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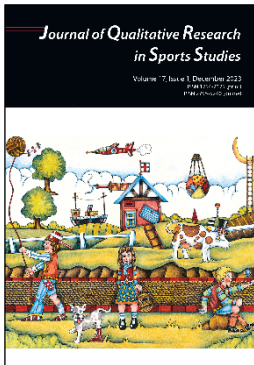
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## 'Being' in the world of football scouting - an exercise in storied and performed data

<sup>1</sup> Craig Lawlor (University of Central Lancashire)

<sup>2</sup> Clive Palmer (University of Central Lancashire)

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# 'Being' in the world of football scouting - an exercise in storied and performed data

**Craig Lawlor and Clive Palmer**

(University of Central Lancashire)

Keywords: *football, scouting, recruitment, phenomenology, lived experience, song writing*

## Abstract

For the scout, the heady responsibility for recognising footballing talent in young players is melded with the promise of their potential success, or even greatness in the game. However, implicit of the scout's role and duty, once talent is spotted, is to pass that talent on to others to nurture, for example, by coaching staff at clubs or academies. This common obligation in scouts for 'letting go' characterises their existence, often in want of recognition for their claims-to-fame, for success stemming from their wisdom and insight to the game. Therefore, ironically, a scout's actions seem to be underwritten by a sense of loss, apart from the brief claim that 'I discovered genius'. This paper reveals aspects of this vicarious lived experience by means of data presented in story and song, collected through a phenomenological lens. The stage is set first by an exposition of the scout's magical [under]world and working conditions, followed by a methodological synthesis of the phenomenon itself, scouting, with relevant theory. Then the story: *Taking in a game: a glimpse through the lens of a Nowhere Man* is followed immediately by the song: *40p a Mile and a Sausage Roll*. These refined presentations of data invite the reader onto the terraces alongside the researcher, and then to participate in the reflection of 'being there', as a researcher engaged in 'scout-ology'. In conclusion, the paper highlights how from the moment of the highly prized discovery the scout seems committed to live in the shadows, understood only by their own community, to continue their vigil, constantly scoping for talent on the football horizon, for glimmers of hope.

## Introduction

Such men are central to the mythology of modern football. Scouts may be marginalised, professionally, but they possess the power of dreams. There is no textbook for them to follow, no diploma they can receive for their appreciation of the alchemy involved in the creation of a successful player. Their scrutiny is intimate, intense, and highly individual. They must balance nuances of character with aspects of pre-programmed ability and fit them to the profile and culture of the clubs they represent (Calvin, 2013).

This quote from Michael Calvin's (2013) seminal book captures the essence of the aptly named *Nowhere Men*, football's hidden tribe of talent scouts; faceless and nameless. Calvin contends everyone knows what scouts do, but no one truly knows



why they do it, and no one knows who they are. Aside from this book by Calvin, another by Cotterill (2021) and other popular journalistic sources, academic literature pertaining to the role of the football scout is relatively sparse (Lawlor, Rookwood and Wright, 2021). Consequently, there is little theory to draw upon when it comes to the practical implementation of scouting and recruitment practices. Perhaps more pertinent is the lack of knowledge of what constitutes a scout, governs their practices and their life-worlds. What is it like to be a football scout? What does it mean to be in the scouting world? This article explores the lived experience of scouts and in doing so, methodologically represents a fundamental shift in research approaches away from a scientised investigation or systematic analysis of what constitutes effective or efficient practices in scouting and recruitment, towards understanding the lived experiences of those embroiled in the scouting world. Through the exploration of phenomenological practices, this article has begun to tell their story.

When undertaking research from a phenomenological perspective, a review of relevant literature should portray the taken for granted meanings and assumptions that make up the knowing of practice (Smythe, 2011). Whilst in this article, creative qualitative methods and performed data are used, it is important first and foremost that the perspectives of professional football scouts' life-worlds are explored. Like Calvin's (2013) appraisal above, and almost a decade later, Cotterill (2021:137) offers a similar assessment of the football scout:

The image of the scout persists, as the mysterious loner in a flat cap skulking around crumbling stadia, scribbling on bits of paper.

In the highly commodified and dynamic industry that professional football has become, it could be imagined that the 'football scout' would be a highly attractive and appealing role for many football enthusiasts. Calvin (2013:3) again examines this assumption stating that being paid to watch 10 games per week would be the sort of fantasy that sustains the average football fan, but he offers a word of warning about the disconnected lifestyle, 'the long, family unfriendly hours where scouts eat on the run, live on their nerves and receive a relative pittance'. In the academic domain, Griffiths and Bloyce (2022) recently explored the motivations of 12 unpaid football scouts working at professional clubs. They came to similar conclusions, that scouts engage in 'hope labour' due to their desire to work in the industry because of their 'love of the game' and 'quest for excitement'. However, the majority were ultimately disappointed, and their fantasy-laden thinking which led them to engage in unpaid labour failed to result in a paid role, often due to a culture of nepotism where a small, tight-knit network of 'insiders' guard against outsiders.

Referring to Calvin's (2013) description of the scouting experience, there is a lack of understanding of the scout's role and thus, a lack of guidelines and training

programmes for scouts. Christensen (2009) states that individuals who engage in player identification possess an eye for talent where scouting is a visual experience, a gut feeling, something seen with the mind's eye (Christensen, 2009). The scout is neither rational, nor objective in their selections which are governed by 'what feels right in the heart and stomach' (Lund and Söderström, 2017:248) where existing beliefs, assumptions, values, knowledge, and past experiences all affect the way in which talent spotters observe performance (Golik, Blanco and Czikk, 2017). In popular culture, the 2001 film *Mike Bassett England Manager* (Barron, 2001) did little to promote player identification and selection as a systematic, error-free process, where the clichéd 'names on the back of a cigarette packet' leads to the inadvertent selection of unknown, out of shape, and past-their-best 'Ron Benson' and 'Tony Hedges' for the England National Team. All this represents some of the taken for granted stereotypes of football scouting, i.e. that scouting is mysterious and non-systematic in nature.

James (2023) points out that the football scouting industry is constantly evolving as data analysis and 'the stats' are driving the way players are identified. For fans and practitioners alike, it seems the hope is that player data and analytics will transform football scouting in the same way that sabermetrics did for baseball, championed in the film *Moneyball* (Briley, 2013). Currently, there is limited evidence of this in the academic literature although several authors contend that the use of player data in the identification process does yield benefits (Schumaker, Solieman and Chen, 2012; Gerrard 2017). Thus, for the processes and products of scouting talent in football, the overall picture may have become a little murkier if we accept that numerical data, complex algorithms and persuasive predictions adds to the sorcery of scouting, which if coupled with the alchemy of the faceless scout, we may reasonably have little faith that football clubs are going to identify players more effectively or more consistently than ever before.

This brief review of literature in a narrow field of research leads us to conclude that scouts are, generally male (see *Nowhere Men*), watch multiple games of football per week, spend long, lonely hours on the road hopping from ground to ground and possess some form of magical insight through a trained eye and a gut feeling. This still leaves us pondering, who, actually, are these scouts? Do they really perform magic? If they do, then why aren't they well-paid and world renowned? Why do they do their jobs at all? How did they develop their alchemy? Is there a hierarchy of chief scout wizards? This article, which is part of a wider doctoral research project, explores through a phenomenological lens what it means to be a football scout, to uncover the experiences of those who live in this world, to explore and potentially erode some of these taken for granted assumptions, whilst inviting the reader into the scouting world, to create their own interpretations from scouts' experiences.

## Methods

Phenomenology is the study of ‘what gives itself’ of the experience as it is lived. van Manen (2017) encourages us to seek and ask, what is this experience like? If we consider that a scout’s eye for talent is governed by the culture in which they are immersed, their previous identifications and personal interpretations (Lund and Söderström, 2017; Larkin *et al.*, 2020), then a phenomenological investigation which explores this culture and individuals’ lived experiences is appropriate. The challenge, according to van Manen (2017) is to uncover and recover lived meaning from experiences without objectifying or turning lived experiences into positivistic themes, sanitised concepts, objectified descriptions, or abstract theories. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover what it is like to be a football scout and how scouts experience their world. Our intention is to impart something of this lived experience through the medium of story and song, that follow below.

The idea of ‘being’ as a motivation for this study comes from Martin Heidegger’s epoch-making work around *Dasein* or being-there (Heidegger, 1927 / 1962) which signifies that as humans we are always experiencing our world in a context which influences our experience (Smythe, 2011). Therefore, *Dasein*, always ‘is’. In ‘being’, we are always open to the things, thoughts, feelings, people that ‘call’ or have, and are forgetful or ignorant of all else that is ‘there’ but does not claim our attention. Other methodologies may seek to remove the issue from its context but phenomenology, in contrast, accepts that not only can we never escape context but that the ‘there’ of being makes the experience what it ‘is’ (Smythe, 2011). Thus, this article stems from wider research that is a study of being-in-the-scouting-world. Hermeneutic phenomenology, more specifically, is an ongoing, creative, intuitive, and dialectic approach which challenges pre-determined rules and research procedures, signifying a freeing from the dichotomous right and wrong way of doing things (Crowther, Ironside, Spence and Smythe, 2016). It endeavours to investigate the covered over, taken for granted or the silenced amongst theoretical discourse.

The initial focus of the wider research project was to identify ‘effective’ and ‘ineffective’ scouting practices, but it was soon apparent that this was a fruitless endeavour with a plethora of factors contributing to ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practice. For instance, one may assume that ‘good’ scouting results in ‘good’ recruitment and thus ‘good performance’, not so. From reviewing literature, completing field observations and drawing on the author’s own experiences in the field, reflected upon and captured in first-person narratives, there are a range of variables and factors which can affect this complex, dynamic process, especially if it is to be regarded as being ‘successful’ (Stephenson, 2012). For instance, there are countless potential players a club could identify, but with so many games for scouts to watch, on top of deciding which players to watch at those matches, is challenging. Following the initial

identification stage of what matches and what players, there is a targeting process where multiple scouts must corroborate to decide which players they should attempt to acquire for given teams. Then, there are recruitment factors relating to transfer fees, contracts, wages, agents' fees; all this proceeding the actual process of player integration and the potential relocation of the player at a new club, and potentially their family, to a new location. It is also assumed that the player will just 'fit in' to the new club culture, be selected by the Manager or Head Coach to play, receive appropriate training for their development and avoid injury. Thus, the general idea that 'good' or 'bad' scouting in some way exists and can be identified, monitored and adjusted in the current era, is at best, ambitious. For example:

**'Discovering genius' – hope labour**

Affirming the stereotype and fuelling folklore about scouting, famously, is Bob Bishop, the Manchester United scout who in 1961 'discovered' the 15 year old George Best in Belfast. Bishop's telegram to United manager Matt Busby read: *I think I've found you a genius*. His local club in Northern Ireland, Glentoran, had previously rejected him for being too small and light (Barret, 2019).

Claims for 'discovering genius', on the basis that 'it takes one to know one', may be part of the problem, not the solution for football scouts generally. Some of the variables mentioned here became apparent during field research, indicating that the richness, and real value of this study lay in exploring the ambiguous, often challenging nature of football scouting with regard to how scouts exchange their social capital, make decisions and exert influence and power over others, all constituting part of their life-world experience as a football scout.

**Research design and participants**

Lived situations are unique and dynamic and therefore an analysis and presentation which mirrors this dynamism is required (Smythe, 2011). A significant advantage of this philosophical and methodological framework is that researchers' horizons of understanding are acknowledged as entwined with the project, as Smythe (2011) points out, we are bound to our own pre-understandings which will always shape our thinking. Reflexivity therefore plays a central role in the researcher's attempts to keep a check on their preconceptions (Horriggan-Kelly, Millar and Downing, 2016). This reflexivity not only allows for the interrogation of the researcher's understanding of things, but it also helps to bring to the fore the researcher's values, beliefs and motivations (Finlay, 2008; Clancy, 2013). Hence, the lead author's 13 years working in professional football and 7 years enmeshed in the scouting industry is acknowledged and valued rather than bracketed away and disconnected from the research process, something which is more common in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021).

Contrastingly, in Hermeneutic Phenomenology, the researcher does not attempt to bracket or adopt a Husserlian phenomenological reduction where preconceptions and pre-understandings are put aside to pursue the interpretive work in an unmediated way (Crowther and Thomson, 2020; Dowling, 2007). For Heidegger, it is the individual's situated 'being-the-world' with their own fore-structures of understanding that allows them to understand and question the world from a certain vantage point (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For example, in reflexive notes it was recorded,

*My attempts to bracket out my understandings and pre-suppositions after 7 years in the scouting world are proving impossible, they are part of me.*

Smythe (2011) therefore challenges us to become aware of our prejudices and alert the reader as to how the study may have been influenced. In Hermeneutic Phenomenology, the main quest is to provide the audience with an account in which they can engage so they can experience the phenomena as lived by others. Our aim in this article is to communicate those experiences through personal narrative (story), and music (song), which are integrated with and from experiences in the field.

A period of ethnographic observation took place between January 2020 and February 2022, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews (n=8). Through immersion in the experiences and examples of others, phenomena began to develop from the interplay between the data and the interpreter. Rather than seeking to identify effective scouting processes and practices, such as looking for pragmatic efficiencies in scouting, it was decided to reflect upon the phenomena of scouting itself, the lived experience, and what emerged were aspects of meaning which scouts attributed to their experiences. It was discovered there was evidence of scouts being undervalued, unappreciated but still finding meaning in their roles, some still active after many decades in the field. Of course, some accounts have been omitted in line with phenomenological enquiry where van Manen (2017) advises that examples are illustrations, they have the capacity to add new knowledge but can be left out without harming the text, whilst also preserving and protecting the situation being researched.

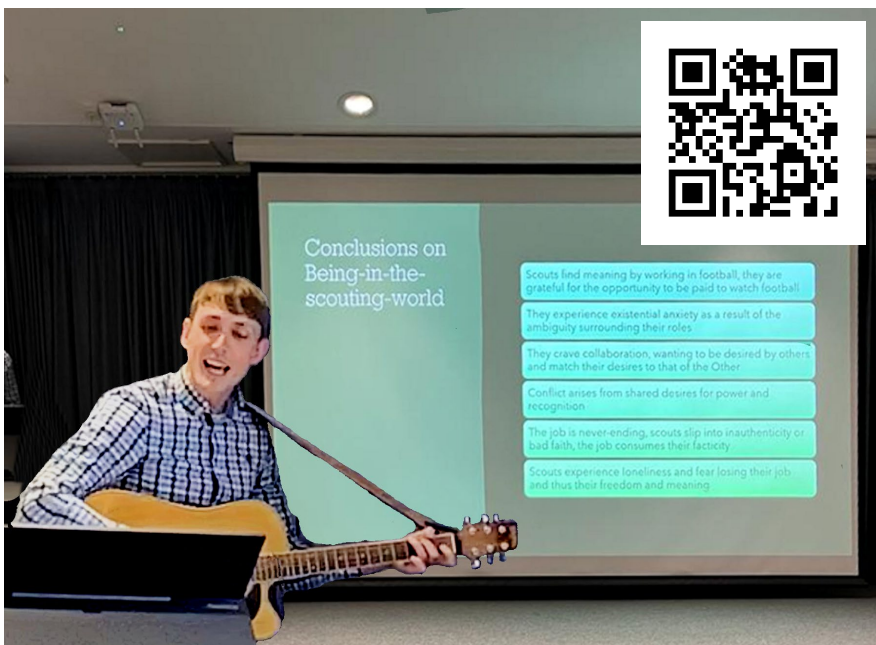
### **Interpretation and presentation: story and song**

Stories are an increasingly common methodological device in socio-cultural research (e.g. Sparkes, 2002; Gunaratnam and Oliviere, 2009; Rooney, Lawlor and Rohan, 2016), and crafting stories is congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Crowther, Ironside, Spence and Smythe, 2016). Shared stories give testimony to past events and experiences, shedding light on what is known but also what is covered over or forgotten (McAdams, 1993). Therefore, in the first instance, our findings are presented in a creative nonfiction piece (Gerard, 1996), a story where readers are invited to delve into a football scouting experience



and make their own meaning from the account, after meeting the scouts that haunt the terraces. By using such creative methods here, the claim is not to state what is true or wholly representative for scouts everywhere but rather, to open a conversation with readers as to possible understandings (Smythe, 2011). As phenomenology deals with narratives, stories, poetry, and anecdotes, not with codes or objectivist data (van Manen, 2017), it is appropriate to interpret experiences and participant responses as ‘meaning units’ (Giorgi, 1970; 2009) or ‘phenomenological examples’ (van Manen, 2017). The word ‘buytendijk’ refers to phenomenology as the science of examples (van Manen, 1997) where ‘the example lets the singular be seen’ (Agamben, 1993:22). These examples or meaning units therefore shine a light within the research, guiding the reader to the experience, to see what the researcher sees, with an open invitation to think together, to acquire a deeper insight and awareness about a shared phenomenon.

The story below, is followed by a song, written and performed by Craig Lawlor in 2023, to a large and appreciative audience at a research conference, figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Craig Lawlor (2023) performing the song ‘40p a Mile and a Sausage Roll’ as part of his doctoral research and data analysis: *An investigation of scouting and recruitment in men’s professional football: issues and future directions*. Graduate Research School Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, University of Central Lancashire, 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> May.

[Photograph credit: Mervyn Clarke and Helen O’Donnell]

*40p a Mile and a Sausage Roll*, takes some of the meaningful themes from the story and from the field data in this research, to invite the reader once again into the

football scouting world. The ‘chorus’ or repeated refrains in the song invite the reader (or audience when performed) to vocally contribute, physically including them to become part of the performance and be drawn closer to the messages which the song hopes to impart. This is a form of Participatory Research Method e.g. see Cargo and Mercer (2008), Bergold and Thomas (2012) and Burns, Howard and Ospina (2021). There is a gathering conversation around music and song as unique forms of qualitative inquiry which historically, have received limited attention (Carless, 2018). As Douglas (2020:59) states,

Song writing is so alluring and challenging; you don’t know what you will find and in terms of my own reflections, not only do I interpret song as an engaging form of dissemination, but the crafting of lyrics and an appropriate melody are extremely useful methods of analysis and interpretation, a process where the phenomenon can begin to show itself.

Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) discourage the researcher from reaching an understanding too quickly, carelessly, or slovenly, something they refer to as ‘bridling’. Similarly, van Manen (1997) also discourages researchers from reaching premature understandings of the phenomenon in question, in short, to avoid jumping to conclusions. Song and story writing can be seen as a form of reflexive practice which avoids early conclusion and deeper refining of data, which aligns with the hermeneutic circle; the ongoing, attentive, circular movement between part and whole (Gadamer, 1988). For example, in song, the composition of both music and lyrics prompt ideas around theme and repetition, rehearsal and shared or participatory methods to impart ideas and interpretations of data. However, as progress is made through a topic, experience or phenomenon, it may be realised that initial assumptions were too narrow, and this triggers a greater understanding of the whole. Crowther and Thomson (2020) state that the hermeneutic circle describes three fore-structures through which individuals come to understand and interpret their life-world:

- 1) *fore-having* is the background context of pre-understandings,
- 2) *fore-sight* relates to how an individual always enters an experience with a specific viewpoint and
- 3) *fore-conception* is an anticipated sense of the interpretations that will be made (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

The aim, therefore, is to prevent interpretations being generated only in what is already known, rather it is about uncovering what is hidden and lies beneath. To provide an example of how the researcher’s preconceptions of scouting connected with the experiences of participants from interviews, Craig reflected on his years in scouting that ‘*at times I felt paralysed by ambiguity*’ [as reference to Simone De Beauvoir’s writing around existential phenomenology - see Bakewell, 2016]. Due to

his experiences in the field, there were undoubtedly times when the research was deductive in nature but due to the scarcity of literature in the field, a process of induction, too, had to occur. The process therefore could be classed as abductive, sitting somewhere between induction and deduction, a common and central facet of hermeneutic phenomenology (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). Therefore, when examples such as the one identified in the brief quote below came forth, it was possible to combine the first-person narrative and ‘data’ collected in the field, to form the results:

[from field notes:] We still don't know our roles. On the day the new guy came in, he should have sat us down and said 'Your role's this, you do that' but that never happened. We still need that to happen because no one knows what they're meant to be doing.

Further examples such as this ambiguity of role and purpose will be apparent in the following section. We therefore invite you, the reader, to experience the football scouting world, and explore what it means to be a football scout through story and song.

## Story

### **Taking in a game: a glimpse through the lens of a Nowhere Man**

I walk up the damp concrete steps from the concourse and the cold winter wind hits me, as does the sound of 90s Britpop over the old tannoy and I squint in the light of the floodlights high above the damp and muddy playing surface. I make my way down to my seat; notebook, pen and team sheet, the scout's toolkit, in one hand, polythene cup in the other – not sure yet if it's tea or coffee, I just said ‘yes’ to the lady in the lounge when she asked if I wanted a drink. I make my way past the seated fanatics, head-to-toe in replica hats, scarves and coats and the familiar smell of meat pies and Bovril. Down to my right I see them, the scouts, my peers, the Nowhere Men. I decided to wear my nice coat and smart shoes tonight, I don't know why, it's bloody freezing. I suppose it's so I look a bit more 'professional' because I want to feel professional, like I've made it, like I'm a somebody. I do look a bit out of place though, everyone else is in big, warm coats and hats.

I make my way to row J, seat 37 where I sit down, two seats down from a scout I don't know. He's youngish, young for the industry anyway, probably mid 30s. He doesn't say a word and doesn't look up. His eyes flick between his phone and his notepad where he's already busy taking notes. We're all here to make notes about players in the game but the game hasn't even started yet, I've got no idea what he's writing.

I'm sat in front of three old-timers, residuals, the backbone of the industry – Hitchcock, McIntosh, and Morris. Morris is the first to pipe up, ‘Here, did you hear

about Nigel? He's got the sack, he found out he'd lost his job from Sky Sports News!' McIntosh replies, 'Aye but they've agreed to keep him on part-time, haven't they, not bad, gets £20K to go to a few games a week and just chuck a report in'. Hitchcock wipes his nose and intervenes, 'Still, better than what happened to Bob, he got sacked by text! It's a bloody disgrace'. The three of them ramble on incessantly as the teams complete their final preparations ahead of kick off.

I avert my attention from the old timers and notice Summers sat on his own, smartly dressed, newly whitened teeth and he's on the phone. He was a hero in his playing days, I remember watching him on tele when I was a kid and in a funny way it gives him this aura of greatness. I've got no idea if he's any good at scouting, but he sure looks the part. He's talking numbers and work permits, probably speaking to an agent, he seems to know his stuff. He doesn't look up from his pristine leather boots as the teams enter the field of play. I hear Hitchcock's voice again, 'I've only come to watch him', pointing at a name on his team sheet. He's not in the starting eleven. 'What a waste of time' he says indifferently shrugging his shoulders, 'He'll probably only get 10 minutes at the end!' McIntosh replies sharply, 'Aye but you'll leave on 70 minutes anyway, so it doesn't matter if he comes on or not!' The three of them laugh. 'Alright then, who are you watching Macca?' asks Hitchcock mockingly, 'No one really, I wanna get a look at Thompson, he'll never play for our lot, he can't play in a two, but I'll put my report in anyway just to cover myself'. 'We've watched him a few times Macca, half of our lot like him, the other half don't', responds Morris quickly, 'they keep telling me everything he can't do, why not tell me what he can do! Scouts don't do that enough these days'. They all nod in unison.

The game kicks off. I hear a rush next to me as Townsend, one of the good guys, middle aged, former analyst squeezes into the seat next to me. 'Evening. Didn't think I was going to make it, just got here from an Under 23s game', he says, panting. 'Managed to get something to eat on the way here though, so that's a win, I'll put that on the expenses!' He immediately opens a professional looking folder full of scraps of paper, team sheets, jottings of formations and other ambiguous scribbles. 'I see we're sat behind the geriatrics' he says with a laugh and immediately starts writing on his pad with an expensive looking biro. He's writing a report on every player tonight. 'Two or three lines on every player, that's what you need to do' is one of his signature phrases.

The game isn't great, there's no real ebb or flow, the ball changes hands frequently on a bobbly, muddy pitch. Both sides are jam packed with older players who've made their money and careers in the higher leagues and don't look too enthusiastic about a lower league game on a wet December night in the northwest of England. There's a smattering of interesting players, an 18-year-old on loan from a top division side, a few Academy graduates in their early 20s but they can't impose

themselves on such a disjointed game. I look down at Summers, he's on his phone again. He can't have watched more than 5 minutes so far in the first half. Townsend nudges me, 'Look at that twat, some scout he is, he's been on his phone the whole time'. He shakes his head with his eyes still fixated on the game, 'Apparently, he's on £100K. He only got the job because he used to play with the gaffer there. Classic football nepotism, what a joke. I hear he's on the take as well'. I ask him what he means, he replies, 'He's using the same agent all the time, Jake reckons he's taking a cut of every deal!'

There's a break in play due to a heavy tackle and the players jog over to the dugout for a mouthful of water and some angry exchanges with their respective managers. I take a moment to listen to the old boys sat in front, it's typical scouting chat. 'That centre half's got a foot like a sheriff's badge! He nearly took someone's head off with that pass earlier' laughs Hitchcock. Then Morris responds, 'Yeah, but he's better than the lad they've got at centre back, look at him (pointing), bloody lazy' which was more racial slur than any serious assessment of physical effort, and totally oblivious to the fact that the player in question is born in England and of African descent. 'Speaking of which, have you seen Godson at our place? He's a lazy git, he's alright on the ball but he doesn't want to defend', quips McIntosh angrily. 'Yeah, heard he's got a bad attitude Macca?' asks Hitchcock with a sharp turn of his head. 'Oh aye he has, so the Gaffer tells me. He couldn't tackle a fish supper, he's weak as piss!' The three laugh in unison as the play gets underway again.

'How bad's this?' Townsend asks about the game as we near half-time. I've lost count of the number of times I've checked my watch and rubbed my knees to try and warm myself up. 'Look at him! He's having an absolute nightmare!' shouts Morris as a midfield player tries to turn and run back on the heavy playing surface, 'My missus would beat him in a race and let me tell you, she ain't quick!' The rear-guard laugh and nudge each other as the ball goes out of play for yet another throw-in.

After a spirited three minutes of stoppage time the half-time whistle blows, 0-0. The fans clap with the same enthusiasm that Townsend and I feel as we trudge up the steps and into the lounge, where there's a crinkled A4 sheet of paper stuck down with blue tack displaying: Scouts and Media, clinging to the door. Hitchcock, Morris, and McIntosh are already in there with their cups of tea and curled up cheese sandwiches. Townsend and I sit on a separate table. You can still hear the three old timers chatting away, 'How's the new bloke at your place? The new Head of Recruitment or whatever' asks Morris. 'Seems alright' replies Hitchcock, 'I've not met him yet but he was alright with me on the phone'. 'You want to see if you can get more out of him than 40p a mile and a sausage roll on the way home' responds McIntosh, with a laugh and a mouthful of sandwich.

Johnny comes and sits next to us, 'Alright guys?' I don't know his surname, just the club he works for. He's in his early 20s, wet behind the ears, carrying an iPad. 'What do you think of Dickinson?' he asks about the 18-year-old loanee. 'He's okay' replies Townsend, 'But he can't get into the game'. Johnny responds sharply, 'His stats are amazing, one of the best in the league for his attacking output'. You can almost feel people's eyes roll as they're sat around the table. 'How are things at your place Johnny?' asks Simon who's a Recruitment Analyst in his mid-30s. 'Not great. I'm working with a really boisterous Manager' Johnny replies, lowering his head. 'I'm sat in with the coaches and everyone's got an opinion. It wasn't like this at my last club, it's incredibly stressful'. 'How did you get that job, Johnny?' asks Townsend. 'I just rang the Chairman up, went in for a chat and he gave me the job. It's great, I love it' says Johnny, with an unconvincing smile, 'It doesn't feel like a job to me, it's an unhealthy obsession. I'm at this game tonight, one tomorrow and two at the weekend'. The conversation ends with some unenthusiastic nods of the head and an equally uninspired 'great' from Townsend.

I look round the room, there must be 40 scouts here. The majority sit hunched over their cups of tea and sandwiches. Two former players-turned-scouts stand by the door exchanging war stories. 'It's bloody crap this game' one of them says. I recognise his face but don't know the name, 'I'm getting off at 65 minutes'. The other, Gaz, replies 'I won't be far behind you, I'm at the training ground tomorrow then off up to Scotland on Thursday'. I feel a hand on my shoulder, it's Smogga. Mid-60s, former council worker, good, honest bloke. 'Hello young man' he says with a smile, we shake hands and exchange some scouting small talk, 'Going well your lot? What's the new gaffer like? How's Will getting on? Heard about Nigel?' He starts telling me all about his current role, like many on the job, it doesn't sound great. He continues, 'We still don't know our roles. On the day the new guy came in, he should have sat us down and said, "your our role's this, you do that" but that never happened. We still need that to happen because no one knows what they're meant to be doing'. I nod away and try and provide some reassurances, but I know it's the same story for a lot of us, 'I'm getting 25p a mile at the moment and going to the same bloody grounds every week. It's ridiculous' he says with a frown. Over the old tannoy comes a crackled message, 'Please welcome the players back onto the pitch' and the Nowhere Men make their way onto the concourse and up the crumbling steps to their seats.

The temperature has dropped, the players look a bedraggled bunch as the referee gets the second half underway. The two former players, Gaz and his mate have come and sat just behind Townsend and me, cups in hand. They're chatting away, 'Listen, nothing ever really gets done with the players you flag up. It all gets lost in data doesn't it?' says Gaz flippantly. 'You're right there. It's like when I signed

Jimmy C., we had a load of reports saying he was no good with the ball and couldn't defend but I goes into the Gaffer and says, "Listen, he can run, don't worry about that" and look at him now Gaz, it was a great signing'. Townsend nudges me and winks. 'That's your only currency isn't it? saying 'I signed him', but we all know it's never just one person, it's the whole scouting team, the coaching staff, the Sporting Director or whoever' he says wryly, 'classic ex-player chat'. The next minute a heavy tackle flies in and both sets of players surround the referee. I look around, the scouts are on the edge of their seats, almost like fans, except Summers of course who's still on his phone. 'Ehh Gaz, I love it when a game gets tasty' he says excitedly. All of a sudden, the game springs into life and there's goalmouth action, chances for both sides, bookings being handed out left right and centre. The emotion of the game is infectious and the Nowhere Men have started to take a real interest.

The game reaches the 77<sup>th</sup> minute and it's still 0-0. A fresh-faced lad steps off the bench and takes his tracksuit off, it's Gerry Jordan, the player Hitchcock has come to watch. I look over to the three old boys, they're already heading up the concrete steps to the exit. Hitchcock looks round at the pitch and sees Jordan ready to come on, 'Bloody typical' he says, throwing his arms in the air as he trudges up the steps. 'Don't worry Hitchy' says Morris calmly, 'You'll get a chance to watch him another time. It's late and you've got a long drive ahead of you'. The nameless scout on the other side of me looks me in the eye and smiles, 'Can you believe it? He's come all this way to watch one player and he's not even going to get to see him'. I smile and laugh in agreement. 'Chris Dennis by the way' and he says which team he works for, we exchange a few pleasantries, establish our mutual connections which is serious currency in this game. 'I'm from an analysis background, me' he says with almost an embarrassed air, 'But scouting's a different ballgame altogether'. We both turn back to the action as the home side miss a guilt-edged chance at goal. 'I get no direction from the club really, I'm just here taking the game in and making as many notes as I can. I put my report up on the system but I've got no idea if anyone reads it'. I nod sympathetically, I know that feeling. 'Here, can I get your number? I'll give you a bell sometime'. We exchange numbers, unaware of just how valuable that connection could be in the future.

'Here lad, are we getting off?' says Gaz behind. 'Too right, you said you'd be away by the 65<sup>th</sup> minute'. The ball rolls out of play for a throw-in. It's minute 81 now and there's a mass exodus. 'Nice to meet you, I'll give you a call' says Chris as he shakes my hand and jogs up the steps. Summers has gone too. There's only me, Townsend and young Johnny left. Johnny's tapping away on his iPad, oblivious to those pushing past him in a rush to get to their cars. 'He's naïve but credit to him he sticks around and does the job' says Townsend.

Minutes pass slowly as the players tire and the pitch worsens. I decide it's my time to go. There's nothing for me to see here but I never go before 87 minutes, it feels wrong to go any sooner. I make my way out as quickly as I can, past the stewards and those still busily working in the concourse and into the rain. As I hear a rambunctious response from the crowd following what I can only assume to be a heavy tackle or a poor refereeing decision, I bump into Harold, a scout for a Premier League club, smoking a cigarette on his way to his car. 'What did you think of Dickinson tonight?' I tell him my thoughts. 'I love him, me, I absolutely love him' Harold responds after expelling a plume of smoke into the cold night air. 'He's got everything, he's big, quick, strong, direct, mobile, sharp...' He carries on in this fashion for another minute or so, listing a plethora of synonyms for the word 'fast' before we part ways and he heads down a side street. 'I prefer parking here, you can get on the motorway quicker. Ta-ra mate'. I feel my phone vibrating, it's an unknown number, I answer, it's Chris Dennis. 'How bad was that? I couldn't take anymore of that game' he says. 'How did it finish up?' I tell him I don't know, I've left early too. 'I've not got a clue why I was there mate, we've always looked at much better leagues and players than that, but this new fella's come in and he wants us to look at the lower leagues, it's bizarre'. Chris clearly wants to talk as I reach my car, open the door and jump in as quick as I can with my coat still on and put the heater on full blast. 'I've watched these teams for years, I watch them on video too, I know who the best players are but when I put them forward, I get a blank look or get told they're shit. The club's an embarrassment'. I'm getting another call, it's my boss, Warren. I need to take it, I apologise to Chris and tell him I'll call him back soon. Warren's on his way back from another game. 'Well the game wasn't great but it was competitive enough, Jennings did well, the Gaffer likes him, I think we might try and take him in January'. I don't really like Jennings personally, but I responded something like, 'Okay, yeah, great'. I don't want to disagree with him really, he's the boss and what he says goes. 'Who did well at your game?' I tell him about Dickinson, the 18-year-old loanee, he replies coldly, 'Nah, don't like him unfortunately'. I try to change the subject onto players we both like or players I think he likes but he's fairly non-committal. 'Where are you on Saturday?' he asks. I tell him, my heart sinks as I utter the name of that club. Early in my career I would have felt excited about going to a game at that place, but it's a long drive and I'm pretty confident there's no players of interest for us there. 'Should be a good game that, make sure you report on Potter' Warren replies sharply. Again, a player I've watched before who I don't think is good enough to be signed, 'No worries, will do' I mutter. 'Okay pal, I'll see you next week for that scout's meeting. Cheers mate, bye...bye' and hangs up.

The End



## Song

### *'40p a Mile and a Sausage Roll'*

Music and lyrics composed by Craig Lawlor, 2023

*(Chant/folk beat in the style of Bob Dylan or Billy Bragg)*

We're just a bunch of *Nowhere Men* finding players here and there  
When I see a talent I stop and stare  
When they do something unique it really makes me smile  
As long as I get my 40p a mile

Chorus/refrain (all):

*40p per mile and a sausage roll, my data reveals my professional role,  
Questions and motives and identity, the real outcomes of my... 'Scout-ology!'*

It's not a science, we're not flying to the moon  
But the Manager, Chief Scout and I aren't singing the same tune  
When I stop and think about it, I don't really know my role  
But at least I get expenses and a sausage roll

There's a player here today he's big, he's quick, he's strong  
But my line manager and I don't get along  
One day it might culminate in an ugly club wide fight  
Cos I'm sick of watching Accrington every Tuesday night

Chorus/refrain (all):

*40p per mile and a sausage roll, my data reveals my professional role,  
Questions and motives and identity, the real outcomes of my... 'Scout-ology!'*

I'm not sure what I'm doing here we have no philosophy  
It's feels like I'm paralysed by ambiguity  
Did you hear about Bob? He got sacked by text  
And now I'm wondering if I'll be next

I do it for the buzz – Wow we've got someone!  
I watch players all day but the job's never done  
When football's good - It's great, it's unbelievable!  
But our targets are unrealistic and unachievable

Chorus/refrain (all):

*40p per mile and a sausage roll, my data reveals my professional role,  
Questions and motives and identity, the real outcomes of my... 'Scout-ology!'*

I want it to go on for as long as it can - I love it!  
But most days I feel like a hypocrite  
Scouting is a privilege - The best job in the world!  
This is what it's like being-in-the-scouting-world

I'm growing tired and weary of going to these games all alone  
I've never met my boss but he seems nice on the phone  
I don't know who I'm watching and what's worse I don't know why  
But at least the club will pay for my butter pie

Chorus/refrain (all):

*40p per mile and a sausage roll, my data reveals my professional role,  
Questions and motives and identity, the real outcomes of my... 'Scout-ology!'*

If you're not sure about being a scout, you should get out now  
All those ex-players are holier than thou  
I spent years in the industry, I don't want to stand here and gloat  
But for my hard work I got a Blackburn Rovers coat

## Conclusion

From the story and the song we see the confusion, the angst, the enthusiasm (and lack of), the anxiety and ambiguity, the heart sinking feeling of being-in-the-scouting world. We experience the paradoxical nature of being a football scout, clinging on to meaning which is not in the successful recruitment of players, it's not the glamorous role some may perceive it to be. The reality is that scouting comes with little recognition or reward for the majority. However, we see the shared, lived scouting experience where groups of scouts gravitate towards similar, likeminded people, where despite some conflict and loneliness, they find meaning in being a football scout. As Heidegger states, being is always being-with, all our lived experiences are shared with, and in relation to others (Heidegger, 1927/1962). We also see scouts striving to survive in an unstable industry, fearful of losing their job, or their life as they know it. Again, paradoxically, they seem to do it for the love of the game, the thrill of the fight, but they still leave the matches early.

Aside from challenging the researcher's preconceived ideas of the role of the football scout and presenting novel results relating to being in the football scouting world, this article calls for further inquiry into, and use of, creative methods in

dynamic socio-cultural settings, as it gets to the heart of the experience, and seemingly tells us more about the realities of the lived experience. Creativity in research is so often dismissed (Braben and Dowler, 2017) but it is hoped this article has evidenced the value of this ongoing, reflective approach to uncover lived experience and meaning, particularly in the philosophy and methodology of Hermeneutic Phenomenology. All the findings; principally the story and the song, are crafted from legitimate qualitative data but expressed in a more accessible, less distant, more inclusive manner. It is hoped the reader might have felt accompanied to walk through the scouting world, and maybe relate to other scouts' experiences through creative descriptions. As Smythe (2011) encourages, we should open ourselves up to a journey of thinking as our knowing emerges. This allows a reconnection with what it means to be human, discover afresh what is already known but perhaps forgotten, hidden or put aside. It exposes vulnerability and resilience, dread and hope, sadness and joy. It identifies things celebrated and things despaired of, and crucially in this context, it reveals the experience of what it means 'to be' in the scouting world.

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## JQRSS Author Profiles

**Craig Lawlor**<sup>1</sup> is a Senior Lecturer and PhD researcher in Sports Coaching and Performance Analysis at the University of Central Lancashire. Email: [CLawlor2@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:CLawlor2@uclan.ac.uk)

**Clive Palmer**<sup>2</sup> is a research supervisor in the School of Sport and Health and a doctoral education lead in the Graduate Research School for the University of Central Lancashire. ORCID-ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-2811>  Email: [capalmer@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:capalmer@uclan.ac.uk)

## Reviewer Comments

This paper brings you up close and personal with the realities and actualities of the football scouting world, affectionately named here as ‘scout-ology’. By employing thick description and inviting the reader into the scouting (under)world, the authors effortlessly evoke a sense of *being-there*. Through the immersive experience of storytelling and song, the authors capture the essence and complexities of football scouting; from witnessing casual forms of racism and sexism to the micropolitics and nepotism associated with a tight-knit network of ‘insiders’. Notably, the authors make a meaningful contribution to a somewhat neglected area of research. By applying novel methodological approaches, they push open the door into a research area still in its infancy, whilst, at the same time, applying these novel methodological approaches helps them to gain increasing traction in contemporary qualitative research. While this paper is based on data that is both context- and geographically-bound, it certainly *gets to the heart of the experience* of football scouting. Now that the authors have ‘submitted their report’, it is for the wider football and research community to ‘take notes’ and offer some clarity to a scouting world shrouded in ambiguity.

