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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, *Mean* = 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

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1. Introduction

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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).

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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

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

43 **1.1 Multidimensional Perfectionism**

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

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

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

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

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

91 reported higher levels of anxiety, anger, and dejection prior to matches (Donachie et al.,
92 2018). A follow-up study showed that changes in the frequency of these thoughts may
93 explain the relationship between trait perfectionism and increases in some of these emotions
94 over time (Donachie et al., 2019). For example, increases in SPP were related to more
95 perfectionistic cognitions and, in turn, increases in anxiety and anger recorded prior to three
96 matches. In a final most recent study, using a sample of collegiate athletes that included
97 soccer players, elements of perfectionistic cognitions were found to be related to increases in
98 burnout over time (Crowell & Madigan, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of
99 taking into account perfectionistic cognitions alongside trait perfectionism in order to
100 understand the experiences associated with perfectionism among soccer players.

101 **1.3 Perfectionism and Qualitative Research Methods in Sport**

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

PERFECTIONISM IN SOCCER TALENT PATHWAYS

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

130 In the current study, we build on previous work by incorporating both the
131 measurement of perfectionistic cognitions and a qualitative approach to gather insights from
132 soccer players in talent pathways. We used quantitative measures to purposefully select
133 participants with perfectionistic tendencies and then employed qualitative methods to expand
134 our understanding of how perfectionism (trait and cognitions) influences their ability to
135 navigate challenges, with a particular focus on perfectionistic reactivity. Flett and Hewitt
136 (2016) emphasised that individuals with higher levels of perfectionism often exhibit
137 disproportionately heightened psychological, physiological, and behavioural responses to
138 stressors in ways that threaten their wellbeing. These responses may include overtly positive
139 reactions like increased effort, overtly negative reactions such as intense self-criticism, or

140 more subtle yet potentially harmful responses like behavioural inhibition. While research in
141 sport supports the concept of perfectionistic reactivity – demonstrated through reduced effort,
142 poorer performance, and self-conscious emotions and cognitive reactions following failure
143 (e.g., Curran & Hill, 2018; Fleming & Dorsch, 2024; Hill et al., 2011; Lizmore et al., 2017,
144 2019) – no studies have specifically focused on this phenomenon in soccer. Given the
145 challenges of studying setbacks in ecologically valid ways, qualitative approaches are well-
146 suited to addressing this gap.

147 **1.4 The present research**

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

156 **2. Method**

157 **2.1 Methodology**

158 In order to fulfil our aim, we purposefully selected participants using scores on the
159 Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS; Flett et al., 1997), if they were below 18
160 years old, and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), if
161 they were above 18 years old, along with the Perfectionistic Cognitions Inventory-10 (PCI-
162 10; Hill & Donachie, 2020). Doing so allowed us to ensure information-rich cases for
163 qualitative enquiry. Participants then took part in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative

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

168 **2.2 Philosophical Assumptions and Researcher's Positionality**

169 The study adopted an interpretivist perspective underpinned by epistemological social
170 constructivism, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and
171 shared meanings and ontological relativism, which recognises reality as multifaceted and
172 shaped by individual perceptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These philosophical foundations
173 guided the use of qualitative methods to deeply explore the unique and context-dependent
174 experiences of participants. Given the complexities of soccer in the UK—such as the different
175 pathways for men and women, variations between countries like Scotland and England, and
176 financial implications (e.g., Conn, 2017, Culvin, 2023)—qualitative methods are well-suited to
177 capture the nuanced and contextual based experiences of soccer players (Sparkes & Smith,
178 2014).

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

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

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

203 **2.3 Participants and Procedure**

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

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

222 Following institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited via gatekeepers
223 (e.g., head coaches/managers) or directly via the lead researcher when they delivered
224 workshops to players at national squad camps or performance schools. Gatekeepers were
225 informed of the study requirements (e.g., completion of questionnaire and potentially an
226 interview) and were asked to invite players meeting the specific criteria to take part. Informed
227 consent or parental/guardian consent and child assent were gained. From a sample of 26
228 soccer players who self-identified as perfectionists, 22 players (10 males, 12 females, $M_{age} =$
229 16.31 years, $SD = 3.73$, Range 11 to 25; average years of playing experience = 10.18, $SD =$
230 3.75) met the criteria and agreed to participate. The female soccer players competed in
231 Scotland at the highest level for their age group (e.g., Premier League) and were part of
232 national squads ($n = 10$) and/or regional performance academies ($n = 10$). The male soccer
233 players competed in Scotland at performance school ($n = 5$), performance academies ($n = 1$),
234 club-based academies ($n = 4$) and the North of England at club-based academies ($n = 2$). Of
235 these, four participated in pilot interviews only ($M_{age} = 17$ years, $SD = 5.35$) and the
236 remaining 18 formed the final sample for interviews ($M_{age} = 16.17$ years, $SD = 3.47$). All
237 participants in the final sample ($n = 18$) scored highly on PCI-10 with $n = 7$ also scoring

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

240 **2.3.1 Participant selection**

241 Athletes ≥ 18 years old completed the HF-MPS (developed for use in adults; Hewitt
242 & Flett, 1991) to assess their levels of SOP and SPP. Each subscale contains 15 items
243 measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Some items
244 were modified to focus participants on perfectionism in sport (e.g., “work” was amended to
245 “sport”). Athletes < 18 years old completed the CAPS (developed for use in children and
246 adolescents; Flett et al., 1997) to assess their levels of SOP and SPP. The SOP subscale
247 contains 12 items and the SPP subscale contains 10 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale
248 (1 = *not at all true of me*, 5 = *very true of me*). The stem of the measure was adapted to focus
249 athletes on their participation in sport (“When practicing/playing football (soccer)...”). All
250 participants completed the PCI-10 (Hill & Donachie, 2020) to assess their levels of
251 perfectionistic cognitions. The scale contains 10 items and is measured on a 5-point Likert
252 scale (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *all of the time*). These measures, while originating in quantitative
253 research, were used to identify participants with relevant perfectionist traits, aligning with the
254 interpretivist aim of purposefully sampling participants in order to access rich experiential
255 data. The appropriateness of these tools for sport-specific contexts was established through
256 prior research (Ho et al., 2015; Donachie et al., 2018). In the present study, all subscales
257 exhibited acceptable levels of internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha $> .70$. HF-MPS: SOP =
258 .79 SPP = .88; CAPS: SOP = .70 SPP = .92, PCI-10 = .86). Participant scores on these
259 measures are reported to provide additional transparency and context in both the selection of
260 participants and the accounts they provided.

261 **2.3.2 Qualitative data collection**

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

273 To establish appropriateness (Gillham, 2005), the interview schedule was piloted with
274 four self-identified perfectionistic soccer players (see Table 2). The average pilot interview
275 time was 44 minutes ($SD = 22.72$, range: 22-75). The interviewer then worked with a 'critical
276 friend' (a researcher with experience of qualitative perfectionism research; Smith &
277 McGannon, 2018) to examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the structure and
278 questions, which resulted in further refinement of the interview schedule. This process led to
279 four key changes: extending the rapport-building phase with additional demographic and
280 soccer history questions, reframing questions to be more open-ended to encourage detailed
281 responses, revising performance-related questions to prompt recall of specific events, and
282 adding a final step where the interviewer summarised the conversation to give the
283 participants the opportunity to confirm or expand on the interpretations presented. All
284 interviews took place at the participant's training venue or school in private rooms free from
285 distractions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The average interview time was 60 minutes ($SD =$
286 21.69; range: 36-130). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure anonymity,

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

289 **2.4 Data analysis**

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

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

312 **2.5 Methodological rigor**

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

326

3. Results

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

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

342 **3.1 Cycles of anxiety: "The pressure I put on myself"**. In the lead up to competition,
343 participants frequently experienced anxiety. Sandra described: "I'm usually nervous before
344 every game whether that is club or country because it still feels the same that I want to do
345 well because...it's not the pressure of everyone else, it's the pressure I put on myself."
346 Anxiety often started the night before competition when preoccupied with obsessive thoughts
347 over what might happen. Ainsley described, "I would overthink things in my head of how the
348 game is going to pan out "What if we lose? What if it's a draw?" Tension increased as the
349 competition drew closer, exacerbated by factors such as poor performance in training or the
350 previous match, fear of disappointing coaches, and the need to prove themselves. James
351 explained, "I want to do it for the coaches as well to recognise I've been trying hard. I get
352 nervous before games, not just because of the coach but because of the occasion for myself, I
353 get nervous." Some participants were most nervous at national camps or trials due to constant
354 comparison to others and the pressure of being surrounded by the best players.

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

362 the ball, panicking, or hastily kicking it away. James shared, “I’m a bag of nerves. I am
363 absolutely a bag of nerves. I get the ball and I want to get rid of it.”

364 **3.2 “Not good enough”: Sadness at being a substitute.** Substitution (i.e., not being selected
365 to start or not playing a full game) was a source of concern and stress prior to- and during
366 competition. Molly said, “It is horrible, I don’t like the feeling. I hate being on the bench. I
367 know it is good to be on the bench for your country and you are still part of the team, but I
368 hate it.” When “left out the team” for one match, Oscar felt, “stressed...I felt really bad about
369 myself. I thought I had failed at everything.” Being substituted was often taken as
370 confirmation of not being good enough, resulting in self-doubt and disappointment and meant
371 participants had less time than others to demonstrate ability. Molly said, “I would cry. I
372 would cry. I wouldn’t cry in front of [coach]. I would cry in my bed. I would be so
373 disappointed. I am so bad. I am so bad.” Participants directed blame and emotions at
374 themselves and others. James described, “It was really gutting. Upset, you feel like a bit of a
375 let-down, you feel angry, you want to blame other people, you want to blame yourself and
376 you don’t want to play football (soccer) as much.” Some participants willed their teammates
377 to fail, especially those who had “taken” their position. Alasdair said, “you want the person in
378 your position to slip up...you feel left out, you feel not part of the team... it feels like you
379 aren’t involved.” Participants felt left out, hopeless, and a lack of worth when substituted, as
380 James articulated, “I felt isolated a bit. I felt like there is no way forward now. You felt
381 everyone is looking at you thinking he is not good enough to get into the team.” Many
382 participants described not being able to sleep after games they did not play; Ainsley said,
383 “...you didn’t sleep because you were thinking about not getting played and you are angry...
384 all of the time.” Participants experienced negative emotions (e.g., anger and depression) until
385 they were selected to play again. James explained, “I feel down and then I eventually get over
386 it when I get on and play well so I can start the next again week.”

387 **3.3. “I am a loser!”: Self-criticism and hopelessness during slumps.** Performing poorly
388 resulted in participants engaging in harsh self-criticism (e.g., ‘I am a loser’), catastrophic
389 thinking (e.g., ‘I can’t do better anymore’), and relentless questioning about not meeting their
390 standards, as Wendy recounted thinking, “I am playing so badly. Why am I not playing
391 well?”. Such thinking disrupted participants’ concentration during a match, as Oscar
392 explained, “you have lost your focus... and it doesn’t feel very good.” When playing poorly,
393 participants described engaging in thoughts about escaping the game and sometimes about
394 quitting soccer. Britney said, “If I play bad, it just really bothers me then my automatic
395 feeling is ‘I don’t want to play anymore, I want to quit.’” Participants expressed feeling
396 dissatisfied and helpless, as Jade stated, “I never felt satisfied with my performance and if I
397 am not satisfied with how I am training and how I am playing, I stop enjoying what I am
398 doing. I don’t want to go to training.” Feelings of frustration and anger were also apparent, as
399 Greg said, “Annoyed...if I am not doing as well, then I will get annoyed with myself and I
400 will start to shout out in games.” Emotions were heightened when others (e.g., coaches,
401 scouts) were watching. Greg also said, “Frustration, I know that I am better than what I am
402 showing so if someone is coming to watch me for first time and I have had a bad game then
403 they will not think much of me.” The feeling of frustration and anger sometimes manifested
404 in physical aggression towards others, as Peter described:

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

408 Some participants described their tendency to overreact. Ainsley said, “too often I react to
409 things that I don’t need...I over-react...I react over the top. I act over-dramatic and it doesn’t
410 need to be. I am a total drama queen.”

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

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

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

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

441 **3.4 "The end of the world": Ruminating on mistakes.** Beyond performing poorly,
442 participants were particularly sensitive to making mistakes, perceiving even minor errors as
443 catastrophic. Britney stated, "I can't just make an ordinary human mistake without it being a
444 big deal...any little mistake was like the end of the world". This hyper-sensitivity to mistakes
445 triggered harsh self-criticism, as Ben described, "I made a bad pass, I would really moan at
446 myself for it. I would shout at myself during the game...and would hate myself the whole
447 game." Mistakes, no matter how small, were seen as failures and signs of inadequacy, leading
448 participants to ruminate about their errors. Jade said, "My idea of a key mistake could be
449 literally messing up one kick. If I make one mistake in the game, then I would think about
450 that." This rumination and worry created a vicious cycle; where dwelling on past mistakes
451 increased anxiety about future ones, making them more likely to occur as Hayley said:

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

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

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

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

483 **3.5 “The worst”: Worthlessness when injured.** Injury was difficult for participants to
484 process. Wendy stated: “Injury probably gets to me the most...it gets really frustrating
485 watching and seeing people doing well in your position.”. Participants experienced intense

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

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

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

516 **3.6 Shame in success and intolerance of defeat.** There was a common basis as to how
517 participants processed successes and defeats after a game. Where participants experienced
518 performance success (e.g., winning), they tended to discount the positives and instead fixate
519 on negative aspects of performance. Jade said, “If I have one job to do on the pitch and I don't
520 do it, I feel useless. Especially if it's a game we win comfortably. I've failed because I've let
521 two goals in...those opponents shouldn't have scored.” Participants were denied any pleasure
522 from winning when mistakes were made, and instead they felt guilt due to not feeling good
523 enough to be part of a winning team. Ainsley said, “When you make mistakes you feel like
524 you shouldn't be there, and you always question why you are there.” They also felt
525 undeserving of praise. Karen described, “If I do something that I've failed at and I do get the
526 praise, I'm like I shouldn't be getting this. I don't deserve it; I shouldn't have got that.”

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

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

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

550 **3.7 Punishment for failure: Psychological distress.** Psychological distress was especially
551 evident when participants failed to meet perfectionistic standards (whether their own or
552 others’) or when unable to strive towards such standards (e.g., injury, non-selection). In these
553 circumstances, symptoms of depression and anxiety worsened, as Jade said, “with depression
554 and anxiety, [perfectionism] makes everything seem ten times worse. It will get me more
555 anxious or more stressed about things, but it also makes me feel worse in the way of my
556 depression.” Some participants responded by controlling their eating behaviours or punishing
557 themselves through self-harm. For some, controlling their eating seemed to provide a
558 misplaced sense of achievement and positive affect. Laura said, “I wasn’t being as successful
559 as I wanted to be [in soccer] so [not eating] was something I could be successful in, but it was

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

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

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

583

4. Discussion

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

595 **4.1 The experience of perfectionism and responses to challenging situations**

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

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

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

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

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

651 Sustaining an injury also resulted in catastrophic thinking, worry, and fear about the
652 future, highlighting how perfectionistic athletes respond to setbacks. Quantitative research
653 suggests that perfectionism may increase the likelihood of injury in sport (Madigan et al.,
654 2018). However, studies have not captured the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural
655 experience of injury for perfectionistic athletes. Unique to the current study, participants
656 experienced intense emotional reactions (e.g., depressive symptoms, low mood, and crying
657 spells) even when injured for a brief time and especially when recovery took prolonged time.

658 The accounts by participants align with quantitative research findings (e.g., Jowett et al.,
659 2018) whereby some individuals were proactive in dealing with injury (e.g., bike sessions),
660 while others used avoidant coping (e.g., missed training). Participants' tendency to return
661 from injury and illness too soon aligns with Flett and Hewitt's (2016) notion that
662 perfectionists are prone to neglecting restorative self-care and demonstrate an unwillingness
663 to rest and recover from exhaustion and injury. This behaviour also offers a potential
664 explanation for why these athletes might be prone to injury or reinjury.

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

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

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

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

708 **4.2 Practical Implications**

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

722 **4.3 Limitations and Future Directions**

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

733 (e.g., Gotwals & Tamminen, 2020), especially at key junctures within talent pathway settings.
734 This type of approach has been used to good effect in soccer academies (e.g., Newport et al.,
735 2021) and other contexts (e.g., Gould et al., 2022). Other qualitative methods may also prove
736 useful in ensuring that perfectionism continues to be understood in context with studies so far
737 typically relying on interviews and focus groups (e.g., ethnographies; Champ et al., 2020).
738 Perhaps most importantly, we believe it is essential that the accounts of those who exhibit
739 perfectionism, however captured, continue to be central to the study of perfectionism in sport,
740 guide theoretical understanding and, eventually, informs the support given to those most
741 affected by it with the issues most important to them (see Smith et al., 2023).

742 **5. Conclusion**

743 The study provided a qualitative exploration of how soccer players reporting
744 perfectionism navigate and cope with the challenges they encounter in talent pathways. In
745 line with perfectionistic reactivity, participants exhibited a cycle of anxiety leading up to- and
746 during performance, particularly when they were substitutes/substituted. Where players
747 perceived poor performance, made mistakes, or experienced injury, they often responded
748 with negative emotions (e.g., dejection) and unhelpful thinking styles (e.g., catastrophic
749 thinking). Post-performance, they struggled with rumination, processing both success and
750 defeat, and experienced psychological distress. Overall, perfectionism was seen as largely
751 unhelpful in managing setbacks and performance difficulties. These findings highlight the
752 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)

Name	Gender	Age	Pathway – Highest Level	Years Played	PCI-10	CAPS		MPS-F	
					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		

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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.

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