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“You don’t know what’s around the corner”: A qualitative study of professional footballers in England facing career-transition.

By Andrew Brownrigg, Viv Burr, Abigail Locke and Alex Bridger

Abstract

Career transition in sport is a rapidly growing area within the field of sport psychology. Interest in this area has been fuelled by the need for an increased number of professional athletes seeking support and assistance during transition from sport. However, whilst research in this field has focused in on a wide range of sports, specific research on retirement in professional football has been limited. Because of this it is argued that current research may fail to consider specific issues associated with the transition from professional football. Therefore, in an attempt to add to the existing body of research the current study aimed to provide an in-depth insight into how professional footballers understand their ‘lived-world’ during exit from their sport. A total of eight former professional footballers, who were at the time experiencing the possibility of career-transition, were interviewed in two separate focus group discussions. The interviews were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The key findings from the research show that a lack of control over their lives, lack of pre-planning and preparation for retirement as well as support and ability to seek it led professional footballers to experience heightened levels of anxiety, uncertainty and fear for their futures as well as an unexpected sense of rejection during career transition. These findings have implications for support organisations and those interested in the life-long welfare of professional footballers. It is proposed that an emphasis on pre-planning and preparation, provisions of support and encouraging help-seeking may aid professional footballers during the process out of their sport.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, issues surrounding career transition have become an increased topic of investigation within the field of sport psychology (Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, and Japhag 2005; Lavallee, 2005; Warriner and Lavallee, 2008). The term Athletic Career (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007) is used to describe an athlete's multiyear sport activity. Athletic career termination or retirement is, according to Alfermann and Stambulova (2007), the clearest example of a normative and even inevitable transition. Athletes consider themselves retired when they are no longer competing at the level they had once achieved (Lavallee, 2005). In contrast, a non-normative transition is considered to be a transition that does not generally follow any type of plan or schedule and is the result of events that occur in an athlete's life to which she/he responds to. These types of transitions are often unpredicted and unanticipated. Examples of a non-normative transition would be de-selection from a team or failing to qualify for a competition (Wylleman, Theeboom and Lavallee, 2004). Furthermore, Wylleman, *et al* (2004: 15) describes 'drop out', as the process by which 'an athlete endures a premature or off-time career termination at a developmentally atypical point in life', and thus fails to reach his/her potential. Therefore, one can see that irrespective of the type, a transition results from a change in circumstances that can directly impact on an individual's social, personal and sporting life (Wylleman *et al*, 2004).

Historic and contemporary research into sport career transition has highlighted how, in some cases, the retiring athlete can suffer severe adjustment difficulties upon leaving elite participation. These transitional difficulties are seen to be particularly problematic in athletes who have been forced to disengage due to unexpected

factors such as injury or de-selection (Webb, Nasco and Riley, 1998). Such associated psychological difficulties reported by elite-athletes during involuntarily retirement include depression, eating disorders (Blinde and Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie and Howe, 1982), decreased self-confidence (Sinclair and Orlick, 1993), feelings of anger and/or anxiety (Alfermann, 2000), lower self-control (Werthner and Orlick, 1986); and problems with body-self relationship due to injury (Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes and Smith, 2004). To date, research suggests that the onset of such adjustment difficulties can be explained in relation to 'symbolic loss' (Brown and Potrac, 2009). This is when the retiring athlete loses the sole focus on what has been their overall being for much of their lives including their sporting identity (Sparkes, 1998), physical proficiency (Lavalley and Robinson, 2007), the adulation and worshiping from others (Sparkes, 1998; Brown and Potrac, 2009), camaraderie with team-mates (Lally, 2007), as well as the extreme 'highs' associated with elite-performance (Totterdell, 1999).

Whilst it is acknowledged that previous research helps to provide a broad understanding of sporting-career transition as a whole, it may fail to capture issues specific to professional football and professional footballers. As an example, it could be argued that the experienced world of an English professional footballer is in some ways different to that of a collegiate athlete in the United States of America. Such comparisons are evident when one considers the differences within each sport regarding how athletes are schooled prior to them entering their sport. During this period, the collegiate athlete is expected to be fully integrated into a balanced educational/sporting development system (i.e. combination of full time education programme and full time sports development programme), whereas the professional

footballer in England is predominantly 'schooled' within a sporting development programme (i.e. only one day a week dedicated to an education programme). Further differences can be identified when comparing the career transitional experiences of Olympic athletes and professional footballers. For instance, when an Olympian faces the transition from their sport it is usually the case that they will never compete again at elite level. However, this is not always the case for the professional footballer. The majority of elite-footballers in England choose to make the transition into semi-professional football upon exiting their sport. When playing at this non-league level, ex-professional players still have the opportunity of being 'talent spotted' by professional clubs and in some cases ex-players are given the opportunity to re-compete again at the professional level. Thus, it could be argued that the transition from professional football does not always spell retirement for the professional footballer.

Until approximately 40 years ago, little attention had been given to the well-being of professional athletes by leading professionals and governing bodies (Gordan, 1995). Interest in this area has grown rapidly over the years due in large to a significant increase in the number of elite athletes needing the support and assistance of sport psychologists during transition from sport (Lavallee, 2005). However, to date, research specifically on career-transition in professional football has been extremely limited. In an extensive review conducted by Lavallee and Wylleman (2000) of past research on career transition in sport between 1950 and 1998, there was only one specific reference to a 'football study' (Mihovilovic, 1968). Since the work of Mihovilovic (1968), other than one study by Lavallee (2005) which showed how life-development intervention can positively assist footballers who are experiencing

adjustment difficulties during retirement, there appears to have been no further research specifically focussing on career transition in football. Therefore, it is argued that, for the most part, research on sport career transition has focussed on sporting domains other than professional football.

The current study aimed to explore the experiences of professional footballers during career transition. The research questions were:

What is it like to experience being a professional footballer? and

What it is like for professional footballers to experience career transition?

The study therefore aims to add to the existing body of research on sporting-career transition by providing in-depth insight into how professional footballers understand their 'lived world' during exit from their sport.

Methodology

The study adopted a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the lived world of a particular population (Langdrige, 2007), in this case professional footballers during career transition. Specifically, the research used the hermeneutic or 'interpretative' branch of phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927, 1962), which attends to the lived experiences of participants as interpreted by the researcher, and is widely adopted in qualitative research (e.g. Roncaglia, 2006; Lally, 2007; Warriner, 2008).

Sampling and Recruitment

The study used purposive sampling, which is often utilised in idiographic approaches where the researcher is seeking to recruit individuals who share the experience being investigated (Langdridge, 2007).

The participants were recruited via the Professional Footballers Association (PFA). Consent was obtained from the PFA to approach a group of professional footballers who were attending the organisation's annual 'Making the Transition' programme. This aims to help players in career transition by helping them develop second career pathways. These players were 'unattached' to a professional football team, and thus facing the possibility of career transition. Nine players were invited to take part in the study and, of these, eight agreed to participate.

Data collection

The data was collected using focus group interviews. Focus groups are well suited to exploring sensitive topics, like for example career transition from professional football, because the group context can encourage personal disclosure (Frith, 2000). A topic guide for the interviews was devised, focusing on issues such as identity, support and pre-planning for retirement. Examples of the interview questions were: *"What is it like to be a professional footballer?"*, *"What are your views on the level of support available to professional footballers during their careers?"*, *"What are your views on the level of support available to players after their careers?"* and *"What are your views on professional footballers planning in advance for retirement?"* The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

Below is a brief summary of the participants. Eight of the players originated from the UK and Ireland, and one was from Eastern Europe. Pseudonyms were used for each player, professional clubs and relevant place names in order to protect the identities of the participants.

Participants

The participants were all former professional footballers between the ages of 30-36, who had over a decade of experience and had played between 100 and 400+ games. Andrew and Tim had represented their country at international level on several occasions. At the time of the interviews, most of the participants had been in career transition for up to one year.

Focus group one (FG1): Chris, Andrew, John, Rich, Alex and Ian. Ian was also a current employee of the PFA, and he participated in both focus group discussions. It was agreed that Ian would be involved in both groups so that he could monitor the players' responses, something which would help him in his role at the PFA, as well as contribute to the discussions as an ex-professional footballer.

Focus group two (FG2): Liam, Noel, Tim and Ian (see above),

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2003) was seen as an appropriate method of analysis for the data as it allowed a rich interpretation of the players' experiences of career transition. IPA is a widely used method of qualitative data analysis, and its theoretical roots in interpretative phenomenology render it consistent with the epistemological approach underlying the research.

Focus groups are not commonly associated with IPA analysis, as this method is sometimes seen as compromising the individualistic focus of phenomenology and the concern to understand personal experience. However, Smith (2004) has argued that collective discussions, such as focus groups, may legitimately be used as a means of generating data for IPA analysis. The transcripts were analysed using the standard principles of IPA (Smith, 2004). In particular, a two stage analysis of group discussions was utilised, where the researcher looks, initially, for group patterns within the data before returning to explore the individual accounts.

Analysis and Findings

Four themes were developed from the preliminary analysis of the transcripts. These themes were: a lack of control over their lives, handling pressures: the known versus the unknown; support and help-seeking; and unfulfilled expectations and anticipating the future.

A lack of control over their lives

The players indicated on a number of occasions that they felt a lack of control as professional footballers, especially over their careers. The players' career successes were more often than not attributed to things which were not of their making. Such talk is evident in Chris's (FG1) experiences:

“...I was 19 working twelve hour shifts then all of a sudden I get signed up by an English Premier League team. It was just beyond my wildest dreams, as well, so I think I feel very blessed for a start and I am not a religious person at all, but

I think some of it is luck without a shadow of a doubt you are just lucky to be in a certain place at a certain time...” (Chris: FG1)

Chris when discussing his pathway into the professional game also talks about this opportunity as something of great importance to him- it is beyond his ‘wildest dreams’. However, in his vivid account of his experiences he doesn’t talk about success as something which he himself has achieved. He instead refers to his situation as being something which occurred due to other factors which were not within his control- like being blessed or being lucky. Rich (focus group one) also talks about this perceived limited control as a professional footballer in terms of luck. When talking about the difficulties he had during his career he relates how he has struggled in the absence of the good luck that he sees other players benefiting from:

“...I am tired of it. I have worked very hard when I’ve been injured and you know some players they get the luck, being in the right place at the right time. I am not that guy, I have had to work for every single thing I’ve got and as my career has shown I have not played the highest level where I wanted to play so...”

(Rich: FG1)

Likewise, Tim in the second focus group also talks about a certain lack of control with regards to his career:

“...you know its swings and roundabouts, stuff you can’t control. I think I learnt that quite early on stuff you can’t control. I was very... you know... whatever happens accept it, deal with it, and how do I move on...” (Tim: FG2)

Through his account Tim suggests that professional footballers have to find a way of accepting and dealing with their lack of control over certain aspects of their professional lives, for example injuries. These players clearly feel that the progress of their careers is to a large extent dependent upon things over which they have little or no control, such as being selected because they were 'in the right place at the right time' or avoiding injury.

However, this is not to say that these men are simply unable to deal with the pressures of playing professional football. As illustrated in the second theme, they feel well able to deal with such pressures where they perceive that they have some level of control. It is lack of control and uncertainty which is problematic for them.

Handling pressures: the known versus the unknown

What was common in the players' accounts across both groups was the ways in which the participants' talked about the differing pressures that they experience. When talking about the pressures within football the players often highlighted how they felt they could readily handle their situation. For example John (FG1) talks about his experiences of pressure specifically in relation to being 'on the pitch training ground around the club:

“...on the pitch training ground around the club throughout your career I have never really... pressure was never really a word, pressure was not something really that cropped up....” (John: FG1)

Similarly, Chris (FG1) reiterates this when he talks about his happiness when performing as a footballer: "...as soon as you get on that pitch I don't feel any pressure at all, I go out and play with a smile on my face..."

Across both of these accounts the players indicate that pressure is not something which really affects them when they are playing professional football. John (FG1) further talks about handling pressure as a pro-footballer:

"...I can handle 20 or 30 thousand fans roaring and shouting at you, I can handle one or two players team one or two managers expecting or demanding or what, because I place them demands on myself, I always found playing on a pitch was a comfort zone for me because I knew exactly...I was in control of what was going to happen or what could happen and I had some sort of hand in it..." (John: FG1).

John talks enthusiastically about the demands which are involved in performing as a professional footballer and how he could cope with his situation because he felt that he had some level of control over the situation. However, when talking about career transition John relates the pressure that he experiences that comes with uncertainty about the future:

"...at the minute I am starting to realise what pressure is because as one or two of the lads, Alex as well, have spoke of the wife and kids you don't know what's around the corner, you don't know where the next wage is going to come from, you don't know what lies ahead..." (John: FG1).

John makes reference to his family and in particular the worry of whether he is going to be able to look after them financially in the future. The worry of uncertainty was something which arose in the experiences of the players on numerous occasions; take for example Tim's (FG2) account: "...I don't know how it is for everyone else, but there is also a sense of fear because this is coming into the unknown..."

Like John, Noel (FG2) also talks about his fear about his family:

"...you are always in fear for your family, you know, I have obviously been the main breadwinner for however many years... you have got to try and keep that going and look after your kids and that, like..." (Noel: FG2).

Perceptions of support: availability and problems seeking it

Although some of the players clearly felt that there was a lack of support from within the clubs, there was also a strong suggestion that players themselves are reluctant to ask for help and that this may in part be due to the culture of professional football. Initially, the reaction from focus group one to this topic was (ironic) laughter and then an acknowledgement from Alex that:

"...I don't think the clubs are bothered about anything..." which led John to propose that professional footballers are: "...used and abused, I think that's what..." (Alex: FG1).

It would seem, initially, that the players were in general agreement that there was limited personal support available to them during their careers, and that this led some to feel a certain sense of mistreatment. However, Alex does go on to imply that support was available to him, even though he felt that this was somewhat dependent on his personal circumstances:

“...I think the only time I have had support is only because...I was born in Kingsley, I have known one of the directors of Kingsley, that’s it and through this he will support certain things and stuff...but that’s only because I am from Kingsley, that’s the only reason why there is support there otherwise we are just pieces of meat basically...” (Alex: FG1).

What is interesting from Alex’s experiences was that despite this perceived preferential treatment he still feels that professional footballers are treated by their employers as a commodity, or ‘pieces of meat’. However, some participants do suggest that support is available, though players may be reluctant to access it:

“...I would say there is plenty, loads of support out there, but, I don’t know whether it is a footballer, or an instinct, or whether it is a pride thing but you tend to never go and ask for the support or for the help...”(John: FG1)

Alex supports this sentiment in the following turn on talk:

“... I tend to agree...you never have a situation where you would go to the chairman or something like that, it’s just not we do basically...I just don’t think

you are pushed into that way, whether or not they don't kind of make themselves available, and say come to me if you need anything or stuff like that...maybe it's there, but we have never been programmed...you have never been told to seek that kind of advice or guidance from them..." (Alex: FG1).

Indeed, Tim (FG2) highlights that the culture of professional football may discourage players from opening up to others:

"...it's almost how you have been brought up in football you don't really like to give away too much...there's a lot of politics in football...almost invisible politics if you like, because you're always up against the guy next to you, he's in your position or someone else is in your position which could affect the team- you or them- in what you say, you know...you have always got to weigh up how much I can give, how much I can tell the truth..." (Tim: FG2).

Likewise, Liam (FG2) talks about players not having many people in whom they can trust: "...it's a trust thing even those who are your closest friends, footballers probably don't have a lot of close, close friends..." Interestingly, Noel in the second focus group talks about the experience of taking part in the interviews in a positive manner, and in particular the opportunity to discuss difficulties:

"...I think even this here [the focus group interview], I have probably never talked like this to anyone, you know what I mean? I have never talked candidly about, you know, this is what I have found hard..." (Noel: FG2).

Unfulfilled expectations and anticipating the future

Some players talked candidly and emotively about how they felt a sense of rejection during career transition. These players express unfulfilled expectations, not only in terms of support, but also in terms of their employability. Take for example John's (FG1) experiences during career transition:

“...I don't see any of them now picking up the phone or patting me on the back and saying we owe you this we'll look after you because you looked after us...”
(John: FG1).

Similarly, Chris (FG1) also expresses a sense of rejection:

“...I am just finding now how harsh it is really is I think during the week when you're playing and everything, your everyone's best mate and now when you're coming to the end of your career...they are all chucking you in the bin because of your age or injuries or whatever they're not really that interested...” (Chris: FG1).

Alex (FG1) also talks about feeling forgotten:

“...yeah and you are just waiting for your agent to ring they've still not rung so you give them a little text just to try and make sure he hasn't forgot about you...” (Alex: FG1).

In addition, Chris (FG1) feels let down; he thought that his prior career success would have counted for more:

“...you are expecting to get emails like that, because you have played so many games and you have done reasonably well...I am hoping that a decent clubs around my local area comes in, so I don't have to move or anything and there's nothing coming in at all...” (Chris: FG1).

It is clear that players within focus group one show that they are beginning to experience career transition from professional football, and the possible exit from their sport, as a harsh reality. It is clear that the experience is leaving some players feeling rejected and that this treatment is for them somewhat unexpected. The players feel that their past glories and achievements, as well as they themselves, are being dismissed and this is not something they were prepared for. It is argued that the players' experiences bear some resemblance to what Adler and Adler (1989: 303) refer to as the 'glorified self'. The glorified self is an identity narrowing which can take place amongst athletes as they become seduced by the celebrity and fame that is attracted to them as sports stars. This self-narrowing leads some athletes to focus predominantly on their glorified athletic identity at the expense or investment in other aspects of self, including their future selves.

Indeed, the players appear unprepared for the nature of career transition, and this is borne out by their responses when they were specifically asked about the need to prepare in advance for career transition, Tim (FG2) admits that he has put off thinking about it:

“...you kind of think, you know...I have got a another year don't worry about it you know I got another couple of years then before you know it has come on top of you but to be fair with myself I have tried to look at it since I was 13 and stuff like that I don't think people really realise what it is actually going to be like...” (Tim: FG2).

Furthermore, Rich (FG1) suggests that, even when their contracts are almost finished, players feel a strong need to focus on their footballing future rather than career transition:

“...I think also when you're in the last year of your contract...you're still not thinking about it, you're still thinking I need to get my head down and concentrate even more doubly hard on the football...to get a new contract...” (Rich: FG1).

Chris (FG1) also suggests that players don't anticipate how quickly their time as a professional player will pass:

“...because if you think about it you play from let's say nineteen to thirty six, so you say seventeen years or whatever it is you think you got plenty of time...but, it soon draws to a close...” (Chris: FG1).

Tim (FG2) also expresses how he has thought about the need to plan for career transition because of his age, yet still has not done anything about this:

“...everyone would say to me ‘you know it will never last forever’ and you know you are getting old when you are picking up injuries, and you think you know in a couple of years I am not going to be here, I am not going to have this. I am still at this situation now where really I haven’t done a great deal about it, but I am on the right lines...” (Tim: FG2).

Noel (FG2) believes that the lack of planning for career transitions is because players don’t want to contemplate it: “...I think we all put it to the back of our minds, we’ll think about that one later...”

Discussion

The research has highlighted a number of important issues surrounding what it is like to be a professional footballer during career transition. The players who took part in this research indicated that they felt a lack of control over their careers; the highs and lows of their professional lives were regarded as due to luck rather than their own actions. Although they felt able to cope with the pressures and demands of playing professional football, the uncertainty arising from this lack of control was seen to produce fear and anxiety about the future. They experienced the reality of career transition as a harsh one, a reality which they had not anticipated and which left them feeling a sense of rejection. At the same time, the players felt that there was limited support available to them during their careers and that the culture of professional football may discourage help-seeking. Furthermore, although they acknowledged the desirability of planning for their career after sport, players reported a tendency to avoid doing this.

Previous research has suggested a number of adjustment difficulties experienced by elite-athletes during career transition, including identity crisis (Baillie and Danish; Crook and Robertson, 1991; Pearson and Petitpas 1990), lower self-control (Werthner and Orlick, 1986) and alcohol and drug abuse (Mihovilovic, 1968). However, this largely quantitative research has not shed light on the possible reasons for these adjustment difficulties. Previous research indicates that the presence or absence of control can have a profound effect on an individual's health and well-being (Averill, 1973; Miller, 1979) and low levels of personal control in the workplace have been found to be psychologically harmful to individuals (e.g. Evans and Carrere, 1991; Ganster and Fusilier, 1989). It may be argued that the perceived lack of control, anxiety and fear for the future, feelings of rejection and difficulties with support and help-seeking reported here are important factors in understanding the difficulties reported by previous research with elite-athletes.

As pointed out in the introduction, professional footballers are unlike many other elite athletes because they do not necessarily face the end of their careers when their contracts are terminated; they hope that they will be offered further employment in the game. However, it may be argued that this uncertainty adds to the anxiety they experience and that it encourages them to focus on the possibility of a continued career rather than on planning for retirement. If players pre-planned for career transition then some of their difficulties may be prevented. Indeed research suggests that those who pre-plan for retirement (e.g. Reitzes and Mutran, 2004; Noone, Stephens and Alpass, 2009), or career transition in sport (e.g. Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte, 2006) are seen to navigate through the process of

career transition more successfully. Although professional footballers may feel the need to show a focus on and commitment to their sporting development while in the game, greater attention to players' personal development may not only help them to better plan for retirement but actually enhance the development of their sporting excellence too (Miller and Kerr, 2002).

The current study set out to build on previous research by identifying some of the difficulties in elite sports transition, providing insight into how professional footballers, in particular, experience career transition. Through a phenomenological analysis, the key issues appeared to be pre-planning and preparation for retirement, provision of support and encouraging help-seeking. These findings will be of value to support organisations and those interested in the life-long welfare of professional players.

The qualitative findings reported here have provided a rich insight into the lived experiences of professional footballers. However, the research was small in scale and the findings may therefore be limited in their scope of application. Future research needs to investigate the issues of career transition in a more diverse population of players than was possible here, as well as investigating in more depth the relationship between these experiences and the psychological difficulties reported by previous research.

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