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# The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of professional footballers

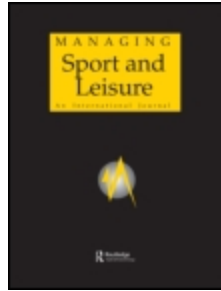
Souter, G, Tonge, A and Culvin, A

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**The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of professional footballers.**

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Abstract:	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic has had huge ramifications on professional football. This commentary focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of professional footballers. Specifically, footballers within the English Premier League, English Football League, FA Women’s Super League and FA Women’s Championship. This commentary considers a holistic approach to mental health, the environment of professional football, and the impact of career transitions and critical moments on mental health. The intention is to stimulate discussion and further research of mental health and wellbeing within professional football. This paper considers the impact of Covid-19 and makes recommendations for professional football clubs to develop a holistic mental health strategy. We recommend that professional clubs increase the level of emotional support for professional footballers, and that this should not be a temporary measure due to the pandemic. Clubs should develop a long-term strategy to encourage players to seek emotional support.</p>

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Manuscripts

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10 I have had a further read of our work and reduced the word length in line with the journal  
11 guidelines for commentaries  
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For Peer Review Only

**The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of professional footballers.**

**Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had huge ramifications on professional football. ~~globally~~. This commentary focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of professional footballers. Specifically, footballers within the English Premier League, English Football League, FA Women’s Super League and FA Women’s Championship. This commentary considers ~~the following~~: a holistic ~~contextualised~~ approach to mental health, the environment of professional football, and the impact of career transitions and critical moments on mental health. The Covid-19 pandemic has had huge ramifications on professional football globally. This commentary focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of professional footballers within the English Premier League, English Football League, FA Women’s Super League and FA Women’s Championship. We consider a holistic contextualised approach to mental health, the environment of professional football, and the mental health impact related to career transitions and critical moments. The intention is to stimulate discussion and further research analysis of the mental health and ~~wellbeing within and the relationship to of~~ professional football. ~~ers~~. This paper considers the impact of Covid-19 and makes recommendations for professional football clubs to develop a holistic mental health strategy. We recommend that professional clubs increase the level of emotional support for professional footballers, and that this should not be a temporary measure due to the pandemic. Clubs should develop a long-term strategy to encourage players to seek emotional support.

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**Key words**

Mental health, professional football, elite sport, career transitions, well-being

**Introduction**

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10 According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is an essential component  
11 of health. The WHO define mental health as ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and  
12 social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 2018). However,  
13 to address the ~~substantive and~~ increasing mental health needs in sports settings further  
14 modification and innovation is required (Henriksen et al. 2019). ~~Elite athletes are tasked with~~  
15 ~~intense training loads, performance demands, and pressures from media, coaches and~~  
16 ~~teammates, that teammates that~~ in combination can cause a threat to athlete wellbeing and lead  
17 ~~to poor mental health (Rice et al 2016). In addition to the persistent demands placed upon elite~~  
18 ~~athletes, this population is at an increased risk for mental disorders, that are often first~~  
19 ~~diagnosed between 16-34 years of age which overlaps with elite athletes sporting career~~  
20 ~~(Kuettel & Larsen (2019). Competing in elite sport means increased training loads alongside~~  
21 ~~high demands to perform, which combined, present threats to athletes’ mental health (Rice et~~  
22 ~~al. 2016). The prevalence of mental disorders is greatest amongst younger people with 16-34-~~  
23 ~~year-olds at the greatest risk (Gulliver et al. 2014). Therefore, the peak competitive years of an~~  
24 ~~athletes’ career overlaps with the risk of onset of mental disorders (Kuettel & Larsen (2019).~~  
25 ~~In 2020~~ The emergence and spread of Covid-19 ~~around to every country in~~ the world has led  
26 the WHO to declare a Public Health Emergency (Clarkson et al. 2020), with consequences  
27 likely to develop into an unparalleled socio-economic crisis. The pandemic continues to cause  
28 ~~increased~~ volatility and precarity globally for many workers who are experiencing  
29 redundancies, unpaid salaries and violations of their rights (FIFPRO 2020a). Footballers are no  
30 exception. Covid-19 is likely to impact the livelihoods and security of professional footballers,  
31 particularly those who operate within the margins of the sport, for example women and other  
32 minority groups (Clarkson et al. 2020).

33 ~~Intense mental and physical demands placed on elite athletes are a unique aspect of a career in~~  
34 ~~sport (Rice et al. 2016).~~ Careers in sport are ~~notoriously~~ fragile, short-term and hyper-

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10 competitive (Culvin, 2020). The focus on the short-term often means long-term objectives such  
11 as the wellbeing and mental health of players are often neglected (Culvin, 2020). These  
12 demands may increase susceptibility to mental health issues and risk-taking behaviours (Rice  
13 et al. 2016). Yet, despite increased sensitivity to mental health problems, to assume those  
14 athletes who do not present with clinical disorders are healthy is overly simplistic (Henriksen  
15 et al. 2019). ~~Of importance to this section is the indication that mental health is more than the~~  
16 ~~absence of mental illness. This is a significant and important move towards a more holistic~~  
17 ~~approach to mental health.~~ Mental health is a human lived experienced and a highly dynamic  
18 feature of life (Henriksen et al. 2019). ~~Thus, in order to~~ To understand mental conditions in a  
19 sports setting, a holistic approach would be expedient. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy  
20 for assessment is necessary if we are to develop a more holistic and contextualised definition  
21 of mental health amongst elite athletes.

### **A holistic, contextualised approach to mental health**

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37 ~~In order to inform the development of an appropriate mental health support system in elite~~  
38 ~~sport, one solution is to utilise a holistic approach (Foskett & Longstaff, 2017). To employ a~~  
39 ~~holistic approach to mental health means acknowledging the mental and social factors that~~  
40 ~~contribute to mental health, rather than focusing on the symptoms of the disease. Defining~~  
41 ~~health in this way does not differentiate between physical and mental health as they are~~  
42 ~~intimately connected. Physical challenges within sport can have psychological consequences,~~  
43 ~~similarly psychological challenges can have serious physical consequences (Schinke et al.~~  
44 ~~2017). Crucially, all athletes, like the rest of the human population, will experience challenging~~  
45 ~~situations, fluctuations in their work and non-work settings. In this way, Henriksen et al. (2019)~~

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10 argue, it is crucial we do not pathologise human condition and experience. Athletes do not need  
11 to display clinical mental health symptoms to require help and support with their mental health.  
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14 Elite sport is characterised by the need to perform towards the upper limit of an individual's  
15 capabilities when under pressure (Cook et al. 2014). It is commonly assumed that only mentally  
16 and emotionally strong athletes can succeed at the highest level (Moesch et al. 2018).  
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18 Subsequently elite athletes are often viewed as mentally tough, therefore mental health issues  
19 are seen as conflicting to the expectations of what constitutes an elite athlete (Bauman, 2016).  
20  
21 Athletes are often reluctant to seek support for mental health due to stigma and the perception  
22 of seeking help as a sign of weakness (Rice et al. 2016). Consequently, it is commonly assumed  
23 that only mentally and emotionally strong athletes are able to succeed at the highest level  
24 (Moesch et al. 2018). Mental health and those who suffer are commonly stigmatised in society  
25 (Culvin, 2020). Combined, these factors fuel an expectation for athletes to be mentally robust.  
26  
27 Therefore, mental toughness and mental health issues in athletes are seen as  
28 contradictory (Bauman, 2016). Psychological studies propose that elite sport  
29 context specific factors such as injury, overtraining combined with ineffective recovery, career  
30 transition and career termination can increase vulnerability to mental health conditions (Kuettel  
31 & Larsen, 2019; Moesch et al. 2014). Overlooked within these studies are wider contextual  
32 patterns that emerge individually and collectively in both work and non-work settings. For  
33 example, occupational fragility, family concerns, such as delayed marriage or family planning  
34 and educational choice contribute to individual and collective vulnerabilities (Kalleburg, 2018,  
35 Culvin, 2019). An athlete may thrive in one sport environment or particular area of life and  
36 others will be a battle, which highlights the influence of the person-environment fit (Henriksen  
37 et al., 2019). In short, mental health wellness and how it is fostered will vary dependant on the  
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51 context.

**Commented [A5]:** Sharpened this and added ref towards mental health and expectations of athletes to be mentally strong.

**Commented [A6]:** Added in the perception of mental tough and reasons not to seek help

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There are distinct reasons why elite athletes are particularly susceptible to common mental disorders (CMD's) mental health problems. Competing in elite sport consists of a unique range of stressors that include, but not limited to, performance expectation, family concerns, injury, ageing and employment conditions (Kuetzel & Larsen, 2019; Culvin, 2019). Research conducted on 224 elite Australian athletes demonstrated under half of athletes demonstrated met-easeness for at least one mental health problem (Gulliver et al. 2012). However, consideration of the influence of sub-groups (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability or an intersection of all) and its relationship with mental health is limited, meaning so too is context. Foskett and Longstaff (2017) suggest the association between gender and signs of distress was significant with 17.3% of men and 39.3% of women athletes reporting signs of distress from the sample group. However, according to Henriksen et al. (2019) contexts include, individual (gender, race, religion, ethnicity), environmental (national, organisational, political, sport specific) and developmental (age, career phases and transitions). Overlooked with the consensus statement is sexuality, disability and/or an intersection of multiple, overlapping contexts. Meaning a more comprehensive strategy for assessment is necessary if we are to develop a more holistic and contextualised definition of mental health amongst elite athletes.

### **The Environment of Professional Football.**

When considering a holistic mental health assessment strategy in elite football, the impact of environmental factors cannot be understated. On the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the English Premier League (EPL), English Football League (EFL), Women's Super League (WSL) and Women's Championship (WC) suspended all football. ~~initially until April~~ However, the restart was delayed and the EPL finally resumed on the 17<sup>th</sup> June (Williams 2020) with the



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~~EFL resuming on the 20<sup>th</sup> June. The FA WSL and FA Women's Championship 2019-2020 season was ended on the 25<sup>th</sup> May with final positions decided on a points per game basis. During this time this halted players professional activity whilst also confining them in their houses (Eirale et al. 2020). As the UK moved into lockdown, matches were suspended and many clubs, particularly lower down the footballing pyramid, furloughed players and training grounds were closed. Players had to take pay cuts and consider options away from football due to contract renewal (Ames et al 2020). Players who previously relied on daily routines and ~~including~~ enjoyed the company of their teammates had to remain at home. This sense of isolation significantly impacted upon their wellbeing (Kilpatrick 2020) and players needed support. A FIFPRO (2020) survey found double the number of male and female footballers in 16 countries had reported symptoms of depression and anxiety since football has been suspended (Ames 2020), and just 16% of female footballers have reported receiving mental health support from their clubs during the pandemic (FIFPRO 2020a). The impact of covid-19 and lack of mental health support had a wide-ranging impact across professional football. This had a wide-ranging impact across the whole spectrum of professional footballers. Some players had been living forced to live alone or away from family members, which impacted upon their usual social networks, and created a high level of uncertainty (FIFPRO, 2020b). To help address this issue clubs have used a range of digital ~~technology~~ technologies ~~communication~~ to keep in contact with players. This allowed players the opportunity to discuss any doubts or problems that they may have had (Foster, 2020). and players have experienced a sense of isolation which has significantly impacted upon their wellbeing (Kilpatrick 2020). A FIFPRO survey found double the number of male and female footballers in 16 countries had reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety since football has been suspended (Ames 2020).~~

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11 Others will have partners and young children and will have greatly benefitted from spending  
12 an increased time with their family. The lives of professional footballers require a large  
13 amount of travelling and spending time overnight in hotels, even more so for elite players  
14 playing either in the Champions League or at international level. Families will have enjoyed  
15 this time and children would have been able to spend more time with both parents. As  
16 professional athletes, players had to maintain their level of fitness in order to be ready to  
17 complete post-restrictions. Players utilised maintain fitness levels. However, those. This  
18 relied on players having the access to means. Some will have had access to gardens where  
19 they could exercise and do ball-work whereas other players may live in accommodation  
20 where they could not access a suitable outdoor or exercise without the means to exercise  
21 may have then experienced increased pressure to adhere to the rules and expectations of the  
22 club. Although the WSL and FA Women's Championship 2019-2020 season was ended on  
23 the 25<sup>th</sup> May, the EPL finally resumed on the 17<sup>th</sup> June (Williams 2020) with the EFL  
24 resuming on the 20<sup>th</sup> June. The EPL launched 'Project Restart' where clubs had to develop  
25 return to play protocols in line with government guidance (Aarons, 2020). Since the restart,  
26 professional football has been played behind closed doors, without fans in attendance.  
27  
28 The absence of fans in stadiums can have a detrimental impact on professional  
29 footballers. Focusing on the crowd instead of their pain can help players when they are tiring  
30 and about to 'hit the wall'. Players who are motivated by external stimulation may have  
31 struggled to perform without the presence of fans, therefore their place in the team and  
32 subsequent contract may be at risk (James 2020). As of December 2020, clubs in certain  
33 areas of England can allow a limited number of supporters into their stadiums following a  
34 relaxation of coronavirus restrictions (Mallows, 2020)

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10 Covid-19 has had a debilitating impact on the mental health of professional footballers. While  
11 the UK was in a national lockdown, the football industry had been awaiting guidance from  
12 the both the UK government and football governing bodies on the lifting of restrictions and  
13 resumption of the football season. This created continuous uncertainty as to how, when and if  
14 the football season would resume and also when the next season would start. This increased  
15 level of uncertainty had heightened the anxiety levels of professional footballers due to the  
16 financial impact on the football industry. Not only had some players been furloughed, many  
17 have also taken wage deferrals to help support their club. Some players were also concerned  
18 for their family members who may need to follow the government guidance regarding  
19 shielding due to either underlying health concerns or having partners who are pregna

### 27 Career transitions and mental health

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29 The curtailment of the football season in March 2020, has led to a period of uncertainty for  
30 individuals ~~associated~~ within football. From July to October 2020, financial decisions  
31 regarding contracts throughout the football pyramid were made, with some struggling to  
32 survive from a financial perspective. Within academic literature, this experience canhas been  
33 termed as 'going through a transition' (Morris & Deason, 2020) or 'facing a critical moment'  
34 (Tonge, 2020; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). The experience of a transition or critical moment  
35 can bring upon a sudden lack of structure and potentially create existential anxiety due to the  
36 uncertainty of what may be coming next (PFA, 2019). One of the potential causes of this  
37 anxiety is that the player holds a particularly strong sense of athletic identity of being a  
38 footballer (Nesti, 2010). Following the Covid-19 outbreak athletic identity may have been  
39 threatened through disrupted integration with teammates, coaches, support staff and  
40 management. Moreover, Mmany players will not have their contracts renewed due to financial  
41 constraints or deselection. Such precarity can stimulate mental health challenges such as having  
42 to move away to join another club (i.e. sign a short-term contract), schooling disruption, and  
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contracts coming to an end leading to uncertainty of ~~renumeration~~remuneration (Tonge, 2020).

Arguably, players who move on from clubs involuntary (i.e. not through their choice) are more prone to psychological difficulties such as anxiety and worry over future steps (Nesti, 2004).

~~Early insight by Hughes and Coakley, (1991) suggested that this involuntary disruption can be a major source of frustration and evoke emotion such as anger, denial, grief and even create clinical depression (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; PFA, 2019).~~

~~Alongside research of the negative components of transitional experiences and critical moments, E~~evidence exists that suggests challenging times can also be used to garner positive experiences (Stambulova, 2000). For many players an extended period away from the regimented lifestyle of professional football has presented an unexpected opportunity for personal growth, and identity development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). ~~Anecdotally, this has been well documented with Marcus Rashford raising 20 million pounds to help feed disadvantaged youngsters (Hainey, 2020), and elite level managers such as Jose Mourinho leading training sessions ‘virtually’ (Pattle, 2020). Also documented are reports club staff contacting players on loan and providing them with the opportunities to stay in touch via interactive platforms such as Microsoft Teams (Magee, 2020).~~ It is hoped that players are engaged with some level of hope, optimism, positivity and meaning around the best ways forwards following an unprecedented issue within our lifetime. It is as crucial as ever that the right support ~~from differing people~~ is in place as players attempt to get their careers moving again, or even seek out new opportunities to move their lives on. We ~~simply~~ cannot allow a ~~high majority of~~ players to fall into a deep hole and then find it impossible to get out.

## Conclusion

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10 The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on elite sport globally and professional  
11 football is no exception. The suspension of the EPL, EFL, FA WSL, and FA WAWC, and the  
12 uncertainty that followed has had a detrimental impact on professional footballer's mental  
13 wellbeing. We recommend that all elite football clubs across both the men's and women's  
14 game develop a holistic mental health assessment strategy and to take responsibility to  
15 support the wellbeing of their employees. In developing a holistic strategy clubs should have  
16 a thorough understanding of the environmental factors, in order to assess and signpost players  
17 for treatment where required. Furthermore, it is essential that professional clubs should  
18 support players thoroughly with their transitional experiences in order to minimise any  
19 potential future mental health difficulties.  
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#### 27 **Disclosure statement**

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29 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).  
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