

The Retirement Experiences of Former Professional Footballers: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Research has indicated that athletes can experience a negative impact on psychological wellbeing when retiring from professional sport. Sporting retirement offers a unique perspective due to the young age at which it occurs, as athletes may need to find new professions, which potentially poses financial, social and psychological challenges. Athletic retirement literature primarily focuses on homogenous sporting groups who have experienced retirement. The following study therefore, aimed to investigate a specific sporting group: Professional football players. The procedure employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach where four former professional footballers were asked about their retirement experiences. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis. The thematic analysis showed four key themes: Change in Structure and Routine; Preparation for After Football; Loss of Footballing Identity; and Lack of Support for Retiring Players. The results demonstrate that there are multiple factors that may potentially negatively impact mood and wellbeing amongst football players in retirement transition. Further research is necessary to understand the relationship between psychological wellbeing and athletic retirement.

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Introduction

Retirement from professional sporting careers can often be a trying period for the athlete involved and can test their physical and mental wellbeing (Carapinheira, Torregrossa, Mendes, Guedes Carvalho & Travassos, 2018; Demetriou, Jago, Richard-Gill, Mesagno & Alli, 2018). Transition to retirement from a sport career not only presents psychological obstacles, but financial and social challenges as well (Pruna & Bahdur, 2016; Cosh, Crabb & Tully, 2015; Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004). Retirement in the general population shares similar challenges with that of sporting retirement, in that social isolation (Cohen, 2004) uncertainty (Doshi, Cen & Polsky, 2008), inactivity (Dave, Rashad & Spasojevic, 2006) and loneliness (Adams, Saunders & Auth, 2004) can become more prevalent during the transitional period. However, retiring professional athletes face additional obstacles due to the earlier age at which they retire (Sanders & Stevinson, 2017; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), the financial pressure of having to find new employment (Agnew & Drummond, 2014) and the potential for a conflict of identity (Giannone, Haney, Kealy & Ogrodniczuk, 2017; Wylleman et al., 2004). This literature review will therefore highlight both the positive and negative outcomes of retirement in the general population; the protective and risk factors of poor mood and wellbeing associated with sporting retirement; and the difficulties that sporting retirement presents in a homogenous sporting population: professional footballers.

Retirement in the General Population

Primarily, literature surrounding retirement in the general population can have both negative and positive outcomes on a person's wellbeing. Literature on retirement in the general population has proven to be quite contentious, being largely steered by two perspectives: retirement provides an opportunity for growth, new fulfilment and freedom of choice (Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004; Carstensen, 1992; Atchley, 1971); or it can lead to uncertainty, inactivity and loneliness (Doshi et al., 2008; Dave et al., 2006; Adams et al.,

2004). Theory and literature have pointed toward retirement being associated with the risk of social isolation, a potential risk factor effecting negative mood during the retirement period (Cohen, 2004; Carstensen, 1992). The Socioemotional Selectivity Theory posits that rates of social interaction decline in old age (Carstensen, 1992), whilst Disengagement Theory theorises that the post-retirement period sees a mutual withdrawal between society and the ageing demographic (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Additionally, social interactions may act as a buffering factor on poor mental and physical health post-retirement (Cohen, 2004). Certain literature also posits that retirement may have a significant negative effect on an individual's mental health (Dave et al., 2006; Reitzes, Mutran & Fernandez, 1996). Dave, Rashad and Spasojevic (2006) analysed data from the longitudinal waves of the Health and Retirement study, finding that retirement lead to a 6-9% decline in mental health across a post-retirement phase of six years. Whilst the study itself acknowledges the potentially unobserved factors that might result in confounding variables, the large sample size and lengthy longitudinal design provides added credibility. Furthermore, loneliness post retirement has been suggested as a significant risk factor for depressive symptoms (Adams, Sanders & Auth, 2004).

While there is evidence that retirement may be associated with negative outcomes such as increased social isolation (Carstensen, 1992), depression (Dave, Rashad & Spasojevic, 2006) and loneliness (Adams, Sanders & Auth, 2004), there is also evidence for a positive impact of retirement for health and wellbeing. Retirement has been found to improve self-esteem (Reitzes, Mutran & Fernandez, 1996) and provide beneficial effects on mental health generally (van der Heide, van Rijn, Robroek, Burdorf & Proper, 2013). Continuity Theory suggests that retirement does not negatively impact well-being due to more autonomy concerning time management and cultural transmission (Atchley, 1971). Furthermore, Atchley posits that the retirement process is deemed more positive due to autonomy and economic support (Atchley, 1971), a theory that has been supported with evidence from numerous studies since (Atchley, 1976; Reitzes, Mutran & Fernandez, 1996; Adams et al.,

2004). In addition to the quantitative findings in retirement literature, qualitative studies have explored the experience of retirement in greater depth providing insight into the positive or negative aspects of the process (Berkovitch & Manor, 2018; Bekhet, Zauszniewski & Nakhla, 2009, Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004). Retirement is often embarked upon with trepidation when observed in pre-retirement qualitative research (Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004). This is largely down to a loss of social network (Bekhet et al., 2009) and fears of lack of occupation or boredom (Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004). A phenomenological study on the adjustment to retirement in females posit that a lack of social and physical activity, as well as negative self-concepts brought about from the loss of profession can arise post retirement (Price, 2003). Social isolation and negative self-esteem are also phenomena that have been highly replicable in retirement literature (Berkovitch & Manor, 2018; van Solinge & Henkens, 2005; Leslie, 2005). Despite these pre-occupations however, much of the topic literature points towards happier and more occupied existences in retirement (Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004; Kim & Moen, 2002; Carstensen, 1992).

Adjustment in Sporting Retirement

Whilst literature pertaining to mood and wellbeing amongst retirees in the general population has been somewhat contentious, there are several different factors in sporting retirements that may potentially pose additional challenges. Professional sportspersons face a unique challenge in their retirement due to the early age at which they are forced to retire (Sanders & Stevinson, 2017; Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett & Knowles, 2015; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). In the vast majority of cases, this often means that retired athletes have to find new careers, forge different identities and deal with the psychological challenges posed during adaptation alongside financial and social responsibilities (Carapinha et al., 2018; Giannone et al., 2017; Agnew & Drummond, 2014). Sporting retirement has been linked to psychiatric distress due to a loss of strong athletic identity (Demetriou et al., 2018) and

identity crisis has been highlighted as a major issue for athletes post-retirement (Cosh et al., 2015; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Negative outcomes have been seen in elite level sport at University level, where an athlete's degree of athletic identity (i.e. the degree to which one identifies with a given athletic role and the rigorous involvement in their sport) may be a risk factor in the emergence of psychiatric distress (Giannone et al., 2017). This is quite significant when considering that professional athletes rely on sport for financial reasons (Agnew & Drummond, 2014) as well as positive self-concepts (Cosh et al., 2015) and daily routine (Clowes et al., 2015).

The change in identity brought about by the early age of retirement during this period can lead to psychological distress (Demetriou et al., 2018; Gouttebauge, Frings-Dresen & Sluiter, 2015; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007), especially when considering certain financial and social pressures that recently retired elite athletes face (Agnew & Drummond, 2014; Wylleman et al., 2004). Cosh et al. (2015) theorised that athletic identity led to an exclusion of other types of identity and self-growth when examining the post-retirement transition of two professional swimmers through the lens of press media. This procedural design was particularly unique as it analysed 121 combined media articles pertaining to mental health difficulties and addiction problems that both swimmers faced. This study highlights a potentially significant aspect of post-retirement adjustment, where certain athletes may have to cope with public pressures and media attention due to exploits during their career. Furthermore, in a single case-study of a former professional Aussie Rules player less than five years post-retirement, retirement transition from elite sport proved to be problematic and distressing (Demetriou et al., 2018). Demetriou et al., (2018) suggested that preparing for retirement as a grieving process whilst increasing self-complexity and varying identity acted as potential protective or buffering factors during this adjustment period. Further study displays that forced injury can have a distinct negative effect on psychological wellbeing post-retirement (Pruna & Bahdur, 2016; Gouttebauge, et al., 2015; Wylleman et al., 2004).

Indeed, literature has displayed that involuntary or forced retirements are associated with more transitional problems than voluntary retirements, in both the short and long-term (Wylleman et al., 2004). Additionally, Lotysz and Short (2004) posit that injury causing the termination of a sporting career is the most distressing form of sporting retirement.

Another aspect of the sporting retirement that links to the loss of an athletic identity, is that of losing advice pertaining to nutrition and exercise. This is an area of sporting retirement that differs greatly from that of retirement amongst the general population, in that the nutrition and exercise regimes that are carefully managed whilst involved in professional sport are no longer available to athletes after they retire (Yao, Laurencelle & Trudeau, 2018; Pruna & Bahdur, 2016). In most professional sports, the athlete's physical health and fitness is of utmost importance and therefore must be maintained not only on a personal level, but in concordance with the standards set by the athletic team they represent (Pruna & Bahdur, 2016; Clowes et al., 2015). Clowes et al. (2015) further posit that there is a challenge in accepting loss of athletic physique when evaluating healthy transition in retired female gymnasts. Additionally, Gouttebauge et al. (2015) found that 42% of former professional footballers have reported adverse nutritional behaviours. These behaviours included the lack of consumption of healthy meals, irregularity of eating and poor timing of eating (Gouttebauge et al., 2015). In terms of general sporting retirement, former athletes on a whole have been shown to have poorer nutritional behaviours than non-athletes after they retire (Yao et al., 2018). Considering that current athletes scored significantly higher in nutritional scores than the non-athlete group in this study, this displays that the decline in healthy nutritional behaviour associated with sporting retirement is quite drastic (Yao et al., 2018). In spite of these findings however, the nutritional behaviour literature regarding sporting retirement is severely lacking in qualitative phenomenological data. Given that poor nutrition and physical maintenance has been linked to psychological distress (Brewer et al., 2018; Da Luz, Hay, Touyz & Sainsbury, 2018), it is plausible that poor management of nutrition and

exercise as a result of having to individually oversee both for the first time could contribute to the negative mood and wellbeing of an athlete post retirement.

With regard to protective factors during sporting retirement, literature often emphasises the need of pre-planning and maintaining social support from peers and family (Giannone et al., 2017; Clowes et al., 2015; Cosh et al., 2015). A study presented on Olympic athletes during retirement posit that dual careers - i.e. sporting career combined with something else - can positively affect the retirement period of an elite athlete (Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallares, Azocar & Selva, 2015). Dual career pathways may be a credible protective factor due to the early age at which athletes retire compared to the general population (Debois, Ledon & Wylleman, 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Professional athletes across various sports normally retire at a much earlier age than societal norm and must then adjust to a new way of life, potentially involving a new career and altered self-perception (Giannone et al., 2017; Agnew & Drummond, 2014). One field of particular interest in this regard is female gymnastics, due to the early age they begin and end their careers even when compared to other sports. Literature in this area highlighted the need for positive coping mechanisms and consistent social support networks (Clowes et al., 2015), whilst gymnasts had feelings of void and frustration (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and acknowledged identity crisis in post-retirement (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Clowes et al., looked at the retirement period of eight Olympic standard female gymnasts, observing that the most effective coping strategy (i.e. the most frequently cited) was keeping in contact with the sport as well as maintaining strong relationships with close peers and family (2015). It is important however, to highlight that there is a diversity among professional athletes regarding their retirement, due to the fact that they may be at different ages or stages of their lives depending on each sport. Literature on sporting retirement tends to focus on homogeneous groups i.e. studies are conducted using participants from a single sport. Thus, the current study will adopt a similar approach, focusing on the retirement experiences of professional footballers.

Retirement Adjustment in Professional Football

Regarding the post-retirement period in football, quantitative studies have displayed a significant difference in depression prevalence rates between football and general populations (Pruna & Bahdur, 2016). In a study analysing the data from the 2013 FIFPro pilot study, 39% of retired football players reported suffering from symptoms of depression and/or anxiety (Gouttebarga et al., 2015). This is in conjunction with findings that retired footballers experience a significant prevalence in distress, sleep, nutrition and anxiety or depressive disorders (Gouttebarga, Aoki & Kerkhoffs, 2016). Another aspect of the transitional period of retirement in professional football is that of career-ending injury. A cross-sectional study found that career ending injury, chronic pain and athletic identity were significantly associated with depressive symptomatology in professional footballers, whilst 16% of the sample displayed significant signs of clinically related depression (Sanders & Stevinson, 2017). Given that the retiring age of a professional footballer is normally between the mid-30s and early 40s, footballing retirement naturally offers more social, financial and psychological pressures than that of a non-sporting population (Calvin, 2018; Pruna & Bahdur, 2016). Additionally, considering most athletes (particularly footballers) leave school early to pursue professional careers, the post career transition can lead to an identity crisis brought about by a lack of professional options (Calvin, 2018; Carapinheira et al., 2018). Seeing as this immersive existence begins at such a young age it often means that players' professional social circles are the only ones they have, thus being forced to leave that behind in retirement (Gouttebarga et al., 2015). In terms of qualitative research, a study in Portugal examined the quality of retirement and resources available to recently retired professional footballers (n = 90), utilising semi-structured interview methodology (Carapinheira et al., 2018). It was found that the majority of participants were only educated as high as second level, 50% of the sample retired involuntarily and none had received support from a formal

programme. Furthermore Carapinheira et al., (2018) found that strong athletic identity resulted in no preparation or planning for a career after football.

Despite unearthing several worrying factors surrounding the aforementioned topic, there is still a stark gap in literature with regard to qualitative studies surrounding some specific issues that may arise in retirement from professional football. Whilst studies have looked at dual career pathways as a protective factor (Torregrosa et al., 2015), no study using retired footballers has explored this thoroughly. This is highly significant considering the lack of education seen in professional footballers (Calvin, 2018; Carapinheira et al., 2018). Additionally, quantitative literature has displayed the potential damage that the loss of nutritional and physical management has on retired athletes (Yao et al., 2018; Gouttebarga et al., 2015), however this factor has not been considered in qualitative studies pertaining to mood and wellbeing of retired athletes. Evidence of social isolation and the loss of social networks have also been identified as risk factors for poor adjustment to retirement within the general population (Adams et al., 2004; Cohen, 2004), yet these factors have not been widely studied in a population of former professional footballers.

Current evidence suggests that whilst retirement may have positive consequences (van der Heide et al., 2013; Atchley, 1971), the process is challenging and can negatively impact mood and wellbeing (Dave et al., 2006; Cohen, 2004; Reitzes et al., 1996). This may particularly be the case for professional sports persons as they face additional challenges due to the early age of retirement and the potential necessity for an additional career path and new identity (Giannone et al., 2017; Clowes et al., 2015; Gouttebarga et al., 2015). The available literature with regard to sporting retirement highlights that the early age at which retirement occurs for professional sports persons is associated with a greater risk for identity crisis and negative mood, compared with those who retire later in life (Carapinheira et al., 2018; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004). Furthermore, studies on retirement across a variety of sporting disciplines have found that stronger athletic identity can lead to a

restricted growth of alternative identities, thus garnering a sense of grief post-retirement (Demetriou et al., 2018; Giannone et al., 2017; Cosh et al., 2015). Across sporting disciplines, retirement has been found to be associated with a number of negative outcomes including identity crisis (Cosh et al., 2015), adverse nutritional and exercise behaviours (Yao et al., 2018), a loss of social networks (Clowes et al., 2015) and in certain cases psychological distress (Gouttebauge et al., 2016). The purpose of the present research therefore, is to further explore the impact and outcomes of sporting retirement among a specific group of sports persons, namely, professional footballers. The current study aims to gain insights into the retirement experiences of former professional footballers, with reference to factors affecting mood and wellbeing.

Method

Participants

Four male participants took part in the study, who were all previously professional footballers for clubs in either the League of Ireland Premier Division or the English Football League. A purposive sampling technique was employed where there were two criteria used for selection of the participants:

- 1) Participants must have played football to a professional standard in either Ireland or abroad and since retired from the sport.
- 2) The participant's retirement could be due to both unforced or forced factors (i.e. in the case of a career-ending injury).

The participants were between 34 to 53 years old ($M = 42.5 \pm 7.94$), had retired from the sport between the ages of 32 to 37 ($M = 33.75 \pm 2.75$) and had been retired for between 2 to 16 years ($M = 8.75 \pm 6.4$). Interestingly, 100% of the sample held football-related positions as football coaches. The study researcher was a 24-year-old final year student at the National College of Ireland (NCI). The candidates for the study were selected upon the advice of a third-party who was previously involved in professional football, through employment at the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) (see appendix for third-party letter of consent). The third party aided in recruitment pathways by sending information forms with the researcher's contact details to candidates directly or via email address (see appendix for information form). Participants then contacted the researcher by phone or email if they wanted to proceed with participating in the study. All candidates contacted by the third party took part.

Design

The study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach and data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. After a thorough review of relevant

literature, the interview question guide was developed in accordance with a number of potentially important factors surrounding athletic retirement. Questions in the guide were open-ended with a number of prompts available for the researcher to utilise if necessary. (see appendix for interview question guide).

Procedure

The study was conducted in co-ordinance with both the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) and NCI codes of ethics and was approved by an ethics committee at NCI. Prior to each individual interview taking place, the participant was informed of the purposes of the study and their ethical rights, including that the information they provided would remain confidential, anonymised and for the purposes of research only. All participants provided written and informed consent which further placed an emphasis on voluntary participation and the participants right to withdraw from the study at any time, as well as their right to avoid questions they did not feel comfortable answering (see appendix for informed consent form). Once the participants contacted the researcher, the interviews were arranged in a mutually convenient location for both parties. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, in person, involving only the researcher and participant. Before starting the interview, participants were asked for their age, the year they retired and whether their retirement was forced (e.g. in the event of a career-ending injury) or unforced. The researcher had pre-prepared a number of proposed questions pertaining to experiences of retirement from professional football. The semi-structured interview largely followed this proposed structure, with leeway available for any important topics of conversation raised throughout the duration. Participants answered questions about their own experiences of retiring from the game, as well as situations they or a teammate had experienced pertaining to the remit of the study. General questions regarding mood, identity, daily routine, nutrition and social networks were asked with regard to footballing retirement. The interviews roughly lasted for

between 30-40 minutes (Range = 29:09-40:12; M = 34.53) from case to case. An Olympus Digital Voice Recorder with a memory card was used to collect audio record of the interview. The data was then securely transferred from the memory card to a password protected computer file. Participants were informed of the data storage precautions being taken. Once the interviews were concluded the data was transcribed verbatim, whilst audio and digital data was destroyed. Each interview was given a specific identification number known only to the researcher. Debriefing sheets were retrospectively sent to participants thanking them for their participation in the study, reiterating the purpose of the research, and providing information on mental health helplines and charitable organisations should they have felt especially concerned with any topics covered during the procedure (See appendix for debriefing sheet).

Data Analysis

Once transcription was completed, the data was then analysed using the six-step thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially the transcribed data was read multiple times in order for the researcher to ensure accuracy of transcription, resulting in the researcher's immersion in the data and improving data familiarity. After the initial stage of familiarisation, codes were generated to identify characteristics of the data considered relevant to the research objectives formulated at the outset. Codes that were very similar were then grouped into overarching themes. This process involved reviewing, cutting and combining codes so that they could be incorporated into a theme. This process was done on a 'visual map' using post-it notes that could be amassed under linking themes, information which was then added to specific quotes on the digital document of each participant's transcripts using Microsoft Word. After this stage, Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that themes without the necessary data to support them are discarded, a technique taken in order for the researcher to arrive at fewer themes better reflecting the evidence from the collected data.

Analysis then moved into stage five, 'Naming Themes' where the remaining themes were defined. These themes became the core themes that best represented the most important details about the data with regard to the research questions. Finally, extracts from the transcripts were chosen to best display what each theme related to. These examples clearly identified the major issues that arose during the interviews and subsequent data-set. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to each participant for the inclusion of transcript extracts in the results write-up.

Results

The thematic analysis applied to the transcripts highlighted four key themes that were centrally evident in the data. The concepts were identified as being essential frames for investigating the post-retirement mood and wellbeing of retired footballers. These themes were devised following the generation of codes from the data and have been labelled as “Change in Structure and Routine”, “Preparation for After Football”, “Loss of Football Identity” and “Lack of Support for Retiring Players”.

Change in Structure and Routine

This theme represents the change experienced when going from highly regimented and structured training schedules managed by coaches and managers, to having to drive their own routine, maintain their fitness and manage their diets. This theme can be represented on two separate levels when charting a retiree’s experience: namely the actual loss of said routine; and how they respond to that loss. All participants in the sample acknowledged the difficulty of this loss in the months after retirement, particularly as they were coming from a highly structured environment:

“One day you're going along, the next thing, bang, finished, last game on a Saturday, retired Monday morning. No training, no routine, no game to look forward to. It's quite challenging for some.”

This indicates the psychological and motivational difficulty that may exist post-retirement, a concept corroborated by Harry who claimed he had “*witnessed a close friend*” who “*struggled since he’s not playing anymore, [and] doesn’t have that structure or organisation*”.

The data-set also displayed that retiring athletes must adopt a responsibility for how they live their lives following retirement, in order to cope without the more rigid structures they are used to:

“Everything was structured. Everything was planned out. You know exactly where you're going to be, where you had to be, and everything was more or less done for you.”

The physical ramifications of losing such a routine may also have a negative effect on the mood and wellbeing of retiring players, as their singular focus dissipates:

“If you're preparing, training right. When you're in a team you have a goal. When you finish playing, it's very hard to maintain that.”

Retirees must, therefore, maintain a strong self-discipline. Harry claimed he had *“occupied [himself] with other things”* and *“had to keep training”*, a thought process shared by Simon who cited being *“disciplined”* and admitted that he regularly would *“enjoy going to the gym”*.

The physiological implications of losing strict nutritional goals can also affect the wellbeing of retirees. Kevin stated that during one's career *“you have to be at a certain weight, you have to do everything right”*. Subsequently the vacuum created by retirement can lead to significant weight gain, as experienced by Kevin: *“Look at the size of me now! You lose all them habits. You switch off a bit”*. The loss in physical and mental routine can also lead to the uptake of harmful habits, often due to poor coping mechanisms and boredom or 'free time'. When Harry was asked about this he claimed that reliance on alcohol is *“common enough...”* where *“30% or 40% of players, [he had] heard maybe have struggled a bit”*. This was also linked to the increased opportunity for social drinking that retirement affords:

“Lads who maybe wouldn't drink massive amounts as players but would drink a lot more socially when they stopped playing.”

The change in structure and routine is also, however, portrayed in a positive light, as retirees cited having more time on their hands to pursue other goals:

“...it came to one particular day where I had a decision to play for [team name] or coach the [team name] game and I wanted to be at the game with the boys with the young boys that I'd been working with for so long rather than play myself.”

Additionally, Harry specified the enjoyment of spending more time with his family:

“I've been able to spend time now, have kids, get married and then move on and watch my kids now play and take a great enjoyment out of not being about me as much anymore and about going and watching them.”

Whilst routine changes offer a challenge to players post-career, results display practical solutions and some potential benefits.

Preparation for After Football

While above we see evidence that a change in daily structure can lead to negative outcomes, a secondary theme can be seen to prove that preparing for a career after professional football can bring about a positive transition into life post-retirement. There is also evidence of detrimental effects on the mood and wellbeing of participants where no plan is enacted pre-retirement. All participants in the sample identified the importance of education pre-retirement in bringing about a positive retirement transition. This is typified by Simon's statement:

“Halfway through my career I found out I'm not going to make enough money. So I began to go and re-educate myself to get a job.”

Educationally-minded professionalism, however, is rare in professional football as Isaac claimed that *“All you can see, all you want is to be a professional football player. I think young players are affected by it. They get the blinkers. They don't think about education. All they can see is dollar signs”*. Similarly, younger players can leave education to pursue

professional careers. This was typified by Kevin's experience who "*...left [Name of College] in America on a scholarship, because [Name of English football team] came in for [him] and [he] wanted to play professional football*".

Preparation was repeatedly identified as a factor that influenced a good transition post-retirement, exemplified by Kevin who claimed that those who seek education will "*...have success with whatever they do, because they're prepared. They're prepared for that moment. They've been preparing for probably 10 years while others have been preparing for it for probably 10 months...*". Furthermore, the willingness to adapt to life post-career and the understanding that the profession post-football needed to be enjoyable, was also presented:

"I spoke to career guidance and kind of revisited "what did I actually enjoy in school" and was there anything there I could further explore maybe and go down that road."

Good transitions were also aided by dual-career approach where other interests were developed in tandem with football contracts. These other interests offered a focus off the pitch for when the football career ended as Isaac claimed:

"...having worked as an electrician and served my time, that qualification, that experience of actually working gave me the confidence then to make that transition from football back into business."

Alternatively, a lack of post-retirement or contingency planning proved to be highly damaging to players from an occupational point of view and this had an impact on their mood and wellbeing in a number of cases. Simon claimed he "*...heard lads saying that they found it difficult going for job interviews and they look at your CV and you've only got playing football*". Additionally, results display that the number of players who don't prepare properly for the end of their playing careers was high, as Kevin speculated that "*only probably 15%, 20% have a plan*" and Harry stated:

“I've plenty of friends that struggled. Yes, definitely. There are people that have tried to find something, and one or two haven't- have struggled. I know personally, very well -and still struggling today and are 40 years of age now.”

This appears in the data to potentially lead to unemployment in some cases. The result can be financial difficulty post-retirement and inactivity, echoed by Kevin:

“I wasn't working at the time. Looking to find a new job or new way I was going to earn a living for the rest of my life. That was probably one aspect of it and trying to make the right career choice.”

This mind-set was coded in the data-set as “players think they can play forever”, a sub-theme that was corroborated across all participant interviews, typified by Harry:

“It's a shock, it's a bit of a shock, to be honest. It is, because you think that day will never come when you're playing.”

Loss of Footballing Identity

Whilst results previously indicated the loss of routine seen in retiring football players, the challenge of losing football and the change in identity following retirement were frequently cited by all participants. Simon described the loss extensively, stating:

“You come from a team with the lads with the banter and the changing room. It's a different world. The outside world, it's not real. You've been in there long enough and you are not in the real world.”

Simon added that there was a change in identity following retirement, iterating that he “*felt like [his] identity was probably slightly changed*”, as he was previously “*known for being a footballer*”. The data-set emphasised that retiring players must therefore recalibrate their focus to occupy themselves after their career:

“...it's very important because you're going to have to find something else aren't you? Not just to live and survive but just to occupy your mind.”

Another notable finding in the data-set was that all participants had moved into coaching careers after retirement. Two participants alluded to the transition into coaching providing a viable outlet for their athletic identity:

“Now, I just find myself obsessed with books and everything about football, about coaching and to be the best that I can be in coaching. Because I can't physically be the best footballer.” – (Kevin)

“It's enabled me to get a job with the [name of organisation], more importantly, which is the nearest thing to playing. Which is coaching.” – (Harry)

All participants further stated that it was imperative to stay within the game for their mood and wellbeing post-retirement:

“The fact that football has always been a major part of my life, and I enjoy coaching. I love coaching. It gave me a focus step without a doubt.” – (Simon)

“I always wanted to stay involved working on football. It's what I know and I felt comfortable.” – (Harry)

In addition to the change in identity, results display that a footballer's sense of self-worth can be defined by their footballing talent and from the adulation of the fans of their club:

“It's very hard to explain when you play and you're in front of 30,000, 40,000 people. The highs and the buzz of that. All of a sudden you're just nothing. They won't even recognize you.”

Professional sport, particularly football, is very unique in this quality, as there are complications to retiring related to losing that sense of self verification, highlighted by Harry who claimed that *“...there's no other career where you're going out and getting judged at least once a week by several thousand people”*, going on to state that he *“[doesn't] think there's many jobs like that”*.

Furthermore, every participant in the sample mentioned the extent to which they miss playing football for a number of reasons, exemplified by Harry, who mentioned that *“over*

time, [he missed] it” and that “there's a void [and] an emptiness there”. The loss of the dressing room atmosphere and team camaraderie before and after games was also frequently discussed, as Isaac specified by mentioning that he “did miss the banter” and “the connection with teammates”. Additionally, the lack of camaraderie was also accompanied with feelings of loss regarding match adrenaline and the lack of a substitute for that feeling:

“Playing the game you love to the best of your ability, nothing can beat that. [Losing that] was the biggest shock to the system.”

Lack of Support for Retiring Players

In addition to difficulties experienced with routine, identity and poor preparation, participants continuously alluded to the effect that the lack of support available for retiring players can have on mood and wellbeing. Isaac asserted that he “...[didn't think] *they* [had] *anything in place to prepare people for retiring*” and that organisational support was “*badly lacking*”. Results also depict that football has become ruthless and self-centred in its approach with players:

“...as a player it's how long you can get out of it, how much you can out of it. Same as a manager or a coach, or a chairman in a club, how much can they get out of it. That's the game now.”

The data displays that football clubs are focused on short-term commercial and on-pitch success, meaning that players are therefore disposable assets:

“I don't think the clubs really care that much about the players. I learned that the hard way. At the end of the day, if the club don't want you, you're gone.”

Isaac theorised that the lucrative lifestyle has increased demand, making success in the profession increasingly difficult and thus leading to a higher failure rate of “*98% with young players*”, who are forced to “*come back from England without a job*”.

In addition to the short-sighted nature of the profession, participants highlighted that there are inherent risks involved in football careers, as the players rely on their physique for their livelihood. This means that careers can end suddenly for a number of reasons, including injury, as specified by Kevin:

“It was a leg-break. I came back. I actually got back on the pitch but I knew I couldn't do it the way I wanted to do it. That was the toughest part to be honest”

Additionally, Isaac described that players can be let go due to poor on-pitch performances, mentioning that he *“went away to England to [name of English club] and played there professionally for two years. It didn't work out and [he] was back”*. Results displayed that football careers are also unique in that players retire at such a young age:

“What happens when that revenue coming in just stops? It doesn't happen in any other profession. This is a very unusual profession. You only go 30-35 max.”

Despite the above factors, as well as the resources and playing numbers in professional football, each participant highlighted that the industry is painfully lacking in infrastructure to support retiring players:

“I certainly didn't get any help. Touch wood, I didn't need it, but not everybody is going to be like that.” – (Isaac)

“There's no information there at all. There was nothing. Probably I didn't go looking for it I suppose, but there was nothing out there to point you in the right direction.” – (Kevin)

Harry acknowledged that this lack of support has had widespread ramifications for the wellbeing of players, as there is a loss of purpose post-retirement:

“Lads maybe who are coming back from England, having played professionally for a number of years and retiring, wake up, “where do you go? What do you do?””

This can lead to risks of anxiety surrounding the uncertainty of retirement, as mentioned by Kevin who stated that he was *“...anxious with the uncertainty”* and didn't know *“what he*

was going to do next". This was also identified by Isaac who speculated that *"if [one doesn't] have a focus, [that person] could definitely be at risk of maybe getting a little bit of depression or feeling isolated"*. The potential risks posed to a retiring footballer's mood and wellbeing, due to the lack of organisational support, were corroborated continuously by all participants:

"Football is a lonely place and it's even worse when you're coming to the end. Only when they get to rock bottom is when they finally get the support." – (Kevin)

"Men wouldn't be the best at talking about that sort of thing anyway so again, it goes back to the footballing world. It's not a place where you generally share feelings" – (Simon)

"I'd still say there's an awful lot battling with it. Definitely. And not reaching out to get the help and support." – (Harry)

Considering many of the problems raised in the three prior themes, accounts from the data-set depict that infrastructure is not able to successfully support players transitioning post-retirement.

Discussion

The above results identify a number of factors that potentially impact post-retirement mood and wellbeing, amongst a population of retired professional footballers. It was particularly evident that despite the negative factors highlighted, accounts display that the infrastructure available to support retiring footballers appears to be distinctly lacking. Primarily, retiring footballers experience a loss of structure and routine central to their playing careers. From a position of training multiple times a week, with professional matches as their weekly target, they suddenly may have nothing to focus on in their daily lives. This concept was multi-faceted in that players recounted both the mental difficulty of losing motivation, combined with the physiological struggles of maintaining a strong exercise routine and healthy nutritional behaviours. Additionally, results indicate the potential for the development of poor coping mechanisms, such as stress eating and excessive alcohol consumption, due to both more free time and the lack of professional necessity to enforce strict diets. Self-discipline and the conscious effort to develop a new routine seem to be significant in overcoming these difficulties, whilst positive changes in routine during transition included having more time to either pursue new goals, or spend time with family and close friends. In addition to the loss in routine, results depict that retiring footballers experience a loss of footballing identity. Participants almost describe a grieving process of losing the sport, as the shortfall of match adrenaline and atmospheric solidarity within the dressing room is hard to replicate post-career. The sample highlighted that footballing identity is also unique in that player's self-worth is often defined on the merit of their performances in front of thousands of fans, a public approval that is never reached again following retirement. This loss in identity sees the necessity for a new purpose and a recalibration of focus.

Further to the recalibration of focus, the importance of preparation for retirement was emphasised in the data-set through both education and dual-career development. As to the former, results displayed that 2nd and 3rd level education is rare amongst footballers due to the

young age at which a profession in the field must be chased, leading to a lack of job prospects following retirement from the sport. This is additionally true of dual-career pathways, as professional players can lack foresight to focus on experience off the pitch, thus restricting opportunities post-career. It is therefore not uncommon that players become unemployed following retirement from football, thus further inhibiting the aforementioned lack of routine. Considering the potential pitfalls for negative retirement transitions identified in the data-set, there was a strong acknowledgement of the necessity for organisational support during transition. Football has become a highly successful commercial industry, as shown by Deloitte's annual review of football finance in 2018 which found that the average revenue per club in the English Premier League is €265m (Deloitte United Kingdom, 2018). In spite of this success and the excessive playing numbers in the sport (Calvin, 2018), results depict a distinct lack of infrastructure in place to support players in their post-career transition. Examples were frequently given as to the short-sighted nature of professional football clubs and their lack of concern over retiree welfare. In addition to this, results display the distinct risks associated with any athletic profession, as careers are based on performance and can end suddenly, due to injury or the non-renewal of relatively short-term contracts. Participants also highlighted the unique nature of working in a career that ends before the age of forty and the negative effect that this may have on retiring players because of a perceived loss of purpose.

Comparisons With Previous Research

In conjunction with the findings of the current study, Carapinheira et al. (2018) also suggested that there was little or no organisational support for professional footballers during retirement transition. Further to this position, Carapinheira et al. (2018) asserted that support during this period could aid retirees in their professional and financial development as well as their education and educationally-minded professionalism, an assertion supported by the current data-set. Prior literature has also pointed towards the importance of consistent social

support networks and the maintenance of close familial and peer-group ties during the retirement transition (Carapinheira et al., 2018; Clowes et al., 2015). In contrast to the position presented by Clowes et al. (2015), that social networks adjust post-retirement, the results from the current study displayed that football players' social support networks were consistent throughout transition. This may be due to the constantly changing environment of football reported by participants and the high turnover of players at professional clubs that this can create. Due to the stresses identified above and the deficiencies in post-retirement organisational support, results proposed that there is potential scope for the development of negative mood and mental health difficulties amongst retired players. This finding supports that of the evidence from the 2013 FIFPro pilot study, that 39% of a sample of retired footballers suffered from depression and/or anxiety symptoms (Goutteborge et al., 2015). Another aspect of the necessity for organisational support in transitions is seen in cases of career ending injury, which was described as both devastating and traumatic in the study at hand. This finding comes in conjunction with significant associations found between depressive symptomatology and career ending injury, chronic pain and athletic identity (Sanders & Stevinson, 2017).

The loss of athletic identity has repeatedly been linked to identity crisis (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007), as well as negative effects on athlete's post-retirement mood and wellbeing (Demetriou et al., 2018). Furthermore, strong athletic identities forged during careers can result in the exclusion of other identity growth throughout careers, resulting in difficulty during the retirement transition (Cosh et al., 2015). Results from the current study support this literature, in that participants referred to the struggle of letting go of their former identity as a professional footballer. However, the findings were unique as they indicated the surreal nature of losing the approval gained by supporting fans when playing. This may result in a loss of self-worth, attributed to the difficulty in letting go of this approval. Participants in the current study repeatedly highlighted this aspect of retirement from football, something which

has not been identified in prior literature on athletic identity. Additionally, results supported the suggestion of Demetriou et al., (2018) that players must prepare for retirement as a grieving process, as all participants in the current study mentioned the psychological difficulty in leaving the dressing room atmosphere and losing the adrenaline of playing top-level football. An interesting aspect of this finding was the transitioning into coaching careers as an outlet for footballing identity. This finding supported that of Carapinheira et al., (2018) in that it was very common for a sample of retired professional footballers to transition into coaching. Results however, offer a new understanding, that coaching affords players an opportunity to stay employed in a profession of interest, whilst utilising said profession as a means to concentrate their former identity as a footballer.

In addition to the positive effects a move into coaching can have, results displayed that preparation and planning for post-retirement generally can benefit mood and wellbeing during transition. Participants frequently identified the unique proposition of the early-age of retirement in professional football, something that has also been stressed in athletic retirement literature as a whole (Giannone et al., 2017; Clowes et al., 2015). Primarily, results supported the findings that education has been problematic alongside athletics, particularly in football due to the early age at which players leave to pursue a professional career (Calvin, 2018). Given that careers can end suddenly and the majority of players must seek new employment for financial reasons, the lack of education limits employment opportunities post-retirement. The rarity of education seen in professional football players was corroborated in the current sample and concurred with Carapinheira et al. (2018), in that the majority of participants were only educated to second level. Notably, one participant in the current sample was unemployed for several months after his playing career and reported the psychological difficulty both from a financial standpoint and a mental wellbeing standpoint, findings that supported Agnew and Drummond's (2014) position that the financial challenges facing retiring athletes can negatively influence their psychological wellbeing. Alternatively,

the positive effect that dual-career development had after retirement was reported by all participants in the existing sample and also supported literature theorising that dual-career pathways may be a credible protective factor to combat poor transition post-retirement (Debois et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015).

Another central factor linked to the mood and wellbeing of retiring athletes presented by participants in the current study, is the difficulty that losing the routine of their career has had on their fitness and nutrition. In prior literature on retirement in the general population, there are two central edicts to mood and wellbeing post-retirement, with regards to routine and structure: namely, retirement can potentially enable new fulfilment with regard to new routines (Nuttman-Schwartz, 2004; Atchley, 1971); or the lack of structure can lead to inactivity during transition (Doshi et al., 2008). Interestingly, despite the differences highlighted in retirement between the general population and professional athletes, results from the current study support both perspectives. Participants reported a relief at finishing their career and being able to either pursue new ambitions, or spend more time with their family. Alternatively, the data also indicated feelings of inactivity post-retirement, supporting the findings of Doshi et al. (2008), who posit that a period of dormancy followed retirement in the general population. In support of this, the current data-set showed the significant difficulty players can have with nutritional management after playing, putting on weight and struggling to stay in peak physical condition similar to that of their career. The field of nutritional and physical management is an area of sporting retirement that is in sharp contrast to that of retirement in the general population, as both facets are heavily monitored on a daily basis during playing careers. The results displayed that this loss of structure was difficult to regain post-retirement and that self-discipline was of paramount importance. Indeed prior literature on the topic has indicated that former athletes generally have poorer nutritional behaviours than non-athletes (Yao et al., 2018), whilst findings on former professional football players have displayed that as many as 42% report adverse nutritional behaviour

(Gouttebarga et al., 2015). Additionally, results support the position of Pruna and Bahdur (2016) that physical conditioning changes from a team goal to a personal self-discipline. Considering the indication in past literature, that poor nutrition and physical maintenance may negatively influence psychological wellbeing (Brewer et al., 2018; Da Luz et al., 2018), there may be a need to understand how mental health relates to the loss of nutritional and physical routine amongst retiring athletes in further study.

Implications for Further Research

The present study determines that, central to the issues that arise in footballing retirement, are the loss of employment, way of life, purpose and identity. The sample asserts that players are not prepared for after their career and additionally, clubs are self-focused and organisations don't specifically help with the transitional retirement period. This adds to the small body of literature on the topic of retirement in professional football, literature that indicates that the infrastructure available to aid and support retiring football players is currently failing. With regard to implications of the current study, there is a need to further understand several factors identified by participants in the sample and how these factors relate to player welfare post-retirement. There is however, scope to develop training interventions and retirement programmes at an organisational level, both of which are currently deficient within the game based on prior literature and the findings of this study. More specifically, another avenue for further research could be a large-sample, longitudinal design observing players as they go through their retirement transition post-career. There is potential for a union-led research study done by for example, the Players Football Association (PFA) in England. Considering the resources of the organisation and financial strength of the game in the U.K. (Deloitte United Kingdom, 2018), a study of such magnitude could look at potential mental health risk factors, as well as protective factors associated with retirement from professional football at the highest level. No participants in the current

sample played football to an international standard, thus due to differences in professional standard, players of a lower calibre may have a higher engagement in protective factors. The aforementioned factors (e.g. education and dual-career development) may provide a buffer for poor retirement transition, factors that are not engaged in at football's highest level.

There were some limitations in the current study, mostly pertaining to issues surrounding the sample. Given the specificity of the topic at hand, gathering a large sample size proved difficult and resulted in a smaller sample, without sufficient ability to draw concrete conclusions. Furthermore, purposive sampling methodology is limited in its nature due to the potential for selective sampling, a limitation that showed as all participants transitioned to coaching roles post-retirement and thus may have a biased perspective on the subject matter due to this transitional step. An added limitation to the sample is that some participants had been retired from the profession for a number of years, potentially alleviating some credibility to their accounts as the game may have progressed since their retirement. Certain procedural aspects could also be improved upon in further research on the topic. The lack of a pilot study in a semi-structured interview design for example, can hold a certain risk in the collection of data, as the researcher is effectively entering the initial interviewing sessions unpractised. Furthermore, thematic analysis as a method of data analysis can lead researchers to overlook the contextual significance of certain information and thus, potentially result in a research bias. These limitations could inform future research however, as a replication of the current study with a larger and more representative sample size, as well as additional and well-practised researchers to compare and contrast thematic analytic content, could negate potential pitfalls previously highlighted.

In conclusion, the sample of retired professional football players acknowledged a number of challenges to mood and wellbeing facing them during their retirement transition: namely the loss of structure and routine; the loss of identity as a football player; and the potential difficulty arising from a lack of preparation for retirement. New understandings on

the topic under investigation include the potential for professional footballers to transition into coaching careers as an outlet for athletic identity and the identification of a loss of self-worth, due to the shortfall of approval in the form of adulation from spectators while playing. The biggest issue arising in the data-set was the deficiencies currently seen in organisational support for players post-career, a position supported in prior football retirement literature (Carapinheira et al., 2018; Pruna and Bahdur, 2016). Further research is required to determine the potential negative psychological effects surrounding athletic retirement and the progression and development of retirement programmes and training interventions within the sport.

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Appendix

Letter of Consent

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Harry McCue former FAI U21 coach and head of the FAI ETB Player Development Course, hereby acknowledge assisting Aidan White in his Final Year Thesis Project recruitment pathways by informing potential candidates of his study.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that the participants being recruited are not currently in direct professional association with myself and will not be coerced into participating in the proposed study.

If you have any questions concerning this matter, please feel free to contact me on the email provided below.

Harry McCue

Harry.mccue@fai.ie

Sincerely,

Information Form

The Retirement Period Experiences of Recently Retired Professional Footballers: An Exploratory Study

INVITATION

You are being asked to take part in a research study aiming to shed light on the transitional experiences associated with footballing retirement. I, Aidan White, am a final year undergraduate psychology student at the National College of Ireland, being supervised by Dr. Caoimhe Hannigan. (*Once obtained*) This project has been approved by the National College of Ireland Research Ethics Committee. If you would like to participate in the proposed study, please email the researcher at x16503176@student.ncirl.ie.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

In this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview discussing your own experiences on the sport, retirement and second hand peer experiences. The interview is semi-structured and will be recorded on a digital dictaphone for later transcribing. I will be conducting the interview which will roughly be 30-45 minutes in length where breaks are acceptable should participants require.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation. You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn/destroyed without penalty.

You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you without penalty.

You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered (unless answering these questions would interfere with the study's outcome). If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

BENEFITS AND RISKS

It is important to be aware that the subject matter of this research may potentially be emotionally or psychologically distressing at times, should you decide to participate. If at any time during the study you feel distressed, overwhelmed, or generally uncomfortable, please inform the researcher immediately.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY

The data collected will be securely protected on digital file under the responsibility of the researcher. The audio data will be securely stored on a password protected computer and after being transcribed, will be destroyed. Furthermore the data will be identified with an identification number to maintain anonymity and any identifying references (i.e. names of friends/family, places or previous teams) will be redacted from the report manuscripts. The data will be presented as a final year thesis project with complete anonymity. Quotes or pieces of information given by the participant may be used in the final year thesis project report or presentation, however any example will be anonymous and identifiable information will be redacted.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The researcher and research supervisor will be glad to answer any questions about this study at any time. You may contact the researcher on the email listed above and the supervisor at caoimhe.hannigan@ncirl.ie.

Informed Consent Form

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

| | | |
|-----|--|--------------------------|
| 1. | I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. | I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. | I voluntarily agree to participate in the project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. | I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. | I have not been coerced or enticed into participation on the project | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. | The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. | If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. | The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. | I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. | The procedures regarding anonymity and identity protection have been clearly explained to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. | I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Debriefing Form

The Retirement Experiences of Professional Footballers: An Exploratory Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The general purpose of this research is to understand the transitional experiences associated with retirement from professional football.

We invited people who have retired from playing professional football in the past five years. In this study, you were asked to participate in an interview discussing your own experiences on the sport, retirement and second hand peer experiences. The results from this study aim to shed a light on some of the transitional experiences that impact mood and wellbeing after sporting retirement.

If you feel especially concerned about some of the content discussed during the interview process, you could phone the Samaritans helpline (116-123) or visit www.aware.ie for further information regarding mental health concerns. If problems persist, please visit a certified health professional.

Thank you for your participation in this study. If you have further questions about the study, please contact x16503176@student.ncirl.ie. In addition, if you have any concerns about any aspect of the study, you may contact the thesis supervisor caoimhe.hannigan@ncirl.ie.