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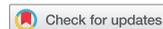


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COMMENTARY



The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of professional footballers

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has had huge ramifications on professional football. This commentary focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of professional footballers. Specifically, footballers within the English Premier League, English Football League, FA Women's Super League and FA Women's Championship. This commentary considers a holistic approach to mental health, the environment of professional football, and the impact of career transitions and critical moments on mental health. The intention is to stimulate discussion and further research of mental health and wellbeing within professional football. This paper considers the impact of Covid-19 and makes recommendations for professional football clubs to develop a holistic mental health strategy. We recommend that professional clubs increase the level of emotional support for professional footballers, and that this should not be a temporary measure due to the pandemic. Clubs should develop a long-term strategy to encourage players to seek emotional support.

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Mental health; professional football; elite sport; career transitions; well-being

Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is an essential component of health. The WHO defines mental health as "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2018). However, to address the increasing mental health needs in sports settings further modification and innovation is required (Henriksen et al., 2019). Elite athletes are tasked with intense training loads, performance demands, and pressures from media, coaches and teammates that in combination can cause a threat to athlete wellbeing and lead to poor mental health (Rice et al., 2016). The emergence and spread of Covid-19 around the world has led the WHO to declare a Public Health

Emergency (Clarkson et al., 2020), with consequences likely to develop into an unparalleled socio-economic crisis. The pandemic continues to cause volatility and precarity globally for many workers who are experiencing redundancies, unpaid salaries and violations of their rights (FIFPRO, 2020a). Footballers are no exception. Covid-19 is likely to impact the livelihoods and security of professional footballers, particularly those who operate within the margins of the sport, for example women and other minority groups (Clarkson et al., 2020).

Careers in sport are fragile, short-term and hyper-competitive (Culvin, 2020). The focus on the short-term often means long-term objectives such as the wellbeing and mental health of players are often neglected (Culvin, 2020). These demands may increase susceptibility to

mental health issues and risk-taking behaviours (Rice et al., 2016). Yet, despite increased sensitivity to mental health problems, to assume those athletes who do not present with clinical disorders are healthy is overly simplistic (Henriksen et al., 2019). Mental health is a human lived experience and a dynamic feature of life (Henriksen et al., 2019). Therefore, a comprehensive strategy for assessment is necessary if we are to develop a more holistic and contextualised definition of mental health amongst elite athletes.

The environment of professional Football

When considering a holistic mental health assessment strategy in elite football, the impact of environmental factors cannot be understated. On the 13th March 2020 the English Premier League (EPL), English Football League (EFL), Women's Super League (WSL) and Women's Championship (WC) suspended all football. As the UK moved into lockdown, matches were suspended and many clubs, particularly lower down the footballing pyramid, furloughed players and training grounds were closed. Players had to take pay cuts and consider options away from football due to contract renewal (Ames, 2020). Players who previously relied on daily routines and enjoyed the company of their teammates had to remain at home. This sense of isolation significantly impacted upon their wellbeing (Kilpatrick, 2020) and players needed support. A FIFPRO (2020) survey found double the number of male and female footballers in 16 countries had reported symptoms of depression and anxiety since football has been suspended (Ames, 2020), and just 16% of female footballers have reported receiving mental health support from their clubs during the pandemic (FIFPRO, 2020a). The impact of covid-19 and lack of mental health support had a wide-ranging impact across professional football. Some players had been forced to live

alone or away from family members, which impacted upon their usual social networks, and created a high level of uncertainty (FIFPRO, 2020b). To help address this issue, clubs have used a range of digital technologies to keep in contact with players. This allowed players the opportunity to discuss any doubts or problems that they may have had (Foster, 2020). Although the WSL and FA Women's Championship 2019–2020 season was ended on the 25th May, the EPL finally resumed on the 17th June (Williams, 2020) with the EFL resuming on the 20th June. The EPL launched "Project Restart" where clubs had to develop return to play protocols in line with government guidance (Aarons, 2020). Since the restart, professional football has been played behind closed doors, without fans in attendance.

The absence of fans in stadiums can have a detrimental impact on professional footballers. Focusing on the crowd instead of their pain can help players when they are tiring and about to "hit the wall". Players who are motivated by external stimulation may have struggled to perform without the presence of fans, therefore their place in the team and subsequent contract may be at risk (James, 2020). As of December 2020, clubs in certain areas of England can allow a limited number of supporters into their stadiums following a relaxation of coronavirus restrictions (Mallows, 2020).

Career transitions and mental health

The curtailment of the football season in March 2020 has led to a period of uncertainty for individuals within football. From July to October 2020, financial decisions regarding contracts throughout the football pyramid were made, with some struggling to survive from a financial perspective. This experience can be termed as "going through a transition" (Morris & Deason, 2020) or "facing a critical moment" (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Tonge, 2020). The experience of a transition or critical moment

can bring upon a sudden lack of structure and potentially create existential anxiety due to the uncertainty of what may be coming next (PFA, 2019). One of the potential causes of this anxiety is that the player holds a strong sense of athletic identity of being a footballer (Nesti, 2010). Following the Covid-19 outbreak athletic identity may have been threatened through disrupted integration with teammates, coaches, support staff and management. Many players will not have their contracts renewed due to financial constraints or deselection. Such precarity can stimulate mental health challenges such as having to move away to join another club (i.e. sign a short-term contract), schooling disruption, and contracts coming to an end leading to uncertainty of remuneration (Tonge, 2020). Arguably, players who move on from clubs involuntary (i.e. not through their choice) are more prone to psychological difficulties such as anxiety and worry over future steps (Nesti, 2004).

Evidence suggests challenging times can also be used to garner positive experiences (Stambulova, 2000). For many players an extended period away from the regimented lifestyle of professional football has presented an unexpected opportunity for personal growth and identity development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). It is hoped that players are engaged with some level of hope, optimism, positivity and meaning around the best ways forward following an unprecedented issue within our lifetime. It is as crucial as ever that the right support is in place as players attempt to get their careers moving again, or even seek out new opportunities to move their lives on. We cannot allow players to fall into a deep hole and then find it impossible to get out.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on elite sport and professional football is no exception. The suspension of the EPL,

EFL, FA WSL, and FA WC, and the uncertainty that followed has had a detrimental impact on professional footballer's mental wellbeing. We recommend that all elite football clubs across both the men's and women's game develop a holistic mental health assessment strategy and to take responsibility to support the wellbeing of their employees. In developing a holistic strategy clubs should have a thorough understanding of the environmental factors, in order to assess and signpost players for treatment where required. Furthermore, it is essential that professional clubs should support players thoroughly with their transitional experiences in order to minimise any potential future mental health difficulties.

Disclosure statement

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