



## A holistic perspective on career development in UK female soccer players: A negative case analysis



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to examine career experiences of UK-based female youth soccer players from a holistic perspective with a view to producing a grounded theory of factors contributing to career/talent development and transitions in UK youth female soccer.

**Methodology:** A Grounded Theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used. Negative case (Denzin, 1989) former female soccer players (N = 13), their best friend (N = 13), soccer coaches (N = 4), and teachers (N = 8) took part in semi-structured interviews about factors associated with talent development and career transitions in female youth soccer.

**Results:** Multiple social agents (players, team-mates, peers, teachers, parents and siblings) need to optimally interact to ensure that an optimal talent development and learning environment is created. This will provide a supportive holistic talent development environment, lead to adaptive player-level changes, and a greater chance of successful athletic and dual career development.

**Conclusions:** This study presents a rich understanding of the dual careers of players who did not make it in female soccer. By considering their perspectives alongside of a range of important social agents, we have been able to construct a substantive grounded theory of factors contributing to career/talent development and transitions in UK youth female soccer. As a result, these findings may contribute to policy and practice development in UK female youth soccer.

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### Introduction

Within sport psychology literature, the notion of dual careers (i.e., combining sport and education; sport and employment) has gained momentum to the point where it is now considered an international topic that is visible in research from across the globe, including Europe, North America, and Australia (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Given that athletes invest significant time and effort into their sporting and life development careers (O'Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014) it is perhaps unsurprising that this body of research has gained such momentum, with scholars aiming to support athletes with attaining an optimal balance that will allow them to successfully navigate key life changes, such as; junior-to-senior career transitions, progression through education, and progression to post-sport careers (e.g., Stambulova,

Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). As such, recent research-informed political attention has been given to how young athletes might best be supported with their dual careers (e.g., European Commission, 2012).

Despite the importance of athletes' dual career investments, how athletes view themselves and their endeavours within their dual career experiences is reported to be under-investigated (Cosh & Tulley, 2014). Moreover, studies that have investigated dual career experiences have tended to investigate multiple sports and both male and female athletes (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2015). Whilst providing valuable insights into dual career experiences, a multi-sport study may not be sensitive to the nuances of an individual sport within it. One sport that presents quite unique dual career demands on young athletes, is soccer (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013; McCormack & Walseth, 2013).

Recently, female soccer ameliorated on a global scale, with 29 million players across the world (Scott & Andersson, 2013) and greater attention now being paid to the development of elite level female soccer players. For example, Fédération Internationale de

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Football Association (FIFA) has championed the development of women's soccer on a global scale. As part of this, FIFA (2014) released its women's soccer development programme guidelines (2015–2018). This document includes key principles for the development of women's soccer; these principles include sustainable and professionalised competitions for female soccer, and having an expert knowledge base involved within decision making. In addition, FIFA's individual nations have developed bespoke soccer development strategies. For example the English Football Association (FA) launched their 'Game Changer' strategy for developing women's soccer (2013–2018) in which they cite the effective transition of youth players to adult players as an important part of the strategy (FA, 2012). Central to these effective transitions is the requirement for a sound knowledge base which can effectively inform policy and procedural decisions.

Of particular interest to this special issue; when experiencing player development centres<sup>1</sup> in the UK, female youth soccer players will often be balancing dual careers in education and sport, as well as attempting to reconcile these within the different stages of adolescence. As a result, these demands may threaten a player's ability to successfully transition the different stages of their career (e.g., from development to mastery/perfection stages; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004) or lead to voluntary dropout (e.g., European Commission, 2012). Considered alongside the aforementioned growth and development of female soccer in the UK, this suggests that greater understanding of talent development and career transitions of female players in the UK may serve to facilitate the balance of players' dual careers and, thus, help to keep talented young players in both their soccer and educational systems. Despite this, little scholarly attention has been paid to these factors in female soccer players (McCormack & Walseth, 2013). This is an important consideration for the body of research given that it further demonstrates historically reported trends that female athletes in general are typically under-represented in sport psychology literature (e.g., Conroy, Kaye, & Schantz, 2008); that female and male athletes will typically have qualitatively different developmental experiences (e.g., Gill, 2001); and in order to extend culturally specific understanding, marginalised groups of athletes (such as female soccer players) need to be more visible in dual career research (e.g., Stambulova & Ryba, 2014).

With this lack of gender-specific understanding in-mind, Gledhill and Harwood (2014) sought to examine the developmental experiences of elite UK female youth soccer players. Using interviews and fieldwork, they highlighted the meaning attached by elite female soccer players to important psychosocial factors such as support from parents, siblings, soccer friends, non-soccer friends and how they impacted on important developmental factors such as leading a disciplined lifestyle. Moreover, self-regulation and adaptive volitional behaviours were identified as key intra-individual competencies that are central to talent development and career transitions in female soccer players. Finally, using their composite sequence analysis approach, Gledhill and Harwood were able to sequentially structure these developmental experiences which provided a more plausible and developmental understanding of how the different factors associated with talent development changed over time, with the key benefit being that this could then serve to provide applied practitioners with age- and gender-specific advice about important social agents that can positively impact on the development of female soccer players. Despite this, their work was limited by a small and homogenous sample of elite female youth soccer players, which creates the questions of how

these research findings inform our understanding of those soccer players who have not favourably transitioned from the development to the mastery stage of their career and highlights a need for a wider range of viewpoints from which researchers can glean a more holistic perspective.

Whilst existing soccer literature allows for inferences to be made about dual careers in soccer, most of these are underpinned by literature examining talent development in soccer and then subsequently extrapolating these findings in to the wider context of career transitions. This has included identifying psychosocial assets of soccer players who are considered elite in their domain (e.g., Gledhill & Harwood, 2014; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Van Yperen, 2009) and examining the views of those tasked with developing male soccer players to an elite level (e.g., Morley, Morgan, McKenna, & Nicholls, 2014) in order to outline personal resources that will facilitate normative career transitions in soccer. Frequently, literature has provided confirmatory findings that support the notion of important player-level assets (e.g., resilience, self-regulation) and/or socio-environmental factors (e.g., parental, peer or sibling support) that may positively influence talent development. Collectively, these factors can be conceptually linked with developmental stages offered in non-soccer specific athlete transitions models (e.g., Stambulova, 2003, 2009; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004) to allow scholars to understand how players may make successful career transitions. However, given the significant level-bias towards elite youth or adult soccer players, it is difficult to understand the differences between those who *do make it* and those that *don't make it* in female soccer. Therefore, to extend current understanding about the complexity of the developmental experiences of female soccer players in the UK from a more holistic perspective, research that examines experiences of lower level players or less-successful players is warranted. One way to address this gap is to adopt a negative case analysis approach (NCA; Denzin, 1989) with female soccer players.

Negative cases have been rarely used in sport psychology literature despite being a well-established strategy for revising and extending existing levels of understanding (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). A proposed benefit of the NCA approach is the potential for it to encourage researchers to question pre-existing assumptions about a phenomenon (Patton, 2002) with a view to broadening understanding and encouraging change where required. For this reason; we argue that a better understanding of the developmental experiences of female players who have not advanced to the highest levels of female soccer in the UK (despite having experienced a female talent development pathway) will extend existing sport psychology literature as it provides the opportunity to produce a grounded theory of talent development and career transitions in female youth soccer.

Whilst grounded theories of talent development in soccer are present in the existing literature (e.g., Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006) these are not culturally or contextually sensitive to the experiences of UK female soccer players. Moreover, existing literature on dual careers (e.g., Stambulova & Ryba, 2014) has reported that research adopting a holistic perspective (i.e., combining a whole person, whole career and whole environment approaches) is a challenge that will enable scholars to extend current understanding. Combining these arguments with recent calls for contextually and culturally specific understanding in sport psychology literature (e.g., Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014), we contend that a grounded theory approach is warranted. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine career experiences of UK-based female soccer players from a holistic perspective (including sport, studies and adolescent social life) with a view to producing a substantive grounded theory of factors contributing to career/talent development and transitions in UK youth female soccer.

<sup>1</sup> We use this term to refer to any form of player development centre on the girls' soccer talent pathway in the UK (e.g., Centre of Excellence).

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