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Abstract: Both elite sport and the road to elite sport performance could be described as stressful. The junior-to-senior transition has proven to be difficult for many talented football players because of the often non-normative nature of the transition. The aim of the current study was to investigate male junior football players from both professional and non-professional clubs, and their perception of two categories of stressors (Hanton et al., 2005): namely, competitive and organisational ones. Ten male players (five junior-elite, five junior non-elite) were interviewed, and the data were thematically content analysed. The highlighted competitive stressors were the pressures to perform and preparations related to performance issues. Among organisational stressors were the increased level of performance and the uncertainty of outcome related to environmental issues. Difficulties arising from the pressures of having a dual career and prioritising football over friends were related to personal issues, and the lack of coaching created leadership issues; meanwhile maladaptive communication was related to team issues. The overall findings in this, one of few studies on junior players in football, indicate that the players have access to performance development arenas, but lack a social affiliation to the senior team players, as well as lacking senior team coaches' feedback, and access to a mastery arena (in a performance focussed environment)including social support. The results from this study thus highlight the importance of adjusting stressors for players in the junior-to-senior transition in football

Keywords: talent development, career transition, stressors, qualitative, player-perspective.

Introduction

The transition from junior elite to elite is one of the most challenging transitions in the long-term talent development process in football, and is even regarded as the most career-defining transition (Drew et al., 2019). Junior elite players within professional clubs are part of a competitive environment (Nesti & Sulley, 2015) with increased stressors and anxiety related to their performance (Morris et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). The players are introduced to a professional environment, which focusses almost solely on performance, compared to their academic environment, which focusses mostly on development (Richardson et al., 2013). From a talent development perspective, it would be advantageous if the transition

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from junior elite to the elite team is normative (i.e. predictable), compared to non-normative (i.e. unpredictable; Wylleman et al., 2011). However, the volatile nature of the professional football world means that these transitions are often unpredictable and inherently stressful for players (Champ et al., 2018; Swainston et al., 2020). Even though the challenges experienced in the junior-to-senior transition in both junior-elite and junior-amateur football are related to the demands of development and performance as football players, they also include balancing school and football (i.e. dual-careers; see Stambulova et al., 2020), which can be a significant source of stress (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Solhaug et al., 2021). One pivotal transition that has received less attention in the literature is the transition to elite sport (Bruner et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2020), and even though there are studies comparing elite and non-elite athletes (Mellalieu et al., 2009), the contribution of this article is to obtain reflections and insights from junior players in the junior-to-senior transition (Bruner et al., 2008).

Theoretical approach

Stambulova (2003, 2009) introduces the Athletic Career Transition model that stated that transitions are a process of coping with a set of transitional demands, where a set of demands is related to every transition and where the effectiveness of coping with the demands depends on a dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers. The model describes the resources as internal or external features assisting coping, while barriers are internal or external features that restrict the coping process. The two primary transition outcomes are either successful transition from effective coping with a good fit between resources and barriers and demands, or a crisis transition where the coping is ineffective, and an intervention is needed to find an exit. Depending on the intervention, the athlete might proceed to successful but delayed transition outcomes, or to an unsuccessful transition, which might lead to negative consequences, so called costs, for the athlete. Stambulova et al. (2015) later pointed out that combining sports with education or work can be a good solution for athletes who want to balance sports with other parts of life, as well as for preparing for life after sports. While completing a dual career can have its benefits (i.e. a broader identity and social network), it can also present challenges, such as an increased risk of burnout by investing in both school and sports, in addition to having leisure and personal time (see Stambulova et al., 2020). Thus, completing a dual career requires coordination between the two careers. The purpose of sports as a study programme is precisely to facilitate a better everyday life, especially with regard to the amount of training, content, and quality in both areas (Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2015). Although a dual career indicates two equal investments in the two careers, studies show that stakeholders often prioritise sport over school (see Drew et al., 2019). The implementation of a dual career can thus be perceived as an adaptation to one of the careers, where schooling is adapted to the sports focus.

The aim of the current study was to investigate male junior football players from both professional and non-professional clubs and their perception of two categories of stressors (Hanton et al., 2005): namely competitive and organisational ones. Even though stressors both within and outside of sports are considered vital in the player's life, this study will only focus on the sport-specific stressors. The main argument is that the stressors within sports are found to be comprehensive and partly challenging to manage/separate, based on earlier research we introduce in the following section.

Earlier research

Psychological stressors are challenges the players must learn to handle in the junior-to-senior transition. The concept of stress and stressors has been heavily debated, and there have been many approaches and definitions (Turner et al., 2020). Highlighting the experience of stressors Uphill et al., 2008), the players' perception of the situation (or period) as a threat, feeling vulnerable, or the likelihood of mastering the situation or period (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), impact on how stressful the player perceives the situation to be. Furthermore, competitive stressors included the subcategory of performance issues, while organisational issues included the subcategories of environmental, personal, leadership, and team issues. This categorisation offers a practical organisation of the stressors (McKay et al., 2008), even though players could experience different types of stressors across these categories, and also at the same time (Neil et al., 2011; Swainston et al., 2020)

The number and range of competitive and organisational stressors has been shown to be enormous (Tamminen et al., 2019). Among competitive stressors, Hanton et al. (2005) found the following performance issues: preparations, injury, pressure, opponents, self, event, and superstitions. Mellalieu et al. (2009) later included (external) expectations and rivalry (related to opponents). On environmental issues Woodman and Hardy (2001) found selection, finances, training environment, and accommodation, while Hanton et al. (2005) additionally found travel, competition environment, and safety as stressors. Among personal issues nutrition, injury, and goals and expectations have been highlighted both by Woodman and Hardy (2001) and Hanton et al. (2005). The same is the case for leadership issues where coaches, and coaching style have been highlighted, and with regard to team issues, team atmosphere, support network, roles, and communication, have also been highlighted by both Woodman and Hardy (2001) and Hanton et al. (2005). Mellalieu et al. (2009) made some wider categorisations of organisational stressors and highlighted issues such as those intrinsic to the sport, roles in the sport organisation, sport relationships and interpersonal demands, athletic career and performance development issues, and the organisational structure and climate of the sport.

Even though the literature on competitive and organisational stressors is vast, studies related to the junior-to-senior transition are far less abundant. Drew et al., (2019) studied this transition quite recently, and investigated perceived stressors in their review in the transition among a range of sports. These authors found that a substantial increase in skill and performance standards may exist between junior and senior athletes related to issues like the coach–athlete relationship/conflict, significant others, inadequate social support, time pressure, the increase in pressure to perform, setbacks/injuries, financial demands, organisational stressors, and lack of motivation; these were the most reported stressors. Simpson et al. (2021) found in their review on organisational stressors that high-performance athletes (e.g. national or international) experienced a higher magnitude of organisational stressors than athletes at lower performance levels did. Within the football context, Swainston et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study of the junior-to-senior transition, and found that pressure of contract decision, adaption to men's football, and preparation for the first team to be challenges in the academy phase. Moreover, the first team environment, opportunities, and coping were the challenges in the first team pase

In the current research, the case of players from Norwegian professional football clubs is considered, specifically those who have a double career while being involved in the junior-to-senior transition (Stambulova, 2009, Stambulova et al., 2020), as they are both attending school and playing at a non-professional or professional football club. Earlier research has indicated that coping with the psychological challenges in general could separate the players who succeed (Van Yperen, 2009), from those who do not. Therefore, the exploration of junior players' perception of stressors during this transition is of major importance for both coaches and parents in order that they can provide social support (Knight et al., 2018), and help the players to develop coping strategies (Strachan et al., 2011). Because of the lack of studies on junior athletes' perceptions of stressors, this study focusses on competitive and organisational stressors in the junior-to-senior transition, based on Hanton et al.'s (2005) two categories found among elite athletes. Even though most stressors can easily be considered challenging and negative, the same stressors can also introduce increased motivation to invest time and effort to overcome some of these challenges by the players, such as rivalry and lack of playing time.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Our study is positioned within a social interactionist ontology, and utilises an interpretivist approach. Our focus is on the everyday interactions between individuals, and how the meanings associated with these interactions are managed and transformed through people's interpretative processes as they try to make sense of, and adjust to,

their social worlds. The ten male players who were interviewed in this sample were in a transition from being full-time youth football players to potentially part-time first team players at a non-professional or professional football club. We only included male players; even though the setup for male and female players are increasingly similar, there are still differences in terms of their context, both related to degree of professionalism (i.e. the number of full-time professional players), thus making a comparison challenging without elaborating and studying the context of the players developing their football skills. Furthermore, male athletes have been shown to experience a higher magnitude (i.e. frequency, intensity, and duration) of logistical and operational issues (e.g. injury and salary), while females seem to experience a higher magnitude of selection and interpersonal stressors (Simpson et al., 2021). None of the players were professional players with a senior contract, but both groups of players were in the transition of joining the senior team in a professional or non-professional club at the time of the study. However, we did not know at the time of the study if the players in the professional (or non-professional) club would become players with a professional player contract. The talent development system in Norwegian football is similar to that of other European countries, where the professional clubs are mainly responsible for the most talented players, even though this is in a later phase than other countries, and in many clubs it can be as late as the age of 15 (Nesse et al., 2020). The strong positioning of grassroot clubs also indicate that players might be able to become professional players even though they have not been in a professional club at a junior age (Sæther, 2017). This is part of the reason as to the studies' focus on comparing players from professional and non-professional clubs. Seven of the participants were born in 2000, and three were born in 2002, and all were playing at the youth team level. To be included in this study, participants had to be contracted to play soccer for the club's junior team, and were the players closest to being contracted by the club's first team. An additional criterion was that five players were playing for a professional club while five players were playing for a non-professional club.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. The interview guide was made with the purpose of providing players with the opportunity to elaborate on the issues that were raised, based on Hanton et al.'s (2005) two categories (i.e. performance issues and personal issues), while the interviewer had the opportunity to follow up higher order themes (issues) in the conversation, and thereby could also explore lower order themes. The interview was mostly based on getting an overall insight into the players' experiences of stressors related to being a football player in the junior-to-senior transition. Few of the questions asked the player specifically about concrete stressors, but gave them the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences. Examples of questions were: are there any

situations or requirements for being a football player (with ambitions) that you experience as especially difficult? Others were: what do you experience as the biggest challenge as a junior player (and youngest) on the senior team? And can you tell me about one experience that you experienced as a problem/difficulty, but where this seemed to have a positive impact on your performance? Interviews lasted between 30 and 54 minutes in length.

Procedure

After gaining ethical approval for the study (Norwegian Social Science Data Services, no. 161859), written consent was received from two clubs' coaches, who gave permission for us to invite the ten players they highlighted as fulfilling the inclusion criteria to take part in the study. The players selected for the study were identified by the coaches and the first author, based on the players' abilities to reflect on their situation at the same time as being among the players most likely to make a senior transition. The players completed an informed consent form describing the study purposes, their right to withdraw, risks, safeguards, and confidentiality procedures. Then a time was arranged for the face-to-face interviews to take place where the participants got to choose the location for the interviews.

Data análisis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. All players were given an identification code, PP = professional player (i.e. PP1) and NPP = non-professional player (i.e. NPP2), to ensure anonymity. Based on Hanton et al. (2005) as a frame, the data were analysed based on the two categories of stressors: competitive and organisational ones, and a deductive approach was employed. Even so, based on the literature's many subcategories on stressors within competitive and organisational stressors, we also challenged the theoretical approach, as the third author initially analysed the data, followed by the first author who also examined the potential subcategories within the approach based on the data. According to the six steps suggested by Braun et al. (2016, p. 191) for qualitative analysis, the data were analysed using the following process: (1) transcribing, reading, and re-reading the data; (2) generating initial codes based on the two categories of stress; (3) applying deductive codes and identifying lower-order themes, such as lack of coaching under leadership issues; (4) outlining the overall higher order themes (issues) from the data in line with the categories of competitive and organisational stressors, such as difficulties related to dual career and prioritising football before friends, which were the two subthemes among the personal issues; (5) reviewing and refining the final lower order themes (see Figure 1); and (6) writing a report and presenting the data. Having gone through all of the data from the interviews, we ended up with a set of lower order

themes, within the higher order themes related to the two main categories of stressors, which, as stated, were (1) competitive and (2) organisational
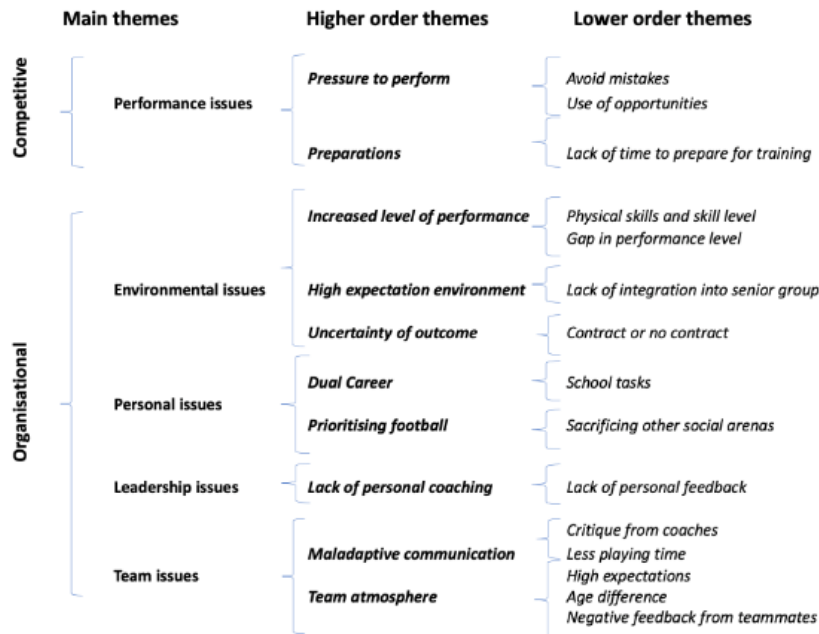
Research rigour

In this paper, rigour is related to the meaningful coherence between the purpose of the study, the procedure, and the findings (Tracy, 2010). Building on Tracy (2010), and the former research on stressors within the sport context, by using thematic content analysis, we have sought to ensure transparency by making a detailed description of the research process. Exemplifying the procedure and data analysis, and making explicit our preconceptions, sensitivity to the environment, and dual role, by creating distance and reflecting on our interpretations, shows our attempt to do so. Furthermore, we have continually sought to verify and validate the analysis and provide critical interpretations of the data, such as discussing various theoretical perspectives, dual role, and interpretations with the co-authors during the data collection, thereby trying to introduce peer validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additionally, ongoing member reflections took place during the study (Tracy, 2010), and the qualitative data was coded by the first author with the intention to increase inter-rater reliabilities were done to make sure that the descriptions and explanations were rich, bountifully supplied, generous, and unstinting (Weick, 2007).

Results

To highlight the competitive and organisational stressors, the main findings from the data analysis process are presented in Figure 1.

Competitive stressors

Main themes	Higher order themes	Lower order themes
Competitive		
Performance issues	*Pressure to perform*	*Avoid mistakes*
		Use of opportunities
	Preparations	*Lack of time to prepare for training*
Organisational		
Environmental issues	*Increased level of performance*	*Physical skills and skill level*
		Gap in performance level
	High expectation environment	*Lack of integration into senior group*
	Uncertainty of outcome	*Contract or no contract*
Personal issues	*Dual Career*	*School tasks*
	Prioritising football	*Sacrificing other social arenas*
Leadership issues	*Lack of personal coaching*	*Lack of personal feedback*
Team issues	*Maladaptive communication*	*Critique from coaches*
		Less playing time
	Team atmosphere	*High expectations*
		Age difference
		Negative feedback from teammates

Main, higher order, and lower order themes based on the data analysis of the interviews of the junior players.

Performance issues

Pressure to perform. According to the players, the most highlighted competitive stressors were the pressure to perform, and especially stressors related to making mistakes. Despite the fact that based on their earlier performance, players knew they were able to perform well, mistakes made them nervous:

NPP5: "If you start with a bad involvement and you already were nervous beforehand, then you get even more stressed and hurried ... It affects your performance, and you fail to do what you know you can."

As a consequence, most players were especially concerned about avoiding making mistakes as they connected making mistakes with fewer opportunities on the senior team in the future. This, they believed, actually resulted in them self-handicapping by trying to hide from the ball, thereby prohibiting themselves from showing their optimal level of performance:

> PP2: That mindset of 'I'm doing badly now I don't get more opportunities with the senior team' I have thought ... the consequences of doing mistakes take over ... You get high shoulders and get nervous regarding making mistakes ... I'm starting to do things too easily, and you don't dare to let go of what you can do.

According to the players, their experience of training with the senior team gave them ways to handle the situation better, as one of the players stated he had learnt to cope by applying more concentration. NPP1: "Now I'm getting more concentrated when I do mistakes, but before I was scared."

Lack of preparations before training sessions with the senior team. This performance gap between junior and senior football was even more challenging in the beginning, as the players got little time to prepare before participating in the training session on the professional team. In fact, they often got the message the same morning as they were participating in the training session:

> PP4: I lay asleep, when the senior-team coach called me at 8 in the morning and said I was going to train with them. You wake up, I didn't have the time to eat before training. I just have to try to make the best of it.

Organisational stressors

Environmental issues

Increased level of performance. The players expressed awareness that the junior-to-senior transition meant going into an environment with players performing at a higher level. Even so, the players in the non-professional and the professional clubs described different challenges. Some of the players in the non-professional club were uncertain as to whether they had the physical skills to handle the next step to the senior level, while the players in the professional club discovered that the skill level was considerably higher on the senior squad compared to the junior squad. The players described this situation as follows, PP4: "Trying to think next and keep in mind that I have skills that are good enough to be here. I showed that I just have to do it. To keep training".

The players in the professional club felt an imbalance between their skills and the players they faced during training sessions. Because of this gap in performance level, these players felt that the step up from talented junior elite player up to the professional level was tough. The players were talking about the need for an intermediate step related to this gap because of the gap in performance level, which was also directly related to their match arena, where they competed at the fourth performance level (division three), while training with players on the highest national level

> PP2: You could see that it's a step up compared to what you're used to. They are more professional in what they do, the quality and focus they have ... The gap is too big, I have not had the opportunity to take any intermediate steps. Going from third division (second team) to the elite level. I'm a good player, but the road up to the elite level is still some distance away.

A high expectation environment. Despite the age difference, as already highlighted, the players were expected to perform, and that was challenging because of the lack of integration into the senior group, which some of the players stated could affect their performance in a negative way:

> PP3: The security of having social relationships means that you also perform, while the opposite of insecurity means that you do not perform as well. It was a bit like I was dreading and getting a bad feeling ... You get a little withdrawn on the field

and a bit defensive. I notice on the junior team that I dare to try more and try those things that I should.

Uncertainty of outcome. The players in the non-professional club were concerned about their opportunity to get a contract with the senior team because they expected the road to professional football to be longer if they did not get a contract, or even worse they actually stopped trying to become a professional player.

> NPP1: The challenge is when I finish as a junior player. Then I get either [a] senior team contract. But if not, I have to find a new club. Then you have to go an even further way in order to succeed ... Then it could be easy to start studying, so you might choose that instead of football

Among the players in the professional club, the situation was a bit less stressful, but this could be related to the fact that some of the players had one more year as a junior player and still had a chance of succeeding, PP1: "It may be that they want to follow me up and maybe take me up or see how I perform this year ... It may be because I have one year left as a junior player".

Personal issues

Difficulties related to dual career. Among the personal issues highlighted by the players, the most prominent was the relationship with school, as these players following the junior-to-senior transition were pupils at the upper secondary school while at the same time investing as much time in football. Thus they had double careers. School was considered a stressor for the players, most often related to either the lack of personal time for the players in general, or more specifically the opportunities to do both things satisfactorily, even though they get help from the school in terms of adjustments to their workload:

> NPP1: Coping in school and expectations from both school and football can be tricky ... even though they are good at adjusting, I feel like I am not getting trained as much as I wanted because of long school days and I was tired, had tests and all that.

Prioritising football over friends. The results showed that the players in the non-professional club report friends and priorities as big stressors. Both groups related the difficulties of trying to sort out their priorities, and maintain dual careers in a satisfying way, and they found it challenging to balance that while also having time to socialise with their friends:

> NPP3: When all your mates go out to a party and meet in the evening and I have to get up early in the training the day after ... That's exactly the priority, which is clearly difficult for me ... they want me to come with them.

Because the professional club players are close to getting an opportunity at the elite level, they were expected to sacrifice both more of themselves and their surroundings to become a professional player. As

one of the players stated, it is all about the overall situation; when trying to prioritise football, you have to sacrifice something on the way:

> PP1: For me, there are no special situations that make it difficult (to prioritise football), because you have to make choices yourself ... for example, going to the city or not, being with friends, being up late. Choices as a youth are ... you have to sacrifice a little if you are going to succeed (to become a professional).

Leadership issues

Lack of personal coaching. Lack of coaching from the coaches on the senior team was another challenge for the players. The coaches are important in their development, and this is especially related to social support and the fact that they act as gatekeepers to knowledge about how to develop as players. However, the players feel that they did not get insight from the coaches in terms of skills to develop, NPP1: "There is no talk of what I should do better to get into the team squad. There is little feedback on things like that".

Team issues

Maladaptive communication. However, a vital finding was that the players' perception of pressure to perform were critiques from the coach, and this was reinforced even more by having few playing opportunities. As player PP2 said, "It just goes on and on. Then you hear the coach screaming, then the next pass becomes bad again, everything just gets bad". The lack of playing opportunities meant that they had to use the opportunities given, even if that only meant playing at the end of a match. The players considered these two stressors to be a threat, where the consequences of lack of performance were less playing time in the future:

> NPP4: I feel pressure. To perform when one has to perform. If I come in at the end of a match and somehow have to make the most of it, it can be difficult. When you are just thrown into it ... you get scared of making mistakes and you get stressed.

Even though this also gets better with experience according to the players, they see these stressors in relation to each other, indicating that when they are nervous, afraid of making mistakes, and receiving criticism, they start to doubt themselves, which affects their performance.

The uncertainty the players experienced when training with the senior players was reinforced among the players in the professional club, when they were exposed to negative feedback and critique from the senior players. This was considered to be a vital stressor. This critique affected the players especially because the senior players are also established and famous. According to one of the players, the senior players were quite demanding and eager to critique the young players, not helping them in the process:

> PP5: You are afraid to be yelled at and then I do not feel that I am at my best. If you lose the ball you become afraid of what they say (the senior team players) ...

this prevents me from showing my skills, I dare not to challenge or shoot, but it plays to those who are higher in the hierarchy in a way.

Team atmosphere. Furthermore, it seems that being labelled a talented player, as they have received the opportunity to train with the senior team, often comes with higher expectations from their surroundings in comparison to the team they normally play for. Both players in the professional and non-professional club described how these expectations could be challenging, and additionally problematic for players in the professional club as they could be exchanged with other players if they did not perform according to expectations, as stated by NPP3: "At the reserve team matches, I feel extra pressure because of these expectations. Because there I have to be the best, to prove that the others who are as old as me are no better than me".

These expectations were also seen as an advantage (a positive stressor) by some of the players, and they actually used these expectations as confirmation that they were developing well:

> PP4: I feel there are quite high expectations, especially from the coaches of the second team ... There are expectations that I will be one of the best on the pitch every time ... there is a reason for this, and it is because I have shown over a period that I can contribute at this level. I feel it is positive because it shows that they have faith in me.

By making the junior-to-senior transition, the players are entering into a high expectation environment. Even though the players were very conscious about the performance part of the transition, they also highlighted the social aspect of entering an arena for men who are both more experienced and older:

> PP1: There is a bit of age difference. The senior team player is a lot older and at the brink of their career, while I'm on my way up. So, there's a bit in the social part, in terms of talking to them. It is not normal to talk and be friends with us (youth players). They do not know anything about you when you are new.

The importance of the social aspect of the relationship with the senior players was confirmed by the impact it had on performance after the players got more experience with the senior team, as stated by NPP4: "With more experience and confidence because of being a part of the group over time, I feel it is getting better and better".

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate junior football players' perception of competitive and organisational stressors in the junior-to-senior transition. This has been less studied, and few studies have compared players from professional and non-professional clubs. The talented players in this study were in the middle of this transition, often described as the most challenging transition (Drew et al., 2019; Swainston et al., 2020; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), as senior football settings increased demands on achievement, skill level, and competition against the established senior players who prevail in this environment (Finn &

McKenna, 2010; Nesti & Sulley, 2015). In addition, one of the hallmarks of professional senior football is its almost one-dimensional focus on performance and results (Richardson et al., 2013).

Increased levels of performance and expectation have been vital expectations of players who have succeeded in the transition from the junior to senior team, where they expected the level to be much higher than their own current level (Morris et al., 2017). According to the players in this study, the most highlighted competitive stressors were pressure to perform, especially related to trying to avoid making mistakes and making good use of their given opportunities (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). The professional players found the technical skills most challenging, while the players in the non-professional club highlighted the physical skills as most challenging. Their subsequent behaviours illuminate how stressors can impact them in performance settings where they do not want to get involved, or play more easily, and they become defensive because of the situation. In addition to the increased level of performance the junior players were expected to cope with while training with the senior team, the lack of time to prepare for senior training was another stressor, as earlier research has pinpointed (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). This was particularly the case for the professional club players whose training with the senior team was irregular, and where there was a lack of a fixed plan for training, thus impacting their performance.

The junior players' introduction to senior football also includes an introduction to the world of the adults. This comes with expectations, an environment and team atmosphere with more negative feedback from teammates (Hanton et al., 2005), and an age difference indicating that the players have different obligations and preferences in their everyday life. The players' descriptions show that they care about how they appear, and they feel pressure to show the senior players that they are coping with the higher performance level (Mellalieu et al., 2009). Because the likelihood of success is low in professional senior football (Strachan et al., 2011), the players in this study are in an internal competition or have rivalries with both the junior and senior players in the club (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). As the junior players are less experienced at both senior and professional levels (Cerin et al., 2000; Nesti & Sulley, 2015), they perceived more insecurity and uncertainty related to both performance and social interactions with the senior team compared to the junior team. This insecurity and uncertainty can be even stronger if the communication with coaches at the senior team is about critique and features less playing time (Hanton et al., 2005).

Compared to their adult competitors, the junior players must handle a dual career (Stambulova et. al., 2015), as they are simultaneously trying to become a professional football player while being a pupil at an upper secondary school (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Even though both arenas could be challenging to handle, the junior players have to find ways of coping with combining these worlds where both expect the players to prioritise their world (Drew et al., 2019). As an example, the players are

often expected to prioritise football over school and friends (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). Some of the non-professional players describe a lack of training and playing opportunities as demotivating, as they were motivated to prove that they were good enough to play, and some even questioned their commitment to the football venture. This ambivalence might be more challenging for the non-professional players as the professional players seems to get more acceptance from their peers to make social sacrifices to go all in on their potential football career. The difference between the non-professional and professional players might even increase as some of the professional club players experience less stressors after more time and experience in senior football, which is in line with previous research (Sæther, 2018).

As earlier research has highlighted, the number and range of competitive and organisational stressors has been shown to be substantial (Tamminen et al., 2019), which has also been confirmed in the present study. Using Stambulova's (2003, 2009) Athletic Career Transition model, the players must cope with transitional demands, in the junior-to-senior transition overall, both related to football and school in their dual career where they are introduced to resources such as senior players, coaches, and environments, but also barriers such as higher performance level, critique from coaches and teammates, and uncertainty of outcome. The transition to senior (and especially professional) football comes with a lot of expectations both normative and non-normative, indicating an uncertainty of outcome related to the chance of ending up as a professional player in a professional club (Morris et al., 2015; Reeves et al., 2009). Most junior players never make the transition to professional football, and this uncertainty might cause the players to undergo a crisis transition, where the coping is ineffective, and an intervention is needed to find an exit. The exit for most players would be either to continue studying or to get a job, both of which are most likely to be dependent on them completing upper secondary school.

Practical implications and future research

The results from this study indicate that the players perceived a lot of competitive and organisational stressors in the junior-to-senior transition, where the overall situation for the players seemed to be impacted by them being in two worlds, football and school. This transition includes a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity that the players have to cope with in their everyday lives, and knowledge of the players' perceptions is important to get insight into how coaches, family, and others can understand their situations, and help them cope with these stressors. The results indicate that coaches recruiting junior players into senior football should consider the importance of support mechanisms for young players, such as introducing senior team players as mentors and talks with the senior team's sport psychologist. Furthermore, this might suggest that the senior coaches should consider their coaching style especially in relation to the newly recruited post-junior players. In

addition, an introductory talk could be instituted between the player and the junior and senior coach to better prepare the player for senior level training. A next step would be to investigate these stressors from the perspective of a coach, as well as investigating their interpretation of the impact the same stressors have and should have on the junior players. Moreover, it would be productive to study the players who have succeeded in making the junior-to-senior transfer to professional football (potentially compared to players who did not), and their experiences of coping with stressors in the process.

Strengths and Limitations

Even though the study was based on Hanton et al.'s (2005) two categories of competitive and organisational stressors, the number of stressors identified in earlier research has been substantial. We aknowledge that our interview guide included questions on leadership issues to a lesser degree, which must be considered as a limitation, and these should be further explored in future studies, even though earlier research has also examined fewer leadership issues (Simpson et al., 2021). Our sample is also from both a non-professional and professional football club, and has a limited value compared to a multi-club perspective. Even so, the sample of players were partially training and competing with senior players, and thus the sample is relevant from a talent development perspective. The fact that the players had not fully completed the transition is a limitation of the present study, and future studies should include players who actually have made the transition and become professional players with a professional contract. Even so, the present study is one of few studies on stressors among junior athletes in the junior-to-senior transition. The study is theoretically based on Stambulova (2003, 2009), and as such a strong theoretical base for the study is provided. Furthermore, we would argue that the study could be related to an analytical generalisation through a theoretical generalisation, as the theoretical approaches used in the study are well established.

Conclusions

The junior-to-senior transition has proven to be difficult for many talented football players because of the often non-normative nature of the transition, which for some players could mean sink or swim in terms of coping with stressors in this period. According to the players in this study, one of few on junior athletes, the most highlighted competitive stressors were pressure to perform especially related to trying to avoid making mistakes and making good use of their given opportunities and lack of time to prepare for senior training. In these high expectation environments, the increased level of performance and uncertainty of outcome were the most often described environmental issues within the category of organisational stressors. Among the leadership issues were

coaching, dual career, and prioritising football, which were the most highlighted stressors within the category of personal issues. Regarding the atmosphere demanding high expectations, age difference and negative feedback from teammates were highlighted, while among the team issues were communication related to critique from coaches and less playing time within the team. The overall findings in this, one of few studies on junior players in football, indicate that the players have access to performance development arenas, lack a social affiliation to the senior team players, lack senior team coaches' feedback, and lack access to a mastery arena (in a performance focussed environment) including social support. The results from this study therefore highlight the importance of adjusting stressors for players in the junior-to-senior transition in football.

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