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# "The Beautiful Game" of Job Demands and Resources

A Qualitative Study Among Norwegian  
Professional Football Players

Master's thesis in Work and Organizational Psychology

Supervisor: Martin Rasmussen Skogstad

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## Preface

It is with a sense of accomplishment that I present this final thesis, marking the completion of my master's degree journey at NTNU Trondheim. This project has been a challenging yet rewarding experience, allowing me to expand on my knowledge and skills in my field of study. On this occasion, there are several individuals who I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to. I am grateful to the participants and fellow footballers for taking their time during their busy schedule. Their insights and experiences greatly enriched the project and added valuable perspectives. I wholeheartedly wish for them to achieve their goals and dreams, both on and off the pitch. I would like to thank my supervisor Martin Rasmussen Skogstad for his guidance, support and sense of humor throughout the process. Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my parents, friends, and partner for their love and support.

This master thesis adheres to the APA (7<sup>th</sup> edition) referencing and formatting guidelines.

### Abstract

Football, a beloved recreational activity turned dream job for some. However, the reality is that professional football players face occupational stress and a range of physical, social, and psychological challenges in their pursuit of success. While extensive research on professional athletes exists, there remains a need for more studies about the well-being of footballers in the workplace. To address this gap, a qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews was employed to investigate the job characteristics and experiences of six Norwegian professional football players. The study employed the job demands-resources model and conducted a reflexive thematic analysis, identifying seven overarching and dynamic themes. Three themes were identified as job demands, including career uncertainty due to fear of injuries, contracts and performance pressure. Work-life balance, priorities, sacrifices, and obsessive football thoughts made balancing football and personal life difficult. Players also experience physical and mental strain as "24/7" athletes, enduring pain, high pressure and expectations. Four themes were identified as job resources, including personal resources such as passion, discipline, curiosity, gratefulness, and personal coping mechanisms and routines. The team climate was deemed crucial in providing social support, followed by the significant role of high salaries and family support. Finally, mental training was identified as a versatile and high-potential job resource. This study identified perceived barriers to mental health and mental training, emphasizing important implications for individuals and organizations. By enhancing the understanding of professional football players' capacity to overcome and manage stressors, this study promotes better well-being and performance.

*Keywords:* work and occupational psychology, professional football, reflexive thematic analysis, job demands-resources model

## Sammendrag

Fotball, en elsket fritidsaktivitet som for noe blir en drømmejobb. Virkeligheten er imidlertid slik at profesjonelle fotballspillere står overfor yrkesrelatert stress og en rekke fysiske, sosiale og psykologiske utfordringer i jakten på suksess. Selv om finnes omfattende forskning på profesjonelle idrettsutøvere, er det fortsatt behov for flere studier om velvære i arbeidet som fotballspiller. For å fylle dette kunnskapsgapet ble en kvalitativ tilnærming med bruk av semistrukturerte intervjuer brukt for å undersøke jobbkaraktistikkene og opplevelsene til seks norske profesjonelle fotballspillere. Studien brukte jobbkrav-ressursmodellen og gjennomførte en refleksiv tematisk analyse, der syv overordnede og dynamiske temaer ble identifisert. Tre temaer ble identifisert som jobbkrav, inkludert usikkerhet knyttet til karrieren på grunn av frykt for skader, kontrakter og prestasjonspress. Arbeid-livsbalanse, prioriteringer, ofringer og overdrevne tanker på fotball gjorde det vanskelig å balansere fotball og privatliv. Spillerne opplevde også fysisk og mental belastning som "24/7"-idrettsutøvere, tåle smerte, høyt press og forventninger. Fire temaer ble identifisert som jobbressurser, inkludert personlige ressurser som lidenskap, disiplin, nysgjerrighet, takknemlighet og personlige mestringsstrategier og rutiner. Lagklimaet ble ansett som avgjørende for sosial støtte, etterfulgt av den betydningsfulle rollen høy lønn og familiestøtte spilte. Til slutt ble mental trening identifisert som en allsidig og lovende jobbressurs. Denne studien identifiserer opplevde barrierer for mental helse og mental trening, og understreker viktige implikasjoner for enkeltpersoner og organisasjoner. Ved å forbedre forståelsen av profesjonelle fotballspilleres evne til å håndtere og takle stressfaktorer, fremmer denne studien bedre trivsel og prestasjon.

*Nøkkelord:* arbeids- og organisasjonspsykologi, profesjonell fotball, refleksiv tematisk analyse, jobbkrav-ressursmodellen

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## **"The Beautiful Game" of Job Demands and Resources**

Striving for excellent performance and successful careers in football/soccer can be a demanding endeavor that draws on limited physical and psychological capacity. Countless children worldwide aspire to become the next superstar in the world's most popular sport. However, the odds of success are low, with only a fraction of football players becoming professionals and making a living (Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Van Yperen, 2009). Successful football players find that their dream job can evolve into a "double-edged sword", providing both rewarding and stressful outcomes. Empirical research has demonstrated that professional football players and elite athletes deal with a relatively high level of occupational stress in facing several growing physical, social and psychological challenges to thrive and adequately develop their careers (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Kristiansen et al., 2012; Tabei et al., 2012). In facing these challenges, coping and recovery are essential in preserving health, well-being and performance (Balk et al., 2017; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Van Yperen, 2009).

Although professional football players are skilled athletes and entertainers, they are fundamentally human beings whose well-being and ill-being are reflected in their mental, physical, and social health (Giles et al., 2020). According to meta-analytic reviews conducted by Purcell et al. (2019), elite athletes experience similar levels of mental illness as the general population, with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and sleep disorders being among the most prevalent. Junge and Feddermann-Demont (2016) reported comparable results when they evaluated the prevalence of depression and anxiety in top-level Swiss football players. Further, an increasing body of research highlights that mental health challenges such as sleep disorders, substance abuse, and symptoms of anxiety and depression are prevalent in several top-level European football leagues (Confectioner et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2018; van Ramele et al., 2017), and among these, Goutteborge et al. (2015) revealed that 40 percent of professional Norwegian football players reported having psychological problems.

Sports culture often celebrates mental toughness while stigmatizing vulnerability, thus hindering athletes from seeking help for emotional and psychological problems (Confectioner et al., 2021; Purcell et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). To make progress in physical training, it is crucial to balance it with adequate recovery. Similarly, when it comes to psychological demands, it is essential to find a balance and incorporate strategies that support good mental health (Henriksen et al., 2020). Moreover, as Lundqvist et al. (2022) emphasized, elite sports organizations must consider protecting mental health as important as the athletes' physical health.

In addition to mental health, research on working as a football player has explored a diverse range of aspects related to "the beautiful game", including health in terms of physical functioning and maximized performance (Confectioner et al., 2021), stress experienced during play (Kristiansen et al., 2019; Noblet & Gifford, 2002), the career transitions of talented youth (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016; Bakker et al., 2011; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Lundqvist et al., 2022) and burnout (Marshall et al., 2022; Tabei et al., 2012). However, Noblet and Gifford's (2002) study on professional Australian football players identified that prior research on stressors in sports has frequently overlooked the distinct challenges professional athletes face in team sports. Moreover, Goutteborge and Kerkhoffs (2018) identified that professional football players are among the occupational groups for which relatively limited information is available about their well-being at work. Without a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to stress in professional football, there is a risk that the workplace or stress management strategies will overlook situations or conditions that are particularly damaging to players' well-being and performance (Noblet & Gifford, 2002).

Work and organizational psychology possess a wealth of knowledge regarding various stressors in the workplace, which are classified and linked to different processes and outcomes through theoretical concepts and models. Burnout, job insecurity and work-life

balance are highly relevant factors. Maslach et al. (2001) conceptualized *burnout* as a "chronic stress syndrome characterized by chronic feelings of exhaustion, negative attitudes toward work and reduced professional efficacy". Professional football players face a unique workload compared to traditional work because the work does not end when the player leaves the pitch of play, taking a psychological toll on footballers (Giles et al., 2020). Tabei et al. (2012) linked burnout in football to major organizational stressors such as training and competition load and environment, travel, nutrition, injury, leadership style, lack of social support, career and performance development, inadequate communication channels, and role overload. Therefore, psychosocial mechanisms within the sport and affiliated organizations can contribute to burnout.

Another relevant concept is *job insecurity*, which has been defined and explored in various ways (Hellgren et al., 1999; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Shoss (2017) recently defined it as "a perceived threat to the continuity and stability of employment as it is currently experienced". According to De Witte (1999), job insecurity causes stress reactions among employees, ultimately increasing physical strain and decreasing psychological well-being and job satisfaction. Professional football players make for a fascinating group of employees to study due to the inherent job insecurity woven into their careers within the sport (Roderick, 2006). Studies conducted with Scottish and Australian professional footballers characterized the work as short-lived, unstable and with high player turnover (McGillivray et al., 2005; Noblet & Gifford, 2022). Research has shown that several underlying factors contribute to job insecurity in football, e.g., such as the short, time-limited, and uncertain nature of employment contracts and negotiations (McGillivray et al., 2005; Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Roderick, 2006), ageing (Roderick, 2006), whether the players could meet the competitive performance standards set by the coach or club (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Moreover, sustaining injuries is one of, if not the most significant factor in causing job insecurity in

football (Roderick et al., 2000, 2006; Noblet & Gifford, 2002), as injuries can have a considerable physical and psychological impact on the employee. Psychological factors and symptoms of common mental disorders, including distress, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and adverse alcohol use, have been linked to injuries in professional sports (Jensen et al., 2018; Junge & Feddermann-Demont, 2016; Kilic et al., 2017; Reardon et al., 2019; Junge & Feddermann-Demont, 2016). Studies have shown that injured athletes are two to nearly four times more likely to report these symptoms than non-injured athletes (Gouttebauge et al., 2016; Kilic et al., 2017).

Lastly, the term *work-life balance* concerns individuals who value the overall quality of their working life and how it impacts their broader quality of life (Guest, 2002). Work-life balance is defined as the "allocation of time and psychological energy in a balanced way in work and non-work life while deriving much satisfaction from both work and non-work life" (Greenhaus et al., 2003; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Football comes to represent more than just a game. It colonizes the lifeworld of its participants, becoming inseparable from their innermost identity (McGillivray et al., 2005). The work can significantly impact private life and vice versa (Amstad et al., 2011). Being a footballer means having priorities and making sacrifices over valued elements of their lives to pursue and maintain a successful career (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Long working hours, weekend work and unpredictable schedules can result in having less time, energy, and predictability to prioritize personal life (Brauner et al., 2019). Relocation also poses a common challenge for professional football players (Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Roderick, 2006). These priorities and sacrifices are expected, as reported by football coaches in Holt and Dunn (2004).

The premise for this thesis is to use occupational and organizational psychological theories and concepts as it considers professional football players as employees. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six Norwegian professional football

players, exploring the balance between job demands and resources in their work. This study offers qualitative insights into the experiences and perspectives of professional football players regarding various stressors and how they cope with and mitigate that stress. The chosen theoretical framework was the job-demands resources model. The data was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis to determine the relationship between job demands, job resources, well-being and performance.

The research question is split in two. The first section revolves around the job characteristics of being a professional footballer. The second part explores how the players balance job demands and resources to achieve athlete success and personal well-being, with an area of interest in mental training surging as a possible job resource.

*Research question:* What are the characteristic job demands and resources experienced by professional football players, and how do they balance these factors to optimize their performance and well-being, and to what extent does mental training play a role in achieving this balance?

The objective of this thesis within work and occupational psychology is to address the unique job characteristics of professional football players and identify key stressors and resources to mitigate them. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by expanding on existing knowledge about the well-being of full-time professional footballers. By shedding light on their experiences, this research will also contribute to the discourse on mental health and mental training in football. The study will explore how football face uncertain careers, challenges in balancing football with personal life, and general strain of working as a professional athlete. Ultimately, the findings of this research can add implications for improving professional football players' well-being and performance at work.

## Theoretical framework

In occupational health psychology, job-demands resources (JD-R) model serves as an influential, flexible and heuristic theoretical framework that seeks to explore the influence of job characteristics on individual well-being and work performance (Lesener et al., 2019; Bakker & Demerouti (2017). Central in the JD-R model is the premise that although different occupations may possess unique risk factors contributing to job-related stress, these factors can be broadly classified into two overarching categories: job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2004). Therefore, the JD-R model, which provides a comprehensive framework that can be applied across various occupational contexts regardless of the specific job demands and resources, has gradually gained an established position in research and practice (Schaufeli, 2017).

According to Demerouti et al. (2001), job demands are physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that require prolonged physical and psychological effort, resulting in specific physiological and psychological costs. Examples of job demands include a high workload, high work pressure, or job insecurity. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), high workload is a job stressor if it requires significant effort from employees without adequate recovery time. Additionally, Van den Broeck et al. (2010) defined job demands as either hindering demands, which impede optimal worker functioning, or challenging demands, which stimulate optimal worker functioning. In contrast, job resources refer to a job's physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects useful in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and associated psychological and physiological costs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Examples of job resources include high autonomy, co-worker support or constructive feedback from management.

The model operates on a second premise which proposes that when job demands and resources are combined, two distinct psychological processes are activated, affecting



employees' performance and well-being. The two processes are health impairment and motivational (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti & Bakker, 2017). The health impairment process assumes that job demands in poorly designed jobs can initiate a process of health impairment, fostering burnout or physical and psychological strain. In contrast, the motivational process is initiated by job resources, fostering growth, learning, and development (Demerouti & Bakker, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Initially, the JD-R model focused solely on the characteristics of the work environment. However, as most psychological approaches acknowledge the influence of personal and environmental factors on behavior, personal resources eventually became incorporated into the model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Personal resources refer to the psychological characteristics, aspects of the self or beliefs people hold regarding how much control they have over their environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Furthermore, personal resources can act as a buffer, moderating or influencing the relationship between job characteristics and employee well-being outcomes. In other words, individuals with more personal resources are better equipped to handle job demands and cope effectively (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Job demands can have positive effects on work performance. On one hand, a high workload may be necessary for achieving optimal work performance. On the other hand, low workload can cause disengagement and boredom, which in turn has shown negative consequences such as absenteeism, poor employee retention and significant health problems (Cummings et al., 2016; Fisher, 1993).

Researchers have recently employed the JD-R model in their studies on elite sports and football. According to Balk et al. (2017), the increasing professionalization of elite sports has resulted in athletes facing greater physical, emotional, and cognitive demands. This

notion is consistent with the belief that elite sports can become more work-oriented than play-oriented. A balance between job demands and appropriate physical, emotional, and cognitive resources is essential for enhancing athlete well-being and performance (Balk et al., 2020; Raedeke & Smith, 2004). The same study revealed that physical and emotional detachment from sports could serve as important job resources in elite sports to aid the recovery from job demands (Balk et al., 2020).

Marshall et al. (2022) found that extended periods of separation from friends and family and limited opportunities for detachment can elevate job demands, causing physical and emotional exhaustion and increasing the likelihood of burnout among athletes. Moreover, the same study found that athletes tend to seek sport-related resources to mitigate the impact of high sport-related demands, implying that sport-related resources are most effective when aligned with sport-related demands. Bakker et al. (2011) conducted a study among young talented Dutch football players, exploring the connection between environmental resources, flow (defined as a state of consciousness where people become totally immersed in an activity), and performance. The study revealed that environmental resources, including autonomy, performance feedback and support from the coach, had a significant impact on flow during the football match. This flow, in turn, was found to be positively associated with both self- and coach-ratings of performance.

### **Mental Training as a Job Resource**

Professional football players face various job demands and resources that can impact their physical and psychological well-being, ultimately hindering their performance. Drawing on the assumption that sport-related resources are most effective when aligned with sport-related demands (Marshall et al., 2022), this thesis wish to include the potential of *mental training* as a job resource amongst other essential resources in working as a professional football player. The concept of mental training is based on the premise that psychological

factors can significantly enhance or inhibit an individual's physical performance (Vealey, 2007). Therefore, mental training efforts work as a supplement to physical performance during their daily work. However, as barriers and stigmas are attached to seeking mental health assistance (Reardon et al., 2019), there are also obstacles in seeking and implementing mental training, as Vealey (2007) noted. Unfortunately, the culture of sports, which is often insular and characterized by a "macho" attitude, can contribute to a stigma and lack of trust around mental training (Vealey, 2007). As such, mental training consultants often face challenges that are rooted in the social-cultural structures of society and sport. And individuals look for other alternatives to achieve similar outcomes.

Research in sports psychology and reviews of mental training literature have supported the effectiveness of incorporating mental training in improving athletic performance and athletes' well-being (Behnke et al., 2019; Vealey, 2007). Vealey (2007) conceptualized mental training in two groups, mental skills and techniques. "A mental skill is the learned capacity or ability to carry out a specific training task. A mental technique is a specific procedure used to achieve mental training goals". The present thesis adopted this broad definition.

According to Vealey (2007), important mental skills for athletes include, e.g., confidence, motivation, focus and energy management. However, Vealey (2007) emphasizes that multiple types of mental skills are important for success and well-being in sports. Moreover, various mental techniques have appeared in various sports and football literature, e.g., mental imagery (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Thelwell et al., 2006; Vealey, 2007), goal setting (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Thelwell et al., 2006; Van Yperen, 2009; Vealey, 2007), self-talk (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Thelwell et al., 2006; Vealey, 2007), and relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and meditation (Jensen et al., 2018; Oguntuase & Sun, 2022). By enhancing their psychological capacity and resilience and developing effective coping

mechanisms and routines, mental training can potentially enable the players to manage occupational stress better.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses in The JD-R model**

All job demands, resources and outcomes can be included in the model, and it has been praised for its simplicity and criticized for its lack of complexity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The weakness of the JD-R model as a heuristic and flexible model is that its flexibility may also create ambiguity and lack specificity in determining whether a specific job characteristic represents a job demand or job resource or whether an outcome is of a health-related or motivational nature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). An important limitation of the model is that it offers limited insight into the psychological mechanisms involved. Thus, additional explanatory theoretical frameworks are usually needed to argue why particular demands interact with resources (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), the limited explanatory power of the JD-R model can be overcome by incorporating alternative theoretical frameworks. One such framework is Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory, which argues that individuals strive to preserve and enhance their resources (Hobfoll, 2001), potentially offering a more comprehensive explanation than the JD-R model alone. However, due to time and resource constraints, the well-known and widely used JD-R model was ultimately deemed most appropriate for comparing and exploring the experiences of football players operating in distinct psychosocial work environments.

Research using JD-R primarily relies on self-report and cross-sectional studies, lacking objective measures and longitudinal studies as a foundation (Lesener et al., 2019). According to recent literature, addressing multiple workplace levels of analysis and intervention may be more effective than solely investigating job demands and resources at the individual level as it is done traditionally (Chen et al., 2018). It is essential to revise the

model as knowledge accumulates continuously and mainly when JD-R is applied to new occupations and professions (Lesener et al., 2019). Work and organizational psychology research are continuously evolving, with a shift in the literature away from the notion that employees are solely reactive to their job design towards acknowledging that they are also proactive in their work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This shift in perspective is an important development in the field, as it allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between the work environment, job demands, and employee outcomes.

Despite its weaknesses, the JD-R model provides an elegant description of the interplay between job demands, resources, psychological states, and outcomes, thereby enabling its practical implementation in many occupational settings to understand and enhance both employee well-being and organizational performance (Schaufeli, 2017; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007) and Lesener et al. (2019), the JD-R model illustrates its processes and outcomes relatively simply. This simplicity contributes to the model's sound theoretical basis for assessing employee well-being and performance across various occupations and organizations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), in this case, being a professional footballer. This theoretical basis is why the JD-R model is selected as the theoretical framework for this thesis due to its established reputation for accurately depicting and identifying unique work characteristics. Additionally, this study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by applying the JD-R model in elite-level sports, specifically football. By utilizing the JD-R model as a theoretical framework, the study identified the distinct psychological factors that affect the quality of professional football players' work environment, well-being, and pursuit of high performance.

## Method

This section provides an overview of how the research question will be addressed. It begins by outlining the rationale for the selected methodology, followed by a detailed description of the methodological approach. Finally, the research process is explained, including ethical considerations.

A qualitative research approach was necessary to investigate professional footballers' characteristic job demands and job resources. This approach enabled the exploration of the participant's own experiences and descriptions of their psychosocial working environment. Conducting interviews is one of the most common data collection methods in qualitative research (Myers & Newman, 2007). The data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), this method is advantageous for understanding various themes from the participants' perspectives. These in-depth perspectives can be people's perceptions, attitudes or opinions towards complex or emotionally sensitive issues (Kallio et al., 2016). Furthermore, it allows the researcher to tailor the interview to the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews require a certain level of familiarity with the research topic, as the questions formulated are based on existing knowledge. Conducting semi-structured interviews enables reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Kallio et al., 2016), enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's responses and allowing their verbal expressions (Tjora, 2017). Being flexible and adaptable during the interview proved to be a valuable way to control the general flow of the conversation. There were instances where specific questions had already been answered. Thus, removing or altering the questions' order was sometimes necessary. Simultaneously, the interview guide helped structure a coherent "thread" throughout the interview by guiding participants on what to talk about.

## **Sampling and Recruiting**

The sample consisted of six Norwegian men who were professional football players, with an average age of 24 years (ranging from 19 to 31 years). It was determined that six participants were enough due to time constraints, and the sample consisted only of men due to significant gender differences within the sport. The criteria for being eligible to participate in this study were to currently play at the highest level in Norway (Eliteserien, four participants) or to play at a relative or higher level in another European league (two participants). The players had an average of seven years of experience as professionals. All participants play actively, without any long-term injuries, and have club contracts as their primary source of income. They all had experience playing for the Norwegian national team and currently play in separate clubs. No further personal information about the participants is provided to maintain anonymity, confidentiality and transparency within a relatively small community of Norwegian professional football players.

The participants in this qualitative research were recruited with the help of individuals within the researcher's professional network who had affiliations with a significant part of the professional football community in Norway. A list of potential Norwegian professional football players was created, and those within the researcher's personal network acted as facilitators. All six participants had different facilitators. Eight players were asked to participate. Two expressed time constraints and a lack of interest, while the remaining six agreed to participate in the study.

The selection strategies used were a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Both strategies work in qualitative studies and were used because the participants are non-random, and it allows the selection of participants who possess qualities and characteristics relevant to the research question (Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling was used to select participants who meet specific practical criteria (Etikan et al., 2016), such

as easy accessibility through personal networks, digital availability, and willingness to participate. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific criteria (Etikan et al., 2016), including shared aspects of their current working situations and experiences listed as personal information above. Individuals were contacted by phone call or text message and allowed to participate or decline. Those who agreed received an email outlining the selection process, research topics, and pertinent information regarding their rights and the implications of their participation.

### **Data Collection**

Six semi-structured interviews were completed. They lasted 65–80 minutes and were conducted over two months (November 2022 to December 2022). Two months was more prolonged than first expected. However, we decided on a flexible scheduling approach to accommodate the players' busy work schedules to ensure their participation. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder for good sound quality and stored separately on a USB device for safe storage. Audio recording the interviews allowed the researcher to concentrate on the topic, maintain the conversation's flow, and recognize and follow up on relevant information without taking notes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

All participants play in different clubs which originate from various cities and countries, which meant carrying out the interviews on the digital meeting platform Microsoft TEAMS was most feasible. The data collection process, including the interview guide, interviews, and transcriptions, was all conducted in Norwegian because it was more natural and more effortless for both participants and the researcher to engage in an in-depth conversation in their native language.



### *Interview Guide*

The interview guide consisted of four sections, namely: (1) Introduction and General Information, (2) Job Demands, (3) Job Resources, and (4) Mental Training. All were developed in collaboration with the research supervisor.

To "warm up" the participant, the first section of the interview revolved around general information such as age, years of experience, prime motivation, where and why it started, what it turned into, and a typical hectic working day. Sections two and three consist of questions directly related to job demands and resources, as presented in the theoretical framework. Section four revolves explicitly around the players' thoughts and experiences regarding mental training.

The interview guide was based on a framework presented by Kallio et al. (2016), which included five phases:

**1. Identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews:** To conduct an effective interview, it was essential to have a thorough understanding of the subject matter. Prior knowledge stems from empirical research done beforehand, own interests and personal experiences. Further, it provides flexibility to focus on significant issues to the participants and allows diverse perspectives to be expressed and rigorous data to be collected. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore specific stressors, such as the uncertainty of a footballer's daily working life, with greater depth and precision while drawing on my personal experiences and relevant literature. The flexibility of questioning facilitated detailed and nuanced responses, while the ability to follow-up important details and ask clarifying questions resulted in a more comprehensive conversation and understanding.

**2. Retrieving and using previous knowledge:** Previous knowledge was gained through empirical knowledge and built-up personal interests and experiences. This knowledge was critically appraised, and potential complementary empirical knowledge was

pinpointed throughout this phase (Kallio et al., 2016). During the question formulation process, my emphasis was on avoiding leading the participant in any particular direction, and instead allowing them to chart their own course. Despite having considered potentially relevant experiences beforehand, the conversation's trajectory remained unpredictable. This is where my personal experiences proved particularly useful.

**3. Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide:** This phase involves formulating the preliminary interview guide based on the previous phases. The researcher creates a conceptual basis for the interview using previous knowledge.

**4. Pilot testing the interview guide:** The pilot test utilized field testing. Field testing is the most used method in developing a semi-structured interview process (Kallio et al., 2016). Field testing simulates the interview situation and provides crucial information using potential participants (Chenail, 2011). The test was conducted with an individual within the researchers' personal network. The pilot participant met the same criteria as the main participants of the study, thus ensuring the intelligibility and relevance of the questions (Chenail, 2011). Additionally, the effectiveness of questions can be assessed and refined to improve the interview guide's coverage, and field testing helped determine session duration and identify potential design flaws or limitations (Chenail, 2011).

**5. Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide:** The semi-structured interview guide is complete in the final phase. The guide was deemed clear and logical and reflected the previous four phases of the development process. Kallio et al. (2016) mention that the goal is making the guide universal and usable by other researchers. Irrespective of whether that goal is achieved or not, having well-defined questions centered on job demands and resources undoubtedly enhances the guide's usability. The openness of these questions and their emphasis on important aspects of one's psychosocial working environment further enhance their effectiveness.

### ***Conducting The Interviews***

At the start of the video call, the main points from the information document were reviewed to ensure that the participants fully understood the purpose of the study, the interview and their role. Furthermore, the researcher highlighted a few important points for the participants to consider before answering the questions. Firstly, the information shared should primarily be based on one's professional career. Secondly, they should not hesitate to use terminology and experiences commonly used by football players as long as it helps answer the question. Thirdly, sensitive medical information such as diagnosis or health-related information should not be included.

One goal was to create as comfortable an environment as possible. Naturally, they were allowed to ask any questions they had. Once the interview and audio recording began, all participants gave oral consent, indicating that they were fully informed and agreed to participate.

During the interviews, several techniques were used to gather as comprehensive and insightful information as possible. The process was both versatile and flexible. Semi-structured questions encouraged the participants to express their thoughts and feelings while allowing the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant responses. Active listening and attention to nonverbal cues were used to clarify and expand upon their responses. Maintaining a neutral and non-judgmental attitude was important to avoid influencing the answers.

At the end of each interview, the researcher asked every participant if there was anything else they wanted to share regarding the topic or if any critical information needed to be covered. After the final response, recording was stopped and the interview was completed, the participants were asked to provide feedback on their experience to help improve future interviews. Additionally, participants were invited to share their thoughts on how it felt to

share information about the topic as a closing conversation. Before closing the call, the interviewee was thanked for their time and contributions.

### *Transcriptions*

According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to conduct a thematic analysis (TA), it is necessary to transcribe the spoken data into written form. TA does not demand verbatim transcription of conversations. Braun and Clarke (2006) stress the significance of transcribing enough information to ensure the transcription accurately reflects the meaning generated by the interview. For this study, the interviews were mostly transcribed verbatim, but pauses and interruptions were only noted when they altered the content or intended meaning of the participant's message. After the last interview, it took approximately one month to complete the transcripts. This process proved to be valuable in gaining familiarity with the collected data. Transcribing was carried out by using VLC Media Player and Microsoft Word. All transcripts were made manually by ear, as it was discovered early on that transcribing programs struggled to dictate words accurately due to a range of dialects among the participants. This approach ensured that the transcription was as comprehensive as possible and that all necessary details were captured accurately.

When conducting qualitative research, ensuring privacy and protecting sensitive information is crucial (McLellan et al., 2003). The interviews contained a wealth of sensitive information that could potentially harm individuals or breach confidentiality (McLellan et al., 2003). The participants shared important information and experiences related to their careers, making it the researcher's responsibility to safeguard confidentiality. To achieve this, McLellan et al. (2003) suggested replacing real names with aliases or using substitution words or phrases to retain contextual and referential information. As such, real names of clubs, players and coaches were replaced in the transcriptions with (former coach), (club), (club abroad), and (player). This approach helps maintain data integrity while safeguarding

the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Any information that could compromise confidentiality was excluded from the transcription.

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

The data analysis employed a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). As described by (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the researcher aims to delve deep into the data and develop an understanding of the patterns of meaning within it. Thus, generate a comprehensive and captivating interpretation of the data, grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend TA as the primary qualitative method for inexperienced researchers as it offers fundamental analytical skills transferable to other qualitative analysis forms.

Opposed to alternative models of TA, RTA is a "Big Q" qualitative paradigm, which depicts the researcher as a subjective and analytical resource (Braun & Clarke, 2019), highlighting the researcher's active role in knowledge production. Another model, i.e., the coding reliability TA approach, is based on including predetermined hypotheses, a focus on identifying "accurate" themes, and attempts to eliminate researcher bias while demonstrating reliability and replicability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In contrast, within RTA, it is understood and accepted that each researcher will apply these criteria in their own way, so there is no expectation that codes or themes interpreted by one researcher will necessarily be reproduced by another, even though it is possible (Byrne, 2021).

The analysis was approached with an inductive approach, working with the data from "bottom-up" (Braun & Clarke, 2012), exploring the participants' perspectives, and examining the contexts from which the data were produced. More on inductive coding can be found below and in Table 1. The focus was not having codes and themes influenced by ideas, categories and definitions from previous literature. Much research has been conducted on football players, and relevant findings are often published in sports psychology journals. A

perspective from work and organizational psychology is less explored, so the main focus has been on uncovering the participants' experiences through their detailed descriptions instead of searching for pre-defined theories (deductive approach). This allowed a more inductive, data-driven approach while at the same time recognizing the role of the researcher in generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

As the experiences and perceptions of professional footballers regarding their psychosocial working environment may vary, it is important to recognize that knowledge about this topic is subjective and may differ. Further, as reflexivity is valued as an essential resource in the research process, RTA was deemed the most appropriate method for this analysis. More on these concepts at the end of the analysis.

### **Analyzing Process**

Braun & Clarke's (2006; 2021) recent articulation of RTA involves six phases, including familiarization with the data, systematic data coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. The phases are not meant to be strictly linear but a flexible and recurring process where researchers can move back and forth between the phases (Byrne, 2021).

**1. Familiarization:** Conducting the interviews and transcriptions created a strong foundation for familiarity with the data. Repeated re-listenings and re-readings were still necessary to completely immerse in the data. Notes of potential points of interest were made throughout the familiarization phase. Braun and Clarke (2012) suggest a particular question during this phase: "How does this participant make sense of their experiences? Some of the notes taken are illustrated with a brief example:

It is way more work than pure joy today. You get an ambivalent relationship with football after a while, especially with the way my everyday life is right now, where it has been a lot more cynical in recent years than it used to be. (Participant 1)

The initial observations included: Feeling burnt out from their involvement with football and have become more aware of the negative aspects of the sport; life circumstances have affected his ability to enjoy football as much as he used to; questioning whether it is worth the effort.

**2. Systematic data coding:** In this phase, the researcher systematically works through the dataset and applies their "analytic take" to identify data segments that are relevant, interesting, or meaningful to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The transcripts were coded using Microsoft Word's "comment" feature, which proved to be more efficient compared to the traditional pen-and-paper approach and the computer software NVivo. TA can be coded using an inductive "bottom-up" approach, a deductive "top-down" approach, or a hybrid approach combining both. According to Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012), this depends on how much the analysis is driven by the data's content and how the theoretical perspectives drive the analysis. Coding can also be done semantic or latent. Semantic codes capture the explicit meaning and are close to the participant's language, and latent codes focus more on a deeper, more conceptual or implicit meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012).

Initially, an inductive approach was deemed appropriate, given that the interviewer's background as a footballer proved valuable insight. Subsequently, both semantic and latent coding were utilized to analyze the participants' statements, allowing for surface-level and in-depth coding. This approach aligns with the reflexive TA methodology, which recognizes the active role of the researcher in knowledge formation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Semantic codes were mostly noted first, followed by latent codes. An example of data extract and corresponding codes can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1***Example Quote and Corresponding Semantic and Latent Codes.*

Example quote	Codes
It has been very important to use the time before and after training to create a relationship off the pitch. It becomes the opposite of superficial. Then, you often talk about your girlfriend, the girl you're dating, family, buying a house, going through a tough time, etc. I have advocated for creating that in the dressing rooms I have been a part of because it can give you 10 or 12 extra points a year. Because if you come into the team dressing room and feel like you're at work, then that passion won't flourish, and the discipline to do extra work won't flourish either. (Participant 2)	<p>Building relationships is important</p> <p><i>Creating an environment that fosters open communication.</i></p> <p>Non-work personal conversations</p> <p><i>Showing vulnerability and building trust</i></p> <p>Building relationships off the pitch improves team results.</p> <p><i>Transitioning to a work mindset can hinder player motivation</i></p> <p>Passion and discipline are important</p>

*Note.* Latent codes in italics.

**3. Generating initial themes:** Braun and Clarke (2012) described codes as the building blocks of analysis. The codes were sorted into topic areas by them from Microsoft Word to Microsoft Excel. All codes were assembled into a comprehensive list, where job demands and resources were the first overarching categories into which the initial themes would fall. Each participant told their own unique experiences, but there were many commonalities in these experiences. By reviewing the codes, and revisiting the data and



notes, the understanding of the emerging patterns from the data was refined. This took place through a time-consuming process characterized by trial and error. However, this allowed for the time and space for reflection, insight and inspiration to develop.

Related codes were organized into potential themes, i.e., "balancing football with life" and sub-themes "Football all day every day, work-life balance, and from hobby to work". It was kept in mind from the beginning that the analysis was grounded in the data. The raw data was frequently consulted while developing codes and themes. Additionally, notes were used to maintain objectivity and prevent narrow interpretations, allowing initial ideas to be discarded as necessary.

**4. Developing and reviewing themes:** Phases 4 and 5 are interdependent. Phase 4 involves reviewing potential themes concerning the coded data and the entire data set. It was about quality checking. Most of the extracts drawn from the data were relevant to the research question. A more significant challenge was to place sub-themes to complement the main themes. It was probably because the participants had diverse responses to the same questions, while the overall theme remained the same. Some themes were hard to ignore, and others reflected shared meaning across the data. Some initial themes were deemed more like a code "teammate support" and "creating culture". Others had a lot of meaningful data to support them but didn't quite fit "try to rest when possible", and some were too diverse and wide-ranging, e.g., "afraid to fail". The next step was to review the themes concerning the entire data set. This step ended with a distinct and coherent set of themes that captured the most important and relevant information concerning the research question.

**5. Refining, defining and naming themes:** Fine-tuning the analysis was in order in this phase. Articulating ideas with the supervisor brought helpful clarity in what themes worked and not. Some sub-themes, such as "Career Uncertainty", were nuanced and prominent enough to be promoted to a theme. Initially, the theme "job insecurity" was selected.

However, in the process of refining this theme, it became apparent that focusing on the sources of insecurity would be more valuable. As a result, the sub-theme 'Injuries Change Everything' was deemed more appropriate and relevant. The aim was to achieve a balance of themes between the job demand and resource categories. Ultimately, mental training was designated as an independent theme, creating a seventh theme. Overall, it ended with seven main themes, most of them having two to three sub-themes.

It is important to ensure that the themes identified have a singular focus and directly address the research question. Each theme should capture a distinct aspect of the data relevant to the research question. However, it is also common for themes to be related and highly relevant to each other. This does not mean that they overlap or lack a singular focus. Instead, they complement and build upon each other to provide a more nuanced understanding of the data. Sub-themes provided adequate structure due to the diversity of the participant's responses and wide-ranging themes. The theme names were developed after distinguishing apparent differences between the ideas and utilizing relevant quotes from the participants to maintain a strong correlation between the themes and the data.

**6. Writing the report:** When writing the report, it was necessary to have a comprehensive set of developed themes (Table 2). However, it was essential to revisit earlier phases to ensure that the presented ideas were closely aligned with the data and research question. In writing the initial report draft, an even more profound sense of what themes fit and those that did not entirely "fall into place" became apparent. The goal was to present the themes in a logical and meaningful order that tells a coherent story about the data. Multiple quotes from each theme were included to ensure effective writing of the report, and the most vivid and illustrative were chosen in the final report. It was imperative to incorporate the viewpoints of all participants in the results. Redundant text and contextual information are enclosed in parentheses [...], and all names have been replaced with appropriate alternatives.

### ***Subjectivity and Reflexivity***

Researcher subjectivity is considered a primary tool for RTA (Gough & Madill, 2012) and was considered a resource during the interviews and analysis as knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). An interviewer must be aware of one's personal experiences, which allows for a deep connection with the participants' narratives as they share their own experiences while knowing that the interviewer remained genuinely curious and empathetic. This approach was beneficial in responding to the participants' expressed and implied distress.

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), reflexivity involves the practice of critical reflection on the researcher's role, which is considered a key to good quality analysis (Elliott et al., 1999). Throughout the research process, it was necessary to acknowledge or "own" one's personal perspectives (Elliott et al., 1999). A question that influenced the choices throughout the process was: "How do my personal beliefs, experiences, and values influence the research process and my interpretation of the data?" and "Am I being transparent about my own perspective and acknowledging any potential limitations in my analysis?". Transparency regarding these aspects of the researcher's role is, therefore, crucial in assessing the credibility of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As a professional footballer, football is a significant part of my identity. My longstanding interest and involvement in the sport have given me a comprehensive understanding of various aspects and mechanisms within the football industry. Given my background, which includes a psychology degree, these experiences could influence the themes and focus derived from the data. Thus, as a researcher, it is essential to reflect on this potential resource, be mindful of it, not let it take over (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2017) and take ownership of the reflexivity throughout the research process.

**Ethics Statement**

Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt) has approved and registered this project (Appendix B: Approval from Sikt). Data was collected with project approval and informed consent. Necessary measures were taken to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Identifying information was altered or removed, data was stored securely, and ethical guidelines were followed. This was particularly crucial since the Norwegian football community is closely interconnected, and the information provided could be exploited in a highly competitive work environment.

## Results

The following section will present the themes characteristic of the psychosocial work environment of professional players. The findings are presented in Table 2 and are related to the two main categories from the chosen theoretical framework; job demands and resources. The different themes should be viewed as highly dynamic and overlapping rather than entirely separate, as one individual's demands could be another's resource. Each participant has a unique professional football experience, including resources and demands. This section presents the most prevalent resources and demands reported by the participants.

**Table 2**

*Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes Categorized Within Job Demands and Resources*

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>Job demands</b>	
Career uncertainty	Injuries change everything
	Contracts are your lifeline
	The pressure to perform
Juggling football and life	Work-life balance
	Priorities and sacrifices
	Football is on your mind all the time
Enduring Mental and Physical Strain	24/7 athlete
	Enduring pain
	Pressure and expectations
<b>Job resources</b>	
Maintaining and developing personal resources	Driven by passion and fueled by discipline
	Curiosity is how you learn and thrive

	Maintaining a grateful attitude
	Creating personal coping mechanisms and routines
Team climate	The dressing room
	Co-workers, teammates or friends
The importance of money and external support	High salaries
	Support from loved ones
Mental training in the player's toolbox	Breaking the silence
	Coping mechanisms and routines

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### **Career Uncertainty**

While only a fraction of players makes a living playing football, all participants in this study had succeeded in making it their primary occupation. It became clear that living life as a professional football player is not without experiencing a sense of uncertainty. Most participants identified the intense pressure they experience and a strong desire to succeed. Football is considered a key part of their identity, and setbacks in the sport can feel like personal failures. When not playing well, it can create a sense of despair, like life is falling apart. Furthermore, the pressure of playing for their entire future daily, is mentally and emotionally exhausting, making it a very demanding sport.

For those who have a burning desire to go as far as possible and beyond, these things can often take a toll when you are not playing, and things are going badly. It can feel like life is falling apart, because it is so easy to identify with being a football player. It is mentally tough to feel like you are playing for your entire future almost daily.

(Participant 3)

All participants described their upcoming daily schedule as highly professional and predictable, knowing what they were walking into that day or week. However, with a broader perspective, for instance, months or years, they never really knew how things would turn out because their working situation could change quickly. Participant 3 provides insight into the uncertainty that football players may face when dealing with the pressures and unpredictability of contracts.

I felt it a lot now that I was on an expiring contract. I don't know what I'll do if I get injured now. Then I might be finished, then I cannot play and what happens now? It is scary to think so much about it [...] I had not thought about being in (club) for (x) years, but it turned out that way. [...] You have little time, you must go with your gut feeling, and it is very unpredictable when you make decisions so quickly. If it goes bad, you don't know if they will want you here, if it goes well, you may want to move on. You live from transfer window to transfer window. (Participant 3)

### ***Injuries Change Everything***

When questioned about feelings of unpredictability regarding their work, all participants mentioned the fear of injuries, highlighting its presence within football. Participant 1 expressed how football players are always exposed to injuries and how an injury can turn their entire working day and career upside down. This sheds light on the psychological toll that injuries can take on football players and their careers. The fear of injuries is a significant source of anxiety and stress for players, and it can affect their mental well-being and performance on and off the pitch. Furthermore, injuries can have long-lasting effects on players' goals and careers, potentially leading to the premature end of their footballing journey. Participant 1 identified that injuries are an inherent part of football and cannot be completely avoided.

"You are constantly exposed to injuries, and your entire workday and career can be turned upside down [...]. It is common that it is week after week or month after month."

(Participant 1)

While some players are fortunate enough to avoid injuries on their path to success, Participant 6's experience highlights the potential stress and difficulties associated with being unprepared for an injury.

When I was injured, I didn't know what to do. To be completely honest, I didn't receive proper or sufficient guidance. It made me a little extra scared and maybe even more impatient because I had no idea how long the recovery process would take, as I had never been injured before. (Participant 6)

### ***Contracts Are Your Lifeline***

Nearing the end of a club contract can be a stressful experience. Contracts are usually around a couple of years. Participant 6 shared the emotional impact of a contract negotiation as a junior player. The participant identified how pressure and anxiety come with the uncertainty of whether they will be offered a new contract. Participant 6 shares a personal experience of almost being let go every year during his junior years, demonstrating that this is common in football. This suggests that the pressure and anxiety of contract negotiations are not limited to senior players but also present with junior players.

I understand people who come to an end and need a new contract. I remember when I was in a club as a junior, we always had one year left, and several of my friends lost their contracts. You can see how it affects them. Some handle it well and take new steps, some completely break, [...] and get told that they aren't not good enough.

Almost every year during my junior time, (club) considered sending me away. It is a very nasty feeling. More people need to consider it and take care of people during that



period. It is hard to focus on matches when you know that every match can affect the whole situation for the next years. (Participant 6)

Loyalty does not always go both ways, whether you perform or not. The mechanisms in football are often described as one-sided, with clubs holding the power in contract negotiations. If successful players refuse to extend their contract, perhaps in hopes of landing a better deal at another club, they are often labeled as disloyal. On the other hand, if the club chooses not to extend with an unsuccessful player, there is no talk of disloyalty. This power dynamic creates pressure and uncertainty for a player, leading to thoughts about the future rather than focusing on performing in the present. Participant 2 mentioned that fans can intensify the pressure by leveraging their perception of player disloyalty.

The mechanisms in football are often such that if I do well and the club wants to extend with me, but I say no, then the table is often turned, "he is disloyal", "he wants to leave", but if the club does not want to extend with you, there is no talk of loyalty. So, it is a one-way street. If you end up in the situation where the club wants to extend with you, but you don't want to extend with them and you're called disloyal and so on, then you get all that hassle on social media, which will make it extra burdensome. If you're in your last contract year, maybe you feel even more pressure, now I must deliver, the unpredictability is a bit like that, it can bring out a lot of thoughts about what happens in the future, not what happens here and now. That will result in you not performing optimally. (Participant 2)

### ***The Pressure to Perform***

There is constant pressure to perform. If you do not, you risk being replaced by someone who can. This creates a sense of instability and insecurity for players, as they must work hard to maintain their position within the team. This finding is particularly relevant to the football industry, as it sheds light on the high-pressure environment that professional

players must navigate. It highlights the importance of physical preparation and mental and emotional resilience to succeed in this industry. The data extract illustrates the need for support systems that can help players manage the stress and pressure of the job, both on and off the pitch. "If you vary a lot, you can basically be shown the door right away. You must try to do everything right on and off the pitch to stay in the club you're in." (Participant 5)

Participant 2 highlights that although there is a commonly held belief that football is driven solely by performance, the reality is that results are the ultimate measure of success. In other words, winning matches and achieving desired outcomes matter most, and performance is merely a means to that end. This finding is important because it challenges the conventional wisdom that performance is the only metric that matters in elite sports. It underscores the importance of taking a more holistic view of success in football and recognizing the complex interplay between performance, results, and the broader context in which the sport is played. The data extract also highlights the potential consequences for players if results do not go the way of the club, emphasizing the need for athletes to be aware of the bigger picture and to take a long-term view of their careers. This finding is significant because it highlights that football clubs may initiate changes within the organization to achieve success, which may be outside of individual players' control.

Many people say that football is performance-driven, but ultimately its result-driven, and you cannot escape that in elite sports. And if you look at it from a longer perspective, for example, if you sign a two-year or three-year contract somewhere, one thing is that the results can go downhill, which in turn forces a change from the club that can affect you. (Participant 2)

Coaches hold significant power over the teams and players, and being liked by them is important. However, turnover among coaches is high in football, which can be very unpredictable for the players. The unpredictability of everyday life in football can be

challenging, but it is a reality that players must deal with. This response sheds light on the importance of resilience and adaptability for professional football players in navigating the ever-changing landscape of the sport.

I've had three coaches in a year, and a coach was also fired in my previous club. There have been many changes, but I have been fortunate and liked by all the coaches. It hasn't changed much for me, but things around the club have. A coach's time in a club is often not very long. It changes the whole dynamic, the player group changes, and the mood of others and yourself changes. (Participant 5)

### **Juggling Football and Life**

Being a professional requires a full-time commitment to compete at the highest level, making it difficult to achieve a work-life balance. Most participants faced significant work-life balance challenges, where football greatly impacted their personal lives.

#### ***Work-Life Balance***

Achieving work-life balance when one's football schedule lacks consistency makes planning and enjoying leisure activities with family and friends particularly challenging.

There is no weekend feeling or anything. Every day feels like a Monday. It is monotonous and goes back to what is mentally challenging. A day off can be on a Tuesday or any other day. What's the point of that if your family cannot do anything on that day. (Participant 1)

Professional athletes face a great deal of pressure and scrutiny in their profession. Participant 5 acknowledged the importance of separating the football player from the person.

There have been times when I've had bad days in training, and it affects my mood outside of football. I'm not necessarily grumpy, but I'm more subdued and not very lively. I just walk around feeling down. This can affect other people around me. On the other hand, when I have a good training session, I'm very happy. It is something

I've been working on, separating the football player from the person. I feel like it has helped a lot. (Participant 5)

Participant 2 shared his way of achieving work-life balance. The participant highlights the importance of disconnecting from work and establishing a boundary between work and personal life. This is particularly important as the demands can be all-consuming. The participant's approach to achieving work-life balance is noteworthy as it emphasizes the need for personal agency in establishing boundaries between work and personal life. "You have to be able to disconnect [...]. The ability to leave football, trainings, and matches at your doorstep when you come home is incredibly important. If not, I think you will be consumed by it." (Participant 2)

### ***Priorities and Sacrifices***

The participants in this study all reported that pursuing a career in professional football involves having priorities and making sacrifices. Sacrifices are a necessary part of becoming and staying a professional, and the participants reported sacrificing valued elements of their adolescent lifestyles, such as family time and social life. Despite these challenges, all participants emphasized that these sacrifices were willingly made to achieve their goals, some indicating that the choices were more complicated than others. One specific sacrifice that emerged from the data was the difficulty in participating more in the lives of friends and family.

It is about participating more in the lives of friends and family. Significant events like weddings, being there when people end up in the hospital or if a friend goes through a breakup. I cannot be there as much as I want to. That's maybe what I feel like I've missed out on the most. [...] However, historically, I get a lot more than I lose.  
(Participant 2)

Participant 3 identified the social sacrifices that come with pursuing a career in professional football. All participants mentioned the difficulty in balancing social commitments with the demands of training and performance. Participant 3 expressed the mental challenge of saying no to friends and potentially drifting away from them due to football's all-encompassing nature. However, the participant also acknowledged the importance of these demands in maintaining a high level of performance.

If friends want to do things, you must say no because you must train tomorrow. It is mentally challenging because you don't want to drift away from friends who don't do the same thing. It is kind of what you have loved your whole life and what you've envisioned doing all along, plus it is your job now. You always have those demands in the back of your mind, and they are essential for you to be able to perform at a high level. (Participant 3)

### ***Football Is on Your Mind All the Time***

For most of the participants, football is a dominant aspect of their lives that demands significant time and mental energy. Participant 4 stated that football is a full-time activity, with constant thoughts on improving. If they fail at something or receive criticism, it sticks with them and affects their mood, potentially leading to negative consequences in their personal lives. The data also highlights the challenge of separating football from other aspects of life and achieving a balance between the two. Participant 4 expressed a desire not to let football control their entire life and to avoid letting a bad training session or match ruin their entire week.

It is twenty-four hours, seven days a week. You're constantly thinking about how to get better. Watching football in the evening, analyzing. [...] It depends on how training has gone. If you have failed at something, it sticks in your head. You go back and think about how you could have done differently. You can feel it in your body if

you've been yelled at. What I've been working on in recent years is that football shouldn't control how life in general is. Our lives are controlled by performance. If things go badly on the pitch, you often take it home. You get moody and it can affect your family. For example, if you lose on Sunday, the whole week is ruined until you get a new chance. (Participant 4)

Most participants did not extensively touch upon the influence of coaches. However, Participant 4 shared a personal experience regarding his early career struggles, where he lost his passion for playing due to the actions of a coach. This extract highlights the importance of the coach's role in shaping the players' experiences and attitudes towards football. This insight is relevant to understanding professional football players' challenges and pressures in maintaining their passion for the sport and enjoying their work. As well as the influence of coaches on players. Especially relevant to younger players trying to establish themselves.

Early in my career I struggled with it. I lost a lot joy. It had a lot to do with the coach. I didn't want to go to training. I was exhausted, and things didn't go well. [...] There was a feeling that things became very serious. There was so much at stake and making mistakes felt very dangerous. There was a lot of yelling and criticism, which I didn't need at the time. (Participant 4)

Participant 3 revealed the pervasive influence of football on their thoughts, extending beyond training and matches. He shared how he is constantly preoccupied with analyzing past situations and planning for upcoming events related to their profession. Notably, the participant mentioned having few interests or worries outside of football, leading to a near-constant preoccupation with the sport. The participant acknowledged the potential benefits of diversifying their interests but challenging to shift the focus away from football.

I think about the last match and situations that I wish I had done better. I can think about previous training, the following training and the next match. I try to put it away,

but I don't have many other interests outside of football, and I don't have many other worries outside of football, so it is mostly what I think about. I think it could be healthy to do something else on the side to try to get rid of the thoughts. When I go to bed at night, it is just football I think about. I cannot find anything else to think about. So, in that sense, it is very difficult to put work aside. (Participant 3)

### **Enduring Mental and Physical Strain**

The participants identified that a typical working day usually ranges from 9 am to 3 pm. The working days included activities organized by a club such as meals, shared football training sessions, meetings with talk or video, treatments by medical staff, or self-directed activities such as physical or mental preparations, extra strengths sessions, socializing, and maintaining a dressing room culture. The participants had autonomy over their schedule outside of working hours, but they still had to consider the potential impact of their actions on their performance and working situation. While most valued taking time off, this was often difficult. During their free time, they felt responsible for making the right choices and remaining mentally and physically prepared. Some even described it as being at work 24/7. However, given the length of a football season, maintaining this level of intensity year-round was described as almost impossible.

Having intensive training and matches throughout the year is an enormous strain. The total workload over a year is very high. You have to sprint, duel, and dig deep every single day. [...] To get up after having run 13 kilometres on Sunday and been tackled seven times, so it is clear that the body and mind is a bit broken down [...]. So the physical demands, the requirement to push and dig deep for energy every day is challenging. (Participant 2)

### ***Enduring Pain***

Enduring pain is a common experience among professional football players. The fear of injuries and the uncertainty that follows were significant factors contributing to this experience. Participants reported playing through chronic pain and taking medication to perform on the pitch. Despite the physical and emotional challenges, most participants felt pressured to endure the pain to perform at their best. This finding highlights the significant physical demands on professional football players and the pressure they face to maintain peak performance, even in the face of injury.

I constantly play with chronic arthritis in my achilles. [...] It is physically demanding to wake up daily with pain and throw in pills to perform on the pitch. It is difficult in the sense that you know it is not healthy. You're afraid that it might become long-term.  
(Participant 1)

Most participants described playing through pain as normal in professional football due to the culture of the sport. The pressure to perform at their best while managing their physical health often led to fatigue, as reported by Participant 4. A lack of choices was a common challenge when pushing through pain. Additionally, criticism from fans was difficult to handle when they were unaware of the player's pain.

You can have terrible pain in an ankle, and then maybe it is just an injection that numbs it, and then you have to play a match. You're caught between pain and those kinds of things. [...] you get tired physically and mentally. You don't feel you have any choice but to push through it. That's when the tough days come. [...] No one in the stands or at home knows you're in pain. That could be a big reason why the performance isn't what it should be. People don't know what's happening behind the scenes. (Participant 4)



### ***24/7 Athlete***

One key aspect that emerged from the data was the intense pressure and constant demand for high performance in professional football. Participants described the toll this takes on their physical and mental well-being, as they must maintain high focus and performance every day for an exceptionally long season. Participant 3 highlighted the expectation to work extremely hard and constantly improve to stay in the team and avoid being replaced. This pressure to perform is further intensified by the constant judgment from outside and within the club. The participants emphasized that being a high-level athlete means that all 24 hours of the day matter and that every training and match counts, with little time to rest.

You have to maintain the level for so long. You meet up in January and finish in November. It is 11 months! 11 months where you must perform at your very best every single day. It is physically and mentally demanding as it is all about performance. (Participant 3)

Many participants reported feeling fatigued and low on energy throughout the football season. However, as Participant 5 noted, you cannot miss out in fear of the consequences.

You're constantly tired. You feel like there's no energy, but you have to keep going anyway. You cannot say one day that you don't feel good and maybe skip training.

You just have to fight your way through, because you're not tired forever. (Participant 5)

As mentioned regarding work-life balance, Participant 4 also described how the social and performance aspect of football can lead to feeling judged as a person based on pitch performance, which can impact self-worth and mental health. Participant 4's experience highlights the challenge of letting football become one's identity and the importance of maintaining a healthy perspective.

It is a social aspect. If things don't go well, you are often looked down upon as a person and judged as a person based on your performance on the pitch. It is easy to feel worthless if things go poorly for some time. You get a lot less attention. You hear people talking when things aren't going well. It can be tough to hear. I have a best friend who has had a tough time as a player. It is a bit scary. Football may be your identity, but it is just something you do. It is not who you are as a person. When it controls a lot of your life, it can mess with your head. (Participant 4).

Participant 5 discussed the impact of negative self-talk on performance and the importance of having the right mindset. He mentioned that negative thoughts could lead to poor performance and defensive behaviors on the pitch. However, positive self-talk or mindset can make a significant difference in performance. The participant emphasized the need to rebuild confidence after an injury and to avoid setting unrealistic expectations. It is crucial to talk to oneself positively to avoid undermining one's performance.

Say you have negative thoughts when things go wrong. You think poorly of yourself, say you are trash, and get sick thoughts in your head. This makes you play poorly and go into a defensive position. Having the right self-talk or mindset can make a lot of difference in how you perform on the pitch. Because you have the skills, it is not like they suddenly disappear. It is just that you think you cannot use them. If you've been injured and come back and feel like things aren't quite clicking yet. You cannot have such high expectations of yourself because you've been out for so long. You have to rebuild what you had before you were injured. You have to figure out how to talk to yourself. (Participant 5)

According to Participant 2, it is also important to balance the intensity with periods of calmness to avoid experiencing burnout. This demonstrate that the ability to regulate and

manage one's mental and physical energy levels is a critical aspect of being a successful professional football player.

I believe in establishing a certain stability in your everyday life, rather than constantly being in high gear, because it is only a matter of time before you hit a wall and start feeling burnt out. You will not be able to maintain the necessary focus for training, video analysis, and especially matches. People talk about having days of high physical and mental intensity. Then you have to calm it down on other days to recover.

(Participant 2)

### ***Pressure and Expectations***

The participants reported feeling both internal and external pressure to perform at a high level, but they perceived the internal pressure as being the most intense. Five of the participants identified the fear of making mistakes and not meeting performance as a substantial source of pressure. Three participants identified the external pressure from fans, social media, and coaches. Participant 3 particularly described struggling with the pressure of expectations he had towards himself, which affected his mood and sleep, and led to negative thoughts.

"It is probably what I've struggled with the most, the pressure and expectations of myself. The perfectionist image where it can never be good enough. [...] One bad involvement overshadows nine good ones. If things are going badly, it affects sleep and mood. It is easy to fall into the trap that if you don't perform well or do poorly, you're a bad person. [...] When I come home, I try to put football aside. I try to put it away, but it is not always easy. You keep those thoughts to yourself. You don't share them as often as you maybe should. It is tough when things are going poorly, because it feels like a big part of your life [...]. When things are going well, you don't feel the

pressure because everything is fun, you're in the flow zone, and everything works.

(Participant 3).

Participant 4 identified the the pressure to perform well, meet expectations, and prove one's worth can take a toll on their mental well-being and enjoyment of the game. It is interesting to note how expectations from family and friends can add to this pressure and contribute to the loss of joy in playing football. Three participants experienced similar feelings of pressure from family, for good and worse. According to Participant 4, this was linked to him having football as a significant part of his identity.

You always want to prove to others how good you are. Feeling those expectations can be mentally tough. Then there are expectations from other players and demands on the training pitch. When I was younger, in the beginning of my career, I found that particularly challenging. [...] My expectations of myself are very high. You know how good you can be, and not being able to live up to that is difficult. You're often your biggest critic. But it is a few mixed feelings about it because those who go far have high expectations of themselves, but it can also be too much or in the wrong way, which makes you lose the joy of it. [...] There were expectations for me to always be the one who loves football. My family and friends still expected me to love it during the challenging time. That is also a heavy feeling. I didn't really want to train at that point. (Participant 4)

Participant 2 seems to have a more positive outlook on the expectations and pressure that come with being a professional football player. This perspective could be relevant and interesting for understanding how different individuals in the same profession can have varying responses to similar pressures.

When the expectations are high of you, or when you feel pressure from outside to deliver this and that, you cannot control those things. If you have expectations or

pressure, you have to take it as a compliment that you have done well, and that they expect you to do well in the future. (Participant 2)

Participant 5's experience abroad highlights an exciting finding, where the external pressure experienced by professional football players varies depending on the country or league they play in. This indicates that the cultural and social contexts in which players operate can significantly impact their mental well-being and performance. Participant 1, who also plays abroad, briefly alluded to the impact of cultural context and the club's history on increased pressure. Moreover, Participant 5's coping strategies, such as disabling social media notifications and concentrating on personal performance, could benefit other players facing comparable external pressure. Notably, half of the participants mentioned disabling social media as a means of eliminating unnecessary pressure.

There is so much more external pressure abroad compared to Norway. Just walking down the street, you can hear things from people. It is a very different kind of pressure from what I'm used to. Sometimes it can be challenging to find that peace. I try to stay away from the pressure that can be in social media or other places. Those are things I have chosen to put aside to get the peace to perform. Their opinion doesn't matter, and you don't need to hear it. You can have a hundred positive and one negative feedback, and one can ruin someone's day. (Participant 5)

### **Maintaining and Developing Personal Resources**

The participants emphasized the feeling of self-efficacy as a key reason for pursuing a career in professional football. They expressed that they wanted to continue improving once they learned something and became good at it. Most participants cited player idols as a source of inspiration, along with playing with friends, family and developing a love for the game. All but one of the participants mentioned a desire to become a professional from a young age.

The participants were asked to reflect on personal characteristics that have aided their success

as professional football players and what they deem essential to endure the demanding nature of their job.

***Driven by Passion and Fueled by Discipline***

According to Participant 2, passion is a crucial factor in driving players to give their best effort and strive for continuous improvement.

If you have passion, you will give 100% every day to become better, and ultimately, you want to achieve teamwork. [...] It is like having an inner flame, a strong desire to achieve something. You get tunnel vision, you see the light at the end of the tunnel, and you go for it. You focus on what you can do and work towards your goals. With this approach, I believe you can overcome some of the negative aspects that come with football. It becomes less daunting, and you can focus on what you can control.

(Participant 2)

Participants 4 and 2 emphasized discipline's crucial role in achieving success in football and focusing on what can be controlled rather than worrying about external factors. Participant 4 spoke about the shift in their mindset towards placing less emphasis on external validation and instead prioritizing what they can control in their performance. Participant 2 emphasized that while motivation can come and go, discipline is a key factor in achieving long-term success. Additionally, the emphasis on enjoying the journey can help players to maintain a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in their pursuit of success.

There are very few who succeed without enough training. Going to the football pitch when it is below freezing, snowing and pushing through. That's discipline. It shows what type of person you are, and it gives a sense of achievement. It is very important for me to focus on what I can control. (Participant 4)

If you're driven by motivation, it will come and go. I think discipline takes you places where motivation cannot. When motivation isn't there, you need to have something

else to fall back on. That's what's important to me. If we lose a match, I'm not motivated to go to training on Monday, especially if we have Tuesday off. But if I have discipline, I do the job on Monday and Tuesday, which will make me better in the long run. If you focus on each day and make the most of it, you'll get there eventually. (Participant 2)

### ***Curiosity Is How You Learn and Thrive***

Most of the participants emphasized the importance of curiosity in the development and success of professional football players. Participant 2 identified curiosity as the willingness to learn about various aspects of football. Not to mention, having a curious mindset in search of learning from others. Participant 5 also adopts a mindset approach with curiosity, focusing on developing a positive and growth-oriented mindset. He emphasized the need to maintain an attacking mentality and continuously strive for improvement even during difficult times.

It is always possible to improve. That's where curiosity comes in, because you're never done learning. There are so many things you can learn, from nutrition, physical training, how to position yourself, which spaces to seek out, and skills you can add to your toolbox. As long as you're curious about it and have the willingness to put in the work, you will get better. You're never done learning as a football player or a human being. You always have something to learn from the youngest to the oldest person in the dressing room. (Participant 2)

I think the mentality of thinking about learning and wanting to improve is crucial. A mindset that always puts you in an attacking position, that you want more. And if you have bad periods, you keep your head up, and you don't dig yourself down.

Ultimately, it is what's in your head that decides. As long as you don't give up, no one can stop you. (Participant 5)

According to Participant 2, cultivating a positive team culture involves developing curiosity about one's teammates and establishing interpersonal trust. This demonstrates that by creating a culture of trust and curiosity, teams can improve their cohesion, performance on the pitch, and overall well-being off the pitch. "If you're not curious about your teammates, you won't thrive and get the same in return" (Participant 2).

### ***Maintaining a Grateful Attitude***

The participants highlighted the difficulty and importance of being present and grateful in their busy and demanding working day, as it can be easy to lose sight of the present moment and get caught up in the continuous pursuit of success. A football player's life is a constant cycle of training and matches, requiring constant adaptation and forward-thinking, regardless of whether the outcome is positive or negative. Participant 5 expressed a sense of privilege of doing what he loved and getting paid for it, emphasizing that playing football daily was a dream come true. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, who identified the importance of taking a breather to see how far he had come in his career. They noted that while the ups and downs of being a professional football player can be intense and demanding, it is essential to enjoy the journey and appreciate the experiences that have brought them to where they are today.

The best thing is to go to the stadium, put on your shoes, do what you love, and get paid for it. What I do every day is actually just play. You do what you've always dreamed of doing. It is great to be a little different from other people. I can do a little of what I want, but also, in a way, I cannot. (Participant 5)

It is a bit like being a football player, "now we won", "now we lost", and "now it is onto the next match". You must always hunt for the next training and match.

Sometimes you must stop and appreciate what you're doing, whom you're doing it with, and enjoy not just winning, but the small joys throughout the week. [...] As you



get older, you become better at taking a breather and seeing how far you've come.

After all, it is a very narrow needle to thread. All the experiences, ups and downs. You have come to a place where you take nothing for granted. I try to enjoy every single day because it doesn't last forever. It is a long way from playing with friends on the pitch as a 13-year-old to making a living from it. (Participant 2)

### ***Coping Mechanisms and Personal Routine***

The participants have developed several coping mechanisms to deal with the high demands of their job. Some even shared parts of their personal routines. Participants 2 and 3 emphasized the importance of focusing on what they can control, such as their training mentality and preparations. Overall, the participants' coping mechanisms revolve around focusing on their performance and staying level-headed during challenges.

If I don't succeed in training or in a match, there will always be a new training session or match to have another go at it. So, try to control what you can control, your training mentality, preparations, making sure you are able to perform at one hundred percent. (Participant 2)

I'm pretty good at focusing on what I can do something about, which is my job, which is to train as well as possible and be best prepared at all times. And I feel that I have had an extra focus on keeping my head cool in situations where things get more difficult. (Participant 3)

One interesting aspect was the importance of adopting a positive mindset and not giving up. Participant 1 expressed how he tells himself that things will either go well or pass, and this coping mechanism has helped him in football and his personal life. Another interesting coping mechanism was the importance of learning from setbacks. Participant 4 highlighted the importance of not giving up, especially since setbacks are inevitable. He talked about how learning from difficult situations and zooming out to see the problem can

help one become better. It is important to persevere and believe that better times are ahead, even in the face of difficulty.

I have become good at telling myself, either it will go well, or it will pass. I actually give most things about 3 days. It has helped me a lot, whether it has been in my personal life or football. It gives things some time, don't do things or react impulsively. (Participant 1)

Never give up. That's crucial, because there will always be setbacks. I believe that learning from them and becoming even better is one of my biggest strengths. If you're in a challenging situation and driven by strong emotions, it can feel burdensome.

However, if you can zoom out and look at the situation itself, there's so much to learn from it. You have to be able to persevere and believe that better times are ahead.

(Participant 4)

### **Team Climate**

Team climate in football is characterized by a sense of shared experiences, both good and bad. A crucial aspect of the sport is forging new friendships and fostering camaraderie among teammates. This sense of camaraderie goes back to the participants' initial days of playing football and endures to the present. As mentioned, football becomes a part of the individuals' identities, and being part of the team climate creates a sense of belonging and relatedness. Most participants expressed that even small things like having coffee with teammates in the morning and discussing topics ranging from personal life to football contribute to a sense of unity. Spending time together actively, both before and after training, helps to build trust and achieve common goals as a team.

### ***The Dressing Room***

The importance of the dressing room as a space for bonding and building relationships among teammates was mentioned by all participants. For each participant and

many other football players, the dressing room has a symbolic meaning beyond its practical function as a place to change clothes, put on football boots and receive team talks. The amount of time spent together in the dressing room creates a strong bond between teammates. It is viewed as a sacred space, essential to team culture and individual well-being, with the potential to impact a team's overall success. According to Participant 2, being seen and supported in the dressing room is crucial in order for players to thrive. This creates a sense of security where players feel seen and heard every day. Furthermore, he expressed that a flat hierarchy should always be encouraged. Prioritization of equality and mutual respect builds trust among teammates and fosters a sense of unity in the group. The dressing room serves as the heart of the team and plays a vital role in team dynamics, impacting not only performance but also well-being. With a strong team climate, players can weather storms and support each other for personal and collective growth.

Regardless of the match, training, it is crucial to be seen in the dressing room. That support is non-negotiable and needs to be there every day. If you come in on a high after scoring three goals, or if you've lost and made mistakes, the stability of being seen in the dressing room and feeling like you have friends there is invaluable. This is also a key factor in our current success. A sports hierarchy will naturally develop based on performance. However, outside of that, in the dressing room or during lunch, we prioritize a flat hierarchy. The oldest player or the one at the top of the sports hierarchy can sit with the lowest ranked player and have a normal conversation. These things create a sense of security in the dressing room, where you're seen and heard daily and be able to weather any storms. Regardless of whether things are going up or down, having a strong foundation will enable you to thrive, and this, in turn, will facilitate your development. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 elaborated even further on the importance of the dressing room. The sense of security and authenticity encourages players to be themselves without fear of judgment or criticism. This "everyone gets to" mentality emphasizes that everyone's emotions are valid and deserve to be seen and heard, regardless of their position on the team hierarchy. Confidentiality and privacy in the dressing room also reinforce the idea that the team is a tight-knit community that supports and protects each other.

You don't have to wear a mask. And we have an "everyone gets to" mentality, regardless of where you are on the emotional spectrum. No matter what you're going through in life, whether it is on a personal level, you can come in and talk about it because the number of hours spent with each other is quite a lot. What is said in the dressing room stays there, providing a sense of security and trust. (Participant 2)

The two participants playing abroad revealed interesting results in identifying their work environment as more egotistical, with co-workers more focused on themselves and less interested in forming social relationships outside of work. As a result, the players characterized their experience as being lonely outside of working hours. Participant 1 mentioned that outside of Scandinavia, the work environment can be cutthroat and that teammates don't always want friends. Participant 5 echoed these sentiments, stating that people are more focused on themselves at higher levels and less interested in forming connections with others.

It is not social at all. We have shared dinners, which can be social and fun, but otherwise, each sits on their phone in their hotel room. It is a bit like I said earlier. Outside of Scandinavia, it is cutthroat because you have to "eat or be eaten". Because people don't want friends, they are here to work. If you come from Africa and feed 40 people a month, you cannot spend time and money all the time. I have both

experienced and seen that. It is just a bit like that. It is not just for wimps, no.

(Participant 1)

The higher the level, the more players want to move on to the next place and play for themselves. Some don't care about others and do exactly what they want. For example, the team has more cliques and player selfishness. That's the biggest difference from playing back home. (Participant 5)

### ***Co-Workers, Teammates or Friends***

All participants identified that social relationships and interpersonal trust are important in team performance and that social connections with their teammates can create a sense of camaraderie and support within the team. However, some participants also mentioned that the work can be lonely. According to Participant 6, he plays better on the pitch when he feels a sense of belonging and connection to his teammates.

When I have fun in the dressing room, it spreads to the pitch. It helps that you stand there and laugh with your teammate, joke with him, you can say whatever you want to each other. Go out on the pitch and shout, scold and smile at each other. But in the dressing room, it is all the same again. I feel that teams and dressing rooms like this are the best. And it makes me play even better. (Participant 6)

In the team climate, some develop close friendships with fellow players while also being competitors, especially in Norway. However, despite the social nature of the job, participant 3 highlighted that it can still feel lonely at times.

It is very social at work because you never work alone, you always work with someone. You're lucky when you come to a new place, and you're assigned twenty-five new buddies. You do other things, but there are many hours spent alone at home, but that's the case for everyone. So, it is kind of social at work, but I would also say it is a lonely profession. (Participant 3)

Interestingly, Participant 1 mentioned the importance of team climate on performance, and how a lack of team climate in playing abroad could impact performance negatively. Participant 1's fear of being replaceable and overlooked, expressed by the use of the word "soldier," can be demotivating, as he may have felt like a mere cog in the machine, rather than a valued member of the team.

You can completely let go. People know where they have you, they trust you. They can play to your strengths [...]. You have a better standing in the group. Whereas in (country), where you're just one of many, you're neutral. It becomes a bit difficult because you're really just a soldier. (Participant 1)

## **The Importance of Money and Family Support**

### ***High Salaries***

At the elite level, high salaries are a well-known and significant perk of football. As expressed by the participants, making a living from playing the sport they love is essentially a dream come true. Money significantly impacts the players' lives and career decisions in football. Despite recognizing the benefits of their high salaries, such as the ability to provide financial support to loved ones and help those in need.

You earn way too much to do something that you just find fun. You do what you find the most fun and get paid for it. That's probably what I think is the best. [...] And you can do that little extra for those around you who are maybe having a hard time. (Participant 1)

Money is a powerful force that can impact players both on and off the pitch. As Participant 2 mentioned, the awareness of the large sums of money involved in the sport can be overwhelming and difficult to ignore. This sentiment is echoed by Participant 1, who emphasized his need to choose between playing "good" football or receiving an even higher salary. While there are undoubtedly sporting opportunities available, financial considerations

often play a significant role in players' career decisions. This tension between financial stability and sporting success is a persistent challenge for professional football players. The participants are aware of the significant economic benefits of playing at the elite level but also recognized the potential downsides of being overly focused on money. "As soon as you start thinking about how much money is involved and how many people are watching, it is impossible not to be affected by it." (Participant 2)

You have to make a stand. Do I really want this? [...] Back to the financial aspect of football, you take that step because you get to live the dream at (club abroad). You take a huge leap both economically and sportingly, and then you must start weighing up and see what's the most important. Play good football or earn a living. I came here because it is better financially, but at the same time, there are sporting opportunities. You must ask yourself whether you want to play better football or make more money. Because that was what I had to ask myself in the end. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 highlights the influence of financial considerations in making career decisions when asked about external pressure. Football players must consider the short-term nature of their careers and the importance of maximizing their financial potential. The economic benefits of playing at the highest level are emphasized, but the participants also acknowledge the impact of this on their enjoyment of football. The reference to hobby becoming work and the desire to have the "best possible cards" suggest a shift in perspective from playing for the love of football to treating it as a means of earning a living and securing yourself financially for the coming future.

Economy. Both for me and my future family. You know that a football career is short. I am being realistic. Even if you're (x) years old, it is hard to get to the Premier League. So, it may be wise to make the right choices financially [...]. Now I had an opportunity to make a better economic choice, but it may also be a shorter career step

compared to taking the next step. I chose to go and try to get even more out of my potential. Money is a big part of it, and you notice that more and more playing abroad. It is fun, but it becomes a job. Like everyone in most jobs, you want the best possible cards. I think it is the external factor that affects the most. (Participant 3)

### ***Support From Loved Ones***

All participants acknowledged the challenges of maintaining a work-life balance but highlighted the critical role of their loved ones in providing support. All participants identified their family as a significant source of stability and emotional support throughout their careers, with four attributing their success to the foundation provided by their parents and upbringing. Although the participants faced challenges regarding seeing their families due to playing away from home and having priorities and making sacrifices, their support remained solid and significant. Three of the participants also mentioned their partner as an important source of support. Participant 2 emphasized the significance of being recognized as a human being by their family, rather than solely as a football player. This personal level of support contributed to a sense of safety and normality.

I was never judged as a football player in my family, but as a human being, and that's safety. No matter how it has gone on the football pitch, whether you have delivered well, poorly, or if you pick up an injury. I have never been measured on that by my closest family. Which in turn makes you feel support on a personal level, but also makes me feel like the ordinary person on the street. Football careers don't last forever. I will eventually get a regular job. If things go badly and you get a regular job when you are twenty-five, that's not a loss. [...] the fact that I have received support not only as a football player, but as mentioned on a personal level, has made me feel safe. (Participant 2)



### **Mental Training in the Player's Toolbox**

When asked about their thoughts surrounding the concept of mental training, its importance was emphasized by all participants. Five out of six actively engage in it through individual or group sessions with a mental trainer or coach. Some had experienced it through the national team, while others sought it out on their own. All participants recognized the importance of the mental aspect of the sport in dealing with demands, setbacks, and challenges within football.

Our brain is the most important tool. You cannot just train muscles and things like that because you can train your brain without thinking about it. I do it myself, and it is something I do every day. So it is very important, and it will become even more important in the future. The brain makes all the decisions on the pitch, and in life, the body is just a tool that does things. The brain tells you what to do. I stand for people starting to use mental training. (Participant 5)

### ***Breaking The Silence***

The participants highlighted several barriers hindering the implementation of mental training, especially within and with the team. These barriers include stigma and taboo surrounding mental health, lack of knowledge, expensive resources, coaches not prioritizing mental training, lack of demand from players, lack of talk among players, old-school culture among the older coaching staff, and difficulty in feeling immediate improvement. Despite these barriers, all participants recognized the importance of mental training and highlighted its usefulness in dealing with professional football's demands, setbacks, and challenges. While implementing mental training within the team might be difficult due to the mentioned barriers, some participants engage in it more easily privately. Participant 2 expressed his beliefs in mental training as its successful use depends on proper use and individual tailoring.

There is a group of about twenty-three personalities in the dressing room. So, when it comes to mental training, I believe in it, but more on a personal level because we all come with different baggage, which means there may be twenty-three different triggers you have to push. (Participant 2)

When asked about mental training, Participant 3 identified the importance of mental training to seek emotional support during tough times and the potential benefits of calling a mental trainer when feeling overwhelmed. This is individual-tailored support. However, it was available within the national team. This suggests that there may be a need for mental health support in professional football clubs.

Clubs are a bit behind on the new and modern in that sense. Clubs have had older people in charge, those leading sports sections or coaches, a bit old-school, who have yet to focus on it so much. There has been little talk about it in the player group, and we haven't asked for it enough [...]. A couple of times this year, when it was the toughest period, I've been close to picking up the phone and calling the mental trainer on the national team. Sometimes you feel like you don't want to talk to family or teammates. You feel like maybe I should talk to someone else now, someone I can be completely open with. (Participant 3)

Participant 1 identified that mental training in professional football impact players' ability to handle both success and adversity. Interestingly, his engagement with mental training is a recent development. He now believes that mental training can help players stay motivated, endure longer and overcome challenges they might otherwise give up on. This is why he took matters into his own hands and sought resources to improve his well-being and motivation.

I should have started earlier. It is a mental resource just as important as the physical.

Not necessarily because I think you can perform better under pressure and take a

penalty kick in front of 50 thousand fans better, but that you can handle success and adversity better, handle depression and motivation better. [...] There is much more that can be trained than one thinks. Most people say they get tired and cannot take it anymore. With a few simple tricks, you might motivate players to endure longer or dare to try. Many players give up when the first setback comes. Everyone cannot become a professional football player. However, many give up a little too easily. More focus on mental training, psychology, and mental health is the way to go. I did it because I saw warning signs around my well-being and motivation. I saw many people praising it in Norway, so, there was no reason why I shouldn't try it. Quickly, I got in touch with one of the best in the country. [...] I did it alone because I saw that I was beginning to affect those closest to me. And I have told myself that my job should never do that. (Participant 1)

### ***A Toolbox of Coping Mechanisms and Routines***

Each player had unique experiences and attitudes towards many ways of mental training. Methods and techniques discussed by the participants included meditation (mindfulness and body relaxation), visualization, individual talks with a mental trainer or coach, goal setting and creating a plan, developing pre-match rituals, cold showers, mindset training, self-talk, and reflecting on personal experiences through diary writing. It is worth noting that some players expressed difficulties seeing specific results from mental training, making it more challenging to track improvement than physical training. Participant 1 mentioned using a training diary and goals to keep track of his progress when asked if he did something specifically to train his mind.

I keep a training diary. I go through the training and my day, what I have done, and what I feel I have improved on. Then I look at my goal and think a little about whether I have come a little closer to my goal today. Then I evaluate a bit and write a

little comment. It is easy to go back to, especially when things are going well, to see what made it go well. (Participant 1)

Participant 4 shared an experience of a mental training session with his team consisting of a mix of meditation and visualization. The initial focus was to relax and practice breathing techniques. However, he expressed that visualization only worked for some players due to personal preference. Participant 4 expressed a preference for taking situations as they come, indicating individual differences in the effectiveness of visualization. The challenge of not feeling like one is improving in meditation was highlighted, which can negatively impact motivation and adherence to the practice.

It was a mix of meditation and visualization, with the first few minutes primarily focused on breathing techniques and body relaxation. Then came the visualization, setting up thoughts. I enjoyed meditating but wasn't a big fan of visualizing. I prefer to take situations as they come. The challenging thing about meditation is that you never know when you're improving. You rarely get that sense of mastery. It can go well one day, and you feel like it worked, but the next day, you feel entirely scattered in your head. Not feeling like you're improving is what breaks many people.

(Participant 4)

Participant 5 expressed how he worked with a personal mental trainer who assigned him tasks and set goals and sub-goals. In addition, the participant practiced meditation to calm his thoughts and noticed that it helped him deal with negative thoughts.

I occasionally see a mental coach who gives me small tasks to solve or set goals, sub-goals, and outcome goals. Then I meditate, 10 minutes before I go to bed and 10 minutes after I wake up, to calm down and set my thoughts aside. [...] If a negative thought comes, it passes faster than before. The coach calls me, and we talk a lot about how I feel and how things are, giving me clues to think about. [...] You have to

dare to talk. Then you feel better. I can wait to answer the tasks, but be aware of them and think a little about them. Right now, I'm making a poster with a five-year plan that I'll hang up in my room and see every day, reminding me of what I want to do in five years and how I will do those things. (Participant 5)

During the interviews, the participants were asked whether they thought mental training could have helped them in difficult situations. Participant 1 identified that mental training could have facilitated his transfer to (club abroad) by implementing mental "tricks" to change his mindset in facing pressure and expectations.

My transition to (club abroad). Yeah, I regret it. My everyday life could have been completely different with simple mental tricks. [...] Not having to satisfy so many others than yourself, and being prepared in the sense that you don't need to think about consequences or what others think or mean. Do your own thing. Trust that what you're doing is good enough. It is easy to forget why they brought you there. You cannot satisfy everyone else but yourself. (Participant 1)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the psychosocial work environment of professional football players. Research question: What are the characteristic job demands and resources experienced by professional football players, and how do they balance these factors to optimize their performance and well-being, and to what extent does mental training play a role in achieving this balance?

The results of this study reveal seven overarching themes. Three themes were considered job demands. Firstly, the fear of injuries, the nature of player contracts and the pressure to perform caused career uncertainty. Secondly, work-life balance, priorities and sacrifices and all-encompassing football thoughts made achieving balance between football and personal life challenging. Thirdly, the results imply that professional football's physical and mental demands are a significant strain source. These include being a "24/7" athlete, enduring pain, and coping with the pressure and expectations associated with the sport.

Four themes were considered job resources. Firstly, personal resources such as passion and discipline, curiosity to learn, being grateful, and creating personal coping mechanisms and routines were considered helpful in managing life as a professional football player. Secondly, the team climate and dressing room were essential for social support, interpersonal trust, and building friendly and competitive relationships. Thirdly, the study found that support from loved ones played a vital role in professional footballers' careers and personal lives. Furthermore, the participants acknowledged that lucrative salaries provide financial stability, influencing their life and career decisions. Fourthly, the results demonstrate that mental training holds significant potential as a resource for professional football players to manage various stressors encountered in their work.

The themes that emerged from the analysis will be explored and elaborated upon in the upcoming discussion section. It is essential to recognize that these themes are highly

dynamic and overlapping, and it is crucial to view them as such rather than entirely separate entities. For instance, what may be considered a demand for one football player could be perceived as a resource for another, and what is a demand currently may become a resource later on, and vice versa. Additionally, the discussion will reflect on previous statements and evaluate the broader connections between the identified themes. Each theme will build upon previous themes and be examined and discussed concerning the research question and findings.

### **Career Uncertainty**

Despite making football their primary occupation, the results reveal that the participants perceive their football career as uncertain for various reasons, and employees with low job control have shown to be at risk of reduced well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001; Brauner et al., 2019). Considering the threat of injuries, the nature of player contracts, and the constant pressure to perform, it is understandable that career uncertainty translates into a sense of job insecurity. This is consistent with previous research by Roderick (2006), due to the constant perceived threat to the continuity and stability of employment (Shoss, 2017). Therefore, the present study provides evidence of job insecurity among professional footballers, underscoring their challenges in maintaining job control and highlighting its presence in a Norwegian context.

The results identified the fear of injuries as a significant source of anxiety and stress for players, affecting their psychological well-being and performance. These results are consistent with previous research highlighting the psychological toll of injuries (Giles et al., 2020; Gouttebauge et al., 2015; Tabei et al., 2012). Taken together, the findings demonstrate that job insecurity due to injuries is an inherent part of the game and can have long-lasting effects on players' goals and careers, potentially leading to the premature end of their football careers. One important point of discussion is how the issue of job insecurity extends beyond a

professional football player's career. Research has found that elite athletes transitioning out of sport are at risk for developing mental health symptoms (Reardon et al., 2019), especially if the retirement is undesired or involuntary due to, e.g., injury, or deselection due to poor performance or organizational changes. For instance, McGillivray et al. (2005) and Roderick (2006) found that football players quit playing with limited transferable job skills. According to Noblet and Gifford (2002) professionals also had career development concerns. Taken together, the findings suggest that making financial career choices is important for professional football players to better prepare for life after their playing career.

Feeling left out when injured and not receiving sufficient guidance can add to the psychological strain associated with injuries (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). This pattern of results is consistent with the idea that job insecurity and the threat of injuries can cause stress reactions among workers, ultimately decreasing their psychological well-being (De Witte, 1999; Roderick et al., 2000; Cheng et al., 2008). One interpretation of these findings is that the fear of injuries and the uncertainty surrounding recovery and return to play can initiate a process of health impairment among football players, which can potentially foster burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Taking into account the inherent job insecurity resulting from the nature of employment contracts in professional football, the findings of this study align with previous literature that characterizes the profession as short-lived, unstable and with high player turnover, and marked by significant player turnover (McGillivray et al., 2005; Noblet & Gifford, 2022). This short, time-limited and uncertain nature of employment contracts and negotiations amplifies the sense of job insecurity. As our participants revealed, football mechanisms are often one-sided, with clubs holding more power in contract negotiations. This power dynamic can create additional stress and uncertainty for players, leading them to focus more on thoughts about the future rather than performing in the present. One



interpretation of these findings is that the increasing trend of clubs signing players on part-time or shorter contracts (McGillivray et al., 2005) may further exacerbate the issue of job insecurity and lack of stability in players' lives.

Players face a high-pressure environment in professional football. While ageing has been identified as a source of pressure in a previous study (Roderick, 2006), present findings do not support it as a source of job insecurity. Instead, the study emphasizes the importance of physical performance and mental and emotional resilience to maintain a player's position and potentially advance their career. This finding underscores the complex interplay between performance and results. The results demonstrate that success in football requires players to navigate the ever-changing landscape of the sport and to be adaptable and resilient in the face of uncertainty. The findings highlight the need for support systems that can help players manage the stress and pressure of the job, both on and off the pitch.

Players often resort to increasing their physical workload to regain trust and secure their position in the team. However, this strategy can have unintended consequences, such as an increased risk of injuries and burnout. The pressure to perform and the physical strain placed on football players can work against their intentions, potentially hindering their performance rather than enhancing it. Thus, the players face a delicate balance between striving to prove themselves and the potential negative impact of excessive physical strain on their overall well-being and performance.

### **Juggling Football and Life**

Working as a professional football player continues after leaving the pitch. Our findings strongly demonstrate that professional football players face challenges in achieving work-life balance, with football having a significant impact on their personal lives. This pattern of results is consistent with previous literature, which demonstrates that employees with high demands and complex jobs tend to bring their work home and obsess about it

outside of work hours (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). The results are consistent with previous research highlighting the interdependence between work and personal life and the impact of long working hours and unpredictable schedules on prioritizing personal life (Amstad et al., 2011; Brauner et al., 2019). As highlighted by Amstad et al. (2011), the absence of work-life balance can reduce the time available for other resources, thereby transforming football from a recreational activity to a job demand. Conversely, having a work-life balance can stimulate a motivational process, enhancing well-being and performance and allowing for more time for other resources e.g., support from friends or family.

Football was identified as a significant part of participants' lives and identity. Professional football players face immense pressure and scrutiny in their profession, and the participants emphasized the importance of separating the football player from the person. This idea is further supported by previous research by McGillivray et al. (2005), which highlights the close link between football players' work and their "innermost identity", with the social context within which they perform carrying significant prestige. The findings imply that this pressure and scrutiny negatively impact professional football players' mental health and well-being if results and performances are not desirable.

The participants reported sacrificing valued elements of their adolescent lifestyles, such as family time and social life, to pursue a career in professional football. This sacrifice is a necessary demand of becoming and staying a professional, as reported by football coaches in Holt and Dunn (2004). However, the present findings highlight the challenge of balancing social commitments with the demands of training and performance. One interpretation of these findings is that pursuing a career in professional football requires a high level of passion and discipline, leading to difficulties in maintaining family and social relationships when football success is the number one priority.

## **Enduring Mental and Physical Strain**

Being a professional football player is a demanding occupation that requires a lot of hard work and dedication. Most participants described their work life as different from what they dreamt of when they were younger. All felt a sense of self-efficacy, competence and accomplishment following their success. The trend towards increased professionalization in elite sports has led to higher physical, emotional, and cognitive demands for athletes (Balk et al., 2017), causing the focus to shift from play to work. Therefore, what once began as a dream and a hobby has now transformed into a profession within a cynical industry.

There is a consensus in the literature that burnout results from high job demands and low job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Lesener et al., 2019). The results show that the participants reported feeling fatigued and low on energy throughout the football season, which can lead to burnout if not met with adequate resources and recovery. One must train hard, long and often to achieve a competitive advantage and optimal performance. Following the classification of job demands by Van den Broeck et al. (2010), a high workload is a challenging demand promoting the personal growth and achievement of the employee. However, to prevent health impairment in face of high workload (Bakker & de Vries, 2021), football players need adequate recovery time (Balk et al., 2017; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Van Yperen, 2009). However, the study's participants expressed signs of psychological problems during their careers, consistent with findings from previous research on Norwegian professional football players (Gouttebauge et al., 2015). Indicating that recovery may not be sufficient to mitigate health impairment.

A professional football player must consistently perform "24/7" at the highest level throughout an exceptionally long season. Every hour and day counts, which further affects the presented demands regarding work-life balance. The results identified that the participants had some degree of autonomy in their work. However, professional football players must

respond to the decisions made by their coaches and clubs and consider the impact of their actions and choices throughout the long season. Autonomy is an important factor in reducing work-related stress and is considered a central job resource in the JD-R literature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). However, according to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), the absence of autonomy does not mean it is demanded. Even with the freedom to make decisions, the players' ability to achieve their goals is not necessarily facilitated. Thus, it is not about having high or low autonomy, but instead finding the right level that allows players to feel empowered and motivated while also receiving guidance and support to achieve success.

The experience of enduring pain is common among professional football players, as they face significant stress in maintaining their physical condition, pressure to perform and the fear of potential injuries. The findings identified that this pressure could have negative consequences on players' health and well-being and increase job insecurity. Some participants reported playing through chronic pain and taking medication to perform on the pitch, highlighting the sport's physical demands. This pressure can lead to health impairment and job insecurity, as players feel they have no choice but to continue playing in fear of the consequences. The culture of the sport also contributes to this pressure, as playing through pain is expected (Roderick, 2000). Players may feel that they are not meeting the expectations of their coaches, teammates and fans. The findings suggest that the pressure to endure pain influences injuries and job insecurity, thus causing health impairment of players' physical and mental well-being.

Another significant finding from the study was the intense pressure and constant demand for high performance in professional football. Participants felt internal and external pressure to perform at a high level, but they perceived the internal pressure as the most intense. One intriguing facet of sports performance is the role of perfectionism. Perfectionism

is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness and establishing excessively high-performance standards, frequently leading to overly critical self-evaluation (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), bound up with self-conception, as mentioned by Roderick (2006). According to Jensen et al. (2018), perfectionism in athletes can result in burnout and depression, it is also a potential risk factor to injuries in sport (Reardon et al., 2019). Perfectionism can split into two categories: perfectionistic strivings and concerns, affecting various aspects of athletes' lives, including social relationships, family, and coworkers (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), in other words, work-life balance.

In football, perfectionistic strivings refer to a player's pursuit of excellence and high-performance standards. On the other hand, perfectionistic concerns relate to their fear of making errors and worry about negative evaluations from coaches, teammates, or fans. When performance standards are not met, negative evaluations can increase pressure and job insecurity, while negative assessments from teammates can reduce an individual's status within the team climate's social and sporting hierarchy. Lastly, successful athletes are highly visible in today's social media environment, and footballers are no exception. Despite their high salaries and status, there is a common misconception that these athletes lead stress-free lives unaffected by negative experiences outside the field. Fans frequently make snap judgments about players based solely on what happens during matches without fully comprehending the complex realities behind the scenes.

### **Maintaining and Developing Personal Resources**

The participants identified that personal resources are crucial in how professional football players manage the challenges they face. Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) found that individuals with more personal resources are better equipped to handle job demands and cope effectively. Furthermore, Holt and Dunn (2004) demonstrated that successful elite athletes possess psychological traits, including stable personality traits and coping abilities, which

enable them to manage stress. While physical fitness is undoubtedly essential for football players, research suggests that psychological characteristics are equally important in achieving peak performance and success at the elite level (Oguntuase & Sun, 2022; Sigmundsson et al., 2022).

Sigmundsson et al. (2022) hypothesized that certain personality factors directly influence an individual's ability to become a football "expert", allowing them to sustain effort over a long period. Interestingly, the same study suggested that passionate athletes may experience better well-being, which in turn can initiate a motivational process. The participants identified passion as a critical factor for becoming and staying successful, consistent with previous research on football players by Lundqvist et al. (2022). Furthermore, research by Verner-Filion and Vallerand (2018) identified that passion can serve as a major motivational force, providing individuals with the energy to engage and persevere in demanding behaviors and activities essential to achieving high-performance levels. Therefore, passion extends beyond deliberate practice and performance to facilitate other outcomes, such as psychological well-being. While passion is a powerful personal resource for the participants, other characteristics were also necessary for success in football. As identified, passion increases motivation. While the JD-R model seeks to understand factors that influence motivation in the workplace, relying solely on it for consistent performance in football can be unreliable. One could argue that motivation is an intrinsic aspect of every professional football player, and losing motivation poses a greater threat than gaining motivation throughout a career.

Maintaining discipline and consistency in performance was identified as crucial to achieving desired outcomes. According to Holt and Dunn (2004), discipline shows dedication and willingness to sacrifice. Even the most talented players will struggle to achieve their goals without discipline. Similarly, maintaining success in the long term requires discipline to

help players focus on what they can control, significantly when demands of the sport and work can affect motivation. As the participants noted, motivation can come and go, but discipline is necessary for long-term success in professional football.

The literature shows that job resources are crucial in initiating a motivational process. Thus, it fosters growth, learning, and development (Demerouti & Bakker, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Additionally, the participants emphasized the importance of curiosity for success in professional football. Within the game, there is always something new to learn, and the participants recognized that this was essential for their development and success. Displaying curiosity can provide the ability to learn from challenging situations, become more robust, and believe that better times lie ahead. This curiosity extended beyond football itself, as players were interested in learning about the lives of their friends, teammates, and co-workers and sharing their own experiences to thrive within the team climate. Further, according to the participants, being curious had the added benefit of providing them with support from more experienced players who often had faced similar challenges.

When work-life balance is disrupted, workloads are excessive, and pressure is overwhelming, the consequences of performance can lead to job insecurity and burnout. In such situations, health impairment will not foster growth, learning, and development. The findings indicate that maintaining curiosity can be challenging when facing high demands and health impairment. Furthermore, successful or experienced players may become complacent, believing they have already learned everything they need to know. They may not display curiosity or further develop themselves, thus hindering their motivation. However, those genuinely committed to improving as players and individuals recognize the significance of maintaining curiosity. This ability can ultimately result in increased performance and well-being both on and off the pitch, as highlighted by the participants.

Bakker and Demerouti (2017) described personal resources as an important aspect of an individual's self-beliefs that can influence their control over their environment. The findings identified that a grateful attitude is one way of exercising control over the environment. The participants highlighted that practicing gratitude by being present and appreciative in their demanding and busy working days is essential. It is crucial to enjoy the journey and recognize the experiences that have led them to where they are today, always considering what started as a dream for the participants. Doing what they love and getting paid for it is a privilege. The participants emphasize the importance of finding fulfilment and satisfaction in the journey towards success to maintain motivation and passion. Therefore, a grateful attitude is a powerful personal resource for the participants in their demanding yet resourceful work life.

According to Van Yperen (2009), coping with psychological challenges is a crucial factor that separates successful players from those who are not. Having autonomy and the ability to change one's work are prerequisites for job crafting (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job crafting involves proactively changing job demands and resources to make work more meaningful and interesting (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Tims et al., 2013). Coping mechanisms and personal routines can be considered a form of job crafting for professional football players.

One participant, for instance, practiced leaving football "on the doorstep" to detach from work demands and facilitate a work-life balance. This finding aligns with Balk et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of physical and emotional detachment for professional football players to aid their recovery from the demands of the sport. Marshall et al. (2022) found similar results, suggesting that a lack of opportunities for detachment increases the risk of burnout and reinforces the importance of work-life balance. The results revealed several different mechanisms and routines. Usually, these also involved focusing on



aspects of the job one can control, maintaining a positive mindset, and having a grateful attitude. In addition, another critical coping mechanism is displaying resilience and curiosity in the face of setbacks instead of giving up. Motivated employees seek to proactively modify their work environment and acquire resources compared to those who experience burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2017). Taken together, the findings indicate that passionate and highly motivated professional football players modify their work environment by implementing coping mechanisms and personal routines for increased well-being and performance in their work.

### **Team Climate and Family Support**

For good reason, social support is among the most used job resources in the JD-R literature (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014). Research suggests that social support is crucial for maintaining good mental health (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and mitigating the negative effects of job demands (Demerouti et al., 2001). The present findings shed light on the importance of social support within the team climate in football and its impact on individual well-being, team cohesion and performance. The results are consistent with previous research that social support is vital in team sports, encompassing feelings of love, care, esteem, and value from others and being part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations (Lundqvist et al., 2022). The present study identified the dressing room as a symbolic yet sacred place that reinforces the ideas of protection and privacy. Research conducted among talented Dutch soccer players has shown that environmental resources positively impact individuals' motivation, engagement, and performance (Bakker et al., 2011).

Results identified that spending time together actively before and after training is vital in building interpersonal trust, achieving better teamwork and accomplishing common team goals. The present study's findings highlight the crucial role of team climate in alleviating job

insecurity among football players, consistent with the positive correlation between interpersonal trust and performance (Giles et al., 2020), as well as the display of curiosity in the team climate. This finding is consistent with previous research by Roderick (2006), which revealed that developing informal workplace networks can help reduce contract uncertainty and the pressure to perform. Football players tend to form networks with their teammates to seek social support during challenges or setbacks, which can positively impact their performance and well-being (Van Yperen, 2009). Taken together, the present results also demonstrate the importance of a supportive team climate in decreasing a players' job insecurity.

The results demonstrate that when a player relocates to a new club, he is handed a set of "25 new friends". To receive ample support from teammates, co-workers, or friends, it becomes essential for the player to assimilate himself into the team climate. Consistent with the results, curiosity is essential in fostering a team climate and interpersonal trust. Conversely, suppose the player has many friends outside of football and a supportive family to spend time with at the current place, his priorities may shift, leading to a potential lack of investment and curiosity in his co-workers, while this ultimately stems from a healthy work-life balance. Dealing with sacrifice and priorities has also been identified as challenging. However, one could argue that individuals who lack available external sources of support may develop even stronger bonds within the team climate to compensate. It may lay a more robust foundation for optimal team climate and performance. Consequently, there is also a chance of facing health impairment in a lack of external support, which is even more important if the performance is lacking and the individual needs support outside the workplace. This highlights the nuanced nature of team climate among professional football players. There is a clear distinction between working alongside co-workers, developing trust and camaraderie with teammates, and potentially forming close friendships within the team

climate. As players progress through these different stages, their perceptions of the team climate may evolve, affecting their interactions, well-being and performance on and off the pitch. Consistent with present findings, highlighting that poor performance on the pitch could result in negative judgments of the individual as a person, leading to self-doubt and decreased confidence, which may further exacerbate their performance and overall well-being. Players can face demands when there is a lack of social support. Notably, the study found that playing abroad was associated with a more egotistical work environment, where co-workers focused more on themselves than forming social connections at work. This was perceived as a challenge by participants, hindering their motivation.

Family is considered an essential external resource in maintaining good health by enhancing resilience to stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Consistent with previous research, the influence from family decreases as the individual grows older and more independent (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Lundqvist et al., 2022), most notably when the player relocates to pursue career goals. Contrary to the findings of Marshall et al. (2022), which suggested that separation from friends and family could intensify job demands, the participants in this study experienced a different outcome. Despite the demanding nature of their profession, the participants reported receiving unwavering support from their families, thereby mitigating the potential negative impact of separation.

The participants' continued familial support serves as a protective factor, enhancing their ability to navigate the challenges associated with professional football. This finding highlights the significance of strong familial relationships and suggests that the support and understanding received from loved ones can alleviate the strain and job demands typically associated with the profession.

An interesting finding in the study was the need to emphasize team climate while playing abroad. When team climates lacked social support, the player's partner became an

even more valuable source of support. It was identified that foreign clubs prioritized families' well-being, facilitating additional family support. It is easy to overlook that when players relocate, their partners may have to search for new jobs, make new friends, learn a new language, or even switch schools for their children (Roderick, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that football can also impact the player's partner, who is often caught in the middle.

### **High Salaries**

In accordance with the JD-R model, rewards such as pay might function as job resource, as high salaries seem to serve as a buffer for high job demands and a predictor of work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However, as identified in this study, high salaries affected the participants in multiple challenging and stressful ways.

For many, work has the purpose of providing economic stability (Sverke et al., 2002). This is particularly relevant for athletes and football players due to their short playing careers. High salaries mitigate job insecurity, it also provides the opportunity to support loved ones financially. Consistent with the findings of McGillivray et al. (2005) and Roderick (2006), the priorities and sacrifices made by football players during their careers may put them at risk of failing to develop transferable skills or advancing their careers beyond football. Thus, prioritizing financial security when making sporting decisions could be a sensible approach to achieve stability, making salaries an important and motivating resource.

The financial decisions made in sports are fascinating when considered internationally, as they can serve as a source of motivation. For foreign individuals who "fail" to become professional athletes, the risk is even greater for those coming from countries without a safety net, in contrast to the Norwegian professionals in this study. On the other hand, those who succeed in becoming professional athletes have the potential to significantly impact the lives of people without economic safety nets from their home countries, as

highlighted by one of the participants playing abroad. Because some of his co-workers prioritized all their time and effort in work and saving money, this resulted in a lack of team climate and social support.

Mainstream media and fans often criticize professional football players for making career decisions based on financial gain. However, the above findings shed light on the reality that financial considerations are important for athletes, especially those from countries without social welfare systems. In this sense, the financial decisions of professional football players may have a broader impact beyond themselves and their immediate families.

Earning high salaries was also identified as challenging due to contract negotiations, short contracts, job insecurity, fans, motivation, and career choices, which all are factors that can contribute to the pressure of earning a high salary in football. An interesting finding among the participants was that the choice between playing "good" football and earning a living can be a difficult one, and that weighing financial and sporting opportunities is necessary as mentioned. Ultimately, high salaries in football can be a job demand in and of itself, particularly in circumstances where the financial aspect of the job becomes a primary concern for the player.

### **Mental training in The Player's Toolbox**

The idea that mental training can serve as a job resource aligns with the notion that it is a beneficial factor in accomplishing work goals and reducing job-related demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). One interpretation is that mental training can initiate a motivational process fostering growth, learning and development (Demerouti & Bakker, 2017). Another interpretation is that motivated football players can trigger the initiation of seeking mental training. According to Behnke et al. (2019), more experienced athletes possess better mental training skills and techniques than lower-level athletes. This is consistent with the present findings indicating that professional football players actively seek ways to enhance their

performance and deal with occupational challenges. Most participants reported having either used or having positive attitudes towards mental training. However, the results revealed that although they believe in its efficacy, half of the participants need to use it more systematically in their daily routines.

According to Vealey (2007), athletes rely on mental training techniques more during competition than during training. However, this differed from the present results, which identified that the participants favored utilizing mental training techniques more during their regular working days. One could argue that competition is a constant state as a professional football player, as you play matches almost every week, sometimes even more than once a week, and compete for places with fellow teammates in training. The perceived pressure and expectations from the coach and club amplify this competitive state. An alternative interpretation of the findings suggests that it may benefit players to do less during preparation leading up to matches routinely. Most participants preferred to relax before a match, avoid overthinking and allow situations to unfold naturally. This preference is likely related to the unpredictable nature of football, where situations rarely occur in the same way twice.

The psychological characteristics identified in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) literature concerning aspects of the self or beliefs regarding one's control over the environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) align with the definition of a mental skill (Vealey, 2007). Furthermore, personal resources developed through mental training can act as a buffer versus strain, influencing the relationship between job characteristics and employee well-being outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). As noted by the participants in this study, psychological skills and personal resources are crucial for success as a professional footballer. Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) suggest that individuals with more personal resources are better equipped to handle job demands effectively. This indicates that football players

with enhanced mental skills and techniques can handle job demands better, stay resilient and remain motivated.

The study's participants identified different mental techniques, such as meditation, mindfulness, and self-talk, as coping mechanisms for stressors. They also practice personal routines, such as taking cold showers, writing in a diary, and setting goals. This is significant because support from a coach or club may be influenced by competitive pressure and expectations, leading to the game's mental aspects being perceived as a demand rather than a resource.

In addition to developing and maintaining personal resources, mental training can help overcome barriers, such as the stigma surrounding mental health. Curiosity, identified as a personal resource by the participants, can be beneficial in this context. By encouraging players to be curious about their mental states and how they can be improved through mental training, coaches and mental health professionals can help break down these barriers and promote mental training as a personal job resource in professional football. Therefore, mental training is a personal job resource within the JD-R model, as it aids in developing resilience, motivation, and a sense of control over one's mental and emotional states, ultimately contributing to the well-being of professional football players.

Mental training can be considered an external job resource in the job demands-resources model, as it offers individuals access to external sources of support that can provide emotional support, guidance, and skills to manage job demands better. The participants in the study identified talking to a mental coach outside of their immediate football environment as a helpful external resource for receiving support. This external support allows players to access a neutral party not influenced by familial or team relationships. However, the cost of accessing such services can be high. Nevertheless, considering the high salaries of professional footballers, this investment might be a small price to pay for the benefits gained.

Brown and Fletcher (2017) support that mental training interventions and techniques, such as goal setting and imagery, when delivered by psychological "coaches," yield greater impact than techniques provided alone. Therefore, talking to an external coach is more accessible due to fewer barriers and may be a more effective option. This is because expressing vulnerability to one's football coach can lead to increased job insecurity and negative consequences. These findings are consistent with Reardon et al. (2019), which found that even elite athletes with positive attitudes towards seeking mental health services may hesitate due to concerns about how they will be perceived. One participant began using mental training through a coach because he saw warning signs surrounding his mental health, affecting his family and work-life balance. This was dealt with privately, highlighting how mental training can mitigate occupational stressors that lead to strain and demonstrating the importance of taking action on mental health in professional football.

This thesis acknowledges mental training as a job resource that can take various forms and serve different purposes while acknowledging that it can be perceived as a job demand in certain situations. Professional football players operate in a high-stress and high-performance job environment, requiring mental resilience and effective coping skills to manage job demands optimally. The importance of supporting mental health and well-being in the workplace is increasingly being recognized, and mental training is becoming increasingly necessary for achieving high performance among elite athletes (Behnke et al., 2019). However, barriers and stigmas are attached to seeking mental health assistance (Reardon et al., 2019). Similarly, there are obstacles in seeking and implementing mental training, as Vealey (2007) noted.

The participants felt pressured into playing while enduring pain and fear of injuries, contributing significantly to job insecurity. Reardon et al. (2019) revealed that elite athletes face additional challenges, including low mental health literacy, negative past experiences



with treatment, busy schedules, and hypermasculinity. The participants' schedules were undoubtedly busy, and the culture was described as brutal, particularly for the participants playing abroad. Therefore, removing barriers such as stigma should be a club's goal, and resources should be provided to help players. If resources are not available, stigma becomes a job hindrance demand due to its relationship with well-being, job insecurity and culture.

In order to prioritize the mental health and well-being of athletes, it is imperative to establish a cultural shift in sports that promotes the normalization of help-seeking behaviors and fosters a supportive environment where athletes feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns without the fear of experiencing stigmatization or negative consequences (Purcell et al., 2019). The increased emphasis on mental training can facilitate a shift towards prioritizing mental health and well-being in professional football culture. As players recognize the benefits of actively working with psychological aspects, a cultural shift towards mental health will likely occur. To support this shift, professional football clubs must focus on providing external resources to support players' mental well-being. However, several identified barriers hinder the implementation of mental training within the team, including a lack of demand from players, a lack of communication among players, and an old-school culture among the older coaching staff. Clubs must view mental training as a job resource rather than a job demand better to support their players' mental health, well-being and performance.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

The research contributes to filling a knowledge gap in work and occupational psychology regarding the psychosocial working environment and its effects experienced by professional football players. Additionally, the participants included in the study are successful top-level athletes who are notoriously challenging to recruit due to their busy schedules and long seasons. Moreover, this study was conducted in a Norwegian context,

providing a unique perspective. A strength of this study is its inclusion of professional football players who play abroad, which provided valuable insights and perspectives that may differ from those of players who only play in Norway. Additionally, the criteria for participating were closely matched between the participants in terms of, e.g., no long-term injuries, currently employed, and primary source of income, adding to the methodological integrity of the study.

Using the established JD-R model as a theoretical framework, this study adds unique information to the specific occupation of professional football. It indicates that work and organizational psychology are relevant and significant in top-level football. It also reinforces the value of qualitative methods in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the given context. Finally, reflexivity was employed as a resource, which ensured the researchers were aware of their role and potential biases. Taking ownership of reflexivity and ensuring it serves as a valuable resource without overpowering or distorting the findings.

However, this study has its limitations. Self-reported data may introduce common method bias and lack objective measures of job demands and resources (Lesener et al., 2019). This limits the study's methodological integrity, reliability, and validity. Additionally, while the study's use of the JD-R has strengths and weaknesses, as touched upon in the theoretical framework section, its flexible approach comes at the cost of limited generalizability (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Further, its limited insight into the psychological mechanisms involved due to the lack of additional explanatory theoretical frameworks is a limitation.

The study has a small sample size (six participants), all Norwegian professionals, which may limit the scope of generalizability and transferability of the findings. However, this is viewed as a weakness. In qualitative research with a limited number of participants, the emphasis is placed on understanding the depth and richness of individual experiences rather than simply aiming for generalizability. While participants were encouraged to reflect on

sources of stress experienced throughout their careers, it is important to note that the data collection occurred towards the end of the 2022 season, which may have influenced their experiences and perceptions.

Another limitation of this study is the limited focus on the stressors associated with organizations and management, especially the role of coaches. Despite the undeniable influence of coaches on the participants, they primarily emphasized their individual experiences and focused on what they could control. While this lack of focus was unexpected, it provided exciting insights into the participants' perspectives. One possible explanation for this choice of focus may be the inherent uncertainty and high coach turnover within professional football, which highlights the importance of focusing on oneself.

### **Implications**

Despite the limitations, the present study has enhanced our understanding of the relationship between job demands and resources in working as a professional football player. The hope is that the current research will stimulate further investigation as the results suggest several theoretical and practical implications. Consistent with recent literature on mental health within sports, considering mental health is a core component of success (Henriksen et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2018; Reardon et al., 2019). It is worth noting that the environment surrounding the players can positively or negatively impact their mental health (Henriksen et al., 2020), highlighting the need for a supportive and nurturing environment to foster mental well-being. These findings contribute to the literature on athlete mental health and stress management strategies, emphasizing the need to consider situations or conditions that are particularly damaging to players' well-being and athletic performance (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Additionally, consistent with Jensen et al. (2018), the study highlights the importance of considering the personality factors of footballers to prevent psychological problems.

The practical implications of this study extend to football clubs and organizations, as they can reduce stigma and consequences for showing vulnerability within the environment. Consistent with Lundqvist et al. (2022), clubs and organizations must consider professional players' well-being and mental health due to the nature of player employment contracts and negotiations. Further, provide adequate support and guidance for injured players and manage the stress and pressures of the job, both on and off the pitch. Moreover, mental health and job insecurity in professional football extend beyond a player's career, emphasizing the importance of support and career choices in preparation for life after their playing career. Football has become an integral part of the players' identity, making achieving a healthy work-life balance challenging.

Providing mental health support, such as access to a sports psychologist or less stigma and consequences showing vulnerability within the environment, can help players cope with the demands of their profession and maintain good mental health. This study also highlights the potential benefits of mental training as a job resource for professional football players. Clubs and organizations can consider incorporating mental training as a job resource to help players develop the necessary coping skills and resilience to navigate the stresses and pressures of their profession. Access to mental training resources can equip players with the tools to manage their mental health, well-being and performance.

### **Future Research**

In work and organizational research, the JD-R model primarily focuses on the individual level (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). However, for organizations such as football teams, examining the levels of job demands, resources, and well-being of entire teams or departments might be relevant. JD-R research must develop measures demonstrating how job characteristics relate to well-being or performance indicators over time and across individual and group levels, in this case, within a football organization.

Future research could benefit from an increased sample size, e.g., including foreign professional football players, as this would provide more diverse and valuable perspectives. However, access limitations and players' busy schedules made this challenging in the current study. Another area for future research could be to investigate potential gender differences within the JD-R model in professional football. It would also be interesting to include other groups, such as non-Norwegians playing in Norway, semi-professional players, long-term injured players, retirees, and those who have experienced failure in their football careers. Including these groups could offer unique and valuable insights into the experiences of professional football players and those that still need or did not reach that status.

As mentioned earlier, the participants' experiences were influenced by recent events. Therefore, a longitudinal study capturing seasonal or even career demands players face could be a worthwhile goal for future research. However, as this thesis has highlighted, conducting longitudinal studies in a busy, low-access football industry is challenging.

Studies could further explore how personality traits such as emotional instability, perfectionism, and workaholism affect football players' well-being and performance by including personal demands in addition to personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Future studies can also include explanatory theoretical frameworks to offer a deeper insight into the psychological mechanisms involved (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). According to (Brown & Fletcher, 2017), implementing psychological and psychosocial interventions can improve athletes' performances. Therefore, exploring a range of mental training interventions for professional football players and teams would be of great interest to increase performance and focus on personal development and team skills.

## **Conclusion**

Playing professional football is undoubtedly a dream occupation, but the reality often falls short of young aspiring footballers' expectations. Job characteristics include a lack of

career uncertainty stemming from fear of injuries, contracts, and performance pressure. Balancing football and personal life posed a significant challenge as work-life balance, priorities, sacrifices, and obsessive football thoughts intertwined. Additionally, players experienced physical and mental strain as "24/7" athletes, enduring pain, high pressure, and expectations. Thus, professional football players numerous occupational stressors and various challenges that impact their physical, social, and psychological well-being.

To mitigate this stress and overcome it, these individuals identified a variety of job resources. The most important resources started with personal resource, encompassing personal resources such as passion, discipline, curiosity, gratefulness, and personal coping mechanisms and routines. The team climate was identified as crucial in providing social support, and high salaries and family support played significant roles. Furthermore, mental training was recognized as a versatile and high-potential job resource. This study shed light on perceived barriers to mental health and mental training, emphasizing the implications for individuals and organizations. Moving forward, organizations must facilitate and provide adequate support and resources for professional football players. Simultaneously, players must develop and maintain the necessary skills, focus on what they can control, and create their chances of success. Future research should continue to explore the psychosocial working environment of football players, because gaining more profound insights into these factors will create a healthier and more conducive environment for their well-being and performance.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Appendix B: Approval From Sikt

Appendix C: Information Letter

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### Generell informasjon

**Om meg:** Går Master i psykologi, og da med fordypning innen arbeids og organisasjonspsykologi.

**Prosjektet:** Formålet med prosjektet er å få innblikk i hvilke jobbkrav og jobbbressurser som er gjeldende i arbeidshverdagen som profesjonell fotballspiller. Etterfulgt av en spesiell del som omhandler bruk og tanker om mental trening. Viktig å påpeke: Helseopplysninger som for eksempel diagnoser, medisiner eller andre sensitive opplysninger er ikke noe dette prosjektet trenger eller vil vite. Intervjuet er delt i 4 deler: Introduksjon, jobbkrav, jobbbressurser og mental trening. Hver del har noen underpunkter.

**Bruk av lydopptak:** For å ta opp intervjuet vil jeg bruke en manuell opptaker type Olympus, ser slik ut. Jeg kan også ta opp via Teams, opptaksfilen blir da ikke kryptert. Hvis det du skal prate om som lite sensitivt så det er bare hvis du anser det som greit.

**Konfidensialitet:** Etter transkribering vil all identifiserbar informasjon fjernes, og det vil være umulig å identifisere at det er din data.

**Databehandling:** Etter intervjuet vil all data transkriberes, og personidentifiserende informasjon vil bli fjernet, navnet ditt vil erstattet med et nummer.

**Rettigheter:** Håper du er innforstått med de rettighetene du har, og hvis det skal være noe ikke vær redd for å ta kontakt.

**Ekstra:** Ta utgangspunkt i hele din profesjonelle karriere. Ikke vær redd for å bruke termer/opplevelser som utelukkende fotballspillere kjenner til, naturligvis da jeg er fotballspiller selv. Selv om du er kontaktet gjennom ditt nettverk, og vi er en del av det

samme store fotballmiljøet, så er det viktig for meg at du vet at det som blir sagt her blir utelukkende mellom oss to og min veileder. Du har all rett til å fortelle hva du vil til andre.

Før vi begynner, har du noen spørsmål?

### **Start opptak:**

Kan du bekrefte at du har lest samtykkeskjemaet?

Samtykker du i å delta i dette intervjuet?

Introduksjon:

1. Hvor gammel er du?
2. Hvor lenge har du vært profesjonell fotballspiller?
3. Har du spilt på landslaget? Uansett lag
4. I begynnelsen, hva fikk deg til å ville bli profesjonell fotballspiller?
5. I dag, hva betyr det for deg?
6. Hva er særegent med å være fotballspiller kontra å drive med andre idretter?
7. I en hektisk periode av sesongen, hvordan ser en typisk arbeidsdag ut for deg? Step by step

2. JobbkraV (JobbkraV er definert som psykologiske, fysiologiske, sosiale eller organisatoriske aspekter ved arbeidssituasjonen din som krever ferdigheter eller innsats.)

1. Opplevelser som fotballspiller:

- Noe i arbeidshverdagen du opplever som krevende eller vanskelig fysisk?
- Hva med krevende eller vanskelig psykisk?
- Har det vært situasjoner hvor du har gruet deg for å gå på jobb?
- Kan du forklare hvorfor det var slik?

2. Som profesjonell fotballspiller, er det noe som gjør eller har gjort arbeidshverdagen din usikker?

- Føler du at arbeidshverdagen din er forutsigbar?
- Er det noen andre aspekter med arbeidshverdagen din som gjør det mindre forutsigbart
- (Kontrakt – Skader – Familie - Venner – Konflikter – Framtid).
- Fortelle mer om det aspektet, eventuelt et annet aspekt.
- Hva går du mest glipp av som profesjonell fotballspiller?
- Hvorfor er det verdt å gå glipp av det?

3. Forventninger/press:

- Opplever du en frykt for å ikke prestere godt nok/ikke lykkes?
- Forventer du for mye av deg selv?
- Hvorfor?
- Har du eller føler du et press fra andre? (Trenere – Medspillere – Klubb – familie).
- Kan du gi et eksempel på ytre press.
- Hvordan påvirker press hverdagen din?
- Hvordan påvirker press prestasjonene dine?

4. Tenker du på jobben når du ikke er på jobb?

- Hva tenker du på?
- Hvilken effekt har det på deg?

Jobbressurser: Jobbressurser beskrives som faktorene som bidrar til å redusere fysiologiske og psykologiske kostnadene som jobben krever.

1. Motivasjon:

- Hva er det beste med å være profesjonell fotballspiller?
- Hva betyr motivasjon for deg?
- Hva motiverer deg som spiller?
- Hvilke utfordringer motiveres du av?

2. Håndtering av vanskelige/utfordrende situasjoner:

- Noe som går igjen?
- Hva gjør du aktivt i disse situasjonene?
- Hva slags støtte/hjelp får du i vanskelige situasjoner?  
(Klubb - Medspillere – Trenerne – Familie - Agent).
- Hvilken støtte anser du som er ekstra viktig for deg i din arbeidshverdag?
- Hvor viktig er tilbakemeldinger på hvordan du presterer?

3. Personlige egenskaper (se bort ifra fysiske egenskaper):

- Hvilke personlige egenskaper mener du er avgjørende for å lykkes som profesjonell fotballspiller?
  - Hva legger du i «egenskap»?
  - Hvilke personlige egenskaper gjør at du har kommet så langt i karrieren?
  - Er det noen personlige egenskaper som du mener trengs for at du skal videre oppnå dine mål?
4. Kan du beskrive det sosiale arbeidsmiljøet ditt? (Garderobekultur, lagkamerater osv.).
- På hvilken måte er det sosiale viktig for ditt personlige velvære?
  - Har det sosiale en effekt på dine prestasjoner?
  - Noe sosialt med fotball som har vært viktigere enn noe annet?

Mental trening: Mental trening er et samlebegrep på ulike metoder og teknikker som øker utøverens eller lagets evne til å bli mer effektiv og bedre forberedt mentalt når utøveren eller laget forsøker å oppnå målene sine.

1. Hva er dine tanker om mental trening?
2. Ser du på mental trening som viktig i din arbeidshverdag?
  - Hvorfor?
3. I løpet av din karriere, har det vært nok fokus på mental trening?
  - Hvorfor tror du det er slik?
  - (Hvis i utlandet) – Opplever du forskjell på det på det mentale i utlandet kontra i Norge?
  - Kan du komme med et eksempel?

<p>4. Har du i løpet av din karriere drevet på med mental trening (med deg selv, med en trener eller med et lag).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Har du mental trener tilgjengelig?</li> <li>○ Hvor ofte trener du mentalt</li> <li>○ Hvilke teknikker har du erfaring med?</li> <li>● Kan du fortelle en spesifikk situasjon hvor slik trening foregikk? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hvordan føltes det?</li> <li>○ Hadde det en effekt?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 4. Hvorfor benytter du ikke mental trening? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Noe som har påvirket deg ekstra?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● 5. Hva må til for at driver mental trening?</li> </ul>
<p>5. Hvordan forbereder du deg mentalt til en kamp?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Snakker du til deg selv for å regulere tanker, emosjoner og eller opphisselse?</li> <li>○ Visualiserer du vanskelige situasjoner for å forberede deg?</li> </ul> <p>6. Bruker du andre ting for å forberede deg mentalt?</p>	
<p>7. På hvilken måte føler du mental trening påvirker din prestasjon?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Positivt/negativt?</li> </ul>	<p>7. Hvorfor ikke?</p>
<p>8. Kan du fortelle om en vanskelig situasjon i din karriere, på eller utenfor banen, som du føler mental trening, kunne forberedt deg bedre på?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ På hvilken måte har du vært mer forberedt?</li> </ul>	

Hvis det er tid, oppfølgingsspørsmål på tema hvis det ble gitt for lite info.



Avslutning:

Før vi avslutter intervjuet. Er det noe annet du kunne komme på som er av betydning som vi ikke har snakket om, noe du mener er viktig i forbindelse med din arbeidshverdag?

Tusen takk tiden, gjerne ta kontakt for spørsmål og eller innspill.

Avslutt opptak.

## Appendix B: Approval from Sikt

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

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[meldeskjema.sikt.no/63528257-0032-452d-be30-f2c84b63b0c5/vurdering](https://meldeskjema.sikt.no/63528257-0032-452d-be30-f2c84b63b0c5/vurdering)

Vurdering av behandling av personopplysninger

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Referansenummer

918854

Vurderingstype

Standard

Dato

11.11.2022

Prosjekttittel

Profesjonell fotballspillers arbeidshverdag, prestasjon og mental trening

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet / Fakultet for samfunns- og  
utdanningsvitenskap (SU) / Institutt for psykologi

Prosjektansvarlig

Martin Rasmussen Skogstad

Student

Jarl Magnus Knutsen

Prosjektperiode

01.08.2022 - 31.08.2023

Kategorier personopplysninger Alminnelige

Lovlig grunnlag

Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene er lovlig så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det lovlige grunnlaget gjelder til 31.08.2023.

Meldeskjema 

Kommentar

## OM VURDERINGEN

Personverntjenester har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.

Personverntjenester har nå vurdert den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vår vurdering er at behandlingen er lovlig, hvis den gjennomføres slik den er beskrevet i meldeskjemaet med dialog og vedlegg.

## VIKTIG INFORMASJON TIL DEG

Du må lagre, sende og sikre dataene i tråd med retningslinjene til din institusjon. Dette betyr at du må bruke leverandører for spørreskjema, skylagring, videosamtale o.l. som institusjonen

din har avtale med. Vi gir generelle råd rundt dette, men det er institusjonens egne retningslinjer for informasjonssikkerhet som gjelder.

#### FORUTSETNINGER FOR VURDERINGEN

Vi legger til grunn at det ikke registreres helseopplysninger i intervjuene. Helseforhold skal i personvernrettslig forstand forstås vidt, og kan inkludere alt som kan påvirke fysisk eller psykisk helse. Vi anbefaler at deltakerne i forkant av intervjuer instrueres til å unngå å dele opplysninger om egne helseforhold, eksempelvis i forbindelse med spørsmål om ting i arbeidshverdagen som oppleves som krevende fysisk eller psykisk, jobbusikkerhet/skader, frykt for ikke å prestere godt nok eller for ikke å lykkes, vanskelige situasjoner, mental trening, etc. Dersom prosjektet likevel kommer til å registrere helseopplysninger, må dette meldes som endring, slik at vi kan gjøre en ny vurdering. TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG

#### VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 31.8.2023.

#### LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

#### PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i

personvernforordningen om: - lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål - dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet - lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

## DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Personverntjenester vurderer at informasjonen om

behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13. Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og dataportabilitet (art. 20). Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

## FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32). Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring, videosamtale o.l.) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med. For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

## MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-utmeldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-enderinger-i-meldeskjema> Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

#### OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

## Appendix C: Information Letter

Informasjonsskriv.

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet:

«Fotballspillere arbeidshverdag, prestasjon og mental trening»?

Formål:

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke hvordan norske fotballspillere på toppnivå opplever sin arbeidshverdag. Det vil undersøkes hvordan de opplever at kravene i arbeidet har betydning for deres prestasjoner og bruk av mental trening. Dette vil undersøkes gjennom kvalitative enkeltintervjuer. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Prosjektet er grunnlaget for en masteroppgave innenfor arbeids- og organisasjonspsykologi.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU) er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Forskningsgruppen for prosjektet består av:

Leder for prosjektet: Jarl Magnus Knutsen, masterstudent, NTNU

Veileder: Martin Rasmussen Skogstad, Seniorforsker, NTNU Samfunnsforskning

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Til prosjektet ønsker vi å intervju profesjonelle fotballspillere. For å få oppdatert og aktuell informasjon ønsker vi deg som spiller profesjonell toppfotball. Nivåkriteriet er enten Toppklubb i Eliteserien og tilsvarende/høyere nivå utenlands i Europa. Totalt ønsker jeg ca.

6-10 informanter. Du som får dette informasjonsskrivet er kontaktet via ditt profesjonelle nettverk.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer dette at du deltar på et forskningsintervju med en varighet på ca. 1 time. Intervjuet vil inneholde spørsmål om din arbeidshverdag og opplevelser som fotballspiller. Intervju kan gjennomføres både fysisk og digitalt etter avtale/avhengig av hva som er gjennomførbart. Dine svar vil bli tatt opp ved hjelp av en lydopptaker. Opptaket vil bli slettet snart intervjuet er transkribert. Ingen personidentifiserende opplysninger vil bli lagret.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke deg uten å oppgi grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt Personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke. Det er utelukkende Jarl Magnus Knutsen og veileder som vil ha tilgang på dine personidentifiserbare data. På oppdrag fra Norges TekniskNaturvitenskapelige Universitet (NTNU) har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Lydopptaket lagres kun på båndopptaker og ikke på PC med internettilgang slik at ingen uvedkommende kan få tilgang til det. Etter intervjuet er transkribert vil intervjuet anonymiseres og lydfilene vil da slettes.

Båndopptaker vil låses inn trygt på instituttet mellom intervju og transkripsjon.



Transkriberte og anonymiserte data lagres sikkert på NTNU sine systemer.

Når prosjektet ferdigstilles sørger vi for at du ikke kan identifiseres. Dette gjør vi i henhold til personvernloven.

Alle navn, alder, arbeidsgiver/klubb, posisjon på banene etc. vil anonymiseres.

Navn og personopplysninger erstattes med en kode som lagres på en egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data.

Dine opplysninger etter avsluttet forskningsprosjekt

Prosjektet vil etter planen avsluttes våren 2023, og dine personidentifiserbare data vil da bli slettet. Det eneste som oppbevares etter prosjektavslutningen er de anonymiserte intervjuutskriftene. Disse vil arkiveres for videre forskning på samme tema, og vil oppbevares innelåst ved NTNU, Institutt for psykologi. Det vil ikke lagres informasjon som kan identifisere deg som person.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

Å få innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi har registrert om deg

Å få utlevert en kopi av dine opplysninger (dataportabilitet)

Å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende

Å få slettet personopplysninger om deg

Å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Videre informasjon

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med;

Masterstudent Jarl Magnus Knutsen (jmknutse@ntnu.no)

Seniorforsker Martin Rasmussen Skogstad (martin.rasmussen@samforsk.no)

Personvernombud ved NTNU Thomas Helgesen (thomas.helgesen@ntnu.no)

NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, på epost (personverntjenester@sikt.no) eller telefon: 53 21 15 00

Med vennlig hilsen

Jarl Magnus Knutsen

Martin Rasmussen Skogstad

Masterstudent

Prosjektveileder, Prosjektansvarlig

NTNU, IPS

NTNU Samfunnsforskning

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Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet «Fotballspillers arbeidshverdag, prestasjon og mental trening» og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

å delta i forskningsprosjektet

å delta i forskningsintervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology