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“It’s a Lifestyle Choice”: The Reality of Work in Men’s Professional Football Clubs in the United Kingdom.

Abstract

Working in men’s professional football can be viewed as a prestigious and lucrative occupation. In reality, this is only the case for few, with many, such as backroom staff, experiencing high workload, stress and pressure in their roles. This paper aims to more adequately assess the reality of working in men’s professional football clubs. 51 backroom staff at professional football clubs across the United Kingdom were interviewed and the data was theorised using a figurational sociological perspective. Working in men’s professional football involved accepting challenges, such as excessive working hours, work-life imbalances and difficulties escaping work. The sacrifices required to work in football were accepted as necessary to survive within the industry. Despite roles being characterised by job insecurity, growing role pressures and an increasingly saturated market, participants typically viewed these as a ‘dream job’, as they had turned their passion for football into a career. While some questioned the long-term sustainability of roles in football, the ‘love of the game’ and fantasy-laden beliefs drove motivations to remain. This research helps further clarify the realities of working life in the men’s professional football industry.

Keywords

Football; Sport Work; Employment; Work-Life Balance; Emotion; Figurational Sociology

Introduction

Men's professional football clubs are significant employers within the sports sector in the United Kingdom (UK). For example, the Scottish professional football sector is estimated to support over 14,000 full-time jobs (Williamson et al., 2026) and in England, the Premier League alone estimates that the league supports over 100,000 full-time equivalent jobs (Premier League, 2025). Over time, the range of pathways and opportunities to work in a non-playing capacity has grown (Mason et al., 2026). Nesti (2010) explained how, following the inception of the Premier League in 1992, staff numbers have grown, where it is common for professional football clubs to have a range of coaching, sports science and medical staff within full-time, part-time and voluntary positions. The composition of backroom teams, which refers to non-playing staff who support the players and manager (also referred to as head coach) with a variety of duties, can vary significantly between clubs. Some clubs, typically those with greater resources, have larger backroom teams with more specialist roles, such as set-piece coaches, nutritionists and data analysts (Bridgewater, 2010). Whereas clubs with fewer resources tend to employ fewer backroom staff. Given the rise in the number of non-playing positions within men's professional football and the perception that professional sport is a prestigious and potentially financially rewarding occupation (Fry & Bloyce, 2017; Purdy et al., 2019), it is no surprise that roles in the industry are attractive, particularly for those with a passion for sport.

Life within professional sport is often romanticised and portrayed as a dream career. There is often a focus on 'extremes', such as how much money

elite players earn (Zimmer & Zimmer, 2001), rather than portraying the experiences of the 'average' person in the industry. Roderick (2006, p. i) made a similar argument, suggesting that his work examined "ordinary" professional footballers, as the lives of most professional footballers do not resemble how they are often presented in the media. This romanticised portrayal of working in football has contributed to the sanitisation of realistic depictions of life in the industry, including documentaries, docuseries, autobiographies/biographies, podcasts, and television coverage. In particular, Amazon's 'All or Nothing' docuseries, produced with Arsenal, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, are presented as providing 'insight' into what life within professional football clubs is like behind the scenes (Higham et al., 2023); however, they offer a sanitised account and overlook many of the challenges experienced by backroom staff in their working lives. There is little supporting academic research to counter these portrayals, and therefore this research aims to provide perspectives more grounded in the reality of the industry. Gilbourne (2012) states that qualitative enquiry of such experiences can help people to escape the one-sided, overly positive view of sport and capture a more realistic picture. This paper aims to offer a more realistic portrayal by the challenges experienced by backroom staff working in men's professional football clubs, examining how individuals manage these challenges and why they continue working in the industry despite issues in their working lives.

Literature Review

The culture within men's professional football clubs has previously been described as "challenging" (Cronin et al., 2020, p. 124), "volatile" (Nesti et al., 2012, p. 23) and "abusive" (Kelly & Waddington, 2006, p. 149). This reflects the

wider sport literature, which explains how the pressure to be successful can develop a ‘win at all costs’ mentality within professional sport, to the extent that working within the sector, as an athlete or support staff, can be challenging. Across wider research, particularly within psychology (Arnold et al., 2019; Bentzen et al., 2020; Pilkington et al., 2022), sport management (Taylor et al., 2019) and coaching (DeWolfe & Dithurbide, 2022; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016), the working culture and occupational challenges experienced by sports workers have been highlighted.

Arnold et al. (2019) examined the experiences of 40 support personnel across athletics, cricket, rugby union, tennis, triathlon and football. They found that issues of work-life imbalance, demotivation, fatigue, tiredness, a lack of job security and monetary concerns were common amongst staff. Knights and Ruddock-Hudson (2016) interviewed Australian Football League coaches, and found similar concerns about work-life imbalances, pressure and loneliness were key components of working in professional sport. While these factors may be present in other industries, the competitive and results-oriented focus of sports work means that many of these issues can be exacerbated (Arnold et al., 2019; Bentzen et al., 2020). Pilkington et al. (2022) explored the prevalence of mental health symptoms amongst coaches and support staff across 32 sports in Australia, finding that participants reported higher levels of anxiety, insomnia and social dysfunction symptoms relative to athletes. These coaches and support staff seemingly viewed these consequences as an accepted part of working in sport (Pilkington et al., 2022). While research (Bentzen et al., 2020; Pilkington et al., 2022), has sought to explain how working in sport can negatively impact work-life balance, there is little further explanation as to why

individuals feel pressure to work these hours and the wider impact on job security and their family – a gap this paper is looking to address.

Within the football-specific literature, there is an acknowledgement of some of the challenges faced in this environment. Baldock et al. (2021) examined feelings of stress and mental wellbeing with eight professional coaches who were currently or had previously worked in the Premier League or English Football League (EFL) Championship. They acknowledge elite sport is an inherently stressful industry, as performance and job security are measured on factors outside an individual's direct control. Although it could be argued that a team's performance does not rely on an individual, they felt that circumstances beyond their control contributed to their stress. Baldock et al. (2021) further explained that issues related to workload, the pressure to gain results, workplace politics amongst non-playing staff and the challenges of maintaining work-life balance were key stressors. They asked participants to identify the three most demanding stressors in their role, exploring their experience of and capacity to cope with these stressors. The pre-structured focus on stressors and negative aspects of working life may narrow our understanding of the broader organisational contexts, interpersonal relationships and everyday practices within which these experiences are situated. Our paper offers a more holistic exploration of the working lives of backroom staff to deepen our understanding of why individuals experience these issues in men's professional football.

Higham et al. (2024) explored the experiences of six coaches working in the first team and academies at Premier League and EFL clubs. They found that

the behaviours and attitudes within football clubs were often promoted by those with high levels of influence, such as the manager, to players and staff under the guise that conformity is required to win. For example, the ‘win at all costs’ mentality often employed by managers was embodied by staff, which led to many feeling that their wellbeing was significantly influenced by team results. The pressure to win to improve job security is particularly pertinent for managers, given the insecure nature of their roles; however, these coaches, according to Higham et al. (2024), similarly felt that team results significantly impacted their feeling of job security. This previous research (Baldock et al., 2021; Higham et al., 2024) has focused almost exclusively on coaches. There is limited acknowledgement of the experiences of a range of people in other roles within a first team setting, such as analysts, sports scientists, medical staff or scouts. This means that current knowledge of employment conditions within football is limited, with a lack of understanding about whether these experiences and workplace challenges are consistent across the broader footballing workforce.

Men’s professional football is a precarious and uncertain labour market (Flint et al. 2016; Gilmore et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Club recruitment practices have created what Parnell et al. (2018, p. 242) called an “endemic stability” problem characterised by high staff turnover. Literature in this area has focussed almost exclusively on the player transfer market (Elliot & Gusterud, 2018; Szymanski, 2010; Velema, 2020; 2021) and the managerial ‘merry-go-around’ (Bridgewater, 2010; Bryson et al., 2021; Galdino et al., 2026; Nissen, 2016; van Ours & van Tuijl, 2016), with less focus on the experiences of backroom staff. Therefore, exploration of how job uncertainty and staff turnover

impact the day-to-day role of backroom staff is limited. Similarly, there is limited understanding about why, despite these issues, individuals seem to persevere with careers in football and there is significant demand for roles in the industry. Gilbourne (2012, p. 12) states that many are “seduced by [the] glitz and glamour” of employment in professional football, while Morton (2014, p. 132) also says that behind much of the glamour of the industry lies “sadness, despair and loneliness”. This paper examines participants’ motivations to work in professional football, exploring how motivations shape their workplace practices and influence the ways they understand, navigate and perhaps normalise the demands of the industry.

Research focussing on support staff (Arnold et al., 2019; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Pilkington et al., 2022; Purdy et al., 2017) has generally been from a psychological perspective, concerning individuals’ experience of and ability to cope with organisational stressors. While this literature provides some insight, it places less focus on the everyday experiences of those within professional sports environments. This overlooks how organisational culture, workplace relations, power balances and working conditions shape everyday experiences. In other words, this literature reduces systemic problems to individual experiences and coping capacities. Appreciating a more holistic view of working life, such as motivations to work in sport, employment processes and day-to-day working relationships can help to illustrate a more complete (and likely more complex) picture of life working in professional sport. With this approach, we aim to place organisational, cultural and relational factors of sports work at the centre of our approach. To do this, a

figurational (or process) sociological perspective will be used. An outline of this theoretical framework will now be provided.

Theoretical Framework

Figurational sociology, first developed by Norbert Elias, places focus on the primacy of process, the importance of social relations and the interdependency of human beings. In a figurational approach, interdependence is central to understanding processes and change, encouraging researchers to examine the relationship between individual and society, rather than analysing them as separate entities (van Krieken, 1998). A key principle of this approach is to consider knowledge as "more extensive, more correct, more adequate", rather than static polarities such as 'true' or 'false' (Layder, 1986, p. 371). This is to bring into focus the primacy of process and to emphasise that social life is not fixed, but it is dynamic and always in flux.

Figurations put human interdependence at the heart of Elias's theoretical approach. This concept allowed Elias to avoid the reification of social life, as if individuals could exist separately from the figurations they comprise – they are bound by interdependence. For this study, the concept helped to position participants within their wider networks of interdependency, both within the club (with fellow backroom staff, managers and players) and outside the club (with friends, family and fellow industry professionals). Examining these relational dynamics and the associated asymmetrical power balances helped to assess how relationships and power impact participants' working lives within a football club. This is particularly important to contextualise the position of backroom staff within the club, given the increasingly complex organisational structures of

professional football clubs (Gondwe et al., 2026; Jacobsen, 2026). Conceptualising power as a dynamic balance enables researchers to evaluate relational configurations more rigorously, identifying the conditions under which individuals possess greater or lesser capacity for action within a particular context (Elias, 2009). This allows for the examination of changes in power over time and at given moments, rather than reifying power and simply asking "who is in control?" (Paulle et al., 2012, p. 78).

To examine these power relations in further depth, the concept of established-outsider relations was applied. This was originally developed by Elias and Scotson (1994) to examine everyday power relations and inter-group tensions within a suburban community referred to as 'Winston Parva'. We use the concept to explore the relationships and power balances within football clubs, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the position of backroom staff within the wider interdependent networks in men's professional football. For example, the concept helped examine the relationship between more 'established' staff, who have worked in football longer, compared to newer, 'outsider' staff. Within this, habitus was also used as a concept to examine predisposed ways of thinking, acting and perceiving within the figuration, particularly to explore social patterns of conduct within football club settings. Elias (2000, p. 368) defined habitus as an "automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control", whilst also referring to it as personality structure, cultural personality makeup and second nature (Kilminster, 2007; van Krieken, 1998; 2001). He used this concept to explore social transformations and explain changing social patterns of behaviours, conduct, and feelings; for Elias, knowledge development did not occur in a vacuum, but within networks of

interdependency. In this paper, habitus was used to examine how individual predispositions and perceptions are developed from being embedded within the football figuration. It was used to explore how particular practices and attitudes had become second nature within their everyday working lives. This helped to explore how power balances impact habitual behaviours and how established members of a figuration influence cultural expectations as the norm for outsiders to conform to.

Finally, 'Shock Experience Theory', a lesser-known concept within Elias's work, was also applied to examine the challenges experienced by backroom staff in adapting to life within men's professional football. This theory was developed by Elias to understand the challenges young people faced when adjusting to becoming working adults. Elias identified eight key problems experienced by young people which made the workplace transition one of shock; however, Goodwin and O'Connor (2006) focussed explicitly on two of these – as we will in this article. These are: 1) the role of indirect knowledge of the adult world; and 2) fantasy versus reality of adult life. This concept has previously been applied in football by Hague and Law (2022) in their examination of the challenges young footballers face when transitioning into full-time academy football. However, there is limited research using this concept to explore adult transitions, which we will address in this study to understand the challenges (or 'shocks') faced by backroom staff in their initial transition to work in men's professional football.

Methods

51 backroom staff working in the first team at men's professional football clubs in the UK were recruited (see Supplementary File 1 for Participant Biographies). These individuals worked in roles such as assistant managers, coaches, kit managers, strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches, sports scientists, physiotherapists, performance analysts, recruitment analysts and scouts across the top five leagues in England (Premier League, EFL Championship, EFL League One, EFL League Two, National League) and top two in Scotland (Scottish Premiership and Scottish Championship). Of these 51 participants, 49 identified as male and two female. Ten had professional playing experience in the men's game. The length of time participants had worked in a first team environment ranged from 4 months to 14 years, with an average of 5.84 years. Due to the difficulty of recruiting participants within men's professional football (Law, 2019), three sampling strategies were employed. Firstly, convenience sampling was used, using the authors' contacts within the football industry, as the lead author had previous voluntary experience working as a first team scout and the third author was a former professional footballer. Secondly, purposive sampling using LinkedIn was used to approach individuals who had specific characteristics which made them suitable for the study. Finally, a snowball sampling strategy was employed to recruit additional participants from the initial sample.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Despite potential limitations in capturing non-verbal cues and connection faults impacting the flow of the interview (Clark et al., 2026), online interviews facilitated access to a wider geographically dispersed sample of backroom staff across the UK, in a more time- and cost-effective manner. An

interview guide was used to avoid digressing too far from the research topic (Cleland et al., 2020). Some interview questions were adapted for each participant to more adequately capture the nuance of their role. The interviews lasted on average 63 minutes (min 36 minutes; max 101 minutes) and explored the participants' motivations to work in football, their employment history (i.e. job applications, interviews, job descriptions and contract negotiations, day-to-day working lives), relationships with key stakeholders (i.e. players, first team manager and fellow backroom staff), and the impact of working in football on them and their lives both within and outside of the game.

In conducting the research, we needed to find an appropriate balance between involvement and detachment. While the research team, with experience of working in men's professional football had knowledge of the industry, we had to ensure that the data reflected the participants' experiences and reality, rather than our own attitudes and views (Malcolm, 2011). Involvement and detachment acted as a sensitising concept, as there was a need for "reflexivity, an ability to critically examine one's own passions and personal interests throughout the research process" (Mansfield, 2007, p. 126). As a research team, we occupied different positions in relation to the research topic, with the lead author having experience working in men's professional football in a backroom team, the second author having no active involvement in the football industry and third author being a former professional footballer. Examining this topic from our different positions helped to shed light on how our insider position may impact the study. This helped establish what Perry et al. (2004, p. 137) called an "iterative process of dialogue" to examine how our

involvement might affect the research process, data integrity and trustworthiness of our interpretations.

In a figurational approach, interviews are seen as a dynamic social process between researcher and the participant – how this relationship is managed throughout the interview can impact the nature, quality and depth of the data generated (Perry et al., 2004). While some interviewees were known to the research team, time was taken prior to each interview to explain the purpose of the research, provide the interviewee with the opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns, and develop rapport with the lead author. Previous literature discussed the challenges of conducting research within a professional football setting (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Law, 2019); therefore, this provided the opportunity to establish the lead researcher's knowledge and industry experiences to make participants more comfortable in discussing potentially sensitive questions and using specific industry terminology, which they might not have done with someone with limited industry familiarity. This was with the aim of eliciting more honest and open accounts from the participants, which reflected their lived realities and provided more trustworthy insights to the men's professional football industry.

Ethical approval was granted from the institutional ethics committee. Participants signed informed consent forms prior to participating in the study, indicating they had read the participant information sheet and understood the nature of the study. Participants were promised anonymity, with identifiable biographical information removed from the transcripts (Cleland et al., 2020; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). They consented to information relating to their job title

and their club's league level being included. Member checking was used to confirm whether the transcripts were an accurate reflection of their experiences and provided an opportunity for participants to remove or further anonymise information they did not want to include in any write-up of the data.

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is a way of "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Clarke and Braun (2017, p. 297) state that this approach is particularly useful for examining "participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practice", which aligns with the aim of this paper. We utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach to thematic analysis. Initially, the lead researcher familiarised themselves with the data by transcribing the interviews, reading and re-reading the data, and beginning initial notetaking. Second, the lead researcher generated initial codes based on features of the data that were of interest. This involved a two-way interaction between theory and data, considering both throughout coding and in phase three, searching for themes. Themes were collated codes into lower-order and then higher-order codes, before developing broader themes. Phase four involved refining the themes and considering how the data set reflected the picture of the study. Here we reflected on the research questions and the figurational concepts which were pertinent to the analysis. At this stage, the research team discussed the data from our different positions which helped to develop a greater blend of involvement and detachment, aiming to allow the data to guide the analysis, rather than trying to fit data into pre-existing themes based on the lead researcher's more involved perspective. Following this, phase five involved defining and naming the themes to ensure

they accurately reflected what was of interest in each theme to provide the reader with an account of what the theme will explore. Finally, the report was produced. We developed arguments related to the research questions, presenting evidence for each theme and introducing relevant figurational concepts to support the analysis. We will now turn our attention to analysing these themes using a figurational perspective.

Results and Discussion

Excessive Working Hours and Work-Life Imbalances

Throughout the interviews, many described work within men's professional football clubs as a "lifestyle rather than a job" (Physiotherapist 3), highlighting the challenges involved in sustaining a career in the industry. This included the excessive working hours, work-life imbalances and sacrifices (both familial and economic) required to pursue a career in football. Despite the growing recognition of the challenges that individuals, such as athletes and managers, face in their working lives (see Higham et al., 2023; Roderick, 2012; Woods et al., 2022), many outsiders tend to hold a rose-tinted view of employment in professional sport. This is often due to outsiders' lack of knowledge and involvement within professional sport. Though these individuals experience a variety of workplace demands and challenges in their role, we would argue that they are, at least somewhat, compensated for this, especially in elite men's football, where the pay at the higher end is particularly lucrative (Platts & Smith, 2010; Prowse & Dobbins, 2022). Although backroom staff do not tend to face the same media pressures and scrutiny of their performance, they make many of the same sacrifices to pursue a football career, such as

extended working hours, working away from home and employment insecurity; yet do not receive nearly the same recompense as players and managers.

Many participants reported extensive working hours and days during the football season (from August to May), which could consist of five or six working days (depending on fixture scheduling) and up to 75 hours per week. Backroom staff, in most cases, had conventional employment contracts stipulating working hours and days. However, the demands commonly exceeded the listed number. For example, Coach 5's contract stated the work was "9-5, Monday to Friday, weekends off", which did not account for the fact that the role involved working on match days, typically on a weekend. Scout 2 said that "70-hour weeks was quite normal for us all really… could probably double my wages if I was paid hourly I reckon". Analyst 7 stated that "there's no set hours in football… I feel like it might be something between 35 and 40 hours [per week on my contract], but I probably do more than 75 hours a week". These working hours could fluctuate during the season, especially if the manager were to change, which is a common occurrence in first team settings (Gilmore et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Participants also criticised the work-life balance in first team environments. Physiotherapist 4 described the balance as "generally rubbish", while Sports Scientist 3 questioned "if there's such a thing" as work-life balance within first team men's professional football. This issue was expressed as primarily a first team issue. Of the 51 participants, 32 worked in both academy and first team environments during their careers. Sports Scientist 3 described academies as more "flexible" and "accepting of in-season holiday"; while in a first team environment, S&C Coach 2 said that "if you ask for a day off, it was like I'd killed his [head of department's] cat". While we are not arguing that

similar issues do not occur within academy football, first team settings, as competitive, results-oriented environments, seemingly contributed to the worsening of these issues.

Participants' frustrations regarding working hours and work-life imbalances were related to the lack of acknowledgement of the issues by senior staff. It was not necessarily the hours themselves that were the problem, but more the unquestioned expectation of extended working hours and a lack of recognition when doing so. This expectation was described by Sports Scientist 2 as a "big sort of invisible push from people at the club" to work these hours. This aligns with Cushion and Jones' (2014) use of symbolic violence and discussion of the hidden curriculum. They used the concepts to explore how coaches exercised power to strengthen their position within a club and deem cultural expectations, such as the need to win at all costs, as legitimate and the only way to be successful in the environment. Similarly, the participants in our study seldom complained about the working hours and work-life imbalances. Symbolic violence, a Bourdieusian concept, closely aligns with Elias's discussion of the stigmatisation of outsiders by the established. In established-outsider relations, those with less power within the figuration (the outsiders) tend to accept their apparent inferiority and the superiority of the established. S&C Coach 2 stated there was a "stigma" of having time off during the season. There was limited discussion among participants about whether, in similar situations, they were explicitly told by the first team manager or a line manager that they could not take this time off. These 'invisible pushes' were not something individuals were explicitly told, such as how many hours to work or to work from home after the working day; however, they became cultural expectations which were not

spoken about but accepted unquestioningly. This expectation seemingly became ingrained in individuals' habitus as they became further embedded within the figuration. In a figurational approach, no one can be completely powerful or powerless (Elias, 1978); however, individuals often fail to recognise their ability to act and may therefore feel powerless. This is seemingly the experience of participants in this study, who did not feel they could question more established staff within the club for fear of the impact it could have on their role responsibilities and job security.

Participants expressed their worry and fear of being stigmatised for not following the norms, to the extent that staff unquestioningly accepted the extensive working hours. For example, Kit Manager 2 said that he "never questioned" the working hours, and Scout 5 stated he "pretty much exhausted your contracted hours after three days [of the working week]" and that "nobody bats an eyelid about that… you just get on with it". Analyst 9 also said "you shouldn't just accept it" but then went on to describe it as the "norm" and stated that you "just accept it". Resigned acceptance and the 'need to accept it' became part of the participants' habitus. Some participants felt that if they complained or spoke out against these issues, it could impact their reputation within the industry or they could risk losing their jobs. For example, Analyst 4 said:

> My girlfriend gets well annoyed, because we'll be out on a walk and stuff and my watch will ring and 'Oh, no', she'll be like 'who is it?', 'It's [Name], the assistant', [she'd say] 'you're not answering it, you're on your day off', '[Girlfriend] I have to, like, they'll sack me otherwise'.

Though this may be an exaggerated response, it demonstrates the fear felt by backroom staff as they seek to protect themselves in a precarious working environment. Many felt obliged to conform to the extensive working hours and to be on demand for the manager and senior staff to protect their job security given the competitiveness for roles. Knowing that there are, in the words of Analyst 9, “hundreds [or] thousands of other people who would kill to have your role”, significantly influenced participants in conforming to the dominant culture within the figuration. Similarly, given first team managers often took backroom staff with them between clubs, conforming to their workplace expectations appeared to be a strategy through which staff could strengthen their relationships with managers and potentially enhance their future employment prospects, should the manager move clubs. Though in the long-term, participants referred to the lack of recognition for the sacrifices made by working long hours with limited work-life balance as contributing to issues of regular staff turnover. The perceived power differential between participants and more senior staff hindered individuals’ feelings of influence, affirming their inability to change the cultural expectations in the first team environment. Using phrases such as “that’s what it is” (S&C Coach 3), “it’s just the way it is” (Assistant Manager 1) and “[you] just accept it” (Physiotherapist 1) demonstrate this resigned acceptance.

Previous research has highlighted how some senior figures believe that those working in football should feel ‘lucky’. Moore and Stokes (2012) interviewed players, managers, and administrative staff, asking about working in the industry and the notion of celebrity and ‘elites’ in this environment. They

explained that many of their interviewees displayed what they termed “power-centric arrogance”, with one participant discussing how senior staff thought people should be “working for nothing because it was a real delight and it was an honour” to be at a professional club (Moore & Stokes, 2012, p. 456). Similarly, Cronin et al. (2020, p. 142) found that the “privilege” of playing professional football was often used to “override the rights of individuals” when exploring the concept of care within a Premier League club. This aligns with the attitudes and expectations among the backroom staff in this study. Staff working beyond their contracted hours was a cultural expectation within the first team environment and became embedded in the habitus of staff. The emotional importance the football industry played in participants’ lives, which will be explored later in this paper, meant they did not question the working hours, despite complaining about this during the interviews. As others have also found, participants generally reported feeling lucky and privileged to be in the first team environment, which contributed to their continued acceptance of these working hours.

Staff also differed in how well they achieved work-life balance. Across the interviews, analysts were frequently described as the most demanding role among backroom staff, with their workload regularly extending beyond contracted hours and job descriptions. Scout 5 described analysts as the “worst paid, hardest working in the club” and cited this as one of the reasons he moved from analysis to a recruitment role. Achieving balance was often a challenge, as analysts received tasks to complete in evenings and on their days off. Analyst 5 received messages from the manager at 11pm asking “who out of the two [EFL League Two Club] centre backs are worst”. The analyst felt they were expected

to respond instantly. Similarly, Analyst 6 said: “If the gaffer comes to you and asks you to do something, you’re gonna do it” straight away. Analyst 4 received a text message from the assistant manager during our interview on his day off work:

> I'm off today, I’ve had a text from the assistant saying, “here's a link to [an Under-21s international match], can you go through it and tag a player…” It's my day off, but I'm expected to do that… I think that's more of an analysis thing because coaches know you have a laptop at home with you and you can do it. I mean, basically because analysis can be done anywhere if you've got your laptop, I don't think physios would get [a] text because what can they do at home?

Analyst 4's point about working remotely helps explain why analysts may struggle more than other staff to achieve what they felt was a break from work. Similarly, Analyst 8 stated how he regularly took work home and Analyst 3 said he could “be on the phone at nine o’clock at night” and be working at home, despite leaving the training ground in the early evening. Analysts were the only staff (other than scouts who already worked remotely) who were expected to work remotely, in addition to their time on the training ground, because fellow staff and the manager knew they could. Other roles, such as physiotherapists, coaches, sports scientists, or kit managers, had little work they could do away from the club other than administrative tasks. Additionally, analysts said they were treated as “tech support” (Analyst 7) and “IT support” as they were “the best one on the computer” (Analyst 11). There was an assumption that because they were an analyst they would also be good at something tangentially related,

which contributed to the role becoming more demanding and further from their original job description. The extension of duties on working days, such as being IT support, helping the kit manager load the team kit van (Analyst 1) or overseeing the management of GPS units and data (Analyst 5) (usually a duty of sports scientists), meant the analysts' role often extended into days off, as staff still had to complete their core duties, such as the pre- and post-match analysis reports and presentations.

Many of the issues relating to excessive working hours and lack of work-life balance stem from inaccurate depictions of roles (particularly in job descriptions) and a fear of not conforming to the behaviours of the established. Participants were, in many cases, unprepared for the reality of life within football. Once they were in the industry, many experienced challenges of 'escaping' work. The paper will now turn to these themes.

Inability to 'Escape' Work and a Lack of Preparedness for a Life in Football

The pervasiveness of football within the participants' daily lives, whether through social relationships (friends, colleagues, family), the prominence of football within society (news or social media) or the role extending into time away from the club (being asked to work on off-days), created challenges to "escape" football (Scout 2). As Coach 3 summarised:

> My missus's Dad is a mad football fan and [my] brother-in-law is a mad football fan. I just tell them that if they're at my house on a Saturday when I get back from a game, even if we've won, I don't want to talk

> about football. But it's difficult because that's all they want to talk about…the same if you go into a pub, that's all people are talking about, like, fucking hell…[you] just try and get a breather where you can, don't listen to TalkSport or don't watch Sky Sports…We have football all day, I don't want to go home and listen about football.

Kit Manager 2 also discussed the issue of escaping football:

> I think because football is a lifestyle, you end up talking about it. It might not be [EFL Championship Club], it might be the Premier League, it could be anything, you know what I mean, but you do find yourself that it all becomes around football.

The emotional attachment many participants had to football, as well as their interactions within their networks of interdependency, made it tough for them to detach from their work. For example, Coach 3 said that people "don't have social lives when you work in football" and Sports Scientist 2 explained how the lack of escape from football was normalised by more established staff: "My old boss used to say 'enjoy your day away' and not your day off, because it's a day away from the training ground, it's never a day off". These quotes are indicative of the challenge participants faced getting away from football during the season – in their eyes, they did not have days off, just days away from the club.

Many discussed their lack of preparedness for the lifestyle of working in professional football, particularly those with little experience in the industry. Some likened this to being thrown in at the "deep end" (Coach; Recruitment

Analyst 1; Analyst 1; Analyst 11; S&C Coach 3; Physiotherapist 5; Sports Scientist 5). Kit Manager 3, who was 50 years of age and had worked outside of professional football until 2018, explained the difficulties when he first joined his EFL League Two club. He explained that he did not have a "long, laborious three-month bedding in process", which he was surprised by as the club knew he had not worked in football previously. The lack of formal induction meant that many interviewees struggled when they first entered the industry, whether through work experience, internship, placement or as their first paid position. Participants also indicated that undertaking qualifications did not adequately prepare them for their roles. Assistant Manager 2, for example, felt he was prepared "qualification wise" for the transition from player to coach; however, he said, "the day-to-day stuff, I was miles off it". The lack of preparedness did not necessarily reflect their ability to undertake the job, as most had relevant qualifications (university and industry), but found the role within the context of professional football clubs challenging. It was adapting to the lifestyle rather than struggling with the role. Even those with previous professional playing experience did not necessarily find the transition into backroom roles easy. Coaches 1 and 5, for example, discussed the challenges of finding a new identity within the football environment. As they were no longer seen as professional footballers, they had to pivot to a new position in the workplace and recognising their newfound identity took time.

The challenge of being thrown in at the 'deep end', not afforded time to transition into the environment and to find their identify as backroom staff, posed challenges for the participants. Elias's 'shock experience theory' can be used to examine these challenges. Elias identified that indirect knowledge of the

adult world could contribute to a ‘shock experience’ when transitioning into the workplace. We would argue that the lack of knowledge (or at least inaccurate knowledge) of football clubs as workplaces led to similar challenges amongst our participants. Insight into professional football is limited for those without insider access. Football docuseries exploring the world of elite sport (i.e. Amazon’s All or Nothing series) are seen to provide some degree of insight (Higham et al., 2023). However, they often fail to accurately depict the reality of these environments, only providing a relatively sanitised snapshot, as explained by Analyst 9:

> You see the kind of Arsenal, Tottenham, All or Nothing documentaries and people think they get an understanding of what it's like and it's completely different. By all means, that stuff happens, that's just the 1%, the nice bits they want to show you.

Analyst 9 stated the docuseries gave a “false perception” of what day-to-day work is like in professional football. Therefore, it could be argued that the lack of true access to professional football clubs means those who enter them have indirect knowledge of the workplace and encounter a ‘shock experience’ when they face the reality. Kit Manager 4 even went as far as to suggest that watching these docuseries led him to pursue a role in football:

> I’d watched the documentaries on Amazon Prime, the All or Nothing with Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, and I saw what the kitman were doing there, the way that they've got a relationship with the team, that they're not going out and doing any of the performance but they've just

got an organisational role and they've got a lot of respect. So I thought, you know, maybe I can do that.

Kit Manager 4 later explained how the reality of the role did not align with these docuseries, particularly referring to the unexpected sacrifices required to work in football, such as working away from family and missing key events. For Kit Manager 4, these docuseries provided what he felt was sufficient insight into the guarded industry for him to apply for a role. Yet, the fact these docuseries did not accurately depict the extent of the reality of life in football, it is hardly surprising that it would lead to a shock experience and participants seemingly struggled to transition into professional football environments.

In discussing their desire to pursue a career as backroom staff, many explained they were motivated by working in football rather than the specific role itself. This means their lack of knowledge of what a role in football entailed was masked by their dreams of working in the industry. The love many had for football and how they envisaged life in the industry offered a distorted reality of the figuration. As Elias might have put it, their knowledge was more entrenched in fantasy than reality. We will now explore how emotions and fantasy-laden beliefs help to understand the participants' motivations and decisions to continue within football despite the challenges.

The Love of the Game and Emotionally-Laden Thinking

From an outsider's perspective, it would be natural to ask, 'if working in football is so bad, why do they not leave?'. Yet few indicated any desire to leave. Griffiths and Bloyce (2023) explain how many initially explore

opportunities to work in professional football due to the emotional attachment they have to the sport. Gilbourne (2012, p. 12) also describes how many working within the industry become “intoxicated by sport” and that it is a challenge to be critical of the industry when they are “seduced by [the] glitz and glamour”. This can help explain why people are initially motivated to look for a career in football and then decide to stay, despite the shock experiences faced. To some extent, the motivations of many in this study were rooted in fantasy beliefs of what a career in football could be, rather than reflecting on the reality of their working lives. The willingness to work in an industry involving a range of sacrifices was offset, in the eyes of some, by their “love of the game” (Scout 2). The ‘love of the game’ was a phrase used by many. The notion of working in football was described as a “dream job” (Coach 6, Sports Rehabilitator 2, Analyst 10, Kit Manager 2), with Analysts 3 and 9 and Assistant Manager 2 describing backroom roles as the “next best thing” after playing football. Many highlighted their passion as a key motivator for working in football and they were not driven by money, going as far, in some instances, to say they were underpaid for the hours and the sacrifices that were made:

> I think most people know, when looking into this area, is that a lot of the roles and backroom staff, generally speaking, are underpaid for what they do. Now if I want to get to a point where you like, if I wanted to earn money, if money was the goal, I probably wouldn't be working in this industry. (Scout 3)

Similarly, Sports Scientist 5 stated: “I could easily go to Aldi round the corner and earn miles more [money] than I earn now for the hours that I do. That’s not

the reason why I do it". The emphasis that money is not a primary motivator was common throughout. For backroom staff, football was not seen as an opportunity to earn more than they could in other industries. Similarly, Fry and Bloyce (2017) found that many of the male professional golfers they interviewed were less motivated by the financial rewards and more by their passion for golf. What led the backroom staff in this study to become involved in the industry and continue working in their roles despite many of the challenges posed was their passion for football.

In this way, work in football can be seen as a 'quest for excitement' in their working lives. Griffiths and Bloyce (2023) noted that the difference between other industries and sport lies in the emotional attachment many have to their work. If individuals view work as mundane, they often seek more emotionally fulfilling and exciting work that aligns better with their leisure habits (Elias & Dunning, 1986). This was the case with unpaid football scouts for Griffiths and Bloyce (2023) and appears to be similar for backroom staff more widely. Many working within football were first and foremost football supporters, and therefore, the opportunity to turn their passion into a career was appealing. Roles in football were seen as more than a job; the participants felt this work fulfilled them in ways other work could not: "I get quite emotional as a staff member because it's more than just a job" (Analyst 5). Analyst 11 suggests: "There's very few industries where you have that elation on a week-to-week basis. I wouldn't want to go into a job where it's very mundane and you have success once in your whole lifetime". Sports Rehabilitator 2 made a similar comment: "I didn't want to be one of those people that end up working [in an] office for the rest of my life with a degree in sports rehab that I'm never going to

use". As participants became more entrenched within the industry and the sacrifices became clearer, many chose to overlook the issues or downplay their significance to justify working in what they felt was still their dream career. In some ways, the participants were still blinded by their fantasy thinking about the industry, rather than the reality of the role. There seemed an acceptance to make significant sacrifices for emotionally fulfilling work, something their employers were seemingly happy to exploit.

Previous research has discussed how the excitement and passion of being involved in sport can lead individuals to ignore the challenges of the role. DeWolfe et al. (2022) explored the wellbeing of coaches and support staff pre- and post-Olympic Games. They explain how working at the Olympic Games contributed to "increased stress and sacrifice" as a challenge to the participants' wellbeing, yet this was not "fully appreciated at the time due to the excitement of being involved" (DeWolfe et al., 2022, p. 1248). Purdy et al. (2017) discussed how coaches in elite European basketball thrived on the drama of the industry, such as the turbulence of managerial change and job uncertainty. This is not dissimilar to our findings. Participants, in many cases, enjoyed the high-pressured and fast-paced working environment of professional football. Although the sacrifices were a negative aspect of the job, they were offset by the thrill and excitement that the work offered. For many, they felt lucky to have the opportunity to work in the first team environment and achieve their dream. With an increasingly competitive and saturated job market, gaining access to professional sport was a challenge, and something participants rarely took for granted. The fear of knowing that other people dream of working in football and would be willing to do their jobs if they left meant they often dismissed the

issues and felt unable to complain, even to their friends and family, due to the prevailing perception of what life in football is like. Participants clearly recognised the issues facing backroom staff; however, they regularly followed up any explanation of these issues with a justification for remaining in the industry. This is nicely summarised by Assistant Manager 2:

> All the downside or the pitfalls of the role or the industry, you still come back to it because of the love of the game and that's the thing that ultimately overrides the trepidation of losing your job after eight weeks or getting sacked while you're unbeaten because you live for the promotions, the playoff finals… these are what you live for.

The privilege participants felt in their roles meant they would downplay the negative effects of the roles. It was the pursuit of these dreams, driven by their fantasy-laden beliefs about what a career in football would entail, that led participants to justify their sacrifices. Though some did question the long-term sustainability of roles in football.

The Sustainability of Life in Football: An 'Expiry Date'

In the short-term, many felt they had to accept the sacrifices if they were to remain in football. However, some questioned whether this was something they could sustain in the long term. S&C Coach 2, who had been in the first team at his EFL Championship club for seven years, questioned the long-term sustainability of working in football: "The day-to-day of my role right now wouldn't be sustainable for any more than another 10 years". Sports Rehabilitator 1 termed this an "expiry date" for working in football. The reasons

behind this expiry date varied person to person, but generally, the sacrifices required to work in football were key. This was particularly the case for those who found their role taking a detrimental toll on their families. Coach 2, for example, said that working in football “probably cost me a marriage”, and Sports Rehabilitator 2 acknowledged the impact his role had on his family life: “It’s been a lifestyle… everything’s been focused around that, holidays, family time, it’s always been around football”. Some spoke of holding off on certain life decisions, such as having children or buying a house, until they found more stability in their working lives – however, there was little evidence to suggest that this stability would ever come in football. For example, Physiotherapist 3, one of the two female participants, mentioned the specific challenges of potentially having children while working in football, explaining how the travel and workload involved while pregnant and then with a young child would be “unrealistic”. Many felt they had to stay in football despite the challenges they experienced. For some, this was a requirement to meet their basic needs, such as paying their mortgage and feeding their family, while others felt unable to work outside of football and did not want to give up on their dream job. This was despite the reality differing from the dream, which may be seen as fantasy thinking clouding their judgment.

There were differences between how younger and older staff felt about the sacrifices required to work in football. Younger staff, especially those who were unmarried and childless, were generally more accepting of the sacrifices. They felt that the decision to work in football only impacted them and although they missed out on events, such as friends and families’ birthday and weddings, the sacrifices were deemed worthwhile. However, these staff often

acknowledged that this level of acceptance may change, as Sports Scientist 2 explained:

> I start to think about when I want to get a girlfriend or settle down, even think about kids and getting a house…do I want my kids growing up and only really seeing me on a Sunday? Probably not. So that's hence why I say I've probably got five years left in football because [as] soon as I get like a partner and kids are potentially on the way, then I don't want to work in football.

Indeed, older staff and those with children indicated that sacrificing time with family was the most difficult aspect of working in football, especially if their careers involved relocation or prolonged periods away from home. Yet, few indicated they would leave football and change careers to avoid the sacrifices. In contrast, there was greater discussion amongst the younger staff regarding their level of acceptance of the sacrifices diminishing. The idea of 'settling down' and starting a family was seen as a reason to potentially leave their roles longer-term:

> I don't think it's sustainable. As I was talking about the lifestyle thing and the travel and the long hours, especially as you get older and get a family, I do think 'is this sustainable to do for 30 years?', probably not. (Analyst 9)

The younger staff interviewed appeared to have greater detachment from their emotional motivations when planning longer-term, as despite their love of the

game, they could see a life outside of football. Older staff working in the industry, which for many was all they knew, were less open to possibilities outside it, as their football career had become more deeply embedded in their habitus. Therefore, these ideas from younger staff about leaving football in the future could be seen as fantasy-laden and it will be interesting to see whether they do leave as they become more embedded within the industry over time. The examples of older staff demonstrate that this decision is not so easy; when they are more emotionally involved, the role is more deeply tied to their habitus, and they have developed a more idiosyncratic set of working skills not necessarily viewed as beneficial to the world outside of football.

On the topic of sustainability, the analyst role was again mentioned. As discussed above, this role was viewed as the most demanding, at least in terms of working hours and impact on work-life balance, within the backroom team. This was because they could work remotely, meaning they would be given work to do when travelling for away trips or when at home, and it was assumed they would also take on duties tangentially related to their role (i.e. IT support). Analyst 10 described analysis as a “young man’s game” due to the travel and workload associated. As such, many analysts saw their futures away from their current roles:

> I’ve been an analyst for 10 years, [I] don't want to move around anymore, don't want to have to go where the work is, so kind of looking at what progressions there are for me next to sort of have a more sustainable lifestyle outside of work (Analyst 3)

Overlapping responsibilities, and in many cases working within the same department, meant some analysts had already transitioned into recruitment roles or planned to. Four of the eight participants in recruitment roles had previously worked as analysts, and three of the 11 analysts indicated they wanted to move into recruitment. Recruitment roles were seen as more flexible as staff had greater control over the structure of their working week. They were seen as offering greater work-life balance, as most of the work could be done remotely rather than being based full-time at the training ground and travelling with the team to and from matches. This differed from analysts' roles, where work was expected at the training ground, to and from first-team games, and remotely during non-working hours (evenings and days off). Although recruitment staff reported loneliness and travel issues, they accepted these sacrifices more readily because of the position's family benefits. Scouts 4, 5 and 6 all said that taking their children to school was a benefit of a recruitment role, with Scout 5 stating: “I like being able to take my daughter to school and then go into a coffee shop and getting on with me work on my time, making calls throughout the day rather than being glued to a seat in an office”.

Of the 10 participants with professional playing experience, only one (Physiotherapist 4) stated they would be willing to work outside football. Physiotherapist 4 had been awarded a professional contract at a Premier League club but, in his words, after “things didn’t work”, he went to university (through the PFA pathway for current and former professional footballers) and gained experience outside of football prior to his full-time role with an EFL Championship club. As he had previous experience working outside of football, it made sense that he was the only former footballer who said he was willing to

leave the industry. Physiotherapist 4 said that if issues of work-life balance impacted him more in the future, then he could seek employment back in the NHS or private practice. Those without non-football experience, such as Coach 4 and 8, wanted to move into football management, while the other seven participants with playing experience explained that even though they had thought about it, they did not see themselves leaving football and stated their desire to remain as backroom staff. This aligns with previous research (Lear & Palmer, 2007; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006) highlighting how players often hope to stay in football after retirement because their identities are tied to it. While they were more accustomed to the issues of working in football than those with no previous experience in the industry, this did not necessarily mean they could cope with the working hours or work-life balance any better; it had simply become more embedded in their habitus. The professional football culture had become second nature to them, and they were therefore seemingly less likely to consider leaving than someone who had experience in non-football workplace settings.

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This paper has explored how working as backroom staff in men's professional football clubs came to be seen as a 'lifestyle choice'. We have highlighted the importance of emotion within sports work, helping to explain why individuals are willing to accept and navigate a range of challenges and sacrifices to sustain a career in the industry. For many, the opportunity to work in a seemingly prestigious industry and their love for the game drove their ambitions. This meant that despite the issues, these problems became an accepted part of the job, and they considered that if they did not do it, the club

would easily find someone else who would. The dream of working in football meant that many participants' beliefs about the industry were entrenched in fantasy rather than reality. Therefore, participants would often dismiss the issues they experienced because they felt it was inappropriate to complain about what was supposedly their 'dream job'. The participants considered that the sacrifices required to work in football were worthwhile as the work was emotionally fulfilling, a 'quest for excitement' in their working lives. As the norms and expectations became more ingrained as part of their habitus, the more they came to readily accept the reality of work within football and disregard the issues they experienced, until the point where they felt they would no longer be sustainable. This notion of sustainability was experienced differently depending on an individual's role, age and previous playing experience, which influenced their level of the acceptance for the sacrifices required and their willingness to transition into a new role or out of football entirely.

Though this paper has provided in-depth exploration of the working lives of backroom staff, there are limitations to highlight. By conducting semi-structured interviews, which rely on self-report data, this study may have been subject to social desirability bias and memory recall errors. Future research may use an ethnographic approach, combining interviews, observations, and field notes, to reduce reliance on self-report data. This would help to further examine the lives of backroom staff in their workplace setting. Being embedded in this environment could also help to understand the increasingly complex organisational structures within professional football clubs and examine how developments, such as the growing influence of sporting directors, shift the occupational landscape for backroom staff. There are also questions to be

asked about whether participants were reluctant to speak candidly about their experiences. While efforts were made to establish the research team's somewhat insider status and demonstrate our understanding of the industry, individuals may have been sceptical speaking to someone as a relative outsider (i.e. someone who had not played the game professionally). Finally, because the interviews explored why individuals wanted to stay in men's professional football, it would be valuable to hear from those who have exited the industry to understand their reasons for leaving and to better understand the dynamic between emotionally fulfilling work and the acceptance of workplace sacrifices.

Recommendations for Practice

We hope this paper serves as a valuable guide for aspiring practitioners by helping them understand the industry's demands and expectations. These findings have highlighted the importance of understanding the motivations for why individuals want to pursue a career in football and the challenges they face if they do so. Greater support for backroom staff is required when completing education pathways and qualifications to understand the reality of the industry and more adequately prepare them for the 'shock experience' they may face. It could also involve football clubs providing clearer job descriptions, more accurately depicting the working hours and role expectations (i.e. impact on work-life balance, working evenings and weekends) to avoid issues of 'shock' once a staff member is employed.

In such a "fast-paced" working environment (Nesti, 2016, p. 192), there can be limited opportunity to reflect. These interviews provided individuals with the opportunity to discuss the workplace challenges faced; however, few

reported being able to speak to those within their club about these or having the opportunity for formal discussions, such as an annual review or appraisal. Given that these issues appear to be industry-wide, it would be worthwhile for clubs, if they do not do so already, to offer more opportunities for staff to voice their views and concerns in a safe environment. Many participants felt the demands of the role and sacrifices made were not recognised by senior staff, a contributing factor as to why they felt staff turnover remains high. Providing a better platform for collaborative and actionable discussion could help with managing the challenges faced within their role, starting with a greater recognition of the sacrifices made to sustain a role in football. This could also better support staff wellbeing and development needs, with the view of improving staff retention.

Responsibility for these workplace issues cannot remain solely at the individual club level. Governing bodies and professional associations should also play a more active regulatory role in establishing standards around working conditions and staff welfare. This could include confidential workplace reporting systems or audits of organisational practices at a first-team level. In addition, given the employment concerns, it was interesting that there was no mention of participants seeking advice from unions or representative bodies. Therefore, we would encourage representative bodies, such as the League Coaches' Association or Football Medicine and Performance Association, to advocate more publicly for healthier working practices and to represent employees who may feel unable to challenge excessive workloads or work-life balance issues due to the precarious nature of men's professional football. Providing individuals with someone to speak to regarding their concerns could help to progress away

from the culture of resigned acceptance of the issues that seem to be present currently. It would be interesting to examine the engagement with and support of governing bodies and unions for backroom staff. This would help to further explore the effectiveness of support available to staff and how this helps them with employment challenges.

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