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Abstract

The youth-to–senior transition in professional soccer within the United Kingdom is challenging, yet previous work has focused on perspectives of a limited range of within-sport stakeholders. We conducted semi-structured interviews with coaches ($n = 12$), sport science support staff ($n = 10$), and parents of players ($n = 6$), exploring their perceptions of transition demands, resources, and barriers. Emergent themes highlighted role-specific support provision, and that athletes progress through a period of adaptation, requiring a diverse set of characteristics and resources (e.g., knowledge of the transition process, social support), developed through a number of preceding transitions.

Key words: within-career transitions, youth development, professional soccer

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The increased pressure, expectations, and other demands accompanying the move from junior to senior sport is associated with enhanced stress and potentially reduced performance (Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008) Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, and Spink (2008) have also suggested transiting athletes may experience additional stressors they do not normally experience in youth sport (e.g., physical and mental demands), which can lead to negative consequences such as burnout. These demands may lead to athletes being released or ceasing participation, with approximately only 17% of all athletes in youth sport successfully transitioning into elite sport (Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004). For the purpose of the current study, the youth-to-senior transition is the transition faced by athletes into professional sport where there is no age banding restricting their participation (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alferman, 1999).

A number of theoretical models outline transitional experiences during sport careers. For example, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) introduced the development model to explain when transitions may occur and highlighted a number of normative transitions that athlete's experience (e.g., the 'youth-to-senior' and 'retirement from sport' transitions). Normative transitions are predictable and anticipated (Schlossberg, 1984; Sharf, 1997). Non-normative transitions, in contrast, are unpredictable, such as when an athlete suffers a career-ending injury (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Many models, such as those by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) and Wylleman, De Knop, and Reints (2011), take a career-long perspective - from a child starting a sport to retirement - highlighting that transitions may occur both within (e.g., youth-to-senior transition) and outside of one's sport (e.g., moving from school to university). Wylleman et al.'s (2011) model highlighted this perspective by including different normative

transitions athletes can be expected to progress through in athletic, psychological, social, academic and vocational, and financial domains.

Conversely, other models (e.g., Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) have focused more on the process of transition within sport. Some are situational-specific (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998, explain the process of retirement), whereas others, such as Stambulova (2003), modelled sporting transitions more broadly. These models predicted that a number of demands, resources, barriers, and coping mechanisms interact throughout each transition, and were based upon ideas from previous mainstream theories exploring the causes, processes, outcomes, and consequences of coping with stressors and/or transition (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). Stambulova (2003, p. 99) suggested that a transition is the athletes' ability to deal with specific demands which pose a conflict between "what the athlete is" and "what he or she wants or ought to be".

Echoing the models above, previous empirical study of the youth-to-senior transition has also highlighted that the process can be characterized by a number of polarizing factors. For example, Pummell et al. (2008) suggested that athletes experience numerous additional demands relative to their previous experiences when they move up to senior sport, such as less time to complete school work, and increased physical and psychological stress characterized by enhanced pressure to perform consistently. Additionally, Bruner et al. (2008) found athletes making the transition from youth-to-senior ice hockey were affected by their previous on-ice experiences, and the level of sport they had played. Less exposure to elite sporting environments as juniors resulted in a lack of perceived readiness, with transiting athletes reporting more difficulties adapting to their new settings than those who had prior experience in senior sport. Also, external pressures from family members, friends, and teammates can make the transition difficult (Pummel et al., 2008). In contrast, however, coaches, fellow players, and parents may also be valuable sources of help during athletic

development, with support received by athletes taking different forms, including informational, emotional, esteemed, and tangible support (Bruner et al., 2008; Pummell et al., 2008).

One common factor from both research and theory is the importance of the presence of support from others (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2013). The support provided can include informational (e.g., tactical or technical advice), emotional (e.g., showing concern for athlete), esteem (e.g., bolstering a person's feeling of competence or self-esteem), and tangible support (e.g., assisting with travelling to and from events; Sheridan et al., 2013). Previous transition literature, however, has tended to focus on athletes' perceptions of the youth-to-senior transition in sport (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Pummell et al., 2008). These athletes' perceptions may vary depending on whether or not they have experienced a positive or negative change. One way to advance knowledge of the change is by interviewing stakeholders who have assisted athletes during the youth-to-senior transition in soccer. Despite being a potential source of valuable information on the process, work which has examined stakeholders' views of the process has focused exclusively on coaches' perceptions. For example, Finn and McKenna (2010) and Jones, Mahoney, and Gucciardi (2014) highlighted a number of factors that coaches' believed were associated with the transition across a number of sports including soccer, rugby union, rugby league, and cricket. Challenges coaches identified included increased physical intensity, the management of free time, and earning respect from senior athletes and coaches. The type of coping resources athletes have available to them includes a positive work ethic, intrinsic motivation, and support from others.

We aimed to develop the work by Finn and McKenna (2010) and Jones et al. (2014) by examining the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders contributing to the youth-to-senior transition. Athletes regularly discuss aspects of their development with various people in

addition to coaches, including sport science support staff and parents (Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2015) who represent alternative sources of information and support with respect to the youth-to-senior transition. Gaining knowledge of the youth-to-senior transition in sport from these various stakeholders' perspectives will be beneficial for two key reasons. First, the within-sport stakeholders (coaches and support staff) will have experienced and observed a large number of soccer players successfully and unsuccessfully manage the change. Those in different roles will have interacted with the players in varying contexts, and with differing boundaries in terms of formality and openness. The resultant breadth of knowledge and understanding of some of the similarities and differences between successful and unsuccessful transitions would not be possible to acquire from coaches or athletes alone. Second, the inclusion of parents recognizes that transitions do not occur in a sporting vacuum, and begins to explore how transitions may be influenced and experienced by those around athletes out with the sporting environment. Exploring the deeply personal views of these stakeholders adds a new perspective to our understanding of athletic transitions. By triangulating the views of coaches, professional support staff and significant others, who observe and interact with athletes in different contexts and for different reasons (Jones et al., 2014), the current research will broaden understanding of the transition process. This knowledge can then be used to support athletes who are moving to senior sport, and help those who interact with the athletes to provide the most conducive environment for successful transitions.

In sum, the aim of the current study was to examine the factors coaches, sport science support staff, and parents (who, as a collective, will be referred to as stakeholders for the purpose of the current study) believed were associated with the youth-to-senior transition process. As discussed, previous models (e.g., Stambulova 2003) have identified that a number of factors, including demands, resources, and barriers, influence the transition

process. These models, however, are generic sport transition models, and the current study

will provide more context specific knowledge of the factors which influence the youth-to-

senior transition in United Kingdom (UK) professional soccer environment, a heretofore

unexamined arena. Richardson, Relvas, and Littlewood (2013) contend that the youth-to-

senior transitions which occur in professional soccer in the UK are likely to be much more

challenging for youth athletes than transitions in other sports due to the culture which

surrounds it. Despite only a few players being chosen to make this step up to senior sport,

between the ages of 17-19 players who are selected are expected to move from a caring,

nurturing, and empathetic youth academy environment to an environment which is defined by

being brutal, ruthless, hyper-macho, and outcome orientated in senior sport (Richardson et

al., 2013). This cultural shift may mean that the factors associated with transitions which

occur in professional soccer in the UK are different to transitions in other sports.

Understanding the perspectives of this youth-to-senior transition from the perspective of

stakeholders involved in the process will help identify if there are indeed differences in

professional soccer within the UK and other sporting contexts. To help achieve these aims,

findings were also cross-referenced with existing frameworks, models of transition, and

previous transition literature to highlight similarities between these and the current study and

to highlight extensions to knowledge.

Method

Participants

Stakeholders (24 males, 4 females, M_{age} = 49 years, SD ± 11.8, range = 25-71) from

six professional soccer clubs in the Scottish or English Premier League were interviewed.

The sample consisted of coaches (n = 12, all males; age range = 35-71), sport science support

staff (n = 10, 8 males and 2 females; age range = 25-54), and parents (n = 6, 4 males and 2

females; age range = 38-56). A larger number of coaches were recruited as the role is diverse,

here including senior team managers ($n = 3$), youth academy managers ($n = 2$), senior team coaches ($n = 3$), and youth team coaches ($n = 4$). Sport science support staff included sport physiologists ($n = 2$), sport psychologists ($n = 4$), physiotherapists ($n = 3$), and a sport therapist ($n = 1$). Parents of players who had moved from youth-to-senior soccer were recruited from clubs involved in the study. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, stakeholders had to have supported at least one athlete through the youth-to-senior transition. Stakeholders also had to have supported an athlete with the youth-to-senior transition in the proceeding one year period prior to being interviewed. These criteria ensured that participants were able to draw on relevant experiences to answer questions regarding factors associated with transition. The respondents' experience of the youth-to-senior transition ranged from 1 to 42 years ($M_{experience} = 17.2$, SD $\pm$ 10.2) years. Coaches had at least 10 years' experience of supporting athletes through the youth-to-senior transition ($M_{experience} = 25.6$, SD $\pm$ 12.2). Sport science support staff had at least 5 years' experience supporting athletes as they moved to senior sport ($M_{experience} = 16.3$, SD $\pm$ 9.6). All parents had supported their child through one transition.

Procedure and Interview Guide

After ethical approval was gained from a university ethics board, potential participants, who were identified via sporting governing bodies, internet websites, and authors' personal contacts were sent a letter informing them of the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study. A willingness to participate was received from 4 participants, with snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) used to recruit the remaining participants, resulting in the accumulation of 28 participants in total.

Once individuals agreed to participate, times for interviews were arranged, and they were re-sent an information sheet and informed consent form for the study. Immediately prior to the interviews, participants were reminded of the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits

of the study, and provided written informed consent. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with all 28 participants, followed a semi-structured interview schedule, were audio taped, and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 37 - 75 minutes ($M = 52$ minutes).

Semi-structured interview techniques were used to explore participants' thoughts and opinions (Patton, 2002), because they allowed exploration of the research questions in depth. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to highlight alternative factors associated with the topic and are not constrained by specific questions preventing further exploration. Semi-structured interviews also assisted data analysis by ensuring interviewees' responses given to each topic were typically easier to discover and compare from the transcripts (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview schedule was based on transition models (e.g., Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and youth-to-senior transition literature (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010), with relevant themes highlighted in this literature being used to inform topic areas to be covered in the dialogue. Prior to the interviews taking place, the schedules were reviewed by two sport psychology academics with backgrounds in qualitative research. Further, pilot interviews took place to test the interview schedules for missing topics and allow me to make necessary revisions to improve them prior to the implementation of the study (Kvale, 2007). Based upon these procedures, the interview schedule was adapted to make some of the questions more open in nature to help ensure that the interview elicited appropriate data. The interview schedule is attached as an appendix, and questions broadly focused on understanding the demands, barriers, and resources participants believed athletes experience and used moving from youth-to-senior soccer.

Data Analysis and Research Credibility

Following transcription, Braun and Clarke's (2006) abductive thematic content analysis helped to summarize key features, highlight parallels and differences between stakeholders, identify unexpected insights emerging from the data, and answer the research

questions. Abductive thematic analysis helped to ensure that data were not pre-selectively grouped into previously existing categories, as the approach is a combination of inductive (where the data were analyzed to highlight themes before being matched to pre-existing themes which have emerged from previous literature) and deductive (where the data were matched to themes arising during analysis) analysis. Analysis of the data using this approach also allowed new themes to emerge which had not been highlighted in previous transition literature. Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of analysis included: (a) becoming familiar with the data (reading and re-reading transcripts and noting initial ideas), (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes (bringing relevant data together), (d) reviewing themes generated to check they were identifiable within the whole dataset, (e) defining and naming themes identified, and (f) producing the report. The interviews were analyzed immediately after they occurred in order to highlight common themes and additional insights that were presented by stakeholders. Although the interviews were analyzed immediately after they had taken place, the interview guide was not altered prior to subsequent interviews to ensure consistency among the interviews conducted. As the interview guide was semi-structured, however, there was the opportunity for the interviewer to ask questions which were in addition to those on the schedule to garner further depth to responses from the participants. These additional questions were, where appropriate, informed by prior knowledge of the results given in previous interviews. After the interviews with the 28 participants had taken place, theoretical saturation (Patton, 2002) was achieved, because the final few interviews (interviews 24-28) were highlighting the same themes as had been discussed previously, and were not developing or adding more insight into the themes that had already been identified.

As we were looking to explain and represent the youth-to-senior transition in a manner useful to others, we would like the work to be judged by its naturalistic generalizability, width, credibility, and transparency, as outlined by Smith and Caddick

(2012). Naturalistic generalizability refers to the ability of the work to resonate or stimulate curiosity among readers. Width is the comprehensiveness of the data collection and analysis methods and the researchers' interpretations. Credibility refers to the data being believable. Finally, transparency is the clear outline of the procedures which the researchers carried out, and the techniques used to analyze the data.

To increase the opportunity for naturalistic generalizability, width, credibility, and transparency, as recommended by Smith and Caddick (2012), we have included rich, thick descriptions of the participants and the context they were from, the number of participants from each group, the number of organizations that took part in the study and where they were based, and the number and length of the data collection sessions. Details on the data collection and analysis methods employed are also included, and these approaches were regularly critiqued by the three authors, who had recurrent meetings to ensure that appropriate techniques were being employed to collect and analyze the data, and to review the conclusions being reached. Shenton (2004) argued that by carrying out such debriefing sessions, the interpretation and understanding of the data that the lead researcher may have can be tested to help acknowledge and manage the influence of personal biases and preferences. Throughout the current work, we have also included a number of quotations supporting the research findings that were agreed upon after the debriefing sessions. Finally, the work was exposed to a *critical friend* independent of the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2012), who examined the data collection and analysis procedures undertaken, and the themes generated, to ensure the process was rigorous and logical. For example, the decision to cease data collection was subject to audience review (Patton, 2002) by a critical friend (Smith & Sparkes, 2014) to help determine that additional insights were not being missed in the final 4 interviews. Sparkes and Smith (2014) highlighted that critical friends can be used to provide a theoretical sounding board which can challenge data collection and analysis

procedures which have taken place, and question the conclusions reached in the work to ensure they are appropriate and representative of the data collected. The critical friend chosen had experience of transitions in high level sport yet was disinterested in the current research project, allowing him to provide critical analysis of the data collection and analysis procedures which were undertaken.

Results

Stakeholders perceived athletes will go through (a) a period of adaptation, which requires (b) a corresponding set of characteristics and resources (e.g., an ability to reflect upon performances), that have been (c) developed through a number of preceding transitions, to become successful senior players. Each theme raised by the stakeholders is discussed below, with representative quotes given to support the findings. Unless otherwise stated, themes were common across the various stakeholder groups.

A Period of Adaptation

Stakeholders perceived that, as athletes move to senior sport, they experience various changes, including an increased standard of sport, greater physical and mental demands, and a change in the type of environment they operate in, from a caring developmental environment to a brutal culture driven by success. These changes suggest that a corresponding period of adaptation is required for athletes to be successful.

All participants perceived that athletes have to perform better as they compete against better players: "…I mean, it's a much better standard, isn't it…the players are more skillful and can make you look silly if you aren't up to scratch and can't challenge a player, or take on a player to create space and time for your team, for example" (Coach C). This increased standard of play may also be exemplified by the players who have just moved up to senior sport competing "…more regularly against international, well respected, and seasoned

professional players, who have managed to maintain a career that youth players could only dream of" (Coach F).

In addition to being a better standard of soccer, stakeholders regarded playing in the senior team as more "physically and mentally demanding" (Parent A) on the players. Physically, stakeholders perceiving that: "…the speed of play is much quicker" (Sport Scientist A) and "…the boys in the senior team are much stronger, and the young boys need to come in and be able to shove opponents around, or at the very least develop to that level very quickly" (Sport Scientist A). Such demand increases can lead to players experiencing a number of physical problems, as this representative quote from a sport physiologist identified:

> The first month or so after the boys move up to the first team, you see them every day, they always have something wrong with them…it's usually injuries that the first team boys have and don't think anything of, but when you're moving into that more physical environment, it must be quite difficult to deal with those knocks…that you aren't used to (Sport Scientist C).

Mentally, players are required to deal with "…getting wound up by their opponent more often, [and] increased pressure to make less mental errors" (Sport Scientist H). Stakeholders perceived that opponents are more likely to "make comments, nip [young players], stand on their toes…all designed to get a rise out of the new boy, and show him who is the boss" (Coach I). Senior sport was also said to be more mentally draining for athletes as any "…mistake [they] made was likely to get punished by their opponent, [meaning] they have to concentrate 100% for the full match" (Coach H). When moving to senior sport, it is highly likely that "a number of players" are not "physically or mentally ready" (Coach H) despite receiving support from sport science staff because they do not have a knowledge of how big an increase in physical and mental ability is required, and do not take ownership of their training to ensure they are in peak condition. These mental demands are exacerbated by a lack

of control which can also result in difficulties adapting to senior sport. A number of the

stakeholders believed that a lack of control over, firstly, the decision as to whether or not

athletes were going to be offered a professional contract, and secondly, what they were

actually going to encounter in senior sport, may result in increased stress: "…the boys moving

up don't have any control over the decisions or what they are actually going to be asked to do

when they move up, so that is tricky for them" (Sport Scientist B) because "…one day they

could be a youth athlete playing center-back and on the verge of the first team, the next day

they relegated to the youth team bench – or even worse [they could be] released" (Coach B).

In addition to adaptations in terms of perceived increases in standards and greater

physical and mental demands, stakeholders from each of the participant groups identified that

moving to senior sport results in a change of culture from "a caring and development culture,

focused on development of elite athletes, to a brutal culture driven by winning", which many

players are "ill-equipped to deal with" (Coach C). Players may also go through a period

immediately after moving up where they feel "lonely and isolated" (Coach C), because they

have not developed social support networks due to their diminishing social status within the

new squad (i.e., they are no longer one of the big names within their team, instead they are

having to prove their worth to more experienced and established players). These changes can

be challenging for athletes and lead to increased stress, as the following representative quote

from a coach identified:

> The changes these boys go through are not just moving from the youth team to the
>
> first team – there is so much more to it than that. They change teammates, manager,
>
> sometimes the position they are playing to suit the team's style of play. But more than
>
> that, the culture changes, they now need to perform to the best of their ability every
>
> day. If they don't, they are out the door. The pressure on them is immense (Coach I).

Stakeholders suggested that because this culture change often resulted in stress that athletes had not experienced before: "…in the first team, the boys are put under more pressure by the teammates, coaches, and themselves to perform at a consistently high standard, so they need to concentrate and work hard – but it's not easy and some of the boys can't cope with how high a standard is expected of them" (Sport Scientist B). Stakeholders believed the increased pressure in training was necessary because mistakes in matches "…[were] more likely to be punished by opponents", so if they are put under increasing pressure in a safer environment by coaches and teammates, they can learn to "cope with the pressure better" (Parent F). Overcoming this challenge may be "difficult for some", especially if they have "not been integrated into the environment gradually" (Sport Scientist H).

These quotes highlight that as athletes move up to senior sport, they may be presented with various concurrent and multi-faceted demands, which need to be overcome. During the initial period of adaptation, these simultaneous stressors may result in a turbulent time for athletes. Indeed, stakeholders identified that this period of adaptation immediately after moving to the senior environment may be an unsettled time for athletes. Responding to a question about whether or not athletes view moving to senior sport as a positive or negative experience, one stakeholder, a coach, said:

> …it really depends on the individual…you will have boys who will be performing really well, but actually tell you that they haven't enjoyed it, then you will have ones who perform poorly, but have still enjoyed the challenge – so I think it depends a lot on the individual…one thing you can guarantee though is that you will get a mixture of positive and negative experiences every year players come up to the first team (Coach J).

No matter how well athletes adapt to the transition process, however, they have "to change from the youth team because it is so different [and they] are now a small fish in a big pond instead of the other way about" (Coach J).

A Corresponding set of Characteristics and Resources

To adapt, stakeholders perceived that athletes needed knowledge of their sport and the transition process, a number of personal characteristics, and access to high quality social support.

Knowledge. Stakeholders perceived that athletes needed to understand the transition process complexity and associated heightened stress. Understanding that the process can be difficult "… may help them to prepare more effectively as they won't assume that they will be successful straight away, and will work harder to ensure their success" (Coach A). Added, athletes needed to realize the process will include "peaks and troughs", with them being coaches' and fellow players' "…favorite player one day, and most hated player the next" (Sport Scientist E).

In addition, players had to understand their own "current levels of physical and mental attributes", the "level of players in the senior team", and what "they needed to do to achieve the same [generally higher] level of the senior players, to be successful" (Coach H). This knowledge was perceived to help athletes to self-regulate more effectively and "…put effort into improving any areas of weakness they may have" (Coach D) before moving up.

The last key knowledge area athletes need is about their roles within their new team. Stakeholders suggested that as athletes move up, if they do not have an understanding of their role they may become "isolated from the rest of the team", "not play often within the first team", and "eventually be released" (Sport Scientist D). These responsibilities include ensuring the tactics and strategies as outlined by coaches are implemented effectively, and

understanding they are "…new to the team and they have to prove themselves as valuable to their new teammates via their performances" (Sport Scientist J).

To ensure athletes have the required knowledge, stakeholders suggested that more should "…probably be done to get [athletes] to sit themselves down and speak to boys who have been through it, speak to [the staff and social supporters], and get an understanding of what they are about to face" (Parent C), so that they know how hard the process of transition can be, how hard they need to work to be physically and mentally prepared, and their role within the broader context of the squad.

Personal characteristics. Stakeholders perceived that athletes had to have an ability to strategically think about improving their own performance in a team environment. When athletes were in the youth team, they could not be frightened to take advantage of a situation "…even if it to the detriment of other players in the youth team" because the purpose of the youth teams is to "develop individual athletes for senior sport, not develop a successful team" (Coach A). Situations which athletes may need to take advantage of include injuries to other players in their position, players getting dropped, and poor performances from other players. Additionally, players need to focus on their own performances when moving up to senior sport. The focus, however, is on the "development of a successful team", not individual athletes, which is in contrast to the youth team. Players, therefore, need to think about what "characteristics they can develop which will aid the team's performances" (Coach K).

A related individual characteristic was a determination to succeed and work hard. Several participants thought: "they have to have the motivation to be successful and that is the most important resource they can have in my opinion" because it leads to: "…success long term….when they are seen to work hard, the manager sees that and is more likely to support them because of that" (Parent D). Related, also discussed was the need for athletes to work hard, like they have done in youth teams, when training with the first team. This hard work

needed to be supplemented by the motivation to work even harder and improve when

mistakes are being made on a continual basis:

> …it's all about working hard in my opinion, and being motivated enough to want to
>
> work hard…I mean, plenty of boys get the opportunity to play in the first team and
>
> they think they have made it, but then they make mistakes and then don't work even
>
> harder, like they should, and are very quickly left behind…they have worked hard in
>
> the youth team to get where they are, so we know they can do it – but many
>
> don't…(Coach E).

When asked about the basis of players' motivation, stakeholders identified a range of goals

including self-improvement (as discussed above) and self-pride, as well as more extrinsic

goals such as "success and money" (Parent F).

The ability to control emotions to assist with integration into the senior team was also

reported by stakeholders because players were liable to be "slagged [verbally abused] and

hounded" when they moved up to senior sport:

> The [established] boys take the piss [wind young players up]; they do silly things to
>
> see how the young boys cope. It's all harmless fun, but there is a serious side to it,
>
> showing you can handle it without getting upset or annoyed is crucial [for acceptance
>
> by teammates] (Sport Scientist G).

Responding to a question on what techniques could be used to control emotions, a common

response was the ability to "block negative thoughts to overcome difficult periods" (Sport

Scientist A). Stakeholders perceived that this ability to remain calm and show value to the

team without getting upset or annoyed could also help bolster a person's confidence: "…if

they come out the other side of it, they should be more confident – they are part of the team

now and they have proved they have the ability to be successful" (Coach L).

The last personal characteristic that athletes need to negotiate the transition was a capability to reflect upon poor performances and to learn from setbacks. During transition, athletes are likely to be "…making more mistakes because of the standard they are playing at" (Parent F), but if they can overcome those by learning what they should do in similar situations in the future via "…reflect[ion] upon their mistakes and getting feedback on performance from coaches and fellow players" (Coach A), they can become more successful senior athletes. Reflection can also be used to help athletes understand what they did well in previous good performances, "so they can learn from the positives and negatives [of previous successes and failures]" (Sport Scientist E).

Social support. Stakeholders believed athletes needed to have access to social support from a range of people including coaches, fellow players, friends, family, and sport scientists, and the assistance included informational, emotional, esteemed, and tangible support.

Stakeholders believed that informational support could be provided in the form of technical and tactical help and this assistance may be provided by their "manager and the coaches… [players' name] has often talked about his youth coach still helping him out, even though he has moved up" (Parent B). In addition to receiving technical support from managers and coaches, athletes moving up to the first team might receive technical support from fellow players, including those in "similar positions, more experienced players, and the team captain" (Coach B). Such support is helpful because "…they [senior players] have played the game at that level and they can take the young boys aside and tell them what they need to do" (Coach B).

Sport science support is another form of informational support athletes may use to overcome the transition, mainly provided by sport science staff and coaches. Participants suggested all types of sport science support are crucial in their own way, because "…[it] helps

the boys to be prepared mentally and physically to compete in senior sport" (Sport Scientist F).

Emotional support is perceived to be provided by fellow players, friends, family, and sport scientists. Friends and family were regarded by many of those interviewed as the most common and important providers of emotional support, giving players a chance to vent their frustrations away from the cocooned sporting environment (Coach B):

> Having friends and family to support them away from the sport environment can have a massive positive effect on those moving up to senior sport. When they move up…they will [get] frustrated and angry…and having some kind of support and someone to talk to at home will really help [with] that.

Sport scientists were regarded by stakeholders as another source of emotional assistance to the athletes. This support was provided mainly by sport psychologists, but was also given by sport physiologists, sport therapists and physiotherapists because, as a physiotherapist (Sport Scientist H) identified, "…when the guys are relaxed, they talk…obviously I'm not a sport psych, but I listen, and they talk…whether that helps them (shrugs shoulders), the guys say it does".

Although there was consensus among stakeholders that fellow players, friends, family, and sport scientists should provide emotional support, there was disagreement regarding whether or not coaches could also offer such support. All parents suggested coaches should also provide emotional support to youth athletes moving to senior sport:

> The coaches should be looking after the players as well, like giving them help if they are feeling down. Obviously I'm biased, but I want my boy to be happy, and I think that the manager should be doing all he can to help that (Parent D).

In comparison, all other groups suggested that coaches should not provide this type of support because they "…can't get too close to the players…[they have] to make big decisions, like

whether to drop a player, sometimes he might have to shout at them, and if he gets too

close…it might come across as bias towards that player" (Sport Scientist E). These

contrasting viewpoints may be because parents are concerned about the welfare of their

children and believe that the coaches have a duty of care. In contrast, the remaining

stakeholders believed coaches are judged upon their ability to develop and manage a winning

team. Although acknowledging organizations have a "duty of care" over their athletes, these

stakeholders suggested that clubs "…put support in place to deal with any difficulties athletes

have, which allows [coaches] to focus on creating a winning team" (Sport Scientist E).

Additionally, coaches also suggested that they are often looking for athletes who have the

"ability to deal with and manage difficulties they come across themselves anyway" because

these are "more likely to be successful first team players" (Coach H).

      Stakeholders perceived that everyone around the athlete could be involved in

providing esteem support through the transition to ensure that the athlete remains "confident

and understands that they can be successful" (Sport Scientist C) throughout their transition.

Stakeholders perceived:

> …being confident in your own ability when moving to senior sport is crucial…we
>
> often see the boys who are most successful in senior sport are those who are most
>
> confident, not necessarily those who have the best natural ability…so anyone who can,
>
> should keep telling the players they have the ability to move up to keep their
>
> confidence boosted (Coach B).

When asked if it was dangerous to give athletes too much praise, many suggested that "this

could be a problem", but that they would rather have confident players than "those who look

out of place and shy away from making big decisions", so a balance is necessary where

players are "informed of their mistakes, but [these mistakes are] work[ed] through and

[players are] show[n] ways to improve performances, which is better than shouting at the players with the risk of hurting their confidence" (Coach H).

Stakeholders suggested that the athletes may need tangible assistance, mainly provided by parents, in the form of "…travel to games, accommodation, and things like making meals and providing food", and "financial assistance" (Parent B). Additionally, the stakeholders interviewed also suggested that the clubs provide financial support in the form of the players' wages.

Developed Through a Number of Preceding Transitions

Stakeholders suggested that to overcome the adaptation period, athletes could be encouraged to reflect on previous transition experiences to identify their existing competencies developed as they moved through age grouped teams. Despite the perceived increase in standard, stakeholders identified that athletes have been though the transition process repeatedly, and their familiarity may help make this process easier for them: "…the players have experienced the actual process of moving up to a more senior team before, so this is something that is familiar to them, but they don't seem to get told often enough about this…" (Coach B).

According to stakeholders, the knowledge athletes have of this process, and the skills and techniques they have developed throughout their youth career, could be used to help them "understand how good they are and the coping mechanisms they have used in the past" (Sport Scientist B). This could then be used to help with their current transition to senior sport. It was also perceived that the previous transition experiences athletes have in youth sport could allow them to develop a number of the other key factors which may help determine their success in the move to senior sport, including "…support from others and their own knowledge and understanding of what is going to be expected of them", but that they need to

be "informed of the connection" between all these experiences to appreciate the value of these previous processes (Coach B).

Discussion

We aimed to advance knowledge of the youth-to-senior transition in sport by examining, via qualitative in-depth interviews, the factors various stakeholders (including coaches, support staff, and parents) believed were associated with the process. Results suggested that athletes will go through (a) a period of adaptation, which requires (b) a corresponding set of characteristics and resources, which have been (c) developed through a number of preceding transitions, in order to become successful senior players. The period of adaptation results from an increase in the standard of sport, greater physical and mental demands, and a culture change. To deal with this period of adaptation, stakeholders perceived that athletes need to have or develop their knowledge of their sport and the transition process, a number of personal characteristics (e.g., a determination to succeed and work hard), and access to high quality social support. These characteristics could have been developed as a result of a culmination of previous transitional experiences within youth sport. There are a number of theoretical and practical implications of this knowledge, and these will now be discussed.

The present study strengthens the evidence that there is a period of adaptation when athletes move to senior sport. These results extend previous literature (e.g., Morris et al. 2015; Pummell et al., 2008) by focusing on the professional soccer context and discussing the culture change surrounding transition. As discussed, often soccer players are moving from an environment which is focused on their development in a nurturing environment, to one which is ruthless, outcome focused, and is masculine oriented (Richardson et al., 2013). Despite having a first team contract, many athletes may have to go through a period immediately after moving up where they feel lonely and isolated due to their diminishing social status within the

new squad (Richardson et al., 2013). These findings have implications for those helping

athletes through the transition to senior sport. To help with establishment in the first team

organizations could gradually introduce players into the senior squad and allow them the

opportunity to integrate with the players at a social level (i.e., during away days or similar).

Athletes could be educated about the difficulties they may experience because this

understanding could allow them to build internal resources to manage the demands (e.g., an

ability to control emotions), and seek support from others about the aspects they cannot

control (e.g., technical aspects of the game). These interventions have been shown to help

athletes establish themselves in senior sport and provide support for their development (e.g.,

Morris et al., 2015). Additionally, encouraging supporters to reflect on their role in transition

and how they are influencing the process of transition in helpful and unhelpful ways may

allow them to support athletes more effectively.

     To overcome the period of adaptation, the results of the current study highlighted that

there were three aspects which could be developed to assist athletes - their knowledge of their

sport and the transition process, personal characteristics, and access to high quality social

support. By having knowledge of the sport demands and transition process, including the

physical and mental demands, and a series of personal characteristics, such as the ability to

control emotions, athletes may be able to self-regulate better as they move to senior sport. For

example, as a result of having greater knowledge of the physical and mental demands required

in elite sport, athletes may be more able and willing to translate an awareness of their

strengths and weaknesses into action, and try to maintain strengths and improve weaknesses

in performances (Toering, Elferink-Gemser, Jordet, & Visscher, 2009). To this end, it may be

prudent to educate youth athletes on the process of transition, the expected physical and

mental demands, and the personal characteristics required in senior sport. This could be done

via, for example, training days where athletes are put through a series of physical and mental

challenges. Athletes may take part in strength based, endurance, and cognitive functioning tests, with comparisons made between their performance and equivalent performances of athletes already in senior sport, which can give them the awareness to self-regulate more effectively before moving up.

Results of the current work also highlighted that there may be a variety of goals relating to athletes' motivation for the transition to senior sport, some of which were extrinsic (e.g., money). From a self-determination theory perspective, these antecedents may not yield persistence in the face of difficulty, or optimal sustained performance (Ryan & Deci, 2007). If stakeholders are educated about the ways they could encourage adaptive motivational antecedents, they may be more able to create environments conducive to intrinsic motivation (i.e., a love of the sport), which has been shown to be more effective for continued success and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

Congruent with previous literature (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Sheridan et al., 2013), the current results suggested that the social support received from others such as fellow players, coaches, parents, other family members, and friends is an important resource which can be utilized by athletes. Adding to these previous findings and advancing theoretical knowledge, the current study also identifies that those people providing support during the transition to senior sport may provide specific types of support dependent on their role and the contexts in which they interacted with the athletes. Those interviewed suggested that: informational support may be provided by managers, coaches, fellow players, and sport science staff; emotional support may be provided by players, family, friends, and sport scientists; esteem support may be provided by everyone that the youth athlete encounters; and tangible support may be provided by parents and the organization the player is attached to. Future research on the exploration of these roles within other soccer clubs and sporting contexts will determine whether or not these findings are more generalisatble across contexts.

Further, it is important to recognize that individual differences in support requirements and preferences (Chay, 2011) may influence the most optimal support networks for specific athletes.

Results of the current study also highlighted that there may be a discrepancy between parents' perceptions and other stakeholders' views on whether or not coaches should provide emotional support to athletes. In the UK professional football context, the youth team athletes are often in environments perceived to be caring and supportive, and in which coaches may provide emotional support (Richardson et al., 2013). The discrepancy between whether or not coaches in senior sport should provide emotional support, therefore, appears only to apply to coaches in the senior team. Although it may be a challenge for senior coaches, the results suggest that clubs do have a duty of care towards their athletes, which could include the need for some coaches to provide emotional support. Considering athletes may already have a relationship with their youth coaches and may already be receiving emotional support from them, continuing this support when athletes move to senior sport may allow for a smoother transition for youth athletes, and help to overcome the discrepancy outlined in the results. Additionally, understanding such discrepancies may help sport psychologists negotiate or prevent tensions that may arise when different stakeholders' opinions clash regarding emotional support. Based upon these results, organizations, coaches, and support staff could clarify to all staff their role in transition, making it clear what is expected of them when supporting athletes during the process, especially where there may be perceived discrepancies. These roles could be disseminated to stakeholders as part of education programs or similar, and this may also give organizations the opportunity to discuss with supporters what may happen if they step outside their boundary of expertise, thus reducing the likelihood of cross-contamination of assistance (e.g., coaches trying to provide emotional support to athletes when they are about to release said players).

Stambulova (2003) suggested that transitions are a process rather than a singular event. The results of the current study add additional insight, suggesting that the previous transitions from around the ages of 13 or 14 through age group sport can influence how well athletes may move to senior sport. Parallels between this idea of cycles of transitions and the transition out of sport literature can be drawn. Much retirement from sport literature (e.g., Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente & Cruz, 2004) has suggested that the process starts many years, in some cases, before the eventual retirement. The results of the current study suggested that if athletes do not acquire many of the skills throughout their youth career, they might not be able to successfully transition to senior sport when they reach that moment. These findings have consequences for organizations, coaches, and support staff when supporting athletes moving from youth-to-senior sport. Programs could be implemented from the age athletes first enter the professional soccer environment, which support athletes, via education sessions and performance profiling, to identify and develop appropriate skills (e.g., technical and tactical knowledge) and coping mechanisms (e.g., reflection upon performances) that they could use throughout transition. These programs could focus on the development of the key skills and resources as outlined in the current study as a basis for supporting athletes through the transition to senior sport. For example, athletes could be encouraged, through a process of reflection, to think about previous transitions, as was suggested by stakeholders, and identify what coping mechanisms they used and use the same or similar ones for the move to senior sport. If organizations, coaches, and support staff implement a system which encourages reflection upon both successful and poor transitions to a higher age group team, athletes can then be made aware of what they have done well and would look to maintain moving forward, and what they could do better in future transitions. As a result of this type of program, athletes may be able to work out what works best for them before they face one of the most challenging transitions possible for a youth athlete. Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, de Roos, and

Visscher (2012) have previously highlighted the value of reflection when they found that athletes who reflect upon their performances are more likely to become elite.

Although this paper has offered in-depth insights into stakeholders' perceptions of the youth-to-senior transition, there are some limitations which need to be considered for future research. Caution must be taken when applying these findings outside of the professional soccer context, due to the different cultures which may be present. For example, the youth-to-senior transition in rugby may occur at an older age for many athletes due to the need for them to be physically stronger. Rugby players may be more psychologically developed when they come to senior sport. Future studies could look at stakeholders' perceptions of the youth-to-senior transition in different sports to identify any differences that may be present.

The retrospective nature of the current study needs consideration given potential retrospective recall biases and information loss. As discussed previously, the maximum time after transition these people were interviewed was one year. It is still possible, however, that there was some memory decay in that time which may have influenced the results gleaned. Longitudinal examination of stakeholders may help to reduce the effects of retrospective recall bias further, and this work can then be used to inform athlete transition support programs. Future research could also use case study methodology to overcome this limitation, extrapolating information from a number of sources including, for example, interviews, policy documentation, and diaries. A case study of organizations during the youth-to-senior transition will help highlight the ways in which professional organizations manage the transition and which resources are prominent across the sector (e.g., Morris et al., 2015). Although there is an increasing amount of research on the youth-to-senior transition in sport, no studies explore whether or not this knowledge is being used within sporting bodies, which a case study methodology may highlight. Such studies would also allow the identification of organizations employing best practice, which could then be used to inform other organizations

supporting athletes moving to senior sport of ways they can support athletes through the process.

The current study's justifications emerged from previous research findings which highlight that stakeholders were regarded as a valuable provision in the youth-to-senior transition, but that little was known about their perceptions of the process. Findings confirmed previously-identified factors influencing the youth-to-senior transition, and added to existing knowledge by suggesting, for example, that there may be utility in drawing from and reflection on previous within-career transitions. Given the relative consistency of experiences reported, governing bodies and professional sports organizations should consider how best to implement recommendations based on the perceived adaptations and support resources required for successful transition.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Introduction

1. Can you describe your experiences of the youth-to-senior transition in football?

   Probe: How long have you known/worked with athletes who have transitioned?

Facilitating the Transition

2. What factors do you believe are important to help young footballers make the transition?

3. Who or what could footballers not transition without?

4. What is your role in facilitating this transition?

Challenges

5. What do you feel are some of the challenges young footballers may face as they move from youth-to-senior level? Probe: What makes the transition hard? Psychological, physiological, technical, social demands?

6. What strategies do/has the player(s) used previously to deal with these challenges?

Minimizing Talent Loss

7. What do athletes who move up to the first team do that others do not do to prevent them dropping out?

8. What do you feel that can be done to help athletes make the step up to senior football?

9. What do footballers need to prepare for in order to succeed at a professional level?

   Probe: Drawing on your experiences, what do you think is important to help people coming through?

Summary

10. Is there anything I should have asked you which I did not, and you think is important to the youth-to-senior transition?