

**Player experience in the academy to first team transition in professional football**

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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## **Thesis Abstract**

The thesis explores player experience during the junior-to-senior transition. A literature review, scoping review (under review), two empirical studies (published), a general discussion, and applied applications of the research comprise the thesis. The scoping review allowed us to explore the breadth of junior-to-senior transitions research in order to identify any and all gaps in the literature. Study one explores the evolving perspectives of young players' experiences going through the junior to senior transition in professional football. Using novel methods, namely video diaries, we were able to gain a rich understanding of the experience of transition players. Unique findings included contract decisions; adaptation to senior competition; barriers to transition without early success; and social aspects of the transition. Moreover, the weekly approach to data collection and analysis allowed a clear progression of the experience to be documented. Study two explored the junior-to-senior transition from professional contract to an established first-team player in an English men's professional football team. Using multiple interviews with each participant four unique contributions to the literature are discussed: the central role of opportunity in career progression; the presence of a "gray period"; difficulties in seeking support from coaches; and contracts' influence across the transition. The thesis includes a discussion of the overall findings and future research directions. The final chapter provides my experiences of working with athletes in transition to professional football.

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### Peer Reviewed Work

- 1 Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (2020) Player experience during the  
2 junior-to-senior transition in professional football: A longitudinal case study.  
3 *Frontiers of Psychology, 11*: 1672, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01672>
- 4 Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (2022) “It’s all about opportunity”:  
5 From professional contract to first team regular. *Journal of Applied Sport*  
6 *Psychology, 34*, 1251-1271. doi:10.1080/10413200.2021.1934914
- 7 Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (under review) Exploring the junior-  
8 to-senior transition: A scoping review. *Sport and Exercise Psychology*  
9 *Review*

## Professional Presentations

- 1 October 2020 – Oral presentation: Supporting the Junior-to-Senior Transition in  
2 Professional Football. AIK Research and Development; Stockholm, Sweden
- 3 August 2021 – Oral presentation: Applied Considerations for Working with Players  
4 in Transition. Icelandic FA Pro License; Reykjavik, Iceland (digital)
- 5 November 2021 - Oral presentation: Supporting the Junior-to-Senior Transition in  
6 Professional Football. Swedish FA Research and Development; Eskilstuna,  
7 Sweden
- 8 August 2022 – Oral presentation: Supporting the Junior-to-Senior Transition in  
9 Professional Football. Southampton FC Learning Lab; Southampton, UK  
10 (digital)
- 11 October 2022 – Workshop: Applied Considerations for Working with Players in  
12 Transition. Rosengård FC; Malmö, Sweden
- 13 October 2022 – Oral presentation: Supporting the Junior-to-Senior Transition in  
14 Professional Football. IFK Värnamö; Värnamö, Sweden
- 15 November 2022 - Workshop: Applied Considerations for Working with Players in  
16 Transition. Melbourne Victory; Melbourne, Australia
- 17 December 2022 - Workshop: Applied Considerations for Working with Players in  
18 Transition. Sydney FC; Sydney, Australia
- 19 December 2022 - Workshop: Applied Considerations for Working with Players in  
20 Transition. Western United; Sydney, Australia
- 21 January 2023 - Oral presentation: Supporting the Junior-to-Senior Transition in  
22 Professional Football. Oceania Football Confederation; Auckland, New  
23 Zealand



## Definition of Terms

- 1 Football – Soccer
- 2 First Team – The professional team unrestricted by age
- 3 Academy – The youth side of a professional club typically from under 9 to under 18
- 4 U18 Scholarship – A two-year (16-18 years old) full-time program including
- 5 education
- 6 U23 – Under 23 age group. Typically seen as a step between the academy (U9-U18)
- 7 and First Team (not limited by age)
- 8 Young pro – a label given to contracted professional players not yet in the first team,
- 9 typically associated with the U23
- 10 Loan – A temporary move, typically to a lower division club, used to gain experience
- 11 and playing time when opportunity is unavailable in the First Team.
- 12 Manager – Title for the head coach of the First Team
- 13 Support Staff – Staff employed by the club that are not coaches. Physios, rehab
- 14 specialists, sport scientists, medical team, psychologists, match analysts, etc.
- 15 Premier League – the highest division of professional football in England
- 16 English Football League (EFL) – The governing body and league system for the 2 to
- 17 4<sup>th</sup> division of English football
- 18 Cup – a competition typically in a knockout style and separate from the League
- 19 competition
- 20 A-Levels – Subject-based qualifications generally seen as a requirement for entrance
- 21 to University
- 22 Uni – slang term for University
- 23 Open University – Distance learning university courses
- 24 Talent identification – the process of identifying someone as “talented”

- 1 Talent development – the system or process for developing talent over time (Vaeyens
- 2 et al., 2008)

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

## Introduction

1           “They just need to be in the changing room and wait for their chance.”

2   This quote comes from one of my first conversations with a football club staff  
3   member regarding my Ph.D. When in conversation with a youth team coach about  
4   the opportunity for young players to get experience on loan they explained,

5           I was talking to a club we have a good relationship with and giving them  
6           some info on a few of the lads. The question I got back was if I am still  
7           playing, they’d be interested in having me down to play. I haven’t played in  
8           almost two years. They are obsessed with experience.

9   First-team staff want players with experience yet gaining experience can sometimes  
10   mean sitting and waiting. This waiting period was summarized by one of the  
11   participants.

12           I have seen a lot of players lose their heads at the fact that they come in and  
13           they don’t play football for 6 months, or 12 months. That’s just part and  
14           parcel of the game and probably one of the hardest things.

15   It was clear from early in the Ph.D. that there was a gap between the two-year U18  
16   scholarship and being ready to play for the first team. In a club where player sales  
17   were paramount to the future of the club navigating, and facilitating, players through  
18   this gap were of the utmost importance to the club’s stakeholders.

19           Two primary departments are at work when looking into the junior-to-senior  
20   transition, the club’s academy, and the club’s first team. These two departments are  
21   generally independent of one another, but their synergy is key to successful  
22   transitions (Relvas et al., 2010). The Elite Performance Player Plan (EPPP, 2010)  
23   was introduced in 2011 to improve and shape player development in English league  
24   academies. The EPPP shaped the academy journey into three phases, foundation

1 phase U9-12, youth phase U13-16, and professional phase U18-U23. An emphasis  
2 being placed on transitioning players between phases (Mitchell et al., 2020).

3         The goal of any academy system is to increase the likelihood of athletes  
4 “making it”. Yet, that is anything but a straightforward process. The typical first  
5 point of entry into an academy at eight years old has been criticized in relation to  
6 player well-being over time (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2014). Michael Calvin, author of  
7 ‘No Hunger in Paradise’ (2017) points out that only 180 of 1.8 million active  
8 footballers in England will play a minute of football in the Premier League  
9 equivalent to 0.012%. In response several clubs have removed the early ages of the  
10 academy and pushed the starting age back to 13 such as AIK in Sweden (see  
11 Skogheim, 2019) and Real Sociedad in Spain (see Clapham, 2019). This is largely  
12 seen as a step to combat the professionalization of youth sport and help players  
13 develop a healthy motivation for the game prior to entering an academy at a later age  
14 (see Vaughan et al., 2022).

15         Moving towards the older age groups of the professional phase, players need  
16 to catch the eye of senior coaches at around 16-18 years old, to begin the academy to  
17 first team transition (Gledhill, Harwood, & Forsdyke, 2017). Yet this is only the first  
18 hurdle as only 10% of youth phase players (U16) will earn a professional contract at  
19 18 years old (Finn & Mckenna, 2010). For those that make it that far, the transition  
20 towards the first team begins, which will include challenges such as: increased  
21 demands, social challenges, changes in support systems, and self-doubt (Morris, Tod,  
22 & Eubank, 2016; Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017).

23         While research has identified these challenges, managers and key figures in  
24 the game have also flagged major challenges for youth players moving into the first  
25 team. Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola has been critical of the English

1 league system stating that he feels young players are unprepared for the realities of  
2 first team football (Ducker, 2017). Further, Steven Gerrard, while under 18's  
3 manager for Liverpool, stated that he feels the physical and competitive edge is  
4 missing within academy football, yet becomes a huge part of the game at the highest  
5 level (Hunter, 2017). The creation of U23 leagues has been one attempted 'solution'  
6 – which while providing competitive games to transitioning players and the inclusion  
7 of more senior professionals as mentors (Fisher, 2021), has had its detractors (see  
8 Prendergast & Gibson, 2022).

9 Sweden and Scandinavia have also seen growth in a specific role in many  
10 clubs called a 'transition coach' as a part of a new project from governing body  
11 Swedish Elite Football (see SEF akademiprojekt, 2021). The transition coach has  
12 responsibility for working across the oldest academy age group (U19 or U21) and the  
13 first team to ensure continuity in support across the environments. These applied  
14 examples show that not only is research interest growing in the junior-to-senior  
15 transition space, but clubs are beginning to see the importance of placing resources  
16 into this career phase.

### **The Conception of the Thesis**

17 This thesis began as a dual-funded project between an English Football  
18 League club and the University of Exeter. The desired scope of the Ph.D. was left  
19 broad to focus on talent development in a football academy with a lens towards sport  
20 psychology. Further, as the project was funded in part by the football club there was  
21 a desire to have the Ph.D. directly influence applied practice and player development  
22 within the organization. Upon starting the Ph.D., I spent the first three months  
23 beginning to shape the scope and aims of the project with key stakeholders while  
24 being embedded in the club as a sport psychologist.

1           Some common stories were apparent, involving players whom the academy  
2 believed to be talented enough to earn professional contracts, but who were  
3 struggling to make a breakthrough in the first team. One specific account of a  
4 player's journey (pseudonym James) stuck out as a key to the conception of the  
5 thesis. James was a player that came through the academy and earned a professional  
6 contract. He was seen by both academy and first team coaching staff as a talented  
7 player in his position and someone that should contribute at the first team level. As is  
8 commonplace during the transition, James was without regular playing time in the  
9 first team. He spent two years on loan after moving from the academy to the first  
10 team to gain playing time and further his development. Upon returning from loan the  
11 second time he was left without playing time again, fighting for a first team place. At  
12 that point in time a senior player occupied the starting place in his position, however,  
13 the club believed James would replace him the following season. While the club was  
14 prepared to make a commitment to James in the form of a new contract, James had  
15 decided to not sign and moved on with his career. This loss of a player, who was  
16 expected to be a contributing member of the squad the following season, led the club  
17 to need to search for external options, costing more money.

18           This story became the lightbulb moment of beginning to investigate  
19 transitions between the academy and first team, focused on how to improve  
20 organizational strategy and player support by better understanding player experience.  
21 Maintaining the applied focus was key and feedback from the results would be  
22 reported to the club to help ensure best practices. A further role of the embedded  
23 research was to provide psychology support to academy players with a focus on the  
24 U18 group prior to and during their transition.

## **The Conception of Methodology**

1           Based on the current literature and applied aims of the project a qualitative  
2 investigation into player experience during the junior-to-senior transition was  
3 deemed most appropriate. Following the initial literature search and the undertaking  
4 of a scoping review, a clear goal was set out for the applied work in the Ph.D. Those  
5 goals were to attempt to investigate the entire scope of the transition from players  
6 attempting to earn a contract to players established in the first team, while also  
7 diving as deep as possible into the experience of the players.

8           At the outset of the development of the empirical studies, an armchair  
9 walkthrough approach was conducted to ensure methodological coherence  
10 throughout the thesis (as well as the individual studies - Mayan, 2009). Using this  
11 method at the outset to ensure methodological coherence was the primary method of  
12 developing rigor. Rigor is discussed further in its context within each of the  
13 empirical studies. During this process, it was acknowledged that the data collection  
14 techniques used would be critical to contributing new knowledge to the existing  
15 literature. Here two separate studies were conceived to accomplish the goals of a  
16 longitudinal investigation and looking into the entire transition period. Each of these  
17 studies would use data collection techniques that steered away from one-off  
18 interviews to gain deeper insights into the player experience.

## **Purpose of the Thesis**

19           Based on the conception of the thesis above the purpose of the thesis is to  
20 explore player experience during the junior-to-senior transition. A secondary purpose  
21 was to inform practice at the dual-funding partner club to improve club strategy and  
22 support for players during the transition. The following section outlines the entirety  
23 of the thesis including a literature review, scoping review, two empirical studies, a



1 general discussion, and applied experiences.

## **The Structure of the Thesis**

### **2 Review of Literature (Chapter 2)**

#### **3 *Purpose of the Chapter***

4 The literature review was the starting point for the thesis and provides a  
5 comprehensive review of the foundational research relevant to the overall thesis. The  
6 major theoretical models of career development and transitions as well as their  
7 importance are discussed.

#### **8 *Contribution to the Thesis***

9 The literature review provides the foundation from which the junior-to-senior  
10 transition research developed. It introduces the field and narrows into the specific  
11 topic of junior-to-senior transitions that will be covered in Chapter 3. Through  
12 reviewing the overall literature, we identified the need for a review paper focused  
13 specifically on the junior-to-senior transition.

### **14 Scoping Review (Chapter 3)**

#### **15 *Purpose of the Chapter***

16 The purpose of the scoping review was to explore the research specifically  
17 focused on the junior-to-senior transition. Two broad questions were asked focused  
18 on how do athletes experience the transition? And, what are the organizational  
19 processes that support the transition and make it more or less effective? Further,  
20 using the insights from the review we could better understand the specific gaps in the  
21 literature that warranted further exploration in the empirical studies of the Ph.D.

#### **22 *Contribution to the Thesis***

23 The scoping review sets the scene for where the growing area of junior-to-  
24 senior transitions research sits. Using a scoping review were able to identify several

1 major gaps in the available literature and plan empirical work to address those gaps.  
2 Specifically, longitudinal studies exploring the complex process over the course of  
3 the transition in real-time. As well as a shift away from one-off interviews to gain  
4 deeper insight into the transition process, ideally in real-time.

5 This review was written as a paper and peer-reviewed in the International  
6 Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology Journal (rejected after revision – primarily  
7 due to the publication of a similar review paper – Drew et al., 2019). The updated  
8 version that was written for the thesis has been resubmitted and is under review in  
9 Sport and Exercise Psychology Review.

## 10 **Study One (Chapter 4)**

### 11 *Purpose of the Chapter*

12 The purpose of this study was to explore the evolving perspectives of young  
13 players' experiences going through the junior-to-senior transition in professional  
14 football to develop a detailed understanding of the challenges during this process.

### 15 *Major Findings*

16 Using video diaries and interviews we were able to gain an understanding  
17 about the academy to first team transition, specifically providing unique  
18 contributions to the literature in the areas of contract decisions; adaptation to senior  
19 competition; barriers to transition without early success; and social aspects of the  
20 transition. Moreover, the weekly approach to data collection and analysis allowed a  
21 clear progression of the experience to be documented.

### 22 *Contribution to the Thesis*

23 A major gap in the literature was longitudinal work and data collection  
24 techniques that dive deep into the transition process. This study addresses those  
25 specific gaps and provides accounts of players prior to earning a contract, those that

1 were released (see Appendix 3), and the progression into the first team. It provides  
2 vast knowledge of the development of the transition around the critical time points of  
3 earning a contract and the realities of moving into a first team.

4 This paper was published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2020.

## 5 **Study Two (Chapter 5)**

### 6 *Purpose of the Chapter*

7 The purpose of this study is to explore the junior-to-senior transition from  
8 professional contract to an established first-team player in an English men's  
9 professional football team.

### 10 *Major Findings*

11 Four unique contributions to the literature are discussed: the central role of  
12 opportunity in career progression; the presence of a “gray period”; difficulties in  
13 seeking support from coaches; and contracts' influence across the transition.

### 14 *Contribution to the Thesis*

15 Study two addressed another gap in the literature and the lack of research into  
16 the transition as a whole. While models have been developed (e.g., Pehrson et al.,  
17 2017) with this focused limited empirical work has sought to add depth of  
18 knowledge to career progression during the transition. This study provides the thesis  
19 with a bigger picture study that can be discussed in tandem with study one.

20 This paper was published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* in  
21 2021.

## 22 **General Discussion (Chapter 6)**

### 23 *Purpose of the Chapter*

1           The purpose of this chapter was to provide a summary and discussion of the  
2 thesis as a whole. A further aim was to discuss the applied experiences, alongside the  
3 empirical research, of working with players in transition.

#### 4 ***Contribution to the Thesis***

5           The results of the thesis are discussed in relation to the literature.

### 6 **Applied applications: Personal Experience Following Ph.D. Data Collection**

#### 7 **(Chapter 7)**

#### 8 ***Purpose of the Chapter***

9           The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the applied experiences of working  
10 with an organization and supporting players in transition. A major emphasis of the  
11 Ph.D. from the beginning was the applied nature in order to support the club dual  
12 funding the research. This chapter allowed for those experiences to be discussed in  
13 detail.

#### 14 **Contribution to Thesis**

15           This chapter contributes to the overall thesis by providing a rich experience  
16 of how I applied my research in the real-world context of professional football. A  
17 major component of the Ph.D. from the beginning was its applied elements and  
18 therefore a major focus is given to applied experiences throughout the completion of  
19 the Ph.D. As I was in positions, both in the funding club and following my return to  
20 Sweden where I worked with players in transitions those valuable insights are  
21 discussed alongside the results of the Ph.D. We further compare the existing  
22 literature to the overall applied experiences to provide important accounts for future  
23 directions in applied practice.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

## Review of Literature

### 1 **Introduction**

2           The landscape of career transitions literature has changed dramatically over  
3 the last 20 years. An early focus on retirement has shifted toward career development  
4 models seeking to explain how an athlete's career might evolve from initiation to  
5 retirement (Stambulova et al., 2009). Key research from Wylleman and Lavallee  
6 (2004) illuminated the importance of viewing transition in a holistic light including  
7 development areas outside the sporting context. Within the sporting context,  
8 Stambulova's (2003) athletic career transitions model is a lens for research  
9 throughout the transition literature. In recent times, researchers have begun to focus  
10 more specifically on within career transitions including the junior-to-senior transition  
11 (Stambulova et al., 2020). Several models have been developed exploring the junior-  
12 to-senior transition while also highlighting gaps in the literature (Pehrson et al.,  
13 2017; Drew et al., 2019).

### 14 **Theoretical Foundations**

#### 15 *Career Development Models*

16           A major shift in career research saw models seeking to explain the entirety of  
17 an athlete's career (Stambulova et al., 2020). Early models from the talent  
18 development field (e.g., Bloom, 1995; Côté 1999; Stambulova, 1994) provide  
19 important considerations for career development scholars and practitioners. Bloom  
20 (1985) proposed the stages of development model that proposed that athletes  
21 progress through early, middle, and late years. Further, staged-based models include  
22 Côté's (1999) sampling, specializing, investment, and mastery or performance stages  
23 that encompass the athlete's sporting career. Finally, Stambulova (1994) developed  
24 the analytic sports career model, which incorporated the following stages,

1 transitioning into sport specialization, intensive training, elite sport, and away from  
2 elite sport. Each of the aforementioned researchers sought to understand the  
3 development process beginning with the introduction of sport to the highest level of  
4 performance.

5       **Holistic Development.** A major influence in the field was the development  
6 of the holistic athlete career model (Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004). This model sought  
7 to understand the person, looking at several transitions that occur alongside athletic  
8 career development (see figure 2.1). This holistic lifelong perspective includes  
9 normative athlete transitions across four stages: initiation, development, mastery, and  
10 discontinuation. The holistic nature adds depth to the understanding that athletes  
11 transitioning, are also transitioning outside the sporting context. The model also  
12 includes psychological development, psychosocial development, and academic or  
13 vocational development alongside athletic development. These normative transitions  
14 that we can predict such as a vocational transition from primary school to secondary  
15 school allow us to prepare individuals for what they will experience (Schlossberg,  
16 1981).

17

- 1 Figure 1: A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes at athletic,
- 2 individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational levels (Wylleman & Lavallee,
- 3 2004).

Age	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic Level	Initiation	Development	Mastery	Discontinuation		
Psychological Level	Childhood	Adolescence	Adulthood			
Psychosocial Level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents	Partner Coach	Family (Coach)		
Academic Vocational Level	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Higher Education	Vocational training Professional occupation		

4



1           The athletic development follows similar paths as previously discussed  
2 models from initiation to discontinuation. These normative transitions into organized  
3 youth sport, potentially even academy football at the age of eight years, and further  
4 into more intense training and the development stage around the age of 13 years.  
5 Athletes then transition further into the mastery stage around the age of 18 years.  
6 This is interesting to compare with the normative timeline of academy football where  
7 athletes receive full-time apprenticeships around the age of 16 years, and a further  
8 chance to transition to professional football around the age of 17 or 18 years. The  
9 final transition in the model is from mastery to discontinuation or retirement from  
10 competitive sport. This final transition typically occurs around the age of 30 years  
11 (Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004).

12           The psychological stages that run parallel to athletic development are  
13 childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The transition from childhood to adolescence  
14 occurs around the same time as the transition from initiation to development occurs.  
15 The final transition is from adolescence to adulthood which typically takes place  
16 around the age of 18 years. This mirrors the typical age that a player would sign their  
17 first professional contract. The psychological development stage includes the  
18 athlete's self-identity both within and outside of sport (Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004).  
19 Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005) suggested that psychological factors can  
20 distinguish performance levels, and maintain elite status, with mental skills being  
21 key in the skill acquisition phases.

22           The psychosocial stage deal with the importance of the coach, peer, and  
23 parent relationships that are important in their development. Throughout the stages,  
24 athletes shift from family and peer relationships to peer, coach and family  
25 relationships that run alongside the childhood and adolescence stages of

1 psychological development. As athletes transition to adulthood their social  
2 relationships change to rely more on coaches and personal relationships and then,  
3 primarily family.

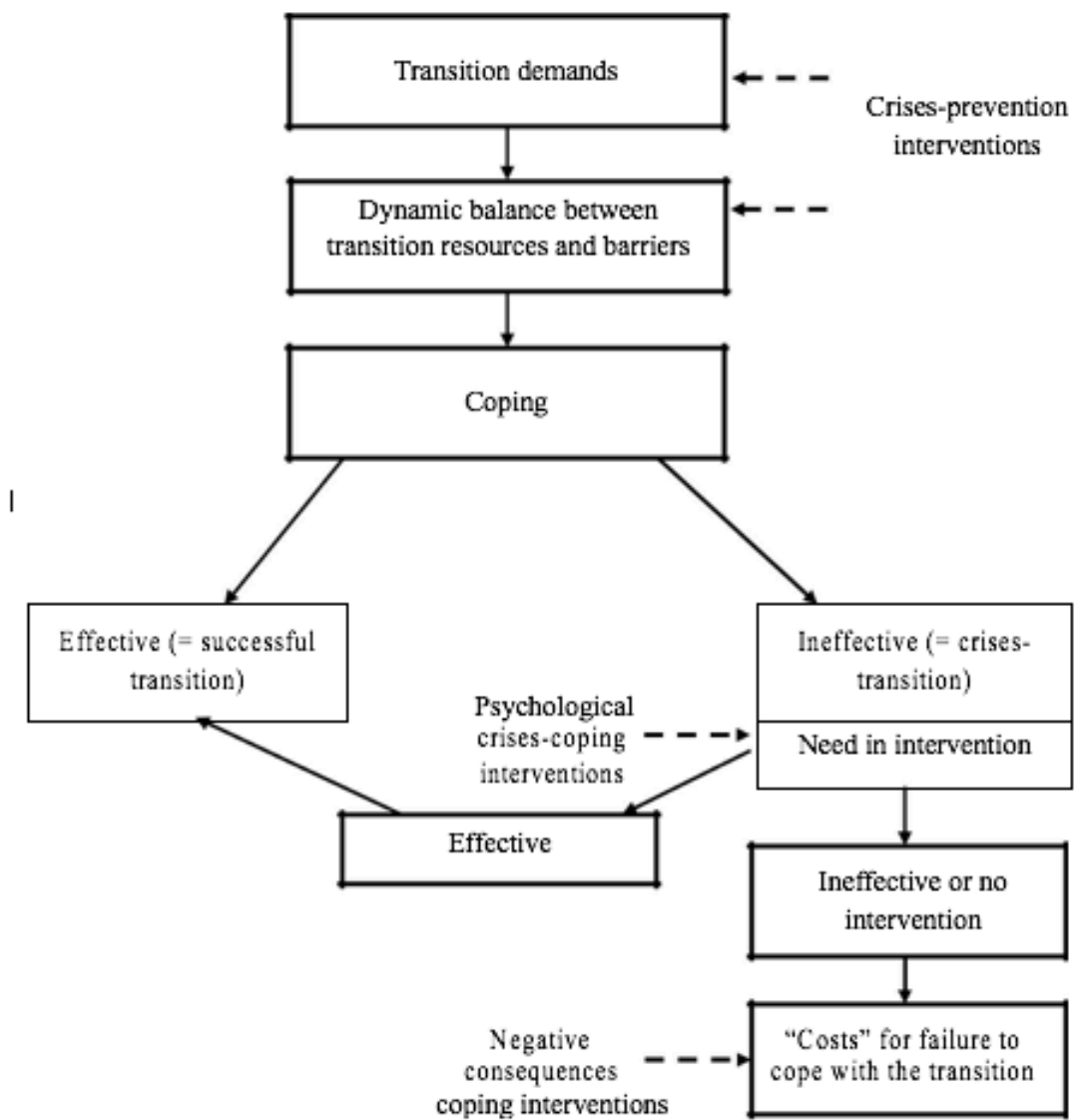
4         Alongside athletic development, athletes will transition through the school  
5 system including the normative transitions into primary school around the age of 6  
6 years, the transition to secondary school around the age of 12 years, and the potential  
7 transition into higher education around the age of 18 years. Looking again at the  
8 typical football academy pathway athletes might transition from secondary school to  
9 a specialized education program at 16 years when they become full-time apprentices  
10 of the club. Following this two-year program, professional footballers are also  
11 unlikely to pursue further education, particularly at the beginning of their  
12 professional career, which outlines a shift from the proposed model.

### 13 *Career Transitions*

14         Early research focused on transitions was developed by Schlossberg (1981)  
15 who described a transition as “an event or nonevent which results in a change in  
16 assumptions about oneself” (p.5). Schlossberg’s model (1981) included three  
17 contributors to the transitional phase; the characteristics of the individual, the  
18 perception of the transition, and finally the environment prior to and after the  
19 transition occurs. This model provides a framework for understanding athletic  
20 transitions, specifically the junior-to-senior transition, that has been a focus in the  
21 literature (e.g., Morris et al., 2016b). Looking into the environments pre and post  
22 transition provides a framework for understanding both the potential preparation for  
23 the transition (Stambulova et al., 2017) and the senior environment that is key to the  
24 continuation of the transition (e.g., Morris et al., 2016a).

1           **Athletic Career Transitions Model.** Stambulova (2003) developed the  
2 athletic career transition model to understand how an athlete might, or might not, be  
3 successful in an athletic transition. An athlete then needs to balance resources with  
4 the potential barriers to effectively cope with demands of any given transition. The  
5 balance between the barriers and resources will determine whether the athlete will  
6 successfully, or unsuccessfully transition (see figure 2.2).

1 Figure 2: Athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003)



1           Looking through the lens of the junior-to-senior transition, demands could be  
2 seen as the increase in any domain at the senior level including physical, technical,  
3 tactical, and psychosocial issues. This increase in demands is well documented in the  
4 literature (e.g., Morris et al., 2016b; Pehrson et al., 2017). The athlete's ability to  
5 cope with this increased demand of the first team environment would determine if  
6 the athlete would be able to successfully transition to the senior team.

7           Throughout the process, the athlete will rely on resources, both internal and  
8 external, to manage the barriers of the transition. Internal or personal resources such  
9 as psychological skills, motivation, and coping strategies will play a role in how they  
10 might deal with the increased demands (Stambulova et al., 2017). External or  
11 environment resources could be in the form of other support provided from the club  
12 or outside social support that assist the athlete to better cope with the new demands.

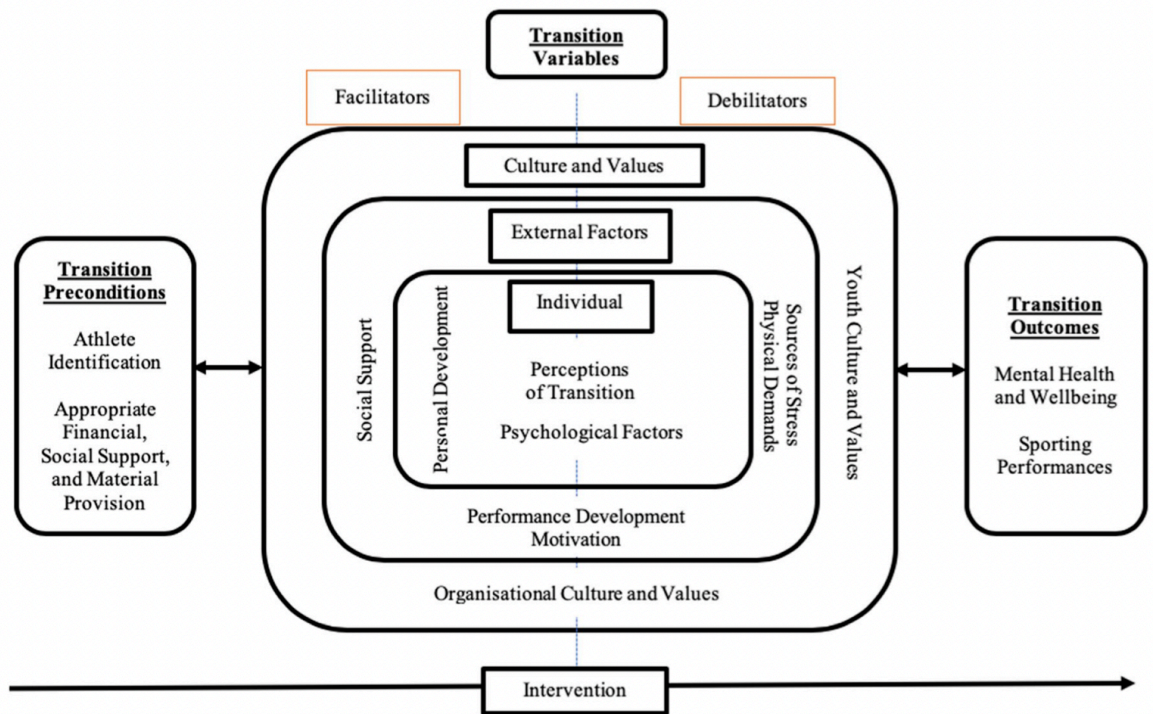
13           According to Stambulova (2003), the interaction of barriers and resources  
14 leads to one of two outcomes, successful transition or the athlete entering a crisis  
15 transition. Entering a crisis transition then requires intervention to transition  
16 successfully. Stambulova (2017) defined a crisis transition as an outcome of an  
17 athlete not meeting the transitional demands due to any number of factors including  
18 insufficient coping strategies, excessive barriers, or a lack of resources. A crisis  
19 transition usually requires the support of professional assistance to further develop  
20 the athlete's ability to cope or provide additional resources for the athlete to use to  
21 meet the demands of the transition. A crisis transition has two potential outcomes  
22 including a delayed successful transition or an unsuccessful transition. Stambulova  
23 (2017) states that 80% of athletes experience the junior-to-senior transition as a  
24 crisis. This statistic stresses the importance of the resources that are available to  
25 athletes to turn a crisis transition into a successful transition. Identifying athletes in

1 these moments of crisis is therefore critical to the development of academy athletes  
2 toward professional careers.

### 3 ***Junior-to-Senior Transition***

4       The following chapter (Chapter 3) will contain a detailed scoping review of  
5 the junior-to-senior transition literature, however, one major piece in the literature  
6 was completed after the scoping review was published. A meta-analysis of  
7 qualitative research in the junior-to-senior transition was completed by Drew and  
8 colleagues (2019). Four overarching themes were developed through the meta-  
9 analysis including, individual factors, external factors, cultural factors, and  
10 intervention strategies. Using the various levels of factors, a meta-synthesis was  
11 created that details three underpinning features of transition were proposed including  
12 transition pre-conditions, transition variables, and transition outcomes. The  
13 interaction of all these factors is shown in the individual, external, culture model of  
14 the junior-to-senior transition (see Figure 3).

- 1 Figure 3: The individual, external, culture model of the junior-to-senior transition
- 2 (Drew et al., 2019).



1           To begin a transition, a precondition must be that an athlete is identified as  
2   having potential, and the desire, for senior-level competition (Gledhill et al., 2017).  
3   In the football world, a transition might begin with offering a contract or training  
4   with the first team to aid in their development. The academy journey then plays an  
5   important role in developing all skills necessary to succeed in senior environments.

6           Once identified and the preconditions have been met, Drew and colleagues  
7   (2019) suggest there are then several variables that will influence the transition.  
8   These variables will include individual characteristics, external factors, and the  
9   influence of the organization on the athlete. During the transition these variables may  
10   help the transition progress, regress, or neither. Variables that are neither in their  
11   basic form depend upon each individual and their interaction with the variable to  
12   determine if they will help their transition develop or become a potential barrier.

13           Drew and colleagues broke down transition outcomes into two areas  
14   including mental health and wellbeing and sporting performance. Definitions of  
15   success in transition relate to performance achievement or status with the senior  
16   team, however, the authors discuss the importance of athlete wellbeing as an  
17   important outcome of the transition. They propose that any transition that does not  
18   lead to positive wellbeing *and* sporting success is an unsuccessful transition.

### **Summary**

19           The purpose of this literature review was to provide a comprehensive review  
20   of the foundational research in career development and transitions. The main  
21   outcome of reviewing the literature was identifying the need for a scoping review  
22   specific to the literature in junior-to-senior transitions. The growing nature of  
23   research in that area, and the lack of a review paper led us to pursue a scoping review  
24   as the first study of the Ph.D.



1 Career development and transition research have gone on a journey from  
2 retirement to whole career models, to investigations of specific within career  
3 transitions such as the junior-to-senior transition. Several key models have been  
4 staples in the literature including the holistic athlete career model (Wylleman &  
5 Lavalley, 2004) and the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003). These  
6 foundational pieces have been used to interpret data, develop interview guides, and  
7 shape future research directions in the junior-to-senior transition. Recently, models  
8 have been developed focused specifically on the junior-to-senior transition (e.g.,  
9 Drew et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2017). The empirical model developed by  
10 Stambulova and colleagues (2017) was a foundation used to conceptualize the thesis  
11 and empirical studies.  
12

**Review of Literature in Relation to Scoping Review and****Thesis**

The literature review provides a base for understanding the development of research in career development and transitions. During the process of completing the initial literature review we identified the need to review the growing field of junior-to-senior transitions. As the junior-to-senior transitions field is still young with limited and broad research aims we chose to complete a scoping review to address this gap in the literature while also providing a specific foundation for our empirical studies.

### **Chapter 3: Scoping Review**

Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (under review) Exploring the junior-to-senior transition: A scoping review. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*

## Exploring the Junior-to-Senior Transition: A Scoping Review

### Abstract

1 The objective of this review is to explore the research focused on the junior to  
2 senior transition in sport, a field which sits at the nexus between talent  
3 development and career transition research. Two research questions guided our  
4 review: How do athletes experience the transition? What are the organizational  
5 processes that support the transition? A scoping review was the most suitable  
6 approach due to the varied methodologies and research aims within this  
7 developing field. Database searches yielded 366 articles, which were double  
8 screened against the exclusion criteria, resulting in 17 included articles. Athlete  
9 experience included issues related to increased demands, decreased playing  
10 time, changing environments, and the necessity of support. Organizational  
11 processes included issues related to athlete preparation, communication  
12 between junior and senior departments, and opportunity for playing time. How  
13 athletes react to the transition demands, navigating new relationships and  
14 support, alongside how the organization seeks to manage this period are likely  
15 to determine the success of a transition. Researchers should consider  
16 longitudinal designs, including accounts of athletes currently in transition  
17 within specific contexts and cultures. Practitioners and sporting organizations  
18 should consider evaluating their programs and athlete experience to create  
19 evidence-based support structures for transitioning athletes.

20 **Keywords:** Talent Development; Youth Sport; Academy; Expertise

### Introduction

21 The purpose of this review is to explore the research focused on the junior-to-  
22 senior transition in sport; from youth sport, defined by age-limited competition, to

1 professional sport with no age restrictions. Our review sought to answer two specific  
2 questions: First, how do athletes experience the transition? This question seeks to  
3 explore how athletes characterize their transition and what they go through during  
4 this process. Second, what are the organizational processes that support the transition  
5 and make it more or less effective? For the purposes of this review, organizational  
6 processes were defined by how the goal of successfully transitioning athletes to the  
7 senior level was met. This transition from junior-to-senior sport is a critical step for  
8 professional clubs and governing bodies seeking a return on their long-term  
9 investment in talent development (Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2015). Additionally, in  
10 individual sports this transition is a key period in which athletes make decisions  
11 about continuing to pursue their sport at the highest level (Hollings, Hume, & Mallet,  
12 2014a).

13       As well as being practically important, the junior-to-senior transition is also at  
14 the nexus of two burgeoning research fields in sport: talent development and career  
15 transitions. The field of talent development has grown over the last ten years, with  
16 several review papers on various aspects of talent development available (e.g.,  
17 Gledhill, Harwood, & Forsdyke, 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2018). However, these  
18 reviews focused mainly on the factors and processes of long-term development, with  
19 limited consideration of the latter stages of the talent development pipeline – the  
20 junior-to-senior transition. Additionally, the career transitions literature has seen a  
21 shift in focus from transition out of sport (career termination; Wylleman, Alfermann,  
22 & Lavalley, 2004; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013) to within career transitions; of  
23 which the junior-to-senior transition may be the most important (Alfermann &  
24 Stambulova, 2007). Therefore, we seek to provide a review of the available literature

1 focused on the junior-to-senior transition to help guide future research and applied  
2 work at the nexus of these fields.

3       These two broad areas of research, talent development, and career transition,  
4 provide us with context about the junior-to-senior transition. Talent development  
5 research has focused on the pathway and development of athletes to achieve success  
6 at the highest possible senior level (Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005). This  
7 pathway generally begins with talent identification, followed by selection of athletes  
8 to enter the talent development system. Once within the talent development system  
9 coaches and support staff seek to develop the necessary skills for success in their  
10 athletes (Webb, Collins, & Cruickshank, 2016). While there is an acknowledgment  
11 of the difficulties inherent in the junior-to-senior transition in the talent development  
12 literature (e.g., Gledhill et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2016), the conclusions from  
13 research have shown that this phase has specific and unique demands (Stambulova,  
14 Franck, & Weibull, 2012) have largely been ignored.

15       These specific and unique demands are the focal point for two prominent  
16 career transitions models: the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003)  
17 and the developmental perspectives on transitions model (Wylleman & Lavallee,  
18 2004). These two models provide a foundation for the growing literature focused on  
19 the junior-to-senior transition, and only one of the studies included in this review did  
20 not cite them. Stambulova's (2003) model considers the demands of the transition  
21 and how athletes balance their available resources with associated barriers  
22 (Stambulova, 2003). Those with the necessary resources to overcome the barriers  
23 will transition successfully, while those whose resources do not meet the demands of  
24 the barriers enter a crisis transition and will require further support to succeed  
25 (Stambulova, 2003).

1           Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) holistic model considers the psychosocial,  
2 psychological, and vocational factors that play a part alongside any specific athletic  
3 factors. Throughout the ongoing junior-to-senior transition athletes' psychological  
4 development will likely move from adolescence to adulthood, while support in the  
5 psychosocial area will shift from parental support to support from the talent  
6 development system, as well as a likely shift away from their mandatory education  
7 (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This model provides further context to the transition  
8 outside of the demands of sport and points to key time periods that need to be  
9 considered across and between the various factors.

10           Both the talent development and career transitions literature base continue to  
11 grow and draw critical attention (Toohey et al., 2018; Stambulova & Samuel, 2019).  
12 The junior-to-senior transition has grown as a subsection of both these areas yet there  
13 is very little, if any, interconnection between the two fields (Coutinho, Mesquita, &  
14 Fonseca, 2016). To establish future directions in these two fields, and any potential  
15 crossover, a review of the relevant literature focused specifically on junior-to-senior  
16 transition is needed. Therefore, our scoping review seeks to position future research  
17 in these fields.

18           Scoping reviews have become an increasingly prominent methodology for  
19 reviews in a variety of fields, including sport (e.g., Pham et al., 2014). While  
20 systematic reviews look to review the best available research on a specific question  
21 (Pham et al., 2014), the primary goal of a scoping review is to map the available  
22 research within a topic area in terms of volume, nature, and characteristics (Arksey  
23 & O'Malley, 2005). A primary feature of systematic reviews is a quality assessment,  
24 however, this is something not typical of scoping reviews (Levac, Colquhoun, &  
25 O'Brien, 2010). Furthermore, a scoping review looks to identify key concepts and

1 gaps in the literature, while also informing practice (Daubt, van Mossel, & Scott,  
2 2013). These style of reviews have been suggested as particularly relevant to  
3 developing fields, such as the junior-to-senior transition, as they allow for the  
4 inclusion of articles with an array of methodologies and study designs (Levac et al.,  
5 2010).

### **Methodology**

6 For this scoping review we adopted the framework provided by Arksey and  
7 O'Malley (2005) and furthered developed by Levac et al. (2010), including the  
8 following steps: identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, study  
9 selection, charting the data, summarizing and reporting the results. The PRISMA-  
10 ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) was used to guide the development of this paper and to  
11 ensure it met the criteria for a scoping review (see Appendix 1).

#### **Identifying the Research Question**

13 The purpose of this review was to explore the research specifically focused  
14 on the junior-to-senior transition. No current review of this specific area has been  
15 explored despite recent reviews of the broader research topics; talent development  
16 (Toohey et al., 2018) and career transitions (Stambulova & Samuel, 2019).  
17 Therefore, two broad questions were developed around the two key stakeholders of  
18 the transition period, the athlete and the organization: How do athletes experience the  
19 transition? What are the organizational processes that support the transition? While  
20 the athlete will have a significant personal investment in this “once in a lifetime”  
21 period for them, organizations (and their employees) should have a more grounded  
22 view, driven by cumulative years of experience of the transition and organizational  
23 strategy. A mapping of the literature around how athletes experience the transition



1 and how organizations seek to reach their goal of developing an athlete to senior  
2 competition should therefore provide directions for practice and future research.

### 3 **Identifying Relevant Studies**

4       The process of discovering literature began with a database search including,  
5 PsychINFO, Sport Discus, and Google Scholar up to and including July 2018 and  
6 then further updated in February 2019. The secondary search was carried out due to  
7 recent literature being published during the writing of this review<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes  
8 of the thesis, a third search was done (June 2022) to update the scoping review with  
9 articles published since the initial manuscript had been rejected and before the thesis  
10 was submitted (using the same criteria). The following search terms were used in all  
11 databases; within career transition OR junior-to-senior transition OR youth to senior  
12 transition OR academy to first team transition. Backward citation searching of  
13 bibliographies and forward citation searching from any eligible studies were also  
14 conducted (Levac et al., 2010). Search terms targeted the specific area of transition  
15 for this review but remained broad enough to include potential studies of within  
16 career transitions as suggested by Arksey and O'Malley's framework (2005). A  
17 review specialist (Jo Varley-Campbell) was consulted in developing the search terms  
18 and search strategy to ensure they were broad enough to match the aims of the  
19 scoping review.

20       Inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to focus our search on the junior-  
21 to-senior transition. During the development of these criteria, the authors were  
22 required to balance comprehensiveness with the practical feasibility of such an

---

<sup>1</sup> This submitted manuscript went through two reviews at IRSEP before being rejected in the period 2020-21. For the purpose of the thesis, we therefore conducted an up-to-date search ahead of completing this chapter.

1 undertaking (Levac et al., 2010; Daubt et al., 2013). First, only peer reviewed  
2 publications were included in this review. This decision was made to ensure  
3 feasibility, in line with previous scoping reviews (e.g., O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015;  
4 Chen et al., 2017), and after reviewing sources of unpublished literature that did not  
5 generate new information. Second, the search included articles from 2003 to  
6 February 2019, as the primary models of within-career transitions were developed in  
7 2003 (Stambulova, 2003) and 2004 (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Third, studies not  
8 focused on this specific transition were excluded as the objective of this review was  
9 aimed to explore the junior-to-senior transition. For example, studies which focused  
10 on a different phase of the transition (e.g., developmental stage); the transition from  
11 lower-level senior sport to higher-level senior sport (i.e., non-elite to elite); adult  
12 based transitions; or dual career (academic and athletic) transitions, would not meet  
13 the inclusion criteria. Finally, studies that merely mentioned the junior-to-senior  
14 transition without studying the experience or processes, as previously defined, were  
15 excluded.

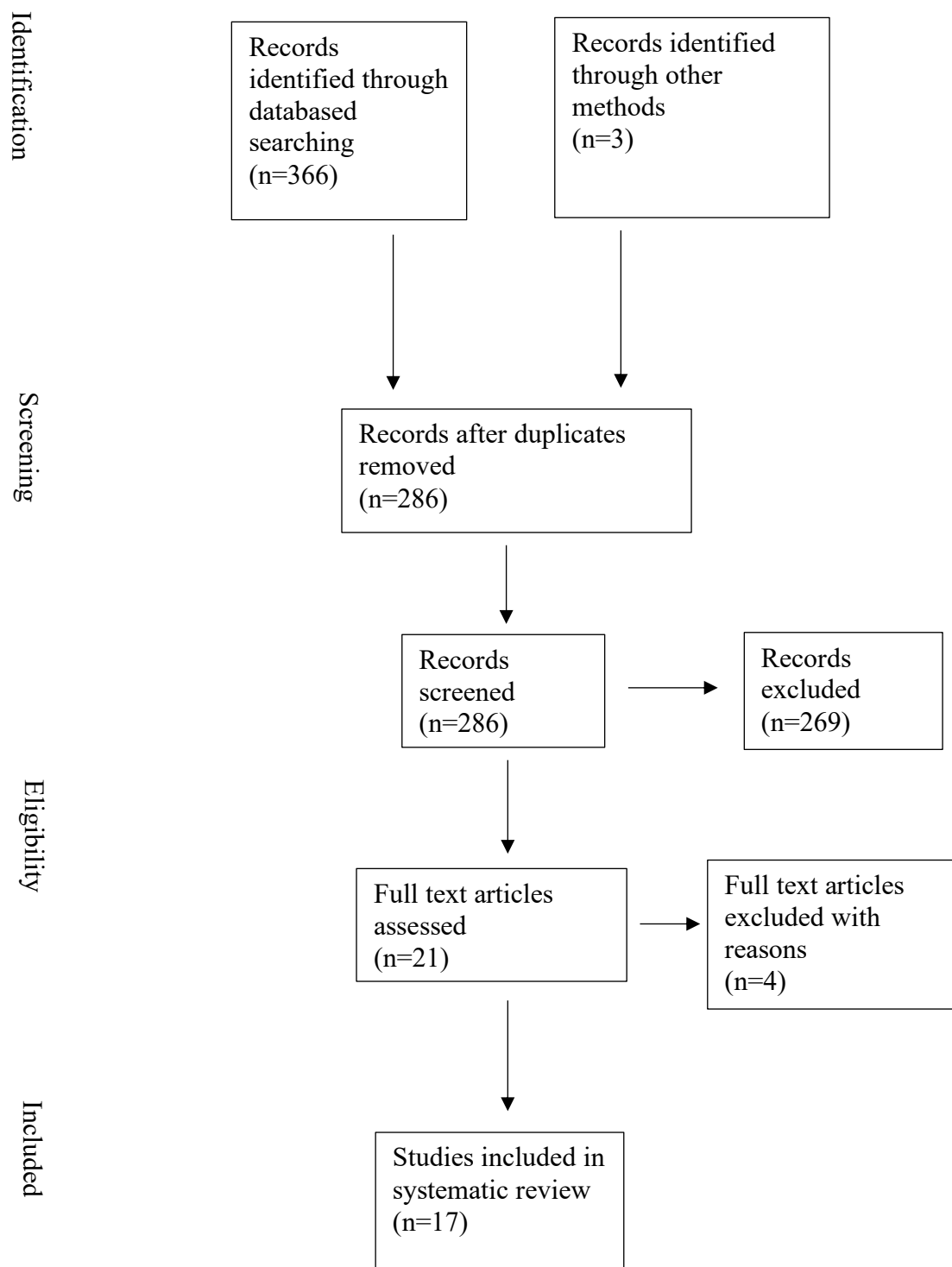
## 16 **Study Selection**

17       The initial two searches returned a total of 369 articles, of which 286 remained  
18 following the removal of duplicates. Titles and abstracts were independently  
19 screened by two reviewers (author one, conducting a Ph.D. in this field, and author  
20 three, a specialist in scoping and systematic reviews) using the eligibility criteria.  
21 Disagreements were resolved by discussion or involving a third reviewer (author two  
22 or four). The primary reason for title and abstract exclusions was not meeting the  
23 target population, those involved in the junior-to-senior transition. Full texts were  
24 retrieved of all articles meeting inclusion at the title and abstract stage (n=21) and  
25 reviewed again using the same team format outlined for the initial screening phase,

1 as recommended by Levac and colleagues (2010). Full-text screening eliminated a  
2 further four articles, meaning that seventeen were included in this review (see Figure  
3 3.1). One article was excluded as its participants were not going through the junior-  
4 to-senior transition as defined by the inclusion criteria. Other articles were excluded  
5 as, while they did mention the junior-to-senior transition, they did not study or  
6 provide specific insights into the transition period.

7       The third search returned a total of 333 articles, of which 291 remained  
8 following the removal of duplicates. Titles and abstracts were independently  
9 screened by the lead researcher using the eligibility criteria. Full texts were retrieved  
10 of all articles meeting inclusion at the title and abstract stage (n=10). Following  
11 screening of the full texts five

1 Figure 4: Flow chart of search



1 papers were excluded (see Figure 5). A further two studies were not included due to  
2 the original inclusion criteria, however as the literature has developed, the study of  
3 *loan transitions* has become a focus. These two studies (Kent et al., 2022;  
4 Prendergast & Gibson, et al., 2022) are reviewed separately in Appendix 2.

### 5 **Charting the Data**

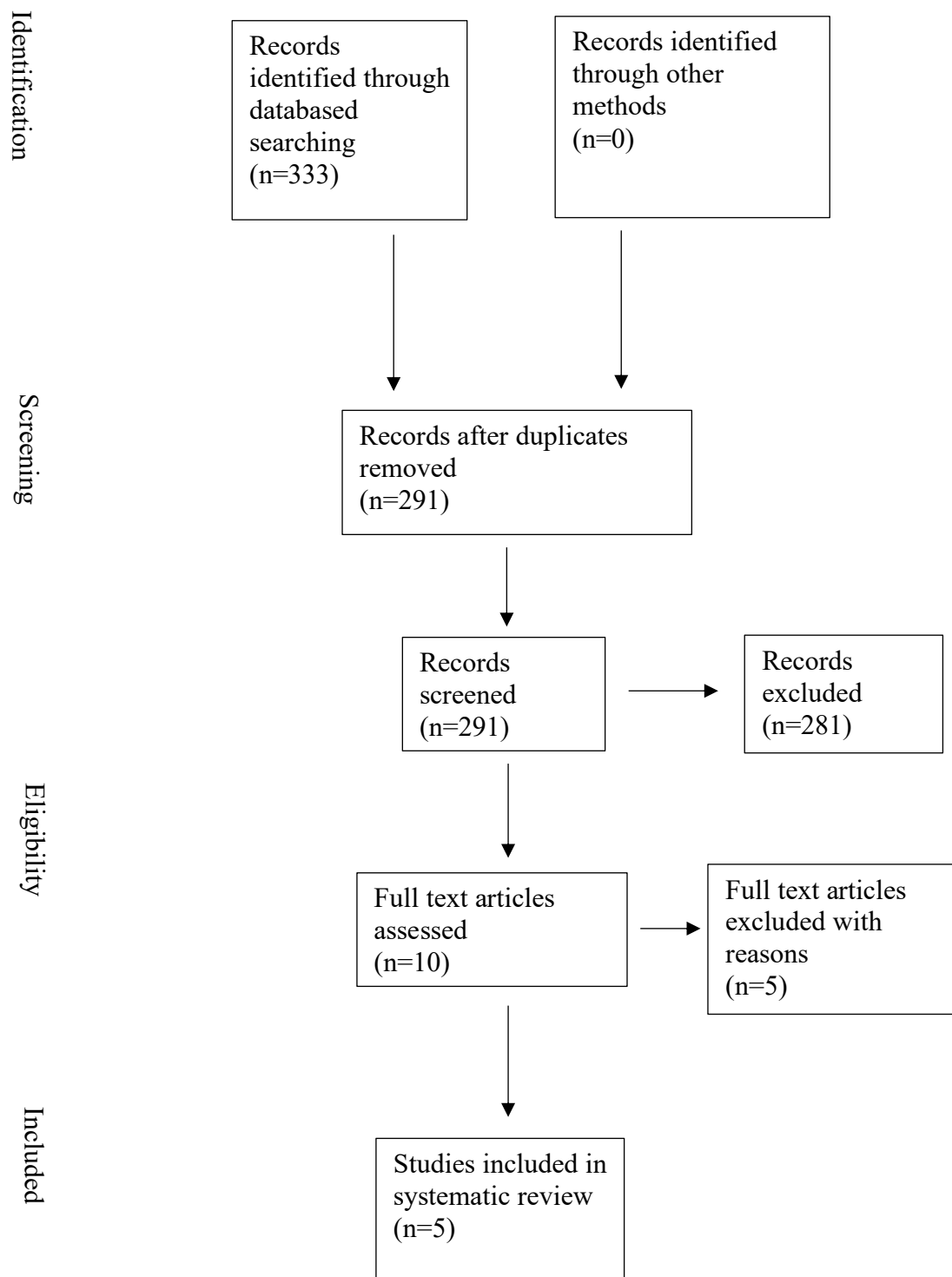
6       Following selection, the studies were reviewed and charted by the lead  
7 author, including, author, year, study location, participants, aims of the study,  
8 methodology, themes or results, key findings, limitations, and future  
9 recommendations (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A summary of the charted data is  
10 provided in Table 1 for the original submitted manuscript and in Table 2 for the  
11 additional search. As the junior-to-senior transition literature is in its infancy, the  
12 papers included in this review are diverse in their participants, specific research aims,  
13 and methodologies. The following section discusses these characteristics in more  
14 detail in order to provide additional context for the data that will be discussed later.  
15 In line with Arksey and O'Malley's framework (2005) a narrative approach was used  
16 to explain the data derived from the existing literature.

### 17 **Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results**

18       The final step in Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework is reporting the  
19 results, which is frequently done via a thematic approach (e.g., Levac et al., 2010).  
20 We chose to present themes in this manner based on the two main research questions  
21 of this review.

22

1 Figure 5: Flow chart of the additional search June 2022



1 Table 1: Overview of the included studies

Authors	Sport	Aims of research	Participants	Data Collection tool/Method	Findings
<i>Athlete</i> Bjørndal, Andersen, & Ronglan, 2018	Handball	Explore athletes' experiences transitioning successfully or unsuccessfully	$n=9$ , $n=5$ successful and $n=4$ unsuccessful	Multiple case study using semi structured interviews	Unsuccessful transitions were marked by injury and the lack of coherence within the Norwegian Talent Development (TD) system. Dropout was a consequence of injury and loss of motivation due to social pressure and exhaustion associated with the TD model. Successful transition was deemed to be mostly chance of opportunity and avoiding injury, though some successful athletes seemed to have better self-regulation within the system.
Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008	Ice Hockey	Explore the experience of transition to elite amateur hockey	$n=8$ elite players, mean age of 17.2	Phenomenology/Focus Groups	Two major themes found: On-ice performance issues including loss of confidence from reduced playing time. Off-ice issues included the importance of support received. A primary source was teammates, with difficulties found as teammates were traded or released.
Franck & Stambulova, 2018a	Swimming & Tennis	Explore transition pathways	$n=2$ , 1 male swimmer, 1 female tennis player	Narrative interviews	Both athletes shared psychosocial factors that facilitated the transition. Jessika struggled with injury and the return from injury including financial support. Erik cited a struggling relationship with groups and new coach as challenges.
Franck & Stambulova, 2018b	Basketball & Football	Explore transition pathways in team sport	$n=2$ , 1 female, 1 male	Narrative interviews	Family/relationships were deemed to facilitate transition and wellbeing. Coach and organizational

Authors	Sport	Aims of research	Participants	Data Collection tool/Method	Findings
					challenges were primary factors for failure to transition and decision to withdraw from sport.
Franck, Stambulova & Ivarsson, 2016	Various	Identify adjustment patterns and describe their characteristics	<i>n</i> =101 players with mean age of 16.51	Transition monitoring survey, athletic identity measurement scale, task and ego orientation in sport questionnaire and physical self-perception profile-revised	Three adjustment patterns were found in transitioning athletes: progressive, regressive and sustainable. The progressive and sustainable adjustment patterns were marked by strong athletic identity, high motivation to reach senior level and a primary focus on the sport.
Hollings, Mallett & Hume, 2014	Track and Field	Explore why some elite juniors became successful seniors and others did not	<i>n</i> =5 male, <i>n</i> =6 female <i>n</i> =5 successful <i>n</i> =6 unsuccessful	Semi structured interviews	Successful senior athletes had high commitment to clear goals, achieved early senior success and relied on a key strength. Unsuccessful athletes had competing demands outside sport (e.g., social/family or academic/career) and revealed limited career progression.
Hollings, Mallett & Hume, 2014	Track and Field	Explore lived experience of WJC and its role in career development	<i>n</i> =12, 7 male, 5 female	Phenomenology	The World Junior Championships (WJC) was deemed a worthwhile experience for all athletes regardless of goal achievement. It was seen as a positive one in terms of their career and a learning experience for what might be to come in senior competition. Emotional support was a key positive factor during the event and performance apprehension a primary negative factor.



Authors	Sport	Aims of research	Participants	Data Collection tool/Method	Findings
Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2016	Football	Explore experience of players immediately pre and post transition	<i>n</i> =5 players age 17-19	Semi structured interviews	Themes included: motivation for transition, confidence and anxiety, stressors and social support. Motivation remained high pre and post, transition, while anxiety lessened following transition. Stress was similar at both time points, and there was no perceived change in social support.
Pummell & Lavallee, 2018	Tennis	Develop, implement & evaluate an intervention on JST	<i>n</i> =7, 4 male, 3 female junior tennis players	Mixed methods single subjects design	An intervention was developed using interviews with senior role models. The intervention saw steady athletic identity but an increase in knowledge of the JST and readiness to cope with transition. Social validation suggests the intervention was valuable in developing understanding of the future transition.
Stambulova, Pehrson & Olsson, 2017	Ice Hockey	Explore a model of phases of transition and athlete experience in varying phases	<i>n</i> =7 semi pro players ( <i>n</i> =1 18yo, <i>n</i> =1 21yo, <i>n</i> =5 25-30yo)	Semi structured interviews	Development of an empirical model of phases of transition: preparation, orientation, adaptation and stabilization. Interviews developed demands, resources, barriers, coping and outcomes of each phase of transition.
<i>Coach/Support</i> Finn & McKenna, 2010	Football	Coach perspectives on JST and coping strategies used in JST	<i>n</i> =7 elite development coaches	Post-positivist / semi structured interviews	Increased demands led to high stress in transition. Strain on athletes with lack of self-management to perform at the high level. Effective coping is essential during the transition. Meaning focused coping was identified as a useful tool in transition.
Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016	Football	Explore factors stakeholders	<i>n</i> =12 coaches	Semi structured interviews	A period of adaptation is required along with a set of characteristics and resources to achieve success.

Authors	Sport	Aims of research	Participants	Data Collection tool/Method	Findings
		believe are associated with JST	<i>n</i> = 10 sport science staff <i>n</i> =6 parents		These can and should be developed through previous career transitions, for example as they move through age groups.
Røynesdal, Toering & Gustafsson, 2018	Football	Youth coach perspectives on youth players managing 1 <sup>st</sup> team environment and support needed	<i>n</i> =8 EPL elite youth coaches	Pragmatic approach – Semi structured interviews	First team environment is an area young player's need time to adjust to in the transition, including social dynamics and first team management. Communication between academy and first team staff as important in facilitating and developing the athlete's perception of the transition as well as players gaining credibility with older players and staff.
<i>Organization</i> Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015	Football	Explore and compare programs, support and factors associated with JST	<i>n</i> =4 youth coaches <i>n</i> =2 senior coaches <i>n</i> =2 senior players <i>n</i> =4 youth players <i>n</i> =4 parents <i>n</i> =1 physio	Case study – Semi structured interviews and document analysis	Organizations which followed closer to Stambulova's model yielded higher transitional success as defined by player value, retention rates and money spent on player assistance.
Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne &	Football	Explore club philosophy, structure, practices, JST and	<i>n</i> =26, heads of youth department	Semi structured interviews	Clubs across Europe were found to have similar organizational structures, including having specific roles for JST and, in some instances, having a B team. A major limitation was the gap and lack of

Authors	Sport	Aims of research	Participants	Data Collection tool/Method	Findings
Richardson, 2010		psychosocial support			communication between youth and professional departments, and the lack of a coherent system.
Larsen, Henriksen, Alfermann & Christensen, 2014	Football	Describe an intervention and how coaches/athletes experienced it		Applied ethnography case study	The intervention had two goals, improve relationships between youth and senior departments and develop psychosocial skills in daily practice. Three strategies were used to achieve those goals: coach supervision, workshops and on pitch sessions. The intervention was deemed a success in regard to the first goal of developing relationships between departments.
<i>Athlete/Coach</i> Pehrson, Stambulova & Olsson, 2017	Ice Hockey	Validating the empirical model of phases of transition	3 focus groups: $n=12$ players, $n=3$ coaches interviewed	Focus groups and interviews	Validation of the empirical model. Five themes were reformulated, and 17 new themes were added while other themes were repositioned within the phases. These themes were added to the phases of transition in the model.

1 Table 2: Overview of the included studies from secondary search – June 2022

Authors	Sport/Country	Aims of research	Participants	Method/Data collection	Key Findings
<b><i>Q1. Athlete Experience</i></b>					
Rye et al., 2021	Football Norway	Explore performance and organizational stressors in the JST	n=10 athletes	Interpretative approach / Semi structured interviews	Competitive stressors were focused on the pressure to perform shown by the desire to avoid mistakes and a perception that mistakes would limit opportunity. Organizational stressors were noted by the increased demand of senior sport without an intermediate step to prepare. Relationships with both coaches and senior players added stress with their criticism, lack of feedback which mixed with the lack of opportunity led to pressure to perform.
Mitchell et al., 2020	Football England	Explore practitioner perspectives on the barriers to transition in JST	n=18 practitioners (n=6 coaches, n=8 academy managers, n=4 education/welfare)	Interpretive / Semi structured interviews	Four main themes were developed: cultural climate, working practices, occupational hazards, social challenges. The performance and social culture of senior environments were major obstacles to transition along with the lack of trust from managers needing to win. Moving towards the 1 <sup>st</sup> team meant higher physical demands that young players need to cope with alongside the potential for less developmental opportunities or coaching. Injury was a major challenge to motivation and matching the demands of the transition. Socially, leaving home was a challenge for some while social distractions could interrupt progress during the JST.

Authors	Sport/Country	Aims of research	Participants	Method/Data collection	Key Findings
McGreary et al., 2021	Football England	Explore JST in female football context using senior and transition players	<i>n</i> =6 athletes	Post-positivist / semi structured interview	Three categories were used to incorporate the main themes within the senior and transitioning groups: perceived transition demands, perceived transition barriers, perceived coping resources. Dual careers were a key demand for both groups, less so for the transitioning players, along with matching the higher standard. Key barriers included anxiety for both groups while there was more pressure in the transition group due to the professionalization of the game. Social support was the main coping resource for both groups while extra training for personal development was key for both groups as well.
Thomas et al., 2021	Track & Field Caribbean	Understand dropout during the JST in elite track & field	<i>n</i> =11 athletes	Interpretivist / semi structured interview	Four higher order themes were developed to explain dropout in the JST within Caribbean track & field. There's not enough support, felt pressure to make sure I committed, it's always competitive here, battle with the injuries. Overall, athletes lacked organizational support to progress through the transition and were left with a choice between remaining in support, often struggling financially, or using their degrees to make a better life. Injury, often from overtraining, led to declining motivation and dropout.
Andronikos et al., 2021	Various (Football, athletics, basketball, volleyball,	Explain factors that contribute to the quality of JST using the TMS and a	<i>n</i> =177 athletes	Cross sectional design / Descriptive stats and multiple	Using the TMS and regressions several key factors found during the JST. Personal resources, environmental support and transition demands were associated with adjustment to senior level while perceived need for support was a negative predictor.

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Authors	Sport/Country	Aims of research	Participants	Method/Data collection	Key Findings
	handball, martial arts, gymnastics, tennis, swimming)  Greece	regression to predict key factors of transition		regression analysis	Environmental support, coping strategies and perceived degree of adjustment to senior level were linked with sport satisfaction. Finally, importance of different aspects of sport and sport satisfaction were associated with life satisfaction during the JST.

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## Results

### 1 Athletes' Experience

2           Of the 17 reviewed studies, 14 studies focused on the athletes' experience in  
3 transition. All five from the additional search were focused on athlete experience.  
4 Ten (four from the additional search) of those were through the lens of the athletes,  
5 three (one from the additional search) were through the lens of coaches or other  
6 stakeholders, and one combined these two approaches. Four key characteristics of  
7 the transition were found to be related to the athlete experience. First, there is an  
8 increase in both physical and mental demands that comes with the increase in speed  
9 of play and competing against bigger, stronger, and more experienced athletes (e.g.,  
10 Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017). Second, at least in team sport, there is the  
11 realization that reduced playing time will be the norm (e.g., Bruner, Munroe-  
12 Chandler, & Spink, 2008). Third, the culture change from junior-to-senior transition  
13 environments requires an adjustment (e.g., Frank & Stambulova, 2018a). Fourth, the  
14 three previous characteristics require the athlete to seek appropriate support in order  
15 to manage the transition successfully (e.g., Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016a). These  
16 four characteristics are discussed further below.

### 17 *Increased Demands*

18           Leaving competition grouped by age to open senior competition leads to an  
19 increase in demands and a necessary period of adaptation (McGreary et al., 2021;  
20 Morris et al., 2016b). Matching the highly competitive culture, physical demands,  
21 and matching the level of skill of senior players were further concerns of  
22 transitioning footballers (Mitchell et al., 2020; Rye et al., 2022). During this period  
23 of adaptation, it is important for athletes to set clear and realistic goals, manage  
24 anxiety and stress, while also coping with the pressure that comes with senior

1 training and competition (Andronikos et al., 2021; McGreary et al., 2021; Pehrson et  
2 al., 2017). For some, the increase in mental and physical demands can be a  
3 motivating factor to push their development forward (Morris et al., 2016a). However,  
4 these demands can also remove some enjoyment factors that were previously  
5 motivating (Franck & Stambulova, 2018a). Intrinsic motivation was suggested as a  
6 way of coping with the intense and competitive culture of senior sport (Morris et al.,  
7 2016a; Stambulova et al., 2017). Others found the absence of a ‘middle step’ to be  
8 too difficult to overcome in their transition (Hollings et al., 2014a; Rye et al., 2022).  
9 This was shown in particularly when finishing World Junior events with the next  
10 step being the Olympics or World Championships. Those that were more successful  
11 relied on clear goals and a high commitment to those goals, while those that were  
12 unsuccessful lacked a clear goal to work towards (Hollings et al., 2014a).

13         An increase in anxiety and stress during and following the transition period  
14 was also reported. Moving up to train and play with accomplished senior players can  
15 often leave those transitioning questioning their abilities, leading to more mistakes in  
16 senior training (Pehrson et al., 2017). Anxiety, in particular a fear of making  
17 mistakes, was a key barrier during the transition (McGreary et al., 2021), while Rye  
18 et al., (2022) noted that players felt that these mistakes might limit their future  
19 opportunity. Further, the pressure of winning in senior competition was felt keenly  
20 by transitioning athletes who are often used to winning at the junior level. This often  
21 led to performance anxiety, alongside the risk of overtraining, injury, and eventual  
22 burnout. In team sport, the demand to win in senior environments was seen as a key  
23 change from time spent in the youth teams (Mitchell et al., 2020).

24         Further, Morris et al., (2016a) reported an increase in internal pressure to  
25 attempt to match the standards of senior players. Learning to deal with these stressors



1 and to further develop psychological characteristics, such as motivation,  
2 determination, and self-regulation skills is key during the period of adaptation to  
3 senior sport (Morris et al., 2016b). Statistical analysis using the transition monitoring  
4 survey (TMS) showed that team sport came with more pressure and stress than  
5 individual (Andronikos et al., 2021).

### 6 ***Reduced Playing Time***

7         The reduction of playing time is another major challenge for transitioning  
8 athletes (Mitchell et al., 2020). Often, talented young players who were stand out  
9 performers at youth level, now enter at the bottom of the hierarchy in the senior  
10 environment. For example, Bruner and colleagues (2008) discussed how one rookie  
11 hockey player went from junior team captain to seventh string in his position. One  
12 athlete mentioned the importance of maintaining perspective - reflecting that his  
13 career was just beginning - a key component in dealing with reduced playing time  
14 (Bruner et al., 2008). For others the limited opportunity created more pressure to  
15 perform in limited game time, as well as in training to earn more playing time  
16 (Mitchell et al., 2020; Rye et al., 2022).

17         The issue with playing time is compounded when considering the change in  
18 relationship that is likely with a senior as opposed to development coach (Mitchell et  
19 al., 2020; Rye et al., 2022). Senior coaches are responsible for winning matches to  
20 keep their job and the future of the club on track, and practitioners suggest coaches  
21 are less likely to trust young players – further limiting their opportunity (Mitchell et  
22 al., 2020). Younger players who are not involved can be left to feel outside of the  
23 managers' thoughts (Franck & Stambulova, 2018a; Røynesdal et al., 2018; Mitchell  
24 et al., 2020). Gaining coaches' trust was seen as key in establishing their opportunity  
25 to play as they continued their transition (Pehrson et al., 2017), as well as

1 maintaining a strong commitment to their sport and a singular focus on becoming an  
2 elite athlete (Hollings et al., 2014a). For example, Franck, Stambulova, and Ivarsson  
3 (2018) found that those who adjusted better during the transition measured higher in  
4 athletic identity, while those who didn't adjust as well had competing demands and a  
5 lower athletic identity. Similarly, Franck and Stambulova (2018a; 2018b) reported  
6 that three of their four participants demonstrated performance driven narratives;  
7 wanting to achieve success at the elite senior level, often at the expense of other  
8 areas in their lives, including relationships, financial stability, and education. The  
9 opposite was found in Caribbean track and field, where athletes believed other career  
10 opportunities were safer and better choices than continuing to struggle financially  
11 during the transition (Thomas et al., 2021).

12 A final related issue to that of reduced playing time, which had a major impact  
13 on the success of the junior-to-senior transition, was dealing with injuries that  
14 occurred during this time (Bjørndal et al., 2018; Franck & Stambulova, 2018a).  
15 Athletes reported injuries taking a toll on both their desire to continue their transition  
16 and their ability to meet the demands of senior sport following lost time due to injury  
17 (Bjørndal et al., 2018; Franck & Stambulova, 2018b; Hollings et al., 2014a; Mitchell  
18 et al., 2020). Due to the long road back from injury some athletes might use this time  
19 to change careers to ensure a better future for themselves (Thomas et al., 2020).

## 20 ***Senior Environment***

21 For a young player coming through a talent development system, the  
22 importance of fitting into the senior team should not be overlooked (Røynesdal et al.,  
23 2018). For example, Franck and Stambulova (2018a) described how a young  
24 basketball player struggled playing for the senior team, as the social aspect of her  
25 junior team was such a strong motivating factor. Additionally, an elite swimmer

1 described the disruption of a positive training dynamic when new members joined  
2 the group (Franck & Stambulova, 2018b). These changes in the social dynamics  
3 were mitigating factors in the choice for both athletes to withdraw from their sport.

4       New norms and ways of interacting will exist in an adult environment  
5 compared with an environment with peers of similar age (Stambulova et al., 2017).  
6 Often this is the first experience young players will have of directly interacting with  
7 “equals” who could be twice their age. The vast difference in age was mentioned as a  
8 key social challenge for transitioning footballers (Mitchell et al., 2020; Rye et al.,  
9 2022). Due to drastically different lifestyles, practitioners felt young players  
10 struggled to build relationships within the senior squad (Mitchell et al., 2020).

11       Coaches discussed the importance of earning respect and establishing  
12 credibility with senior players as a way of adapting socially (Finn & Mckenna, 2010;  
13 Røynesdal et al., 2018). However, this can be particularly challenging due to the  
14 hierarchies and macho-culture that exists in many senior sporting environments  
15 (especially football; Mitchell et al., 2020). Poor relationships with the new training  
16 groups was also seen as a significant factor in athletes whose transitions were  
17 unsuccessful (Franck & Stambulova, 2018b; Hollings et al., 2014a). Likewise, the  
18 ability to fit in within the highly competitive culture of the senior environment makes  
19 a successful transition more likely (Franck & Stambulova, 2018a; Røynesdal et al.,  
20 2018). Furthermore, Røynesdal et al. (2018) reported that the perception of senior  
21 teammates of young players as a threat to their job and livelihood as causing strain  
22 on this social dynamic. Relationships were further strained by what young players  
23 felt was negative feedback from more senior players. However, with time this is  
24 something that appeared to improve (Rye et al., 2022).

25 ***Support***

1           While athletes are the at the center of the transition, the importance of support  
2 around the athlete was identified in the literature. Types of support can range from  
3 emotional support provided through key relationships, to informational support from  
4 a variety of stakeholders including coaches, teammates and/or support staff  
5 (McGreary et al., 2021). Those capable of actively coping or managing the support  
6 networks around them are suggested to be better at handling this transition phase  
7 than those who distance themselves or avoid the barriers to their transition (Finn &  
8 McKenna, 2010). Further, the importance of support was noted as a key factor in  
9 adjustment to senior competition in Greek athletes (Andronikos et al., 2021).

10           The most common source of support mentioned in the literature was emotional  
11 support from family. All of the athletes interviewed in Hollings, Hume, and Mallett  
12 (2014b) mentioned the value of having support from those close to them. Franck and  
13 Stambulova's (2018a; 2018b) narratives all included supportive families that were  
14 mentioned by transitioning athletes as important in their athletic and personal  
15 development. This support came in a variety of ways including helping the athlete  
16 through rough times, and investing significant time into travel to and from training or  
17 competition (Morris et al., 2016a). In female football, emotional support from  
18 families was key to senior players who transitioned to semi-professional  
19 environments, while current transition players moving to fully professional  
20 environments believe emotional support is important (McGreary et al., 2021). There  
21 is also evidence of negative trends in emotional support from families. Thomas et al.,  
22 (2021) noted that support networks can also be sources of stress and add pressure to  
23 succeed. Similarly, practitioners believed overbearing parents can cause issues  
24 during the transition (Mitchell et al., 2020).

1           Teammates, or training groups, also play an important role in either supporting  
2 or creating barriers within the overall junior-to-senior transition. Senior players, as  
3 role models, can provide a valuable avenue of support (McGreary et al., 2021;  
4 Stambulova et al., 2017). For example, two interventions, designed to improve the  
5 junior-to-senior transition, used senior players' experiences to enhance knowledge of  
6 the demands of the transition (Larsen et al., 2014; Pummell & Lavalley, 2019). These  
7 experiences are incredibly valuable, as senior players are often viewed to be more  
8 credible due to their relatability compared to coaches or psychological practitioners  
9 (Larsen et al., 2014). This final element of support from within the structure of the  
10 club highlights specific ways in which the organization can support or hinder the  
11 transition process and is discussed further below.

12           In men's professional football, a lack of support and development opportunities  
13 was identified during the transition, with attention largely being given to the senior  
14 squad (Mitchell et al., 2020). Players also believed there was a lack of feedback from  
15 senior coaches. Further, they had a view that often harsh criticism could be leveled  
16 leading to anxiety (Rye et al., 2022). While in individual sports, a lack of support  
17 from national federations led Caribbean track and field athletes to withdrawal from  
18 their sport during the transition (Thomas et al., 2021).

### 19   **Organizational Processes**

20           Three of the reviewed studies, none of which were from the additional search,  
21 focused on the processes designed to facilitate the junior-to-senior transition. Of  
22 these three studies, one compared two organizations' processes, one examined club  
23 structures and policy, and one was an intervention within the organization. Three key  
24 areas were identified: preparation for transition; communication between youth and  
25 senior departments; and opportunity. While only three studies directly focused on the

1 organizational processes, those that focused on athlete experience also recommended  
2 and discussed these three areas and their insights are included in the reporting of the  
3 results.

#### 4 *Preparation for Transition*

5 Several athletes discussed the importance of different modes of preparation;  
6 from 'playing up' (i.e., in a higher age group) to prepare for the increased demands,  
7 to staying in age grouped competition to allow more playing time in key and diverse  
8 situations (Bruner et al., 2008). In team sport in particular, how athletes prepare is  
9 likely to influence how they react to changes in tactics, playing style and training  
10 methods (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Senior players discussed the importance of training  
11 with quality to better prepare them for the demands of senior training sessions  
12 (Larsen et al., 2014), while transitioning athletes discussed extra training in order to  
13 prepare for preseason and the need to be physical ready to compete at a higher level  
14 (McGreary et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2016a; Stambulova et al., 2017). Individual  
15 sports were marked by key events such as the Junior World Championships which  
16 played a crucial role in determining whether athletes would begin the junior-to-  
17 senior transition (Hollings et al., 2014b).

18 Preparation can take the form of education about the transition itself within  
19 organizations, to help increase athletes' knowledge of the critical issues (Pummell &  
20 Lavalley, 2019). Players, coaches and parents have discussed positively the impact of  
21 education or preparation during the junior-to-senior transition (e.g., Morris et al.,  
22 2015; Pummell & Lavalley, 2019). While individuals will be motivated and excited  
23 to join senior competition, doing so without adequate thought and effort to prepare is  
24 likely to be a barrier as the transition evolves (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2017).

1           Larsen et al. (2014) worked directly with under 17 football players and  
2 coaches in preparation for their transition. Senior players and coaches were used as  
3 mentors in discussing the demands that exist in senior competition and training.  
4 Similarly, Pummell and Lavallee (2019) developed an intervention measuring  
5 knowledge of, and readiness to cope with the junior-to-senior transition. They  
6 focused on understanding the lifestyle that comes with senior competition; mental  
7 skills that are needed and used at the senior level; and a greater understanding of the  
8 life of a senior professional tennis player. Quantitative results of the intervention  
9 showed an increase in the players' knowledge and readiness to cope with the junior-  
10 to-senior transition, while players reported through interviews that the intervention  
11 was worthwhile in terms of their preparation for the junior-to-senior transition.

### 12 *Communication Between Departments*

13           Organizations with better communication between junior and senior  
14 departments create avenues for preparation, clearer pathways to success in transition,  
15 and help those working with athletes in transition (Relvas et al., 2010). Further  
16 evidence also shows more success in terms of players transitioned and players sold in  
17 organizations that follow Stambulova's model (2003) which discusses the barriers  
18 and resources of their transitioning athletes (Morris et al., 2015). One of the primary  
19 objectives of the intervention developed by Larsen and colleagues (2014) was to  
20 improve the relationship between the junior and senior departments. This goal was  
21 constructed in order to address the limitation that the junior players lacked role  
22 models in the senior team. One example of an incongruent system was presented in  
23 Bjørndal et al. (2018), who cited the lack of communication and awareness of the  
24 different environments as leading to unsuccessful transitions due to injury or

1 burnout. Further evidence of this was shown in football with the increased demands  
2 leading to young players being injured (McGreary et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2020)

### 3 *Opportunity*

4 A major challenge of the junior-to-senior transition – especially in team sport  
5 – is the opportunity to play and impress the coaching staff holding the gatekeeping  
6 role, because trusted, experienced senior players are given the bulk of playing time  
7 (Mitchell et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2017). A potential consequence of this lack  
8 of playing time is declining confidence (Bruner et al., 2008). Further, the stress of  
9 having to perform in limited roles can also be an important factor for organizations to  
10 consider, alongside finding potential middle steps to enhance readiness (Rye et al.,  
11 2020). Athletes without early senior success or playing time can often be left  
12 frustrated at the lack of opportunity despite feeling ready to compete at the next level  
13 (Franck & Stambulova, 2018a; Hollings et al., 2014a).

14 However, these gatekeepers themselves provide a different perspective,  
15 feeling that players might expect too much without proving their worth to senior  
16 coaches (Pehrson et al., 2017). Despite this potential incongruence between  
17 transitioning players and coaches, it is clearly important for young athletes to earn  
18 the trust of these key stakeholders in order to increase the likelihood that they are  
19 given an opportunity (Mitchell et al., 2020; Røynesdal et al., 2018) and grasp these  
20 when given the chance (Hollings et al., 2014a; Stambulova et al., 2017).

## **Discussion**

21 The purpose of this review was to examine the research focused specifically  
22 on the junior-to-senior transition in sport with regards to athlete experience and  
23 organizational processes. Four key characteristics that marked athlete experience  
24 were, an increase in mental and physical demands, reduced playing time, a required



1 adjustment to the senior environment, and the necessity of support during this period.  
2 While the individual athlete is required to deal with the challenges, ideally with skills  
3 developed during their time in junior sport, the organization also plays a key role.  
4 Specifically, preparation for the transition, communication between the junior and  
5 senior departments, and opportunity to play were key characteristics of the  
6 organizational process. In this section we discuss the findings as they relate to the  
7 two research questions to provide critical analysis of the findings.

## 8 **Athlete Experience**

### 9 *Increased Demands*

10 Dealing with the increased demands present in the junior-to-senior transition  
11 is likely to be the primary marker of success. An array of psychological skills was  
12 seen as important in dealing with the increased mental and physical demands,  
13 together with a high athletic identity (e.g., Pehrson et al., 2017; McCreary et al.,  
14 2021). Developing these psychological skills should be seen as paramount for  
15 athletes within talent development systems prior to the transition, as entering the  
16 transition without these key skills will likely be unsuccessful (e.g., Morris et al,  
17 2016b). When entering the senior environment, a crucial period of adaptation occurs  
18 where athletes are exposed to the new standard of training and competing (e.g.,  
19 Morris et al., 2016b; Rye et al., 2022). During this period two differing perspectives  
20 became apparent. The first, an increase in motivation (e.g., Morris et al., 2016a), and  
21 the second a loss of enjoyment (Franck & Stambulova, 2018a). This is a critical  
22 period for key stakeholders to manage ensuring athletes stay motivated and push  
23 through the demands that come with moving to the senior level. Finally, every sport  
24 will come with unique demand increases at the senior level. More research should  
25 explore sport specific demands and the differences between junior and senior

1 competition from an interdisciplinary perspective to better prepare athletes for the  
2 transition.

### 3 *Reduced Playing Time*

4           Players who are selected to go through the junior-to-senior transition are  
5 players who excel at the junior level. This change of going from key player to having  
6 limited playing time created several issues. Athletes reported a loss of confidence  
7 (Bruner et al., 2008), which provides further support for the importance of  
8 psychological skill development within talent development systems (e.g., Webb et  
9 al., 2016). Further, in some team sports like football, there are opportunities for  
10 players to be loaned to lower division clubs, which can be an avenue to for players to  
11 receive playing time during the transition (Røynesdal et al., 2018). This issue is  
12 particularly important as evidence suggests that senior managers are less likely to  
13 trust younger players while fighting to win games to keep their jobs (Mitchell et al.,  
14 2020).

15           The concept of playing time is linked to how the organization manages  
16 athlete expectations during the transition process and how coaches consider the  
17 needs of transitioning athletes. Finally, as injury can also limit athletes' playing time,  
18 and was reported by athletes as a reason for withdrawing from sport (e.g., Hollings et  
19 al., 2014a; Franck & Stambulova, 2018b; Thomas et al., 2021), a strategy should be  
20 in place within organizations to support injured athletes as it relates to their  
21 transition. One such strategy could simply be meetings with key stakeholders to  
22 discuss each individual's transition, and target support for each athlete, including  
23 how to manage injury during the transition (Morris et al., 2015).

### 24 *Senior Environment*

1           The senior environment can either be a place that can help foster young  
2 players and build avenues of support, or hinder the transition (e.g., Franck &  
3 Stambulova, 2018a). Senior players were reported to be the most valuable resource,  
4 due to their first-hand accounts of the transition and knowledge of the organization  
5 (Larsen et al., 2014; McCreary et al., 2021). However, not all organizations aligned  
6 junior and senior departments to foster these relationships (Relvas et al., 2010;  
7 Mitchell et al., 2020). This should be seen as a key goal for organizations to aid in  
8 the transition period. As moving to the senior environment can be intimidating for  
9 young athletes, coaches and support staff should work actively to provide  
10 opportunities for junior and senior players to interact. This can be done during the  
11 preparation period, by providing juniors with opportunities to experience the senior  
12 training environment prior to the transition (Morris et al., 2015).

### 13 ***Support***

14           A well-rounded support network, including both informational and emotional  
15 support from a variety of key stakeholders, is vital for athletes going through this  
16 demanding transition (Stambulova et al., 2017; McCreary et al., 2021). Athletes  
17 should look to create diverse lines of support as they deal with the increased  
18 demands. One critical area for organizations to consider is developing an  
19 understanding of each athletes' individual support systems. Considering that, in some  
20 cases, support from home can add pressure and stress this can be key to providing  
21 better internal support to transitioning athletes (Mitchell et al., 2020; Thomas et al.,  
22 2021). Hollings et al. (2014b) reported the importance of family support; however,  
23 each athlete transitioning might not have the same levels of support outside the  
24 organization. This is one key gap in the literature, a general lack of research  
25 evaluating individual needs during the transition. While the literature has begun to

1 understand general key factors and explore individual transitions (e.g., Franck &  
2 Stambulova, 2018a; Franck & Stambulova, 2018b) future research should continue  
3 to explore methods of evaluating individual needs during the transition including  
4 individualized support.

## 5 **Organizational Process**

### 6 ***Preparation***

7       According to talent development researchers, those that achieve senior  
8 success are prepared during their time in the talent development system and arrive to  
9 the senior environment ready to succeed (e.g., Webb et al., 2016). The reviewed  
10 literature had strategies for preparation including, education about the transition (e.g.,  
11 Pummell & Lavalley, 2019) and training up to gain experience (Morris et al., 2015).  
12 The primary findings suggest education on the transition increases knowledge of the  
13 transition (Pummell & Lavalley, 2019) and organizations that follow more in line  
14 with Stambulova's (2003) model (balancing demands and resources) are more  
15 successful, in terms of player retention and player sales, than those that do not  
16 (Morris et al., 2015). While these studies are a valuable starting point, their findings  
17 appear to be evidence that doing something is better than nothing. More research  
18 attention on what organizations do *specifically* to improve the likelihood of success  
19 in the junior-to-senior transition is needed. Perhaps creating additional steps along  
20 the pathway could be beneficial to make the jump to senior competition at the  
21 highest level more manageable as suggested by footballers in transition (Rye et al.,  
22 2022). The specific factors of preparation both for senior sport and the transition  
23 itself should get more attention in the literature.

### 24 ***Communication Between Departments***

1           While in many cases the junior and senior departments are separate, how they  
2 work together is important to athletes' transitions. As the athlete moves between the  
3 two departments, the junior department can provide valuable information to the  
4 senior department that might aid the transition (Relvas, 2010). Unfortunately,  
5 examples of this not happening were available in the literature with negative  
6 consequences for transitions (e.g., Bjørndal et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris  
7 et al., 2015). This is an area of organizational structure that should receive further  
8 research interest in terms of intervention studies (e.g., Larsen et al., 2014). Program  
9 evaluations including both the junior and senior department can help provide further  
10 detail as to *how* organizations seek to transition athletes. In the case of individual  
11 support, how transitions are supported by national federations and governing bodies  
12 is key to retaining talent during the transition (Thomas et al., 2021). Overall, there is  
13 a lack of understanding in exactly how clubs or talent development structure's view  
14 or work with transitioning athletes. More research should seek to explore the applied  
15 world of transitions and develop future research questions based on what is currently  
16 being done as best practice.

### 17 ***Opportunity***

18           Hollings et al. (2014a) discussed the importance of early senior success,  
19 defined by representing the senior national team at international competition, as a  
20 marker for those that continued, compared to those who dropped out. This suggests  
21 that those athletes with a shorter transition period are more likely to be successful.  
22 Clearly, there is an implication that systems that do more to prepare their talented  
23 juniors for the demands of this process should have more success (e.g., Pummell &  
24 Lavalley, 2019), and that more support will be needed for those athletes whose  
25 transition might take longer (e.g., Thomas et al., 2021). While talent development

1 structures seek to prepare athletes with skills to compete at higher levels on the pitch,  
2 the importance of well-rounded development to do deal with the challenges off the  
3 pitch and throughout the transition period should be seen as equally important (e.g.,  
4 Mitchell et al., 2020).

5 Further, in transitions that are not immediate, what support is needed and how  
6 do organizations identify these problematic transitions? When opportunity is  
7 unavailable to a transitioning player, organizations should seek to answer how they  
8 keep that athlete engaged and striving for excellence (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020).  
9 These motivational and confidence factors are key as discussed earlier (e.g., Bruner  
10 et al., 2009; Bjørndal et al., 2018). Regardless of talent, the opportunity factor might  
11 still be too much to overcome as senior coaches might still prefer the experience of  
12 senior players (Stambulova et al., 2017). This again points to the importance of  
13 coherent communication between junior and senior departments which could allow  
14 senior coaches to better understand the young players joining the senior team.  
15 Furthermore, organizations should seek to provide opportunity with the senior team  
16 in the long term and be aware of the consequences of dropout with athletes left  
17 frustrated by the system (e.g., Bjørndal et al., 2018).

#### 18 **Methodological Concerns**

19 While no quality assessment of individual articles was conducted several  
20 methodological concerns were apparent in the literature. First, when looking at the  
21 findings related to athlete experience there was a reliance on one off interviews  
22 (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012). Only two of the reviewed studies used multiple  
23 interviews, both using a pre and post interview. These interviews typically lasted  
24 approximately one hour. When seeking to understand a process that could take some  
25 athletes up to five years, it is likely only a brief synopsis of the overall period is

1 collected, rather than details of the exact lived experience. When attempting to  
2 understand the demands of such a complex event, over the course of several years,  
3 methods should be adopted that can elucidate these complexities.

4         Second, only five of the studies (two studies from the additional search)  
5 collected data from participants *during* the transition (Bruner et al., 2008; Hollings et  
6 al., 2014b; Morris et al., 2016a; Pehrson, et al.; Stambulova et al., 2017). In other  
7 cases, athletes were reflecting on a period of their life which occurred years  
8 previously, which has obvious limitations in terms of the detail they can provide  
9 (Bell, 2005). This is a significant limitation of the current literature and our  
10 understanding of this process. Novel methods, such as case studies using journaling  
11 or video diaries, as well as ethnographical approaches where the researcher can  
12 understand the demands in real time, as well as how they interact with these demands  
13 over time.

14         Finally, interventions only counted for two of the 17 (22) studies in this  
15 review. Only one of which collected empirical data (Pummell & Lavalley, 2019).  
16 While there were methodological limitations of this intervention including its rigor  
17 and participant selection, it should be seen as a benchmark for future interventions.  
18 While intervention research is lacking in the junior-to-senior transition field, those  
19 looking to develop future interventions researchers can look to outside fields for  
20 examples, such as positive youth development (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016) and  
21 leadership training (Hasson, von Thiele Schwarz, Holmstrom, Karanika-Murray, &  
22 Tafvelin, 2016). Establishing key factors and testing their effectiveness over time  
23 should be a priority of program evaluation and best practice in the applied world.

### **Future Directions and Limitations**

1           First, there is a need for more detailed longitudinal research that captures  
2 athletes' experiences over the suggested four-year period of transition (Stambulova  
3 et al., 2017). These longitudinal designs should look to capture the experience of  
4 transitioning as it is occurring over time, rather than snapshots or retrospective study  
5 designs. Case studies that follow athletes over time are one potential solution, as well  
6 as ethnographical reports from researchers embedded in the environment. Further,  
7 the specific phases of transition are untested in the literature as whole, as well as  
8 within other specific cultures and sports (Pehrson et al., 2017). As a new model  
9 within the junior-to-senior transition, looking at the transition over time, this should  
10 be tested by future research and made culturally specific for varying contexts.

11           Second, a push towards quantitative methods to further measure the transition  
12 and it's change over time is also important. The further use of latent profile analysis  
13 (e.g., Franck et al., 2018) can be explored to profile groups based on indicators from  
14 this review with transitional success. Further use of the TMS (e.g., Andronikos et al.,  
15 2021) could help add to the quantitative data around transitions, particularly as a part  
16 of mixed method studies to delve deeper into experience of transitioning athletes.  
17 Growth curve modelling is another potential area for exploration to see how key  
18 factors change over time such as support networks and ability to manage stress.  
19 These types of studies can provide talent development systems with more  
20 manageable data in understanding characteristics of transitions in order to set  
21 organizational strategy.

22           Finally, researchers should further explore organizational processes of the  
23 junior-to-senior transition. Investigations into this process could use the work of  
24 Morris et al. (2015) as a foundation. Organizations who followed Stambulova's



1 model appeared to have more transitional success in terms of player retention and  
2 money spent, however due to the nature of the study conclusions could not be drawn.  
3 Further insight into these processes and how clubs use theory to drive practice,  
4 including identifying key factors of transition would be a valuable addition to the  
5 literature. In this review we identify key factors of athlete experience and  
6 organizational process that can be tested in future research. These could then set up  
7 the potential for interventions to look at manipulating club strategy and measuring  
8 the impact on transition success based on these key factors. There are  
9 methodological challenges in setting up interventions, as well as challenges in  
10 gaining access to clubs willing to “test” relatively unknown factors in a multimillion-  
11 dollar business. Stronger evidence measuring and understanding athlete experience  
12 should help organizations be open to improving their practice. One avenue to explore  
13 is evaluating programs to see what key factors organizations are aware of and  
14 working with in the applied world. Evaluating these programs can then be seen as a  
15 next step. This can be a similar process to what is seen in positive youth development  
16 work where programs are evaluated to check the impact on the goals of the program  
17 (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016).

18         While the intervention literature shows how organizational processes can  
19 educate and improve the transition in general, more research should seek to evaluate  
20 and assess athletes at the individual level. Better individual support should be a key  
21 element of the transition period, yet this is ignored in the intervention research.  
22 Developing a tool to assess individuals transition resources and barriers could be the  
23 start to individual interventions. However, from both a practice and research  
24 standpoint this is a significant challenge in terms of time and financial resources.

1 Practitioners working within sporting organizations should look to further  
2 their understanding of the athlete experience in the transition. A better understanding  
3 of the experience should allow an improved external support network for the athlete  
4 and the creation of an individual plans of support. These plans can target the  
5 demands of transition, adjusting to the senior environment, dealing with reduced  
6 playing time, or enhanced support as discussed previously in this review. Further,  
7 practitioners should look to develop educational programs for the transition to aid in  
8 the understanding of what is to come (e.g., Pummell & Lavallee, 2009). Finally, as  
9 the organization plays a large role in determining opportunity at the senior level, an  
10 awareness of the player perception of opportunity should be considered to maintain  
11 motivation and confidence through a period that likely includes decreases in playing  
12 time. Providing a variety of opportunities should be seen as a priority for  
13 organizations.

14 One limitation of this review is that we targeted only published papers  
15 focused specifically on the junior-to-senior transition. Naturally, a review that  
16 included a broader range of studies would have yielded information that may have  
17 been missed in this review. However, the PRISMA-ScR guidelines suggest that gray  
18 literature is not always included in scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018), and during  
19 the development of the search criteria it was decided that published studies would  
20 provide sufficient evidence in our mapping of the literature. Several avenues were  
21 explored to broaden the scope; however, we felt the specific nature of the questions  
22 warranted a specific search strategy and inclusion criteria.

### **Conclusion**

23 This review explored the junior-to-senior transition as being part of, but  
24 distinct from the overall talent development process and requiring specific attention

1 in the literature. Identifying contextual and environmentally specific awareness of  
2 the transition can lead to better transition success. The athlete experience and  
3 organizational processes reviewed in this paper can help provide directions for future  
4 applied research. The experience of the transition shows an increase in demands and  
5 reduced opportunity that requires preparation from both the athlete and organization.  
6 Not only does the organization play a role in developing necessary skills over time,  
7 but it plays a significant role in providing opportunity for the transition to blossom,  
8 along with the necessary support for the potentially lengthy transition period. The  
9 right preparation prior to transition along with support in the social contexts of the  
10 senior environment should give each athlete every chance for success.

11

### **Scoping Review in Relation to Thesis and Empirical Studies**

#### ***Contribution of Scoping Review to Thesis***

The scoping review was the first deep dive into the specific topic of junior-to-senior transitions. The broad scope of the review focused on player experience and organizational processes of the transitions helps frame the overall thesis around these topics that are important for football clubs. Further, the scoping review helped to identify gaps in the literature and plan the empirical studies of the thesis in the coming chapters.

#### ***Contribution to Empirical Studies***

The overall interpretation of the review was that the literature only scratched the surface of this challenging, complex process. The methods and data collection techniques often relied upon single semi-structured interviews allowing limited time to uncover experiences from a multi-year process. From this review of the literature, we established that ‘how’ we investigate the topic was equal to if not more important than the ‘what’. Utilizing methods that would allow for depth of exploration became a primary aim of the PhD to understand the experience of the participants.

Therefore, we designed two studies to fill those gaps in the research utilizing methods that would allow us to dig deep into player experience. First, using video diaries as a data collection technique to explore the initial transition as it unfolded; and second, to widen timescale of exploration to include the full transition from professional contract to first team regular.

#### **Chapter 4: Study One**

Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (2020) Player experience during the junior-to-senior transition in professional football: A longitudinal case study. *Frontiers of Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01672>

**Player Experience During the Junior-to-Senior Transition in Professional  
Football: A Longitudinal Case Study.**

**Abstract**

1 The purpose of this study was to explore the evolving perspectives of young players'  
2 experiences going through the junior to senior transition in professional football. A  
3 primary objective was to adopt novel methods – weekly video diaries – to allow  
4 participants to control and report their own narratives as the transition unfolded over  
5 40 weeks. Semi-structured interviews, held at four time points, allowed the lead  
6 researcher to probe further into themes that were developing. Six participants from  
7 the academy volunteered to take part, but only the three who earned professional  
8 contracts completed the study. The primary themes in the academy were the pressure  
9 experienced waiting for the contract decision, and then preparation for senior football  
10 and the first team environment once contracts were awarded. Adaptation to senior  
11 football included not only increased physical and mental demands but also those  
12 related to the different style of play, the pressure to win, and how these both  
13 impacted decision-making. The football club set up two pathways to support this  
14 adaptation, loan moves and time with the U23's. In the following season, the move  
15 to the senior squad was characterized by a lack of opportunity to play for the first  
16 team, resulting in additional loan moves. These moves, and the associated perceived  
17 lack of support structures, led to the participants experiencing issues with their club  
18 identity, motivation, and confidence. Internal (mindset) and external (social support)  
19 coping strategies were developed over the study's duration. Concluding comments  
20 from participants were related to greater acceptance of the need to be patient, perhaps  
21 reflecting on the club's reputation of giving young players a sound football  
22 education. These phases of the transition came with ups and downs for each

1 participant illuminating key elements of the adaptation to senior competition, barriers  
2 to transition without early success, and social aspects of the transition. Enhanced  
3 detail in these key areas poses important questions for future research and applied  
4 practice.

### **Introduction**

5       Every year, hundreds of footballers across Europe are offered their first  
6 professional contract. However, very little research explores the unique and  
7 challenging experiences that players go through as they step up from the academy  
8 into the first team (Morris et al., 2016b). Stambulova et al. (2009) stated that this  
9 junior-to-senior transition is the most challenging step in a player's career, and may  
10 take up to five years, as players orientate, adapt, and hopefully stabilize themselves  
11 within their senior teams (Stambulova et al., 2017). There is more to making a  
12 successful transition to the professional ranks than simply being a talented academy  
13 player (Gledhill et al., 2017), and indeed, youth team players appear to be  
14 unprepared for the challenges of the adaptation process during this transition, as  
15 outlined both by empirical research conclusions (e.g., Morris et al., 2016a) and by  
16 the opinion of top managers (e.g., Pep Guardiola in Ducker, 2017). The aim of the  
17 current study was, therefore, to examine the experience of players currently going  
18 through the junior-to- senior transition to develop a detailed understanding of their  
19 perceived challenges and opportunities.

20       A transition is defined as an event, or non-event, that leads individuals to  
21 change assumptions about themselves (Schlossberg, 1981). In transitioning from  
22 youth football to professional adult football, a player will face an increase in  
23 physical, technical, tactical, and psychosocial demands on the field of play  
24 (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). At the same time these changing assumptions will also

1 pose additional challenges off the field of play (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). How  
2 an athlete copes with these demands and overcomes barriers, by accessing both  
3 internal and external resources, largely determines whether an athlete transition is  
4 successful (Stambulova, 2003).

5         A recent empirical model of the junior-to-senior transition by Stambulova  
6 and colleagues (Pehrson et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017) explicitly considers  
7 the time course of the transition, which may take a number of years. Stambulova and  
8 colleagues identified four phases in their empirical model: preparation, orientation,  
9 adaptation, and stabilization. The preparation phase is defined as the preparation for  
10 a full-time move to the senior environment following initial experience with the  
11 senior squad. Following the full-time switch to the senior environment, the athlete  
12 begins the orientation phase where they learn about the new environment, how they  
13 fit in, and how they operate within the team or organizational structure. Once players  
14 learn the major features of senior sport they begin adapting to a bigger role in the  
15 squad in their performances and responsibility. Finally, players reach the  
16 stabilization phase as a regular member of the senior team (Pehrson et al., 2017;  
17 Stambulova et al., 2017).

18         The current study focuses on the first two of these phases, which is where the  
19 majority of the empirical studies in football have concentrated. Not only do these  
20 phases coincide with the specific event of the move from academy to senior football  
21 for most players, but also, this period marks some of the largest changes that are  
22 likely to occur in daily life and self-assumptions (Schlossberg, 1981). Morris et al.  
23 (2016a) interviewed footballers prior to and immediately after the start of their  
24 transition. They reported an almost immediate increase in motivation and confidence  
25 as well as a decreased sense of anxiety following the full time move to the first team.



1 However, as the transition is not a single event but a process that occurs over time  
2 (Stambulova, 2003), it is critical to explore what happens after this initial positive  
3 feedback, as the subsequent challenges develop (e.g., Røynesdal et al., 2018).

4         Indeed, a recent position statement of the International Society of Sport  
5 Psychology explicitly calls for a better understanding of the changing demands  
6 across the transition (Stambulova et al., 2020). While we focus on these same two  
7 phases, our goal was to provide a more nuanced, deeper account of athlete  
8 experience as it unfolded before, during, and after this critical timepoint, using  
9 weekly video diaries. This is especially important as Morris and colleagues have  
10 revealed that stakeholders in the transition believe there is a necessary period of  
11 adaptation that requires appropriate support and important personal characteristics in  
12 order to successfully navigate (Morris et al., 2016b; Drew et al., 2019).

13         Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore the evolving  
14 perspectives of young players' experiences going through the junior to senior  
15 transition in professional football to develop a detailed understanding of the  
16 challenges during this process. As such, this study meets recent calls for more  
17 longitudinal research (Morris et al., 2016a,b) and the specific call from Drew et al.  
18 (2019) that research moves away from a reliance on one-off interviews. Additionally,  
19 it is hoped that the use of novel methodology for this research area – the thematic  
20 analysis of weekly video diaries – will provide a more detailed, nuanced, and holistic  
21 understanding of this process. Such information is critical to further the research  
22 agenda in this field and help clubs support the development of future young  
23 footballers.

## Materials and Methods

### 1 Methodological Rigor

2           At the outset of the proposed research, we sought to develop methodological  
3 coherence as the primary source of rigor, through a reflexive, group process (Mayan,  
4 2009). This process began with using the *armchair walkthrough* approach outlined  
5 by Mayan (2009). The longitudinal nature of this inquiry and the novel approach to  
6 data collection required a flexible framework, as in this instance there was no “one  
7 size fits all” structure as one might find with grounded theory or interpretative  
8 phenomenological analysis (Sparkes and Smith, 2009). The combination of  
9 longitudinal data collection techniques and semi-structured interviews provided  
10 broad and rich accounts of the player experience, demonstrating width of  
11 exploration. The inclusion of ample direct quotations represents the data in an honest  
12 fashion, in line with recommendations from qualitative description methodology  
13 (Sandelowski, 2010).

14           To further add rigor to our investigation we adopted criteria from Smith and  
15 Caddick (2012), specifically, coherence, transparency, resonance, and credibility.  
16 Credibility was established through the lead researcher being embedded in the  
17 environment to build established and trusting relationships between the researcher  
18 and participants. Video diaries allowed each participant to control which data they  
19 submitted to the lead researcher. Participants were able to pause, re-record, or delete  
20 any footage to ensure they were able to withdraw their data at the point of data  
21 collection rather than requesting to do so later in the study. The interviews then  
22 allowed the researcher to probe for deeper insights and feedback on interpretations.  
23 Transparency in the procedure and methods written below, as well as the theoretical  
24 positions of the research allow the reader to interpret the findings. While “external

1 validity” is not sought in qualitative research our aim was to provide accounts that  
2 resonate with the reader and encourage comparisons to other contexts through  
3 naturalistic generalizability (Smith, 2018).

#### 4 **Qualitative Description**

5         We form our work from a naturalistic approach, attempting to study the  
6 phenomena in its natural context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 2000,  
7 2010). In line with our methodology, qualitative description, we attempted to allow  
8 the phenomena to emerge as if it were not under study (Sandelowski, 2000). The lead  
9 researcher (Scott Swainston) was completing a Ph.D. which was partially funded by  
10 the football club. This role included spending several days a week at the football club  
11 and providing psychological support services to academy players. The lead  
12 researcher therefore had developed a working relationship with all of the academy  
13 players before the study started.

14         Our ontological perspective is based in relativism, in which we assume  
15 multiple realities and multiple truths to the phenomena in question (Denzin and  
16 Lincoln, 2011; Bradshaw et al., 2017). These multiple realities and truths are evident  
17 in the literal description of the thematic analysis by participant, showing the meaning  
18 each participant attributed to the transition (Sandelowski, 2010; Bradshaw et al.,  
19 2017). The epistemological assumption of constructionism is that knowledge is  
20 developed through subjective experience and socially constructed (Creswell and  
21 Poth, 2013). The collection of data in the everyday environment of the participants  
22 and lead researcher allowed for this subjective experience to be understood and  
23 described.

24         Qualitative description seeks to understand complex experience and  
25 processes through the use of multiple techniques of data collection. Participants

1 should be purposively sampled to describe their experience while “in the midst” of  
2 the experience (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). The end goal is then to present the data  
3 in the purest, simplest form, with limited interpretation and a focus on the  
4 experiences the participants described (Sandelowski, 2000; Bradshaw et al., 2017).  
5 This is opposed to a hermeneutic phenomenological approach where interpretive  
6 meaning is given to experience (Neergaard et al., 2009). The simplistic, yet rich  
7 nature of the description should aid the data being used directly in an applied setting  
8 (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). For these reasons,  
9 qualitative description was chosen as the method by which we sought to answer our  
10 research question: What are the evolving perspectives of young players experiences  
11 going through the junior-to-senior transition in professional football?

## 12 **Participants and Sampling**

13 A total population sample of players in their second year of their 2-year  
14 apprenticeship within an English Football League club was used. Included  
15 participants were required to have been a part of the club’s academy for at least 3  
16 years and have participated in at least one first team training session (i.e., the  
17 preparation phase of Stambulova et al., 2017 model). It is important to note that  
18 during the planning of this study it was unknown which of the participants would  
19 earn a contract and remain in the study. Traditionally, contracts are awarded at the  
20 end of the scholarship period in April, and data collection was planned accordingly.  
21 In total, six participants aged 17–18 years old ( $M = 17.85$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ) agreed to  
22 participate in this study (see Table 3) from a total of nine who met the inclusion  
23 criteria. Participants had been in the academy between 4 and 10 years with an  
24 average length of ( $M = 8.5$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ). At the halfway point of this study, the players’  
25 2-year apprenticeship ended. At this point three participants were released from the

1 club while three continued with their first professional contract. The players who  
 2 were released no longer continued their participation in the study.

3 Table 3: Participants' (not their real names) demographic information

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Time in academy</i>	<i>Contract status</i>
Oliver	18	4 years	Pro
David	18	10 years	Released
John	18	10 years	Released
Charlie	17	10 years	Pro
Thomas	18	8 years	Pro
George	18	8 years	Released

#### 4 **Data Collection and Analysis**

5 To better understand the participants' evolving experiences, a longitudinal  
 6 process was developed using both video diaries and semi-structured interviews.  
 7 While multiple interview formats have value (e.g., Morris et al., 2016a) they result in  
 8 timepoints of understanding rather than the evolving experience (Grossoehme and  
 9 Lipstein, 2016). With this in mind we chose to use weekly video diaries to gain  
 10 deeper insight into the experience of the participants throughout the ongoing  
 11 transition. Rich et al. (2000) cited the effectiveness of video diaries in younger  
 12 populations, based in part on their use in pop culture television (e.g., Big Brother).  
 13 Further, familiarity with the technology will likely lead to young populations being  
 14 more confident in sharing their personal stories (Rich et al., 2000).

15 Following ethical approval from the researchers' institutional ethics  
 16 committee, the lead researcher held a meeting to inform the eligible participants  
 17 about the project and what would be required to participate. They were ensured that  
 18 participation or non-participation would not affect their standing within the football

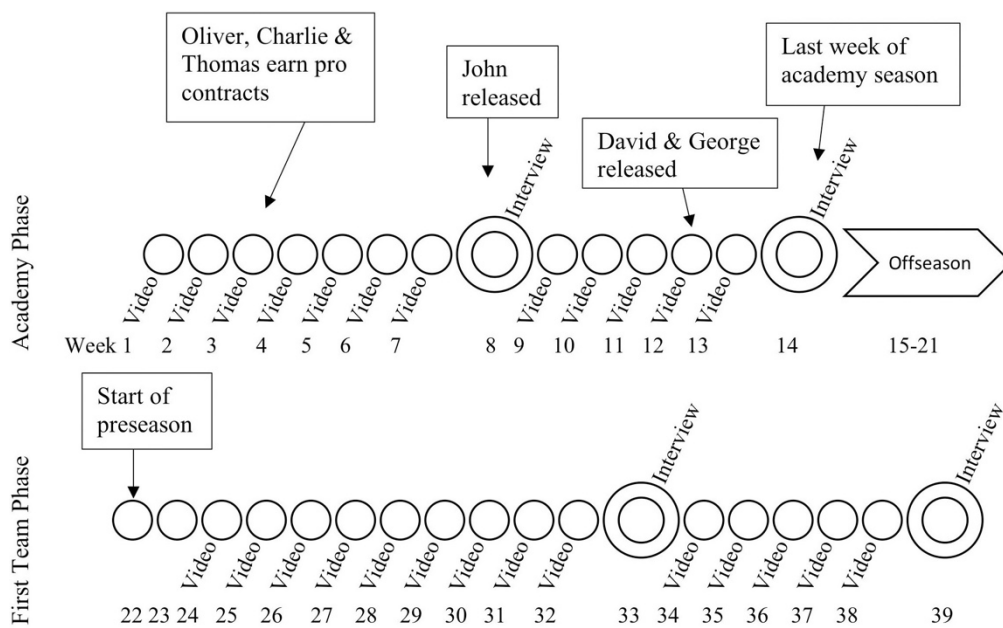
1 club and all non-anonymized data would only be seen by the lead author and his  
2 supervisors (co-authors) and could not be accessed by coaches or other  
3 “gatekeepers” within the club. The data were collected on a weekly basis over 40  
4 weeks. Weekly video diaries were supplemented by semi structured interviews  
5 (collected by the first author) roughly at the halfway point and at the conclusion of  
6 each phase of the study (see Figure 6 for a pictorial representation of the data  
7 collection timepoints over this period).

8         During the first week of data collection the lead researcher discussed with  
9 each participant the process of the video diaries and answered any questions. A well-  
10 known popular culture television show (Rich et al., 2000) was used as an example of  
11 a “video confessional” to guide participants in how to talk about their current  
12 experiences both on and off the pitch for roughly 5 min. An individual written guide  
13 was provided each week to prompt participants, but instructions on the guide  
14 indicated that they were not required to answer these questions and could discuss  
15 anything meaningful to them. Prompts were created in response to the data  
16 participants provided in previous video diaries. Each guide was different for every  
17 participant and changed weekly. Participants completed the video diaries during  
18 breaks in their day as full-time scholars at an English Football League club or at  
19 home during their free time. Video diaries were collected using the participants’ own  
20 mobile phone with printed questions to guide their diary reflections.

21         Following collection of the weekly video diary, the lead researcher  
22 transcribed and analyzed the transcript, following the first two steps of Braun and  
23 Clarke (2006) thematic analysis procedure. The collection and analysis of data  
24 followed an iterative approach where analysis preceded the collection of additional  
25 data. This iterative approach to data collection and analysis allowed for topics that

- 1 were addressed in each week's video diaries to be readdressed or clarified, and for
- 2 the guides to build upon one another, adding depth to the data being collected.

- 1 Figure 6: A timeline of the study protocol, outlining the key decision points and data  
 2 collection methods.



- 3  
 4  
 5 This process was repeated up to week seven, when codes were sorted, and interview  
 6 guides were developed to discuss potential themes and each individual's experience.  
 7 The interviews allowed for potential themes that developed in the video diaries to be  
 8 discussed in more detail. Interviews also enabled the lead researcher to probe using  
 9 follow-up questions to gain further insight. The interview process also aided in the  
 10 analysis of the data by allowing the lead researcher to better understand the position,  
 11 opinion, and experience of each participant (Morse, 2020). The interview guides  
 12 developed were highly personal, but also included general themes that had begun to  
 13 develop across the participants.

- 14 This same iterative collection and analysis cycle was then repeated for the  
 15 second half of the academy phase for all six participants and throughout the first  
 16 team phase for the remaining three participants (see Table 4). Due to the differences



1 in experience within the two phases of data collection they were separated in the  
 2 final analysis. Codes for each phase  
 3 Table 3: The number and mean duration of video diaries and interviews for each  
 4 participant.

Name	Oliver	Thomas	Charlie	David	George	John
# of video diaries	26	25	24	11	10	11
average length	05:03	04:27	04:16	04:28	04:15	04:31
# of interviews	4	4	4	2	2	2
average length	32:05	28:12	26:41	38:04	25:50	22:52

5  
 6 were sorted into potential themes and reviewed against the coding by the lead  
 7 researcher. The potential themes were discussed with the research team to ensure  
 8 they accurately reflected the coding and the data. Using a thematic mapping  
 9 technique (Braun and Clarke, 2006) higher and lower themes were developed for  
 10 each phase. Once the higher and lower order themes were confirmed by the research  
 11 team the report was generated with consideration given to the best way to represent  
 12 the data.

### 13 **Data Representation**

14 Results should be reported in a way that best fits the data (Sandelowski,  
 15 2000; Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005), whether that be by relevance or chronologically  
 16 (Neergaard et al., 2009). With this in mind our data is presented chronologically by  
 17 theme across the two different phases. We provide a straight description of the data  
 18 giving voice to the participants' experience with limited interruption (Sullivan-  
 19 Bolyai et al., 2005). The presentation by theme allows similarities and differences to

1 be shown between the participants giving the reader a full picture of the evolving  
2 transition.

### Results

3 The participants' experiences were explored over two phases, while they  
4 were members of the academy (preparation; Stambulova et al., 2017) and following  
5 the full time move to the first team (orientation and adaptation; Stambulova et al.,  
6 2017). Themes were developed for each of these phases marked by the experience of  
7 those transitioning (see Table 5). In week three of the study Oliver, Charlie, and  
8 Thomas received early professional contracts. John was released in week eight, while  
9 David and George, were released at the end of the season (Figure 6). As a result,  
10 only the experience of the three players who made the transition are considered in  
11 this article<sup>2</sup>.

12 Table 4: Higher and lower order themes by phase

Phase	Higher order themes	Lower order themes
Academy phase	Pressure of contract decision	Stress Motivation
	Adaptation to men's football	Playing style Physicality Decision making
	Preparation for first team	Learning the demands Social adaptation Individual preparation
First team phase	First team environment	Social dynamic Organizational support First team demands Belonging
	Opportunity	Training experiences Loan opportunities
	Coping	Internal: Psychology/mindset External: Support network

<sup>2</sup> The experience of the non-contracted players - including their themes and quotations - which were related primarily to the stress and pressure of waiting for the contract decision (see also section 'pressure'), can be found in Appendix 3.

## 1 **Academy Phase**

### 2 *Pressure*

3           Pressure to earn a contract was inherent in the academy environment. Prior to  
4 receiving his early contract decision, Oliver discussed the stress he was experiencing,  
5 “before I got mine it was something I struggled with. The week I got told I had the  
6 meeting I couldn’t sleep for the whole week.” Charlie expressed a similar view, “I  
7 was worrying. It was affecting my performance. I was worrying about things I didn’t  
8 need to.” Pressure in general was also seen in a positive light by Oliver, “that  
9 pressure, as horrible as it feels, is good because it makes you want to improve.” This  
10 was evidenced in a key event in Thomas’s journey, “They said at the moment I’m  
11 not going to get (a contract) and something switched in my head mentally. I thought I  
12 have to do something now, change this because I didn’t have much time left.” He felt  
13 this helped him in establishing better habits, “I worked harder. I have done things  
14 more professionally, and that’s shown on the pitch with more consistency in games.”  
15 Oliver believed coping with the pressure was an important characteristic to  
16 demonstrate to coaches, “if you can get through that, then it shows that you will  
17 succeed.” Charlie discussed this in relation to his mindset, “you just have to do your  
18 best and they can’t expect more of you than to do your best.”

19           The early contracts eliminated this worry, allowing each to look forward to  
20 the next phase of their career. Oliver addressed this saying, “not that I can relax now,  
21 but I’m less stressed.” Specifically, when talking about the pressure on the pitch he  
22 commented, “it’s taken the pressure off me. It’s different, I know now that if I do  
23 something bad it won’t affect me too much. I can try more things and take more  
24 risks.” Although receiving his first professional contract provided a sense of security  
25 over his future, Charlie remained focused on his mindset, “It never stops, never stop

1 working. Just because I have been told early and we have a few months left in the  
2 season, doesn't mean I'm going to not play my best or relax." This preparation  
3 period was the next focus for Oliver and Thomas. Oliver described, "I have already  
4 earned it now, but what can I do when I start my pro? What can I do to push so when I  
5 come back, I'm fit and an even better player than I was before?" and Thomas stated,  
6 "obviously I have weaknesses that I still need to improve, that's what I will be  
7 working on to be ready for next season."

### 8 *Adaptation to Senior Football*

9 **Adaptation via Loan.** Both Oliver and Thomas were sent on loan during the  
10 academy phase to begin their adaptation to men's football. Both felt that this was an  
11 important development opportunity:

12 If I want to progress to a higher level of football, I need to do other parts of  
13 the game, the dirty parts. Where I am going to get kicked, I am going to get  
14 taken out, it's not going to be fair, so I need to get used to it. (Oliver).

15 I think going against men will really test me mentally and physically. I feel  
16 that's what I need right now to show the first team manager that I am capable  
17 of getting into his team. (Thomas).

18 Both were met with the realities of lower league football and the drastic  
19 differences when compared to academy football; "it's completely different playing  
20 men's football, their demands are different. It's actually harder than I thought it  
21 would be." (Oliver).

22 It's "get it to the center half and boot it long," which isn't really my game.

23 That's proper football, that's (lower) league football, that's what I have to get  
24 used to so that's why I think it's a good level for me to get experience and  
25 grow as a player. (Thomas).

1           According to Thomas these differences required adaptation, “I think just  
2 learning about the ins and outs of football that you don’t get at the academy. It’s  
3 proper men’s football, it’s not really what I have been doing for the last 10 years.”

4           As the loan continued, Oliver and Thomas’s experiences separated as Oliver  
5 received regular playing time and Thomas did not. For Oliver, physical demands  
6 received less attention as his loan progressed. Instead, tactical differences in senior  
7 football, that aren’t often seen in the academy, came to the fore.

8           We are used to playing football where it’s simpler into my feet or to the  
9 striker to play to me. Not too many times have I had to play off people where  
10 it’s flicks or play me in behind on the flick.

11           These differences required him to alter his decision making.

12           I think I am meeting the demands physically. It is more decision making, it’s  
13 more I have to hook a ball on or play it in behind and run after it. Which in  
14 18’s football you have to do that, but you want to look after the ball a bit  
15 more.

16           He also added, “You have to learn to think your way around things.”

17           Another major difference for Oliver was the importance placed on winning  
18 matches: “Playing on loan, sometimes the best option is just to kick the ball up the  
19 pitch and leave it in the corner. That’s frustrating because I want to do something  
20 with it.” “You can be more spontaneous in 18’s football.” When summarizing his  
21 loan experience at the end of the season, Oliver reflected that it provided unique  
22 opportunities not present in academy football.

23           It’s hard to sometimes know what you want to do in those instinctive  
24 moments. Sometimes you don’t do the right thing but going on loan gives

1           you experience. You get experience and confidence; you get confidence from  
2           that experience. I think the loan is really helping my transition.

3           Thomas' lack of playing time on loan heavily influenced most of his  
4           experience during this phase, with less reflection on specific learning opportunities.

5           It's probably just more frustrating, because when I was playing well for (the  
6           academy), I was playing week in and week out scoring goals. I was coming in  
7           happier and more confident, whereas now it's a bit dull and I don't want it to  
8           fizzle out.

9           However, in the final weeks of his loan he finally received an extended  
10          opportunity to play, helping his confidence prior to the offseason.

11          When you are looking at it on the sidelines, you think, look at these tackles  
12          and aerial battles, can I do this? It's always going to be in the air and it's not  
13          going to get on the floor. Then when I got out there, I proved to myself that I  
14          can handle that.

15          **Adaptation via Home Club.** Charlie was the only participant not to go on  
16          loan, resulting in a different adaptation pathway. The necessity to adapt to senior  
17          football was something he was aware of, "I think I have developed my game to suit  
18          (men's) football more than it was last year. Last year it was to suit U18's football. I  
19          feel now I have progressed my game to suit men's football." His only experience of  
20          men's football was with the U23 team, yet this yielded at least one similar  
21          experience to Oliver's loan.

22          It's a different kind of football. U18's matches you are passing the ball more.  
23          Saturday (with the U23's) our game plan was two big strikers up front, one  
24          that was good at heading the ball and one that was quick. We were trying to  
25          play it up to one of them and flick it on for the other to run on to.

1 Charlie also mentioned conversations with the U23's coach, also a first team  
2 coach, as helpful, "He speaks to us about what he wants in that game. What he  
3 expects from the formation, tactics, out of possession, and in possession. I think he  
4 sets you up like he would speak to a first team player." "If (he) talks about the way  
5 we need to adapt our game to become senior football players, I think that's a good  
6 thing for us."

7 Another key area for Charlie was identifying differences between the U18's  
8 and first team, "what they find is a good thing to do and what they find is something  
9 that needs to be better is going to be different than what you find at U18's football."  
10 Charlie elaborated, "you can quicken up your adaptation to the first team by  
11 watching their games back or spending more time with the first team if that's  
12 possible." As part of this learning process Charlie identified a senior player with a  
13 similar style of play to watch and learn from, "when we come off training we always  
14 see them doing bits of training, I always try to look out for what he does," and when  
15 he attended first team matches, "I always try to see what he is doing. Trying to pick  
16 up ideas. He is very good at what he does, so if he does the things that are right then I  
17 can pick up on it." Due to a period they were both injured at the same time Charlie  
18 had the opportunity to speak with him, "I was talking to him about what he finds to  
19 be the most important parts of his game to get into the team and what the manager  
20 wants." He added,

21 I don't see why players like us who are trying to learn from players like that  
22 can't go up and speak to them. Ask them what they think. Someone like  
23 (senior player) who is like 35 and has 20 years' experience in the game, I  
24 don't see why you can't go up to him and pick his brain a little bit.

25 *Preparation for the First Team*

1           **Learning the Demands.** All three players spent limited time with the first  
2 team, trained once a week with the U23 group, and were included in several U23  
3 matches. Through these experiences they developed perceptions on entering the first  
4 team environment and how they would need to prepare. Thomas suggested, “it’s just  
5 about getting experience really and making me feel more comfortable so when I step  
6 in it won’t be such a big surprise to me.” Charlie’s perspective was more specific, “I  
7 think everyone needs to get used to the way the first team do things. It’s different to  
8 ours (U18’s).” For Thomas, the experiences with the U23’s were beneficial in this  
9 regard, “I think this helps me in my transition by being around the pro’s. Seeing what  
10 they do in the changing room, and what it’s like to be in the first team changing room  
11 at the stadium.”

12           Preparing for an increased competitiveness was important to Oliver, “the  
13 toughness of it, the sort of drive that they all have. Every man for themselves kind of  
14 thing, even though you are a team. It’s the sense that you want to make a career for  
15 yourself.” “You have to be selfish in the fact that you can’t give it to someone else.  
16 Otherwise, that might be your only chance.” Oliver felt that entering this intense  
17 environment required a specific mindset. “I think the challenges of transition to the  
18 first team is not seeing myself as a lower player, like as a young one. That I see  
19 myself as a target to get into the team.” When asked more specifically about this he  
20 said, “I can’t see myself as a first-year pro, I have to see myself as a pro. My job is to  
21 try to play and play the best that I can and that hopefully will transition into one day  
22 playing with the first team.”

23           **Social Adaptation.** Oliver also outlined some of the social dynamic concerns  
24 associated with entering this competitive environment. “I think you find it hard for  
25 those reasons and you are a young lad trying to take their place in the team. They



1 won't want that." During the first week of the academy phase, Oliver explained his  
2 experience training up with the first team.

3       Socially, it's different because you don't have anyone around you that you  
4       can confide in. You are on your own for a bit and you have to make a  
5       friendship or make a bit of chemistry with one of the lads.

6       Thomas also believed the social aspects of the transition were important, "we  
7       are around the pros more often now and training with them more, getting to know  
8       them," adding, "If it's the first time seeing them you might be more nervous and just  
9       sit back, relax, and watch the session go by. If you are confident around them then  
10      you are going to show that on the pitch." However, despite him saying it was  
11      important to get to know them, he added, "I don't necessarily speak to anyone in the  
12      first team. Maybe I will more next year."

13      Oliver reflected on his specific view of coping socially, which was to just  
14      improve as a footballer.

15      By being myself to be honest. I am not going to try to be someone I'm not.  
16      They will either get used to me or not like me, either way it doesn't really  
17      matter as long as my football improves. That's all I really care about.

18      **Individual Preparation.** While social challenges were perceived to await, so  
19      too were challenges in gaining organizational emotional support. Thomas stated, "I  
20      think over there (first team), it's harder to open up and speak to people, whereas here  
21      (academy) there is always someone to speak to. You can speak about your worries  
22      and they can help you." However, despite changing support structures within the  
23      club, he felt he had good support from both his "natural" ("my mum is really  
24      supportive, even though I don't see her much. She is always texting me asking how  
25      I'm getting on") and host family ("they really look after me, I can tell them anything.

1 They give me advice, listen, and they can recognize when I'm down"). Thomas did  
2 get informational support from the U18's manager through the first team manager,  
3 "he has been feeding back to our coach what his thoughts are on games and in  
4 training. Which is good to know what he is thinking, so when we go over there isn't  
5 not too much of a shock."

6 Charlie had a proactive view on finding out important tactical information.  
7 I can see in the next few months what the manager wants from (his  
8 positions). I think I can see what he wants from the player, what kind of  
9 tactics he wants them to do, parts of the game that they need to be good at. I  
10 can look at them and improve my game on that, and then hopefully get  
11 myself into the first team on that.

12 He came back to this point in later weeks discussing in more detail, "if you  
13 get to know him and what he likes, what he doesn't like, what he finds would make a  
14 good or bad player then you know what you are getting really."

15 Finally, Thomas and Oliver believed their experiences and focus on mental  
16 skills would benefit their move to the first team environment. Oliver discussed his  
17 view on psychology, "I think when you can get it right, get your head right it's often  
18 the difference in consistency and how you play, how you improve. I think it's helped  
19 me quite a bit." Overall, he felt during the final months in the academy that he had  
20 developed a mindset that would aid in his transition.

21 Going out of your comfort zone makes you better. I've gotten in that mindset  
22 while being a scholar. It's easy to just go with an easy group, whereas  
23 stepping out will be what I have to do at the start when I train with the first  
24 team. I am going to be out of my comfort zone, so those are the times that  
25 will make me ready.

1           Thomas recognized that moving away from home had helped in developing  
2 his character, “I have matured and grown into the lad that I am now because moving  
3 away from home is a big thing.” He also referenced how previous challenges helped  
4 him be more resilient when describing his younger years in the academy.

5           When you are down in the middle of the pack, they aren’t that bothered. I  
6 think going through that is quite hard. I was strong enough mentally. I have  
7 suffered not playing games and being on the bench all the time. There are  
8 people who have played their whole career and then something bad happens  
9 to them and they don’t know how to react to it. Whereas, it hasn’t always  
10 been positive with me and I’ve been strong enough to deal with that and react  
11 to it.

## 12 **First Team Phase**

### 13 *First Team Environment*

14           **First Team Demands.** All three ended the academy phase having discussed  
15 their perceptions of what life might be like from their limited experience in the first  
16 team. Moving full-time to the first team environment came with experiences both  
17 confirming and refuting previous perceptions. Oliver ended the pre transition phase  
18 on a high and was met with a new reality at the start of the season.

19           It’s frustrating as a first-year pro. You are right down the bottom of the list of  
20 everything, so the chance you want or the chance you need, you might be  
21 pushed aside. Even if you do take your opportunities, it’s still often not  
22 enough.

23           This feeling was amplified by his previous status within the academy. “The  
24 end of your scholar when you get your contract you end on a high, thinking ‘oh I’m

1 unbeatable.’ Then you train with the first team and you think I have to improve a lot  
2 more.”

3 Oliver continued to find this part challenging.

4       It’s a bit demoralizing at times. I know on a Friday I’m going to come and  
5       I’m going to be put in any position just to replicate the other team. Positions I  
6       never play in. It gets a bit frustrating because you want to play where you  
7       play and impress. You can’t, you just have to do what they want you to. It’s a  
8       bit annoying at times. The word I think is demoralizing. You lose a lot of  
9       confidence in yourself.

10       For Thomas, the introduction to the first team was more positive. “In my first  
11 week I think I was quite nervous. Definitely quite nervous. It only takes a week to  
12 settle in really. Now I’m ready to start my third week and I feel a lot more  
13 comfortable.” The excitement of joining the first team was a boost for Thomas,  
14 “being with older pros definitely brings more drive within myself. I need to be at  
15 their level and their standard at all times or else they will tell you about it,” adding,  
16 “It definitely brings more out of yourself, more life, more buzz and also you want to  
17 impress them.” This was important as his transition continued.

18       If you are at their standard, then you are going to improve. I think just having  
19       that drive to be at their standard, I have become fitter and sharper training  
20       with men. The tempo is quicker, and you have to be stronger and when  
21       people are pressing you, you have to pop it around quicker. I think I have  
22       gained sharpness.

23       He added later, “to be fair I think everyone is a bit worried stepping up but  
24 honestly, I feel, that it’s not that much of a challenge. I think I cope with it easy  
25 enough.”

1           **Social Dynamics.** In the academy phase Oliver predicted social challenges,  
2 which he did indeed experience at the start of this phase, “You don’t really know  
3 how to talk to them. I guess that’s where in training you want to earn their respect by  
4 training well and if you don’t train well you don’t feel like you can speak to them.”  
5 Oliver explored several avenues to integrate including during meals.

6           I try to sit on other tables with the older lads even if I don’t say anything or  
7 know what they are talking about at least I’m there. They know I’m there so  
8 maybe sometimes they feel they have to talk to me.

9           New signings were also a way to have an “in” with the more senior group,  
10 “because we have brought in a lot of new lads they know people less than you do so I  
11 guess that has been an easy way in, speaking with the new lads.” It was interesting  
12 that later on in the study, Oliver seemed less interested in what the experienced pros  
13 thought of him.

14           You think, oh they don’t like me, or you have a bad day and they think you  
15 are rubbish. At the end of the day if I make a career out of football and they  
16 still think I’m rubbish, I still made a career out of football.

17           The fact that Charlie was not on loan the previous year helped him be more  
18 familiar with the first team environment; “I think the people that I know I’ve talked  
19 to a lot. The people I don’t know, that I haven’t really spoken to before, I feel that  
20 I’ve gotten to know them a lot more.” His attitude toward adjusting and fitting into  
21 the group was shaped by a previous transition.

22           I’m always genuine, so if anyone doesn’t like what they see of me I feel like  
23 I’m not going to change just to please them. I had that many times in the  
24 U18’s moving up from the U16’s, things like that. You get players that you  
25 just don’t get on with, which is fine because you aren’t going to get on with

1 everyone. I feel it's important that you stick to who you are, what your  
2 morals are, and what you think is right.

3 Charlie believed that this attitude and willingness to mix in with the group  
4 was important to his transition, "I think I have made the transition quite smooth,  
5 because I have bonded with players and staff."

### 6 ***Opportunity***

7 **Loan Opportunities.** During preseason all three learned they would go on  
8 loan for the first half of the season. As this was Charlie's first loan move, his initial  
9 impressions were similar to those of Thomas and Oliver from the previous season.  
10 This included acknowledgment of the increased physical demands, "It was more  
11 physical, quicker, and sharper"; the style change, "it's a lot different to what it used  
12 to be like in the academy where it was more pass football, pass, pass, pass"; and the  
13 competitiveness, "I thought U18's football was really important at the time but when  
14 you are out of it, you look at (the EFL), (U18's) is not as important as you think it  
15 is."

16 While Charlie was learning lessons the other two had learned 6 months  
17 earlier, Thomas believed that his experiences from his previous loan would be  
18 helpful, "I learned a lot about myself and how I can handle things, how I can handle  
19 men's football. I have taken all of that experience." Further, being on loan a second  
20 time shifted priorities from simply learning men's football to showing the ability to  
21 perform. Oliver had a simple goal in mind. "I think if I can cement a good standard  
22 of playing at my loan club that will look good for the start of the season to (the  
23 manager) and show that I'm fit." This priority on performance came with a  
24 challenge, "now it's a bit more pressurized. I feel I have to find form and get good  
25 stats in games." Similarly, Thomas targeted being more selfish and achieving

1 performance goals to “get my name out there.” He saw this as key to gaining  
2 opportunity at his home club adding, “that’s what is going to get me into the first  
3 team.” Oliver had a similar impression, “if I don’t do well when I’m on loan they  
4 will probably think, if he can’t play against that standard then how is he going to  
5 play against the higher standard?” This perceived pressure remained with Oliver  
6 throughout this phase, with him reiterating later in the study, “I definitely feel a lot  
7 more pressure.”

8           The opportunity on loan, again, began to separate the experiences and  
9 illuminate potential unintended consequences. Oliver was playing a high number of  
10 loan games which he believed helped accelerate his development.

11           I felt from my loan I had gotten a lot of experience to bring into that (U23’s)  
12 game. Just from playing on loan, it’s clearer in my mind what I want to do.

13           You are starting to catch up in terms of football now, with how the first team  
14 play at that level of tempo.

15           While this improvement came as a result of the playing time, Oliver exhibited  
16 a high level of self-awareness, adding, “I am finding good techniques to get me up  
17 for a game and get me in the right zone to be able to play. I think that is getting better  
18 as well, managing myself.”

19           Meanwhile for Thomas, although the loan period started off positively, “I’ve  
20 stamped my authority and showed what I’m about. Hopefully, I can continue and do  
21 the best I can do for the team,” he soon became frustrated as playing opportunities  
22 became limited.

23           I thought this is going to be my year. I have worked well in offseason, I had  
24 done well in preseason, but they (home club) weren’t really interested. That  
25 was a bit of a low. Then I went (on loan) which was a bit exciting, it was a

1 new club to go to. Done well there in preseason, but then didn't start the first  
2 game of the season so that was another thing where I was asking myself why?  
3 What have I done?

4 This feeling was something that he struggled with.

5 It's very lonely. Football can be, when you are out of favor, football is a  
6 lonely place and I do feel lonely at times. It does get me down. Feeling down  
7 about being out on loan because I'm trying my best and not getting the best  
8 or what I feel deserve.

9 He continued, "it's hard. I don't know, it's really horrible. Football is lonely,  
10 I don't know, the experience is hard."

11 **Training Experiences.** For Charlie, the loan period began to impact how  
12 things were going at his home club. "You are out on loan and they think you have  
13 another four months out on loan, so we don't have to worry about him for another  
14 four months." This manifested in training sessions.

15 You can have a good session and do really well, you are really proud of  
16 yourself, and they won't notice it because they might be doing work with the  
17 starting XI for Saturday. They don't notice how well you are doing. I think  
18 you just have to keep going really. People will notice eventually, but it's  
19 obviously hard and a bit degrading really sometimes when you are trying  
20 your hardest and putting in a lot of effort, doing well, and it's not getting  
21 noticed.

22 This frustration was echoed by Thomas, "they aren't too bothered or focusing  
23 on what I'm doing."

24 The difficulty is that you are a first team player, but the first team is not really  
25 bothered about you. That's the hardest thing to take. I know that I'm a good



1           player and that I'm good enough, but not being able to get a chance to show  
2           what I'm about is the most difficult thing.

3           Charlie had similar views, "it is hard to maintain confidence because you are  
4           in and around the first team, but you aren't as well." During this time, he stressed the  
5           importance of his loan, "I think being away at the loan club and they feel you are  
6           doing well, then that gives you confidence." At the end of the study he did reflect  
7           that perhaps this trade off was worth it, "I feel like I'm readier to play men's football.  
8           I'm readier to compete and win the ball back than when I was an U18. I think that's  
9           the main reason they sent me out on loan."

10          Finally, Thomas discussed what he felt was the most important thing he had  
11          learned so far.

12          I've learned when you get that opportunity, the higher you go the less  
13          opportunities you might get. The less leeway you might get, you might get 45  
14          min then get taken off because that's not what the manager wanted. It's  
15          cutthroat, but as I get older and as I get more experience, I will be able to  
16          know what I have to do to take those opportunities.

17          For Thomas the day-to-day challenges seemed to lessen toward the end of the  
18          study, nevertheless the major obstacle of lack of opportunity remained.

19          You can handle the training, you can handle the day-to-day life, but the  
20          challenges that come with trying to get an opportunity or trying to get that  
21          break in men's football is really tough. That's what I think is the toughest  
22          thing for a young kid to get that break.

### 23          *Coping*

24          **External: Support Networks.** With opportunity limited and frustration  
25          mounting throughout the first team phase, access to support was a significant barrier.

1 Oliver outlined a major obstacle to support, “to actually gain attention so that people  
2 want to help you, you have to cope with being on your own.” Thomas also felt that  
3 more support would help, “I think more support should be available for the young  
4 pro’s because it’s so tough for us to get that opportunity. Then, when we get that  
5 opportunity, we have to show it or else we will be bombed out.” Charlie had a  
6 differing opinion, perhaps created by his staying at the home club previously.

7 I think it’s important that you know that there are people in the club that  
8 would help you. (U23’s manager) would always help you and give you  
9 advice. We have teammates, we have family at home, and your loan club. I  
10 think it’s important that players know that they aren’t alone and have  
11 someone to speak to.

12 Further Charlie added, “I think some people try to bottle it up.” Something he  
13 felt needed to be overcome, “I think some people just struggle to open up to coaches  
14 and members of staff, I think that’s the best thing for you really.” In Oliver’s opinion  
15 this came with a potential barrier, “It would be nice to have someone in the club that  
16 you could speak to, but it’s hard because if you are getting coached by them, you  
17 can’t show them your weaknesses.” Whilst Thomas found it difficult for another  
18 reason, “you think, I probably do need someone else to speak to about my worries  
19 and things like that. You don’t want to be a burden on anyone or think that you are  
20 wasting their time or anything.” When Oliver discussed this further, he said, “I don’t  
21 think there is really anyone in the club that you can talk to. Obviously, people that I  
22 know, but not really people in the club.”

23 This is something both Thomas and Oliver desired, with Oliver adding, “It  
24 would be good because you could express whatever you want to them and they can  
25 help you get through it.” While Thomas suggested, “maybe it’s more about them

1 approaching you because you are worried or embarrassed about it.” Further he  
2 wanted, “more chats, one on one chats, asking us if we are alright and asking us if we  
3 have any worries. That would be good.” This was a large change from the academy  
4 where Thomas said, “there are so many people upstairs that you can speak to” and  
5 that the 18’s manager, “was always having meetings with you. He was always  
6 worrying for you and caring for you because he wants the best.”

7       Toward the later stages of the study, Thomas felt that coach support did  
8 improve.

9       Recently I have been speaking to our U23’s manager more. Which has been  
10 good. He has been telling me what I need to do and what he thinks about me  
11 right now, and what the first team manager thinks about me right now. That  
12 was a little bit of a confidence booster.

13       Further, Thomas found one area of social support useful, his peers in the  
14 U23’s, “We speak in a group. That’s not really solving anything, that’s just getting  
15 your point out there with the 23’s in our changing room. They talk about their  
16 experiences and I talk about mine.” He expanded about the importance of this group.

17       There are a lot of us that are in the same boat. We can give each other  
18 encouragement and talk to each other about what we can do to get an  
19 opportunity, get better as a player, or stand out on loan.

20       While this peer group was helpful, Thomas wished for more support from  
21 senior players, “you can learn so much from the first team players as well, but it’s  
22 getting time to speak to them. Asking them questions and asking them what they did  
23 as a youngster. I think that would help.” However, he appreciated that perhaps he  
24 would need to take the lead; “I think it’s our job if we really want to go speak to

1 someone from the first team, we have to do it ourselves. I would say I probably  
2 haven't done that as much."

3 Oliver shared this difficulty.

4 Sometimes you feel like they are going to be like, go away. Why are you  
5 being so busy? I have to just get my nose in there sometimes. Often, you  
6 think that people are going to think, oh look at him being a busy body.

7 The value of senior player support was expressed by Charlie. "I think it's  
8 important that those players teach you what it's like to be in the first team dressing  
9 room. I think that just listening to them and picking up things that they say, and their  
10 ideas is really important." He continued with a similar idea from the academy phase,  
11 "when you get a chance, talk to someone that's in your position about things they do  
12 well and things that they need to improve on. I think that will help you improve your  
13 game." The U23 cup competition was again a helpful resource, "just listening and  
14 playing with them who have more experience it's important to being in and around  
15 the first team. You are getting more used to the environment on a match day." While  
16 all three players felt speaking with senior players was important, Charlie was the  
17 lone participant to report doing this regularly.

18 **Internal: Psychology/Mindset.** As the first team phase continued, important  
19 psychological coping strategies were discussed. For Charlie this meant, "just keeping  
20 the mindset that if you give 100%, you can't do any more, that's a really important  
21 mindset that I have thought about. I think other players need to think about that more  
22 often." This mindset remained unchanged throughout this phase, with him adding  
23 late in the study, "It's important that I know that I just need to keep doing my best,  
24 keep trying, keep trying to perform to the best that I can. That's all I can do really."

1           Oliver reflected late on in the study that all the challenges he was facing in  
2 the transition were a part of his development as a person and player.

3           I think I have learned to be resilient and I have learned for myself that I'm  
4 more resilient. I think I am mentally stronger than I thought I was. Through  
5 this, as I've said before, in terms of how much you do and how much you  
6 train, you are looked after a lot less. You are at the bottom of the pile, so you  
7 have to be strong in yourself and look after yourself a lot more.

8           Further to this he added in the final interview.

9           Some of those experiences have been good but some of them haven't been  
10 great. I've either had to decide for myself, am I going to let this get me  
11 down? Or am I going to rise above it and move on to the next?

12           Despite the frustrations and challenges, Thomas preached one key message  
13 throughout this phase.

14           I think being a young pro you have to wait your time and be patient. That's  
15 hard. Especially, when you want to do your best and everyone is pushing you  
16 to try to get that opportunity, but it doesn't come. You have to be so patient  
17 with it. That's a tough thing to handle. You just have to be patient and bide  
18 your time.

19           He continued, "What's the point in getting down? You go again, you play  
20 well, you train well throughout the week and play for your loan club. See what you  
21 can do there." Similar to the academy phase, Thomas mentioned his resilience, "I  
22 have been through ups and downs. I know how to deal with it now." During this  
23 period, he outlined his plan to keep moving forward.

24           You just have to improve yourself at every little thing, it's not big steps, it's  
25 just little steps, that's what I see. Little steps in the gym, little steps on the

1 pitch, little steps off the pitch. That's just my focus really, to improve myself  
2 as a person.

3 In the latter weeks he seemed to have a more relaxed perspective that allowed  
4 him to cope with the challenges he was facing. "I still have time on my contract and I  
5 still have people backing me to do well. I am happy with that." In the final interview  
6 he reflected on his time in the academy compared to the challenges he was currently  
7 facing.

8 In the academy you don't go through any of that, it's all very comfortable.  
9 It's easy and you aren't worried about anything, everything is simple. You  
10 play a game on a Saturday and that's it, it's not like life and death.

### **Discussion**

11 The purpose of the current study was to explore the evolving perspectives of  
12 young players experiences going through the junior to senior transition in  
13 professional football. The innovative video diary approach enhanced the depth of our  
14 understanding about the academy to first team transition, specifically providing  
15 unique contributions to the literature in the areas of contract decisions; adaptation to  
16 senior competition; barriers to transition without early success; and social aspects of  
17 the transition. Moreover, the weekly approach to data collection and analysis allowed  
18 a clear progression of the experience to be documented.

19 The transition was initially marked by the pressure to earn the professional  
20 contract, a key milestone within the junior-to-senior transition and a necessity for the  
21 transition to continue (Drew et al., 2019). The early contract decisions allowed  
22 players to begin preparing for life in the first team and focus on their adaptation to  
23 men's football. The first team phase began with the excitement of preseason,  
24 including opportunity in first team friendlies, however loan moves quickly shifted

1 the dynamic of this phase. Throughout this phase, players were required to adjust to  
2 training demands and a new social dynamic while learning new avenues of formal  
3 and informal support from the organization. Being on loan combined with limited  
4 opportunity to impress in training at their home club created frustration and led to  
5 difficulties in establishing an identity within the first team. Each player relied heavily  
6 on personal support networks and their own mindset to cope during this period, as  
7 there was limited formal support provided (see Table 5 for themes). Over time these  
8 challenges were accepted as part of the process, and players focused on continuing to  
9 work toward their goals.

10         Adapting to senior competition after ten years of youth football was  
11 identified early in the academy phase as a priority for all three participants (Morris et  
12 al., 2016a). Yet, apart from handling increased mental and physical demands (Morris  
13 et al., 2016b), there has been limited enquiry into what players specifically need to  
14 adapt *to*. As found in previous research, all three participants initially perceived the  
15 physical demands of senior competition to be a challenge (e.g., Morris et al., 2016a;  
16 Stambulova et al., 2017). However, this was superseded by difficulties in adapting to  
17 a different style of play and the subsequent decision-making demands while being on  
18 loan. Time spent on loan and training with the first team helped provide learning  
19 opportunities for senior football decisions. Decision making was also crucial, in the  
20 short term, to get out of physical battles that would be lost as a younger player.

21         The focus on the specifics of the adaptation pathways – being on loan and  
22 playing with the U23s – was another novel element of the current study. While these  
23 pathways are common practice in European football clubs, they have received  
24 limited focus in the available literature (see Røynesdal et al., 2018). Participants  
25 reported that both provided valuable learning experiences that were not available

1 during their time in the academy. The loan system was the primary method of  
2 adapting to the physicality, decision making, and style of play demands of senior  
3 football, as well as the distinct focus on winning matches. Participants felt that the  
4 focus on winning meant that it was no longer acceptable to take unnecessary risks or  
5 play in a way that was previously commended in the academy setting (e.g.,  
6 Røynesdal et al., 2018). There was pressure to accumulate good match statistics at  
7 their loan clubs to show they were impacting games at the senior level and so earn  
8 the trust of their club's senior coaches, something that has been reported previously  
9 by ice hockey players (Bruner et al., 2008). While loan moves seem to provide an  
10 excellent learning opportunity, they need careful managing if playing time is limited,  
11 as was the case for Thomas (see also Røynesdal et al., 2018).

12         The second pathway – playing for and training at the club with the U23's –  
13 also provided additional, context specific learning opportunities, as they replicated  
14 first team style and tactics. It also provided the opportunity to impress first team staff  
15 (who coached the U23s) and more experienced first team players (who made up the  
16 majority of the U23 match squad) directly. This was not always possible in training  
17 with the first team squad, as the focus was on preparing the match day squad for  
18 upcoming games. The experiences of being in the changing room with first team  
19 players, in first team stadiums, were reported to be valuable to their adaption and  
20 motivation.

21         The next major finding in the current study was the challenges caused  
22 because of the lack of opportunity in the first team. This lack of opportunity has been  
23 previously reported as a major barrier to successful transitions (Drew et al., 2019),  
24 though, the current study provides the first description of how players experience,  
25 and learn to cope, with this barrier over the first few months of their transition.



1 Several specific examples were discussed including: motivation and confidence  
2 issues; lack of identity with the first team squad; and lack of organizational support.  
3 The difficulties with motivation and confidence were discussed throughout the first  
4 team phase. Despite not having an opportunity to impress within the first team  
5 environment, Charlie and Oliver discussed their loans as a way of maintaining  
6 confidence with regular playing time (cf. Bruner et al., 2008; Drew et al., 2019).  
7 Without this outlet of playing time on loan, Thomas described feelings of frustration  
8 and loneliness.

9         The use of loan moves as an outlet appears to be a critical organizational  
10 strategy for facilitating transitions, especially when it is known there will be a lack of  
11 opportunity in the home club (e.g., Pehrson et al., 2017; Drew et al., 2019). Drew et  
12 al. (2019) also suggest the importance of organization culture in transitions, as the  
13 perception of opportunity can have a large impact on motivation. It is important to  
14 note that the club in question has a reputation for providing youth players with  
15 opportunity in the first team, though rarely in the first year. At the end of the study  
16 the participants were no closer to having such a role (e.g., Morris et al., 2015;  
17 Pehrson et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017), and in this example it appears that  
18 general adaptation to senior football was prioritized over integration within the first  
19 team environment. The impact that this prioritization has on the long- term transition  
20 is unclear, but initial negative perceptions were clearly reported, including being  
21 demoralized, feeling ignored, and not being supported (see also Morris et al., 2016b).

22         One key strength of the longitudinal nature of the study was that it was  
23 possible to see how participants' experiences changed over time. Following an initial  
24 period of excitement, there was a period of frustration, caused by a lack of  
25 involvement in first team training and limited information about what the plan for

1 their development might be. Toward the end of the study period, there was a degree  
2 of acceptance; a recognition that patience was important; and reflections on the  
3 benefits of the challenging period. Indeed, all three participants reported how the  
4 challenges they faced helped make them more “resilient” and tougher, characteristics  
5 they knew would be important as they progressed in their careers. Future research  
6 should further explore the role of informal peer support (e.g., with colleagues in the  
7 U23s), as it appears as though this might be one way in which players can gain  
8 perspective through the sharing of similar stories. Toward the end of the study  
9 period, all three participants reported that, despite the challenges, they recognized the  
10 importance of patience and giving their best, which would lead to opportunity over  
11 time. This view could potentially be attributed to the culture of the club that  
12 opportunities would become available for young players.

13         While the informal peer support might have helped the participants gain a  
14 sense of camaraderie (they were not alone in feeling frustrated), they did also desire  
15 more formal support from the organization. Unfortunately, these formal structures  
16 were not readily available (cf. Morris et al., 2015), and Oliver especially felt that he  
17 could not approach coaches with his problems as this might be perceived as  
18 weakness (Morris et al., 2016b). Charlie was the only participant open to seeking  
19 support himself, and comparatively his narrative detailed less challenges, which may  
20 be a result of his willingness to seek support (Morris et al., 2016b; Drew et al.,  
21 2019). A primary resource for players in the literature has been sport science staff,  
22 who provide emotional and informational support about the transition (Morris et al.,  
23 2015, 2016a,b). In the current context, the first team had fewer staff members in  
24 these roles, especially when compared to the academy, which likely exacerbated the  
25 perceived gap in support during the transition.

1           The final major finding of this study was the enhanced understanding of the  
2 social aspects of the academy to first team transition. The competitive environment  
3 for places on the match day team was perceived as an obstacle to developing  
4 relationships with senior players (Røynesdal et al., 2018), which in turn was related  
5 to a circular effect on perceived performance for the participants. There was a belief  
6 that being comfortable with senior players was an important precursor to  
7 performance on the pitch (Morris et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2017), and at the  
8 same time performance on the pitch would help in being accepted within the senior  
9 team (e.g., Røynesdal et al., 2018). The concept of social competence, believed to be  
10 an important psychological predictor of transition success (Drew et al., 2019) may  
11 help individuals build relationships despite the competitive environment. The two  
12 participants who believed the transition would come with social challenges struggled  
13 to build relationships with senior players, while Charlie, who believed he could  
14 speak to anyone, was able to.

15           The important learning from these data for organizations is that simply  
16 providing the opportunity for young players to be around senior players is not  
17 sufficient for developing relationships (see Larsen et al., 2014). Without an explicit  
18 mentor system in place (see Pummell and Lavalley, 2018), there is a greater  
19 emphasis on the social skills of each individual (e.g., Drew et al., 2019) and the  
20 strength of their own emotional support systems (family, friends, and significant  
21 others; e.g., Morris et al., 2016a,b; Pehrson et al., 2017; Drew et al., 2019). One  
22 further support network that grew organically in the club was the U23's group which  
23 was particularly important for Thomas. A better understanding of how the dynamic  
24 balance of these systems supports successful transitions should be a priority for  
25 future research.

### Applied Implications

1           From an applied perspective, the current study outlines the impact of early  
2 contract decisions when comparing the two groups of participants (see Appendix 3).  
3 The early contracts allowed a specific period of preparation with reduced stress and  
4 pressure to perform. Organizations should be aware of the timing of contracts, when  
5 possible, to provide enhanced preparation periods for their players. Further, the  
6 adaptation pathways provide important choices for organizations to make in how to  
7 best aid adaptation to senior football in general and the specific context of the home  
8 club. In this regard, loans benefited the players' perceptions of adaptation and  
9 provided learning opportunities not present in the academy setting (cf. Røyndal et  
10 al., 2018).

11           Organizations should also seek to understand the experience of players in  
12 their context, allowing them to make more informed decisions while balancing  
13 intended and unintended consequences. For example, there may be benefits in  
14 withholding support if this helps draw out (or reveal) important psychological  
15 characteristics such as resilience (Gledhill et al., 2017). However, providing general  
16 support as called for by Oliver and Thomas (e.g., a non-coach staff member to talk  
17 with) or from targeted support (e.g., a buddy system to help players build  
18 relationships with senior players) may increase the likelihood that the transition is  
19 successful (Larsen et al., 2014; Pummell and Lavalley, 2018). Avenues of support  
20 should be evaluated within organizations and an awareness of players' views on the  
21 ability to seek support. Education in the preparation phase might signpost support  
22 pathways for players both internally and externally (Morris et al., 2015).

23           Specific to the academy system and preparation phase, psychosocial  
24 development should be seen as a priority. The development of psychosocial skills

1 can aid in coping with the demands and significant changes that occur during this  
2 transition (Stambulova et al., 2020), and in other life domains such as, education,  
3 relationships, and future vocation. All three players in this instance discussed  
4 specific psychological skills that aided their development and that were used in  
5 handling adversity. Social skills should not be overlooked in this process and  
6 developing opportunities for interaction between academy and first team players  
7 could aid in bridging the gap in transition (Larsen et al., 2014).

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

8       This innovative approach to longitudinal research creates opportunities for  
9 future researchers to employ similar methods. The video diaries helped drive the  
10 collection of a large amount of data with relevantly low amount of time and effort  
11 when compared with semi structured interviews. They also allowed flexibility for the  
12 participant to complete in their own time what they were most comfortable to share.  
13 Weekly data collection allowed enough time to pass for participants to reflect while  
14 also providing data in real time, adding nuance to the collected data. As key events  
15 were happening during the data collection, participants were able to share their  
16 experience “in the moment” providing accounts of their beliefs and the changes over  
17 time. Finally, participants discussed with the lead researcher that the video diaries  
18 helped provide them with another outlet, creating an additional support source.

19       Several limitations were present in the current study, which means that the  
20 results, while novel, should be interpreted with caution. First, the reduced pre-  
21 contract period for three of the participants created a strong disconnect between them  
22 and the other three participants during the academy phase of the project. While the  
23 timing of contract awards cannot be predicted, this was not common practice in the  
24 club and drastically changed the experience that was anticipated by the research

1 group. While dropout was expected, the fact that none of the three participants who  
2 received late decisions were successful, meant that we could not compare differences  
3 in preparedness for the first team phase within the group. Finally, the organizational  
4 context and the specific experiences of this group are critical factors underpinning  
5 the transition, and therefore these will be different in each organization. Future  
6 research should look to understand the context of their specific organization and  
7 examine similarities with, and differences to the findings of the current study.

8         A methodological aim of this study was to use a novel combination of data  
9 collection methods to uncover the experience of those transitioning. Currently, our  
10 understanding is limited by the reliance on single time point interviews or focus  
11 groups (26 of 27 studies in a recent review by Drew et al., 2019). While semi-  
12 structured interviews are staples of qualitative inquiry, especially in sport (Smith,  
13 2010), our experience found that video diaries were easy to implement for both  
14 researcher and participant. We encourage future researchers to investigate the use of  
15 video diaries, audio diaries, or journals, as methods to examine the *process* of the  
16 transition.

17         This longitudinal exploration illuminated novel details of the transition  
18 experience – especially with regards the unfolding and changing nature of the  
19 challenges and successes of players as they live this experience yet leaves much still  
20 unexplored. Future research should look to explore areas beyond the scope of the  
21 current study including the challenges that exist as the transition further develops and  
22 players attempt to adjust to the first team squad. Different issues, including those  
23 related to social dynamics, are likely to become pertinent as players are brought back  
24 from loan and are fighting for their opportunity in their home club. Collecting data  
25 on individual transitions across a greater time span comes with challenges of cost

1 and feasibility but could greatly enhance our knowledge of the unfolding ups and  
2 downs inherent in the transition.

### **Conclusion**

3       The current study explored the evolving experiences of young players over  
4 40 weeks as they navigated the junior to senior transition in professional football.  
5 The use of weekly video diaries allowed us to better understand the individual highs  
6 and lows encountered as they adapted to life as professional footballers. Of particular  
7 interest was the head start in preparation due to early contract decisions, a period that  
8 each individual used differently to further their readiness for the full time move to  
9 the first team. Upon that move, differences were reported in how the players adapted  
10 to the frustrations inherent in receiving limited opportunity to establish themselves  
11 on and off the pitch within the first team. While there was no resolution to the source  
12 of frustration by the end of the study, the players had developed coping strategies  
13 that enabled them to perceive these frustrations as being transient, if they continued  
14 to work hard and develop their game. While we have no way of knowing if these  
15 players will be successful, or which specific combination of factors would predict  
16 their ongoing success we have provided enhanced detail to the specific demands  
17 during this transition and how individuals seek to cope with those challenges. The  
18 current study provides a launch pad for future studies to adopt similar longitudinal  
19 methods that further explore the unfolding experiences of players as they make their  
20 way as professional footballers in a way that is free from the bias of retrospective  
21 recall.

### **Study One in Relation to Thesis and Study Two**

#### ***Contribution to Thesis***

Study one was the largest undertaking of the PhD with an aim to provide a detailed, longitudinal investigation of players during the transition. During this relatively short period of time a number of up's and down's were encountered due to the vast changes encountered. Individual differences were found and reported that highlight the importance, that even within the same environment, no transition is the same. Thinking of the complexity of a player's career that could include injury, changing clubs, coach changes, among a number of other factors, it is essential that young players are looked after during this transition period.

#### ***Contribution to Study Two***

It became clear towards the end of this study that much was still to uncover about the overall transition. None of the participants had settled into the first team which provided further evidence of the long-term nature of this process. Due to time constraints of the PhD, we moved towards a cross-sectional approach that would help us understanding the challenges at varying phases of the players careers. The aim of the next chapter was to pick up where we left off while also deepening our understanding of the overall junior-to-senior transition.



## **Chapter 5: Study 2**

Swainston, S. C., Wilson M. R., & Jones M. I. (2022) “It’s all about opportunity”:

From professional contract to first team regular. *Journal of Applied Sport*

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**"It's All About Opportunity": From Professional Contract to First-Team****Regular****Abstract**

1 The purpose of this study was to explore the junior to senior transition from  
2 professional contract to an established first-team player in an English men's  
3 professional football team. Six players were purposively sampled across four  
4 suggested phases of transition: preparation; orientation; adaptation; and stabilization.  
5 A series of three interviews explored their past and current experiences, as well as  
6 their future ambitions. Eight higher-order themes were developed using thematic  
7 analysis: performance culture; opportunity; organizational strategy; contracts;  
8 relationships; motivation; power dynamics; and dual career. Several general  
9 adaptation factors found in previous research were present, along with four unique  
10 findings. The current study sets the opportunity to play within the first team as the  
11 primary factor in career progression. Without the opportunity, a "gray period"  
12 develops when a player is in an undefined phase without specific goals. This  
13 complex transition is further complicated by the short-term nature of contracts,  
14 which influences motivation and the ability to see the big picture. Throughout the  
15 transition, receiving support from key stakeholders was challenged by their role as  
16 gate-keepers of playing time and future contracts. Organizations should seek to  
17 manage transitions through a hands-on approach, providing the necessary support  
18 throughout the gray period, while being aware of the limitations of support from  
19 those with power over opportunity. Future research should look to explore the  
20 suggested gray period and the challenges that develop without continual opportunity.

21 *Lay summary:* Professional football players at different stages in their career  
22 discussed the challenges experienced in their journey to becoming a regular first-

1 team player. Those players that were not getting the opportunity to play felt isolated  
2 and unable to discuss their concerns. Implications for football clubs managing this  
3 transition are discussed.

4 *Implications for practice:* Providing opportunity in the senior while managing  
5 players with no opportunity. Availability and awareness of supports systems outside  
6 of decision makers.

### **Introduction**

7         Researchers have pointed to the junior-to-senior transition as the most  
8 challenging career stage in sport (Drew et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2009), and  
9 English professional football (soccer) specifically (Mitchell et al., 2020). These  
10 challenges are further supported by the England manager criticizing the low number  
11 of minutes played by English players in the Premier League (Morgan, 2019), and a  
12 growing number of players moving abroad to seek opportunities in first-team  
13 football (Lawrence, 2019). Although these trends exist, football clubs spend millions  
14 of pounds on youth academies in the hopes of producing players for the first team  
15 (Morris et al., 2015; Relvas et al., 2010). Producing homegrown players is necessary  
16 to comply with the English Football League (EFL) rules and in continental  
17 competitions in Europe (Relvas et al., 2010). Furthermore, for clubs in the EFL  
18 selling academy-developed players is a significant revenue source, allowing  
19 reinvestment of resources (Morris et al., 2015).

20         Research attention on the junior-to-senior transition has grown in the last five  
21 years (Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2015; Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016;  
22 Morris, Tod, et al., 2016; Swainston et al., 2020). This research has typically focused  
23 on the immediate move from academy player (U18) to the first-team environment  
24 (e.g., Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016). However, the typical transition pathway in

1 professional football is rarely a jump straight into the first team matchday squad.  
2 Indeed, when the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) was developed in 2012, an  
3 U23 Premier League was developed with the aim of bridging the gap between the  
4 academy and the first team (EPPP, 2010). Furthermore, the transition does not stop  
5 upon that first experience, and therefore, Swainston et al. (2020) recommended  
6 exploring how the transition develops past the initial common experience of contract  
7 award. A longitudinal exploration of career progression in the junior-to-senior  
8 transition in professional sport is limited, although Stambulova et al. have recently  
9 developed an empirical model applied to semiprofessional ice hockey (Pehrson et al.,  
10 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017).

11         The empirical model (Pehrson et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017) was  
12 developed as an extension of the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003),  
13 incorporating elements of the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman & Lavallee,  
14 2004). The initial athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003) was used to  
15 outline the demands, barriers, resources, and coping strategies for each phase of the  
16 transition. The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) further  
17 considered the development of the players outside of their sport and how these  
18 experiences might influence the overall transition (Stambulova et al., 2017). The  
19 ensuing empirical model describes four phases: preparation; orientation; adaptation;  
20 and stabilization, that were initially proposed to occur over four competitive seasons.

21         The preparation phase occurs before the full-time move to the senior  
22 environment beginning with the first experience in the senior team (Stambulova et  
23 al., 2017). During this phase, athletes seek to become part of the senior team and  
24 learn the requirements for senior sport (Pehrson et al., 2017). These outcomes are  
25 developed through the opportunity to train with the senior squad before the full-time

1 transition (Morris et al., 2015; Swainston et al., 2020), via a process that seeks to  
2 reduce the perceived gap between junior and senior competition (Pehrson et al.,  
3 2017). Researchers have called for interventions aimed at reducing this gap by  
4 developing knowledge of the transition itself, educating players and parents, and  
5 using mentors to improve awareness of the demands (Drew et al., 2019; Morris et al.,  
6 2015). Although this remains an underdeveloped area of the literature, athletes who  
7 have received such a focused intervention have reported an enhanced knowledge of  
8 the transition and the development of coping skills (Pummell & Lavallee, 2019).

9         As players transition to the senior environment full time, during the  
10 orientation phase, they look to find their role in the team and understand the  
11 requirements of senior competition (Pehrson et al., 2017). Fitting into the new senior  
12 environment comes with challenges such as a harsher, more competitive dynamic  
13 (Røynesdal et al., 2018; Swainston et al., 2020), and a contrast from the development  
14 centered approach often taken in youth sport (Drew et al., 2019; Morris, Tod, et al.,  
15 2016). Relationships with senior players are valuable for learning via mentoring  
16 during this phase (Morris, Tod, et al., 2016; Swainston et al., 2020) yet these same  
17 players are also seen as rivals for playing time (Røynesdal et al., 2018).

18 Simultaneous to adjusting to the new environment, athletes need to adapt to the  
19 increased standard in training and competition (Morris, Tod, et al., 2016; Swainston  
20 et al., 2020). This adaptation requires physical development (Morris et al., 2015),  
21 tactical adjustments (Pehrson et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020), and psychological  
22 skills (Morris, Tod, et al., 2016; Swainston et al., 2020). Showing progress in these  
23 areas is critical in earning the trust of management, a key factor when progressing in  
24 the transition (Pehrson et al., 2017; Røynesdal et al., 2018).

1           Once players have settled into the first-team environment, they enter the  
2 adaptation phase where they try to establish themselves in the team and gain  
3 experience of senior competition (Pehrson et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017). To  
4 gain experience, it is necessary to understand and fulfill what coaches require from  
5 senior players (Røynesdal et al., 2018). In football, this might mean going on loan to  
6 gain experience and prove you can manage the increased demands (Røynesdal et al.,  
7 2018; Swainston et al., 2020). Although earning the initial opportunity is a  
8 significant challenge, it is just the beginning of a process of establishing oneself in  
9 the senior team (Morris et al., 2015). Once they have fully established themselves in  
10 the senior team, players reach the stabilization phase. At this point, they look to  
11 perform consistently, take more responsibility in the group and team including  
12 evolving to leadership roles, and potentially look to further their career at a new level  
13 (Pehrson et al., 2017).

14           As this transition pathway is highly cultural and sport-specific, an  
15 investigation is required in contexts other than Swedish ice hockey (Stambulova et  
16 al., 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the junior-to-senior  
17 transition from professional contract to an established first-team player in an English  
18 men's professional football team. Specifically, the primary research question is,  
19 "what do players experience at different stages of the junior to senior transition in  
20 professional football?" The secondary question is, "what are the major checkpoints  
21 (points of change) in the transition from professional contract to first-team regular?"  
22 As the existing research base has focused on the immediate transition period (e.g.,  
23 Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016; Swainston et al., 2020) this study answers the call for  
24 a broader exploration of the challenges and experience across the entire transition.  
25 Furthermore, previous research has been heavily reliant on recall interviews of

1 successful or unsuccessful transitions. In contrast, this study seeks to explore  
2 participants' experiences in varying phases of the transition.

### Methods

3 Establishing rigor in qualitative work is essential to ensuring research  
4 integrity, yet how one engages with rigor is a highly debated process (Morse, 2020;  
5 Smith & McGannon, 2018). Rigor, in this study, began with the research team  
6 engaging in an armchair walkthrough as developed by Mayan (2009). At the outset  
7 of the study, the research team discussed and aligned our research question to our  
8 epistemological and ontological approach, methodology, data collection technique,  
9 and method of data analysis. This approach ensured methodological coherence and  
10 transparency of our methodological choices, in turn enhancing rigor and credibility  
11 (Mayan, 2009). Furthermore, credibility was established as the lead researcher was  
12 embedded in the club as the academy sport psychologist as part of a dual funded PhD  
13 and therefore a naturalistic approach was most appropriate. The naturalistic approach  
14 was guided by our ontological position of relativism, in which we assume multiple  
15 realities and multiple truths to the phenomena in question, and the epistemological  
16 approach of subjectivism, where knowledge is developed through subjective  
17 experience, and socially constructed (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Our method, qualitative  
18 description, was chosen in line with these positions (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). Data  
19 were collected using multiple semi-structured interviews, analyzed using thematic  
20 analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and then presented thematically. Finally, we  
21 engaged with rigor through our goal of contributing to open science by providing  
22 access to our coding framework, interview guides, and theme development through  
23 the open science framework (<https://osf.io/6mjr/h>) to allow the reader to further  
24 interrogate this process (Tamminen & Poucher, 2018).

## 1 **Qualitative Description**

2           Qualitative description was developed from a naturalistic approach, whereby  
3 a phenomenon is studied in its natural context (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). In line  
4 with our qualitative description methodology, we attempted to allow the phenomena  
5 to emerge as if it were not under study (Sandelowski, 2000), using participants “in  
6 the midst” of the experience (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). Furthermore, using an  
7 interviewer who was embedded at the club allowed for this subjective experience to  
8 be understood and described. Our goal was then to present the data in the voice of  
9 the participants with limited interpretation (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski,  
10 2000). The simplistic, yet rich nature of the description should aid the data being  
11 used directly in an applied set- ting (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Sullivan-Bolyai et al.,  
12 2005).

## 13 **Participants and Sampling**

14           Stambulova’s empirical model (2017) was used as a sampling tool to recruit  
15 participants across the proposed phases of transition. This sampling technique  
16 allowed for a rich collection of experience during the transition, helping to identify  
17 key “checkpoints.” As both the first and second author were embedded within the  
18 football club (as academy and first team psychologist respectively), the research  
19 team identified players that aligned with the suggested phases. Participants were  
20 invited if they had a professional contract and spent at least three years in the club’s  
21 academy. Furthermore, criteria were developed to fit each phase of transition: (1)  
22 U18 players with professional contracts yet to make the full-time transition, (2)  
23 players in their first year as a professional, (3) second to fourth-year professionals  
24 without having an established place in the first team, and (4) newly established  
25 members of the first team. Three players were identified for the preparation and



1 orientation phases, with one from each phase electing not to participate. Two players  
 2 were identified for the adaptation phase; however, one player left the club following  
 3 the participant recruitment stage, resulting in only one available participant. Only  
 4 one participant was identified and participated in the stabilization phase (see Table  
 5 6). Players were ensured that participation or nonparticipation would not affect their  
 6 standing within the football club, and only the research team would see all non-  
 7 anonymized data.

8 Table 5: Participants' (not their real names) demographic information.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years in academy</i>	<i>Years in the first team</i>	<i>First team appearances</i>	<i>Phase of transition</i>
Sam	17	10	0	1	Preparation
Ryan	17	9	0	0	Preparation
Lewis	19	8	1	1	Orientation
Tyler	19	9	1	3	Orientation
Daniel	22	10	4	57	Adaptation
Jake	23	10	5	127	Stabilization

9

## 10 **Data Collection and Analysis**

11 Following ethical approval from the researchers' institutional ethics committee,  
 12 the lead researcher contacted the eligible participants and briefed them about the  
 13 study, its aims, and what was required to participate. The series of three interviews  
 14 for each participant were done roughly within one month of each other based on their  
 15 availability during the season. All 18 interviews were completed over four months.

16 The research team developed unique interview guides for each phase and  
 17 participant based on a basic understanding of the player's career and previous junior-  
 18 to-senior transitions research (e.g., Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016; Stambulova et al.,

1 2017). To further develop the interview guides a pilot interview was conducted with  
2 a former player at the club who had experienced the transition. The first interview  
3 focused primarily on the participant's career up to the current date, including their  
4 time in the academy and earning a professional contract. Probing questions were  
5 used to explore their views of their career, including specific challenges and  
6 opportunities in different phases of their transition. Using an iterative process of data  
7 collection and analysis, the first interview was transcribed verbatim, and a guide was  
8 created for the second interview. Allowing time between interviews for analysis is  
9 suggested to strengthen the quality of the data throughout the entire data collection  
10 process (Jones & Harwood, 2008).

11 The second interview began with each participant having the opportunity to  
12 discuss what they felt relevant from the first interview. It also included specific  
13 questions and quotations from the first interview to enable the participant to revisit  
14 and expand upon critical events and interpretation of the data. The interview then  
15 moved on to discuss their current phase of transition. Following the interview, it was  
16 transcribed verbatim, and the third interview guide was created. The same process  
17 was followed for the third interview with the latter part focused on how they viewed  
18 the future phases of transition (see Table 7 for interview lengths).

19 A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using the phases set out by  
20 Braun and Clarke (2006). This method of analysis was deemed appropriate for a  
21 qualitative description, as described by Sandelowski (2010). The first two phases of  
22 thematic analysis were completed iteratively between interviews. Following the final  
23 interview, coding was completed, and the lead researcher sorted the codes into  
24 potential themes. The research team then discussed the possible themes that were  
25 developed. Engaging the research team, in particular the third author who is a

1 qualitative expert, helped drive rigor through a consistent focus on developing  
 2 specific criteria for each theme. These themes were then checked against the coding  
 3 by the lead researcher. The research team then refined the themes to accurately  
 4 reflect the coding and were true to the data set. Finally, the raw themes were sorted  
 5 into lower-order themes and then higher-order themes.

6 Table 7: The duration of the three interviews for each participant.

Name	Sam	Ryan	Lewis	Tyler	Daniel	Jake
Interview 1	51.12	51.35	61.19	58.03	53.04	85.57
Interview 2	52.13	55.23	71.53	78.57	53.45	75.34
Interview 3	43.49	59.43	57.17	65.10	57.28	58.08

## 7 Data Representation

8 In a qualitative description, the presentation of results should remain close to  
 9 the data, giving voice to the participants' experiences using their language  
 10 (Neergaard et al., 2009). To stay true to our participants' voices, several "British"  
 11 terms are used in our findings. A list of terms and definitions is provided in the  
 12 supplementary materials (see Appendix 4). The results can be presented in a way that  
 13 best represents the data (Sandelowski, 2000; Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005), whether  
 14 that be by prevalence, theme, or chronologically. Here we used Stambulova et al.  
 15 (2017); (Pehrson et al., 2017) empirical model, to present our themes by phase. This  
 16 allows the commonalities, differences, and progression to be presented together,  
 17 allowing for easier "generalizations" to be made by the reader.

## Results

18 The participants' experiences were analyzed, and eight higher order and 15  
 19 lower order themes were developed. The higher order themes were performance  
 20 culture, opportunity, organizational strategy, contracts, relationships, motivation,

1 power dynamics, and dual career (see Table 8). It is important to note that not all of  
2 these higher order themes are present in each phase but instead reflect the data set as  
3 a whole (including data presented in the supplementary materials. To provide as  
4 much focus as possible on our unique findings, some of the results (including  
5 participant quotations) have been moved to the supplementary materials (see  
6 Appendix 4).

### 7 **Preparation Phase**

8         At the core of this phase was an exposure to the first team helping them  
9 prepare for the future. Sam and Ryan were in this phase—academy players with  
10 professional contracts yet to join the first team—at the time of the interviews. The  
11 other four participants reflected upon their experiences in this phase as a part of the  
12 first interview.

### 13 *Organizational Strategy*

14         **U23 Group.** During the season that data collection occurred, the club created  
15 an U23 training session, once a week, for young pro's and U18 academy players.  
16 They also entered an U23 cup competition. This group was not a full team or  
17 separate squad but comprised of players in the academy, young pros, and senior  
18 players in need of game time. Sam, "It helped me prepare so when I did go over to  
19 the first team, I wasn't shocked by it." Adding, "That will help me get used to that  
20 environment of at least one step up. Hopefully, I can push on with the first team as  
21 well."

22

1 Table 8: Thematic analysis higher and lower order themes

<b>Themes</b>		<b>Phases</b>					2
<i>Higher</i>	<i>Lower</i>	<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Gray</i>	<i>Adaptation</i>	<i>Stabilization</i>	
<i>Opportunity in First Team</i>	<i>Playing time</i>	n/a (no playing time expected)	No playing time	No playing time for foreseeable future	n/a (begin to be included in squad and play)	n/a (regular playing time)	
	<i>Training</i>	Some opportunity – preparation	Limited opportunity after preseason	Continual limited opportunity	n/a (regular training)	n/a (regular training)	
<i>Performance Culture</i>	<i>Men's football</i>	Begin to adapt via U23 and First Team training	Adapt via U23 and loan moves	n/a (continue development)	n/a (prove you make a difference in men's matches)	n/a	
	<i>Training standard</i>	Learn about standard by training with First Team	Adjust to the daily training standard	n/a	n/a	n/a	
	<i>First Team environment</i>	Test and learn about the environment	1 year to adjust to the first team environment	n/a	n/a	n/a	
<i>Organizational Strategy</i>	<i>U23 context</i>	Preparation experiences	An outlet: learning & playing time	An outlet: learning & playing time	Opportunity to prove readiness for first team	n/a	
	<i>Loan moves</i>	n/a	Adaptation and playing time	Playing time	Lose playing time returning from loan	n/a	

<b>Themes</b>		<b>Phases</b>			<b>1</b>	
<i>Higher</i>	<i>Lower</i>	<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Gray</i>	<i>Adaptation</i>	<i>Stabilization</i>
<i>Relationships</i>	<i>Coach relationships</i>	Supportive in academy but see change coming	Professional relationships. Less support available	Limited support and learn to seek support yourself	Coach starts to come to you	They protect and support you as an asset to the First Team
	<i>Social dynamics</i>	Preparation helps meeting new teammates	Separate groups and challenges to fitting in	n/a	n/a	n/a
	<i>Teammate Support</i>	U23 context builds support from former teammates	Shared experience. Learn from senior players	Shared experience	Needed less and start to become support	Become support; leadership; connect w/ young pros
<i>Power Dynamics</i>	<i>Challenge to support</i>	Exists even in academy - pro contract or FT opportunity	Belief it could influence the transition and contracts	Belief it could influence the transition and contracts	Belief it could influence opportunity and contracts	Belief it could influence opportunity and contracts
<i>Contracts</i>	<i>Influence on transition</i>	Pressure after becoming a pro. Relax too much after achieving this goal	Short term focus with short term contract	Difficulty balancing short- and long-term goals with short term contracts.	Financial security	Contract dispute – financial and ambition to move higher
<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Changing motivation</i>	Maintain motivation despite early contract	Motivated to achieve next contract	Motivation as major challenge in this phase	Reinvigorated by being close to first team	Motivation challenge being a regular starter.

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<i>Dual Career</i>	<i>Education</i>	finish education	n/a (focused on football)	n/a (gap due to short term contract issue)	University	University	1
							2

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1 ***Relationships***

2 **Teammate Support.** Specifically, for Sam, the first-year pros who were his  
3 teammates in the U18 squad the previous year were a source of support. “It’s quite  
4 helpful if they tell you what they did and what happened. See what they do around  
5 the training ground. They have been there a year, so they know what’s going on.”

6 **Coach Support.** Sam, “I think the coaches are the main support you can get  
7 from the first team.” He also discussed the differences between academy coaches, “I  
8 think the academy coaches always try to look after you and see your best interests at  
9 heart,” whereas with the first team coach, “It doesn’t really matter what he thinks  
10 about you, he isn’t really going to care about how you feel, he just wants you to do  
11 the right job.” Adding, “It’s challenging because you don’t have that trust with them.  
12 You don’t know if you can speak to them about anything.”

13 ***Power Dynamics***

14 Trust, and the power dynamic between players and coaches, was a major  
15 complication to receiving support from coaching staff who were in charge of  
16 determining playing time and held influence over contract decisions. Ryan, “It is  
17 tough because you have to find different support in a way somewhere else, if that’s a  
18 teammate or something like that. That’s not ideal, it is tough.”

19 You don’t want it to help them jeopardize your role. If you say I’m not  
20 enjoying it and I don’t think I can give 100% right now or I don’t feel I’m  
21 playing my best. That might affect you, he might have a thought about not  
22 playing you. You don’t want to give anything that might make him hesitate to  
23 choose you. (Sam)

24 ***Contracts and Motivation***



1           In this phase, two higher-order themes were linked to the overall experience.  
2           Earning a long-term contract early while in the academy created a motivational  
3           challenge. Ryan, “It’s so easy to sit back. This is probably the easiest stage to waste  
4           this year.” Sam agreed.

5           It can be easy to sit off this season and not improve much because there is no  
6           pressure on me, other than to just try to play as many games as high as I can.  
7           I just have to try to flip that on its head and think what can I do now? How  
8           can I get ready for next year?

### 9           ***Dual Career***

10           Football was their primary focus, but they were also completing their  
11           education. Sam, “You still have your college stuff sorted and have the grades. Even  
12           though I probably could have done A-Levels. It won’t stop me from going back and  
13           doing Uni.”

14           I already have my B plan prepared. I know what I want to do. I know I  
15           always have something to fall back on. If you don’t have something to fall  
16           back on, you are putting so much pressure on football. (Ryan)

### 17           **Orientation Phase**

18           This phase began when players ended their two-year U18 scholarship and  
19           joined the first team full-time. Players learned about the new environment and  
20           adjusted to its demands. Ryan predicted what was to come when he made this move.  
21           “Next year will be one of the harder years. That’s when you have to almost start my  
22           life again and go figure things out.” Although Jake reflected, “I’d say the transition  
23           probably took the whole season. I remember coming back the second year and  
24           thinking yeah, ok, I know what it’s about now. I’m ready.”

### 25           ***Opportunity***

1           **Playing Time.** Moving into the first team came with the realization you were  
2 at the back of the line for playing time.

3           The frustration of the lack of opportunity or the realization that you are not  
4 there yet. Getting the contract, you might think, ok I'm really close. Then you  
5 get in first week of preseason and there are four players ahead of you in your  
6 position and you think, well, I'm nowhere near it. (Tyler)

7           **Training Opportunity.** Not only did the young pros not receive playing time  
8 early on, they were also left on the fringes of first team training.

9           You are only training with the first team group a few times a week. You are  
10 less prepared for that and sometimes you are feeling like you have the  
11 pressure on you then. You think the manager hasn't seen me train in a week  
12 and a half. You are thinking about everything that you do in front of him.  
13 (Tyler)

#### 14 ***Organizational Strategy***

15           **U23 Group/Loan Moves.** With playing time unavailable and the main focus  
16 on the match day squad, two outlets for their efforts were available: U23 group and  
17 loan moves. Jake didn't have this experience, but believed it was an important  
18 change. "Now they have the sessions for the U23s. They can have those sessions  
19 where they feel it's all about them. That's a positive for them." Lewis confirmed this,  
20 "(The U23 coach) can feed information and knowledge to us that has come from the  
21 manager. He can say 'this is what he is after.' Then in our sessions we can then work  
22 on that. That has been positive." At the same time players were sent on loan to gain  
23 experience and playing time.

24           It's quite helpful when you go out on loan. Even if you think the level is  
25 lower than the first team, you are still put in the same situations on the pitch

1           and you are making the same decisions in a real pressured environment  
2           instead of on the training pitch. (Tyler)

3           Not only did it help their development, but the playing time gave a sense of  
4 normalcy to the week. Tyler, “If I hadn’t been playing games at the weekend it  
5 would have been more difficult, I would have struggled more. At least you have that  
6 at the end of the week, you have a game to look forward to.”

### 7 *Relationships*

8           **Coach Support.** The change in coach relationships was noted by the players  
9 in this phase. Lewis, “it’s just a professional relationship. The only time we see each  
10 other and the only thing we talk about is football.” Tyler, “It seems very  
11 businesslike,” adding, “it doesn’t really seem as though they are taking an interest in  
12 what you are doing outside of turning up and training. All they care about is what  
13 you do in that hour and a half session.” One potential consequence of this perception  
14 was a reduced willingness to seek support.

15           I remember being a young lad, 18 or 19, and going into the manager, you  
16 didn’t really do that as a young person because you didn’t really have the  
17 right. You probably did, but you don’t feel that you do so you often don’t do  
18 that. (Daniel)

### 19 *Power Dynamics*

20 Similar to the preparation phase there was a strong feeling that support, particularly  
21 from the coaching staff, was not entirely possible.

22           They decide the team, they decide if you earn a contract at the end of the  
23 year. There are certain things you don’t want them to know. There are things  
24 that you feel if they did know, may affect your opportunities. (Lewis)

1           Anything you say to a coach, because they aren't only trying to help you  
2           improve, they are also making a decision on you as to whether you are ready  
3           or going to play. You are always going to think, what are they going to take  
4           from that? Not just how they can help you with it, but they are also going to  
5           think something else which might be this person doesn't have the right  
6           attributes. (Tyler)

### 7           ***Contracts***

8           The contracts for Sam and Ryan in the preparation phase were long term contracts,  
9           however that was not the case for Lewis and Tyler. Having short term contracts  
10          appeared to limit their focus on long-term development. Lewis, "I've not really  
11          thought of anything longer than (a few months) because I can think about that as  
12          much as I want but ultimately, I've got to get it right now." Tyler agreed.

13          It's just a year period you are constantly thinking about whether I am going to  
14          get the next one. Whether I am going to get anything afterwards. You spend  
15          more time worrying about that than on thinking about actually what is best  
16          for me in the long run.

17          He continued, "the fact that the contracts are yearly it misleads you to think that you  
18          have a year to break in or a year to impress."

19          It's hard to judge whether you are at the right point. Whereas if it is a two- or  
20          three-year contract you can say to yourself by the end of this I need to be in  
21          the first team or it's not worth me doing. (Tyler)

### 22          ***Dual Career***

23          For Tyler this was a part of his education choices during the scholarship, "I  
24          have my education to fall back on and maybe go down another route." Due to the  
25          short-term contracts, he had yet to continue his education.

1           With the uncertainty of the contract and whether I am going to be here next  
2           year. I think if I wasn't here, I would probably go to Uni. I don't want to be  
3           halfway through an Open University course and then think I'd like to go do  
4           this full time.

### 5   **Gray Period**

6           Reflected in the data was a separate phase that developed due to a prolonged  
7   lack of opportunity in the first team. Players had progressed past the orientation  
8   phase and were not yet adapting to the context of the first team. This phase was  
9   marked by the absence of a clear goal, apart from simply improving as a player.  
10   Previously, players had a goal of earning a pro contract and later of breaking into the  
11   first team, however during this phase there was no clear path into the first team for  
12   the foreseeable future, leaving them in this "gray period."

### 13   *Opportunity*

14           **Playing Time.** Playing time was not readily available early in their careers  
15   (i.e., orientation phase) and for Daniel in particular this continued for several years.  
16   Jake, in his time at the club, had seen this affect teammates.

17           I have seen a lot of players lose their heads at the fact that they come in and  
18           they don't play football for 6 months, 12 months. That's just part and parcel  
19           of the game and probably one of the hardest things.

20   Daniel agreed. "You think when you turn pro that all of a sudden you are going to  
21   play every single game, it's not like that at all, it's really difficult."

22           I thought coming through the academy and the scholarship I would be  
23           playing when I was 17, 18, 19 and it has taken me to when I was 21 to start  
24           really featuring and even now, I'm still not an out and out starter or of that  
25           pedigree. (Daniel)

1           **Training Opportunity.** A further challenge in this phase was the continued  
2 lack of opportunity in first team training with the focus on those playing in the first  
3 team to play the next match. Jake had seen this throughout his time in the first team.  
4 “They don’t get much attention. It’s all about what the first team is doing.”

5           There are times when the manager just wants to work on something for  
6 Saturday so it’s just—stand there and feed balls or stand there on the sideline  
7 and I’ll bring you on for 20 or 30minutes. Then they are stood their freezing  
8 cold for 20 minutes not doing anything and then expected to come on and  
9 perform. Then when you don’t—it’s well, that’s why you aren’t playing.

10 Over time this created obstacles to Tyler’s motivation:

11           You will improve with putting everything into the session and doing  
12 everything you have to, but you know that’s not going to change the fact that  
13 you aren’t playing. I would say there are points in this season where I have  
14 just got through sessions.

15 Jake recalled a similar experience:

16           You sometimes find yourself just getting through. In particular when there is  
17 no goal to aim towards. You are just getting by and getting through a session.  
18 There were mornings when I woke up when I was younger and just thought, I  
19 don’t want to go in today. I do not want to go in today. I’m just going to get  
20 abuse or there isn’t going to be anything there for me. It’s going to be  
21 rubbish, I don’t want to go in. I know for a fact there are youngsters now  
22 feeling the exact same thing. It’s hard, it’s very hard.

### 23 ***Organizational Strategy***

24           **Loan Moves.** During this phase players were still on loan, however, the loans  
25 did not always yield positive experiences. Daniel, “I thought it was going to be a bit

1 better than it was. I really wasn't enjoying it and I wasn't really playing. I couldn't  
2 really cope with not being picked to play."

3 Jake, both from his own experience and watching other young players,  
4 summarized the combination of lack of opportunity and the challenges of life on  
5 loan.

6 You come in as a first-year pro and you aren't playing. You are chucked out  
7 to some crap club and getting booted left, right and center. You can't play  
8 football, it's getting shelled and you get blokes trying to kick you, calling you  
9 every name under the sun. You are thinking Jesus Christ this is a shock. Not  
10 just that but you are sat there week in and week out thinking well I know I'm  
11 not going to play for the first team on the weekend, this is crap.

## 12 **Adaptation Phase**

13 Following the period marked by continued lack of opportunity (or having  
14 skipped that period altogether [Jake]) players fought for a place in the first team  
15 match day squad. Daniel was in this phase and had spent the two previous years  
16 without opportunity in the first team. Jake had previously been through this phase at  
17 different points in his career before establishing himself as a first team regular.

## 18 ***Organizational Strategy***

19 Loan moves. Daniel discussed his post loan period.

20 Coming back (from loan), he didn't want me to go out on loan again. I had  
21 come back and I'm not playing again. I asked, do you want me to go out on  
22 loan again? He said no, you are too close.

23 He continued, "I was a bit stuck in the middle."

24 I was thinking if he doesn't want me to go that must be a good thing. At the  
25 same time, I was thinking that's another week without a game or another

1 week traveling and not even being on the bench, not playing again. It was a  
2 tough time, but also at the same time it wasn't the worst time.

### 3 *Opportunity*

4 **Playing Time.** After that period of limited opportunity, it was important for  
5 Daniel to gain confidence in reserve fixtures and prove readiness for the first team. "I  
6 was doing better in reserve games, U23 games and I was really stamping my  
7 authority down." During this period his opportunity came, "making a few  
8 appearances was an achievement, a big thing for me to be involved on a Saturday on  
9 the bench or occasionally coming on." This changed his experience. "You feel  
10 almost happy that you are involved. You are with the team and you feel more a part  
11 of it compared with the early years where you aren't with it at all." Jake described a  
12 similar change after he featured for the first team.

13 I had the confidence that I could take a (shouting at) if I got it wrong, because  
14 I had been on the pitch and done it. Shown to everyone that I am good  
15 enough and shown to myself that I'm good enough to play.

### 16 *Relationships*

17 **Coach Support.** Returning from loan, and even previously, gaining  
18 information about your progress was important but required the player to take action.  
19 Daniel, "You have to become a man and speak to people." "You have to show them  
20 that you are interested and that you care about your career."

21 I remember around 20, I would start going in more and more to discuss  
22 things. I felt so much better for doing it. I had more of a clear, more often  
23 than not, I had much clearer head about what I had to do. (Daniel)

### 24 *Power Dynamics*



1           Later in their careers Daniel and Jake gave examples of how they sought  
2 support. In both instances they turned to psychologists knowing that those  
3 conversations would be kept confidential and not shared with stakeholders at the  
4 club. Daniel, “I honestly just think it’s people you can trust to talk to. That would be  
5 someone like (a psychologist), being completely in confidence. You know they  
6 aren’t going to say anything.”

7           I spoke to (psychologist) about it rather than just trying to figure it out myself  
8 or just keep it in my head and deal with it. I had a little bit of help with it and  
9 it was good after that. (Jake)

### 10 ***Contracts***

11           The older players had a different experience with contracts as they had earned  
12 several new contracts in their career. Daniel, “The older you get the more money you  
13 want to earn and the more comfortable you want to be. You want to be able to do  
14 things that you wouldn’t be able to do a couple years ago.”

### 15 ***Dual Career***

16 Senior players, perhaps being more settled, began university courses to advance their  
17 careers outside of football.

18           I’m doing a degree at the moment through The Open University. I started that  
19 three years ago. It’s probably one of the best things that I’ve done. I love  
20 football but coming back from training I don’t want to think about football.  
21 (Daniel)

### 22 ***Stabilization Phase***

23           Following the battle for places in the first team a player settles into the squad,  
24 becoming a regular player. In this case only Jake reached this phase in the previous

1 season. Here he dealt with no longer having competition for places and his ambition  
2 to move to a higher level.

### 3 *Motivation*

4 One key challenge in this phase was maintaining motivation now that Jake  
5 was assured a place in the team. “As much as you say you want goals from other  
6 people and you need that, you also have to be able to set your own goals and push  
7 yourself along.” “I don’t mean to but there are days when I have a bad session and I  
8 think it doesn’t really matter because I’m playing. I get annoyed because I don’t  
9 want that mindset.” His ambition to play in higher leagues became his motivation.

10 It’s then a battle with yourself to keep pushing yourself every day. Even  
11 though you are pretty sure you are going to play on a Saturday you have to  
12 push yourself to do better anyway. Because for me it’s not just doing well on  
13 a Saturday, it’s then to get to the next level, ready to step up.

### 14 *Power Dynamics*

15 Even in the late phases, and throughout his journey, Jake believed support  
16 was hard to come by within the club.

17 You are always thinking I can’t go now and say, I’m struggling with this and  
18 that or whatever. That could be used against you for contracts. You don’t  
19 want to go and look weak or like you are struggling. They could see that as a  
20 weakness and a reason to get rid of you. (Jake)

### 21 *Contracts*

22 Having earned several new contracts Jake felt he was now at an important  
23 point in his career.

24 You are here until you are 24 unless you are absolutely flying, and someone  
25 is going to pay a couple million for you. It is quite hard because you don’t get

1           that same respect. I think that's a big thing when you are a youth team player  
2           coming through you don't get the same respect as another and that's hard to  
3           take.

#### 4    ***Dual Career***

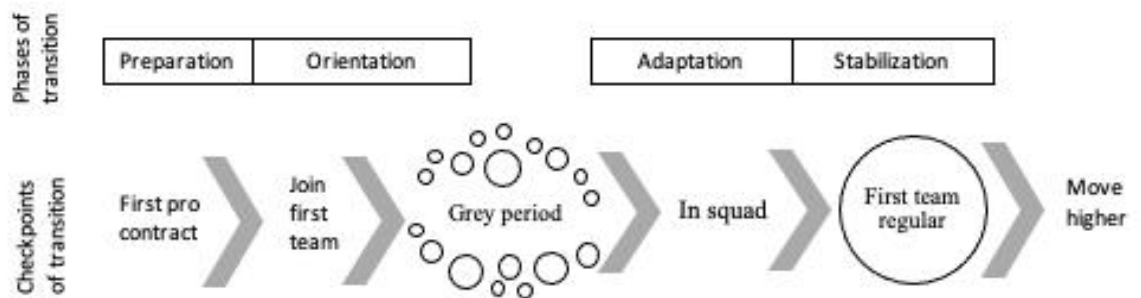
5           Much like Daniel, Jake believed it was important to continue his education.  
6           I'm doing a degree alongside things. I decided to take that up when I got  
7           injured. I thought at the end of the year that if I get an injury like that and I  
8           can't come back, I have to have something to fall back on. I did quite well  
9           and switched on in school, I thought I would do something like that. I have  
10          that off the pitch as a bit of a switch off. That's my switch off I would say  
11          doing that. (Jake)

#### **Discussion**

12          The purpose of this study was to explore the junior-to-senior transition from  
13          professional contract to an established first-team player. The selection of participants  
14          throughout the transition allowed for creating a general picture of the entire transition  
15          process. Furthermore, it allowed major checkpoints to be mapped based on the  
16          players' experience (see Figure 7). The first checkpoint was earning a professional  
17          contract and followed by the full-time move to the first team upon finishing their  
18          U18 scholarship. For Sam, Ryan, and Daniel, the full-time move would come  
19          roughly 18 months after their contract decision, although Lewis, Tyler, and Jake  
20          received contracts following completion of their U18 scholarship. A large gap then  
21          appeared as the next central point was earning a spot in the first-team squad. This  
22          checkpoint had not been reached by Sam, Ryan, Lewis, or Tyler. In Daniel's  
23          experience, this took three full seasons. Jake, however, was in the first-team squad in  
24          his first season, yet his journey was far from over as he was then in and out of the

1 squad throughout his second season and injured for his third season. The final  
 2 checkpoint, establishing yourself in the starting XI as a first-team regular, was only  
 3 achieved by Jake in his fifth season.

4 Figure 7: Visual representation of higher order themes, checkpoints, and Stambulova  
 5 et al. (2017) phases



6 Four unique contributions to the literature are discussed: the central role of  
 7 opportunity in career progression; the presence of a “gray period”; difficulties in  
 8 seeking support from coaches; and contracts’ influence across the transition. The first  
 9 significant finding was the central role of opportunity in the progression of the  
 10 transition. Previous researchers (Pehrson et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2017)  
 11 suggested four phases that players progressed through during the junior-to-senior  
 12 transition. Our study did show evidence of the four phases mentioned; preparation,  
 13 orientation, adaptation, and stabilization, however rather than timeframes as the  
 14 primary indicator of the length of the phases, our data suggested opportunity in the  
 15 first team as the main indicator of progression. Moving from preparation to the  
 16 orientation phase was the only natural progression without the necessity of  
 17 opportunity. Afterward, all four players who had made it to this point agreed there  
 18 was an adjustment period in the first season, as Jake specifically discussed (cf.  
 19 Pehrson et al., 2017).

1           Following this period, Daniel and Jake both dealt with long periods outside  
2 the first team. Pehrson et al. (2017) suggested the potential for a non-linear path  
3 where players move back and forth through the phases and mentioned playing time  
4 as a crucial development opportunity. Yet, they did not discuss how the absence of  
5 playing time could challenge a transition's success (cf. Mitchell et al., 2020). Our  
6 participants' experiences suggested that once you graduate from one phase you do  
7 not return to the previous phase again, but rather you are somewhat stuck 'out of  
8 phase.' For example, once a player orientated to the first team, they would not return  
9 to reorientate should they not be progressing in the transition. At the end of their first  
10 year and contracted for half of the next season, Lewis and Tyler were aware they  
11 would again be on loan and without first-team opportunity. They would not reenter  
12 the orientation phase nor progress to adapting to the first team, instead they enter a  
13 gray period without specific goals. Equally, it can be hypothesized that early,  
14 consistent opportunity in the first team could eliminate phases of the transition all  
15 together. Furthermore, as evidenced by Jake's story, a player might progress through  
16 all phases, only to have opportunity removed due to injury or being replaced by a  
17 new player and therefore be out of phase.

18           The second major finding is the presence of a gray period, defined as a period  
19 without a clear short-midterm goal. There were two clear goals in the players'  
20 careers: first, earn a pro contract, and then to play for the first team. As our players'  
21 experiences reveal, it was expected that playing for the first team was rare in the first  
22 few years, and without that playing time, the broader experience changed. For  
23 example, Daniel spent two seasons on loan before returning to remain without  
24 opportunity in his third season. This long period without opportunity created  
25 challenges to motivation and confidence without the typical reward of playing

1 matches for the main squad as detailed in his experience (and that by Tyler and  
2 Lewis). One potential explanation for the ‘grey period’ is the growing business  
3 landscape of football alongside the social and cultural influences of talent  
4 development. A greater emphasis on homegrown players due to league rules and the  
5 potential financial benefits in terms of player sales, and reduced spending on players  
6 bought, could see clubs retaining homegrown players longer during transition (see  
7 Reeves & Roberts, 2023). Understanding the cultural context should be seen as  
8 paramount to understanding this period or how it might emerge differently in other  
9 contexts and how to best manage transitions successfully (see Vaughan et al., 2022).  
10 Such challenges have been seen as barriers to transitions without early success (Drew  
11 et al., 2019; Swainston et al., 2020); however, no researchers have discussed how  
12 these challenges evolve with continued lack of progression. One potential reason for  
13 the uniqueness of the gray period finding is the lack of longitudinal research or the  
14 retrospective nature of research investigating transitions that were either successful  
15 or unsuccessful. Furthermore, using participants just at the start of the journey (on  
16 contract award e.g., Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016) limits the opportunity to explore  
17 the challenges that develop after the initial honeymoon period.

18         The next major finding was the role of organizational and coach support. Past  
19 research has suggested the importance of support from key stakeholders (e.g., Morris  
20 et al., 2015; Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2016). Morris, Tod, et al. (2016) also suggested  
21 that coaching staff’s emotional support was not always an option due to their role in  
22 selecting squads. Our evidence suggests similar difficulties in accessing support from  
23 coaching staff. In particular, there was a view from the players that seeking help  
24 could hurt their opportunities. Gaining opportunity was the single most crucial  
25 element of their career, and it appears to be the driving force behind their

1 unwillingness to seek support from the coaching staff. All participants in all phases  
2 agreed that showing weakness could limit opportunity, playing time, or be used  
3 against them in deciding contracts. Sam and Ryan, yet to join the first team,  
4 presumed that moving to the first team would come with less access to support,  
5 although Lewis and Tyler discussed a change in the nature of the relationships with  
6 coaches. As a young player, Daniel believed he did not have the right to seek support  
7 from first-team staff. Both Daniel and Jake thought maturity was necessary for the  
8 willingness to seek support, but again they did so from resources they felt they could  
9 trust, giving examples from outside the club.

10         The final major finding was how contracts influenced the overall transition.  
11 In football, having a contract and renewing your contract was the only way to  
12 continue your transition. Early contracts allowed for a preparation period (cf. Morris  
13 et al., 2015; Swainston et al., 2020), as seen in Sam and Ryan's experience. Lewis  
14 and Tyler, who were on short-term contracts during the gray period, struggled to  
15 manage long term development goals while also maximizing performance in the  
16 short term that was perceived as necessary in earning their next contract. In some  
17 instances, this meant actively choosing short term priorities despite knowing they  
18 should be taking a long-term approach. In the latter phases, maximizing financial  
19 gains became a priority alongside ambition to move to higher leagues.

### **Applied Implications**

20         The detailed picture of the transition from professional contract to first-team  
21 regular illuminates several applied implications. In professional football, clubs serve  
22 as the gatekeeper for the opportunity, and key stakeholders are charged with  
23 managing transitions effectively to get the most value from each player. As playing  
24 time is a critical factor of the transition, managing the club's overall scope to ensure

1 there are routes into the first team is paramount to a transition's success (see  
2 Swainston et al., 2020). Without opportunity, several challenges developed that need  
3 to be managed by key stakeholders. Individual plans for each player can help players  
4 provide clear purpose as they await their opportunity while furthering their  
5 development. Effective communication from the club to the player can clarify this  
6 purpose and potentially eliminate some worry during the suggested gray period.

7         From the beginning of the transition, early pro contracts allowed for a  
8 specific preparation period (see Morris et al., 2015). Away from the typical stress of  
9 earning a contract (see Swainston et al., 2020), these players were afforded  
10 opportunities to train up with the U23 group and first team. As the transition  
11 continued, short-term contracts became a source of stress, and for Lewis and Tyler,  
12 long-term development was sacrificed in the battle to earn a new contract. This  
13 brings forward another challenge for clubs in how they manage contracts during the  
14 transition. Where possible, long-term contracts might provide security and allow for  
15 a more explicit focus on development toward the first team, although this is primarily  
16 a balance between financial resources and player development strategy. In this  
17 context, it appeared the club was trying this strategy with the youngest players, Sam  
18 and Ryan, by offering two years plus one additional year option contracts to allow  
19 them to develop over time without the pressure of earning a new contract during the  
20 gray period. Again, communication can be seen as an important message in order to  
21 help players understand where they are in the transition despite their contract  
22 situation.

23         There is no doubt that this transition is complex, with many challenges for  
24 organizations. On the personal level, holistic care should be seen as a priority in the  
25 first team environment. Providing ample emotional support could be improved by



1 developing the coach-athlete relationship in order to help ease the power dynamics at  
2 play. Training in motivational interviewing, for example, could be an appropriate  
3 intervention to target relationship building and communication (Mack et al., 2021).  
4 Although this would be a positive step, further avenues and layers of support should  
5 be available away from those stakeholders. Specifically, as evidenced in this study,  
6 players desired psychological support (cf. Swainston et al., 2020). Although not  
7 every club will have access to a full-time psychologist, external relationships could  
8 be built to help signpost athletes to where they could find this type of support.

9         As discussed in the recent meta-study (Drew et al., 2019), players' wellbeing  
10 needs to be considered one of the critical outcomes of a successful transition, not just  
11 match day minutes. The current study's findings echo these suggestions that clubs  
12 should provide support structures, internally and externally, that allow players to  
13 express themselves in a safe space in order to enhance their wellbeing. Indeed, there  
14 has been much interest in how sporting organizations can find balance in chasing  
15 performance targets while managing the well-being of their players (e.g., Ringland,  
16 2016). For example, performance outcomes such as gaining playing time in the  
17 senior squad could be seen as success, which might mask individual well-being  
18 concerns (Ringland, 2016). Our data suggests that protecting opportunity appeared to  
19 be a priority over seeking support which over time might lead to well-being  
20 concerns. An awareness of individual wellbeing, as well as specific stakeholders  
21 focused on player wellbeing, should be seen as a priority regardless of perceived  
22 success in transition.

23         Not only is holistic support necessary in the gray period, but the current study  
24 illuminates the importance of an outlet for players' efforts. In this study, this outlet  
25 was via loan moves (playing time) or the U23 group (development opportunities).

1 These were key experiences for players to maintain the normalcy of having a weekly  
2 game to prepare for, and opportunities to further develop their skills during the gray  
3 period. Clubs should be aware of how limited opportunity in the first team might  
4 influence player experience and plan how they will keep that player motivated to  
5 continue their longer-term development. Although these were the two ways this was  
6 done in the current study, the balance between loans and time at the home club  
7 should be discussed with an awareness of individual player experience.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

8 The current study sought to further our understanding of the junior-to-senior  
9 transition, while reducing the reliance on a one-off, retrospective interviews.  
10 Multiple interviews with participants in the transition provided a richer data set,  
11 allowed participants to revisit areas of importance to them, and fostered an enhanced  
12 researcher-participant relationship (Jones & Harwood, 2008). Participants who were  
13 in the midst of their transition, at differing time points allowed for a broad, yet  
14 detailed picture of how the transition developed over time.

15 The cross-sectional approach can be seen as a limitation, and future research  
16 could seek to follow participants over the suggested four-to five-year transition  
17 period. However, there are significant funding challenges to such work. Additionally,  
18 researchers should look to focus on the experiences in delayed transitions and in the  
19 suggested gray period. It seems apparent that a number of difficulties develop with  
20 prolonged periods without opportunity, and based on the current data, this might be  
21 the norm in professional football. Exploring later phases of transition would shed  
22 light on these challenges as well as how clubs can better monitor and support players  
23 during this period.

### Conclusion

1           The current study explored the junior-to-senior transition from professional  
2 contract to established first team player. Different from previous models was the  
3 central role of opportunity in the progression of the experience rather than a  
4 chronologically focused pathway. Once past the initial move to the first team came  
5 an extended “gray period” where motivation was difficult to maintain without  
6 opportunity and without clear goals. To complicate matters, a lack of support was  
7 noted, with players hesitant to seek support from key stakeholders at the club in case  
8 it jeopardized opportunity. Later in the transition, players gained opportunity which  
9 normalized the overall experience, at which point ambition to play at a higher level  
10 and gain financial security influenced contract discussions. From an applied  
11 perspective, football clubs could improve how they manage the human elements of  
12 the transitions; including improved communication and access to support systems as  
13 well as providing players with an outlet for their effort.

### **Study Two in Relation to Thesis**

#### ***Contribution to Thesis***

While study one provided a longitudinal investigation of players during the transition, study two looked towards a bigger picture the junior-to-senior transition from professional contract to an established first-team player in an English men's professional football team. This study challenged the phase-based model of Stambulova and colleagues (2017) setting opportunity to progress as key factor rather than a linear progression over time through phases. This finding along with unique findings around support, contracts, and a challenging 'gray' period contribute new knowledge to the field and the added depth of understanding of the junior-to-senior transition in this thesis. The overall contribution of the empirical studies are discussed in the next chapter alongside significant applied considerations from my time as a practitioner working in the transitions space.

## **Chapter 6: General Discussion**

## General Discussion

### 1 Introduction

2           The purpose of this PhD was to explore player experience during the junior-to-  
3 senior transition in professional football. In this chapter we synthesize the findings  
4 from both applied studies, look at the contribution of the overall thesis to the  
5 literature, and discuss future research directions. Applied implications and  
6 applications of the research is discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 7). The  
7 program of work achieved the purpose of the thesis in the following ways:

8           1) Completion of two empirical studies that have been published with unique  
9 contributions to the literature with an emphasis of depth of understanding during the  
10 junior-to-senior transition.

11           2) Development of a methodology and data collection techniques to shift away  
12 from one-off interviews in order to better understand the complex transition process.

13           3) A focus on applied implications for practitioners, organizations, and coaches  
14 to improve best practice in working with players in transition (see Chapter 7).

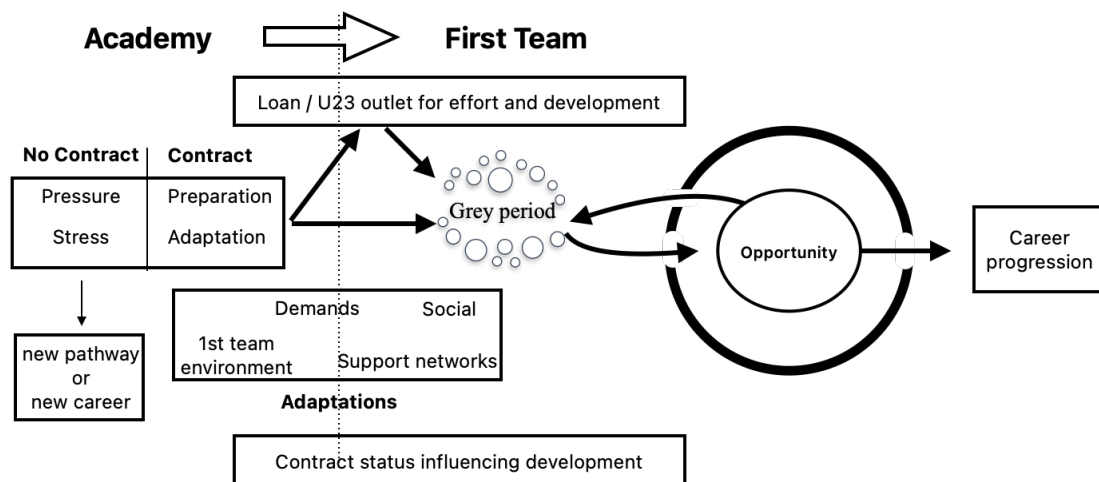
### 15 Synthesis of Findings

16           The main new contribution to the literature is a detailed timeline of the full  
17 transition from academy player to first-team regular. The data collective techniques  
18 of video diaries and multiple interviews have generated substantial amounts of data  
19 from participants currently in the transition. This viewpoint and depth of  
20 investigation generated a new understanding of the life, challenges, and influential  
21 factors of this transition. While the timeline is the primary contribution, the depth  
22 and detail along the way provided in the two empirical studies develops new  
23 knowledge in key areas previously discussed in the literature, such as, social aspects

1 of the transition, contracts, support, adaptation to senior competition, and barriers to  
2 the transition.

3 The timeline developed from the two empirical studies shows the central role  
4 of contracts and opportunity (see figure 8). Beginning in the academy, vastly  
5 different experiences were present based on contractual status (see Appendix 3 for  
6 non-contract player experience). Even within those receiving professional contracts,  
7 the length of those contracts led to differing experiences. Development towards the  
8 first team was the primary goal for all players, however, these external contractual  
9 factors influenced their decision making and livelihood. This early phase of their  
10 careers was marked by challenges to motivation, coping with stress and pressure, and  
11 the necessity of navigating loan systems or a lack of playing time (see Chapter 4 and  
12 Appendix 3).

13 Figure 8: Visual representation summarizing findings



14  
15 Throughout the early part of the transition adaptation to senior football was  
16 an important part of their progression. Several pathways emerged as being supportive  
17 of their development including loan moves and U23s matches and trainings. These  
18 pathways were used by the club to help provide adaptation but also to gain playing  
19 time and opportunity elsewhere when first team play was unavailable. In several

1 instances, loan moves could cause greater frustration among the players. Generally,  
2 however, they were important experiences for progressing within the transition in  
3 preparation for what was to come within the first team (see Chapter 4).

4         Playing time with the first team was the crown jewel and primary motivation of  
5 all players yet getting to that point required a long-term outlook and an investment  
6 mindset (focusing on some future payoff). Only one participant received playing  
7 time early in their career, primarily due to a lack of club finances. The necessity to  
8 remain patient and deal with challenges along the winding path to first team football  
9 was key in the journeys of all participants. The lack of early success within the first  
10 team was a personal struggle for most of the players despite an acceptance that this  
11 was likely. The ‘gray period’ was a novel finding in Chapter 5, showing that players  
12 can be outside of a clear phase in their career. They had entered the first team  
13 environment, adjusted to life there, yet remained without playing time. This lack of  
14 playing time, especially over longer periods of time, was a significant challenge and  
15 hurdle to overcome for individuals who essentially loved playing the game of  
16 football. Specific support could be key during the ‘gray period’ to ensure players  
17 could maintain motivation while without playing time and specific, concrete goals to  
18 achieve (see Chapter 5).

19         Progressing to the first team was the main goal within this specific transition,  
20 however players also had ambitions of moving to higher levels of football. As  
21 careers developed, this ambition separated for those players who had realistic  
22 opportunities and those who had to rationalize that perhaps an upward move might  
23 not transpire. Due to the level of football, cementing a life off the pitch was an  
24 important factor during the transition. Whether that be through studies, side



1 businesses or investments players were aware of the need to build a career after  
2 football.

3       Finally, a major point of emphasis throughout the PhD was building novel  
4 methods that allowed the complexity and timescale of the transition to come through.  
5 A longitudinal study was an emphasis early in the PhD allowing for maximum time  
6 to explore what might happen during the transition, rather than retrospectively.  
7 Single point interviews were seen as insufficient to understanding the long, winding  
8 journey that would likely occur. Using video diaries on a weekly basis allowed a  
9 narrative to build over time and organically for each participant. Additionally,  
10 knowing that we wouldn't be able to follow those players throughout their entire  
11 transition we determined it important to draw out information across time in the  
12 transition. Here we chose multiple interviews from players in various suggested  
13 phases of transition (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2017). The multiple interviews allowed  
14 further depth of exploration and time for the participants to reflect between  
15 interviews and add to their accounts during each interview.

## 16 **Contributions to the Literature**

17       The importance of the findings in general have been discussed but it is  
18 important to look at the thesis overall contributes to the existing literature. First, we  
19 look at available models in relation to our applied work, followed by how work sits  
20 in relation to the themes from the scoping review.

### 21 ***Models in Junior-to-Senior Transition***

22       The primary model that exists specifically within the junior-to-senior  
23 transition is the individual, external, culture model of the junior-to-senior transition  
24 Drew et al. (2019), Our findings across both studies support the idea that the  
25 transition is a complex, dynamic process rather than a stage or phase-based process.

1 Similarities exist in the transition pre-conditions and the preparation discussed across  
2 study one and two. While our studies added further detail to the preparation process  
3 and how that looks specifically in professional football. The importance of gaining  
4 that experience during the preparation period is shown by the experience of players  
5 with a contract in study one.

6         The flexibility of the facilitators and debilitators variables to the transition  
7 can also be found in our data. For example, in study one, social aspects of the  
8 transition could be seen as facilitative to the overall transition in one case, but  
9 debilitative in another. The wide range of factors that influence a transition should be  
10 thought of as highly individual and contextual. Again, through the synthesis of  
11 findings we provide several examples of facilitators, such as social support, and  
12 debilitators, such as contracts, that are specific to this context and could maybe be  
13 generalizable to other professional football contexts.

14         The two outcomes of the transition, mental wellbeing and performance are  
15 welcomed and show the importance of a more holistic view of transition success.  
16 The challenging transition highlighted by the participants in this PhD, and the  
17 realization of the older players of the importance in getting psychological support  
18 show the importance of a wider definition. Finally, the progression of this model  
19 showing the importance of organizational processes in relation to an individual  
20 transition are key, especially in this context of professional football.

### 21 *Athlete Experience*

22         **Increased Demands.** Adaptation to senior football is widely discussed in the  
23 literature (e.g., McCreary et al., 2021) and in our findings were a key component of  
24 the overall experience. In Study 1 the players discussed the importance of thinking  
25 for themselves and evolving their decision making more than just adapting to the

1 physical demands (cf. Mitchell et al., 2020). Similar to Morris et al., (2016a) several  
2 players discussed an added motivation to bridge the gap between themselves and first  
3 team players. However, our findings show that motivation can spike during the initial  
4 transition (see Study 1) yet drain over time as they remain out of the picture for the  
5 first team. In that context, the U23 cup competition played an important role in  
6 providing a step between the U18 and first team and giving opportunity while the  
7 first team was still not in the picture (e.g., Hollings et al., 2014a).

8         **Reduced Playing Time.** A major finding in the PhD was the role of the grey  
9 period (see Chapter 5). In this period players remain without playing time and a clear  
10 goal in sight (see Bruner et al., 2008). Even in study 1 (see Chapter 4) players  
11 making the initial transition had hoped for playing time, but found themselves out on  
12 loan. In one particular experience (Thomas – Chapter 4) even the loan move resulted  
13 in reduced playing time, compounding this challenge (cf. Prendergast & Gibson,  
14 2022). Earning the trust of coaches was a key aspect of this period in order to further  
15 opportunity (see Chapter 5 and cf. Røynesdal et al., 2018). Injury also has been  
16 suggested to have a major impact on a transition (see Bjørndal et al., 2018) and  
17 several examples in our own findings show the added challenges that this can create  
18 (see Chapter 4).

19         **Senior Environment.** The social aspects of the transition were discussed in  
20 both studies and shown to be highly individual. The dynamic of fitting into the senior  
21 environment was key for young players as suggested by Franck and Stambulova  
22 (2018a), and differed between Charlie and Thomas in study one (see Chapter 4).  
23 Challenges to relationships with senior players were also discussed (cf. Rye et al.,  
24 2022), and the importance of fitting in or inviting yourself into the group was shown  
25 in study two (see Chapter 5).

1           **Support.** The necessity of support during the transition is well documented  
2 (see Andronikos et al., 2021). McGreary et al., (2021) suggest that transitional  
3 players could gain support primarily from coaches, however our data suggests  
4 players are unlikely to seek support from key stakeholders due to the power  
5 dynamics at play. One potential explanation could be a difference in gender, with  
6 McGreary et al. (2021) focusing on female football while our data is from male  
7 players. Another could be the lack of professionalization in the EFL leading to less  
8 support roles available to senior players in our context.

9           Teammates as role models as also been proposed as important for the  
10 transition (see Stambulova et al., 2017). Our data shows more specific relationships  
11 that were key during the transition including older teammates from the academy who  
12 are in transition or have made the transition (see Chapter 5). This is perhaps one  
13 strength of this club with multiple players each year progressing to the first team,  
14 allowing for an informal chain of support to be built for younger players.

### 15 *Organizational Process*

16           **Preparation.** As previously discussed, preparation was important to the  
17 experience of the players, yet something that is largely controlled by the organization  
18 and coaches. Bruner et al. (2008) gave examples of playing up age groups in order to  
19 further facilitate the need to deal with increased demands. More specifically in a  
20 footballing context adjusting to tactics and playing style were important during the  
21 transition (see Røynesdal et al., 2018). This was documented in our evidence by the  
22 loan experiences of the players, particularly while still in the academy (see Chapter  
23 4) where players had the opportunity to adjust to senior football prior to joining the  
24 first team. We further explore the loan transition in Appendix 2.

1 Another key aspect preparation can be the education around the transition  
2 itself (see Pummell & Lavalley, 2019). The up and down experience around the main  
3 transition point in study one (see Chapter 4) can suggest that there was a lack of  
4 understanding about the specific pathway to the first team from staff to players.  
5 Further, the experiences of the loans can also indicate that players might not have  
6 known what to expect or what the purpose of the loan was from the club perspective  
7 (cf. Kent et al., 2022).

8 **Communication Between Departments.** In this context the two  
9 departments, academy and first team, were in separate buildings but within the same  
10 training ground. Players in both studies discussed the ability to receive more support  
11 from the academy, in part due to better resources through EPPP funding, than they  
12 could receive in the first team. This realization was informally made by the players  
13 themselves, and not something that the club strategically took advantage of to help  
14 players in transition. Discussing the barriers and resources available to transitioning  
15 players is discussed in the literature (see Morris et al., 2015), and perhaps something  
16 that could have strengthened the transition process in this context.

17 In the case of loans, the communication is suggested to aid the transition  
18 when the home club and loan club communicate on the players development (Kent et  
19 al., 2022; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Without clear communication the players in  
20 study one began to lose motivation or go through the motions (see Chapter 4).  
21 Further, in study two one player (Lewis – Chapter 5) suggested the challenge of  
22 balancing short-term goals, playing for the loan club, and long-term goals, preparing  
23 for the first team, clashed without clarity from the club.

24 **Opportunity.** Challenges to transitions without early success have been  
25 documented across the literature (e.g, Hollings et al., 2014a; Rye et al., 2020). As has

1 been previously discussed in study 2 (see Chapter 5) opportunity stands central to the  
2 transition experience (cf. Drew et al., 2019). Opportunity is controlled by the first  
3 team coaches and stakeholders who often place the emphasis on young players  
4 proving they are ready (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020; Røynesdal et al., 2018). In our  
5 data this is shown through the pressure to push into the team, even early in their  
6 contracts (see Chapter 4). Further, as discussed by Lewis and Tyler (see Chapter 5)  
7 the contract situation adds pressure to feeling the necessity to break through in a  
8 short, often unreasonable amount of time. In this case that was acknowledge by the  
9 club and changed for the young players coming through.

10           Loan moves, while seen as an opportunity to adapt on the pitch, at times lead  
11 to a lack of opportunity. Prendergast and Gibson (2022) suggest this might be  
12 valuable to build resilience in players that were not often left out of academy teams.  
13 Both Thomas (see Chapter 4) and Daniel (see Chapter 5) had periods like this.  
14 Daniel returned from loan early on his own accord due to not receiving opportunity,  
15 which he discussed as perhaps being naïve to the overall experience. Thomas had  
16 two such periods which he found to be very difficult.

### 17 **Future Research Directions**

18           Future research directions should look to improve methodology and the  
19 ‘how’ when understanding the experiences of the junior-to-senior transition. The  
20 shifting view of the transition as a process (Stambulova, 2009) and the long-term  
21 nature of the transition (Pehrson et al., 2017) show the importance of deepening our  
22 understanding in this field. Logic would suggest that one off, one-hour interviews are  
23 unlikely to uncover the nuance and complexity of a junior-to-senior transition.  
24 Therefore, we need to be innovative in our thinking when approaching questions  
25 about this area. Longitudinal case studies or perhaps intermittent interviews over

1 time are examples of methods that could gain further insight. In this thesis video  
2 diaries were used, and in my opinion used successfully to capture experience over  
3 time without overloading the researcher. This process allowed for greater freedom  
4 for participants when discussing their experience and gathering data more  
5 organically, while also being able to dive into areas of interest to each participant.  
6 Following each story uniquely allowed new knowledge to be generated while also  
7 building shared experience. Overall, we need to look at how we ask the questions  
8 and follow experience over time to better understand the junior-to-senior transition.

9 Another area to be considered in future research is who is doing the research  
10 and what is their relationship to the participants. In this instance the researcher was  
11 embedded within the club which allowed the experience to be interpreted by  
12 someone living in the same environment as the participants. I believe this added  
13 important depth to the data and important reflections to be made during the thesis in  
14 relation to the participants experience and how the club interacted with the  
15 transitioning players. In order to gain depth in understanding this process, the  
16 cultural influence of the club, appreciate the responses of the participants I would  
17 encourage more research to come from embedded researchers.

18 Finally, future research should look to avoid survivorship bias by  
19 investigating players within the transition despite the fact they might not succeed. In  
20 this thesis we chose to look at players starting in the pre-transition or preparation  
21 phase which allowed for insight into the struggles attempting to push forward in the  
22 transition with uncertain contract status. This allowed unique findings to develop in  
23 those players experience that provide valuable insights for talent development  
24 organizations. An overreliance upon players who have transitioned will cloud the  
25 literature without understanding the full and varied experience.

**Chapter 7: Applied Applications: Personal Experience Following PhD**  
**Data Collection**



**Applied Applications: Personal Experience Following PhD Data Collection****1 Introduction**

2           Following the data collection, write up and publication of the two  
3 experimental chapters, I began work at a Swedish Allsvenskan and Damallsvenskan  
4 (men's and women's Premier League) club (2021). In the first season I was  
5 employed as the girl's U14 and later U19 head coach and held a role as sport  
6 psychologist within the women's first team. The following season, I became the first  
7 team assistant coach and the girl's academy psychologist. This placed me firmly  
8 within the transition space and allowed me to try and deliver on my evidenced-based  
9 experience from my PhD. Below is an account of my experiences and reflections of  
10 applying this research directly within a professional club.

**11 Background**

12           The club in question was promoted to the topflight of the Swedish women's  
13 league the year prior (2020) to me starting at the club. This progression had a drastic  
14 impact upon the club, and in particular the transition pathway from the academy to  
15 the first team. This transition was a major focal point of the club with ambitions to  
16 maintain fifty percent of the squad as club-developed players. Promotion would  
17 require numerous improvements, but especially in the academy to improve player  
18 development and match the new standards of the highest league. The new league is  
19 one of the top five leagues in Europe, with every team boasting internationals from  
20 the top national teams in the world.

21           Prior to promotion, most of the top players from the academy could make a  
22 successful transition to the first team. Promotion meant that players who had  
23 previously transitioned, and played for the first team, needed to adapt again to the  
24 new higher standard. For the academy players, the increases in demands would mean

1 that very few players were likely to successfully transition. To date, several academy  
2 players have debuted in Damallsvenskan but none would be categorized as having  
3 become first team regulars. Several of these players would have benefitted from  
4 loans to further adapt to senior football, however due to limited budgets they were  
5 required to stay in the squad. During this time the sporting director recognized the  
6 gap and moved to provide additional support to the academy to help manage these  
7 transitions. This included further developing my role, adding a full-time fitness  
8 coach, and employing an academy director with responsibilities in the first team as  
9 well. These initiatives were supported by evidence from the findings that I present in  
10 chapters 4 and 5.

### 11 **Organizational Strategy for Transitions**

12 The updated organizational strategy for transition players had several main  
13 components. First, club collaborations were identified and/or strengthened to ensure  
14 playing time for transition players. The club continued to promote youth players to  
15 the first team and created a number of 50/50 jobs for staff working between the  
16 academy and first team. These roles attempted to breakdown any barrier between the  
17 academy and first team. With the jump to a higher league, it was important to club  
18 leadership (i.e., sporting director) that the academy staff was aware of the demands  
19 that came with competing at the highest level. This strategy also accounted for the  
20 importance of mentorship through the transition and having staff working across the  
21 transition space could help players feel more comfortable.

### 22 ***Pathway***

23 Within the academy there were two primary transitions prior to the academy to  
24 first team transition: into the academy and into the U17. A major aim within the club  
25 was to reduce barriers or groups, and move to a more fluid, open structure. This in

1 part was included in a previous decision to move the age of academy selection up to  
2 age 13 (previously age 9). Furthermore, opportunities for extra training were  
3 provided for all players where groups could be mixed. This included in pre-academy  
4 age groups where boys and girls were encouraged to train together. During this time  
5 the girl's academy was working to build this more fluid structure eliminating  
6 previous transition, such as between U17 and U19.

7         These changes caused a significant amount of friction; fighting against an old  
8 culture that was based around prestige, winning at all costs, and a 'my group'  
9 mentality from coaches. This shift was sought to encourage better player wellbeing,  
10 build internal motivation for the game, and build a broader culture within the club.  
11 Over the course of my first year within the club a split developed between the new  
12 and the old culture. Roadblocks were placed within the academy, which prevented  
13 player rotations across age groups. At the end of the year several staff members left  
14 the club, which did help senior leadership to embed the new culture more strongly  
15 throughout the academy. Following my move to the first team a new U19 coach  
16 came in, previously from the boy's academy, that had been a part of their culture  
17 shift previously. This cemented a strong team working across the U17-19 space  
18 which would aid transitions towards the first team (see Vaughan et al., 2022 for more  
19 on the importance of this cultural element in transitions).

20         The U17 and U19 collaboration removes any major transition point with both  
21 groups training and playing together regularly. During this time players are in a  
22 sport-based high school (NIU) where they train during the day with academy  
23 coaches. Outside of daily training sessions I worked to manage the relationship with  
24 the U19's, providing support to both players and the academy coaches. Here I could

1 help coaches understand the demands and gap that exists between the academy and  
2 first team and how this could be narrowed (see Chapter 5 applied implications).

3         Several obstacles were however present in this phase. First, the U17 group  
4 were previously led by a coach of the old culture leading to a very difficult transition  
5 for those players coming into that age group. On the pitch they struggled to adapt to  
6 training methods and game tempo of the national U17 league. A large amount of  
7 work went into getting that group invested in their new environment and off pitch  
8 transition to the new culture was seen as a priority. Social relationships were  
9 prioritized early in the season and an active attempt to create a larger U17/19 group  
10 was seen as a strategy for helping this group. However, while the benefits for such  
11 stronger links are clear for the U17 group, there were issues for many of the U19  
12 group, who felt that their development would be impaired by training with younger,  
13 less experienced players. Navigating this balance of moving the U17s into the new  
14 culture while also providing appropriate challenge in daily training for the U19s, in  
15 order to bridge the gap to Damallsvenskan was difficult.

16         At the end of 2021 a decision was made to release a number of U19 players  
17 to improve the culture. This left the U19 group with zero players in the oldest age  
18 group (2003), one player in the second oldest (2004), and the majority of the squad  
19 made up of players two years younger. When looking ahead to the transition towards  
20 Damallsvenskan this was a major challenge, and the feeling in the first team was that  
21 the academy players were not going to reach the required level. Yet the club strategy,  
22 and pressure from the board, remained to include 50% home-grown players in the  
23 first team.

24         The roles of staff progressed to encourage development of the players across  
25 the pathway. Having several members of staff with joint roles between the academy

1 and first team allowed a steady flow of information across departments. We were  
2 able to consistently follow up player development, manage playing time, and explore  
3 external options that benefited the players. Sharing of information allowed demands  
4 and barriers of the transition to be well documented and understood from the  
5 multiple perspectives. A further new addition to the club in my second year was joint  
6 facilities which allowed informal contact time between first team and academy staff,  
7 further improving relationships among staff and a collaborative approach (see Relvas  
8 et al., 2010; Chapter 4 discussion).

9 ***Loan/Club Collaboration.***

10         Similar to the club in my PhD, providing opportunity for playing time was a  
11 challenge during the transition. Our club – men, women, youth academies – use two  
12 primary strategies to provide opportunity to players in transition. The first is a loan  
13 system similar to that described for participants in this thesis. The second is a ‘club  
14 collaboration’ which allows players under the age of 22 to be put on list whereby  
15 there are eligible to play for both the home club and another club in a lower division.  
16 The list of eligible players can be changed each week with a five-day waiting period  
17 to be eligible for games. This ‘club collaboration’ allows the home club to have  
18 players eligible for their squad throughout the season while also being eligible to  
19 play for the partner club should they not be included in match day squads.

20         On the men’s side there are both collaborations on the first team level and on  
21 the academy level. This allows academy players in the older age groups the  
22 opportunity to receive game time in senior environments without needing to go on a  
23 full loan. At the current moment only the senior women’s team has these  
24 partnerships. This is largely due to budget where players require at least a minimum  
25 contract to be available for a ‘club collaboration’. In the women’s team, that allows

1 us to monitor transitions where players might not receive game time and at the same  
2 time have cover for any potential injuries in the first team squad. In several instances  
3 prior to these partnerships, players were not sent on loan, despite an agreement that it  
4 was best for their development, because of the need for squad players.

5 Further, the U19 league allows overage players which provides further  
6 avenues of opportunity. Within this environment there can be a better guarantee of  
7 playing time and closer control over positions and minutes that might not always be  
8 available through the partner clubs. My role, in the first year, specifically allowed a  
9 closer collaboration with the first team to help players yet to make the transition,  
10 players in rotation training, and players from the first team playing or training with  
11 the academy. These benefits had to be weighed against the significantly lower  
12 standard in the U19 league compared to the first team league. In comparison to the  
13 club in my PhD, the difference in level between U19 and First Team was notable.  
14 Gaining playing time was important for the players, and in many instances, it was an  
15 opportunity to gain confidence, however, over time the club worried this would lead  
16 to bad habits. Players in transition returning to play in the academy for long periods  
17 of time could work against their need to adapt to senior competition.

18 As has been discussed throughout this thesis, playing time is a huge factor  
19 during the transition to ensure players are adapting to senior football and furthering  
20 their development. In our context this was an extremely challenging balance due to  
21 the squads' budget. We were not in a place to fill out a squad with squad players and  
22 give younger players loan moves to further their development. Each season there  
23 were three to seven players who needed to be on loan to further their development  
24 however without cover in the first team squad, most of the players needed to stay at  
25 the club. Week after week they would struggle to receive playing time limiting their

1 adaptation and development, while also putting stress on their wellbeing and  
2 motivation. Managing this phase was challenging and especially within the first team  
3 a view that providing support to them could easily become ‘babysitting’. Support  
4 was encouraged and we had several strategies to try to facilitate healthier more  
5 successful transitions, however often a view from senior coaches was that ‘this is just  
6 the way it is for young players’. Fighting against these old adages and providing  
7 meaningful support was one of the greatest difficulties and frustrations I experienced  
8 given my lack of power in critical decision making.

9         A further obstacle that developed was in the ‘club collaborations’. First,  
10 finding clubs at a level that challenged the player appropriately was difficult,  
11 especially clubs where playing time would be likely. Several collaborations  
12 dissolved due to the partner club not wanting to play “on loan” players ahead of their  
13 own players. This was particularly challenging as our club preferred players to train  
14 with the first team regularly to ensure further adaptation to the first team. Perhaps  
15 cultural to Sweden, most clubs preferred to play with club owned players ahead of  
16 more talented or better performers from partner clubs. Out of 11 different players  
17 that had at one point been on loan or with a partner club only three could be deemed  
18 successful in terms of playing time at an appropriate level.

19         A further complication to partner clubs was the managing of the relationship.  
20 While the sporting director took the majority of the responsibility it was left to the  
21 coaching staff to determine which players would be in match day squads and who  
22 then might play on a ‘club collaboration’. On a weekly basis, it was incredibly  
23 complex to predict match day squads and then manage the multiple training  
24 environments, who would train where on what day to ensure players got the best  
25 opportunity each week. Once decisions were made the dialogue between the partner

1 clubs then had to take place. These last-minute decisions and the fact that both clubs  
2 would push for what was best for them led to strained relationships. Even when both  
3 clubs were seemingly on the same page and happy to work with each other, these  
4 were difficult relationships to maintain, bringing additional load on already  
5 overworked coaching staff. Elsewhere in the league, several clubs have started their  
6 own teams to play in lower professional leagues, rather than creating club  
7 partnerships. This allows for much easier management but was not possible for my  
8 club due to the budget and resources required to build a second team.

9         In a similar manner to my own data, player motivation was also a challenge  
10 during loans and club collaborations. This was more prevalent on the women's side,  
11 which only employed players part time. The history and lack of professionalism  
12 within the women's game could be an explanation for players not being accustomed  
13 to loans or playing for other clubs. Several players preferred training with the first  
14 team regularly to being on loan to receive playing time. There were hints of this  
15 within the findings of my PhD, however as loan moves were commonplace within  
16 the club it was, perhaps, easier to accept that was a part of the pathway. There may  
17 also be questions around the relative value of playing competitive fixtures versus  
18 training in terms of development in the two contexts. With the relatively low number  
19 of successful loans, perhaps this option to remain with the club could be a stronger  
20 strategy, however this is likely to be very individual and personal to each player.

### 21 ***Contracts***

22         A similar shift in this club occurred to my PhD where longer contracts were  
23 given to academy players making the transition. This was largely uncommon in  
24 women's football and this club, but the ambition was to provide players with a  
25 certainty of their future and allow them to develop over time within the club. One of



1 the major successes of the longer contracts (a rarity in the league), was that a home-  
2 grown player was sold within the league for a league record fee.

3         However, the long-term contracts were largely viewed as unsuccessful,  
4 especially in the context of performance in the new league. As many players had  
5 previously played in the lower league or begun their transition in that context, there  
6 was perhaps a false confidence that they would instantly step into the first team.  
7 When they were met with the reality of being on loan, outside the squad, or even  
8 struggling for playing time, they struggled to maintain their motivation. In several  
9 instances a player with a long-term contract appeared to lose motivation and believe  
10 they were comfortable within the team. There is always a risk with longer contracts  
11 in that when correct decisions aren't made it can hurt the building of the squad over  
12 time. In a squad with a limited budget this was an obstacle that proved to cause a  
13 number of problems later in the project. Further, pressure from within the club to  
14 have home-grown players in the squad compounded the challenge of building a  
15 squad capable of playing at the highest level while moving players through the  
16 transition phase.

17         Outside of the transition players, most of the players in the squad had one-  
18 year contracts. Squad planning suffered because of this issue. Having large numbers  
19 of contracts going out at the end of each season challenged the ability of the  
20 organization to plan effectively for transition players. This combined with the jump  
21 to the higher league caused difficulties in recognizing which academy players might  
22 be capable of making that jump. The afore mentioned 'poor investments' had a  
23 knock-on effect in later years where shorter-term contracts became more common  
24 and similar experiences to the participants in this thesis were found. Players that  
25 struggled to balance short-term success with long-term development.

### 1 ***Group Transition Support***

2           In my daily responsibilities I was on the pitch with the first team and often  
3 leading the group of young professionals in separate parts of the session. This, in  
4 theory, allowed us to have more of a development focus with that group while not  
5 interrupting the first team's focus on the next match. Like the club in this thesis, we  
6 created a separate morning training session each week for the players in transition.  
7 This allowed a collaboration with players in school training with the U19 to join  
8 younger first team players and fulfill a similar role in a specific session focused only  
9 on their development needs. The extra trainings were appreciated by the players, but  
10 they were difficult to build into the schedule of the first team. A further complication  
11 was that the physical status of the younger players was far off the first team players.  
12 This led to the transition players often experiencing overtraining symptoms that  
13 would require staff to manage their overall training load. This often led to extra  
14 training sessions being impossible. For several months no training sessions were  
15 offered because of this issue, which players were left frustrated by, even though they  
16 understood the rationale.

17           The divided sessions during first team training were appreciated by all  
18 parties, however there were significant challenges to the young players motivation  
19 throughout their transition. Consistently being outside the main group became  
20 difficult for the players to cope with over time. Players would often feel that less  
21 attention was paid to their group or that the head coach would just send them away to  
22 work with an assistant. Despite having good relationships with the players, they did  
23 have a clear desire to be seen, which often they felt wasn't being met. At the same  
24 time more sessions that were combined caused senior players to become upset due to  
25 the gap in level between the two groups. First team players felt that sessions would

1 slow down, the representativeness of matches and the professionalism of the session  
2 would go down. Yet some senior players would stick up for the younger ones, saying  
3 they needed to be included in the main session more often. Managing this friction  
4 became an enormous challenge for the coaching staff. Many staff meetings took  
5 place to discuss how we manage this issue and how we build each week to include  
6 enough of each piece to keep the group happy and push the first team towards the  
7 results that were necessary.

8         Extra training sessions, or transition group meetings, became almost more  
9 about support and a group ‘therapy’ session than development on the pitch. Players  
10 could come together and share their experiences or frustrations. The academy players  
11 could start to learn the challenges that were ahead which in turn could be helpful to  
12 their preparation. Preparation for the transition rarely existed until recently. Many of  
13 the players were thankful for this time and having some within the club to speak to  
14 about their experience. This reminded me a lot of the video diary process being  
15 cathartic for the participants in the research presented in this thesis. Finding solutions  
16 wasn’t always needed but expressing how they feel was important.

### 17 ***Individual Transition Support***

18         As my role, in the second year, was focused heavily on the transition space,  
19 both coaching and psychology based, I was able to provide individual support to  
20 players in transition. From a more coaching perspective I developed individual  
21 development plans for the players to use autonomously. The aim of these plans was  
22 for players to be reflective about why they play the game and how they want to push  
23 their career forward. Rather than simply focusing on what do you want to develop?  
24 What are your strengths? They were focused on the journey to build their ability to  
25 reflect and prepare for upcoming challenges within the transition space.

1           A personal challenge was balancing coaching and a psychology role in this  
2 space. Dual roles in this area are less than optimal and blurred lines came too easily  
3 (see Ellickson & Brown, 1990). I primarily focused on coaching but used my  
4 psychologist skills to build relationships and listen effectively to the players. My  
5 experience in this PhD and understanding of the player perspective was a tremendous  
6 aid in providing individual support. Despite being focused on women's football in  
7 Sweden there were an enormous number of similarities in the overall experience of  
8 the players when compared to my PhD participants. In several instances I shared  
9 quotations from my publications with players who found it comforting that others  
10 had similar experiences to them in other environments.

#### 11 **Barriers to Implementing Best Evidence-Based Practice**

12           When looking across the PhD and applied experiences I have experienced a  
13 number of barriers to implementing best practice in the junior-to-senior transition. A  
14 primary barrier is the culture of football, and particularly senior football  
15 environments. At the start of my PhD a senior coach said something to the effect that  
16 young players just need to sit in the changing room until their time comes.  
17 Throughout my journey and to this day there are numerous senior environments that  
18 believe best practice is young players working hard, doing more, and sitting around  
19 in the changing room waiting for their time to come. Research continues to point  
20 towards the importance of support needed to manage transitions (e.g., Hollings et al.  
21 2014) yet applied environments still largely live in the 'old school'. Changing beliefs  
22 of coaching staffs, club leadership, and board rooms is difficult, and often done 'inch  
23 by inch'. Even in environments where staff can be progressive, the overwhelming  
24 emphasis on first team results can often cloud judgement and leave transition players  
25 left fighting for themselves.

1           During my work at AIK I worked closely with a head of coaching /  
2 development director on the boys' side to further define transitions within the club  
3 and help support best practice. In this instance a governing body had given audit  
4 points for clubs with a transition coach. The governing body, through my  
5 communications, was not research driven or informed. These governing bodies and  
6 audit processes can define large amounts of how a club must operate and, in many  
7 cases, work against research-informed practice. In order to get around this barrier we  
8 discussed the importance of who that person is to gain the outcomes that would  
9 benefit transitions. As evidence by this PhD, another coach adding technical and  
10 tactical support is largely unneeded. In this space, through our discussions, we placed  
11 more value on mentorship. A former first team player took that role to provide his  
12 insights from his career to the players rather than coaching on the pitch.

13           Another barrier was the connectedness of club strategy and club culture.  
14 During my PhD it was very clear from boardroom to first team to academy that the  
15 club's model was to promote youth players to first team and then into higher leagues  
16 for profit. In my next club this was clear and largely successful on the men's side of  
17 the club, however very fractured on the women's and girl's side. There lacked a clear  
18 goal with steps to accomplish that goal leading to differences of opinions on multiple  
19 levels, from boardroom to first team to academy. Without a stable academy and  
20 pressure from the board on the number of home-grown players, the first team was  
21 put in an impossible position when building a squad.

22           Finally, the dual roles of staff while on paper are helpful to managing  
23 transitions became a challenge for staff members. On paper the roles were divided  
24 into two 50% roles yet the reality of professional football and expectations from  
25 leadership were often two 100% roles. The divided roles were also, in some

1 instances, developed to save money from each budget. This resulted in the roles  
2 themselves being stretched across a number of different areas, placing individuals  
3 under immense stress. For example, the U19 coaching role included full time  
4 coaching, NIU school training sessions, and another school training program, with an  
5 additional expectation to provide mentorship at the school. Essentially, three 50%  
6 roles each competing to get more out of that person that could often lead to days  
7 starting at 7.30 and finishing at 19.00. The amount of stress placed on staff naturally  
8 led staff to perform well below their abilities and in several instances led to burn out  
9 (Baldock et al., 2022). This, of course, had an impact on support available to  
10 transitioning players.

### Summary

11 In summary from both a research and applied perspective this transition is a  
12 highly complex process with multiple stakeholders that influence success. An  
13 organization needs to be interested in moving players forward to senior teams with  
14 opportunity available. When that desire exists there needs to be stakeholders or a  
15 system that links the academy to first team in order to retain players and progress  
16 them through the transition. Further, the club must prepare and develop players to the  
17 senior context, that in elite football can change placing new demands on player  
18 development. When gaps or 'gray periods' exist, they need to be navigated with both  
19 strategy and individual support. The organization also needs to be able to handle  
20 short term result goals with long term development goals to retain and progress as  
21 many players as possible through this transition.

22 The organization in team sport is a gatekeeper that ultimately controls  
23 transitions through providing opportunity, loan or collaboration moves, and  
24 contracts.

1           While organizational strategy is a key factor in the transition it is ultimately  
2 about the person. Throughout this process motivation has been a key factor and  
3 perhaps a starting point for applied psychology work with players in transition. This  
4 challenging process will stress one's motivation and many players wonder 'is it  
5 worth it?'. Managing those doubts was key in Daniel's experience (see Chapter 5)  
6 and despite working in Swedish women's football these same perceptions existed.  
7 Being able to continue one's development in the senior environment, often without  
8 playing time, and maintain motivation through the challenging times are key to  
9 individuals managing the transition.

### **Future directions**

#### **10 Future applied work: What would potential "best" practice look like?**

11           When looking towards future applied work within transitions we can ask,  
12 "what would best practice look like?". In a highly complex process, it is difficult to  
13 cover all basis but here are a few recommendations from my experience.

14           First, and perhaps the easiest, communication. Talk to the players preparing  
15 for the transition, going through the transition, and towards the end of the transition.  
16 It could be safe to say talk to everyone and support, but especially players in this  
17 phase. Often the players preparing to move towards the first team, as was the  
18 experience of the players in this thesis (see Appendix 3), have an enormous amount  
19 of stress and are unaware of what is going to happen in their life. Sitting down for  
20 simple conversations and allowing them to express themselves can be cathartic. In  
21 this study, anecdotally, the video diaries filled this role with the players enjoying  
22 being able to get things off their chest. Further, they lack understanding of what the  
23 transition might hold. As was the case in Pummell & Lavalley (2018) gaining  
24 understanding of the transition ahead was beneficial. Players within the transition, as

1 is well documented in this thesis and the applied work, struggle with motivation and  
2 begin to have doubts. Talking with these players about where they are at, what they  
3 should be working on, and giving clarity will only help them refocus their energy on  
4 their long-term development. Often coaches, in my opinion, are scared to harm a  
5 player's motivation by saying they aren't ready, however from my experience  
6 players want honesty and a way to channel their efforts.

7         Similarly, communication is key in organizational strategy between the  
8 academy and first team. Understanding the demands between the two, the context of  
9 the first team, and where the first team is headed are extremely important for the  
10 academy staff to understand. In my experience during my thesis this was a strength  
11 of the organization and resulted in little 'wasted talent'. Yet in my applied work, the  
12 gap between the academy and first team alongside the lack of understanding led to  
13 significant 'wasted talent'. This is a key organizational question to ensure that the  
14 departments are well synced (i.e., Relvas et al., 2010).

15         While coaches are important in supporting players further support staff is  
16 required and perhaps someone specifically responsible for transition players. Players  
17 desire support, communication, and someone to speak with about more than just their  
18 football. While transition coaches have become increasingly popular, I fear that their  
19 role is to become another coach that strictly helps players on pitch development. The  
20 evidence from this PhD suggests that on-pitch development comes relatively  
21 straightforward through opportunity to play senior football (see Chapter 4). What is  
22 often lacking is the emotional support (see Morris et al., 2016). Tying psychological  
23 support to this transition would be a wise move by clubs to ensure this type of  
24 support is being met with expertise. In cases where this isn't possible attaching  
25 someone in a role focused on mentorship as was discussed previously (see Chapter 4



1 discussion). This could even come from a senior player as has become common with  
2 several examples in England of older players playing the U23's for this specific  
3 purpose (Fisher, 2021).

4         Finally, in addition to communication and providing support, managing  
5 individual transitions alongside organizational squad planning. In my experience this  
6 often requires someone oversee the transition players with great insight into pre-  
7 transition players, transition players, and the first team squad. First team staff largely  
8 focusing on the next result and results in general often leads to skepticism with  
9 young transitioning players. Further, the limited amount of data or match film, in  
10 senior competition, can lead to less knowledge about those players furthering coach's  
11 doubts. Having someone who is an advocate for those players, pushing for them to  
12 gain opportunity is important within the organizational structure.

13         Additionally, managing the individual's transitions and what will help them  
14 move closer to the first team level requires significant time and effort. As shown  
15 throughout this thesis different players might require different things with factors  
16 including, social dynamics, adaptation to senior football, motivation, training  
17 environments, dual careers, among others. From there individual considerations  
18 should be made for each player on what the appropriate steps are to move towards  
19 the first team. In some instances, and at specific times, it appears training with the  
20 first team should be a priority for a player, while in other instances and times it might  
21 be more beneficial for a player to be loaned or away on collaboration. How to  
22 navigate that complexity and the following up with each player requires significant  
23 time and engagement. Someone filling this role is key to the overall strategy and  
24 likely to be highly specific to each club and league.

## 1 **My Future Directions**

2           Five years ago, I began this process as a dual funded PhD working and  
3 researching within an English Football League club. Two weeks into moving from  
4 England to Sweden the academy director that brought me in was fired. After two and  
5 a half years of uncertainty and challenges the club decided to remove funding and  
6 moved back to Sweden where I began coaching senior football while writing my  
7 publications. I then moved to one of Stockholm's biggest clubs, AIK, as an academy  
8 coach where I met the sporting director for the women's team who was very  
9 interested in having psychology more present in the club. Later in the year I was  
10 promoted to U19 coach to work more in the transition phase, and the following year  
11 first team assistant coach while maintaining a role as psychologist in the girl's  
12 academy. Five months in I, along with the sporting director and head coach, were  
13 fired after a string of losses. Now I sit here, mostly in my favorite cafés in  
14 Stockholm, reflecting on my experiences and this thesis wondering what's next?

15           Much like the participants and players I have worked with since, I wonder is  
16 it worth it? The nature of professional football is ruthless not just for transitioning  
17 players but the staffs that do their best to support, push, and guide the players to  
18 achieving their potential. My current thoughts are along one of three paths: 1)  
19 sporting director, development coordinator, or academy director; 2) psychologist  
20 focusing on players in transition; 3) applied academia. Throughout my experience  
21 and research, I find it painfully frustrating how many environments are not  
22 conducive to player development and player wellbeing. Taking a role where I could  
23 be the one to set strategy, manage personnel, and guide player development would be  
24 interesting. The opportunity to use what I have learned through my research and  
25 experiences would almost be research in and of itself on how to implement much of

1 what I have just written about. Secondly, specializing in the transition phase and  
2 providing the support that the players desire would be a great fit. I enjoy working  
3 with players and being a psychologist more than coaching so being able to apply my  
4 knowledge and expertise to this demographic would be satisfying. Finally, a move  
5 into educating future coaches through academia could be an avenue to help them  
6 deal with the challenges I know exist in the real world.

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20           Fitness Infomration Technology

## 1 Appendix 1: PRISMA-ScR checklist

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
<b>TITLE</b>			
Title	1	Identify the report as a scoping review.	43-44
<b>ABSTRACT</b>			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary that includes (as applicable): background, objectives, eligibility criteria, sources of evidence, charting methods, results, and conclusions that relate to the review questions and objectives.	44
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known. Explain why the review questions/objectives lend themselves to a scoping review approach.	44-45
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the questions and objectives being addressed with reference to their key elements (e.g., population or participants, concepts, and context) or other relevant key elements used to conceptualize the review questions and/or objectives.	44-45
<b>METHODS</b>			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate whether a review protocol exists; state if and where it can be accessed (e.g., a Web address); and if available, provide registration information, including the registration number.	n/a
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify characteristics of the sources of evidence used as eligibility criteria (e.g., years considered, language, and publication status), and provide a rationale.	49
Information sources*	7	Describe all information sources in the search (e.g., databases with dates of coverage and contact with authors to identify additional sources), as well as the date the most recent search was executed.	49-50
Search	8	Present the full electronic search strategy for at least 1 database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	49-50
Selection of sources of evidence†	9	State the process for selecting sources of evidence (i.e., screening and eligibility) included in the scoping review.	50-51
Data charting process‡	10	Describe the methods of charting data from the included sources of evidence (e.g., calibrated forms or forms that have been tested by the team before their use, and whether data charting was done independently or in duplicate) and any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	53 + figure 4
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought and any assumptions and simplifications made.	53



SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
Critical appraisal of individual sources of evidence§	12	If done, provide a rationale for conducting a critical appraisal of included sources of evidence; describe the methods used and how this information was used in any data synthesis (if appropriate).	n/a
Synthesis of results	13	Describe the methods of handling and summarizing the data that were charted.	53
<b>RESULTS</b>			
Selection of sources of evidence	14	Give numbers of sources of evidence screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the review, with reasons for exclusions at each stage, ideally using a flow diagram.	52
Characteristics of sources of evidence	15	For each source of evidence, present characteristics for which data were charted and provide the citations.	63+ table 1&2
Critical appraisal within sources of evidence	16	If done, present data on critical appraisal of included sources of evidence (see item 12).	n/a
Results of individual sources of evidence	17	For each included source of evidence, present the relevant data that were charted that relate to the review questions and objectives.	Table 1&2
Synthesis of results	18	Summarize and/or present the charting results as they relate to the review questions and objectives.	63-72
<b>DISCUSSION</b>			
Summary of evidence	19	Summarize the main results (including an overview of concepts, themes, and types of evidence available), link to the review questions and objectives, and consider the relevance to key groups.	72-73
Limitations	20	Discuss the limitations of the scoping review process.	80
Conclusions	21	Provide a general interpretation of the results with respect to the review questions and objectives, as well as potential implications and/or next steps.	82-83
<b>FUNDING</b>			
Funding	22	Describe sources of funding for the included sources of evidence, as well as sources of funding for the scoping review. Describe the role of the funders of the scoping review.	n/a

1 Appendix 2: Loan transitions addition to scoping review

2 **Introduction**

3 As discussed in the scoping review chapter a secondary search was conducted  
4 in June 2022 to update the review paper for the purpose of the thesis. To update the  
5 scoping review, we used the same search process, as well as the same inclusion and  
6 exclusion criteria. However, during the screening of articles and study selection stage  
7 two articles were screened that did not match the initial inclusion criteria yet were  
8 determined to be important to the scoping review process. These two articles targeted  
9 a new area of research within the junior-to-senior transition, that is also discussed in  
10 our empirical work, loan transitions. We, therefore, made the decision to review the  
11 studies separately in an appendix to the scoping review.

12 **Methodology**

13 **Charting the Data**

14 The data was charted in the same way as the original scoping review with a  
15 summary provided in Table A1.

16 **Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results**

17 The reporting of the results was again done thematically (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005;  
18 Levac et al., 2010). The two major themes of the review were again used, athlete  
19 experience and organizational processes. Following the charting of the data it was  
20 compared to the data of the original scoping review and it was determined that the  
21 same themes were present in the loan transition papers. We, therefore, chose to use  
22 the same themes and presentation of the data.

23

24

25

1 Table A1: Overview of included studies – loan transitions

Loan studies					
Kent et al., 2022	Football England	Explore experiences of stress during the loan transition and coping strategies used by athletes	<i>n</i> =11 athletes	Critical realism / Semi structured interview	Themes were developed across three themes, loan transition demands, individual differences, and loan resources. The loan transfer exposed players to further demands that could aid their coping with future transitions. Practitioners were encouraged to work with players during the transition to help build resources and support individual transitions.
Prendergast & Gibson, 2022	Football England	Explore loan transition of U23 players into professional football	<i>n</i> =9 athletes	Interpretive / Semi structured interview	Four overarching themes were developed: the need for additional experiences for U23 players, the impact of different socio-cultural environments on a player's development, the role of non-league loans in player's physical development, and the perception of non-league football clubs and supporting players during the loan. Overall, loan transitions were important to further aid the JST providing unique development opportunities not available in the U23s. Further, support is crucial to managing the overall loan period to get the best possible development outcomes.

2

## 1 **Results**

### 2 **Athlete Experience**

#### 3 ***Increased Demands***

4           Playing on loan required players to adapt to a style of play that in the end was  
5 focused on results, which was not the case in the U23 where development and  
6 performance was more in focus. The added pressure of winning games increased the  
7 demand on players actions on the pitch which they felt would aid their transition to  
8 first team football in their parent club (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). The loan itself  
9 was seen as a demand to players in their desire to impress their parent club to gain  
10 further opportunity in the future. Coping with the pressure was a key demand for  
11 players during the loan (Kent et al., 2022). Further, the physicality of the game  
12 played at senior level was not something players could experience in U23 or age  
13 group football which provided important learning to developing players. While this  
14 new style of play also came with adaptation to higher required fitness levels  
15 (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022).

#### 16 ***Reduced Playing Time***

17           Often loan experiences were the first time that players faced de-selection by  
18 not making match day squads for their loan clubs. In age groups football, playing  
19 time was seen as important to development and, perhaps, a given, while the reality of  
20 winning games on loan meant that young players could be dropped (Prendergast &  
21 Gibson, 2022). Players believed that even in times of reduced playing time it was  
22 important to continue to push to develop and stay ready. This could be done through,  
23 for example, goal setting or establishing purpose to their loan period (Kent et al.,  
24 2022).

#### 25 ***Senior Environment***

1           Having spent time on loan players experienced a different environment  
2 within the first team dressing room than they had previously, which required  
3 adaptation. This often came with harsher more direct communication from  
4 teammates and a culture focused on winning (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Also  
5 present was the greater reality of competing directly with teammates for playing time  
6 and managing the social dynamic of taking another player's place while being on  
7 loan (Kent et al., 2022). Socially adapting to this environment was key (Kent et al.,  
8 2022; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Coaches believed that loans were key in  
9 developing psycho-social skills to cope with the first team environment through  
10 experiences that were not possible in the academy (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022).  
11 This was echoed by players who believed how they carried themselves in the new  
12 environment was important to how they would fit in. For example, being true to  
13 yourself or being more outgoing (Kent et al., 2022).

#### 14 ***Support***

15           Primary resources during the loan came through the form of external support.  
16 Loan managers guided players during the loan and managed the relationship with the  
17 loan club (Kent et al., 2022). Support was important from various sources, including  
18 from senior players in their parent clubs sharing their experiences in order to help  
19 young players prepare for a loan transition (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). In some  
20 examples senior players in loan clubs could help players fit into their new  
21 environments (Kent et al., 2022).

22           A major challenge in support during the transition was the reality that, in  
23 some cases, players were required to move cities while on loan. This came with the  
24 loss of their usual support network and having to manage new living conditions that  
25 might not always be conducive to the lifestyle they want to live (Kent et al., 2022).

## 1 **Organizational Processes**

### 2 *Preparation for Transition*

3 Kent et al. (2022) developed a theme of resources prior to the loan beginning.  
4 Informational support was seen as important to gain an understanding the rationale of  
5 the loan as well as giving advice and social support for the loan period. Players  
6 discussed the challenge to their ego having to leave a parent club to go down leagues  
7 to gain experience. Finally, organizational support was important in helping players  
8 end up in a place that will aid their development and give them the experiences they  
9 need.

### 10 *Communication between Parent and Loan Club*

11 In the case of loan transitions communication between the parent club and  
12 loan club were shown to be important in managing the success of these transitions.  
13 Parent clubs gaining information from the loan club about the player helped provide  
14 better developmental and wellbeing outcomes during the transition (Kent et al.,  
15 2022; Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Specifically, injuries and medical support was  
16 important as often players trusted the help from their parent club due to their  
17 previous experiences with those staff (Kent et al., 2022).

### 18 *Opportunity*

19 An interesting aspect of the loan transition was the suggestion from managers  
20 that the lack of opportunity to play might be a valuable part of a loan process.  
21 Learning to cope with setback and gaining resilience being key constructs that are  
22 important to build in this transition (Prendergast & Gibson, 2022). Players, however,  
23 did not always see it this way with stress mounting due to a lack of game time and a  
24 desire to impress on loan to gain future opportunity with their parent club (Kent et  
25 al., 2022). Yet again, managers and coaches, discussed the regularity of seeing

- 1 players return from loan psychologically stronger due to the full experience,
- 2 including de-selection (Prendergast & Gibson, et al., 2022).

## 1 Appendix 3: Supplementary materials to chapter 4

2 **Introduction**

3 As a part of the publication of this study, the participants who did not  
 4 complete the full transition (those not receiving a professional contract) were  
 5 removed from the main document. This decision was made in order to provide as  
 6 much of our data in the main publication as possible. We, therefore, used  
 7 supplementary materials to further tell the story of the players that did not complete  
 8 the full story. The full supplementary data is provided here in this appendix.

9 **Released Players**

10 Three players were not offered professional contracts following their two-  
 11 year apprenticeship. John was informed of this decision during week 8 of the study  
 12 while David and George were informed at the end of season reviews during week 13.  
 13 Over the course of the study these three players reported dealing with a pressure to  
 14 perform on the pitch in order to earn a professional contract (see table 3). All three  
 15 players reported their goal was to play professional football and that this was  
 16 something that they had been working towards since they joined the youth academy.  
 17 While they all reported this pressure as a part of their experience, they had individual  
 18 differences in how it was perceived, as well as how they attempted to cope with the  
 19 pressure to earn a contract.

20 Table A2: High and lower order themes for non-contracted players

Phase	Higher order themes	Lower order themes
Academy phase – no contract	Pressure	View of mistakes Plan B Coping Limited time



1 ***John***

2 From the first week of the study John described the pressure of the contract  
3 decision, “it’s difficult because we are coming to decisions soon. I need to make sure  
4 I am playing well as often as I can.” While the pressure was present in week one so  
5 too was his focus on his future as a whole, “I want to make sure I have all my options  
6 open.” For him this meant exploring other options such as university, because, “I  
7 don’t want to be in a position where I don’t earn a contract and have nothing to fall  
8 back on.” Throughout the study the balance of these two areas were at the center of  
9 John’s narrative.

10 The pending decision resulted in him counting down sessions, saying, “if you  
11 have a bad session, you think that’s one session I’ve wasted.” The pressure combined  
12 with the limited time remaining led to difficulty when interpreting mistakes, “you  
13 have that thought of, if I make a mistake, they are going to use it against me, that  
14 helps towards their decision. It’s difficult.” Following his release, he reflected on the  
15 pressure.

16 You are having that fear of are you going to make it? Am I going to get the  
17 contract? It wasn’t like I lost enjoyment, but it was frustrating. If you have a  
18 bad session, that’s one less session that you can prove yourself. The  
19 enjoyment was there, well, in terms of the fear it does put that enjoyment  
20 down a bit.

21 John believed that coping with pressure was a key factor in the transition and  
22 earning a contract, however, it was not something he learned until late in his time in  
23 the academy. “I think it’s how you deal with the pressure. How you either use it as  
24 an advantage or not.” One way John attempted to cope with this was by exploring his  
25 career options, which had a positive influence both on and off the pitch.

1 “Psychologically, I think it’s allowed me to play really good football knowing that if  
2 it doesn’t happen, I have somewhere else to go”, and later, “it reassured me that I can  
3 go out and play with freedom.” Further, he described how he might feel without the  
4 security of knowing he had other options, “if this was all I was going for then I  
5 would probably be very uptight, very stressed, very worried about making mistakes,  
6 and having a bad training session.”

7 *George*

8         In week 3, George stated he was behind in earning a contract. “I have a lot to  
9 do to get a professional contract.” That same week George admitted, “If I’m being  
10 honest, I don’t think I am going to get a professional contract” citing injury and  
11 performance. Also, in week 3, George was looking into other options including  
12 university.

13         It’s really important. You need something to do. The amount of people that  
14 become a professional footballer is so slim compared to the amount of people  
15 who try. If you have a plan B, it’s there now, you just focus on your football.  
16 You don’t have to worry about what you would do if you weren’t to get a  
17 contract.

18         For George the pressure was a result of the environment in elite football. “It’s  
19 so intense every day, I lose the enjoyment of it and that’s why I make mistakes and  
20 don’t play as well.”

21         However, in his mind the pressure in the environment was likely to be ever present in  
22 elite football.

23         You will always be in high pressure environments. If you crumble under the  
24 environment, then you aren’t going to make it to the very top. If you succeed

1           under the high pressure, show what you can do and what you are best at then  
2           you are going to see yourself progressing.

3           As a result, George believed the pressure led to a choice on how you  
4           approach this period. “It is mentality. Do you worry more about making a mistake or  
5           not worry if you do make a mistake?” Throughout the study, George linked pressure  
6           to enjoyment and his view of mistakes.

7           I almost need to forget or not forget, but not think about the pressure of me  
8           not getting a pro and just enjoy the last few months. That’s when I’m playing  
9           the best when I am enjoying football.

10          Towards the end of the study, he reflected that he learned these coping  
11          strategies late in the process, “I reckon I could have developed this sooner” and “it’s  
12          taken me awhile to realize it, but when I did realize it, I’ve enjoyed it a lot more.”

13          **David**

14          David described how the pressure impacted him early on.

15          I try not to stress when things don’t go my way. Recently, I’ve been feeling  
16          when I haven’t trained well that I get stressed. I think that’s one more session  
17          down, another reason for them not to give me one.

18          This counting down of sessions led to the stress growing over the course of  
19          the study. “When you don’t perform well your stress goes crazy, because there isn’t  
20          long before decisions are made. You get a bit worried thinking, are they interested in  
21          me?” This seemed to continuously grow, “when I think that’s the last review before  
22          (the decision) that makes it even more stressful.”

23          Off the pitch the stress levels have gone crazy. I don’t think about it, but I can  
24          feel myself being stressed. I think why am I stressed? My first thought is  
25          football and then I find myself thinking about it for ages.



1           Several coping strategies were reported including having a plan B and  
2 mindset. John and George both developed a plan B, which in their view helped them  
3 feel more relaxed and play with more freedom. David chose not to explore future  
4 options, believing it was giving up. All three believed dealing with this pressure was  
5 a key characteristic in earning a contract. John and George both believed they  
6 improved their mindsets to deal with the pressure from the environment, however, in  
7 both cases it seemed to be tied to their release or feeling they wouldn't earn a  
8 contract.

9           In closing, these findings add to our understanding of the pressure  
10 encountered prior to earning a contract. The three participants who earned contracts  
11 mentioned pressure as a factor, however each believed the majority of that was  
12 relieved by the early contract as they shifted their attention to adapting to men's  
13 football and preparing for the first team environment. The remaining three, without  
14 contracts, detailed their feelings and challenges with the pressure of limited time  
15 remaining to earn a contract. In their narratives there was limited discussion of  
16 preparation and adaptation to senior football as they were primarily focused on  
17 proving they should earn a contract. However, as none of these participants received  
18 contracts the ramifications of this as it relates to their continuing transition is  
19 unknown.

## 20   **Individual summaries for additional context**

### 21           **Individual Summaries**

#### 22           *George*

23           George joined the academy when he was 9 years old. At the start of the study,  
24 he was coming back from injury and not receiving playing time in the under 18's.  
25 This was something the felt greatly limited his opportunity to earn a professional

1 contract and in week 2 of the study he admitted he didn't believe he would earn a  
2 contract. At this time, he was also looking into backup plans should he not earn a  
3 contract. His options were University in the U.K or attempting to find another  
4 professional club.

5 His primary focus he stated at the beginning of the study was to enjoy  
6 football more and not let the intense environment get to him. The pressure of the  
7 environment was something he discussed often. This pressure resulted in being  
8 fixated on doing everything right, worrying about making mistakes, and being  
9 worried about the impression he was giving to coaches. With the belief that he  
10 wouldn't earn a contract, he believed he had nothing to lose which eliminated some  
11 of the pressure allowing him to play with more freedom. Later in the study, he  
12 discussed how mentality is everything in professional football, and dealing with this  
13 pressure was a key trait of those who make it. Despite feeling he was behind and not  
14 going to earn a pro contract his focus remained on becoming a professional  
15 footballer. Towards the end of the study, he was looking into exit trials and  
16 Universities with football programs to find another route back into professional  
17 football. Ultimately, in the final week, George was released.

18

1 *John*

2           John had been a member of the academy since he was 9 years old. From the  
3 first week John expressed the presence of pressure to perform in order to earn a  
4 contract, and the stress from the limited time remaining before the decision. Proving  
5 why he should earn a contract was a priority. While three players earned early pro  
6 contracts, this was not something that he felt impacted his pending decision.

7           During the first week, he also discussed the importance of exploring all  
8 options for his future. In his case, this was University in the U.K. or a scholarship to  
9 the U.S. This plan B was important to ensure that he had a future regardless of the  
10 decision at the club, something that seemed to be in doubt. When asked about his  
11 contract and future, he said his future was “open”. Having a plan B was something  
12 that he thought helped him cope with the pressure to perform by knowing he would  
13 still have a future if he were to be released. This he thought helped him play with  
14 more freedom.

15           When discussing the potential transition to the first team he believed dealing  
16 with the locker culture and being amongst experienced pros, as well as the  
17 competitive nature of trying to take senior players places would be most challenging.  
18 He also believed there would be significantly less support when compared with the  
19 academy. He also reported feeling unprepared for such a transition and that it wasn't  
20 something focused on.

21           In week 8 he was released from the club. He believed time out injured in the  
22 middle of the season and not recovering form was the key factor in his release. He  
23 also discussed the challenges he had in dealing with the pressure to perform where  
24 every move was judged by the staff making contract decisions. Dealing with the  
25 pressure, he believed, was a key factor in those who would earn professional

1 contracts. Having a plan B available was also something he reported to help him  
2 upon his release.

3 *David*

4

5         During the first week of the study he was told he would go on loan. A week  
6 later three early contracts were offered leaving David as the only player on loan to  
7 not have a contract. He believed he need to adapt to the differences in men's football  
8 and perform well to positively influence his contract decision. A primary adjustment  
9 was making decisions himself without the help of coaches. During training with the  
10 academy, he stated he had to show that he was better because of his loan.

11         Throughout the study, his primary focus was proving to the staff why he  
12 should earn a professional contract. This led to pressure to perform and substantial  
13 stress with the limited time remaining before the decision. His view was coaching  
14 staff were judging every move and that they viewed mistakes as reasons he shouldn't  
15 earn a pro contract. As time went on, he stressed about bad training sessions and  
16 mistakes with the thought that it was one less chance to prove his worthiness. These  
17 views led David to become too safe and retreat into a shell. A criticism he often  
18 received from the coaching staff. During this time, he also discussed that exploring a  
19 plan B was accepting failure and choose to remain 100% focused on earning a  
20 contract. Over time he reported it being more and more difficult to deal with the  
21 pressure and judgment, and his worries only grew when told he was on the fence of  
22 earning a contract near the end of the season.

23         He struggled to seek support from the club as he believed he couldn't share  
24 negative thoughts with the coaching staff as they needed to have the best possible  
25 opinion of him. Further, he rarely talked at home as he didn't want to cause his  
26 family stress. Individually he discussed not developing any coping strategies to deal



1 with the pressure. Finally, in week 12 he was released, saying after he enjoyed  
2 feeling more relaxed and was unsure if he wanted to return to football and the  
3 pressure.

#### 4 *Oliver Pre-transition*

5         Oliver learned he would go on loan in the first week of the study. While on  
6 loan he learned found the game completely different, primarily the physicality, but  
7 also different tactics and general style of play. Later, this shifted to focus more on  
8 decision making. In the adjustment to men's football the under 23's cup experiences  
9 were also important by mimicking first team tactics, working with first team coaches,  
10 and analyzing the match with those coaches. In week three Oliver signed a two-year  
11 professional contract. While he discussed struggling at times with the pressure and  
12 judgment others had, he felt he could now relax and focus on preparing for preseason  
13 with the first team. He believed the first team environment would be harsh and  
14 reported feeling alone when training up with the first team. This environment  
15 required him to be more selfish and ruthless in taking opportunities. During the  
16 transition, he thought it would be important that he viewed himself as a target to get  
17 into the team. He knew it would be a challenging process and how he viewed himself  
18 was important. Starting with the first team meant having to prove yourself to new  
19 teammates and coaches in order to fit in socially and access support. This social  
20 aspect was a worry, particularly when talking about senior players. In general, he  
21 attempted to step out of his comfort zone in the academy to better prepare him for  
22 that experience the following year. When adapting to the first team he believed he  
23 was gaining valuable experience from his loan and that he could take confidence  
24 from when joining the first team. Developing confidence and his psychological

1 approach to the game was something he discussed as important for his personal  
2 development in handling the challenges and performing more consistently.

3 *Oliver post-transition*

4         One of his first impressions upon joining the first team was the feeling of  
5 being at the bottom of the pile. There were nerves and worries about how he  
6 performed, specifically as it related to fitting in with new teammates and the  
7 impression that senior players would have of him. He believed it important to train  
8 well to gain traction socially. After a few weeks he reported settling in more and no  
9 longer being nervous. He believed it was important to overcome the feeling of  
10 inferiority when around the senior, established players. During week 5 he learned he  
11 would again go out on loan. This loan period came with added pressure now that he  
12 had a pro contract and the need to prove he was able to handle lower-league football  
13 in order to gain an opportunity with the first team. Within first team training, he  
14 found how important results were, and it was no longer about just doing the right  
15 thing. He believed there was less support in the first team and while you needed to  
16 cope on your own it would be beneficial to have someone to talk with. Spherically,  
17 he was interested in receiving more psychological support and someone to talk with  
18 about what he was experiencing.

19         As the transition continued, he noted that playing on loan helped him perform  
20 better and more consistently in Under 23's cup games. However, the time away from  
21 the club led to him feeling he hadn't adapted socially to the first team. While this  
22 improved, even in the last week he felt he wasn't there in terms of fitting into the  
23 group. Another issue was the lack of opportunity in first team training. Often not  
24 training in full sessions or coming in for parts, while on Fridays he was mimicking  
25 the opponent and rarely playing in his position. He described this as demoralizing as

1 he had no opportunity to impress. Again, he had a heavy focus on developing his  
2 mindset and psychology. Repeating often he just had to do his best and keep  
3 perspective on the long term. He also believed the challenges of the transition made  
4 him mentally stronger and more resilient.

5 *Charlie Pre-transition*

6 Charlie earned a contract in week three. From this early point, he focused on  
7 preparing for being a pro the following year. He was interested in learning what the  
8 manager would want from a player in his position, as well as things he thought were  
9 good and bad in a player. While he was not out on loan, he believed he had  
10 developed his game to suit the demands of men's football. He was involved in the  
11 Under 23's up which for him was valuable to the adaptation to men's football,  
12 mimicking first team tactics and style. It was also an opportunity to work more  
13 closely with first team coaches. While it also had the benefit of being around senior  
14 pros in the squad with the opportunity to speak with them in a less intimidating  
15 environment. He was the only player to actively seek out support or relationships  
16 with senior players, as well as watch first team training and matches to learn. The  
17 coaching staff saw him playing a similar role to a current player and due to time  
18 spent rehabbing, he developed a relationship with that player. Someone he felt was  
19 open to helping him and providing insight on life in the first team under the current  
20 manager.

21 His aim with the transition was to get into the first team match day squad as  
22 quickly as possible. The biggest challenge to that was adapting to the style of play,  
23 while also needing to learn how things worked within the first team. He believed  
24 maintaining confidence would be key in the transition and felt he had developed his  
25 mindset while in the academy. Using the intensity, he trained at within the academy

1 he felt he was more prepared for training with the first team, something he could take  
2 confidence from. He also mentioned becoming less worried about things he could  
3 not control and developed a mindset that was simply focused on doing his best every  
4 day, something that would be important the following year.

5 *Charlie post-transition*

6 At the start of preseason, Charlie believed it was an important year to break  
7 into the first team, however, in the second week, he learned he would go on loan. He  
8 was not on loan during his time in the academy and was excited about the  
9 opportunity for regular playing time in men's football. He believed there was a good  
10 social dynamic in the first team and found it easy to speak with people and develop  
11 relationships, even with senior players. This was key in his mind to make the  
12 transition smoother, something he acknowledged later in the study. He believed this  
13 was one element of the transition with the other being the on-pitch demands. The  
14 training tempo was something that took a while to get used to and something that  
15 improved in part by his regular playing on loan. He was noticing differences and  
16 improvement both in first team training and Under 23's cup games. He reported that  
17 the first team environment and the loan environment were harsher than the academy  
18 and large focus on winning, something that while important in the Under 18's was on  
19 a whole other level. However, he repeated his idea that just doing his best every day  
20 was good enough. He also felt prepared for the demands of the first team and loan,  
21 acknowledging playing up the previous year as helpful.

22 As the transition progressed it became challenging to maintain confidence  
23 while being on the outside looking in with the first team. Often being overlooked or  
24 not receiving opportunities in training while putting in maximum effort was  
25 something, he found difficult. He believed it important to keep going and give his

1 best through this tough period. He mentioned the desire to have more support for  
2 young pros and it would be beneficial to talk more with coaches or other staff. One  
3 primary outlet during this time was the regular playing time on loan that he could put  
4 his attention towards.

5 *Thomas pre-transition*

6 Thomas learned in the first week he would go on loan, something that was  
7 exciting as he felt he needed a new challenge. The following week he earned his pro  
8 contract. This came as a result of hard work and changing his habits after he was told  
9 he was behind early on. With a contract, he was now preparing and focusing on  
10 being ready for preseason. While on loan he struggled to gain playing time leading to  
11 him being very frustrated by the experience. He also believed the limited  
12 appearances late in games came with the pressure to show why he should get more  
13 playing time. At the end of the year, he gained the chance to start a run of matches  
14 which helped him feel more comfortable in the changing room and enjoy the  
15 experience more. He believed the men's game required adapting to as it was a  
16 completely different style of play, however upon playing more he found it easier than  
17 he expected. He also was involved in the Under 23's cup which further helped this  
18 adaptation by mimicking the first team tactics.

19 Socially he only had relationships with the young pros and thought it harder  
20 to develop relationships with senior players. However, he felt the following year this  
21 would be important and his responsibility to approach them. He believed it was  
22 important to get to know the lads in order to train with more quality. Support was  
23 another key area where he thought it would be more difficult next year as coaches  
24 wouldn't approach him as much as they did in the academy. He did have a good  
25 personal support network with his parents and host family being there for him. His

1 move away from home at a young age was something he thought was a benefit to his  
2 transition in that he was more self-reliant and mature. He also discussed dealing with  
3 key challenges such as injury and lack of playing time in the academy as ways he  
4 had developed resilience to deal with the challenges he was facing now and will face  
5 throughout the transition.

6 *Thomas post-transition*

7         At the start of his contract, he felt nervous but settled in with the first few  
8 weeks. He believed there were lots of little groups, but that it wasn't an issue getting  
9 along with people. Training with the pros brought out more drive and excitement,  
10 something that he thought would help him improve. He learned in the third week he  
11 would go on loan; he was less excited about this and wanted more opportunities to  
12 prove himself in the first team. Now that he was loaned out, he felt the first team had  
13 less interest in him and wasn't bothered by what he was doing. Something that he  
14 found difficult was being on the outside looking in, saying it was lonely in football  
15 when you are not involved. He thought more support could be provided for young  
16 players as this process was so difficult. Specifically, he mentioned how the club or  
17 coaches should approach and talk with them more. He again found himself not  
18 playing on loan which only caused his frustrations to grow with no outlet to play or  
19 focus on. He mentioned again that he has always had setbacks and felt his mentality  
20 was good and would help him deal with this period. He talked a lot about needing to  
21 be patient and just keep going believing his talent would get him an opportunity  
22 eventually. Support emerged from the under 23's changing room where the players  
23 could talk about their experiences with many in similar spots in their careers. He  
24 thought this didn't solve anything but was nice to talk with the boys and share his  
25 experience. Handling the day-to-day life of being a pro and the training demands was

1 easier than he thought, but the elusive opportunity was the biggest challenge. He  
2 talked a lot about taking opportunity being the most important factor in professional  
3 football.

4

1 Appendix 4: Supplementary materials to chapter 5

2 **Contents of Supplementary Materials**

3 Theme development

4 Interview Guides

5 Results

6 Discussion



1 Table A3: Theme Development

<b>Raw Themes</b>	<b>Lower Order Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Lower Order Themes</b>	<b>Higher Order Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Higher Order Themes</b>
Frustration without playing time Maintain patience Realistic expectations Cope with only training Take opportunities Realization moment in squad Carry on	Discussing the opportunity or lack of opportunity to play for the first team in competitive matches	Playing time	Any experience or discussion of opportunity, lack of opportunity, or perception of opportunity as it relates to the first team	Opportunity
Unknown schedule Less training sessions Less chance more pressure	Discussing the opportunity or lack of opportunity to train with the first team squad including the experiences relating to those opportunities	Training opportunities		

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Away from first team	or lack there of			
Prove yourself				
Show you belong				
Extra training with first team staff	Discussing the U23 group as a resource to development, motivation, or opportunity to prove readiness for the first team	U23 group	Discussing resources and opportunities provided by the club to further development, coping with lack of opportunity, or helping gain route into the first team	Organizational Strategy
In the spotlight				
Adaptation aid				
Less intimidating environment				
Senior player resource available				
Individual development plan				
Playing time outlet	Discussing the loan moves as resource to development, motivation, or coping	Loan moves		
Implement learning				
Pressurized environment				

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Adaptation to

men's game

Winning

importance

Frustration

without playing

time

Normalcy to

week

Post loan limbo

Mature

decisions

Physicality

Risk/reward

decisions

Mentally

challenging

Tactical shift

Winning focus

Different style

of play

Play

percentages

Learn how to

impact game

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Discussing  
men's  
football  
including the  
need to adapt  
from academy  
football and  
the specific  
demands that  
require  
adaptation

Men's  
football

Discussing  
overall factors  
that surround  
the first team  
culture  
including  
performance  
demands, off  
pitch  
environment  
shifts, and the  
specifics of  
what one  
might need to  
adapt to in  
this new  
culture

Performance  
Culture

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Pressure to impress	Discussing the increase in demands in daily training when joining the first team and challenges that develop throughout the transition with these demands	Training demands		
Less mistakes allowed				
Increased standard				
Train for yourself				
Away on loan				
challenge				
No longer the best				
Concentration levels				
Daunting changing room	Discussing the overall environment of the first team, it's demands, and how one might need to adjust to this culture from time spent in the academy	First team environment		
Selfishness				
Harshness				
Fight for places				
Increased responsibility				
Age difference	Discussing social dynamics, factors, and relationships between players during the transition	Social dynamics	Discussing relationships within the club with key stakeholders during the transition including	Relationships
New relationships				

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Together		teammates and coaches
ness		
change		
Perform		
to fit in		
Social skills		
Make		
connections		
Prep		
experiences		
Young pro	Discussing	Teammate
group	support	Support
Academy	gained or	
teammates	desired from	
Same position	teammates	
connection	during the	
Football friends	transition	
Connect with	including how	
senior players	one might	
Senior player	seek support	
wisdom	from	
Difficult to	teammates	
approach		
Speed up	Discussing	Senior
development	support	players
Learn ways of	received or	
working	desired	
	specifically	
	from senior	
	players (first	
	team regulars	
	or those seen	
	as in the first	
	team) during	
	the transition	
	including how	
	one might	
	seek support	
	from these	
	players	

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Helping hand

Academy development focus	Discussing support received, desired, or challenges to receiving	Coaching staff
Shift in support academy to first team	support from coaching staff during the transition including differences	
Trust in support	from academy to first team	
Business like relationships in first team	and where one might turn to find support	

Football only

focus in first

team

Limited support

available in first

team

23s manager as

middleman

Initiate support

yourself

Trust key in support	Discussing a lack of trust specifically as it relates to coaching staff and their role as gatekeepers	Lack of trust from in coaching staff	Discussing the power dynamic between coaches and players and how one might	Power Dynamics
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Unwilling to share with coaches	of opportunity and/or how one might seek support outside of the structure of the club because of this issue		overcome this issue or seek support elsewhere	
Coaches as gatekeeper to opportunity				
Find external support				
Psych support				
Priorities	Discussing the specific challenge of long-term and short-term development or goals as it relates to contract length	Long-term vs short-term	Discussing how contracts influence experiences throughout the transition	Contracts
Long-term goal				
Balance short vs long term				
Development or perform				
Mixed messages				
Early contract decision				
Earn 2 <sup>nd</sup> contract	Discussing the desire to gain financial security as the transition progresses and you earn new contracts	Financial security		
Financial security				
Less money in contracts				
(league rules)				

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Limited advancement opportunity				
Handling adversity	Discussing specific personal challenges or difficulties during the transition	Personal challenges	Discussing personal factors of the transition specifically individual aspects that are challenging the transition and/or how they might cope individually with the transition	Personal Factors
Fan abuse				
Limited opportunity				
Demoted				
Not willing to seek support				
Pressure to perform				
Confidence you are on par				
Surviving on your own				
Personal development	Discussing specific individual or personal coping strategies that players used during the transition to overcome personal or general difficulties	Individual coping strategies		
Willingness to be uncomfortable				
Goal setting				

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Ownership of

your career

Reflection

Enjoyment

Willing to make

mistakes

Proactiveness

Healthy

competitiveness

Realistic

expectations

Parent support

challenges

Family

emotional

support Non-

football friends

Discussing  
personal  
support  
networks,  
presence or  
absence, or  
how a player  
interacts with  
their network  
outside the  
club

Personal  
support  
networks

Logistical

support from

parents

Held

accountable by

parents

Academy player

Young pro label

Discussing  
one's identity  
during the  
transition and

Identity

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Post loan limbo	how it may or may not			
Lost identity in transition	change throughout the transition			
Self-driven late in career EFL	Discussing motivation as a factor in the transition and	Motivational changes	Discussing motivation during or for the transition	Motivation
more self-driven	how it may change or			
First team place	fluctuate throughout			
Do it for yourself	the duration of the transition or			
Enjoyment	differ by phase			
Not complacent				
Application to the craft	Prove yourself			
Education as important as football	Discussing education or other career developments throughout the transition	Education	Discussing maintaining a dual career or education on the side during the transition	Dual Career
University courses while in first team	as how it may or may not affect the overall transition			
Future career				
Safety net				
Set up life after football				

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## Interview Guides

### Preparation Interview 1

#### *Introduction*

Can you describe your footballing career?

- Meaningful experiences or moments in the academy

Can you describe your transition from Academy to First Team?

- Professional contract
- Under 21/23 experiences
- First Team experiences
- How has it evolved (since contract)?

#### *Facilitating the transition*

What factors do you feel are important in making this transition?

- o Are there specific individuals who helped? Who, why, how?

#### *Challenges*

What challenges have you faced in this transition (earning a contract)?

How do you prepare for the move full time to the first team?

Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

#### *Minimizing Talent Loss*

What do athletes who transition successfully do that others do not (earning a contract)?

What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about to make a similar transition?

#### *Summary*

Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

1 **Preparation Interview 2**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
6 or clarify?

7

8 *Quotes from previous interview to elaborate on...*

9

10 Can you describe where you are currently in the transition from Academy to First  
11 Team?

12 - How has it evolved?

13

14 Can you explain what is life like as an academy player with a pro contract?

15 - Is anything different? What is the same?

16

17 ***Facilitating the transition***

18

19 What do you feel is important in this stage of transition?

20

21 ***Challenges***

22

23 What challenges have you faced in this phase of transition?

24

25 Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

26

27 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

28

29 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

30

31 ***Summary***

32

33 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

34

35 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Preparation Interview 3**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
6 or clarify?

7

8 *Quotes from previous interviews*

9

10 ***Future life***

11

12 How do you currently see your future at the club?

13 - In professional football?

14

15 Have you received any information on what's expected of you going forward?

16

17 We talked about your time in the academy and preparing for the full time move...

18 - What will the first and second years be about?

19 - What do you think will be important for you personally?

20 - What support or help might you need?

21 - What barriers or challenges will be in your way?

22 o Are these different that previously?

23

24 What will be the biggest challenges to furthering your transition?

25

26 From your experience, why might players struggle in the full time move to the First  
27 Team?

28

29 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

30

31 What do athletes who adapt in transition successfully do that others do not?

32 - What could be done to help those who don't make it succeed?

33

34 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

35

36 Is there anything else that would you want tell someone about how to adapt to the  
37 First Team?

38

39 ***Summary***

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41 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

42

43 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Orientation Interview 1**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Can you describe your footballing career?

6 - Meaningful experiences or moments in the academy

7

8 Can you describe your transition from Academy to First Team?

9 - Professional contract

10 - Under 21/23 experiences

11 - First Team experiences

12 - How has it evolved (since contract)?

13

14 Describe this past year as a full time first team player...

15

16 ***Facilitating the transition***

17

18 What factors do you feel were important in making this transition?

19 ○ Are there specific individuals who helped? Who, why, how?

20

21 What did you know about this transition prior joining the First Team for preseason?

22

23 ***Challenges***

24

25 What challenges have you faced in this transition moving to the first team?

26

27 How did you cope with the demands of this level of football?

28

29 Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

30 - How? Specifics? Systematic/organizational support?

31

32 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

33

34 What do athletes who transition successfully do that others do not in the first year?

35

36 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

37

38 Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about to make a similar transition?

39

40

41 ***Summary***

42

43 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

44

45 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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48 **Orientation Interview 2**

49

50 ***Introduction***

1  
2 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
3 or clarify?

4  
5 *Quotes from the previous interview...*

6  
7 Can you describe where you are currently in the transition from Academy to First  
8 Team?

9 - How has it evolved?

10  
11 Can you explain what is life like as a First Year pro?

12 - Challenges of being a first-year pro

13 - Resources available to you

14  
15 ***Facilitating the transition***

16  
17 What factors do you feel are important in this stage of transition?

18  
19 What did you know about what life would be like as a first-year pro?

20  
21 Describe your experience trying to adjust to this new environment.

22  
23 ***Challenges***

24  
25 What challenges have you faced in this phase of transition?

26  
27 How did you cope with the demands of this level of football?

28  
29 Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

30 - How? Specifics? Systematic/organizational support?

31  
32 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

33  
34 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

35  
36 Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about joining the first  
37 team full time?

38  
39 ***Summary***

40  
41 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

42  
43 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Orientation Interview 3**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
6 or clarify?

7

8 ***Quotes from previous interviews***

9

10 ***Future life***

11

12 How do you currently see your future at the club?

13 - In professional football?

14

15 Have you received any information on what's expected of you going forward?

16

17 We talked about the first year...

18 - What will the second and third years be about?

19 - What do you think will be important for you personally?

20 - What support or help might you need?

21 - What barriers or challenges will be in your way?

22 o Are these different that previously?

23

24 What will be the biggest challenges to furthering your transition?

25

26 From your experience, why might players struggle to adapt further to the First Team  
27 and bridge the gap to that group?

28

29 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

30

31 What do athletes who adapt in transition successfully do that others do not?

32 - What could be done to help those who don't make it succeed?

33

34 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

35

36 Is there anything else that would you want tell someone about how to adapt to the  
37 First Team?

38

39 ***Summary***

40

41 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

42

43 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Adaptation Interview 1**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Can you describe your footballing career?

6

7 Talk about what it was like receiving your First Pro contract...

8

9 Can you describe your transition from Academy to First Team?

10 - When do you believe this transition began?

11 - How has it evolved?

12

13 Describe the experiences you have had out on loan...

14

15 Can you talk about how the academy and First Team are different?

16 - How are loan clubs different than First Team and/or academy?

17

18 ***Facilitating the transition***

19

20 What factors do you feel were important in making this transition?

21 ○ Are there specific individuals who helped? Who, why, how?

22

23 What did you know about this transition prior joining the First Team?

24

25 ***Challenges***

26

27 What challenges have you faced in this transition moving towards playing for the  
28 first team?

29

30 How did you cope with the unique demands of this level of football?

31

32 Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

33 - How? Specifics? Systematic/organizational support?

34

35 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

36

37 What do athletes who transition and gain playing time do that others do not?

38

39 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

40

41 Is there anything else that would you want tell someone about to make a similar  
42 transition?

43

44 ***Summary***

45

46 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

47

48 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

49 **Adaptation Interview 2**

50

1 ***Introduction***

2

3 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
4 or clarify?

5

6 *Quotes from previous interview*

7

8 Can you describe where you see yourself currently in this transition?

9

10 Can you explain what is life like fighting for a place in the squad and on the pitch?

11 - Resources available to you in this phase of your career

12

13 ***Facilitating the transition***

14

15 What factors do you feel are important in this stage of transition, pushing to be a first  
16 team regular?

17

18 What did you know about what this stage of your career thinking back to your first  
19 few years as a pro?

20

21 From your experience, why might players struggle in this final phase of transition  
22 successfully?

23

24

25 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

26

27 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in the transition overall? In  
28 this phase?

29

30 Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about how to adapt to the  
31 First Team?

32

33 ***Summary***

34

35 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

36

37 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Adapt Interview 3**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
6 or clarify?

7

8 ***Quotes from previous interviews***

9

10 ***Future***

11

12 How do you currently see your future at the club?

13 - In professional football?

14

15 Have you received any information on what's expected of you going forward?

16

17 We talked about the first years being figuring everything out, settling in...

18 - What will this last stage be about?

19 - What do you think will be important for you personally?

20 - What support or help might you need?

21 - What barriers or challenges will be in your way?

22 o Are these different that previously?

23

24 What will be the biggest challenges to furthering your transition?

25

26 From your experience, why might players struggle to make this final step to first  
27 team regular?

28

29 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

30

31 What do athletes who take that final step in transition successfully do that others do  
32 not?

33 - What could be done to help those who don't make it succeed?

34

35 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

36

37 Is there anything else that would you want tell someone about this final step into the  
38 first team?

39

40 ***Summary***

41

42 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

43

44 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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1 **Stabilization Interview 1**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Can you describe your footballing career?

6

7 Talk about what it was like receiving your First Pro contract...

8

9 In general, what do you think the academy to first team transition is or is about?

10

11 Can you describe your transition from scholar to first year pro?

12

13 Talk about your experience as a first-year pro...

14

15 How has this transition evolved since your first year as a pro?

16

17 ***Facilitating the transition***

18

19 What factors do you feel were important in making this transition?

20

- Are there specific individuals who helped? Who, why, how?

21

22 What did you know about this transition prior joining the First Team?

23

24 ***Challenges***

25

26 What challenges have you faced in this transition?

27

28 How did you cope with the unique demands of this level of football?

29

30 Who has helped support you with these challenges and demands?

31

- How? Specifics? Systematic/organizational support?

32

33 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

34

35 What do athletes who transition successfully do that others do not?

36

37 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

38

39 Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about to make a similar  
40 transition?

41

42 ***Summary***

43

44 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

45

46 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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48 **Stabilization Interview 2**

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50 ***Introduction***

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Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further or clarify?

*Quotes from previous interview*

Can you describe where you see yourself currently in this transition?

Can you explain what is life as a regular in the first team?

- Resources available to you in this phase of your career

***Facilitating the transition***

What factors do you feel are important in this stage of transition, stabilizing and establishing your first team place?

Now that you are “established” as a first team regular, how has that changed things on and off the pitch?

From your experience, why might players struggle in this final phase of transition successfully?

***Minimizing Talent Loss***

What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in the transition overall? In this phase?

Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about how to adapt to the First Team?

***Summary***

Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

1 **Stabilization Interview 3**

2

3 ***Introduction***

4

5 Is there anything from the previous interview that you would like to discuss further  
6 or clarify?

7

8 *Quotes from previous interview*

9

10 ***Future***

11

12 How do you currently see your future at the club?

13 - In professional football?

14

15 Have you received any information on what's expected of you going forward?

16

17 We talked about fighting for a place in the team, but now that you are there...

18 - What will this last stage be about?

19 - What do you think will be important for you personally?

20 - What support or help might you need?

21 - What barriers or challenges will be in your way?

22 o Are these different that previously?

23

24 What will be the biggest challenges to furthering your transition?

25

26 From your experience, why might players struggle to make this final step to first  
27 team regular?

28

29 ***Minimizing Talent Loss***

30

31 What do athletes who take that final step in transition successfully do that others do  
32 not?

33 - What could be done to help those who don't make it succeed?

34

35 What do athletes need to prepare for in order to succeed in this transition?

36

37 Is there anything else that would you want to tell someone about this final step into  
38 the first team?

39

40 ***Summary***

41

42 Can you think of any questions I should have asked that I didn't?

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44 Do you have anything else you would like to discuss?

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## Results

The eight higher order themes reflected the entire data set. In the main document we chose to focus on our unique findings. However, due to the page limits of publication a number of our themes were not reported. Here we present these additional findings followed by a brief discussion of where these findings sit within the current junior-to-senior transition literature.

### Preparation Phase

#### *Opportunity*

**Playing Time.** The opportunity to play in the first team was not an issue in this phase as it wasn't expected. Sam, "I want to make appearances, but I don't know how realistic that is. I definitely want to be in and around the 23's, be a part of that."

**Training Opportunity.** In this phase players, at times, experienced training with the first team. Ryan, "I think I learned quite a lot in the last 6 or 8 weeks where you stand and what you need to do to be able to play with them." Sam, "It was quite daunting, and I was really nervous." He added, "I know I deserve to be over there because they have picked me to go and train, it's just getting that into my mindset and knowing that I deserve to be there."

#### *Performance Culture*

**Training Standard.** Ryan described his academy experiences, "I feel like even if I have a bad day, I'm still going to be one of the better ones" and training up with the first team, "It's difficult to not be one of the best players straight away." Sam, "It's probably the intensity of the training and the standard of what people expect. You always have to be on it really." Daniel recalled his initial impressions of first team training.

1           How ruthless it was and how much better you had to be. I thought I was a  
2           good player in the youth team, and I probably was a good player in the youth  
3           team, but I was still nowhere near as good as what these guys were. I would  
4           have to be at my very, very best to be at the level that they were.

## 5   **Orientation Phase**

### 6   *Performance Culture*

7           **Men's Football.** There was a general consensus that results in men's football  
8           came with greater significance. Lewis, "the academy is based around progression  
9           and development. That's the sole focus. The First Team is completely about winning.  
10          That is the most important thing. It's people's livelihood, mortgages. People have to  
11          look after their kids." Daniel recalled, "People are playing for bonuses and stuff like  
12          that. This meant something to people. There is money on the line and their job."

13          Sometimes you can get caught up in academy football where it's a game, but  
14          a lot of it is about learning and improving. At the end of the day that's not  
15          how it is though. As much as the academy style and the scholarships are  
16          good, there are also negatives to it because it might not get you 100%  
17          prepared for what's to come. (Daniel)

18          There is so much emphasis on the result. I know they stage it up from the  
19          lower age groups up to the U18s where it is more about that. The fact that  
20          there are bonuses on the line, it's people's jobs. (Tyler)

21          **Training Standard.** Training with the first team while still in the academy  
22          was important in Lewis's experience. "When you are playing you are going to be  
23          with those players so the actual experience of training with them and playing was a  
24          massive help." Regardless, the full-time move wasn't the same.



1 I know I had trained with them before, but it is different. You are a pro, you  
2 are seen as a pro. You want to really impress and do things right. It's almost  
3 the case of overthinking things. You can try too hard.

4 The increase in standard created mental challenges for Tyler. "Because it is a step up  
5 in terms of the football and the training, I have probably found it hard to have the  
6 confidence in those sessions and to feel like I do deserve to be there." This would be  
7 a key turning point in Tyler's opinion. "I think just in the training sessions just get to  
8 a point where I'm not feeling like an outsider." "Once you have made that jump and  
9 decision in your head then there is no reason why you can't go from that to actually  
10 being in the first team."

### 11 ***Relationships***

12 **Social Dynamics.** Joining the first team meant living their peers in the  
13 academy and joining the first team group. The social dynamic had a circular  
14 relationship with performance. For Tyler, "if you feel like you are on par with them  
15 on the pitch you maybe feel like off the pitch you can be the same level kind of  
16 thing." Whereas Ryan, yet to move full-time, felt developing relationships would  
17 lead to increased performance.

18 I think if you didn't really have relationships it would be really hard, you  
19 wouldn't really know what to do. You are more likely to not talk to anyone  
20 and hide away. Your confidence would drop, and your performance would  
21 drop.

22 While the other participants acknowledged the importance of social factors, Lewis  
23 was less interested.

1           Off the pitch I don't think I have to try to get myself in that group. On the  
2           pitch I wouldn't say I have to get myself a part of that group in a social sense.

3           It's more performance, I have to be at their level of performance.

4   Adding, "ultimately you are there to perform and do your job as well as you can do  
5   it. If that overrides being be part of the social group, then that's the way that it is."

6   This perspective seemed to have merit as the two senior players believed a key to  
7   being accepted in the group was performance based. Daniel, "all of a sudden you get  
8   the respect of people just by being good, it's difficult if you aren't good. That's it  
9   ultimately, if people think you are good enough you are in sort of a thing." Jake, "I  
10   think if you aren't accepted, and they don't think you are good enough to be there  
11   then they will give you stick."

12           A further complication was the age difference between first team players and  
13   the young pros. Lewis, "The difference between some of the lads is that they are old  
14   enough to be your dad." Tyler, "The age gap can be so big. On a social level you  
15   might not have much in common at all." Daniel recalled, "They are in a completing  
16   different stage of their life to you. It can be pretty daunting. I remember going into  
17   the dressing room and I thought I just have to keep myself to myself a bit."

18           Lewis and Tyler believed their preparation experiences prior to moving over  
19   full-time helped build relationships.

20           You get to know the individuals and build relationships with them. As a  
21   second-year scholar training with them, there were a few of them that I got to  
22   know quite well. Then coming in start of this year there was a familiar face  
23   which is useful. (Lewis)

1           On the first day you know maybe 50% of the players that you are going to be  
2           training with or going to be mixing around with in the first team building.

3           You have had contact with them already and they know you. (Tyler)

4           From the senior players' perspective figuring out the new social dynamic was  
5           important. Daniel, "you don't have to be friends with everyone or in everyone's  
6           group, but it's important to have one group of four or five players that you mix  
7           with." "Even if it's going for a coffee after training or just hanging out, whatever,  
8           you have to do these things in order to make friends and enjoy your experience  
9           more." Further, "A lot of people come into the changing room, train and go home  
10          and that's probably the people that struggle the most. They don't reach out to people  
11          and they don't make time to do stuff with people." Jake agreed.

12          There are a lot of young lads that come and are honestly scared of saying  
13          anything. The lads will pick up on it and they are likely to give them more  
14          stick or not be as friendly towards them. They think you aren't even trying to  
15          be a part of the squad.

16          *Teammate Support.* The primary support source in this phase came from their  
17          own young pro group or former academy players. Tyler, "The fact that there is a  
18          group of us in the same situation. If you have a bad session, you can kind of have a  
19          joke about it. The group around you can help you." While there were challenges to  
20          relationships with senior players one advantage was the number of former academy  
21          players in the first team. "I'd say mainly the ones that have come through (the  
22          academy). Like (two senior players) because they have been in our position."

23          Developing relationships with senior players, while difficult, were important  
24          to their development. Lewis, "They are a fountain of knowledge when it comes to  
25          football. It's good to be exposed to that, because you don't get that in the youth

1 team.” Adding, “I could then watch him and see him play with the information he  
2 gave me. I could think ok that applies there. It’s things like that that help you to  
3 improve, those bits of information.” Daniel, further along in his transition agreed.  
4 “You need to speak to experienced players or players that have been through a  
5 similar situation.” “I remember I spoke to (a senior player) and he said a lot of  
6 people don’t see what I do, but the manager sees what I do really well, it’s  
7 sometimes something secondary to what you think.”

## 8 **Adaptation Phase**

### 9 *Motivation*

10 Daniel, “I feel like once you are in the position that I am, is that good  
11 enough? No, I’m not really happy with that, I want to keep going. It’s never the  
12 finished article.” Daniel’s strategy was shifting his purpose.

13 I’m doing a lot more for just myself and doing it for my own good. At the end  
14 of the day and you come home from work and just go look, I gave it  
15 everything I got, sometimes that’s all you can do.

## 16 **Discussion**

17 The purpose of this study was to explore the junior to senior transition from  
18 professional contract to established first team player. The data presented here are in  
19 large part supported by the previous body of literature. In order to gain opportunity  
20 in the first team, players needed to acclimate to several general factors including  
21 adapting to men’s football, meeting the increased standard of first team training,  
22 fitting into the social dynamic, and finding new support sources (see supplementary  
23 results). A period of adaptation has been suggested throughout the literature (Morris  
24 et al., 2016b; Swainston et al., 2020), and specifically in adjusting to senior football  
25 (Røynesdal et al., 2019; Swainston et al., 2020). The challenges off the pitch when

1 moving to senior sport have also been documented (Mitchell et al., 2020; Pehrson et  
2 al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). Joining a new team and environment also meant  
3 learning new support networks (see Morris et al., 2016).