
Coping with transitions into professional football: The player's perspective

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Abstract

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Experiences of eight Icelandic footballers (mean age =17.14) were examined in relation to their transition into professional football in top leagues in Europe. The purpose of the study was to explore the possible developmental stress factors connected to the transition; stress reactions (emotional and behavioural), and coping strategies (emotion-focused and problem-focused) used by Icelandic football players with the aim to find the path to the top level of professional football.

A productive conceptual framework to examine the transition experience was used, which was brought forward by Wylleman and Lavalle (2004) called "The developmental model faced by athletes". The model states that the athlete career is in developmental stages that pertain with four simultaneous profound developmental demands (Wylleman and Lavalle, 2004). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is the second conceptual model used in this study. This model was brought forward by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) as a framework to evaluate the processes of coping with the stressful development events which occurred during the transitions. The aim of this paper was to provide understanding and depth into the transition process of Icelandic football players into the top European professional leagues.

Background

Labour migration has turned out to be a significant and recognized characteristic of the football industry. The pull of profitable contracts from the professional leagues in Europe has proved to be difficult to oppose for generations of players from other continents and other regions inside Europe. This is the "case of Iceland"; young footballers dreaming of a playing career in bigger European leagues where the opportunities are widespread, wages are higher, and the quality of football significantly better and where the support for the game is at a high level. The trend is that more and more Icelandic players are

migrating to bigger leagues in Europe (ksi.is).

Previous research has argued that many young players are badly prepared for this normative transition; they lack the required abilities, knowledge, and experience to cope, endure, and achieve within this environment (Richardson et al., 2012). Athletes that move from home for the first time, to a new country and new social circumstances, very seldom make a successful transition into the senior elite ranks (Wylleman and Reints, 2009). This study examines the process of adoption by comparing successful and non-successful transitions (successfully make it as a first string player at the club vs. fail to make it in the senior elite ranks) of Icelandic footballers.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

A phenomenological approach was applied to examine the experiences of young athletes as they made the pivotal transition into elite sport in one of the top leagues in Europe. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and varied between 1 to 3 hours. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method was employed in analysing participant's transcripts to achieve their descriptions of lived experience, seeking to understand the data and to identify significant statements which were then converted into formulated meanings, clusters and a final thematic construct (Creswell, p.270-271, 2007). The approach allowed the young athletes to be the experts and the researcher to move beyond brief descriptions toward an in-depth understanding of the athletes' transition experiences.

Results, discussion and implications

Icelandic footballers face particular challenges, expectations and pressures in their transition to professional football, along the need to balance with demands from other life domains. The transitions are characterized by high intensity training and competition, late adolescence and social comparison, psycho-social interaction which goes from nurturing and caring to humble and un-supportive, uncompetitive and lonely environment, which is supportive to prior research (Richardson et al., 2012). Moreover, this study recognizes the four possible simultaneous developmental demands (Wylleman and Lavalle, 2004) that the athlete could face in this normative transition, likewise the study specifics potential sources of stress and effective coping strategies in these settings. This knowledge may be helpful in supporting future footballers.

The findings argue that the description for success among Icelandic migrating footballers is that you need to be mentally strong, to possess high levels of self-confidence, to make it "step by step", and to have the "right" manager. Further, it seems beneficial if someone inside family is able to join the player abroad when he's ready. Moreover, the players need to be better educated and distinguished with the possible development demands that can occur, inherit social skills, and devour various coping strategies.

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