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COVID-19: A commentary on implications for Academy Football players athletic identity and wellbeing

On March 23rd 2020, the UK government instituted a full-scale lockdown in response to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. People would only be permitted to leave their homes for the following purposes:

1. Shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible;
2. One form of exercise a day – for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household;
3. Any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person;
4. Travelling to and from work, but only where absolutely necessary and where work cannot be completed from home.

In the days prior to the start of the lockdown, I left a role at one professional football academy based in the North of England and relocated to start a PhD undertaken in conjunction with another professional football academy based in the Midlands. Through doing so, I have had a unique insight into the response of two English football academies to this unprecedented situation. The present article offers a brief commentary on the potential implications of the COVID-19 lockdown for academy players athletic identity and wellbeing. Observations will be presented along with reference to relevant literature in order to draw lessons from the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK for athletic identity, and prepare for future eventualities which share the characteristics of: i) people staying at home; ii) social distancing; and iii) the closure of places of work; in this instance football academies.

In the UK, all domestic football leagues and cups have been postponed until further notice, which also includes the cessation of training across all clubs. Through daily media reports, the impact COVID-19 on those involved in the industry at first team level (Premier League, 2020), is well known, but there has also been a profound impact on football academies across the country. There have been varied responses of football clubs in the face of this crisis. For example, as of the 20th of April, many clubs (e.g., Newcastle United, Norwich City, Derby County) have placed staff on 'furlough'¹ following announcement of the government coronavirus job retention scheme, whilst others continue to pay employees their full salary (e.g., Manchester United, Arsenal, West Ham United). Irrespective of response, the COVID-19 pandemic has left players having to adapt to prolonged periods of self-isolation. Many players within academies across the country, especially within the Youth Development Phase (U12 to U16) and Professional Development Phase (U18 to U23), will have been a part of an academy for many of their formative years. During this time, an 'athletic identity' may have developed, defined as 'the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role' (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 237). Through their participation within sport, a player is making a social statement about who they are and how they want others to think of them. Specifically, Brewer et al. (1993, p. 238) propose that this is a cognitive structure that 'guides and organizes processing of self-related information' as well as a social role. This therefore implies that 'athletic identity' is largely derived from the feedback from others (e.g., parents, coaches, teammates) which for many players, given the current lockdown, has been missing. This pandemic is a situation like no other, but

¹ For further information on furlough arrangements please see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

comparisons could be made to that of a nonnormative transition in sport such as a forced retirement due to injury. A transition results in a change in assumptions about oneself and are generally unpredicted and involuntary events, such as COVID-19, where players must adjust to life without sport for a prolonged period (Schlossberg, 1981).

The cessation of training has meant that players 'athletic identity' may be challenged, which therefore may have implications on players wellbeing. For example, research by Kim and Moen (2001) highlighted that a dramatic change in lifestyle can be accompanied by a shift in subjective well-being. This new lifestyle will be void of their usual routine, whilst players will also be missing their sporting environment and the competition that accompanies this, which can leave players with a feeling of emptiness in their lives (Stephan, 2003). Research has also highlighted that such transitions can lead to a loss of personal control over a player's life, considered a key factor of enhanced well-being (Lang, & Heckhausen, 2001). Therefore, how academies respond to this pandemic is critical when you consider the impact such a transition could have on an individual.

Within academies across the country, in an attempt to broaden an individual's identity beyond an athletic identity, there are many proactive programmes in place for players that focus on both the development of non-sport specific skills, as well as how skills developed within the sporting context can transfer into other areas such as academic study (Bailey, Hillman, Arent, & Petitpas, 2013). Over recent weeks, staff within academies have come up with novel ways of supporting not just the players, but also their own identities as coaches, by organising team meetings through apps such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These have ranged from general catch ups, to quizzes, to technical and physical challenges to provide competition that many players currently miss. Through doing this, not only have staff and players developed their skillset and their ability in using this means of communication, but feedback has highlighted other positive outcomes. For example, coaches and players have discussed the increased feelings of connectedness with one another, a critical factor in a positive coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). This finding has also been found in the education setting where the use of technology has led to improvements in the teacher-student relationship (Pollock & Amaechi, 2013). Inter-personal relationships can provide a psychological resource to protect individual's health and wellbeing, particularly in times of adversity (Praherso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). As we begin to move out of the enforced lockdown, could we see such technologies become a more common means of communicating within sporting academies, further developing creativity, as well as enhancing the relationships and wellbeing of those involved? In considering the use of such means of communication, due consideration must be given to safeguarding and confidentiality issues, especially when working with those under the age of eighteen.

The lockdown resulting from COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of those involved within football maintaining interests and skillsets outside of a sporting/football domain. It has also emphasised the importance of remaining connected to those around us, so that potential issues related to wellbeing during such situations may be minimised.

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