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Football as work: the lived realities of professional women footballers in England

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ABSTRACT

Research question: To date no studies have conceptualised women's professional football as work. In 2011, the inception of the FA Women's Super League (FA WSL), created the opportunity for football as work for elite women footballers in England, in an occupational field tied historically to a highly masculinist and thus, gender-exclusive culture. Consequently, research exploring the impact of professionalisation and perspectives of professional women footballers is sparse. This research explores the lived realities of professional women footballers in England.

Methods: 30 semi-structured interviews with professional women footballers currently competing in the FA WSL were undertaken. This research project adopts an interpretative qualitative approach, data were analysed thematically.

Results: Data revealed that employment conditions of women have created both insecure, precarious work, and non-work conditions. Drawing on the thinking tools of Pierre Bourdieu data demonstrates precarity is increased based on gender, as women's football suffers from material resource inequality.

Implications: The findings provide empirical evidence that professionalisation is not necessarily a linear, or even beneficial process to women footballers, offering a counterargument to the evolutionary narrative that underpins discussions around gender equality and women's sport. Further evidencing consequences of precarious work and the experiences of professional footballers in their new occupation. The exegesis is to encourage researchers to consider the impact of professionalisation if we are to more adequately understand the complex lives of professional women footballers.

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Introduction

This article examines the development of professional football as a career for women in England. Women's football in England is evolving rapidly. Since the formation of the FA WSL in 2011, it has been subject to various reconfigurations. The most recent restructure in 2018/19 required all clubs in the FA WSL to move to

full-time status. The most notable outcome of the transition to full-time status is that football can now be considered a career opportunity for elite women footballers in England. Further, the collective successes of both the FA WSL and the England women's national team culminated in Barclays investing £10 million into the women's game for the 2019/20 season which

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represented the largest investment into the women's sport in England. However, little knowledge exists about how women experience the transition to occupying jobs as professional footballers as a female counterpart of the highly prestigious football labour market and what their labour conditions are. Consequently, this research set out to contribute new insights related to professional women's football and the precarious nature of life as a professional women's footballer.

To date, no empirical research has been conducted on the work of professional women footballers, mitigated by fewer and lower resources, less mainstream media coverage, less lucrative sponsorship deals and the recent development of a new career opportunity (Allison, 2018). Research on men's football suggests it is a career characterised by its short-term nature, both in contract length and career duration (Roderick, 2006), and ever-present insecurities such as failure, rejection, and unemployment (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Wood et al., 2017). Despite this, normative views exist that the professionalisation of football is straightforwardly beneficial to women (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). This research challenges this notion, arguing professionalisation is not a linear process and is often disadvantageous in many ways. Overloaded with masculine stereotypes and measured on a male career model (Watts, 2003) football is a precarious occupation that lacks long term security (Culvin, 2020). Additionally, the sustainability of professional women's leagues has been questioned (Allison, 2016). Roderick et al. (2017) claim high-profile athletes have their career carved out for them through formally prescribed expectations on them to achieve. Indeed, expectations to perform, means football being routinely described as a career that is cut-throat, and those who survive cite using endurance techniques (Wood et al., 2017). However, research within an elite sports academy highlights employees' reluctance to voice their opinion on important issues such

as workplace marginalisation through policy (Manley et al., 2016). Research suggests employees are unlikely to voice one's opinion if the environment discourages such communication (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), and/or is likely to be damaging to career progression; both concerns can be considered to exist within professional football clubs (Roderick, 2006). Meanwhile, the Duty of Care report (Grey-Thompson, 2017) identifies that the representation of the participants voice as crucial and that line between welfare and winning should be scrutinised thoroughly, whilst recognising the ongoing contestation of whether athletes can and should be considered as employees.

Whilst much of feminist research on women's football posits women as having poor relations to men, it must be noted that women's football and its players have benefitted from the involvement of men and men's clubs (Liston, 2006). To position women as a homogenous powerless group, is an oversimplification of more complex socio-economic developments. However, previous studies have overlooked that women have a little history as professional women footballers in the male-dominated industry of football, meaning masculine ways of working are accepted and normalised. In short, the voices of women athletes articulating their experiences of professionalism and related employment are largely missing from the extant literature. Thus, following Taylor et al. (2020) we must go beyond organisational and commercial conceptualisations to look at how professionalisation processes impact women footballers. In addition, research must explore and better understand precarity in elite sport cultures and the gender-specific pressures that emerge through professionalisation.

In light of these opening remarks, the central objectives of this qualitative examination, are to contribute to sport-as-work literature, exploring how professionalisation processes have impacted professional women footballers in both work and non-work settings. The thinking

tools of Bourdieu are employed throughout this paper (Jenkins, 1992), to enable a relational understanding of the complex and precarious workplace and work-life conditions of professional women footballers, with a particular focus on habitus, capital and practice within the field of football. This article will seek to examine how the transition to professional football is experienced by women footballers. Beyond the case of women and women's football, this article contributes to the literature of the precarity of work in high-profile occupations, intersected by gender relations. As a relatively new occupation, women's football emerges as a good place to tell the story of social processes for women at work. Having outlined the processes of professionalisation and the precarious features of this new occupation, the sections of analysis highlight the unknown and unreported aspects of professional women's football. Although there has been some recognition of women working as professional sportswomen, the assumption exists that professionalisation processes have been unequivocally beneficial to women (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). This article goes some way to contest this perception in three significant ways. First, arguing for a contextualised approach to professionalisation processes; second, to consider how gendered precarity shapes the experiences of women as professional footballers and finally a more nuanced understanding of the impact of professionalisation.

Transition to professionalisation

Over the last decade, significant changes have impacted the political, social, and economic field(s) of women's football in England (Culvin, 2020). In 2018, the FA announced the FA WSL 2018/19 season would comprise a full-time professional women's league. The objective transformation due to professionalisation has both shifted cultural meanings of women's football and created a non-male workforce of professional football players. More tangibly, the

shift meant that all players competing in the FA WSL are professional footballers, and football is their occupation. The implementation of FA WSL was timely and provided the FA with an opportunity to shape the women's game of the future. Whilst research exists on the history and development of women's football (Williams, 2006), watershed moments in England, (Bell, 2012), and analysis of structure and governance (Dunn & Welford, 2015), researchers have not treated women working as professional footballers with much detail.

The development of elite football for women was central to FA objectives (Woodhouse et al., 2019). However, scholars have been critical of the FA's marketisation methods concerning women's football, which appeared to be based primarily on commercial business objectives (Bell, 2012; Dunn & Welford, 2015). The FA needed results for its investment, and whilst increasing competition and standards of play are difficult to quantify, attendances and public interest, via broadcasts are easier to report (Dunn & Welford, 2015). For women's football to survive in an oversaturated sports market, absorption into men's clubs (FA, 2013) and embracing both market values and commercial orientation were perhaps necessary. Arguably, in line with men's football then, an increased focus on a commercial product and entertainment spectacle developed (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016). Focusing on the Republic of Ireland, Liston (2006) argues that many women footballers have notably benefited through increased absorption and commercialisation, for example, improvements in facilities, greater access to supporters, medical staff, and organisational capacities. In contrast, Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) state such absorption is ineffective as it relies on men's clubs sharing resources. In the case of football clubs and the women's team specifically, absorption often means the financial health of the club operates within organisational dichotomies between pragmatism and saving money (Bullough & Mills, 2014).

The FA's goal was that WSL clubs become "small, sustainable businesses" and FA WSL licences were put out to tender for clubs to apply (Woodhouse et al., 2019). Two important considerations emerged for incipient FA WSL clubs through increased FA investment and the financial support of their men's clubs (Culvin, 2020). First, increased investment meant elevated professional expectations on FA WSL teams and by extension the players, and second, emergent professionalisation processes were accelerated. In contrast to those teams unable to compete or were unsuccessful with their application, for example, Leeds United, some incipient FA WSL clubs invested more than the minimum requirement in order not to lose ground in the competition (Woodhouse et al., 2019). Clubs employed a handful of full-time players, staff and introduced more systematic training schedules as part of growing professionalisation. Accordingly, an immediate disparity emerged between clubs in terms of finances and club attractiveness to potential employees (Culvin, 2020). The change in values and structure of women's football and its clubs, from staunchly amateur to wholly professional, did not occur at the same, or indeed with the same tempo (Kjær & Agergaard, 2013). Research conducted on rugby union found professionalisation processes included accelerated commercialisation, increased expectations on clubs for sponsorship and marketing, intense resource demand, and extreme competitive pressures (O'Brien & Slack, 2004). Despite the turbulent processes and uncertainty and conflict detailed by scholars, an oversight exists in how professionalisation processes impacted individuals. Many clubs in the FA WSL struggled to cope in their new professional reality, it appeared clubs did not know what professionalism meant financially; unpredictability emerged in the shape of clubs liquidating, for example, Notts County in 2017 (BBC Sport, 2017). However, a trend towards aligning financially and commercially with a men's club emerged and was highly

coveted by the FA, often meaning women's football clubs are precarious, uncertain places to work and may be subject to unavoidable change (Culvin, 2020).

The precarious work of professional women footballers

Increased professionalisation of women's football globally offers an opportunity to disrupt traditional gender hierarchies and contest the definition of football as a man's game (Taylor et al., 2020). However, ambiguity exists between the growing professionalisation of women's football and the uncertain work conditions in which players operate (Culvin, 2020). Previous research has overwhelmingly focused on men's football, which details an unpredictable workplace (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006). Professional sport is often glamorised as a care-free occupation with high economic rewards and a celebrity lifestyle (Fry & Bloyce, 2017). However, a career as a professional women's footballer is increasingly complex and characterised by its gendered precariousness (Culvin, 2020). Effectively, women are walking the tightrope at work, meaning they perform a balancing act in the workplace, proving themselves as legitimate professionals and that they actually *deserve* their professional status. Previous studies support this notion and suggest women are expected to "prove it again" (Dixon et al., 2008) based on socially constructed differences, such as gender. The workplace concerns of women footballers can be considered as part of the broader issues concerned with gender in the workplace.

The rise of precarious work has emerged as a serious challenge to the contemporary world of work (Kalleberg, 2018). Hewison and Kalleberg (2013) define precarious work as work that is unstable, uncertain, and insecure, whereby workers receive little social benefits or statutory requirements. Whilst insecure work is on the rise, it is women and other socially marginalised groups who are impacted most (Kalleberg,

2018). Professional football is an industry characterised by its precarity, with a constant prospect of early career termination (Roderick, 2006). Even if professional footballers avoid injury and obtain employment, their careers are short. According to Kalleberg (2009) precarity is intimately related to perceived job insecurity. When considering precarity and women's experiences as professional footballers, research by the International Federation of Professional Footballers, FIFPro (2017) surveyed 3295 elite women footballers from across the world on their employment conditions. Data highlighted concerns of players, including absent childcare policy, low economic remuneration, short contracts, and limited post-career playing options. It would not be unfair to say these factors are unique to elite women athletes, meaning their careers are more uncertain and precarious than their male counterparts. Moreover, professional women footballers' athletic qualities are questioned, often compared with the strength, speed and power of their male counterparts, factors that augment workplace pressure and insecurity (Culvin, 2020). For women, who until recently experienced relative subordination in football, it is plausible to agree with Agergaard and Unhugue (2016) who argue that despite precarisation processes that occur, workers, in this case professional women footballers, accept work in precarious conditions as it allows them to pursue their dreams and develop a certain amount of prestige. But there are consequences of operating within unstable work environments that extend beyond the quality and quantity of jobs. Patterns emerge individually and collectively in both work and non-work settings, for example, family concerns, such as delayed marriage or family planning (Kalleberg, 2018). For women in this study, the opportunity to transition to professional footballers has been a recent one. Accordingly, this research aims to examine women's experiences of transitioning

to professional footballers and conceptualise their experiences in elite sport culture.

Research methodology

This research is part of a larger doctoral project which analyses football as work for women in England. Adopting a Bourdieusian analysis, this qualitative research draws on semi-structured interviews with 30 professional women footballers. This research offers a first-person account in an attempt to avoid the subject/object dualism key to Bourdieu's work, supported by previous research that has attempted to explore and describe hard-to-reach social fields (Roderick, 2006). It is important to present the personal position of myself in the social field and relate experiences I had during my football career and the research process to bring to life stepping into the shoes of the research object. This study employs a qualitative interpretative framework that allows for an in-depth understanding of football as work for women in England. It is important to recognise that given the gendered inequalities women experience at work, the collective experiences of women will be different from their male counterparts. However, it is assumed here that the category of "women" cannot be generalised as such. Women experience gender and therefore work, differently across, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and cultural background, women footballers are a category in itself and therefore were explored as such.

My experiences at different clubs and my biography as a player shaped my research ambitions, particularly the emphasis on employment policy and the welfare of players. There were times I understood player welfare to be last on the list of concerns for clubs. Scholars support this notion, suggesting our interests have guided our decisions before the research is conducted (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). My life and experiences as a footballer underpinned my ambitions for the research, and

more than this impacted my thoughts and feelings towards the object of my research, the players. I set out as a footballer insider, turned researcher outsider. Considering the position of the researcher then, methodologically, this research project adopts an interpretative qualitative approach, which is the approach most appropriate given the “insider position” of the researcher (Merton, 1972). The interpretative paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the social world as it is (Morgan, 1980). For the interpretative researcher, the world of our lived experience, the lifeworld and life-history are the fertile ground in which our understandings grow and formulate (Angen, 2000). Our very being in the world means we are already morally implicated.

Participants

The research sample was conducted on a criterion-based sample whereby a set of criteria was set, and participants were chosen because of that particular characteristic or feature (Patton, 1990). The predetermined criteria were set that all players must be women playing currently in FA WSL. All players who responded positively to the interview request were interviewed. Requests were made via social media, email, or SMS. Footballers, on both a national and international stage, are not always willing to give access to their lives and are a notoriously hard group to reach (Roderick, 2006). From these players, all were competing in the FA WSL, 27 were full-time professional, two were considering a full-time contract and one was in a dual career. The ages of participants ranged from 20 to 34. The interview schedule was constructed and divided into six themes: demographic information; football-specific information; dual career/education; life in the Women’s Super League; contracts and policy; life as a player/identity and future. The questions attempted to lead players through accounts of their life-history from youth football through to securing professional

status, their experiences of life as a professional and how they understand football as work. Demographic information was critical to both enable an understanding players life-histories, and to gauge a sense of their socialisation and player perceptions of their position in the field.

Interviews were recorded after permission had been granted from the participant. This was crucial as at the time of interview many players could have been considered a celebrity in the outside world. Previous research suggests players have fears of openly criticising their managers or teammates (Roderick, 2006). With this in mind, it was important to reassure players of confidentiality, as questions and their replies would almost certainly involve not only their coach and teammates, but also their clubs and the Football Association. It was important for players to know their comments would not be traceable to them to enable a free space for responses. The interviews were undertaken between 2017 and 2018 and lasted between approximately 45 min to 150 min.

Data analysis

Throughout the course of the research process, I attempted to identify emerging patterns within the data. I followed several steps to analyse the data, providing primacy to participants own understandings of their experiences as a professional footballer. To gain a sense of familiarity with the transcript, I read, and re-read each transcript. I made initial comments on each transcript, fairly loosely in terms of what I deemed to be significant. The comments I made involved one-word comments, descriptive content, and conceptual ideas of Bourdieu. Here I started to get a feel for the data, interpreting experiences. Certain themes emerged, and each theme was identified and labelled. At this point, I was essentially attempting to capture what was said and make theoretical and practical connections across participants. The themes identified in the first instance helped orient the second and so forth. Notes were made of both similarities

and differences in each transcript, identifying both repeating patterns and new issues that emerged. This process resulted in 21 substantive themes being identified. The subthemes attached to each substantive theme ranged from four to eighteen subthemes. Many subthemes overlapped and held shared meanings as I began to make connections between the emergent data.

Discussion

The thematic analysis identified three themes that explain the experiences of professionalisation in the lives of women footballers. In the next section, I tease apart complex notions of lived professionalism, gratitude, and surveillance.

Lived realities of professionalism

Previous research on men's football (Bourke, 2003; McGillivray et al., 2005; Roderick, 2006), depict players who appear willing to accept the unstable working conditions of professional football as common-sense realities. Unlike male footballers, women who enter their new career as professional footballers are unprepared for the precarity associated with a career in professional football. Many players spoke of the precarious working conditions at their clubs. Precarity was experienced often in the form of inconsistencies which varied in terms of players access to facilities; resource allocation; economic remuneration, medical care and so on. The dilemma for players in their new realities is clear: players appear willing to accept unsatisfactory working conditions, and in turn are expected to be grateful for the opportunity.

As one experienced WSL player suggested:

"We are quite a big-name club we have decent money and good players ... Other clubs are investing as well ... Our facilities aren't great, we have no chill out area and we don't get food provided, we all complain as players cause we're getting told to be professional but

they (club) don't provide us with the means to be professional. Cause we train at the men's facility as well, they get priority, if they were scheduled for the morning, they can just tell us to move our session." (Interview 22)

Being a big-name club with resources appears fundamental to the survival and stability of women's teams, although prevailing discourses position women's football as culturally distinct from men's football (Woodhouse et al., 2019). It appears the FA encourage women's teams to be absorbed by financially secure men's teams, as a means of protecting their viability. However, data in this study contradicts the FA objectives, and it can be tentatively suggested big-name clubs are not always a solution to safeguard the women's game. Women players appear to be integrated into their clubs on a partial basis which depends largely on perceived levels of success, which manifests as precarity amongst players. Players articulate feelings of additional stresses associated with the pressure to be successful. As one experienced senior England international put it:

"Without success we're invisible! We need to get a bronze medal in the World Cup for any recognition. If we didn't qualify for anything, people wouldn't care. If we don't win games with (club) no-one comes to watch - it is something that goes hand in hand." (Interview 21)

Similarly, a senior international suggested that women must be successful to be allowed to train at the men's facility:

"We don't train at the men's facility yet; you know in the run up to an FA cup final it was seen as a treat for us to train on their pitches that week. I mean of course we were happy cause the facilities are much better than ours, so in that sense it was a nice treat but then if you step outside and look in, you see it from the view of you have to get to an FA cup final to be allowed these treats." (Interview 11)

When asked if she felt like it was a treat, she went on to explain:

"Yes and no, it's like you're asking for more, but you have to be careful how you go

about asking cos it's the person giving you money who you want more from. So, you have to be happy but then know the right times to ask for more. That's what the management do. And as players were told to be as professional as possible and as nice and polite and professional as we can, it is certainly not expected of us to be critical ... or publicly do things like that (be critical of the club)."

All players alluded to the expectation to be good professionals was taken-for-granted. This expectation becomes ingrained into players habitus' and bound up with her conception of self (Roderick, 2006; Wacquant, 1995). Players incorporate what it means to be a good professional into their identities. Failure to display the appropriate behaviour(s), can generate unwanted reaction from coaches, managers, and teammates. Yet increased expectations on players are comprised of contradictions. Players expressed feelings of discontent as clubs do not repay their professional behaviour accordingly. The emerging picture of professional women footballers in this study is of an employment field which is characterised by its gendered precariousness, and yet players remain highly committed to being a professional footballer. Unlike AWFL athletes in Pavlidis' (2020) study, many FA WSL players expressed feelings of discontent with their position in clubs. The present study raises the possibility of players expected to feel grateful, despite unsatisfactory conditions

Being grateful

Within this study *profession* is understood as a socially constructed term which holds value and prestige in the field for professional women footballers. There appeared to be a certain appeal of professionalism which served to structure and shape the habitus of players. In this research, professionalism is considered a form of capital and a dynamic concept, something which is constantly at stake and contested. Being prepared to operate within precarious work conditions is

defined as a central characteristic of women's football. Data provides evidence that clubs have placed professional expectations on players, with a desire to attract a bigger fan base, increase media exposure and more generally, increase the commercial product of women's football (Woodhouse et al., 2019). The problems for players are two-fold. In the first instance, expectations placed upon players are not always matched within club operations, yet players are expected to function and perform within inadequate environments and be grateful for the opportunity. The second and related problem concerns the effects on players as they accept their work conditions, and more than that, attempt to display appropriate professional behaviour (Bourdieu, 1984). A good illustration of players' contradictory feelings towards their clubs is provided by one senior international:

"There is pressure to be professional. In women's football you try and live a perfect life, tick every box, I feel like that's what I've gotta do, otherwise ... I'm wasting my time, well not wasting but I feel very privileged to have this position even, though I complain a bit, I'm actually a footballer. I mean my hours are a lot but I'm playing football, how hard is that? But then ... you kinda feel grateful but then sometimes you accept things, then I'm like, why am I accepting that? If I had an office job and someone turned around and said things to me (like they do at football) you'd turn around and be like - no that's not okay! But here you're like ... Okay. I find this weird mentality in football, isn't it? Like you just accept things you almost wouldn't in other jobs. I look back and I'm like why did I do that? I should have stuck up for myself. At the time I was very vulnerable." (Interview 4)

Similar sentiments were expressed by another current FA WSL player when discussing disparities and feelings of insecurities for women players at her club:

"There's so much pressure on us because people put this whole stigma on us that we should be grateful. Grateful we're professional. Grateful we're getting money, any

money at all. Part of me is grateful I was part-time and now I'm fulltime, but that doesn't mean I can be shit on. People are just running on empty cos we train, train, train and no-one cared to monitor us or take care of us." (Interview 2)

The grateful rhetoric is important and is evident in many players accounts, expressed by two experienced senior England internationals:

"In women's football now people say we don't appreciate what we have. I'm like okay I earn a full-time salary, but we've given so much time and sacrifices to the game, I mean I've missed my whole social life - know what I mean? An' we're only on a normal salary and normal people don't have to do what we do. We do more for less. They don't take their job home or fit their lifestyle round their job. I'm expected to feel grateful or lucky? When you're a lawyer or whatever you've worked hard to get there, you've earned the right to be the best." (Interview 13)

This account is revealing in terms of the way the player feels her status as a professional athlete is undermined by expectations placed upon her to feel grateful, for an opportunity given to her, rather than one she had earned. The second experienced senior international echoes this when discussing uncertainties at their club:

Player: "Uncertainty is hard ... But it's like you ... or we accept it. Cause, we don't ... it's cause, we feel privileged - when we're not really. It's different to working a 9-5 cause in a normal job you'd get warnings before you got fired, or a pay out, here we don't. I feel privileged at (club) cause, we constantly get told the club are investing massively and everyone's doing us a favour, it's almost like a charity."

Qu: Do you feel like that?

Player: "I think that's why I accept things yeah. It's a catch 22. I wouldn't accept what I do at work what I do at the club, no way, you can't! Imagine if I had a family and by the end of the year I didn't know if I could afford to live?." (Interview 21)

It was established from the interview data that players expressed multi-layered strategies to

mitigate precarity and make the most of their short career. The majority of players had a heightened awareness of their position in the field (Bourdieu, 1977) as they struggled for symbolic and other forms of capital, and most felt grateful for the opportunity to play professional football, whilst simultaneously voicing their discontent. Women's entree into professional sport means they are ever reminded of their precarious position (Pavlidis, 2020). The ambitions to succeed as a professional mean that players conform to organisational expectations and accept intrusive surveillance mechanisms and disciplinary codes (Parker 2000).

Surveillance

With the professionalisation of women's football in England demands placed on players have increased significantly in recent years (Datson et al., 2017). It was clear the structural and organisational transition to professionalism impacted players physically and emotionally. Professional athletes experience periodic transitions in their career (Morris et al., 2017). Transitions are defined as adjustments or events that go beyond the changes of everyday life (Sharf, 1997). Common transitions in football include youth to senior teams and retirement (Morris et al., 2017). While little work exists on the transition from amateur to professional, research on common transitions detail complex, multifaceted and dynamic transitional periods (Taylor et al., 2020). For many women, the opportunity to transition to professional footballer has been a relatively new one. Transitions in the workplace encourage the imposition of normative values, fitness tests, body fat tests which were utilised to guide and shape behaviours in both work and non-work settings (Culvin, 2020). These practices of conformity arise from habitus whereby our past experiences and practices influences the way we act and feel, this is largely intuitive rather than deliberate (Miller, 2016). Meaning players accept this intense approach to professionalism

as they understand that that's what it takes to be a professional. As such surveillance is evident and by nature exposes individuals through the acquisition of information disclosing patterns of activity for the purpose of control (Giddens, 1984).

Players articulated feelings of "being watched", as described in extracts within the study which can be understood as surveillance. Surveillance appears indicative of individualism and accountability associated with neoliberal values whereby mechanisms for monitoring and producing appropriate behaviour are administered (Davies, 2005). Such insights suggest conformity to neoliberal mechanisms is accepted and almost encouraged through the practical taking up a position in the field (Bourdieu, 1984). Increased exposure via new media forms and the growth of commercialisation in women's football have led to increased surveillance and the critique of athletic bodies and the meanings players ascribe to their bodies (Kohe & Purdy, 2016). Professional footballers enter a body-centred universe which requires field appropriate capital (Coupland, 2015). In this instance, physical capital and "looking athletic" were high on the agenda of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). Consequently, players find themselves engaged in behaviour which is deemed appropriate and are conscious of being watched. The following extract describes one senior international experience:

"We have no privacy at all [...] you always have to look the part [...] when you're eating and drinking. Like you'll stand there on a night out holding a bottle of water and you might not be drinking that water, but you say to your mate 'pass that water' just so you don't get caught out. Some people are out there to catch you out." (Interview 27)

It is clear from the above quote, and from interviews conducted, players are hyper-aware of public perceptions and looking athletic and behaving in a way deemed professional at work. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of a footballers' physicality and image

are highly important for organisations, in terms of the product of the athlete and specifically, for the athlete in terms of capital and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1986). The control exercised over players lives in part extends to other areas of their lives, as one senior international explains: "That stretches to how you appear on social media, we get trained in that. It makes a big difference how we appear outside" (interview 6).

The perceived control detailed in the previous extract extends to both on and off-the-field activities. Thus, such sentiments were not uncommon, as many players were trapped in a battle for legitimacy within the football field. In the quest for legitimacy, players experience and accept an intense approach to accountability, surveillance, measurement, and quantification (Roderick et al., 2017). Little scrutiny has been afforded to those women footballers entangled in the pressures of "doing the right thing", a phrase which was used by multiple players in various contexts. The control afforded to this phrase is exemplified by one senior international: "I always felt like I was being watched, not on purpose, I just felt like I constantly had to impress (manager) by doing and saying the right things" (interview 15). The drive for perfection in women's football appears to be a very real pressure faced by players as they fear the reality of losing their professional status, consequently, players appear vulnerable and accept control explained by one experienced senior international:

"As players were expected to do more and say less. I mean if you go for a drink with friends, you have to be aware of what you put on social media [...] you are being watched. I feel like I'm being watched the whole time [...] I think we're judged more than ever before. What you eat, what you look like." (Interview 13)

Players discussed being unable to "switch off" and rarely leaving their work in the workplace. Discussed in the following extract of one senior international: "It's really hard for people

to have a social life cause, they don't know how to! There has to be time to detach yourself, but people don't do it and people find it difficult" (interview 17).

The findings in this research correlate with previous research that characterises taking-your-work-home as work spill (Patricia et al., 2003). Such work spills are highly problematic, as players are unable to switch off, often resulting in wellbeing ill-health (Michie & Williams, 2003). It must be noted work spill may be common within other professions. However, unlike other professions, data in this study portrays the work of professional footballers defined by intense training schedules, sponsorship commitments, living away from home and high levels of surveillance of their lifestyles outside of working hours. As articulated in the following extract by one senior international:

"You can't really put a foot wrong. You're constantly trying to be in the game and that is hard when you're going through emotions of not playing [...] you don't wanna show any sign of weakness. You want your team to know they can count on you [...] when you get back to your room you can relax, cry, shower, do whatever you want, but when you're around the team it's pressured." (Interview 23)

The mechanisms of surveillance located in professional football clubs and imposed on individuals were interpreted by players as normative pressures that are par for the course as professional athletes. The use of normative pressures and intense accountability restricted players both in work and non-work settings. One predominant area of concern with the highly regulated culture of surveillance is the control over athletes' bodies and personal freedoms. Within the data, it was clear that players are less likely to speak out as they are caught up in professionalisation and are reluctant to risk their career. The central point is that players are expected to deal with high levels of intense scrutiny and loss of control over their bodies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's football in England has undergone significant transformations in the last decade. Arguably, the professionalisation of football for women, and the development of a career opportunity is the most notable transformation. To date, no empirical work has considered women working as professional footballers. This research sought to address this gap as women footballers are a growing demographic in the athletes-as-workers labour market. The qualitative data analysis offers a unique and novel insight into the work of professional women footballers that contradicts the commonly accepted discourse that professionalisation is straightforwardly beneficial to women. Data suggests an implication of professionalisation confirms overexposure to uncontrollable work and non-work environments led to players feeling uncertain and unstable in their new occupation. A career in football is defined by uncertainties. However, in agreement with FIFPro (2017) women's football is more uncertain and more precarious. Although this research does not endeavour to present a one-sided account. For many players the pursuit of professional football as an occupation is strong and with that, players accept their precarity in favour of playing professional football. Furthermore, FIFPro remains an advocate for improving the working conditions of professional footballers globally through strengthening the employment rights of players and advocacy work (see: <https://www.fifpro.org/en> for further details).

Through a Bourdieusian lens, this research advances our knowledge of sport as work. Moreover, Bourdieu offers a means to critically analyse the experiences of women at work more generally. Research establishes how the everyday practices of those working as professional footballers contribute to and reproduce the structures and realities of professional football. The evidence presented clearly demonstrates that the gendered

experiences of the majority of players included in the sample, mean players feel grateful for the opportunity to play professional football. That sense of gratitude was evident and important in many players accounts. Players attempt to make sense of their precarious work conditions by expressing gratitude for the opportunity some believed would never be possible. However, players indicated contradictory feelings towards their work. On one hand, players recognise the unpaid, hard work and dedication to football pre-professionalisation, so it becomes difficult to criticise their current work conditions as they are better than they ever have been. On the other hand, many players perceive their work conditions as precarious and uncertain and resent the expectation of gratitude. With this in mind, I call on further research in this area to advance our understandings and implications of gratitude for professional athletes.

The study presented women's narratives as they enter paid employment in professional sport. In entering a profession that has long been the exclusive domain of men, women expressed their experiences of club culture that has been developed and enacted by men. Parker (2000) indicates that youth football has progressed from its informal beginnings to a more regulated, systematic, and standardised practice, the same can be said for FA WSL clubs. The prefix of "professional" was expected by players to provide them with professional feelings of legitimacy, prestige and acceptance into a profession that has devalued women for so long. However, the realities of players were markedly different. The evidence presented in this research clearly demonstrates the majority of players in this sample, based on their gender, are undervalued at their clubs and are not treated as legitimate professionals. Players appear hyper-aware of perceived professionalism at all times that conforms to organisations, club and agent expectations that facilitate their career. In sum, the professionalisation of women's

football in England has not been straightforwardly beneficial to players. This article offers new insights into precarity in elite sport cultures and gender-specific pressures that have emerged as a consequence of transitioning to professional status. It is within the context of professional women's football and their new realities; players are expected to deal with new pressures, precarious work whilst performing in their less than satisfactory work conditions.

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