'honeymoon' period merely reinforces the delayed impact of change. When evaluating performance over a relatively small number of games, there is also an element of serendipity about the configuration of the league/cup programme and the perceived difficulty of fixtures.

Ascribed responsibility and the difficulty of determining expertise and its application are directly linked to the situation in which managers' contracts are terminated by the club but involve a process of negotiated settlement. Flint et al (2016) discuss relevant employment law in relation to unattributable achievement and unproven expertise, concluding that 'mutual' termination is permissible, although perhaps not 'fair'. It may, however, be a necessary sub-cultural practice, within which managers come to accept its advantages and disadvantages (Nissen and Wagner, 2020). If a club wishes to make an impactful change, the

decision options are limited. There are no short-term solutions in terms of adjusting the playing staff, with difficulties exacerbated by the timing of transfer windows, and the impact of buying and selling on the balance sheet. Training resources or playing 'culture' are insufficiently tangible in affecting performance. In the short term, players can be offered incentive bonuses, tactics can be altered and preparation improved. This may lead to a delay in the perceived need to act to change the direction of travel. An alternative, with the concomitant risk of limited impact and financial liability, is to change the manager.

The contribution of coaching studies

Introduction

The evidence suggests that there are a number of very evident sub-cultural features associated with involuntary termination of managers in professional football, and it is not unreasonable to assume that understanding organisational decision making has to be couched in an appreciation of these factors. The environmental features and the reliance on outcome measures and/or stakeholder/fan/player dissatisfaction suggest that completely rational decision making is unlikely (Arnulf et al, 2012; Fry et al, 2021), or perhaps even possible. It is also difficult to generalise across clubs with very different resources, ambitions, and values. Nevertheless, it is important to seek a clearer understanding of involuntary termination and its consequences, and why it should be such an endemic feature of professional football organisations. The paper now attempts to demonstrate that a number of conceptual elements from sport coaching studies can shed some further, and perhaps novel, light on this phenomenon.

Expertise

Expertise in sport coaching is acknowledged to be an essentially cognitive capacity, with which coaches are able to draw upon a repertoire of stored knowledge and experience to make decisions in an apparently intuitive manner (Nash and Collins, 2006; Lyle and Muir, 2020). Experiential decision making is the norm (Harvey et al, 2015) and the complex dynamics of the coaching environment and the particularity of application (Jones and Ronglan, 2018) result in a 'tacit' expression of knowledge. There is a distinction between more-deliberative decisions in planning and selection, and the less-deliberative decision making evident in managing training drills, player interactions, or in-game decisions. Expertise can variously be described as the capacity to assimilate, accommodate, align or apply appropriate actions at the appropriate time and for appropriate reasons (Lyle and Cushion, 2017); the full context, however, is rarely subject to scrutiny. This contributes to coaching as a 'hidden profession' – the contribution and effect are assumed and acknowledged, but difficult to identify.

Coach education contributes to the development of expertise but the most valued element is experience (Lara-Bercial and Mallett, 2016). There is a direct parallel with football management. Managers learn from experience and also, initially, lean on role models (largely managers with whom they have had a prior relationship). However, an extension into management training beyond that associated with football performance has been a welcome development (Morrow and Howieson, 2018). Work has yet to be done on the impact on practice of qualifications such as the UEFA Pro-Licence. Prospective and neophyte managers are immersed in an occupational milieu in which it may be difficult to escape 'stereotypical manager behaviour'. There is a danger of a heavy reliance on 'what has been done before', reinforcing the perception of an inward-looking 'closed community' (Kelly, 2017).

The difficulty of identifying largely tacit expertise means that managerial ability cannot be established prior to appointment (Peeters et al, 2017). However, it is equally difficult to establish that managers do not have the requisite expertise. This may not become evident immediately because of a reliance on 'acceptable norms of practice'. The expertise of the manager is esoteric - passed on from others, experiential, and with occupational socialisation from having themselves been players. Knowledge is largely tacit and is most visible to the outsider in game management, which reinforces the association with outcomes. The 'visible' element of expertise are decision outcomes – media interest ensures that this is related to game behaviour. However, there is much less attention to technical coaching, individual relationships, player development, instilling a style of play, managing crises, or flexibly adapting to circumstances. In these circumstances of hidden expertise, underperformance cannot be substantiated; in a situation of involuntary termination, a compensation culture will be inevitable.

Goals

Sport coaching is acknowledged to be an instrumental, goal-directed process (North, 2017), within which goals are established and lead, through planning, to coaching interventions (Lyle, 2020). Goals are viewed as the central core around which the coaching process is managed. Actions and decisions are evaluated (consciously and unconsciously) against a hierarchy of more- or less-immediate goals. Goal-setting is important for individual motivation, and performance preparation, but there is also a crucial organisational aspect. Coaches work within a climate of stakeholder goals – conceptualised as 'layered' (North, 2017) or 'nested' (Abraham and Collins, 2011). The goals set by dominant stakeholders determine both resource allocation and performance expectations, and the means by which

performance outcomes are evaluated. In simple language, the goals set by the owners are the yardstick by which the football manager's continued employment is judged. These goals may not be publicly available and in professional sport are likely to evidence a trade-off between business and sport goals. Increasingly, and no matter the form of governance, financial priorities are dominant (Morrow, 2017).

When measured solely by league position, it is not possible for all teams to be equally successful. If couched in terms of club-specific objectives, this is more feasible (e.g., top six, not being relegated, qualifying for European competition, 'safe' mid-table, higher than previous season, and so on). However, there is a 'zero sum game' in the distribution of rewards. This may seem obvious, but the implications of an active opposition by other clubs/teams to the organisation's goal achievement are often overlooked. Projections about managerial 'success' are rarely couched in terms of the consequential 'failure' of others. This brings us back to goal setting and the issue of unrealistic ambitions and goals set without consideration of resources. Clubs could achieve realistically-established goals. On the other hand, prestige and the resource threat of relegation and less-tangible influences from owners and fans may render completely rational goal setting and evaluation less likely.

Goal setting requires an awareness of the distinction between absolute and relative goals, and primary and secondary goals. Managers/coaches will establish absolute performance targets (possession, set-piece delivery, shots on target, etc.) but outcome success is relative to the performance of others. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a 'minimum level of acceptable performance' is established. When this baseline (primary) goal is threatened, the club may alter the goal or maintain the goal and remove the person perceived to be accountable for underachievement. Failure is not absolute – relative failure means not achieving expectations. For this reason, managers of teams with a high league standing can also find themselves removed from their positions. Involuntary termination is likely to occur

when there is a negative evaluation of 'the extent to which recent outcomes fail to contribute to the organisation's primary goal'.

Role clutter

The underlying assumption in statistical treatments of involuntary termination is that there is a direct association between the manager's performance and results, treating the manager's role in the organisation as unproblematic. However, there is a significant element of inter- and intra-role confusion. In an era in which the complexities of structure, scale, scope and finance have multiplied, increasingly the leadership role is shared by a team of support staff. The extent of this internal network will differ according to the size, resourcing and positioning of the club in the league hierarchy. The differing perceptions of role are reflected in terms such as manager, manager of football, 1st team coach, or head coach. In practice, of course, there is a good deal of role clutter: for example, the roles of manager and coach, decision making responsibilities, scope of responsibilities (1st team, academies), support staff, line management responsibilities, recruitment/transfers, and day-to-day training.

This is evident in sport more generally. In sport coaching studies, there is an increasing acceptance of the term sport coach as an umbrella term for a plethora of related but domain-specific leadership roles (Lyle, 2021). Of particular relevance is the relationship between coaches and performance directors (Jones and Cruikshank, 2019). In sport more generally, and Olympic sports in particular, there is a clear distinction between the roles of performance director and coach. This is mirrored in football with the appointment in the larger clubs of directors of football (Parnell et al, 2018; Widdop et al, 2018). These roles also lack a consensual purpose but are likely to range across recruitment and recruitment policy,

contractual arrangements, medium to longer-term strategy, monitoring and evaluation, and liaison with the Board of Directors/owners.

When comparing the roles of coach and manager in football, the irony is that the manager, certainly in the larger clubs, appears to act more as a performance director. There is support from, and the need to coordinate the contribution of, assistant manager/coaches, sports scientists, analysts, and increasingly specialist coaches (goalkeeping, defence, throw in). This suggests a strategic role but with 'hands-on' responsibility for team selection and in-game management. It might also be argued that interference from owners in performance-related decision making can be considered a form of role confusion (Kelly, 2017). In relation to involuntary termination and contract 'closure', the significance of role clutter is that direct responsibility for team performance is dissipated and difficult to sustain.

Demonstrating control

Sport coaching studies acknowledge a significant element of 'impression management' in the coach's presentation of self (Jones et al, 2011), one aspect of which is presenting an image of authority and control (Cassidy et al, 2016). However, football is inherently uncontrollable because of an active opposition and, to a lesser extent, the effects of environment and refereeing decisions. Nevertheless, there is an attempt via scouting, match analysis, preparation, player selection and tactics, resource building and a high-performance environment to exert as much control as possible. There is also an element of 'scientising' the approach. The overall effect is compounded by managers' in-game behaviour; this is part of 'impression management', creating the notion that the manager is 'controlling' matters.

The absence of detailed insight into the execution of the role perhaps explains the media's emphasis on the 'visible' elements of behaviour – touchline activity, perceived team

'set up', tactical adjustments, and assumptions about half-time 'team talks'. Improvement in second-half performance is often attributed, without evidence, to the manager's verbal intervention in the dressing room. Because of the spotlight on results, managers are invited to give 'explanations'. This is a 'double-edged sword' for the manager. The temptation to attribute negative outcomes to external unstable factors (player effort, refereeing decisions, playing conditions, VAR, fixture congestion) rather than internal stable factors (choice of tactics, player selection, preparation, physical condition of players, player ability, managerial decisions) mitigates managers' responsibility for results, but reinforces their possibly tangential impact. The evident recourse to unstable factors following a defeat diminishes the perception of managerial control. Similarly, the reliance on internal stable factors for explaining positive outcomes reinforces responsibility (even if the assumed measure of control is overstated). The danger for managers is that emphasising control, even when this may be illusory, lends weight to their perceived responsibility for performance and outcome.

The relationship between the manager and other stakeholders (Directors of Football, Chief Executives and Owners) will reflect the hierarchical site of organisational decision making power, notwithstanding the influence of personal relationships. Overall control of resources lies outside the control of the manager/head coach, in terms of, for example, recruitment, salaries, overseas tours, strategic direction and financial management, although in many clubs the manager may be a voice in the decision-making process (Morrow and Howieson, 2014). We might speculate, therefore, that the manager operates 'within' strategic goals, whether or not these are the outcome of a truly collaborative (or, indeed, informed) decision-making process. There is, therefore, a potential 'distance' between the management of football performance and the governance of the football club (Kelly, 2008). It is not surprising, therefore, that managers seek to emphasise behaviour that evinces control within the ambit for which their responsibility lies. This may offer a degree of authority but also

creates a 'bounded' culpability. In a goal-driven environment, impression management of success creates the conditions for assuming responsibility for failure.

Celebrity

Ironically, the final feature of sport coaching that is relevant to the discussion is its difference to football management. It is rare for the coaches of Olympic medallists to be widely recognised but that is obviously not the case in the upper tiers of professional football. It is entirely understandable that players are treated as celebrities in local and national, even international contexts (Andrews and Clift, 2017). Media interest in both football and celebrity lifestyles ensures that this is the case. However, (top) managers are also acknowledged to be, "truly global sport celebrities" (p.208) (also Berndt, 2022; Carter, 2007; Wagg, 2007).

The cult of celebrity (see van Krieken, 2018, for an extended account), highlighted by media attention to major leagues, reinforces the association between clubs and managers. Press conferences and media speculation about 'head-to-head' statistics (e.g., Story, 2017) reinforce the notion that the manager represents the club. In the world of celebrity culture, the manager 'becomes' the club; culpability is reinforced, responsibility is assumed. The manager is most often the club spokesperson, not only for performance but also personalities, transfers, perceived failings, and misdemeanours, what Berndt (2022) calls the 'human face of the club'. Clearly, celebrity is encouraged by some managers and self-esteem and ego may reinforce the association, particularly in the 'good times'; other managers may encourage or accept the limelight as a necessary part of the managerial role (Bréhon et al. 2018).

The impact of celebrity status will be most evident in those levels of football that receive the greatest national media attention. Nevertheless, assuming the mantle of iconic representative for a football team would appear to be endemic at all levels of professional

football. Celebrity status may be felt at a more local level or within the fan base of a club, but the involuntary termination statistics in lower league football suggest that the relationship between figurehead, accountability and subsequent termination is a pervasive characteristic.[iv]

The symbiotic association of manager and club reinforces the potential for the scapegoat approach and deflects attention from other potential contributory factors to perceived underperformance. There is support for the impact of creating 'the manager is the club' perception from leadership studies. Arnulf et al (2012) examine the concept of 'heroic leaders', who have less influence than is often perceived to be the case but act as public symbols or figureheads. Arnulf and colleagues liken this to the sacking of football managers, underlying which a "perception bias exaggerates the importance of football managers to the team's performance" (p.170). It is ironic that assuming the mantle of club representative reinforces the subsequent accountability that will, for most managers, eventually lead to dismissal.

Discussion and implications

The decision making by owners/CEOs in football clubs is, at best, subjectively rational and it might be argued that the ritual scapegoating of organisational figureheads is made easier by its prevalence. The involuntary termination associated with football management is an inherent and pervasive part of that sub-culture. Managers accept cyclical employment mobility (Nissen and Wagner, 2020) and the 'bottom line' – results matter, posts are transitory for most, and employment speculation (whether informed or uninformed) is commonplace. However, the rewards may be substantial or at least attractive for those wishing to continue a role in professional football, and financial compensation is a mitigating factor. Involuntary turnover is not a barrier to re-hiring. In a strange feature of the sub-

culture, but one that acknowledges and demonstrates the responsibility/accountability dilemma, being relieved of duties does not appear to imply a sustained negative evaluation of the individual's expertise in future decision making about appointments. The very clear picture from turnover statistics confirms that short-term tenure is the norm and raises the question of something intrinsic to the role that explains this phenomenon. The concepts associated with sport coaching demonstrate that the phenomenon is both understandable and unavoidable. A more-detailed appreciation of expertise, goal management, role clutter, impression management and celebrity confirms a leadership role based on a contextual purpose in which absolute goal achievement is available only to the few, but relative goal achievement may not be acceptable to all stakeholders.

Incompetence or under-performance in relation to organisational goals is difficult to attribute to the manager and a compensation culture is the result. The tacit nature of expertise and the inability to determine expertise in advance of appointment, when allied to the time required for appropriate managerial practice to be demonstrated, leave owners with little alternative than to resort to results and league position. Terminating the manager's contract satisfies the external stakeholders' call for change, and implies and demonstrates positive action by club owners. In an excellent review of the issues, Arnulf et al (2012) argue that club decision makers have an 'illusion of validity' in making decisions about managerial tenure. They are unable to base their decisions on valid cues and are unduly influenced by the (availability of) weekly indicators of assumed managerial performance.

In coaching terms, the number of games over which a manager's fate may be decided can be expressed as a balance between certainty and impact. If the club delays during this period in order to be certain that there is a need for change (irretrievable negative result momentum), the impact of the change may be lost. Acting sooner may have greater impact, but may be redressing a problem that could have been 'righted' (or even interpreted as 'self-

righting'). However, there is some speculation that the contribution of the manager in football is less impactful than is generally assumed (Kuper and Szymanski, 2018). This argument identifies the aggregate quality of the players as the determining factor in achieving success. A 15-year dataset was used, with considerable accuracy, to predict league placings based on player rankings (The Economist, 2019). Gerhards and Mutz (2016) found that success was highly predictable in Europe's top leagues, with the market value of the players the most significant factor. There is further support from studies that demonstrate little difference in performance, in comparable circumstances, between those clubs that replace managers and those that do not (Balduck and Buelens, 2007). In addition, the constant managerial changes may mask any longitudinal evidence of impact. In practice, in relation to a club's ambition to optimise its resources (over a given period of time), the football manager is viewed as a necessary but ultimately disposable figure.

Putting the phenomenon into a wider sporting and organisational perspective, soccer managers appear to be the epitome of results-based accountability for performance (Audas et al, 2002; Gammelsæter, 2013). This state of affairs may not easily be changed, although we might speculate that financial instability or insecurity may decrease risk taking, but the opposite appears to be the case. Further research is required to establish whether a more 'for profit' approach to ownership (perhaps exemplified by American models of business behaviour) and frequent changes of ownership, in contrast to a focus on 'on-field performance' (McLeod et al, 2021) impacts on managerial tenure. There is a cross-cultural prevalence of dismissals but subsequent research may demonstrate that particular approaches to ownership may lead to closer scrutiny of results and a consequent impact on managerial tenure.

Sport performance cannot be enhanced by short-term measures. Sport coaching operates in a macro-cycle to micro-cycle planning context; compare an Olympic Games

preparation programme over 4 or 8 years to football's managerial tenure, noting, however, that a club's playing resources are also never stable over that period of time. The distinctiveness of football management is clear; the game values player capital over managerial capital as the defining feature of performance, although there are also pragmatic/financial reasons for investing in the former.

The focus of empirical research is on major leagues, although the evidence from the lower leagues in England suggests that fragile tenure is characteristic at all levels. There is no doubt that the intensity of media coverage, the scale of resources, and more extensive technical staffing create circumstances in which the factors that occasion involuntary termination are likely to be more strongly felt in major leagues. In lower leagues, media coverage and celebrity status may be more local than national, although the extent of media coverage and the association of the club with the manager suggest that similar factors are at play. Fewer technical support staff may also place more emphasis on the role and contribution of the manager/head coach. There is a considerable disparity in salaries paid to managers across the divisions in England[v]. This suggests that contractual compensation may offer some security but is unlikely to be the key attractor for potential managers. The compensation culture is a necessary corollary to the acceptance of involuntary termination. That said, further research is required on the impact of involuntary termination in less-well-resourced clubs.

It might even be argued that attention to involuntary termination should not be treated as a noteworthy event. Regular replacement of managers is the norm; either through termination or replacement. The pervasiveness of decision making leading to short-term tenure is at odds with the findings of research on the outcome of involuntary termination of football managers' employment. Nevertheless, the strength of this sub-cultural practice suggests that superficial recommendations for change may be idealistic rather than realisable.

A more-nuanced appreciation of dismissals in football, one that is more clearly rooted in the contribution of coaching concepts, offers some potential for influencing stakeholder perceptions. Decision making by dominant stakeholders may be subjectively rational but a greater awareness of the research evidence on the consequences of action and inaction may temper the recourse to changing the manager as a visible remedy to a perceived unpalatable situation, even when the solutions may be sub-optimal.

From an individual's perspective, preparation for football management might benefit from a greater awareness of the balance of risk attached to attributing expertise to positive and negative outcomes. Goal management is the key skill; avoidance of failure is a pre-requisite, and early identification of trends is crucial. Avoiding relegation is a primary goal but for higher-achieving clubs, perceptions of under-achievement may not be within the control of the manager. Nevertheless, the issue is not one of proving or not proving responsibility for outcomes; culpability and accountability comes with the territory. Managers may benefit from emphasising, through good practice and peer recognition, their expertise in matters for which they can take responsibility. Nevertheless, involuntary termination is an accepted part of the occupational milieu. Managers with the greatest profiles may not have helped their profession by being happy to assume responsibility, and consequent celebrity, for success; the corollary is responsibility for perceived lack of success. Accepting the plaudits may offer decision makers an opportunity to mitigate criticism for their actions and sow the seeds for the manager's subsequent dismissal.

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[i] The literature relevant to this study is largely based on UK/European professional leagues
and invariably uses the term 'football' rather than soccer. This paper follows this convention
and uses the term 'football'.

[ii] Relevant data change on a day by day basis. The website
https://en.wikipedia.org/List_of_current_Premier_League_and_English_Football_League_ma
nagers provides a daily update of tenure data. The statistic provided was calculated from data
accessed on 9th October 2022.

iii The CIES data were calculated from tenure data on 1st March 2022.

iv In figures calculated by the author (source https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/51362104, January 2020) the average tenure for English Championship, English League Division 1, English League Division 2 and National League (levels 2-5 of the football pyramid in England) was 11.7 months, 19.7 months, 12.0 months and 20.7 months respectively. Each is a shorter period than the statistics for the English Premier League (23.9 months) and the Scottish Premier League (23.6 months).

v The evidence from a leaked English Football League salary review reveals the significant disparity in managers' salaries across the Championship and Leagues 1 and 2. See a MailOnline article by Mike Keegan, 28th April 2020, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-8262315/Physios-191-000-kit-men-56-000-Crazy-wages-dont-add-EFL-clubs-brink.html (accessed 31st October 2022).