A literature review exploring the mental health issues in academy football players following career termination due to deselection or injury and how counselling could support future players

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Abstract
The aim of this literature review was to show the mental health impact to academy football players after career termination due to deselection or injury. The review will also broaden to look at research around career termination in other sports. The place where this type of support could be implemented is within football clubs, before, during and post-deselection or career termination for injured players. Previous research on this subject has relied on player case studies and questionnaires, and this has been unable to provide any substantial evidence that deselected players are being given appropriate support. This is fundamentally destructive for players considering the high percentage of them being released (99% being released before their scholarship and 85% afterwards). This review looks at the limited research that has been published over the last few years to gain a better understanding of how this serious issue is overlooked. It focuses on what support is currently available and provides evidence to show how professional associations such as the PFA (Professional Football Association) and the LFE (League Football Education) treat deselected football players. The findings indicate that while the Elite Player Performance Plan supports players through education and by funding better facilities for clubs, the model bypasses emotional and psychological support for players before, during and after deselection, leaving an opening for the introduction of counselling services to support the players through this transition.

KEYWORDS
academy football, counselling, deselected, football players, mental health, young adults

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many football clubs have no real strategies to help deselected players back into normal society, and they go through a certain amount of trauma (Green, 2009).

In 2012, the Professional Football Association (PFA) launched their first well-being department. Since then, mental health issues in professional and ex-professional players have been well researched and documented, but very few researchers have explored the mental health issues affecting young, deselected football players.
Two key pieces of research have been published in the UK: Brown and Portrac (2009) and Blakelock et al. (2016). Both give in-depth insights into issues of identity and psychological distress in elite-level youth professional football players following deselection.

Due to the limited research into the potential reasons why a player could experience mental health issues before and after deselection, it was necessary to extend the search to also include research surrounding career termination through injury.

Exploring whether football clubs are aware of and understand the psychological impact of this process on players is important, and identifying whether support from the clubs or the PFA can be put in place at key times for players would be beneficial, to help emotionally prepare the players when they are approaching deselection, as this can bring feelings of anxiety, fear, depression, anger and humiliation (Brown & Portrac, 2009). Even more crucially, support is required following career termination as some players are vulnerable to experience clinical and severe levels of psychological distress requiring service input from mental health professionals (Blakelock et al., 2016).

Football players create an identity for themselves when they are part of the football club; once their career is terminated through deselection or injury, players can find it very difficult to understand who they are outside the game. They can experience anxieties surrounding their personality and experience feelings of loss.

Looking at the type of mental health issues that most commonly arise in deselected academy football players and statistics around the number of players that are deselected each year will give an indication of the number of players leaving UK football academies that may be left feeling low and vulnerable.

For comparison, this review will explore practical options for young academy players around career termination due to deselection or injury by the football clubs. This will include some research on educational opportunities through the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), identifying whether either offers any emotional support for deselected academy football players. In the conclusion, the quality of research will be examined with recommendations and suggestions for improvements to the support systems in place.

This literature review aimed to summarise the research and findings around the effect on mental health in young academy football players through career termination due to injury or deselection from professional football clubs and the mental health support in place.

The review will broaden to include the psychological/athletic identity impact of sudden career termination in other sports.

2 | WHAT TYPE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES COMMONLY ARISE IN DESELECTED ACADEMY FOOTBALL PLAYERS?

Through research, it has become clear that the most common mental health issues that can initially arise in players facing career termination through deselection or injury are low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Research by Brown and Portrac (2009) suggests this may lead to long-term feelings of loss, loss of identity and trauma after deselection from professional football clubs. Brown and Portrac (2009) cite an example to support the emotional impact of deselection: ‘I think it definitely killed me emotionally and I lost all confidence. I felt lost and confused. I got very depressed and didn’t know where my life was going’ (p. 151).

Counsellors can offer support to individuals facing the above mental health issues by showing an understanding of their client’s personal world.

Almost without exception, counsellors from any school of thought would agree that listening and communication are paramount from the outset. Players who have just suffered rejection and are feeling lost and confused could benefit from the warmth, respect and unconditional positive regard that a counsellor has to offer.

Identified in the literature have been elements of how the above mental health symptoms also affect elite sport players in other areas of top-level sport. Over the last few decades, there has been a substantial growth in literature (Brown & Portrac, 2009) addressing the process of athlete disengagement from top-level sport. This will support the direction of initial findings of mental health issues that commonly arise in deselected football players.

Implications for Practice

1. Football clubs would need to offer a space that would fit the required boundaries of counselling practices today. A space where counsellors can work to the BACP ethical framework offers confidentiality and hourly sessions so counselling can be beneficial to the players and staff. Commitment and trust in the counsellor and counselling environment would need to be accepted by the football club from the outset.

2. For a counselling set-up to run successfully, the football club would need to understand that the counsellor would need to be employed by the club and work closely with the sport psychologist, psychotherapist and team managers to receive referrals of players in need of counselling. From this, the counsellor could create a weekly schedule.

3. Players whose careers are terminated through deselection or injury could benefit from counselling through their transition and beyond their time at the club. Counsellors could facilitate further sessions at a private practice.

4. At present, this area of research is limited. Further qualitative research using methodological data by interviewing coaches and players would be beneficial. The target area needs to be current, deselected and injured players, with research focusing on what support the players were offered by the football club through the transition period of career termination due to deselection or injury.
An article titled *Psychological Distress in Elite Adolescent Soccer Players Following Deselection* (Blakelock et al., 2016) provides evidence of psychological and mental health issues arising in deselected football players. The authors compared deselected players and retained players by monitoring their psychological distress over time. Measurements were taken at three points in time to establish a clear timeline regarding the impact of deselection on psychological distress. The age range of the 91 participants was 15 to 18 years. Every participant was asked to complete a General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 2006). The GHQ-12 is recommended as a reliable screening tool for psychological distress in clinical groups. The outcome of the GHQ-12 provides a unidimensional measure of psychological distress in community and nonpsychiatric settings that encloses symptoms of anxiety, depression, loss of confidence and social dysfunction (Hardy et al., 1999). A score of 3 or greater was used to indicate clinical levels of psychological distress, and a score of 2 or less indicates the absence of psychological distress.

The results showed that 55% of the players taking part in the study were suffering from clinical levels of psychological distress 21 days after being released.

In accordance with the findings of Blakelock et al. (2016), it concurs that some players may experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, loss of confidence and social dysfunction in the first month following deselection. Over a longer period, the mental health of the deselected players appeared to decline—they recorded scores that were between 8 and 12 from the GHQ-12 screening, which revealed severe psychological distress.

Counselling support in the first stage of the player’s deselection could help identify signs of social dysfunction due to the disconnection of the immediate structure of their past life and the need to try and reintegrate back into the community.

Mearns et al. (2013) state that human beings can be deeply affected by not only the responses by significant others to them, but also by societal (the football club) and cultural norms when they note: ‘The organismic valuing process is inevitably affected by these norms and is indeed permeated by them in such a way that the individual is sometimes prevented from behaving in ways that could be foolhardy or even self-destructive’ (p. 11).

Common mental health issues were explored through the article ‘You’ve not made the grade, son: de-selection and identity disruption in elite level youth football: Soccer and Society’ (Brown & Portrac, 2009), which studied four male participants who had experienced deselection from elite-level youth football.

The underpinning method of approach by Brown and Portrac (2009) relates to interpretive biography, which, according to Denzin (1989), explores individuals’ life experiences and, more specifically, the important turning points and epiphanies of the individuals, giving the reader an insight into problematic experiences of ordinary people.

All four participants had undertaken a three-year scholarship at a professional football club, which is aimed at the best 16- to 19-year-old players. The article mentions that the football career of each individual started at a young age—two of the participants joined the club at the age of 10, the other two aged 12 and 13. It is important to acknowledge the timescale that these players were committed to the football club throughout their adolescence, especially when relating to symptoms of ‘loss of identity’, which is an example of ‘symbolic loss’ as referenced by Brown and Portrac (2009) in the introduction to this paper.

As part of their study, an interview process was undertaken. All the participants were interviewed twice, with each interview lasting an average of 60 min.

The findings showed that each player had built a strong athletic identity, which shaped their responses. Feelings of loss, uncertainty, failure and disorientation followed their deselection from their football club. Interestingly, the research shows that the emotional disturbances that followed their deselection could be linked to the fact that their lives revolved around football from a young age. This could relate to young football players creating a one-dimensional identity, based around their football skills, team and performances. By removing this, the players could then experience ‘loss of identity’.

One of the participants in the Brown and Portrac (2009) article touched on the mental health issues that were present for himself after deselection: ‘I think there should be some sort of support for you, more importantly, something that helps you deal with the depression and lack of confidence that you experience after deselection’ (p. 152).

Despite the limited sample number used by Brown and Portrac (2009), the study’s findings provided a unique insight into the players’ raw feelings after deselection, giving an understanding into the potential impact of common mental health issues that could arise from their experiences.

Brown and Portrac (2009) cite two examples to support the emotional impact of deselection:

> I felt as though I didn’t know who I was anymore because football was my life and I didn’t have that anymore. It was as though they had taken away my identity and stripped me of everything I knew

(p. 151).

> Everything I had worked for in my life had come crashing down in front of me… Being released just makes you think that you are a failure

(p. 151).

This research by Brown and Portrac (2009) showed the lack of support towards the players from this club, before and after deselection. The outcome was that the young players felt angry and betrayed.

Counselling support would help the player understand the conditions that have been applied to them through their lives revolving around football. This could be similar to conditions of worth (Merry, 2002) acquired from childhood when considering that many players (Green, 2009) start playing for football clubs at a very young age.

We learn in counselling (Merry, 2002) through theory and practice that conditions of worth play a role in the way we behave in
our lives through decisions we make and how we respond in our relationships.

Through counselling, we can start to look at these conditions, understand their effect on our actions and choose which to keep or remove.

Merry (2002) wrote about conditions of worth when talking about the counselling relationship when he noted: 'The introjection of many or powerful conditions of worth results in an inevitable estrangement between the “real self” and the conditioned self, sometimes to such an extent that a person’s defence system is completely unable to maintain itself and the result is a complete breakdown of the self-structure’ (p. 5).

Mental health issues can present themselves in football players who sustain long-term injuries resulting in shortened or terminated careers. A study titled ‘Professional Footballers’ Association Counsellors’ Perceptions of the Role Long Term Injury plays in Mental Health Issues Presented by Current and Former Players' (Gervis et al., 2019) shows an understanding of players’ mental health issues after receiving an injury through findings by the Football Associations Counsellors.

The study aimed to investigate counsellors’ professional understanding of the long-term psychological consequences of injury in UK football players.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 counsellors registered to work for the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA). The interviews examined the counsellors’ perceptions of the relationship between long-term injury and mental health issues. Recommendations for psychological transitions through retirement or transfer after injury was a significant part of the study. It has been noted that the 11 counsellors interviewed were appropriately qualified in either counselling, addiction counselling or psychology, but had no specific training in sport psychology. The counsellors reported working with current and ex-professional players between 17 and 40+ years of age.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed through a review of the available literature and consultation with an expert in the area of athlete well-being and injury recovery. Participants answered questions regarding their professional background, the number of PFA clients they had seen and their playing status (academy, currently playing or retired). Interviews were between 20 and 55 min long.

The results showed that every participant brought up their difficulties in adapting to retirement from football. While most considered it an antecedent to other presenting issues, it was also a stand-alone issue that players would bring to counselling. The counsellors mentioned that retirement is seen as a traumatic experience for players; they typically enter the football system at a young age. Even a lengthy career will see them retiring from the game while still young, potentially while the players are still teenagers.

Previous research (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999) suggested that forced retirement has the potential to be traumatic; the findings of the above study mention that retirement seems to be more psychologically challenging for players than previously thought, highlighting the need for academies to help prepare players for life after football.

Examination of the psychological disruption to players reported by the counsellors highlighted particular mental health issues, including depression, loss of identity, lowered self-esteem, loss of future and emotional disturbance. An example of this was illustrated by one participant relating to a player showing signs of loss of identity: ‘oh well, who the hell am I? If I’m not a midfielder, who am I?’

The same participant also mentioned the struggles around depression and grief when they mentioned ‘they very often feel that they’re failing...as a person, they often feel its out of their control, they feel they don’t know what’s happening to them, they’re often depressed...sad, angry...’ (p. 457).

The study mentioned an important factor reported by counsellors; this was that forced retirement due to injury or deselection was judged as more traumatic than retirement after a lengthy career. In cases where an injury was significant enough to end a player’s career, counsellors reported problems with identity, accompanied by low self-esteem and confidence.

The pressure and nature of trying to become a professional footballer are one reason that retirement through injury or deselection has the potential to be traumatic for players. Several counsellors stated that leaving football is similar to leaving the army: ‘they’re like...soldiers you know they’re kind of in this gang and then they’re released...’

All participants in Gervis et al.’s (2019) research suggested that having trained psychology professionals in football clubs would provide players with a clear point of contact, helping to normalise psychological support.

3 | The Impact of Psychological/Athletic Identity and Career Termination in Football and Other Sports

Existing research (Čečić Erpić et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2014) shows that most sport players, whether at academy or professional level, will go through a process of creating an athletic identity and this has been linked to mental health issues.

Reconstruction and support for athletes who develop an athletic identity and then leave the sport due to deselection, injury or retirement has been reviewed in a 2018 paper titled, Reconstructing Athletic Identity: College Athletes and Sport Retirement (Menke & Germany, 2018).

This phenomenological study from the USA examined the transition out of sport for former college athletes from revenue-producing sports. The findings of this research found that coping with transition, gains or strengths and loss of identity are salient themes when careers in sport end.

Academy systems in UK football take on players from the age of nine; 99% of these will not make it through the youth development system (Green, 2009), and 85% of the academy players on scholarships will not receive a contract (Brown & Portrac, 2009). This coincides with research from Menke and Germany (2018), which found
that 98% of college athletes hoping for a career in professional basketball will not make it (NCAA.org).

Menke and Germany’s (2018) research states that understanding the negative feelings associated with the end of sport careers in the lives of athletes is critical in helping former athletes transition out of the sport as these negative feelings could lead to mental health issues.

This qualitative research involved 15 interviewees. The participants were eligible college athletes in division bowl championship series football or division 1 men’s basketball. A snowballing sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was also used to find additional participants. Three major themes emerged from the data: coping with transition, gains or strengths and loss of identity. Many voiced that transition out of a sport career was associated with difficulties coping with the life change, accompanied by feelings of loss of life as it once was and shattered dreams. Links to mental health issues were a common theme throughout the research which showed that some individuals were suffering from deep depression, with feelings of emptiness and a big void to fill.

Transitional life events, such as deselection, injury and family circumstances, are likely to result in feelings of grief and loss as they challenge the established world view, with the individual trying to come to terms with life as it was and life as it should be (Parkes, 1988).

We understand from Lake (2012) the impact that a career-ending injury can have on a football player. Shortly after his career-ending injury, he announced in hospital that he needed to be alone. He did not want anyone else—not his teammates, his best friends or even his beloved family to witness the depths of his pain and self-pity. He mentioned that after five years of dashed hopes and false dawns, he needed the privacy to finally get to grips with the fact that his career as a professional footballer was over. The sport that he was put on this earth to play would no longer be part of his life.

Lake (2012) relives the most extraordinary moments in his mind as a footballer before coming to the stomach-churning knowledge that he will never experience those footballing highlights again. He quotes, ‘I’m finished. It’s over’ (p. 9).

Phenomenological and humanistic counselling approaches (Hough, 2014) could be favourable for sport clients leaving sporting professions through deselection, injury or retirement, where authenticity needs to be restored.

Hough (2014) mentions that the existential approach to therapy’s central goal is to help clients become more personally authentic when she notes: ‘...it refers to the individual’s ability to define who they are and what they feel. The person who is not authentic accepts, without question, that it is others, including family, culture and religion that are responsible for this important definition’ (p. 167).

The 2015 article Exploring athletic identity in elite-level English youth football: a cross-sectional approach (Mitchell et al., 2014) supports the research of Brown and Portrac (2009) when exploring levels of athletic identity in Elite Youth Professional football and the void of the athletic identity being linked to mental health issues.

The study is the first empirical investigation that explored the levels of athletic identity in elite-level professional football. Family, friends, parents, coaches, teachers and, in some cases, the media can influence the goal of advancement in that sport, and consequently, young players may begin to form an ‘athletic identity’ (Weichman & Williams, 1997).

While at the outset this can be a positive and motivational experience, when a player experiences injury or deselection happens, they may experience psychological or behavioural disturbance (Coen & Ogles, 1993).

For this piece of research, 168 youth team football players aged 16–18 years took part. They were all playing football in the four major English professional football leagues. They were all signed on a two-year football apprenticeship. The research method consisted of each player receiving a pack containing forms relating to consent, a demographic questionnaire and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). AIMS is a 7-item questionnaire with responses made on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932) ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores of the AIMS range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicating higher levels of athletic identity. The questionnaire was divided into three subscales: social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity.

The results showed that out of the 168 participants, 40.5% were showing high levels on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale–16.4% for social identity, 11.5% for exclusivity and 12.3% for negative affectivity. The research concluded that all players develop similar levels of athletic identity. Interestingly, the research showed that first-year players perceive themselves to be a footballer at a deeper level due to their recent transition from a schoolboy to a full-time football player (LFE – League Football Education [LFE], 2020).

Calvin (2017) highlights an element of concern in how elite youth professionals create an athletic identity. This is possibly a false persona set in an unrealistic environment: ‘... but an academy is a fantasy world, isn’t it’ (p. 241). When the players detached from their athletic identity, there was a link to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Further research by Mitchell et al. (2014) shows that at the start of the process, an elite academy player may start to create an athletic identity. Research shows that 85% of young players on scholarships do not receive a professional contract (Brown & Portrac, 2009) and, therefore, as they approach deselection, a high number of players may be subject to experiencing loss of athletic identity, coinciding with loss of identity (Brown & Portrac, 2009).

Athletic identity can be a social construct, bestowed on the individual by family members, peers, teammates, and coaches. An individual often constructs the self by maintaining those aspects of identity undoubtedly regarded and imposed with other conditions of identity becoming less significant and less connected to the self (Layder & Stryker, 1982).

Counsellors have an awareness and understanding of the different factors that can influence the process of loss and grief, enabling them to offer a sensitive appreciation of individuals experiencing shock, trauma or other issues associated with loss and grief.

Ross (1969) looked at denial being used by people at times of loss and suggested that this can be seen to be used as a buffer after receiving unexpected or shocking news. This allows the person to collect himself and, with time, start to use other less radical defences.
Some sports adopt different ways of approaching deselection. The 2016 study *The Deselection Process in Competitive Female Youth Sport* (Neely et al., 2016) examined 22 coaches in the Canadian provincial soccer-level, basketball, volleyball and ice hockey through individual semi-structured interviews.

The results discussed the communication of deselection and informing players. Coaches from all sports said that the toughest part of the role is communicating to players that they will not make the team and seeing the tears and emotion that followed this. Most coaches believed that the most appropriate and respectful way to communicate deselection decisions was through an individual face-to-face meeting. The study (Neely et al., 2016) showed that each sport tried different processes to communicate the news to their players. An ice hockey coach used various processes, including email, a telephone call and a letter in the post to break the news but agreed that the best way was to talk to someone directly. The basketball coach thought face-to-face meetings would be more beneficial as it gives the player a chance to ask questions and get feedback.

The basketball coach also mentioned that they secure an exit route for athletes that would eliminate them having to be seen by other athletes as some of them can be emotional.

The research showed that their sport organisations directed some coaches to follow a specific protocol.

Neely et al. (2016) noted an example of soccer (football) coaches supporting face-to-face deselection meetings:

> The way that the provincial program wants it (deselection) done is by letter, by email and I’m not 100% onboard with that
> (p. 148).

Researching this area has given me an insight into how players experience the loss of a career through deselection and links to mental health issues. It has given the groundwork to investigate the support that is in place to help players cope with the transition, which will be covered in the following section.

**4 | EXPLORING PRACTICAL OPTIONS FOR YOUNG ACADEMY PLAYERS AROUND CAREER TERMINATION DUE TO DESSELECTION OR INJURY BY THE FOOTBALL CLUBS**

Current literature (Calvin, 2017; Green, 2009; Macari, 2009) shows concern towards the lack of support and duty of care provided by football clubs for their players around the time of deselection.

Research (Brown & Portrac, 2009; Calvin, 2017; Green, 2009) has indicated, through a series of case studies on deselected players, that not enough support is being provided by football clubs.

Green (2009) suggested that the Premier League and football clubs have not done enough to research and monitor what happens to deselected players following completion of their scholarships. Green (2009) wrote, ‘It is so sad and quite shocking to hear that boys feel so depressed by their experience that they want to give up playing completely. There has to be something fundamentally wrong with the way boys are released’ (p. 145).

However, Calvin (2017) expressed how over a 10-year period attempts by the football education department to support deselected football players had been evident.

Green (2009) interviewed Dr Andy Pitchford, a co-author of the 2006 report *Child Welfare in Football*, which stated that there was a ‘culture of secrecy’ within the game that makes academies a tough nut to crack for researchers who are trying to build a thorough and authoritative picture of the academy system.

Green (2009) suggests options for deselected academy players, such as playing football in the Midland Junior Premier league (MJPFL). The MJPFL was formed by Worcester City Director Bob Marley in 2004, offering a new tier of football, sitting above local junior leagues, but a step down from the professional club academies. Deselected academy players could get scouted in the MJPFL league and, if fortunate, this would give them a chance to get back into professional club academies.

Green (2009) interviewed Andy Barnett, the MJPFL’s former secretary. Barnett estimated that this gave at least one third of academy players a chance to carry on playing football. This was a positive step forward but did not acknowledge or address players’ mental health issues relating to the loss of their dream of becoming a professional player. By the time a player has signed to the league they will have been dissociated from the football club, with research (Green, 2009) finding that Marley himself did not receive any support from the clubs.

Green (2009) cites an example of how the support came from the players’ parents: ‘The league we started didn’t do it by itself, we were helped by the deselected players parents and all the other willing workers’ (p. 154).

In 2007, *A review of young player development in professional football* (Richard Lewis) was created on behalf of the Football Association, Premier League and The Football League. The report showed how football clubs previously supported released players. It also made recommendations for change that were put forward to clubs. Point 17 in the report was dedicated to player release. It recommended the possibility of players being able to be retained in other areas of the game. Although there remains scope for improvement, levels of care have increased, as clubs have more sensitively managed the difficult process of ‘letting young players go’.

Specific recommendations for the clubs and associations to consider were alternative opportunities such as coaching, administration, support roles or match officials. The report also recommended that football clubs and education bodies such as the League Football Education and Premier League Learning offer education and training to all players being released from football scholarships, and also to utilise the ongoing membership identification system to form the basis of ongoing research, studying what happens to players when released by football academies.
Over the last decade, various associations within the football industry have realised that changes needed to be made within academic systems.

No hunger in paradise; the players, the journey, the dream (Calvin, 2017) identified through various case studies that more support was needed for deselected academy football players. One parent of a deselected player expressed how the news of deselection could be compared with adults working for 10–15 years coming into the office to find a letter on your desk telling you that you’re out of a job.

However, research by Platts (2012) supports the notion that there are many hardworking welfare officers and coaches with good intentions working at football clubs today.

Platts (2012) also identifies that football clubs and leagues did positively take on board recommendations from Lewis’s Report (2007) and, five years later, the Premier League brought in the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).

The EPPP has potentially been put in place due to the findings in the Lewis (2007) report, giving players better opportunities regarding coaching, youth development, education and performance. However, it has been noted that there is no part of the EPPP that offers emotional support prior to and after deselection for players when they are most vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues.

According to Gordon Taylor, the Chief Executive of the Professional Football Association (PFA), past PFA research has shown that of those players who make it into the elite scholarship programme at 16 years of age, only one in six are still playing professional football at 21. This shows that the success rate of a player getting a professional contract after participating in the scholarship is low, suggesting that emotional and psychological support would be beneficial to the high number that do not make it at this stage.

In comparison, research by Roe and Parker (2016) shows that most players who are offered the scholarship at 16 will experience a boost in self-esteem when receiving their professional contract, only to then be released two years later. The success rate of gaining a professional contract after a scholarship is low. Existing research by Platts and Smith (2010) shows that players who receive a scholarship believe that they will make it as a professional football player. This could put deselected scholarship players at an even higher risk of serious mental health issues, compared with those released two years earlier.

The 2010 study ‘Money, money, money? The development of financial inequalities in English professional football’ (Platts & Smith, 2010) conducted research on 302 apprentice footballers from professional clubs. Results from this research showed that footballers learn very little from the educational programmes that are part of their scholarships. In focus-group meetings led by researchers, almost all of the 302 apprentices, who were aged from 16 to 18 years, described the teaching as boring. The study showed that the importance players placed on becoming professional footballers frequently led them to pay little, if any, attention to other post-vocational careers. This is a matter of concern as 85% of players will not go on to become professional footballers (Brown & Portrac, 2009) and will be left with no professional contract, vague learning experiences, demotivation from studies and a high risk of suffering from mental health conditions after deselection. With little support being provided by football clubs, for this part of the review consideration turned towards what support is offered by the League Football Education and the Professional Football Association.

5 | THE INFRASTRUCTURE PROBLEM THAT DESELECTED ACADEMY PLAYERS FACE DURING AND AFTER DESELECTION

Unfortunately, specific research and writings on what support the League Football Education (LFE) and the Professional Football Association (PFA) offer deselected players was non-existent or unavailable. This shows that there is a great need for more research to be undertaken in this area to show the type of support needed for deselected players.

However, literature regarding mental health support in football has grown substantially over the last 15 years. The 2019 article ‘They’ve just scratched the surface’—football tackling mental health but more can be done (Foster, 2019) shows that there is growing discussion and exposure surrounding mental health in football. Charities, the PFA, clubs and players are helping the sport to become more open and aware of the support available.

The article mentions how Michael Bennett, the Director of Welfare at the PFA, held discussions with the late Peter Kay, who co-founded the Sporting Chance rehabilitation clinic, and former Arsenal player Tony Adams, in 2013. As a result of these talks, PFA members were given access to the clinic’s network of over 100 counsellors. In 2016, 160 players approached the counselling services, in 2017, 400 players, and in 2018, 438 players.

Research indicates (Calvin, 2017; Green, 2009) that football clubs are now acting — putting systems in place to both prevent mental health issues developing and treating them.

The PFA recommends that all clubs should employ an objective professional who is readily available to players and an in-house counsellor or psychologist. They should be part of the playing staff who are around the players all the time to offer a confidential space so the players feel safe to share.

Research by Foster (2019) shows that support towards mental health from the PFA and football clubs is starting to move forward at a real pace. The mental health support being offered for the players at professional level is life changing. Unfortunately, in this article no support is evident for academy players around or after deselection. Football clubs consist of 85% of players that will experience deselection and whose mental health is more at risk upon deselection (Blakelock et al., 2016).

Foster’s (2019) research shows that there is now more focus on mental health support for professionals in the game. A change in legislation through Football’s Safeguarding Policy and Procedures in 2013 shifted responsibility from the FA to individual clubs. Football academies and the staff that run them are fully aware that most players are not good enough and are only there to support the very best coming through.
Giles (cited in Calvin, 2017) claims that most of the academy players and, to an extent, their parents are being used. This contradicts research by Green (2009) that shows that various policies within academies are put in place to protect young football players.

Academy staff members are expected to follow a code of ethics and conduct, in which relationships are ‘based on openness, honesty, trust and respect’ (Calvin, 2017).

Previous research by Brown and Portrac (2009) shows that only a minority of academy players succeed at football clubs and that academy coaches know the lifetime of a player from the outset.

Research (Calvin, 2017) showed that younger coaches are appalled by the deselection process but have careers to protect in what remains a stratified industry. Literature is minimal surrounding this subject, suggesting that if players and parents were told how long their child was going to be part of the football club, it would be in their interest to protect their child and remove them from the academy process. Football clubs then would not have enough players to make up the squads to support the one per cent of players that will make it through to the first team (Green, 2009).

Research by Calvin (2017) shows that players and parents give up a significant part of their lives, travelling to matches and devoting themselves to the football clubs, inevitably to support the one per cent of players that go through to professional level. With this understanding of the process and for the duty of care of the deselected players, clubs should make sure the mental health support before and after deselection is in place and paramount.

For the players who receive a scholarship, well-being support is available through the English Football League and the PFA (Calvin, 2017).

The League Football Education (LFE) was established in 2004 by the English Football League and the PFA. The LFE’s responsibilities extend to the delivery of life skills from the Under 9s to the Under 23 players, parents and club staff (Green, 2009). Part of their life skills programme covers emotional well-being. They also advise all participants to become a member of the PFA, which gives them access to all the well-being services available including a network of 100 counsellors and a counselling helpline which is available all day, everyday (LFE, 2020).

In accordance with research findings by Green (2009), the LFE stated they had a dedicated team who work on exit and progression, providing career exhibitions and exit trials and, at the time, they were working hard to develop partnerships with potential employers and universities.

Green (2009) cites two examples to show the lack of support from football clubs: ‘if a deselected player and parent receives the news as a surprise then the clubs individual reporting has been poor. The players and parents should always be kept informed and updated on what is going on’ (p. 143).

Sometimes the clubs are barely willing to talk to the parents of the players that they release (p. 151).

Sufficient research (Calvin, 2017) is available surrounding safeguarding, but unfortunately, very limited research is present relating to the duty of care that the players receive around deselection from football clubs.

In the preface of the 2016 book No Hunger In Paradise (Calvin), a paragraph explains that, in 2016, the Football Association looked to reassure parents and the public by revealing that 99% of its 7,814 grassroot clubs encompassing 62,238 teams had responded to a deadline to renew their safeguarding policies. Any club not responding was to be suspended until further notice. The clubs had been compelled to employ a full-time head of safeguarding, an academy safeguarding officer and a community safeguarding officer, all to be overseen by a specific board member. Centres of excellence operated by the football league clubs signed up to the same safeguarding policies, which involved ongoing training and in-house education.

Around the time of the safeguarding policy update, the PFA was less precise in outlining the nature of its response, suggesting there were approximately 40 counsellors available to 50,000 current or former players (Green, 2009).

Calvin (2017) supports the close relationship that the PFA’s well-being department have with their members, offering an around-the-clock helpline, a national network of counsellors and residential rehabilitation.

Foster (2019) showcases the breakthrough that Michael Bennett achieved when linking up with Sporting Chance, expressing that it was crucial for its members. Progress around mental health in football is shown in the PFA’s annual report of trustees (2018). The report displayed that £330,000 had paid for a network of counsellors and 468 members had accessed counselling for issues such as anxiety, depression and addiction. The report shows progress, in that players are accessing this newly available mental health support.

6  | IMPLICATIONS OF THE MENTAL HEALTH OF DESELECTED PLAYERS FOR SUPPORT AND COUNSELLING

When accessing the research available, it is apparent that there are only a few academic studies on this subject, and they have been restricted by the limited access to clubs and young players, and this is of serious concern.

One limitation of the study by Blakelock et al. (2016) was that the chosen group of deselected players was only a small minority of the players who are released from football academies each season. Thousands of players join academies with dreams of a professional football career every year. Ninety per cent of youth players fail to achieve professional status (Anderson & Miller, 2011).

This could suggest that the participants who took part in the research may have been more susceptible to experiencing psychological distress compared with participants who may have been more resilient. This means the findings need to be treated with some caution, restricting possible generalisations to other deselected players.
In comparison, previous research (Cecić Erpić et al., 2004; Kendler et al., 1999) noted that some players may have been caught off guard by deselection, causing a response of shock. Both articles touch on the importance of understanding and timing relating to the transition from the sport. This suggests the care they receive before and after transition from the sport is crucial to the outcome of the athlete’s mental health.

Research from Menke and Germany (2018) shows that college athletes have also participated in their sports from a noticeably young age, and in time have developed an identity centred on the athletic role. Removal of this athletic role has been linked to mental health issues.

It has been noted in previous research (Cecić Erpić et al., 2004; Kendler et al., 1999) that ahead of deselection, some players may have noticed reduced playing time in professional games or a change in the way coaches behave towards them. These players may have prepared themselves psychologically and practically before they received the news. These players may have experienced the deselection process as less harmful and threatening, which may have reduced their stress levels and possibility of experiencing any mental health issues.

7 | CONCLUSION

Current literature researched for this review has documented that not enough support is available for deselected football players. As my research developed, it became apparent that a high percentage of academy players will not make it through the system to play at a professional level. These players will be deselected from their football club, mostly without warning and without support to cope with this devastating news. This could leave them highly vulnerable to mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, loss of identity, loss and trauma.

Further research underlined the reactions that young players experience before and after deselection. Having the option to inform a current player of what to expect and to give a parent further knowledge to prepare themselves for the inevitable outcome of their child being deselected by the football club would be beneficial. Further research could make football clubs, the PFA and LFE more aware that a support system before, during and after deselection could be considered. This area is well supported by Calvin (2017), and hopefully, more research and knowledge around the subject could inform and educate people within the industry to make a change.

It seems evident that the EPPPP was established to produce a more substantial structure through better facilities at football clubs and to offer academy players education alongside their scholarship (Calvin, 2017). With 85% of players not securing a professional contract and leaving the game before the age of 21 (Brown & Portrac, 2009), it leaves me wondering why the EPPPP does not have an emotional support system in place for deselected players alongside education and player performance.

It is apparent through research by Calvin (2017) that the PFA encourages all academy players to become members, which gives them access to the well-being services available, including a network of 100 counsellors and an around-the-clock counselling helpline. However, support is only available if the deselected players personally access the well-being department. Research by Blakelock et al. (2016) clearly shows that a deselected player will experience psychological distress and dissociation following deselection from a professional football club. It seems evident that mental health issues are prominent in the first 21 days after deselection, which leaves some doubt as to whether a deselected player would contact the PFA well-being department in this time. I would propose that more research is needed to identify timescales around when deselected players have accessed the PFA’s well-being system for support. The findings of this research could encourage football clubs to be more aware of the mental health of the player before they leave the football club. Further research could investigate whether football clubs offering an emotional support system and providing a duty of care to each player could lower the risk of the player not contacting the PFA’s well-being department and then experiencing mental health issues.

Mental health support offered for deselected football players has received minimal research over the past decade, leaving scope for recommendations. Intervention from professional football clubs could reduce mental health issues in players before and after deselection. Research by Blakelock et al. (2016) shows that emotional support is paramount in the month after players are deselected from football clubs. It is noted that more research could offer a framework of support for deselected football players.

From personal experience, and the research that I have studied for this review, my recommendation to the PFA and football clubs would be 50-min, weekly counselling sessions for players, available one month prior to deselection and one month after, depending on individual circumstances. The first month of sessions could take place at the football club, leaving the second month of sessions to be carried out at the client’s home or a counsellor’s practice after deselection.

Research by Calvin (2017) shows that 99% of players are released before their scholarship and 85% after; therefore, counselling support would be more effective if the football clubs informed deselected players of their decision in advance. The player and counsellor could then prepare together for the transition out of the sport, working around their feelings at this time of shock, anger and anxiety (Brown & Portrac, 2009).

With no similar support system in place, I have concerns around the duty of care to players.

This literature review has presented evidence (Calvin, 2017) that managers and coaches have knowledge of the players’ timescales for deselection well in advance of deselection.

I would propose that there is much more to be learned about mental health issues in academy football players after deselection by football clubs. Undoubtedly, more campaigning is required on a national level to convince football clubs that a support system needs to be a permanent part of academy life to provide support for football players before and after deselection.
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