

Sports psychology in the English Premier League: ‘It feels precarious and *is* precarious’

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### **Abstract**

This article gives a rare account of the working life of a sports psychologist in the English Premier League (EPL), the elite division in English professional football. It shows how members of emerging professions such as sports psychology are a new precariat. Martin is more successful than many sports psychologists, but his job security is dependent on his continued ability to navigate managerial change: using his skills as a psychologist in the defence of his own employment but simultaneously keeping the (potentially sensitive) ‘psychology’ label of the work he does hidden until circumstances are propitious.

**Keywords:** elite sport, football, insecurity, precarious employment, precarisation

The lived experiences of a sports psychologist and the precariousness of his job are the focus of this account. The intersection of football’s globalisation with its commercialisation has provided football’s elite clubs with the opportunity for huge financial rewards (Giulianotti, 2002): requiring sustained team performance to maximise club profitability and status (Solberg & Haugen, 2010). Consequently, performance outcomes are increasingly dependent on innovative medical and

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scientific support that promise a competitive edge (Waddington & Smith, 2009). One of the core sport medicine and sport science (SM&SS) roles is that of the sport psychologist. In the UK, the title “Sport and Exercise Psychologist” is legally regulated and practitioners are registered with, and regulated by, the Health and Care Professions Council. Their work can be diverse, but typically includes working with athletes, coaches, teams and significant others regarding performance enhancement or performance restoration across issues such as injury, stress and emotion management, communication, leadership, motivation, confidence and career transitions. Sport psychologists might work in higher education, research, applied practice or a combination thereof.

For those sport psychologists operating within applied practice, one common characteristic of this job is its precariousness. That is, this work is uncertain and risky from the perspective of the worker (Kalleberg, 2009: 2), and often lacks standard forms of labour security and statutory entitlements (Vosko et al., 2009). Within professional football, precarious work is often linked to the high turnover of first team managers and head coaches (LMA, 2015). New managers typically bring their own key, trusted staff with them, often resulting in incumbent SM&SS staff ‘departures’. It can also result in the re-setting of sports science practices to suit those of the new regime – which can pose problems concerning the institutionalisation of disciplines like psychology. Overall, the effect of the high turnover of managers on SM&SS workers is highly contingent employment with little long-term security (Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2012) in a highly competitive industry (Roderick & Schumacker, 2016).

The threat of unemployment and the fear of losing one’s economic independence

constitute central risk factors (Blair, 2003; Burchell et al., 1999; Smith, 1998), especially when the possibility of gaining employment is difficult (Kalleberg, 2012). Martin, one of the co-authors of this article, is in his mid 30s and has worked for over a decade as a sports psychologist within the EPL and the higher echelons of English County Cricket. The first author met Martin in 2009 and introduced him to the second author shortly afterwards. Because of these connections, Martin facilitated the participation of his club in a study conducted by the authors concerning the impacts of managerial team change on sport science work and workers (Wagstaff, Gilmore & Thelwell, 2015). His narrative links to this work as it shows the strategies and tactics he developed to avoid losing his job when managers departed and new ones arrived.

While sociology of work scholars have focused on the subjective experiences of workers in other professions facing precarity, such as those working in the cultural and creative industries (e.g. Umney & Kretsos, 2015), agencies (e.g. Elcioglu, 2010) and vulnerable workers (e.g. Burgess, Connell & Winterton, 2013), studies of employees in this comparatively new profession are rare. Martin's account is particularly interesting because it shows that even those, like him, who have never been sacked or demoted following managerial change fear failure and job loss. While it could be argued that the longer an individual remains with the same employer, the safer they should be from dismissal, either because investments in company-specific capital are protecting them (Becker, 1964) or because implicit contracts and trust developed over time are at play here (Rosen, 1985), this is not the case in terms of Martin's perceptions. Additionally, while anxiety about job loss may increase with length of job tenure, because departure from the company could give rise to high costs associated with investments made – both personal, professional and financial (Erlinghagen, 2008) – Martin's personal view towards his profession has seemingly

remained constant over time. That is, he viewed it as inherently instable, to be enjoyed whilst it lasted, but seeing his career as a practitioner in the Premier League as being a short one.

One way of conceptualising stories such as Martin's and the impact of such uncertainty on working lives is by seeing them as lived examples of precarisation; the ways by which society, workplaces etc. are becoming more destabilised, insecure and discontinuous (Berlant, 2011: 201; Jokinen, 2016). Berlant (2012) argues that precarity exists as social conditions from which clear political demands and principles emerge. Martin's account suggests the opposite: workers may become skilled in finding ways of defending their employment through highly individualised tactics that make them *more* valuable to employers. Rather his account exemplifies Berlant's earlier (2011) observation that capitalism thrives on workers' uncertainty, as it shapes minds and bodies (such as those of athletes and SM&SS staff like Martin) for its own purposes.

Precarisation is also a problem of the reproduction of life. Making a life, and taking a decision to start a family or engage in other life decisions, such as purchasing a house, has become more challenging, as the division between home and work is no longer palpable and the latter seeps into the former. Instead, according to Jokinen (2016: 88), work has become a project and we must continually extend our working time because of the precariousness of our employment. Martin's long working hours and his substantive focus on work exemplifies this project. The discussions which form the basis of this article took place shortly before his departure from club football for a more secure career in performance research and consultancy as parenthood loomed.

Work precarity is argued to impact on life course patterns with the postponing of life landmarks such as parenthood (Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Golsch, 2003). Parenting can necessitate or prompt stable employment for those engaged in it, so Martin moves to a more regularised job – at least temporarily (Bulut, 2014) – with the possibility of the return to elite sport remaining in the background.

While arguments have been made that education and the attainment of professional qualifications militate against precarity (e.g. Sorensen, 2000), this is not evident in Martin's story. He possesses a PhD and has professional qualifications in psychology, personal networks developed from university onwards (Bernstein, 2006), and has expanded the remit of sports psychology work within his club. Nevertheless, although these qualifications and achievements may help him get jobs and develop tactics for retaining them, they do not give him secure employment – or at least they do not provide a solid sense of job security.

Martin's account illuminates the insecurities (existential as well as structural) of his work and highlights the ways by which he has navigated his survival of five changes of manager in five years within an EPL club. His interview highlights how precarisation is lived – made routine and habitual, with lengthy working hours, spillage of work into home and private life (Granter et al., 2015), a constant need to prove himself and to please others. Martin's narrative suggests that precarisation is internalised and results in adherence to its demands as to how one becomes a worker in this setting and his story highlights his (outward) conformity to these demands in the public spaces of the club. Nevertheless, whilst openly challenging the precarised mode of being an employee would result in job loss and the loss of professional

identity, the narrative illuminates the various ways in which Martin resists managerial claims over his work, workplace relations and ways of working. That is, although he outwardly demonstrates adherence to managerial team preferences and needs to concede to certain managerial demands, he also succeeds in ‘smuggling’ psychology into the ways he approaches his work. By doing this Martin manages to stay ‘true’ to his sense of self and feelings of professional pride.

### **Martin’s story**

For me, sport psychology is about helping professional sportspeople to improve their performance: supporting people and behaviours, the way they think, the way they behave. My work was divided into three different areas. One was around player development: helping players develop and transition into the first team. Another was supporting the environment that surrounds the players: the culture, the staff, the general climate. Finally, there was counselling: supporting a player and dealing with any issues or crises or challenges they’ve got. For example, we had some Welsh National Team players when Gary Speed<sup>2</sup> passed away and we’ve had young players in criminal situations (laughs) different sorts of situations that you had to support.

My approach to sport psychology used different techniques such as one-to-one sessions with players, emotion regulation, and concentration and focus interventions with players and staff. How I use these approaches always varies depending on the player. I do a lot of goal-setting – individual action plans involving one to one’s with players: are they doing what they said they were going to do to achieve the goals they set themselves as well as the goals we’ve set them? So, a lot of performance

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Speed was the Manager of the Welsh national football team who died by hanging at the age of 42

management reviewing. I also spend a lot of time with staff – the doctor, physios, coaches, mentoring some of the analysts and supporting the younger, less experienced people. I help them map out their journey – defining what they want to achieve because many of them are technical experts but are very uncertain - there's an identity crisis for them because of the vulnerable nature of their world when change happens.

I would usually arrive at the training ground at 8.00, have breakfast with the staff and talk about the day ahead. Everything between 9.00 and 10.00 is dictated by training at 10.30. So, staff meetings or some player meetings. 10.30-12.00 is training so during that time I watch training, speak to an injured player or go to the gym to see some of the injured guys or work on projects. I'd have lunch at 12.30/1.00 with the staff and some of the players. In the afternoon, I generally speak to and spend time with players; trying to influence their mind-set, getting them to a good place mentally – whether they're injured or you're trying to get them ready for the next game.

Mid to late afternoon I'd have staff meetings – it could be checking in with the Academy Director; it could be spending time with the Analysis Team on a project. It could be helping with player care – rehousing and settling a new signing, it could be a review of player performance with the Performance Director. Approximately 5.30 is home time and I would also factor in reading time and presentation work. If there's a game in the evening or at the weekend, I would attend. It might be a Reserve game or a First Team game. In the evening, I'd still be on the phone or on emails if need be.

All those sorts of things get thrown at you during a working week.

It's a life-decision that you make to be fully involved in a team. You live and breathe what happens to them. You do whatever it takes. Everything must be done now, it's a very instant culture and if you can do something to help the team win the next game

then you need to do it. Ultimately it consumes your whole life and makes you vulnerable to change because you're invested in it.

A lot of my work involves doing psychometrics with incoming players and staff: profiling them to better understand their traits and any predispositions. We also developed a needs analysis interview process so when we have a new player joining the team at any level, we have a good idea as to where they are as people: what their family situation is, what their life story is and this would shape how we supported and helped during their time at the club. I also went back to the psychometric profiles when players were going through difficult times or when we had particular challenges with them – supporting the science staff in managing the player at that moment in time. For example, if we had a player with a long-term injury, I would look at his personality profile and see if he's a high-detail person or a low-detail person. If he's a high-detail person, I would advise the rehab team to give him a detailed plan to regain fitness. If he's a low-detail person, just tell him he's going to be alright: he's got to do what you tell him and that'll be enough for him. If you know the person, it helps you tailor how you work with them. When we sign a new player, the psychometrics would be part of the medical so I would have that information very early on. So, I would talk through the questionnaires with them to get to know them. I'll also sit down with the coaching staff and say, 'this is the type of person we've hired; how he'll typically respond in these situations, this is what he's likely to like or dislike' – just to give them certain things to think about.

To give another example, we signed a player who came in in the middle of the season. We weren't performing particularly well so we had to get him up to speed with what



we wanted as quickly as possible. I was involved in the pre-signing stage: getting to know him, his circumstances and situation. I then managed the player liaison team getting him and his family settled. He and I met with every member of staff to go through what they expected of him and what he wanted, how we could help him. Over the following weeks/months I would check in with him to help him learn the language, the culture, our processes, to help him perform. He was motivated and focused on an international tournament in the summer – that was on his personal agenda – we helped him with that and he helped us stay in the League that year. All that stuff *might* have happened without me, but my role was to make sure it all happened as quickly as possible by putting the player at the centre of the process and supported him through that transition into the organisation and in all the other things that come with that.

It's a precarious job in reality and in how you feel. Psychologists will often be the first out if change happens, because psychology is the most intangible discipline within sport medicine and science. With medics, physios and coaches, there's a tangible 'this is what we do' aspect to their work and not everyone can be an expert in it as it's complex from a science perspective. With psychology, you could easily not have it and function, so that's why it's more precarious. You're always aware that you are vulnerable. I approached my jobs thinking 'this isn't going to last forever' – because I would either get the sack or I'd leave. It's probably a form of defensive thinking, but it's also the reality. Financially, you've got to be careful and it affects the way you live your life. Your mortgage is for 35 years, but your football career probably isn't so that influences purchases like houses because you have to be confident that you can maintain that salary. Pay starts at £27,000 a year for junior

staff and goes up to maybe £75-100,000 after about 10 years experience. Often it's whatever you can negotiate and who wants you most as well. So, if you really want the job, and a lot of people desperately want to work in football, then the club can negotiate a good rate. If a manager wants you, and you're with another club, then you can name a price. Personally, my contract was a fairly robust employment contract – pretty standard - but I'm aware that other people have had it different and they are on bad contracts and that's a big issue for them.

When managers change, everyone's thinking 'what does this mean for me?' There's no consideration for each other amongst the staff; there's no 'right, we've been here three years as a group and this is how we're going to approach it'. So it becomes a very volatile and unpleasant environment. Some people know they're going to be pushed out because the new manager's worked with the same fitness coach for 15 years you're the incumbent fitness coach so your world's changing significantly. The managerial merry-go-round can set the wheels in motion across the industry as they're drawn from a very small pool, so when one leaves, there's managerial change across the board – and they can bring their own people with them, which happened here all the time. The precariousness of it does impact how you approach it and that's a reflection on the industry.

In most jobs, you've got a line manager who is there to support you, but in football your line manager's in exactly the same position as you and just trying to hang on to his job. I've had five managers in five years. This brings fear and uncertainty because anytime there's change you don't know whether your face is going to fit. A lot of people will not believe that psychology has a place and that's not a reflection on you or your capabilities, it's just that they don't want it in their team, or say they do and

just side-line you. Or they have their own people, or a friend or a psych who they've used before so you're always at the mercy of one person's attitude or perception, their team and their networks. All of this adds to the precarious nature of the work. You do the best you can to survive and hopefully thrive as well. Just try and apply what you're capable of doing and hopefully you can create enough good will, respect or credibility to a) stay in the job and b) hopefully *do* a good job.

There was one situation where a manager got the sack and as usual it was followed by a period of uncertainty. The CEO called three people into his office and they all lost their jobs. I then got a phone call saying he wanted to see me. You kind of get the impression that you're going to be fired. In that situation, I was helping the outgoing manager with something he was working on; so the CEO wanted to see me about that. But at that moment in time I thought 'this is the end' (laughs). There was a sense of relief that I was still in my job but there was *still* a sense of the unknown – is he (the new manager) going to like what you do? Is he going to want you as part of his team? And there are levels of involvement as well. You might be in his team but on the edges, or you might be a core part of it. You have to find a way to stay true to yourself and add value and do what you want to do. For me, this was all about personal pride; wanting to be the best; wanting to win, improving things and making things get better. If I was developing and contributing, I was doing a good job.

This club didn't have anything before I joined, so there was a blank canvas to create something that was unique which was obviously a great opportunity. But the downside was that people didn't really get what it was, what it should look like, how you do it. Therefore, you've got quite basic, uneducated opinions to deal with,

pulling it in different directions. And it took a lot of time and energy to educate people. Over time, that became easier but to start with it was difficult.

Every time you have a new manager you pretty much press the reset button and start again. You try and package everything around them so they're the driving force behind it – it's their work, their ideas, that person's way of working. I got to the point where if they didn't buy into something, I just focused on what they *did* buy into. I would focus on the five things they like, build some quick wins, build the relationship and over time you pick up another two or three themes to work on. For example, I had two coaches who didn't believe in sports psychology. They wouldn't let me speak to any of their players, and they wouldn't give me any time in their schedule to do anything. What we *all* agreed with was that the players needed some support in their off-field life so I created a performance lifestyle programme that covered what we agreed on and I hid the psychology within that. Over time, they saw the benefit of that programme and then we had a bit more leverage, and in the end, we had a working relationship that was fine. The players wanting and needing it was probably the biggest thing and ultimately it got to the point where it was going to happen anyway so it was just polite to ask the manager's permission.

The first manager I had, I wasn't in the inner circle so I wasn't at risk when he left. The second manager, an experienced, international manager, was a big influence and ultimately he gave me my bigger opportunity to do the stuff I wanted to do. I was very close to him and when he left it was a major disappointment. However, I'd done enough good work, gained a lot more credibility and profile to create support from senior executives and colleagues. So, when the next manager came in, I got the opportunity to present what I was working on and how it could fit in with what he

wanted. We then shaped it in a way that would make him better at what he did and luckily, he bought into that. Then when he left there was two managerial changes in quick succession. By that point I was 3-4 years into my journey at the club so I was a well-respected and an influential member of staff.

The longer you're there, provided you do good work, the more you get exposure to and involvement with senior staff. By the end, I had 10 or 15 quite varied projects. I did a player development project looking at the journey of a young player to the First Team and as part of that we identified that we don't send enough players out on loan to get First Team experience. I created and project managed this with the Academy Director, Club Secretary, coaching staff and analysts and became the loan player manager having 16 players out on loan at one point getting experience at various levels in the football pyramid. Another project was the training ground re-development. There needed to be a football person at the meetings who could guide what we're trying to do. I was seen as that sort of person.

I mentor people who are aspiring sports psychologists and I find it difficult because it's a really frustrating industry: there's few job opportunities, there's no structured career path; it's quite a tough existence. Because sport psychology has not been a clearly defined, regulated profession for long, people don't know what they want in a sports psychologist so you can have people who are untrained and unqualified coming in and taking that kind of space which is dangerous, but the sports industry isn't sophisticated enough to see that. It's very fickle in the sense of managerial change - your job could go at any point through no fault of your own so I always entered any opportunity I took knowing that it won't last forever, knowing that it could be taken

away from me at any point in time so I then lived my life accordingly. Thinking that is probably a form of defence, but I think it's also the reality as well.

It's quite an addictive culture because it just happens so quickly and it's roller coaster ride stuff. If you're passionate about sport, the highs of winning are phenomenal. There's a buzz around the build-up to a game. Being in the inner sanctum of the elite performance environment and being around the stars and the rest of it is highly exciting. If you've got that in your blood and you enjoy that, it's hard not to get excited by it. It's definitely like an addiction; it's a high. There's nothing more exciting than being at a game with 40,000 people there watching and you're right at the heart of it. But when things aren't going so well, it's unpleasant and pretty volatile, there's no middle ground. I really tried to be neutral around win, lose or draw, but when it's just you that's like that because everyone's absorbed in winning or losing, it becomes really difficult.

The main tension in football is caused by the need to win the next game and that expectation to get results is a big pressure. Therefore, any work that has a longer-term focus than that next game gets squeezed and pressurised because all the key people you need to get involved in your work only care about the next game. I was working on a digital project, a technology-based project that was longer-term with a 2 to 3-month roll-out to deliver iPads to all the staff with a content hub on it with footballing knowledge and IP – quite innovative at the time. That always got pushed back because it wasn't about winning the next game. It gets frustrating when stuff you're trying to implement is not given the attention it needs but it also forces you to understand that all that matters is winning the next game. Would I go and work in a sports organisation again? No, I have other responsibilities now and the nature of the

work is too unpredictable and uncertain. It's hard to plan for family life if you don't know what's going to happen.

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Martin Jones is the pseudonym of a sport psychologist who has worked at the highest levels of football and cricket. He is currently taking a break from this role and will soon be undertaking a Masters in Business Administration.