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**PERSPECTIVES**

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# Counselling, psychotherapy and training the football elite

Oliver Twizell  | Terry Hanley 

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

**Correspondence**

Terry Hanley, Manchester Institute of Education, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.  
Email: [terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

Counselling and psychotherapy are not common professions that are considered alongside the work of sporting institutions, such as football academies. This paper therefore provides a brief reflection upon the existing research considering the way that such institutions currently engage with the mental health and well-being of those that they support. In doing so, the world of elite sport engagement is considered before focusing more specifically upon research that has explored how football academies make use of psychological theory and therapy. This paper concludes that counselling and psychotherapy have an important role to play in supporting those at all stages of their football careers. However, delineation with clear roles and boundaries from other professions, such as sport psychology, proves vitally important, and further systematic exploration of this growing area of work is needed.

**KEYWORDS**

counselling, football academies, mental health, psychotherapy, sport psychology

## 1 | MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF ELITE SPORT TRAINING

The role of psychotherapy has been mistaken for sport psychology within elite sport, and this misperception has created negative connotations to both sport psychology and psychotherapy (Barker & Winter, 2014). The blurring of the therapist's and the sport psychologist's roles has created confusion within elite sport training, and a lack of clarity has compounded the misunderstanding (Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Sharp & Hodge, 2013). Recent sport psychology literature calls for therapy to be integrated within sport psychology, rather than distance itself from the discipline (Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Sharp & Hodge, 2014). However, these sport psychology-related studies fail to address a fundamental issue that a sport psychologist is not qualified to provide therapeutic support, creating ethical and legal dilemmas.

Mental health and well-being have gained recent ground in public and media awareness, particularly in relation to depression within elite sport (Doherty et al., 2016; Kirwan & Thomson, 2010; Trescothick, 2008). However, Doherty et al. (2016) highlighted that despite 'an increasing number of review articles on the subject of mental health and depression in elite sport... there currently is a dearth of research directly exploring the phenomenon' (p. 2). The existing literature, which is reflected upon below, currently suggests that mental health and well-being issues in elite sport are influenced by sport organisations and coaches, can be career-threatening, can be normalised, but can also be addressed through appropriate interventions.

There are 72 football clubs within the English Football League (EFL) (Kilvington & Price, 2019). Currently, there are 24 category 1 academies with roughly 12,000 academy players, producing the highest level of footballing excellence in England and Wales. The EFL academy coaching philosophy is to provide 'the best opportunity

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to develop the technical, tactical, physical, psychological and social skills' (Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020, p. 7). Each academy system must 'establish a Personal Development and Life Skills Plan to support the holistic development of each of its Academy Players' (Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020, p. 62). Therefore, well-being is addressed within top-level academies. Sporting organisational culture is influenced by the governing bodies that oversee the whole sport. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Football Association's (FA) current Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) category 1 academy guidelines stipulate one full-time (or equivalent) Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)-accredited academy psychologist and state that all players must be available once a season for between 45 and 90 min 'to receive information regarding the support and resources available to promote mental and emotional wellbeing' (Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020, p. 153). While this provides a good grounding for academy football players, beyond a requirement for a Mental and Emotional Wellbeing Lead, there are no other mental health and well-being requirements for an academy system. Despite increased literature on mental health and well-being within football academies, more still needs to be done (Confectioner et al., 2021). Indeed, where research has been conducted to highlight the potential roles of counsellors or psychotherapists in football, little emphasis has been placed upon the role of therapeutic input (Nesti, 2010; Romar et al., 2016). Further, although current elite athletes display a more positive approach towards mental health and well-being than they previously did, they admit to being influenced by significant others, such as coaches and senior management (Green et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2015).

Non-supportive mental health and well-being messages can have a significant detrimental effect on an athlete's career. Linder et al. (1991) reported that American athletic students who sought therapy had a significantly lower professional-draft rating compared with athletes who did not seek support. This sends a message to athletes that seeking therapeutic support is potentially a career-ending move. More recently, rowers reported actively suppressing emotions to avoid appearing mentally weak (Doherty et al., 2016). Doherty et al. (2016) furthered that by stating that 'empirical research reports that athletes have a negative perception of help-seeking' (p. 2). Doherty et al. (2016) explain that this existing mentality is due to elite athletes being 'exposed to values that serve to reinforce qualities [such as] competition, aggression, and toughness' (p. 2). Elite athletes are exposed to unique challenges, stresses and constraints that are synonymous with mental ill health, such as 'organisational stress,... extrinsic motivation,... burnout,... attitudes to help seeking,... risk-taking,... and adversity' (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 2). Therefore, it is unsurprising that athletes remain susceptible to developing mental health issues, which will be exacerbated if appropriate support is not provided or sought.

The challenges, stresses and constraints of elite athletes can become embedded in sporting cultures, resulting in the normalising of mental health and well-being difficulties. Research has called

### Implications for practice and policy

- Football academies within the UK prove to be a major arena that requires more systematic exploration of mental health and well-being support.
- Research appears to reflect that professionals in football academy settings may misunderstand what therapy is, how it might differ from the work commonly engaged in by sport psychologists, and thus how it may be integrated into work supporting the individuals in academies.
- There is the potential for individuals at all levels within academies to become distressed and harmed while coping with the challenges of the environment.
- As the mental health and well-being of those in the football academy system gets higher on the agenda, the need for further systematic exploration of each of these areas warrants further attention.

for a thorough understanding of the psychological care made available to athletes based on their unique presenting issues (Doherty et al., 2016; Reardon & Factor, 2010). Elite athletes can develop an external locus of evaluation, 'playing sport to prove worth and gain acceptance from others' (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 5). They can therefore view poor performance, or loss of skills, as 'narrative wrecking'. This self-critique can potentially turn to global negative self-evaluation (Doherty et al., 2016). Elite athletes' difficulties with mental health and well-being are arguably hard to recognise, with a number of factors impacting upon observers' perceptions. Difficulties recognising mental health and well-being concerns can occur due to the public idolising athletes and subsequently becoming blind to the struggles they face, athletes hiding their problems by becoming focused on competition, and overtraining or a denial of discomfort being confused with signs of 'good athlete characteristics' rather than potential mental health concerns (Doherty et al., 2016). This can lead to conditions such as eating distress, which may not be picked up because symptoms may also be viewed as 'good athlete characteristics' in certain sports. However, some athletes do recognise their mental health issues, take personal responsibility and embark on their therapeutic journeys with the same focus and commitment that is demanded of them in their respective sports. Doherty et al. (2016) suggest that therapeutic approaches, such as person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1957), can help elite athletes with their mental health and well-being issues. Doherty et al. (2016) further state that therapeutic interventions rely upon the therapist's 'ability to draw on positive athlete traits while providing the core conditions so central to the humanistic therapies' (p. 9). However, the literature suggests the culture of sport and the interplay between the athlete's sense of self and the elite performance environment requires further research in order for significant development to occur in this field.

## 2 | CURRENT PROVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SERVICES WITHIN FOOTBALL TRAINING FACILITIES

As is indicated above, person-centred theory (Rogers, 1957) has been utilised in some sporting contexts. This theory has informed the development of athlete-centred consulting and has been extensively accepted by the sport industry. Moen and Federici's (2014) critical review of the literature claimed that an athlete-centred coaching approach helped to empower athletes to make important decisions for themselves without being directly influenced by others. The use of reflective practice within the professional training and development of applied sport psychology has been advocated for in the literature (Cropley et al., 2010). Longstaff and Gervis (2016) suggested that the use of counselling skills proves to be a critical component to develop practitioner-athlete rapport and provide support within the relationship. There has been no specific research focusing on appropriate effective psychological frameworks within football academies. However, the existing literature suggests that adopting growth-focused humanistic approaches could allow academy footballers to harness their own developmental goals. Using reflective practice as a skill within this framework could also provide an excellent opportunity to facilitate psychological growth among academy footballers (Champ et al., 2020; Cropley et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2014).

Marcus Rashford and Jesse Lingard eloquently and simplistically highlighted the statistics of becoming an elite footballer in May 2019 on their Instagram posts, which read '0.012%' (Bevan, 2021). This is in reference to the percentage of boys in England playing organised youth football who will play a minute in the Premier League (Bevan, 2021). With only 180 players out of 1.5 million boys playing youth football in England progressing to play in the Premier League, it begs the question, where do the rest go after their dream for football stardom fades away? The academies represent the elite of the 1.5 million boys who purposefully strive, with an enormous amount of talent, to realise their dream. Being cut from these academies can be quick, unexpected and brutal at times, leaving young individuals adrift from the dream that was so tantalisingly close. It may appear obvious to those who are therapeutically trained that psychological support is needed for these young people, and indeed, some academies do actively support the players in these situations. However, the requirement by the Football Association Premier League Limited to provide such support is vague. They state that someone should be employed to be responsible for the 'Induction and Transition Strategy, in addition to other aspects..., including mental and emotional wellbeing of Academy Players' (Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020, p. 40). Notably, the broad term of psychologists is referenced throughout the FA's Youth Development Rules, without specific suggestions for counsellors or psychotherapists. While psychology is an element of the philosophy of the Football Association Premier League Limited (2020), which considers the environment within the players' long-term development, it fails to elaborate further on the intricacies of psychological support. The provision of therapy within football academies is a field that requires

more detailed research. Clearer demarcations between the therapist's and the sport psychologist's roles will allow a greater perspective of the provision counselling and psychotherapy can offer elite football.

## 3 | CONCLUSION

The world of elite sport has a challenging relationship with the concepts of mental health and well-being. At times, the behaviours of individuals, which might ordinarily be viewed as harmful, may be prized and celebrated as a means to succeeding in their chosen sport. In contrast, such behaviours may also lead to life-changing negative events and illness. Football academies within the UK prove to be a major arena that requires more systematic exploration of counselling and psychotherapy. These academies recruit large numbers of children and young people into their ranks, with limited numbers progressing to the point of making their dreams become a profession. As such, the potential for individuals at all levels of the profession to become distressed and harmed while coping with these challenges is arguably high. Concerningly, research appears to reflect that professionals in these settings may misunderstand what therapy is, how it might differ from the work commonly engaged in by sport psychologists, and thus how it may be integrated into work supporting the individuals in academies. Highlighted the requirement for developed mental and emotional well-being support mechanisms for academy footballers. Almost two decades later, as the mental health and well-being of those in the football academy system gets higher on the agenda, the need for further systematic exploration of each of these areas warrants further attention.

### ORCID

Oliver Twizell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6628-7222>

Terry Hanley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5861-9170>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Oliver Twizell** is a trainee counselling psychologist at the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. His thesis focuses on the perceived role of therapy in football academies.

**Terry Hanley** is a reader in Counselling Psychology in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. He is a co-author of the textbook *Introducing Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* and a co-editor of *Adolescent Counselling Psychology* and *The SAGE Handbook of Counselling and Psychotherapy*.

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