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Exploring How Soccer Players with Perfectionism Navigate Challenges in Talent Pathways

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Abstract

The study provides a qualitative exploration of how soccer players reporting perfectionism navigate challenges in talent pathways. Eighteen players (10 female, 8 male, *M*age = 16.17 years, *SD* = 3.47) from talent pathways with higher levels of perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions (1*SD* above the mean of samples from previous studies) participated in semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Using semantic thematic analysis, seven themes were identified: cycles of anxiety, sadness at being a substitute, self-criticism and hopelessness during slumps, ruminating on mistakes, worthless when injured, shame in success and intolerance of defeat, and psychological distress. Participants experienced heightened anxiety, especially when substituted, and responded to poor performance, mistakes, and injuries with self-criticism and unhelpful emotions. Post-match, they ruminated over both success and defeat, with some reporting extreme psychological difficulties. The findings highlight how aspiring soccer players perceived perfectionism as a barrier to overcoming challenges and impeded both their performance and wellbeing.

Keywords: qualitative; perfectionistic reactivity; football; cognitions; emotions

1. Introduction

Talent pathways play a crucial role in the development and success of aspiring soccer players. In the United Kingdom (UK), club-based talent pathways (e.g., academies) are the main route to professional level, offering high-level training and support. These pathways focus primarily on competitive success and professional advancement, contrasting with other sport systems that may prioritise participation (Conn, 2017). In recent years, significant financial investment has been directed towards the development of soccer talent, especially in bridging youth development to professional teams, such as those in the Women's Super League (FA Communications, 2023). Scotland's talent system is well established for the men's game but is still evolving for women's soccer. Despite considerable investment in this system and its importance to the game, research has only recently begun to focus on better understanding the experiences of the players within these settings. As such, there is considerable scope to explore the accounts of players across different contexts and systems (Simpson et al., 2022).

Talent pathways aim to develop the physical, tactical, and psychological skills required to handle the pressures of soccer at international and professional levels (Junge et al., 2000). However, only an extremely small percentage of youth athletes achieve senior international honours or professional status (Calvin, 2017). These pathways can therefore be highly pressurised, often normalising a need for perfection and irrational beliefs, which can harm players' mental health (Jordana et al., 2023). Accounts of both male and female soccer players often allude to an intense drive for perfection and the presence of a pervasive sense of evaluative scrutiny (e.g., Culvin, 2023). However, research explicitly examining perfectionism in these settings is limited. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how perfectionism influences soccer players' ability to navigate the challenges they

encounter and whether perfectionism helps or hinders their coping mechanisms in this context.

1.1 Multidimensional Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality characteristic which reflects the perceived need to perfect the self (Hewitt et al., 2017). One popular way of studying perfectionism is using Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model that includes three trait dimensions: self-oriented (SOP; perfectionistic standards directed toward the self), socially prescribed (SPP; perfectionistic standards perceived to be directed from others), and other-oriented perfectionism (OOP; perfectionistic standards directed toward others). The model emphasises both intrapersonal and interpersonal elements of perfectionism. As such, it offers a fuller understanding of what it means to be "perfectionistic" at trait level (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). It is arguably the most comprehensive account of perfectionistic behaviour available and has been widely applied in many contexts including sports research. Research in sport has shown each of these trait dimensions of perfectionism to confer some degree of risk for athletes that is evident across motivation, performance, and wellbeing outcomes (see Hill et al., 2018). Socially prescribed perfectionism is the most problematic for athletes whereas self-oriented perfectionism appears to be a vulnerability factor. Other-oriented perfectionism is the lesser examined of the three in sport and is associated almost exclusively with interpersonal, rather than personal, difficulties (e.g., Rodríguez-Franco et al., 2023).

These three dimensions have also been examined in research in a soccer context. Based on that research, SOP appears to be somewhat ambiguous as it is related to both positive and negative emotional experiences. For example, SOP (and similar dimensions) has been found to be positively related to both excitement (e.g., Donachie et al., 2019) as well as anxiety and depression (e.g., Jordana et al., 2023) in youth academy soccer players. In contrast, in this research and other research, SPP is revealed to be problematic. For example,

SPP has been found to be positively related to dejection, depressive symptoms, and burnout in youth academy players (e.g., Smith et al., 2018). Mirroring broader research trends, research on OOP in soccer is limited compared to SOP and SPP. Nonetheless, in samples of team sports (including soccer), OOP has been found to be positively related to antagonistic emotions towards others such as angry reactions to teammates' poor performance (e.g., Grugan et al., 2020). For aspiring soccer players, then, the experiences of being perfectionistic will almost certainly vary depending on the particular trait aspects of perfectionism they exhibit.

The experiences of perfectionistic soccer players will also reflect the degree to which they are preoccupied with thoughts of perfection. This issue speaks to the difference between 'being perfectionistic' and 'thinking about perfection'. Perfectionism Cognition Theory (PCT; Flett et al., 2018) articulates these differences and serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between trait perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions. Perfectionistic cognitions are frequent automatic thoughts and images about the need to be perfect (Flett et al., 1998). They arise due to deeply rooted cognitive biases that impact the processing of self-relevant information and skew thoughts towards a focus on deficits, inadequacies, and discrepancies from an 'ideal self' (Flett et al., 2018). Traits, by contrast, include information on the different targets of perfection (e.g., self or others) and general behaviours that signal the perceived need to be perfect. The two features are related with those displaying trait perfectionism also typically experiencing more frequent perfectionistic cognitions. However, perfectionistic cognitions may also occur more independently in response to external events, with less apparent behavioural manifestations, and operate subconsciously as a filter for everyday experiences (Flett et al., 2018).

Three studies of soccer players have measured perfectionistic cognitions. The first study demonstrated that youth academy player who experienced more of these thoughts

reported higher levels of anxiety, anger, and dejection prior to matches (Donachie et al., 2018). A follow-up study showed that changes in the frequency of these thoughts may explain the relationship between trait perfectionism and increases in some of these emotions over time (Donachie et al., 2019). For example, increases in SPP were related to more perfectionistic cognitions and, in turn, increases in anxiety and anger recorded prior to three matches. In a final most recent study, using a sample of collegiate athletes that included soccer players, elements of perfectionistic cognitions were found to be related to increases in burnout over time (Crowell & Madigan, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of taking into account perfectionistic cognitions alongside trait perfectionism in order to understand the experiences associated with perfectionism among soccer players.

1.3 Perfectionism and Qualitative Research Methods in Sport

The preceding studies all adopted a quantitative approach. While useful, these studies are unable to capture the full extent of soccer players' experiences. To achieve a more comprehensive and contextualised understanding, qualitative approaches are required (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). These methods allow participants to be understood on "their own terms" (Patton, 1980, p. 22), rather than be constrained by a single theoretical framework. This is something that others have highlighted as important in context of studying perfectionism because of the various ways models can presuppose the effects of being perfectionistic (Hill et al., 2015). In the absence of complementary qualitative approaches, too, there is a risk of creating an artificial, static, and limited view of individuals' experiences (Cohen et al., 2002). This limitation is evident in research on perfectionism in soccer which has largely focused on discrete emotional experiences in specific contexts (e.g., pre-competition emotions) whereas more complex, nuanced, and insightful personal accounts are typical of studies adopting qualitative approaches in this and other areas.

To date, six studies – Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere (2014), Hill et al. (2015), Sellars et al. (2016), Mallinson-Howard et al. (2018), Gotwals and Tamminen (2020), and Fleming and Dorsch (2024) – have employed qualitative approaches to explore the experiences of perfectionistic athletes. Notably, five of these studies combined purposeful sampling techniques and quantitative scores to select athletes and then employed qualitative research methods (season-long diaries, interviews, and/or focus groups) to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Accounts from these studies indicate, for instance, that perfectionistic athletes often link their perfectionism to their goals, values, and the purpose of their sport, as well as to their interpretations of success and failure. In addition, while perfectionism has been reported to serve as an internal source of ‘drive’ or 'momentum’ for these athletes, it has also been found that any disruptions to this momentum can trigger intense and adverse emotional, behavioural, and cognitive reactions. The latter finding may be especially relevant to experiences within soccer talent pathways where the pressure to succeed is immense and challenges are almost constant. This work highlights the complexity and diversity of experiences associated with perfectionism in a sport context.

In the current study, we build on previous work by incorporating both the measurement of perfectionistic cognitions and a qualitative approach to gather insights from soccer players in talent pathways. We used quantitative measures to purposefully select participants with perfectionistic tendencies and then employed qualitative methods to expand our understanding of how perfectionism (trait and cognitions) influences their ability to navigate challenges, with a particular focus on perfectionistic reactivity. Flett and Hewitt (2016) emphasised that individuals with higher levels of perfectionism often exhibit disproportionately heightened psychological, physiological, and behavioural responses to stressors in ways that threaten their wellbeing. These responses may include overtly positive reactions like increased effort, overtly negative reactions such as intense self-criticism, or

more subtle yet potentially harmful responses like behavioural inhibition. While research in sport supports the concept of perfectionistic reactivity – demonstrated through reduced effort, poorer performance, and self-conscious emotions and cognitive reactions following failure (e.g., Curran & Hill, 2018; Fleming & Dorsch, 2024; Hill et al., 2011; Lizmore et al., 2017, 2019) – no studies have specifically focused on this phenomenon in soccer. Given the challenges of studying setbacks in ecologically valid ways, qualitative approaches are well-suited to addressing this gap.

1.4 The present research

The aim of the current study was to explore how soccer players reporting higher levels of perfectionism navigate and cope with the challenges they encounter in talent pathways. In keeping with theoretical suppositions regarding perfectionism, perfectionistic cognitions, and perfectionistic reactivity, we were particularly interested in the accounts of soccer players in regard to their experience of setbacks as they seek success in the sport. The specific research question addressed was: how do talent pathway soccer players with higher levels of perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions respond to challenges in their sporting context?

2. Method

2.1 Methodology

In order to fulfil our aim, we purposefully selected participants using scores on the Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS; Flett et al., 1997), if they were below 18 years old, and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), if they were above 18 years old, along with the Perfectionistic Cognitions Inventory-10 (PCI-10; Hill & Donachie, 2020). Doing so allowed us to ensure information-rich cases for qualitative enquiry. Participants then took part in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative

methods formed the primary focus of the study and main way we sought to understand the experiences of the participants and address our aims. The way we selected participants and then adopted qualitative methods intentionally models other work in this area (e.g., Gotwals & Tamminen, 2020).

2.2 Philosophical Assumptions and Researcher's Positionality

The study adopted an interpretivist perspective underpinned by epistemological social constructivism, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and shared meanings and ontological relativism, which recognises reality as multifaceted and shaped by individual perceptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These philosophical foundations guided the use of qualitative methods to deeply explore the unique and context-dependent experiences of participants. Given the complexities of soccer in the UK–such as the different pathways for men and women, variations between countries like Scotland and England, and financial implications (e.g., Conn, 2017, Culvin, 2023)–qualitative methods are well-suited to capture the nuanced and contextual based experiences of soccer players (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The research team was assembled with the intention of ensuring a range of skills and expertise appropriate to our aims. All members have experience in perfectionism research which informed the study's approach and analysis. The first author is a Caucasian female whose positionality is shaped by an extensive background in playing soccer, particularly within talent pathways, and her experience of delivering workshops to national and school-based programs. This direct involvement in the practical aspects of athlete development has given her a nuanced understanding of the pressures and expectations that soccer players face, especially those with perfectionistic tendencies. Her research history, which focuses on perfectionistic cognitions and the development of interventions in soccer, has also shaped the

approach to this study and interpretation of themes related to perfectionism and stressors in soccer.

These skills and experiences are complemented by other members of the research team. The second author, a Caucasian female with experience in both qualitative and quantitative research and youth sport contexts, served as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2017) and was involved in guiding the research, supporting reflexivity and rigor across all stages, and providing feedback on each part of the study. The third author, a leading researcher in perfectionism in sport, is a Caucasian male who plays soccer and has coached youth and adult soccer teams, bringing both professional expertise and personal perspectives to the study. He also provided guidance throughout each part of the study. The fourth author, a Caucasian female specialising in qualitative methods, assisted in developing the results and themes, and helped orientate the work in regards to different qualitative approaches. The collective background enabled the team to interpret participants' narratives empathetically and insightfully, while ensuring that the findings are contextually relevant and grounded in the realities of competitive sport.

2.3 Participants and Procedure

The present study used criterion sampling, a sub-strategy of purposeful sampling, to select participants based on the following criteria: (a) soccer players who self-identify as perfectionists (b) a score for perfectionistic cognitions (PCI-10) *and* one dimension of trait perfectionism (SOP or SPP) of a minimum of 1*SD* above (+) the mean of the samples from Donachie et al. (2018) and Donachie et al. (2019); (c) male or female participants aged 11-25 years; and (d) those competing in the highest level of soccer for their age group and/or involved in a talent pathway. The age range of 11-25 was selected as it encompasses key periods for perfectionism development (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2002) and peak soccer engagement (e.g., Ford & Williams, 2012). By age 11, players are typically scouted by professional clubs

and can articulate their experiences (Conn, 2017). While those up to 25 years old are usually considered at their career peak, female players in Scotland may still be navigating the talent pathways to break into professional soccer or reach the national team. For instance, one player in the current study was previously part of the under-19 national squad but had continued to be involved in the development system to support her growth and prepare her for potential inclusion in the senior national team. This sampling approach allowed us to capture a diverse range of experiences across different talent development systems and competitive contexts and aided our efforts to explore the influence of perfectionism within different soccer pathways.

Following institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited via gatekeepers (e.g., head coaches/managers) or directly via the lead researcher when they delivered workshops to players at national squad camps or performance schools. Gatekeepers were informed of the study requirements (e.g., completion of questionnaire and potentially an interview) and were asked to invite players meeting the specific criteria to take part. Informed consent or parental/guardian consent and child assent were gained. From a sample of 26 soccer players who self-identified as perfectionists, 22 players (10 males, 12 females, *M*age = 16.31 years, *SD* = 3.73, Range 11 to 25; average years of playing experience = 10.18, *SD* = 3.75) met the criteria and agreed to participate. The female soccer players competed in Scotland at the highest level for their age group (e.g., Premier League) and were part of national squads (n = 10) and/or regional performance academies (n = 10). The male soccer players competed in Scotland at performance school (n = 5), performance academies (n = 1), club-based academies (n = 4) and the North of England at club-based academies (n = 2). Of these, four participated in pilot interviews only (*M*age = 17 years, *SD* = 5.35) and the remaining 18 formed the final sample for interviews (*M*age = 16.17 years, *SD* = 3.47). All participants in the final sample (n = 18) scored highly on PCI-10 with n = 7 also scoring

highly on both SOP *and* SPP, *n* = 10 also scoring highly on SOP, *n* = 1 also scoring highly on SPP (see Table 1).

2.3.1 Participant selection

Athletes ≥ 18 years old completed the HF-MPS (developed for use in adults; Hewitt & Flett, 1991**)** to assess their levels of SOP and SPP. Each subscale contains 15 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Some items were modified to focus participants on perfectionism in sport (e.g., "work" was amended to "sport"). Athletes <18 years old completed the CAPS (developed for use in children and adolescents; Flett et al., 1997) to assess their levels of SOP and SPP. The SOP subscale contains 12 items and the SPP subscale contains 10 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true of me*, 5 = *very true of me*). The stem of the measure was adapted to focus athletes on their participation in sport ("When practicing/playing football (soccer)..."). All participants completed the PCI-10 (Hill & Donachie, 2020) to assess their levels of perfectionistic cognitions. The scale contains 10 items and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *all of the time*). These measures, while originating in quantitative research, were used to identify participants with relevant perfectionist traits, aligning with the interpretivist aim of purposefully sampling participants in order to access rich experiential data. The appropriateness of these tools for sport-specific contexts was established through prior research (Ho et al., 2015; Donachie et al., 2018). In the present study, all subscales exhibited acceptable levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > .70. HF-MPS: SOP = .79 SPP = .88; CAPS: SOP = .70 SPP = .92, PCI-10 = .86). Participant scores on these measures are reported to provide additional transparency and context in both the selection of participants and the accounts they provided.

2.3.2 Qualitative data collection

A semi-structured interview approach was employed to explore how soccer players reporting perfectionism navigate and cope with the challenges they encounter in talent pathways. The main questions were designed to build on previous qualitative studies adopting interview methods to understand perfectionism in sport (e.g., Hill et al., 2015) and to explore experiences in line with Flett and Hewitt's (2016) concept of perfectionistic reactivity. The interview schedule was divided into introductory questions (e.g., "Can you tell me about your football (soccer) experience?"), main questions (e.g., "Can you describe in what way(s) your perfectionism shows itself?") and concluding questions (e.g., "I wanted to better understand your experience of thoughts and feelings related to perfectionism, have we missed anything?"). The interview schedule was redrafted several times before and after conducting the pilot interviews (final schedule available in Supplementary Materials, S1).

To establish appropriateness (Gillham, 2005), the interview schedule was piloted with four self-identified perfectionistic soccer players (see Table 2). The average pilot interview time was 44 minutes (*SD* = 22.72, range: 22-75). The interviewer then worked with a 'critical friend' (a researcher with experience of qualitative perfectionism research; Smith & McGannon, 2018) to examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the structure and questions, which resulted in further refinement of the interview schedule. This process led to four key changes: extending the rapport-building phase with additional demographic and soccer history questions, reframing questions to be more open-ended to encourage detailed responses, revising performance-related questions to prompt recall of specific events, and adding a final step where the interviewer summarised the conversation to give the participants the opportunity to confirm or expand on the interpretations presented. All interviews took place at the participant's training venue or school in private rooms free from distractions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The average interview time was 60 minutes (*SD* = 21.69; range: 36-130). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure anonymity,

transcripts were given an identification code, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed.

2.4 Data analysis

The analysis followed the steps of semantic thematic analysis – exploring the meaning on a surface level – as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This process commenced with data immersion, where the researcher engaged in repeated and active reading of transcripts to ensure a familiarity and thorough understanding of content and to note initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, initial codes were generated in a systematic way across the dataset using line-by-line inductive analysis rather than imposing a framework on the data. Independently, two researchers read and re-read one transcript to identify individual meaning units (e.g., sentences) which were then assigned a code. The lead researcher produced a list of codes, descriptions, and key quotes which allowed for organizing and retrieving meaningful components. The process of coding was iterative, involving ‘checking in’ with a critical friend for every three to four transcripts to enhance interpretive depth and reflexivity.

The codes were used to identify themes by reviewing for similarities and differences and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Although this process was primarily inductive, the researchers acknowledge that their preconceptions influenced the analysis creating interplay between induction and deduction. Some degree of deduction occurred when themes aligned with existing knowledge from previous research and theory. Thus, the analysis involved an iterative process between inductive and deductive analysis. Developing themes were explored and interpreted in greater detail, followed by a review to ensure that they were coherent, consistent, and distinctive. The penultimate step was defining and naming themes, which involved analysis of each theme and considering how each theme fitted with the broader narrative, before producing the report.

2.5 Methodological rigor

Tracy's (2010) 'big eight' criteria initially provided a framework for the current study as we sought to bring rigor to our approach. However, we have also sought to adopt an approach that emphasizes reflexivity and interpretive depth, and to prioritize credibility, trustworthiness, and coherence as markers of quality in line with the guidance of methodological experts such as Sparkes and Smith (2009) and Smith and McGannon (2018). We employed methods including pilot interviews and extensive preparation of interview guides, criterion sampling, and ongoing consultations with a critical friend to support reflexivity throughout the research process. Multiple data sources, including questionnaires and interviews, were used to gain authentic, diverse, and relevant perspectives on perfectionism among soccer players. Additionally, member reflections at the end of the interview were used to facilitate co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participant (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Institutional ethical approval was secured and an audit trail was maintained to support transparency and reflexivity in the decision-making.

3. Results

The data presented in Table 1 highlight the levels of perfectionism reported among the self-identified perfectionists. All participants scored highly on the PCI-10, indicating a frequent presence of perfectionistic cognitions. Among these participants, ten scored higher in self-oriented perfectionism, reflecting a personal drive for perfection. Seven participants scored higher in both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, suggesting a dual pressure from personal standards and perceived external expectations. One participant scored higher in socially prescribed perfectionism, reflecting the influence of external demands and criticisms. Using semantic thematic analyses, seven key themes were identified: (1) cycles of anxiety, (2) sadness at being a substitute, (3) self-criticism and hopelessness during slumps, (4) ruminating on mistakes, (5) worthless when injured, (6) shame in success and intolerance

of defeat, and (7) punishment for failure: psychological distress (see Table 3). For context, all participants identified as a 'soccer player'. Soccer was, at one time, the most significant feature of their life and participants frequently measured their self-worth based on success in their sport. They desired success in soccer, mainly due to its' career potential, and made sacrifices to attain success. Against this backdrop, the essence of each theme is outlined next.

3.1 Cycles of anxiety: "The pressure I put on myself". In the lead up to competition, participants frequently experienced anxiety. Sandra described: "I'm usually nervous before every game whether that is club or country because it still feels the same that I want to do well because…it's not the pressure of everyone else, it's the pressure I put on myself." Anxiety often started the night before competition when preoccupied with obsessive thoughts over what might happen. Ainsley described, "I would overthink things in my head of how the game is going to pan out "What if we lose? What if it's a draw?" Tension increased as the competition drew closer, exacerbated by factors such as poor performance in training or the previous match, fear of disappointing coaches, and the need to prove themselves. James explained, "I want to do it for the coaches as well to recognise I've been trying hard. I get nervous before games, not just because of the coach but because of the occasion for myself, I get nervous." Some participants were most nervous at national camps or trials due to constant comparison to others and the pressure of being surrounded by the best players.

Participants often doubted their abilities and worried before games, as Hayley said, "It makes me feel obviously quite worried before it and then I just kind of doubt myself but then...I doubt myself and then it makes me get wound up." Such self-doubt tended to correspond with feeling less competent than team-mates and when they fixated on achieving unrealistic goals, such as "not making a mistake", as noted by Oscar. Additionally, participants reported heightened anxiety when performing tasks (e.g., shooting) where they lacked confidence. This nervousness sometimes manifested in behaviours such as avoiding

the ball, panicking, or hastily kicking it away. James shared, "I'm a bag of nerves. I am absolutely a bag of nerves. I get the ball and I want to get rid of it."

3.2 "Not good enough": Sadness at being a substitute. Substitution (i.e., not being selected to start or not playing a full game) was a source of concern and stress prior to- and during competition. Molly said, "It is horrible, I don't like the feeling. I hate being on the bench. I know it is good to be on the bench for your country and you are still part of the team, but I hate it." When "left out the team" for one match, Oscar felt, "stressed...I felt really bad about myself. I thought I had failed at everything." Being substituted was often taken as confirmation of not being good enough, resulting in self-doubt and disappointment and meant participants had less time than others to demonstrate ability. Molly said, "I would cry. I would cry. I wouldn't cry in front of [coach]. I would cry in my bed. I would be so disappointed. I am so bad. I am so bad." Participants directed blame and emotions at themselves and others. James described, "It was really gutting. Upset, you feel like a bit of a let-down, you feel angry, you want to blame other people, you want to blame yourself and you don't want to play football (soccer) as much." Some participants willed their teammates to fail, especially those who had "taken" their position. Alasdair said, "you want the person in your position to slip up…you feel left out, you feel not part of the team… it feels like you aren't involved." Participants felt left out, hopeless, and a lack of worth when substituted, as James articulated, "I felt isolated a bit. I felt like there is no way forward now. You felt everyone is looking at you thinking he is not good enough to get into the team." Many participants described not being able to sleep after games they did not play; Ainsley said, "…you didn't sleep because you were thinking about not getting played and you are angry… all of the time." Participants experienced negative emotions (e.g., anger and depression) until they were selected to play again. James explained, "I feel down and then I eventually get over it when I get on and play well so I can start the next again week."

3.3. "I am a loser!": Self-criticism and hopelessness during slumps. Performing poorly resulted in participants engaging in harsh self-criticism (e.g., 'I am a loser'), catastrophic thinking (e.g., 'I can't do better anymore'), and relentless questioning about not meeting their standards, as Wendy recounted thinking, "I am playing so badly. Why am I not playing well?". Such thinking disrupted participants' concentration during a match, as Oscar explained, "you have lost your focus… and it doesn't feel very good." When playing poorly, participants described engaging in thoughts about escaping the game and sometimes about quitting soccer. Britney said, "If I play bad, it just really bothers me then my automatic feeling is 'I don't want to play anymore, I want to quit.'" Participants expressed feeling dissatisfied and helpless, as Jade stated, "I never felt satisfied with my performance and if I am not satisfied with how I am training and how I am playing, I stop enjoying what I am doing. I don't want to go to training." Feelings of frustration and anger were also apparent, as Greg said, "Annoyed…if I am not doing as well, then I will get annoyed with myself and I will start to shout out in games." Emotions were heightened when others (e.g., coaches, scouts) were watching. Greg also said, "Frustration, I know that I am better than what I am showing so if someone is coming to watch me for first time and I have had a bad game then they will not think much of me." The feeling of frustration and anger sometimes manifested in physical aggression towards others, as Peter described:

> I was getting frustrated, and you could tell because my performance wasn't so good. I ended up kicking out...I ran up behind him and took him clean out completely…He was always better than me and that was frustrating me; that is why I lashed out.

Some participants described their tendency to overreact. Ainsley said, "too often I react to things that I don't need…I over-react…I react over the top. I act over-dramatic and it doesn't need to be. I am a total drama queen."

Immediately after a perceived poor performance (as early as in the changing room or the journey home), participants were consumed by negative thoughts about their own play and withdrew from social interaction. Greg said, “It was quite bad, my team actually won this game, but I wasn’t happy with the way I played…After the game, I didn’t speak in the car and in the changing room. I was just thinking about the game.” Participants ruminated about what they “should” and “must do better” which seemed to leave them feeling angry and dejected, as Karen described, “I feel down, and I feel like everything is against me when I have done it. I just feel angry like I said. ‘I should have done better, I should have did this’”. Rumination and mood were intertwined for some participants. Kyle explained, “It is like a circle. I feel bad and then thinking about feeling bad just makes me feel even worse and it just keeps going. It keeps going round and round.” Replaying negative parts of performance disturbed participants’ sleep and recovery. Billy described when he played badly:

> I get really really angry, and some decisions I have made in my head it just plays about in my mind for hours and hours…I will just be thinking “why did you do that? What was going on in your head when you played that pass? You know that wasn’t the right pass so why did you play it?”…It makes you think more which stops you from sleeping.

Rumination about poor performance also impacted some participants’ concentration and motivation in other contexts. Oscar stated, “Sometimes I lose my focus in school a little bit because that’s [poor performance] what I am thinking about.” Wendy said, “It just affects my motivation to do stuff, so trying to do [university] work if I am in a bad mood, I won’t really do it because I won’t be concentrating enough so it stops me doing stuff I should be doing.” This mindset led participants to consciously downgraded their effort in training because they believed it held little value if it did not transfer into a perfect performance. Bryan would think, “‘I can’t be arsed training today’ or ‘why am I doing this?’ or ‘I would rather be still in

bed'…Just don't want to [train]...it makes you feel like it's not worth doing or trying if I've had a bad game." Being consoled by others helped some participants feel better. Britney said, "Until I was reassured by someone that it was alright or I was convinced by someone to go…It was just always reassurance I needed. I would feel hopeless, unliked and shitty. Like I was just a shitty person."

3.4 "The end of the world": Ruminating on mistakes. Beyond performing poorly, participants were particularly sensitive to making mistakes, perceiving even minor errors as catastrophic. Britney stated, "I can't just make an ordinary human mistake without it being a big deal...any little mistake was like the end of the world". This hyper-sensitivity to mistakes triggered harsh self-criticism, as Ben described, "I made a bad pass, I would really moan at myself for it. I would shout at myself during the game…and would hate myself the whole game." Mistakes, no matter how small, were seen as failures and signs of inadequacy, leading participants to ruminate about their errors. Jade said, "My idea of a key mistake could be literally messing up one kick. If I make one mistake in the game, then I would think about that." This rumination and worry created a vicious cycle; where dwelling on past mistakes increased anxiety about future ones, making them more likely to occur as Hayley said:

> I keep thinking about that one mistake, I think about it too much and then I end up making it again which makes me get angrier at myself and like inside of my head, I just get angrier because I knew that I already made that mistake once and if I make that mistake again then I know that I shouldn't have done it.

This cycle often led to strong emotional reactions, including anger, frustration, and annoyance. Karen described, "I would feel like if I didn't get it perfect, I would feel angry, I would feel upset and I would think 'why have I not got this done right?' and then I would feel down." Participants viewed fixing their mistakes as paramount to success, often spending excessive time deliberating how to fix their mistakes, which only deepened their feelings of

sadness and frustration. Wendy said: "I go in a bad mood then it just gets worse because I just keep thinking and thinking about [mistake] and then I just get too hard on myself…" While some participants focused on self-correction, others directed their emotions outward, sometimes lashing out at themselves with intense self-criticism or at opponents, teammates, and coaches. Ben admitted: *"*If I do something wrong, I will get on at people...I could get myself a booking for mouthing off to opposition players…because I have made a bad pass or done something wrong." Significant mistakes, such as missing a penalty or a key shot, were seen as unacceptable and had a profound and lasting impact. Britney considered giving up football after missing two penalties, "I was looking to give up football. I was at that point if I can't score a fucking penalty in a game." This experience left her avoiding penalties altogether, "If I can't be perfect at taking a penalty then it will just never do it." She continued "I will always think about that game…It gives me the fear – if we get a penalty in a game, people better not look at me because it gives me the fucking fear!"

Some participants experienced self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame, guilt), while others felt unhappy, which impacted their performance through lapses in concentration. Ainsley said, "Upset; I am too upset to think about what I am doing which means I am losing concentration." Karen added "I am too busy concentrating on my mistakes instead of getting back into my position or something. It costs the team." This fear of making mistakes lingered in future matches. Sandra expressed, "On the lead-up to that game and the week after, I was still annoyed because I played bad and remembered it every time I kicked a ball." Ben said, "it puts a downer on your week, it puts a downer on your sometimes two weeks, sometimes three weeks and every game you play in, you are scared of making a mistake again."

3.5 "The worst": Worthlessness when injured. Injury was difficult for participants to process. Wendy stated: "Injury probably gets to me the most…it gets really frustrating watching and seeing people doing well in your position.". Participants experienced intense

emotional reactions at the onset of injury, as Oscar said, “I was crying and everything, I was upset, I was really upset”, and even when injured for a brief period, as Molly said, “The worst. I hated [being injured]. I hated it. I hate life. I hate this. It was so annoying. Upset, angry, annoyed, eh…frustrated.” Emotions were tied to thoughts about the possibility of never being able to play soccer again. Sandra explained, “Genuine worry…I was really upset because it hurt so much and at that time I felt like ‘oh I am not going to play again’…in the end, it wasn’t that bad. At the time, it felt like the worst thing.” When the recovery process was prolonged, participants described frequent episodes of crying due to feeling depressed and isolated. Ainsley said, “I would cry on alternate days for about a month. It was pretty severe and then I couldn’t sleep at night because I was like “oh my god, life!””. Participants felt worthless when injured. Laura said, “I feel almost purposeless...Like I don’t have a purpose when I am injured”. Bryan also said, “It was so annoying, so frustrating, just pointless really because I couldn’t do anything.”

Injury also brought about concerns that other players would progress ahead of them. Greg expressed, “I am out for two weeks, and everybody else is training and I am not. Folk are getting extra hours on me…annoyed.” They became preoccupied with and worried about not attaining their goals. Oscar said, “I was upset again, and I didn’t feel very good about myself and I didn’t think I could achieve what I wanted to achieve if I was injured all the time.” Participants’ thoughts even escalated to blaming themselves for injury. Michelle said, “I should have just not went in for that challenge! If I had waited, then it wouldn’t have happened…I was quite annoyed at myself.” Despite repeated warnings from health professionals, participants rushed their recovery, returned to play too soon, and over-trained in attempt to feel effective again. Karen said, “If I don’t play then I am going to lose my touch and then I won’t get into the starting team…I need to play to show them I can play football (soccer).” Participants expected to be at the same level as before the injury; Jade

said, “you are not good enough because it should be the same as before...” When participants made performance errors, they evaluated themselves harshly, often in comparison to others. Ainsley described, “Frustration…feeling like you aren’t improving because you are comparing yourself to everyone else…suddenly you can’t keep up with everybody and then every mistake you make seems like a failure because you aren’t actually up to that level.”

3.6 Shame in success and intolerance of defeat. There was a common basis as to how participants processed successes and defeats after a game. Where participants experienced performance success (e.g., winning), they tended to discount the positives and instead fixate on negative aspects of performance. Jade said, “If I have one job to do on the pitch and I don't do it, I feel useless. Especially if it’s a game we win comfortably. I’ve failed because I’ve let two goals in…those opponents shouldn’t have scored.” Participants were denied any pleasure from winning when mistakes were made, and instead they felt guilt due to not feeling good enough to be part of a winning team. Ainsley said, “When you make mistakes you feel like you shouldn’t be there, and you always question why you are there.” They also felt undeserving of praise. Karen described, “If I do something that I’ve failed at and I do get the praise, I’m like I shouldn’t be getting this. I don’t deserve it; I shouldn’t have got that.”

Participants were largely intolerant of losing, as Alasdair said, “[Perfectionists] always want to do their best, doesn’t like failure…not doing things right, and doesn’t like defeat in any way. They can take defeat but not gracefully.” Where a defeat was perceived to be directly related to a participant’s poor performance, it proved especially difficult to reconcile as participants often shouldered the blame. Sandra stated, “If we lost then it was due to me then I would feel really bad.” The perceived standard of opponents exacerbated participants’ inability to reconcile defeats. Greg explained, “Frustration in wee [small] games but then annoyed that we are getting beat this amount by a bigger team. We should be able to

compete with the bigger team. I should be playing better." Greg also said, "If it is smaller clubs then and we do get a loss then I am usually quite down and just stick to myself."

A loss to local rivals was particularly crushing, especially in the context of historic rivalries. Alasdair described, "Devastated because it is [club] and we are [club], you just don't want to be getting beat off your biggest rivals and they have now got the bragging rights." Such a loss led to a sense of personal failure and shame. Ben described, "Still just now I don't want to speak about it because it is such a bad defeat and especially to [club] who are your biggest rivals…it is not a great feeling at all." For some, being beaten by any team, whether rivals or not, brought up frustration and sadness. While the stakes for defeat were generally high for these players, they seemed even higher in these circumstances. Peter expressed, "Upset, well I don't cry…I just feel 'argh'; we had them the whole game and it's annoying.' Defeat (i.e., loss/poor performance) left participants feeling less motivated and engaging in undesirable behaviours. Britney articulated, "It would start 'I don't want to be there', 'I want to quit football (soccer)', 'I want to stop playing' that sort of thing. Then I would do unhealthy stuff [self-harm, drinking alcohol, and smoking] in that cycle."

3.7 Punishment for failure: Psychological distress. Psychological distress was especially evident when participants failed to meet perfectionistic standards (whether their own or others') or when unable to strive towards such standards (e.g., injury, non-selection). In these circumstances, symptoms of depression and anxiety worsened, as Jade said, "with depression and anxiety, [perfectionism] makes everything seem ten times worse. It will get me more anxious or more stressed about things, but it also makes me feel worse in the way of my depression." Some participants responded by controlling their eating behaviours or punishing themselves through self-harm. For some, controlling their eating seemed to provide a misplaced sense of achievement and positive affect. Laura said, "I wasn't being as successful as I wanted to be [in soccer] so [not eating] was something I could be successful in, but it was

holding me from being successful as well…" Britney said. "That was my goal…not to eat anything. I was striving to be the best. If I couldn't have that label of being a footballer (soccer player), I would have the label of being the best of 'couldn't eat'." I was and I basically nearly fucking killed myself.". Britney explained:

> [Family] thought it was something from my childhood…its nothing to with my childhood. It's because I wanted to perfect at football. I was overthinking too much over [the off-season] and when I was back at training, I needed to look good, I needed to be back feeling good and I thought stopping eating would make me feel good.

Self-harm seemed to manifest, for some, as a punishment for not achieving perfection in soccer. Jade said, "I will punish myself for doing something wrong…I just can't get out of that cycle in my head like you've done something wrong, you've got to be punished, you need to do it better next time. It's the same recurrent thoughts that happen of being worthless, not good enough." Jade further explained, "Football (soccer) can make me hurt myself. I just felt really angry and agitated and the only way it worked for me to get the frustration out was to hurt myself." For some participants, relentless overthinking and negative self-evaluation coupled with a pervasive sense of inadequacy led to self-harm as a coping mechanism. Jade added, "[self-harm] is linked to my mindset of trying to be perfect and overthinking because I overthink everything and its always negative...It leaves me to believe that I should have done things, everything, completely different and I'm not good enough." The perceived failure to meet standards resulted in severe emotional distress and harmful coping behaviours. For example, when Britney felt *"*shit about football (soccer)", she would do "unhealthy things". She said, "I don't want to play anymore, I will want to eat shit, I will smoke, drink...just stuff that is not any good for becoming a potential athlete. why? I am shit so why bother?"

4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore how soccer players reporting perfectionism navigate and cope with the challenges they encounter in talent pathways. Seven themes were identified, which highlighted a range of emotions (e.g., anxiety) and cognitions (e.g., self-criticism) experienced pre-, during, and post-match. Emotions were fuelled by a fixation on achieving unrealistic standards and self-doubt. When soccer players performed poorly, made mistakes, or experienced non-selection or injury, they were likely to respond with catastrophic thinking, self-criticism, and rumination, and some participants experienced psychological distress. These patterns reveal the specific ways in which players with perfectionistic tendencies respond to and cope with setbacks. These findings are discussed in context of extant theory and research and offer insights into the experience of perfectionism and perfectionistic reactivity in this context.

4.1 The experience of perfectionism and responses to challenging situations

The accounts of the soccer players offer new insight into the emotional experiences associated with perfectionism and, in particular, the interplay between overthinking and anxiety. Anxiety was a prominent emotion for all participants. It was pervasive and formed the "background noise" of most of the affective experiences of participation and competition. They were anxious to do well, concerned about not doing well, and ultimately anxious about the consequences of falling short. The stakes for failure, or even success that was unequivocal, were perceived as exceptionally high, reflecting the players' complete self-investment in achieving success in this context. However, it also reflected a cycle of obsessive and rigid thoughts, a fixation on unrealistic self-expectations, heightened self-doubt, and deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, further intensifying the players' anxiety.

Non-selection and being substituted were especial sources of self-doubt, stress, and anxiety. These events are particularly noteworthy as their impact has not been discussed in other qualitative (or quantitative) studies on perfectionism in sport. The influence of these

experiences belied the routine nature of these events in this context. For the soccer players, not being selected or being substituted appeared to speak directly to their already heightened fears. The public and comparative nature of non-selection or substitution likely intensified the effects and directly upended a sense of progress or 'forward momentum' (see Tamminen et al., 2022). A history of success and experiences of typically being the best players in their age group impeded their capacity to cope with being viewed less favourably to peers and made them ill-prepared for such events. Rather than responding in a reflective manner, they catastrophised and overgeneralised, consistent with the concept of perfectionistic reactivity (Flett et al., 2018).

The challenges of poor performance and mistakes illuminate the cognitive turmoil that athletes with perfectionistic tendences face. Echoing findings from quantitative studies outside of sport (e.g., Besser et al., 2004), participants engaged in a relentless cycle of self-criticism and ruminations - "I should do better" and "need to do better". This internal dialogue, as noted by high-level sport performers in Hill et al. (2015) and in Fleming and Dorsch (2024), underscores a fixation on performance errors which hinders satisfaction and not only perpetuates but intensifies negative emotions in athletes (Flett et al., 2018). The quest to rectify mistakes and improve performance led participants to engage in an exhaustive contemplation of "why" (e.g., why did mistakes happen?) and "what" (e.g., what could they have done differently?) revealing their methods of navigating these challenges. This pattern of mistake rumination (i.e., the inability to stop thinking about mistakes) is characteristic of the cognitive experiences associated with perfectionism (Flett et al., 2018). We have seen some illustration of this process in other research (e.g., Frost & Henderson, 1991), however based on the accounts here the importance of the internal dissonance created by achievement difficulties is underappreciated in existing work on perfectionism in sport.

The results regarding participants' intense emotional reactions and preoccupation with mistakes provide insight into the topics of perfectionism and perfectionistic reactivity. Previous research has shown that perfectionistic athletes often exhibit heightened sensitivity to mistakes (Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere 2014), and experience reduced enjoyment following errors (Frost & Henderson, 1991). In this study, athletes interpreted mistakes as failure, inadequacy, and an inability to excel, perceiving even minor errors as disastrous, leading to the experience of self-conscious emotions. One player described their response as a "circle" – feeling down, worrying about the next competition, and continuing to feel down until they performed well. This experience echoes the cycle of self-defeat identified by Musquash and Sherry (2012) where perfectionistic individuals engage in a repetitive cycle of unrealistic goal setting, failure, and harsh self-criticism. The disproportionate responses observed in this study highlight the difference between regular reflective disappointment and the extreme, pervasive impact of perfectionism. Participants reported feeling "down" when failing to meet their standards, but what distinguishes perfectionistic reactivity is the exaggerated and persistent nature of these emotional responses. These findings suggest that these athletes may need help to interrupt the self-perpetuating 'circle,' process poor performances and mistakes more effectively, and manage the emotional and cognitive impacts of perfectionism.

Sustaining an injury also resulted in catastrophic thinking, worry, and fear about the future, highlighting how perfectionistic athletes respond to setbacks. Quantitative research suggests that perfectionism may increase the likelihood of injury in sport (Madigan et al., 2018). However, studies have not captured the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural experience of injury for perfectionistic athletes. Unique to the current study, participants experienced intense emotional reactions (e.g., depressive symptoms, low mood, and crying spells) even when injured for a brief time and especially when recovery took prolonged time.

The accounts by participants align with quantitative research findings (e.g., Jowett et al., 2018) whereby some individuals were proactive in dealing with injury (e.g., bike sessions), while others used avoidant coping (e.g., missed training). Participants' tendency to return from injury and illness too soon aligns with Flett and Hewitt's (2016) notion that perfectionists are prone to neglecting restorative self-care and demonstrate an unwillingness to rest and recover from exhaustion and injury. This behaviour also offers a potential explanation for why these athletes might be prone to injury or reinjury.

Results related to the processing of success and defeat provide insights to the content of rumination among athletes, which is a novel contribution to the literature in this area. When their team performed poorly or lost a match, participants engaged in counterfactual thoughts (e.g., how they should have done better), perfectionistic thoughts (e.g., how they fell short of their perfectionistic standards), and wishful thinking (e.g., wishing they could fix their mistakes). This tendency to self-blame in the face of failure aligns with previous research outside of sport (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In contrast, after a success or a win, participants would quite often experience anger, shame, and embarrassment, which overshadowed any pleasure they might derive from their achievements. Being successful simply was not enough for many of these players. Previous qualitative studies have documented perfectionistic athletes' resistance to performance satisfaction (e.g., Gotwals & Tamminen, 2020). Building on previous work, we see in the current study that this may be tied to ongoing and protracted periods of rumination that erode a sense of accomplishment (Hill et al., 2015).

The experience of perfectionism in response to challenging situations manifested not only in emotional and cognitive turmoil but also in distinct behavioural responses. One response was avoidance; during training sessions, players would stop trying if they couldn't "get a drill" right, demonstrating reduced effort which has been observed elsewhere (e.g., Hill

et al., 2011). Similarly, in games, some players who missed a penalty reported never attempting one again. In externalising their self-directed frustration, some participants lashed out – kicking opponents, shouting at team-mates and coaches, and even storming off the pitch. This behaviour is consistent with Grugan et al. (2020) who found a link between perfectionism and antisocial behaviour towards others via anger. After matches marked by poor performance, substitution, or mistakes, many players withdrew from social interactions, experienced sleep disturbances, and reduced their training intensity—or even skipped training entirely. Conversely, some engaged in excessive training or returned from injuries prematurely (Flett & Hewitt, 2016). These examples illustrate how perfectionistic reactivity extends beyond internal struggles and influences athletes' actions in ways that can be detrimental to their well-being and relationships with others, both on and off the field.

One of the stark findings of this study is how for some participants the need to be perfect manifested in extreme anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and self-harm. Although quantitative research suggests that athletes higher in perfectionism may be vulnerable to psychological distress, such as depression (e.g., Jensen et al., 2018), accounts of these issues are largely missing from existing qualitative studies in sport. Given the nature of these difficulties and the importance of safeguarding athletes, more research is needed to explore these issues in relation to the experiences of perfectionism among athletes. For the soccer players here, it was evident that the sense of internal and external pressure generated by perfectionism created significant amounts of strain and these behaviours are reflective of this burden. To what degree eating disorder symptoms and self-harm was the direct result of perfectionism is not knowable in the current study but, according to the participants, was a major contributory factor. This notion is consistent with other findings from research (e.g., Vacca et al., 2021; Gyori & Balazs, 2022) and alludes to the need to better understand the most harmful experiences of perfectionism in sport.

4.2 Practical Implications

The findings highlight the need to consider how best to support soccer players with perfectionism, especially in how they appraise setbacks and challenges, which often result in self-blame and self-criticism. Addressing these issues, Watson et al. (2023) found support for the use of an online acceptance and commitment therapy programme for reducing perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions in women soccer players. Another strong indication was provided by Donachie and Hill (2020) who found a cognitive-behavioural therapy self-help book reduced perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions in male and female soccer players. These studies are the clearest indications yet that these issues can be successfully countered in this setting, so we encourage practitioners to revisit this work and consider the approaches used in their applied work. Our findings suggest this type of work may be most effective when taught in relation to specific situations in which perfectionistic reactivity is an issue – dealing with poor performances, substitution, deselection, and injury - rather than in a general context, so we also recommend that this is also considered.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The study has a number of limitations worth considering. We used a small number of quantitative measures to identify participants and are mindful of the various ways this bounds the accounts of participants. In reality, the perfectionism profiles of the soccer players will be exceedingly complex when broadened to other measures of perfectionism and shaped by other personality and contextual factors. We are confident that, overall, our approach provides a strong handle on the experiences of the participants and their accounts are reflective of their perfectionism. However, we encourage future research to explore other aspects of perfectionism, more complex profiles, and alternative means of identifying participants (e.g., self-identification, Hill et al., 2015). Our study relied on a single interview. There would be great value in revisiting participant experiences and perspectives over time

(e.g., Gotwals & Tamminen, 2020), especially at key junctures within talent pathway settings. This type of approach has been used to good effect in soccer academies (e.g., Newport et al., 2021) and other contexts (e.g., Gould et al., 2022). Other qualitative methods may also prove useful in ensuring that perfectionism continues to be understood in context with studies so far typically relying on interviews and focus groups (e.g., ethnographies; Champ et al., 2020). Perhaps most importantly, we believe it is essential that the accounts of those who exhibit perfectionism, however captured, continue to be central to the study of perfectionism in sport, guide theoretical understanding and, eventually, informs the support given to those most affected by it with the issues most important to them (see Smith et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion

The study provided a qualitative exploration of how soccer players reporting perfectionism navigate and cope with the challenges they encounter in talent pathways. In line with perfectionistic reactivity, participants exhibited a cycle of anxiety leading up to- and during performance, particularly when they were substitutes/substituted. Where players perceived poor performance, made mistakes, or experienced injury, they often responded with negative emotions (e.g., dejection) and unhelpful thinking styles (e.g., catastrophic thinking). Post-performance, they struggled with rumination, processing both success and defeat, and experienced psychological distress. Overall, perfectionism was seen as largely unhelpful in managing setbacks and performance difficulties. These findings highlight the need to better support aspiring soccer players with these issues.

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Table 1

Demographic information, perfectionism, and perfectionistic cognition scores (*N* = 22; 4 pilot, 18 final sample)

					PCI-10	CAPS		MPS-F	
Name	Gender	Age	Pathway – Highest Level	Years Played	M	SOP M	SPP M	SOP M	SPP M
Participants who completed pilot interviews									
Jack	Male	14	PS (S)	11	2.40	4.00	2.80		
Alisdair	Male	14	PA (S)	7	1.70	4.00	2.10		
Donna	Female	25	NS (S)	20	2.20			5.40	4.20
Alison	Female	15	NS (S)	7	1.70	3.83	1.60		
Participants who scored higher in SOP and PCI-10									
Oscar	Male	11	CA (S)	8	2.50	4.17	2.60		
Wendy	Female	22	PA/NS (S)	17	3.20			6.60	4.00
Laura	Female	20	PA/NS (S)	10	2.60			6.93	1.93
Hayley	Female	13	PA (S)	7	3.40	4.33	1.20		
Molly	Female	14	PA (S)	5	3.20	4.67	1.90		
Greg	Male	14	PS/CA (S)	10	3.10	4.83	2.60		
Michelle	Female	14	PA/NS (S)	9	2.80	4.17	2.00		
Sandra	Female	15	PA/NS (S)	7	3.10	4.83	2.20		
Ainsley	Female	18	PA/NS (S)	10	3.00			6.27	4.27
Billy	Male	16	PS (S)	10	3.00	3.91	2.60		
Participants who scored higher in SOP, SPP, and PCI-10									
Karen	Female	13	PA/NS (S)	7	3.40	4.92	3.80		
Ben	Male	16	PS (S)	10	3.50	4.50	3.40		
James	Male	16	CA (E)	7	2.80	4.41	3.40		
Jade	Female	17	PA/NS (S)	13	4.00	5.00	4.10		
Britney	Female	25	PA/NS (S)	17	3.80			6.40	5.67
Bryan	Male	17	CA (E)	12	3.10	4.50	3.40		
Kyle	Male	13	PS/CA (S)	10	3.20	4.25	3.50		
Participants who scored higher SPP and PCI-10									
Peter	Male	17	CA (S)	10	2.90	3.66	3.20		

Table 2

Overview of themes

Main Theme	Description
1. Cycle of anxiety: "The pressure I put on myself".	Pre-competition anxiety characterised by obsessive thoughts over potential outcomes. Tension increases as competition approaches, leading to self-doubt, fixation on unrealistic goals, and persistent worry about performance.
2. "Not good enough": Sadness at being a substitute.	The fear of not being selected or playing a full game leads to feelings of inadequacy. Substitution is perceived as a failure triggering self-doubt, disappointment, anger, isolation, and sleep disturbances.
3. "I am a loser": Self-criticism and hopelessness during slumps.	Poor performance triggers harsh self-criticism, catastrophic thinking, and relentless questioning about not meeting standards which leads to disrupted concentration and thoughts of quitting. Feelings of dissatisfaction, helplessness, and frustration often result in anger, annoyance, and aggression.
4. "The end of the world": Ruminating on mistakes.	Mistakes are equated with failure and the inability to be the best which leads to harsh self-criticism and a cycle of worry and rumination that perpetuates further mistakes. This results in feelings of anger, guilt, shame, and dejection, along lapses in concentration and self- and other- directed frustration.
5. "The worst": Worthless when injured.	Injury causes feeling of depression, isolation, and worthlessness. Concerns about falling behind others, not attaining goals, and expectations to be at the same level before injury leads to harsh self-evaluation and frustration. This often results in rushing recovery and overtraining.
6. Shame in success and intolerance in defeat.	Success is overshadowed by a fixation on negatives and a feeling of undeserving, denying any pleasure from winning, and creating feelings of guilt. Defeat is intolerable, especially against local rivals, leading to self-blame, reduced motivation, and harmful coping, along with feelings of isolation and frustration for not meeting expectations (e.g., "should have played better").

7. Punishment after failure: psychological distress.	Psychological distress is heightened when perfectionistic standards were not met or when unable to strive towards these standards (e.g., injury, non-selection). Failure exasperates symptoms of depression and anxiety and leads to adopting harmful coping mechanisms like controlling eating or self-harm. These actions are driven by a misplaced sense of achievement or as a form of self-punishment for perceived failures, further deepening the cycle of distress.

907

908