

A Foucauldian Disciplinary Analysis of Early Career Professional Footballers' Loan Experiences

ENZO OLDE-WOLBERS
University of Hull

While retirement transitions in sports are well-researched from a psychological perspective (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Park, et al., 2013), little focus is given to temporary transitions. My research focuses on the socio-political aspects of the loan system in professional British football utilising Foucault's (1995) concept of discipline. Six professional football players between 18 and 21 years were interviewed with a focus on their loan experiences. Through a Foucauldian reading of the interview data, I highlight two key themes in the participants' loan experiences: docile footballing bodies on loan and the loan as a test. This study contributes to our understanding of how young professional players have to tiptoe through a new power-laden environment to handle the pressures that come with the expectations of performing in a new social and disciplinary space.

Keywords: loan experience, football, post-structuralism, Foucault

Former British football players have begun to reflect on and share their experiences when they were 'loaned' from their parent club to another club. For example, on his podcast, Peter Crouch reveals how "you're seen as a pawn...a commodity. You are traded like a piece of meat really..." (Crouch & Stark, 2022-present). Players often have little control over where they play, uprooting their lives to pursue the dream of playing professional football by learning how to win. As a former semi-professional footballer, who played in multiple countries, the loan experience is of particular interest to me as a researcher. Current research primarily attempts to understand this experience from a sport psychology or psycho-social perspective where the aim of the research focuses on the development of player resilience and improved performance (Abbott & Clifford, 2022; Kent et al., 2022; Prendergast & Gibson, 2021). In response, I adopt a Foucauldian stance to examine how relations of power shape early career footballers' experiences of the loan process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A loan typically occurs when the parent club wishes to retain the player's contract, but has no immediate use for the player's services. Thus, a player is made 'available

for loan' whereby the club attempts to 'sell' the player to a lower league club (The Football Association Premier League Limited, 2020, p. 697) with a relatively limited budget (Bond et al., 2020). The loan experience predominantly affects players at the outset of their careers, where the loan process exposes young players to the necessary challenges required to become a first team player at the parent club. The intent is for young players to gain more playing time during games by playing in a lower league or tier. More playing time is seen as essential to preparing young, academy level footballers to make the jump to a professional footballing career as a 'first team'¹ player (Bond et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2014; Stratton et al., 2004). Overall, the loan system is perceived as beneficial to both the parent and loan clubs: talented, young players from the parent club receive more playing time in lower tier leagues and, in exchange, the loan club benefits from the addition of high-quality (academy) players.

Being 'loaned' has been considered as a 'quasi-normal temporal transition' (Bond, et al., 2020) for a player. Transitional research, however, is dominated by positivist and post-positivist psychological lenses (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014), which investigates the cause, adaptation process, and coping strategies used by athletes as they seek to navigate transitions (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). For example, Swainston et al., (2020) and Abbott and Clifford (2022) found that loaned players had to adapt physically and tactically, as well as psychologically to being on the first team. Even though they play at a lower level, loanees were required to adapt to the increased strength and pace of playing against more experienced, older players, less recovery time between games, and the amount of tactical information provided. Additionally, players had difficulty interacting with their new teammates (based on age and experience differences) and maintaining their motivation after poor performances. Abbott and Clifford (2022) suggested improved access to coping and mental training resources, as well as a more targeted method for matching players to loan teams, improved feedback and communication between the loan and parent clubs, and an increase in matches at the academy level to help the player transition. Kent et al. (2022) further examined the transitional demands and individual coping mechanisms of loan players. Based on their findings, the authors proposed that pre-transitional resources could help players cope and adapt to new playing contexts. However, this research focuses on the player as an individual with little regard for or articulation of the different social contexts.

Prendergast and Gibson (2021) attempted to capture the connection between the social environment and a player's development of psycho-social and physical competence by examining perspectives of both players and coaches/managers. While Stamp et al., (2021) employed an interpretivist approach to shift away from the cognitive capacities of the transiting athlete towards embodied feelings and relationships with others, their work focused primarily on transition out of

¹ 'First team' refers to a football club's best players, the eleven starters on the field and the substitutes on the bench.

professional football (retirement). Roderick's (2006a, 2006b) studies of within-career transfers illustrated that this process was dictated primarily by managers. In professional football, this has recently shifted. For a transfer to occur, the managers, directors, and players agree to some extent to work within league regulations, where power shifted from the club to the player. Agents, club doctors, and players' partners also play a role in loan transfers (Roderick, 2012). In short, a professional player's transitional experience was enhanced when a player can participate in the decision-making process (McKenna & Thomas, 2007; Roderick, 2006a).

These qualitative studies revealed that the changing nature of socio-cultural environments evoked by being on loan (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021) was key to how a player perceived and negotiated that experience. However, no studies to date have attempted to map the power relations and thereby the make-up of these changing socio-cultural conditions.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Numerous sociocultural scholars document the challenging sub-culture of the British working football context (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Giulianotti, 1999; Jones, 2019; Jones & Denison, 2017; Manley et al., 2012; Manley et al., 2016). For example, post-structuralist research illustrated how multiple different power-laden techniques work in the context of football. Giulianotti (1999) highlighted how footballing bodies were controlled through Foucault's techniques of discipline through the control of space, time and activities, or anatomo-politics (Foucault, 1995). Foucault's concept of anatomo-politics encapsulates "general formulas of domination" (Foucault, 1995, p. 137) whereby bodies can be made docile, through years of constant surveillance and scrutiny, by coaches and by their own practices, to adhere to socially acceptable football behaviours (Jones & Denison, 2017). Post-structuralist researchers demonstrated that players were disciplined to comply with certain arrangements and training structures (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Giulianotti, 1999; Jones, 2019) through intense surveillance (Manley et al., 2012), normalized behaviours and expectations (Roderick, 2006a), and verbal abuse (Hickey & Roderick, 2022). The prospect of ejection from the football space was also a constant and daunting factor shaping a player's daily experiences (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017; Stamp et al., 2021). Through these practices, a coach categorized players as good or bad based on their willingness to adhere to these disciplinary practices (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Because the coach is a gatekeeper to a player's success, the coach is positioned as an authority figure whose decisions, actions, and behaviours are unquestioned. In short, the greater control has coach had over an athlete, the greater the chance of competitive success (Mills & Denison, 2013). Control was enabled through constant observation and evaluation by coaches, use of punishment, and the perpetual

presence of disciplinary mechanisms, which footballers unquestioningly accepted as part of a professional life filled with uncertainty, stress, and structure (Jones & Denison, 2017). These findings articulated a social world where a coach's or manager's constant gaze, or hierarchical observation, meant that players subject themselves, both knowingly and unknowingly, to taken-for-granted truths about their roles as playing bodies within the structure of a football club.

Foucauldian scholars Jones and Denison (2017) established in detail how discipline operates at the localised level of the working football club to produce 'docile footballing bodies', which had significant implications for players both during and after their careers. The findings from their study suggested that new ways of thinking about the environments, which high-performance athletes occupy, could lead to a fresh awareness of the implications of discipline and called for the adoption of alternative or re-imagined practices (Denison et al., 2019). Hence, Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational presented a unique approach to studying the loan process. Instead of aiming to understand individual meaning-making processes, Foucault (1978) considered meaning and knowledge to be ever-changing, shaped through relations of power in social contexts, to inform individual experiences (Avner et al., 2025). A footballing self, therefore, was constructed within a social context. However, loaned players experienced two footballing contexts – the parent club and the loan club – which were instrumental in shaping players' experiences. Therefore, in this study, I aimed to answer the following research question: How can a Foucauldian understanding of power and disciplining effects of space provide insight into young professional football players' experiences of the loan process?

METHODS

Interviews are a typical method used in qualitative research as they grant “insight into people's opinions, feelings, emotions, experience” (Purdy, 2014, p. 161). I intentionally designed my interview guide to map and analyze the workings and effects of power that shaped the disciplining experiences of the participants (Jones & Denison, 2017) by shining a light on specific aspects of Foucault's conceptualization of discipline, specifically hierarchical organization and space as a technology of discipline, which influenced the loan experience of each participant. In so doing, I aimed to highlight the subtly different disciplinary networks and pressures of lower-level non-professional first team football settings.

Participants

I employed both purposeful and criterion sampling to identify potential participants (Patton, 2014). I purposefully contacted English Football League (EFL) teams from the Championship League (2nd tier) down to League Two (4th Tier), who loaned

players to teams in League Two or to clubs further down the British non-league football pyramid, as participants in these leagues had experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The parent clubs then purposively reached out to their contracted players currently on loan or to those players who had experienced a loan within six months. These players were then invited to recommend teammates from other clubs to take part in the research project thus increasing the potential pool of participants through snowballing sampling (Patton, 2014).

Because younger player experiences were largely undocumented (Abbott & Clifford, 2021), I selected participants based on the following predetermined criteria: participants had to be young (18+) players, part of a professional academy or professional football team competing in the UK, and had recently experienced a loan spell at a club away from their parent club. Each participant (as well as their parent and loanee clubs) was given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. A total of six participants chose to participate (Table 1). This sample size is consistent with studies of other hard-to-reach participants (Purdy, 2014). I obtained ethical approval for this study from the University of Bath's institutional ethics committee.

Table 1. Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Parent club level at time of interview</i>	<i>Division of loan Club (Number of games played for loan club)</i>
Lewis	20	Championship level	7 th (63)
			6 th (17)
			6 th (10)
Max	20	League Two level	6 th (4)
Daniel	20	Championship level	4 th (34)
Charles	18	Championship level	9 th (16)
			8 th (9)
			8 th (1)
			7 th (2)
Seb	19	Championship level	7 th (12)
George	20	Championship level	7 th (9)
			4 th (10)
Kurt	26	Championship level	3 rd (5)
			4 th (6)

Semi-Structured Interviews

Although semi-structured interviews utilize a predetermined set of questions, they possess more flexibility than structured interviews as the questions serve merely as a

guide and interviewees are encouraged to direct the course of the conversation (Markula & Silk, 2011). This level of flexibility permits the interviewer to explore unanticipated insights (Purdy, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews allowed me, as the researcher, to explore disciplinary based topics guided by Foucauldian theory and let the conversations meander around different issues. I constructed my Foucauldian-inspired interview guide according to Avner et al. (2025) and further tailored the guide based on my experience as a football player. Video calls, rather than in-person meetings, were employed to ensure participants could reflect on their experiences from a safe and comfortable space (home). The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes in length.

Because previous literature highlighted the potentially sensitive nature of loan experiences, I began each interview by sharing my background as a semi-professional footballer playing across a range of countries and cultures. My experience allowed me to speak the 'language' of an established football environment (Roderick, 2006a). I reassured and encouraged participants to provide honest and rich accounts of their experiences through this mutual understanding of the specific vocabulary around the loan process (Hannabus, 1996). Additionally, as recommended by Smith and Sparkes (2016), I closely attended to the participants' body language and tone for any signs of discomfort.

Data Analysis

In line with Markula and Silk's (2011) recommendations, I read the data generated from the interviews while simultaneously engaging with Foucault's (1995) analytical tools associated with anatomo-politics. Multiple readings allowed me to reveal and analyzed how the movement of an individual from one disciplinary context (with its own relations of power) to another, 'foreign' subculture that was similar yet also subtly different (Jones & Denison, 2017). Based on these readings, I identified themes that intersected and illustrated incongruities (Markula & Silk, 2011). In the following section, I explore how subtle changes in relations of power that underpin participants' loan experiences and tie this to existing literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

My findings centred on a Foucauldian interpretation of the loan experience as an enforced exposure to a new context typified by alternative *arrangements* of power relations to that of the player's parent club. Within this overarching understanding, I articulate my findings based on two themes: docile footballing bodies on loan and the loan as a test.

Docile Footballing Bodies on Loan

Football's disciplinary context prepares and conditions players to act and expect to be treated as 'docile footballing bodies' (Jones & Denison, 2017). In this study, the players expressed similar experiences. As Lewis stated, "[w]ell, you wouldn't play on matchday if you turned up late, things like that. If you were meant to start you would be on the bench and that would be your punishment." Punishment, in the form of not being allowed to play, was and still is a typical disciplining tactic that allows coaches to mold their players to become the stereotypical 'coachable' player (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). As in other sports, young academy footballers were "there 9-5 basically every day [...] so you're there all day, so when you get home, you feel like you ain't got time at all" (Charles). Long training sessions, in addition to rules, aimed to enhance team-bonding (e.g., cell phones are not permitted in the changerooms to 'encourage' player interaction), and demonstrated players' compliance to and acceptance of their circumstances (see also Manley et al., 2012). Foucault (1995) believed that discipline was not only enacted via corrective instruction, but also by the transformation of the body to work efficiently and usefully. With the removal of distractions and choices at the academy level, the player could focus solely on football and became a useful asset to the club. This finding is in line with Roderick's (2006a, 2006b) and Jones and Denison's (2017) research that highlighted the need for professional footballers to be seen as useful. In short, a player's conformity to the everyday workings of the football club meant that they readily conform to and accept the loan process (Giulianotti, 1999; Jones, 2019; Jones & Denison, 2017). As docile bodies, players on loan lacked decision-making ability in the political process of arranging loans. This, in turn, was exacerbated by a lack of communication, a perception of being intentionally misled, and staying silent, where players chose to not voice their concerns to their coaching staff.

Lack of communication

Players repeatedly spoke about the lack of transparency and clarity in the loan process. This lack of dialogue overwhelmingly added to the confusion that typifies the already uncertain career of young professional footballers (Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). Daniel recalled his own experience of this situation:

[I] played ninety minutes [*for the first team at parent club*] and did alright, and then I saw an article in the newspaper, that my grandma sent me about how I was ready to go out on loan. Something about U23s being a step back or something. The gaffer hadn't even spoken to me at all about it (*italics added*).

Without consulting Daniel, the head coach (gaffer) made the decision to send him on loan, across the country, that same day. Max, another player, was left out of a match day squad without having been given a reason: "I almost felt like I was running

around trying to get answers” where he recalled chasing down representatives from his parent club to determine that he had been loaned. This lack of communication was a commonplace experience for loanee players.

Foucault’s (1995) concept of docility illustrated how this significant and disruptive life transition is enacted upon players by clubs and managers. Techniques and instruments of discipline enacted by an institution (the football club) served to make players docile, and a player who challenged a decision to be loaned would disrupt day-to-day proceedings. Therefore, docility was reinforced through minimal levels of communication that were then accepted and legitimized. This lack of communication was often tied to experiences of being misled.

Intentionally Misled

‘Sugar-coating’ was something that those in positions of influence employed in communications about loan decisions. George provided an example of frustrating conversations in which the coach did not always speak candidly with him and regularly broke promises: “I was told I wasn’t allowed to go on loan and then a week later he wants me on loan. Was told he wasn’t going to sign a left-back. Near deadline day, he signs a left-back.” In a profession that demanded sacrifice and loyalty, it is understandable why George felt frustrated at the lack of reciprocation of loyalty by his manager. This example, provided by George, occurred after a disagreement with his head coach over his playing time. Clearly, the micropolitics of club football played a covert role in the loan process, whereby George dared to question a decision made by the coach (Cushion & Jones, 2006). While other participants recalled similar situations, where the details of their loans were ‘inconsistently’ related to them, they all accepted these discrepancies as part and parcel of ‘making it’ in their football work.

Again, Foucault’s concept of docility clarified players’ experiences of being misled. While they were cognisant of an injustice, they felt incapable of destabilizing this imbalance and thus continued to ‘trust’ the process of player loaning. For George, this was just “part of the job” whereby a player was made compliant through a club’s disciplinary practices. As previous Foucauldian scholars illustrated, coaching discourses that positioned the coach as an authority figure, through the use of disciplining tactics in daily training sessions, enabled players to rationalize the lack of honesty in the loan process (e.g., Denison, 2010; Mills & Denison, 2013; Jones & Denison, 2017).

While Foucault (1995) articulated power as omnipresent in every relation rather than possessed by an institution, individuals must be compliant for these relations of power to be maintained. The coach-player interaction depicted by George demonstrated that players perceived and unintentionally reinforced hierarchical understandings of power in footballing spaces. The acceptance of being misled as a part of the process could significantly impact early career trajectories (Jones, 2019),

and normalized working football settings often saw footballers treated as assets or cogs required to function effectively as part of a system (Giulianotti, 1999). The player was repeatedly placed in a position where they must either decide to accept the decisions made for them or risk falling out of favour and have their potential footballing careers jeopardized (Manley, et al., 2016). Players, therefore, reinforced the consistent lack of dialogue by not speaking out or ‘pushing back’ against the loan decisions.

Staying Silent

The lack of push-back, or staying silent about a loan, resonated with Manley et al.’s (2016) research where players must endure in an environment that claimed to be more holistic yet failed to give them a voice. For example, George confessed that he feared the manager’s opinion of him would change if he had refused his loan: “I think, I just would have gone down in his estimations” as someone who would avoid a challenge and lacked the desire to be a better player. For Charles, a loan was always presented as “sort of one of those questions where you couldn’t say no ‘cuz you felt like you had to say yeah”. These responses were not surprising given that questioning the wishes of the coach is traditionally frowned upon in a high-performance football setting (Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). Years of being exposed to the disciplinary norms of the parent club and the coach’s authority illustrated that players’ silence on loan decisions was commensurate with other findings of footballers’ docility (e.g., Jones, 2019). Players clearly believed speaking out against their loans would jeopardize their standing within the club.

This fear of speaking out was also evident in the challenges experienced by loaned players in unfamiliar territory, both geographically and socially, in their new clubs. As most interviewees grew up in the same social ‘bubble’ during their time at the academy of the parent club, they also voiced their pre-loan jitters. Some worried that playing at a lower level would stunt their development:

I think a lot of academy players are very wary of the level of what they’re sent on loan to and a lot of academy players turn their nose up at loan moves. (Seb)

Well with loans, people usually just think it’s... you’re going out there and the football is gonna be rubbish. Slower than what you’re at and people will sometimes think that the club sort of don’t care where you go. They are sort of just shipping you out because you haven’t got... maybe you haven’t got a chance of, at the time of, playing in the first team. (Max)

Obviously, you want to play as high as you can but sometimes when you go to them leagues it's like 'Do I actually need to be here?' or 'Am I learning stuff?' (George)

Champ et al. (2020) theorized that players build a strong sense of pride and cultural identity during their formative years at a club. Therefore, being loaned jeopardized or questioned their identity as players. This tension played out against a backdrop where, paradoxically, the players were also aware that they needed to get 'game time' to progress in their careers. In this study, footballers feared the level of their loan would be too low and not provide enough of a test or challenge.

The quotes above also highlighted how discipline was productive through a process of hierarchical observation (Foucault, 1995). Foucault saw how 'experts' (coaches, managers, analysts) examined the targets (players) to ensure optimal performance. While perceived as providing support, this constant surveillance acted as a gaze, where unwanted traits were constantly scrutinized by a range of observers connected to the parent organization (Andrijiw & Jones, 2023): there was no place for players to hide poor performances. For players educated in the academy system, this normalizing gaze was experienced from an early age (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2017). Hence, it was unsurprising that players reported not only a positive response to coaches and managers from their parent clubs scrutinizing their loan performances, but also a simultaneous fear regarding their performances on loan going unnoticed. As Max noted: "I had seen teammates going on loan to lower levels and it almost used to look like they were just forgotten". The absence of communication regarding the loan was reproduced during the loan period legitimized players' fears of being absent from their coaches' immediate gaze. Although George agreed that this was a risk, players who were not going to go professional at least "...get sent out on loan to lower-lower leagues like, just to get some experience. So, when they get released, they've got at least some men's football on their CV ...". Again, this highlighted the tension of being on loan, where early career footballers perceived silence as the best option. This pressure to internalize disciplinary control, despite being aware of the pitfalls, such as injury or de-selection/non-contractual security, meant players willingly relinquished their autonomy. While players rightly experienced trepidation about the loan arrangement, they willingly engaged in an opportunity that could act as a platform for them to continue their footballing careers and potentially secure a long-term contract.

Examining these players' experiences of loan through Foucault's (1995) concept of discipline further illustrated how institutional conditions led to the legitimization and continued problematic orchestration of disciplinary power at management levels (Andrijiw & Jones, 2023). This hierarchical arrangement of power ensured that neither coaches nor managers considered clear communication or consultation with players as significant or necessary parts of the loan process.

Similar to retiring players (Abbot & Clifford, 2021; Kent et al., 2022), young footballers experienced transition, being loaned, without support. To add to the complexity of this experience, players on loan felt they had to live up to the expectations of the parent club as well as those of the new club (space) into which they were thrown.

The Loan as a Test

In navigating a new social arrangement of power at a lower-level club, young players often perceived the loan experience as a type of test, a challenge they had to meet to show their commitment to football.

I think he would have thought “I don't want to go play men's football” or something - he would have developed a different perspective of me if I didn't say “yeah”...I think he thought that I was gonna go out there and then struggle with it... I think that was sort of a test as well, to be fair. (Charles)

When you're young, I almost felt a little bit vulnerable in that moment...I thought ‘if I say no here, they're gonna think I'm a “Big time Charlie.” (Max)

As both Charles and Max described, players rarely resisted loan arrangements for fear of being seen as arrogant or a loser. A player who accepted the loan reinforced their value as a team player as part of the parent club. However, while on loan, a player was not removed from the overall disciplinary nexus of football, they had to navigate new ‘enclosures’ (spaces), new timetables, and new routines that were monitored and observed in subtly different ways by new coaches, managers, and teammates under alternative (loan club) judgement criteria (Foucault, 1995).

Interacting with new players in new spaces (e.g., changeroom), orienting to and managing different expectations experiencing, playing in front of large crowds, and managing a new level of independence were highly destabilizing experiences (Jones & Denison, 2017). For example, George recalled his initial fear of fitting into this new social setting:

I was nervous. Didn't know what to expect cuz I was still really young and was stepping out my comfort zone massively. I was quite a shy person, walking into a changing room full of people like [...] I was pretty nervous, and I didn't really want to do it to be fair.

British football culture can be defined by its toughness and hyper-masculinity (Parker, 2001). Hickey and Roderick (2022) found that senior players commonly tested a neophyte player's resilience by ‘banter’, teasing, and scolding in the men's changing room environment. Thus, at the new club, a player was subjected to not only the

surveillant gaze of a coach or manager, but also that of new, and frequently more experienced, teammates. This process of developing and enhancing resilience through interactions with coaches and teammates could be brutal (Champ et al., 2020). Therefore, the loan-as-a-test was a way to illustrate a young player was tough enough to handle the pressure of professional football and live up to the expectations placed upon them.

Living up to expectations

For some, being on loan meant that they were on the first team, playing in pressured situations to ensure a team's win (e.g., helping the team earn points in the standings). Charles articulated how expectations intensify during a loan where, as an academy player:

[in the home club academy?] you're forgiven more, because they (coaches) know you're gonna make a mistake and the players know you're gonna make a mistake, that's inevitable. At the loan clubs it's more ruthless or harsh if you make a mistake. You could cost three points, and they will be on your back a bit more.

Players perceived academy/ U23 settings as a 'softer' environment to those of a men's first team, even in lower tier leagues, where the result, winning, was paramount (Mills et al., 2014). Young footballers navigated this increased pressure by forming intense social bonds in a changing room setting (Stamp et al., 2021). Yet, as George highlighted in the previous section, fitting into this new space was not straightforward.

At these levels, expectations of loaned players were explicit: they were there to gain experience and help the new club improve its standings. Seb articulated this pressure as follows:

I'd imagine if you're a non-league team and you have a professional or academy football player coming into your changing room, I'd imagine that they'd expect you to be a good player, or the best player they've got. I think that sort of feeling of living up to the expectations of the other players, yeah.

Because the loan player came from a parent club that was sometimes multiple leagues above the new club, players felt the need to prove themselves. As Prendergast and Gibson (2021) found in their psycho-social exploration of loan players' experiences, players pressured themselves to be at least good enough, if not better than expected. The pressure to excel is exacerbated by playing in front of thousands of fans. Fans also aggressively articulated their expectations. For example, Daniel talked about a crucial play-off game, in which he did not play, where the players

understood that it was going to be a sell-out and obviously the fans wanted you to win, so quite a few of the players were nervous. I was a little bit nervous going into the game and we got beat two-one...You could see everyone walking from the game and they were all devastated really, but it's just part of football and after the play-offs there were fans outside the stadium getting shepherded by the police. I drove my car out not expecting anything, I didn't play in the play-offs, but the fans were screaming "You're effing shit!" all this stuff, saying "You're an embarrassment to yourself" stuff like that, and I was a little bit taken back by that...

For many young footballers, being on loan exposed them to the taken-for-granted pressure of being a professional player. Those who survived the test of living up to expectations were more likely to have a long career.

In thinking with Foucault's disciplinary technique of space and the instrument of hierarchical organization, I illustrated how the loan experience can be seen as a test of a player's potential as a professional footballer. By showing subtle shifts in power relations of new (loan) social settings, such as integrating into a new changeroom environment and playing surrounded by thousands of fans, a young player's loan experience was fraught with challenge that they, alone, learned to navigate. Daily training practices ensured players were further disciplined through the loan process to normalize tension, anxiety, and dislocation as part of the process of becoming a professional footballer. To some extent, these findings mirrored the experiences of retiring football players who contended with different arrangements of power in different spaces (Jones & Denison, 2017). However, for these participants, they were at the beginning of their careers with little experience to draw on. Thus, Foucault's relational understanding of power allowed me to illustrate how subtle changes in disciplinary practices were enacted in a new, loan club, context. Learning to navigate the change in power dynamics between the parent and loan clubs, thus, further normalized docile behaviours as part of becoming a professional footballer.

CONCLUSION

Although this quasi-temporal loan transition is not unique to UK football, little research to date has focused on this commonplace temporary transition. Previous research highlighted the psychological challenges of the loan process (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021), yet being on loan cannot be fully captured by players' experiences in isolation of the social context. Through Foucault's concepts of disciplinary techniques that make docile bodies, I highlighted how players are simultaneously

frustrated, resigned, fearful, and accepting of the loan process. The lack of communication (on the part of the club management and by players staying silent) and the perception that players were just a ‘cog’ in a club’s machinery illustrated how young footballers were seen, and reinforced themselves, as docile participants. The loan process itself was deemed a test of players’ mettle, almost designed to weed out the weak, those who can be identified as unable to withstand the pressures of changing settings and expectations. By examining the loan process of young footballers through a Foucauldian understanding of power, I demonstrated how docility was developed within an academy setting (through learning to become a football player) and articulated in new ways during the loan process. New spaces, such as a changeroom and a stadium full of fans, significantly shaped a loan player’s experience by articulating different arrangements of power. Power was, therefore, enacted in different ways among coaches, managers, teammates, fans and the loaned player at both the parent and loan clubs. These interactions were further informed by a shift in emphasis, from player development (at the parent club academy environment) to winning at all costs at the loan club. The use of Foucauldian concepts to make sense of players’ loan experience, therefore, enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the loan process.

My research, therefore, highlights how changes in relations of power should serve as the focal point of discussion of ethics in player development. In seeing power as relational, every member of sporting institutions has the potential to change the way we do sports. Although going against the grain can be tough, we can change not just our lives, but those around us (Denison, 2010). Future research could examine approaches that incorporate young players in the loan decision-making process as well as the development and implementation of Foucauldian-informed player resources. Ultimately, encouraging player input and pushing back on a culture of silence could not only enhance a player’s loan experience, but also make them better team players.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, W., & Clifford, T. (2022). Professional academy soccer players’ perceived experiences of loan environments. *Soccer & Society*, 23, 609-630.
- Andrijiw, A., & Jones, L. (2023). The production of docility in professional ice hockey. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 5(1), 1-15.
- Avner, Z., Jones, L., & Denison, J. (2025). Poststructuralism. In L Nelson, R. Groom, & P. Potrac (Eds.), *Research methods in sports coaching* (pp. 42-52). (2nd Edition). Routledge.

- Bond, A., Widdop, P., & Parnell, D. (2020). Topological network properties of the European football loan system. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 20(5), 655-678.
- Brown, G., & Potrac, P. (2009). 'You've not made the grade, son': De-selection and identity disruption in elite level youth football. *Soccer & Society*, 10(2), 143-159.
- Champ, F. M., Nesti, M. S., Ronkainen, N. J., Tod, D. A., & Littlewood, M. A. (2020). An exploration of the experiences of elite youth footballers: The impact of organizational culture. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 32(2), 146-167.
- Christensen, M. K., & Sørensen, J. K. (2009). Sport or school? Dreams and dilemmas for talented young Danish football players. *European Physical Education Review*, 15(1), 115-133.
- Crouch, P., & Stark, C. (Hosts). (2022-present). *Peter Crouch's loan moves: Gold bracelets, Swedish girlfriends and Holly Willoughby* [Audio podcast]. Apple Podcasts.
- Cushion, C., & Jones, R. (2006). Power, discourse, and symbolic violence in professional youth soccer: The case of Albion Football Club. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 23(2), 142-161.
- Denison, J. (2010). Planning, practice and performance: The discursive formation of coaches' knowledge. *Sport, Education and Society*, 15(4), 461-478.
- Denison, J., Jones, L., & Mills, J. (2019). Becoming a 'good enough' coach. *Sports Coaching Review*, 8(1), 1-6.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, volume one: An introduction*. Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of a prison*. Penguin Books.
- Giulianotti, R. (1999). *Football: A sociology of the global game*. Polity Press.
- Hannabuss, S. (1996). *Research interviews*. New Library World.
- Hickey, C., & Roderick, M. (2022) When jokes aren't funny: Banter and abuse in the everyday work environments of professional football. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 1-21.
- Jones, L. (2019). Wearable GPS devices in a British elite soccer academy setting: A Foucauldian disciplinary analysis of player development and experience. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 1(1), 4.
- Jones, L., & Denison, J. (2017). Challenge and relief: A Foucauldian disciplinary analysis of retirement from professional association football in the United Kingdom. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 52(8), 924-939.
- Kent, S., Neil, R., & Morris, R. (2022). Coping with the loan transition in professional association football. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 60, 102-158.

- Manley, A., Palmer, C., & Roderick, M. (2012). Disciplinary power, the oligopticon and rhizomatic surveillance in elite sports academies. *Surveillance & Society*, 10(3/4), 303-319.
- Manley, A., Roderick, M., & Parker, A. (2016). Disciplinary mechanisms and the discourse of identity: The creation of silence in an elite sports academy. *Culture and Organisation*, 22(3), 221-244.
- Markula, P., & Silk, M. (2011) *Qualitative research for physical culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- McKenna, J., & Thomas, H. (2007). Enduring injustice: A case study of retirement from professional rugby union. *Sport, Education, and Society*, 12, 19-35.
- Mills, A., Butt, J., Harwood, C., & Maynard, I. (2014) Examining the development environments of elite English football academies: The players perspective. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 9(6), 1457-1472.
- Mills, J., & Denison, J. (2013). Coach Foucault: Problematizing endurance running coaches' practices. *Sports Coaching Review*, 2(2), 136-150.
- Park, S., Lavalley, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic review. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 6(1), 22-53.
- Parker, A. (2001). Soccer, servitude and sub-cultural identity: Football traineeship and masculine construction. *Soccer & Society*, 2, 59-80.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Prendergast, G., & Gibson, L. (2021). A qualitative exploration of the use of player loans to supplement the talent development process of professional footballers in the under 23 age group of English football academies. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 40(4), 422-430.
- Purdy, L. (2014). Interviews. In L Nelson, R Groom and P Potrac (Eds). *Research methods in sports coaching* (pp. 161-170). Routledge.
- Roderick, M. (2006a). *The work of professional football: A labour of love?* Routledge.
- Roderick, M. (2006b). A very precarious profession: Uncertainty in the working lives of professional footballers. *Work, Employment & Society*, 20(2), 245-265.
- Roderick, M. J. (2012). An unpaid labor of love: Professional footballers, family life, and the problem of job relocation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 36(3), 317-338.
- Smith, B. M., & Sparkes, A. C. (Eds.). (2016). *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 103-123). Routledge.
- Stambulova, N., & Ryba, T. (2014). A critical review of career research and assistance through the cultural lens: Towards cultural praxis of athletes' careers. *International Review of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 7, 1-17.

- Stamp, D., Potrac, P., & Nelson, L. (2021). More than just a 'Pro': A relational analysis of transition in professional football. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(1), 72-86.
- Stratton, G., Reilly, T., Richardson, D., & Williams, A. (2004). *Youth soccer: From science to performance*. Psychology Press.
- Swainston, S., Wilson, M., & Jones, M. (2020). Player experience during the junior to senior transition in professional football: A longitudinal case study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 1672. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01672
- Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. C. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of applied sport psychology*, 6(1), 1-20.
- The Football Association Premier League Limited (2020) *Premier League Handbook Season 2020/21*. The Football Association Premier League Limited. <https://resources.premierleague.com/premierleague/document/2021/04/07/6ebff069-a7ee-415d-afbd-15878b6d33b2/2020-21-PL-Handbook-240321.pdf>
- Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective*, 18(3), 507-527.