

Dears,

Throughout my life I have lived in multiple Countries with my Parents, learned several languages and appreciated all cultures.

In 2021, after graduating from ISD (International school of Dusseldorf) with an IB Diploma, I moved alone to Southampton, England, to embark on a new educational and athletic journey.

Here, in the Solent University (September 2021 - June 2024), I studied BSc (Hons), Sport Business Marketing Management , with the Bachelor's Degree in July 2024 (FIRST CLASS HONOURS as 110/110).

On top of that, during my life in England, I played soccer at a semi-professional level in the Team Hamble FC (TheFA).

These experiences have significantly improved me not only as a student athlete, but above all as a person. Through hard work, determination and perseverance, I was able to achieve excellent results both on and off the pitch.

Additionally, I gained vital experience at Southampton FC (through my life in the University) regarding sports development. This role has allowed me to deliver high quality training programs with organizational skills, and a positive attitude helped me keep track of each session and report to the project manager when necessary. As a result, I was able to improve my self-confidence and overcome unexpected challenges.

The next two years I worked in the hospitality industry at the award-winning The Halo lounge, belonging to Southampton FC. This experience was fundamental to improving mine customer service skills and perform well under pressure, as well as developing a leadership role attention to detail.

I had other experiences and some small jobs in England, in Germany in Italy too (you can read in my CV).

I would like to advance my career with you in such an exciting and imperative role, willing to contribute successfully from the start.

I can't wait to hear at your place.

Best regards.

Ethan Perotto

Mobile +49 176 661 45 474

Email ethan.perotto@gmail.com and ethan.perotto10@gmail.com

Personal Data

Name	Ethan Daniele Perotto
Nationality	Italy
Age	21
Date of Birth	14.07.2002 Milan, Italy
Gender	Male
Address (UK)	15 Newcombe Road Southampton SO15 2FJ
Address (Italy)	Via Pierluigi da Palestrina, 220 41122 Modena MO, Italy
Mobile Number	0049 17666145474
E-mail	ethan.perotto10@gmail.com

Education

Sep 2008 - Dec 2013	International Campion School Athens (Greece)
Jan 2014 - June 2021	International School of Düsseldorf (Germany)
Sep 2021 - June 2024	Solent University (England)

School Graduation

IB International High School Diploma in June 2021

University Degree

BSc (Hons) Sport Management in June 2024

Languages

Italian	(Mother tongue)
English	(Excellent)
Spanish	(Very good)
German	(Intermediate)

Previous Experiences

- Internship as member of the Sports and Activities Team at the International School of Düsseldorf. (2019)
- U14 Assistant Football Coach at the International School of Düsseldorf Summer Camp. (2020 - 2021)
- Renovation and maintenance works at the International School of Düsseldorf sports facilities. (2021)
- Bartending at the Lido di Lerici Beach Bar for summer season. (2022)
- Casual Football and Sports Development Coach at Southampton FC. (2022)
- Pre-Season Training at Modena FC. (2022)
- Hospitality at St Mary's Stadium for Southampton FC. (2022 - 2024)
- Semi-Professional Footballer for Hamble FC. (2021 - 2024)

Accomplishments

- Student Ambassador at Solent University. (2021 - 2022)
- Level 3 Emergency Aid Qualification at Solent University. (2022)
- Hampshire Cup Finalist. (2023)
- UEFA C Licence. (2023)
- Undergraduate Dissertation. (2024)

Skills

- Organisation
- Communication Skills
- Reliability
- Football Coaching
- Sports Marketing
- HR and Client Service
- Microsoft Office
- Google Suite
- Digital IT



**A CRITICAL EVALUATION ON THE MENTAL
HEALTH PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF
ELITE MALE ACADEMY FOOTBALLERS IN ITALY.**

ETHAN DANIELE PEROTTO
Student ID: Q15604659

Faculty of Sport, Health & Social Sciences
BSc (Hons) Sport Management
Solent University

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the mental health experiences and perceptions among male academy footballers in Italy, as well as discovering individual coping mechanisms, performance levels and support available. A section with future recommendations has been provided in the study.

Seven elite academy football players aged 18-24 years and one professional coach were recruited through purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview guide encompassing questions about mental health problems was developed. The interviews were transcribed and analysed qualitatively.

Participants generally reported high levels of stress and openly discussed challenging moments from their youth careers. Issues such as performance pressure, injuries and contract termination led to symptoms of depression and anxiety. The high expectations from coaches were occasionally difficult to handle. A few preventive measures and solutions were mentioned.

Overall, there is a crucial need to address mental health issues in elite level youth sport. Italian clubs and organisations must continue to destigmatise the topic through strategic and systematic policy work, education and digital or face-to-face support provided by professionals outside the football context.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research Context

Throughout history, football has been crucial for social change and unity, impacting the lives of roughly four billion people around the world (Cleland, 2015). Football and its global appeal has led to immense revenue, countless sponsorship deals and huge social media influence (FIFA, 2023). With over 240 million registered players worldwide, it has grown rapidly in terms of social importance, to the point of being considered more than just a game (Bowman, 2019). As a result, the high expectations from fans and the pressure to perform often leads footballers into psychological distress (Gouttebarge, 2016). This intense environment may become difficult to handle, particularly for academy youngsters who strive for a professional contract. Mental health plays a massive role in pursuit of their goals, despite facing a stigma in contemporary football (Herbst, 2023). The concept of mental health has evolved drastically over time but has gained wider attention in recent years (Hutchison and Hickman, 2016). According to Parnell and Krstrup (2017), it refers to a positive theory of social and emotional wellbeing, occurring both individually and collectively. With a growing body of research demonstrating the interrelationship between mind and body, footballers are often involved in mental health studies (Atkinson, 2018). For example, a global study analysing 607 male footballers published by Kerkhoffs and Aoki (2015) reported a prevalence in depression or anxiety of 38%. In broader society, one in four people will experience a diagnosed mental health problem during their lifetime and over 10% of the population has depression at any given time (THEFA, 2023). These facts and figures highlight the need to address mental health as a growing social issue. Therefore, it is essential to critically examine the role, function, and meaning of mental health in the lives of academy footballers, given the risks associated with it (Giulianotti, 2015).

Research Purpose

The motivation behind this study was to investigate a subject that is often ignored and insufficiently researched in the Italian context. Only a few players in Italian football have openly spoken about their mental health, most notably Gianluigi Buffon, who revealed his struggles with depression and panic attacks during his early period with Juventus (Billings and Hardin, 2023). Former Atalanta player Josip Ilicic has also battled with severe depression throughout his career, never allowing him to fulfil his potential (Pilo, 2022). Hence, this study was necessary to represent the importance of mental health and how it drastically affects daily life. Although each individual has a different, respectable opinion on the matter, Sanderson (2022) believes that part of the problem are the media and the fans who tend to severely criticise players. This study can hopefully encourage more athletes into speaking out and tackle the ongoing stigma that footballers are immune from poor mental health.

Aim & Objectives

This investigation will explore how youth male footballers, with experience in elite level Italian academies, are affected by mental health issues, their thoughts on the topic, and

their abilities to overcome psychological challenges including performance anxiety, stress and depression. The participants will reveal their mental struggles in football and the lack of support demonstrated in the industry. The study will also present the initiatives taken by Italian youth academies and governing bodies to limit mental health concerns, through conversations with coaches and sporting directors. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the stigma around mental health within football, in a country where this topic is still minimised (Nyzio, 2021). The investigation is being conducted primarily to reduce its ambiguity within Italian football, and provide a safer pathway for youth academies moving forward. The purpose is not only to raise awareness on a concerning subject, but to discover and interpret unique information that may enhance the mental state of young footballers. There are numerous studies already published on mental health in football, however, only a few discuss the perceptions of youth players, and even fewer analyse this aspect in Italy (Ivarsson and McCall, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to realise how poor mental health can damage the development of academy players, while attempting to understand their points of view on the subject.

Using primary research, this study will achieve a range of objectives produced to support the research question, each one with an intent to discover new findings. These objectives will help establish the depth and scope of the study, as well as providing more reliable conclusions (Smith, 2010). There are five main objectives:

- (i) to determine the perceptions and experiences of youth male footballers on mental health.
- (ii) to evaluate how mental distress (eg. increased anxiety or depression) may impact performance.
- (iii) to explore the initiatives and steps taken by Italian youth academies in limiting mental health problems.
- (iv) to understand and evaluate how coping mechanisms differ between players.
- (v) to raise awareness in reducing the stigma around mental illness within football.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Perspective

There is a fair amount of academic literature published on mental health in football, ranging from grassroots to the elite level. The concept of mental health has progressively evolved, but gained wider attention in the past few decades (Hutchison and Hickman, 2016). According to Parnell and Krstrup (2017), it refers to a positive theory of social and emotional wellbeing, occurring both individually and collectively. With a growing body of research demonstrating the interrelationship between mind and body, footballers are often involved in mental health studies to help researchers understand the psychology behind the sport (Atkinson, 2018). A FIFPRO (2015) study found that almost 40% of active players had experienced severe symptoms of depression, with a lack of support demonstrated in the industry. It also revealed that anxiety and sleep disturbance are highly prevalent issues within modern footballers. Most notably, when the book *A Life Too Short: The Tragedy of Robert Enke* was published in 2010, it provided an insight on the mental problems faced by German goalkeeper Robert Enke during his career (Reng, 2010). The biography highlights that many professional footballers suffer from depression regardless of their earnings, but choose to hide the illness in fear of damaging their reputation (Larsen and Moesch, 2021). As Brooks (2009) discusses in *Beyond the Crisis of Masculinity*, this fear of speaking up is traditionally associated with poor masculine behaviour and does not suit the stereotypical gender roles in society. It has been evident in a study involving 81 male adolescent footballers in English academies, where it was found that over half of them avoided mentioning their mental health due to fear of negative reactions from coaches or teammates (Busch, 2010).

Nonetheless, mental health has also been at the centre of criticism. Many authors believe that mainstream media deliberately encourages younger generations to become more sensitive and emotional when facing adversity (Aarnio, 2019). For example, in *The Myth of Mental Illness*, it is argued that mental conditions cannot legitimately be classified as diseases and are often misunderstood by Western society (Morris, 2013). Benning (2016) supports the idea, claiming that stress must be viewed as a motivating factor to improve confidence and resilience, especially within athletes. A study conducted by Mills (2012) found that academy coaches typically persuade young players into believing adversity can facilitate development. In the study, adversities and mental problems were largely perceived as opportunities for growth whereby players must introspectively dig deep to evolve. Due to the glamorous lifestyle depicted by footballers, most fans expect them to be living a life without difficulties, hence their credibility on mental health is immediately questioned (Parnell and Krstrup, 2017). Overall, there is a lack of knowledge on how youth academies are responding to mental health, and further attention must be placed on helping players overcome their struggles (Green and Smith, 2016).

Mental Health in Academy Football

Nixdorf and Beckmann (2019) suggest that without effective support, footballers will experience poor confidence, anxiety and fatigue at some point in their careers, impacting performance both on and off the pitch. Although it is rather complicated to gather

empirical data on this aspect, there are studies indicating that performance and productivity levels drop significantly when youth players face mental problems. An investigation by Souter (2018) revealed that college footballers in the United States are twice as likely to lose focus and commit more individual errors throughout the season if they have suffered from a traumatic event in the past six months. Furthermore, Dixon and Barker (2020) present a collection of academic literature and case studies in *The Psychology of Soccer*, regarding factors that could affect the performance of academy footballers. They highlight some of the primary causes, such as setbacks from injuries, fear of being released, cultural differences, and more recently, hate speech on social media platforms. Written by established sport scholars, the source may be useful for coaches who are willing to understand and elevate the mental side of their players. Another important piece of literature is *Football, Migration, and Mental Illness* published by Elliott (2022). The article points out the inability of foreign players to adapt to a new culture, and how separation from physical support networks can result in loneliness or isolation. Although professional academies often recruit players from abroad, the study suggests that settling in a new environment is often challenging at such a young age due to socio-cultural factors (Green and Smith, 2016). Elliott has published more work consisting of the motivations, experiences and pressures of migrant athletes, which may also apply to Italian clubs due to the increased number of foreign players signed in the last decade (Richter, 2015).

Linking back to the poor amount of support received by players, Wilkinson (2021) presents a literature review exploring the *Mental Health Issues in Academy Football Players Following Career Termination*. The article includes a series of studies which emphasise the impact of contract termination or injury on academy footballers, and how counselling could support future players. It also mentions that deselection in football is the main cause leading to long-term feelings of regret, loss of identity and prolonged trauma. Similarly, a qualitative investigation by McGlinchey and Saward (2022) analyses the lived experiences of youth players being released from a professional football academy. Each player talked about being marginalised in training sessions by their club and coaches before the point of release, adding to frustration and negative emotions. Blakelock (2016) highlights that 55% of academy players in the UK suffer from clinical levels of psychological distress at least three weeks after being released. Effective counselling during the early stages could help identify signs of social dysfunction in players as a result of the disconnection from their previous routine, and reintegrate them back into the community (Wilkinson, 2021). Human beings are not only deeply affected by the responses of significant others towards them, but also by societal and cultural institutions and its members (Mearns and Thorne, 2013). According to Brown and Portrac (2009), over 85% of academy players on scholarships do not receive a professional contract and quit football before the age of twenty one. Mental health issues will prevail unless clubs implement an emotional support system for deselected players (Rogers and Pilgrim, 2014). A report by Lewis (2007) identified recommendations that were put forward to clubs, such as the possibility of players being involved in other areas of the game after being released. Whether through coaching, administration or officiating, deselected footballers could experience a smoother transition from playing and consequently improve their mental health (Wilkinson, 2021).

Additionally, Sothern and O'Gorman (2021) have explored more factors influencing the wellbeing of academy footballers in England. Above all, demanding training schedules led athletes to prolonged periods of mental fatigue, however, participants felt the need to display a positive attitude and concealed their feelings in order to present a tough behaviour that would be accepted by society. Nesti and Littlewood (2011) asked twenty one elite academy footballers to self-rate their mental toughness twice during the competitive season and two senior coaches to rate them using the same scale. Several important findings emerged, in particular the self-ratings of players were found to be significantly higher than the ratings provided by coaches. The perceptions of mental toughness between players and coaches also differed. Whilst this may be the result of a generational gap, players are continuously encouraged to display a tougher mindset which builds pressure (Larsen and Moesch, 2021). This is explained in further detail by Graney (2017) with a *Critical Investigation Into the Management of Mental Health* in football academies. He outlines whether coaches are effectively managing the needs of their players and claims that very little research had been conducted on youth mental health prior to the global pandemic. As Frawley and Schulenkorf (2022) discuss in *The Routledge Handbook of Sport and COVID-19*, the pandemic was arguably the biggest cause in modern history that significantly deteriorated the mental health of academy players, as well as being the primary reason leading them to abandon football. A study by Ivarsson and McCall (2021) analysed the mental state and well-being of players from one Serie A club, both academy and first team, during the COVID-19 lockdown. Data was collected from one hundred male participants through an online questionnaire. The results found that 36% of players reported clinical levels in depressive symptoms and no change was found in positive effects over an eight-week process. Younger players were also more likely to lose motivation and confidence during the self-isolation period. The lack of physical activity and social recreation damaged their wellbeing and prevented some players from obtaining a professional contract. Once again, this study highlights the need to invest more time and effort towards the mental health of players in Italy and encourage different types of stress management techniques (Green and Smith, 2016). The COVID-19 event and its consequences on Italian football will be discussed further in this investigation.

Italian Context

As previously mentioned, there has been notable progress around the world in regards to mental health, yet this progress appears to be less evident in Italy (Fioretti and Amaddeo, 2014). Although the government established a range of non-profit organisations particularly during the pandemic, over 40% of the current population feels anxious on a daily basis and only one in six people feel optimistic about their future (TELUS, 2023). These concerning statistics may relate to a series of factors affecting the country, such as rising inflation, ineffective public healthcare and a scarce educational system. In addition, Cepiku and Marchese (2020) argue that municipally-owned sports facilities across the country are outdated and deficient, incomparable to new ones around Europe. Not only do substandard infrastructures prevent participation, they also create economic dilemmas which compromise the future of Italian football and mentally affect young athletes. Whilst this is an ongoing matter between local councils and clubs, another issue such as organised crime has played a damaging role. Testa and Sergi (2018) discuss the infamous history of corruption scandals in Italian football, claiming that illicit associations often interfere with

clubs, referees or players. Along with several insightful arguments, their book *Corruption, Mafia Power and Italian Soccer* indicates how the development of youth players is restrained by the unethical behaviour of individuals surrounding their lives outside the pitch. This subsequently affects the mental aspect of players or leads them to quitting football, whether they are indirectly or directly involved.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

When conducting research, the principal investigator must acknowledge clear methods and techniques to ensure a systematic and rigorous process (Silverman, 2024). Thus, research methodology is an essential strategic framework that outlines a consistent procedure used to gather, interpret, and analyse data more accurately (Phanse, 2016). According to Bryman (2016), it also helps to establish the reliability and validity of results.

Ontology & Epistemology

The philosophical branches of research, encompassing ontology and epistemology, play a fundamental role in shaping investigations (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Barbour (2014) defines ontology as the nature of existence and perception of reality, whereas epistemology focuses on the limitations and justification of human knowledge. Both concepts are closely interconnected within qualitative research as they encourage different worldviews and the ability to debate complex topics (Dierontou, 2014). Awareness of philosophical assumptions can increase the quality of research, besides contributing to human creativity (Mertens, 2010).

Bryman (2016) identifies two ontological components in regards to social entities, describing them as objectivism and constructivism. Both are valid methods of understanding reality, however, they oppose beliefs on how truth is acquired. While an objectivist point of view asserts that knowledge is obtained from logic and reasoning, constructivism argues that it is actively developed through self-experience (Given, 2008). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a constructivist approach was applied to understand mental health from the perspective of those experiencing it. All participants were asked to construct their individual realities based on subjective experiences, leading to diverse interpretations of the same phenomenon.

Qualitative Data

Through a qualitative approach, this study gained an insight into the personal feelings and experiences of participants. Qualitative research is by definition exploratory and seeks to describe a topic rather than measure it (Skinner and Edwards, 2014). Therefore, it allows researchers to capture meanings or qualities that cannot be numerically quantified, whilst gathering information that is not currently present in existing documents and records (Miles, 2014). This method promotes critical thinking and helps identify trends, patterns or themes when discussing results (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Barbour (2014) suggests that qualitative data is typically collected over time through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires or observations, in order to examine subjective concepts shared by individuals. Nonetheless, some limitations may arise from this approach. The rich quantity of data could make the analysis and interpretation process time-consuming, but more importantly, qualitative research alone is often insufficient to produce summaries generalisable to the wider population (Chapman and McNeill, 2005). Selection bias potentially occurs as a result of non-random identification, whereby the sample group is

not representative of the target population, compromising the accuracy of findings (Pannucci and Wilkins, 2010). Deciding whether to conduct qualitative or quantitative data highly depends on the research question and its objectives. Given the dynamic nature of this study to understand the mental health perspectives of academy footballers, a qualitative methodology underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology was adopted.

Sampling

Daniel (2012) identifies sampling as the selection of a subset from a target demographic. In the vast majority of research studies, the participation of an entire population of interest is not possible, thus a smaller group is relied upon for data collection (Turner 2020). Effective techniques and procedures, including purposive sampling, were designated prior to this investigation to ensure an appropriate sample group and size. Purposive sampling is defined by Bryman (2016) as a non-probability method in which researchers use expertise to intentionally select participants based on their traits or characteristics. All participants involved in this study are familiar with the environment surrounding academy football, and although personalities may differ, they share very similar mental health experiences.

Data Collection & Semi-Structured Interviews

The use of semi-structured interviews is common when gathering qualitative data (Silverman, 2024). It can be defined as a data collection strategy that combines a predetermined set of open questions together with a follow up discussion between the researcher and participant to explore new ideas or responses further (Given, 2008). Fundamentally, two individuals engage in embodied conversations to develop knowledge about themselves and the social world (Smith and Sparkes, 2017). In this research, undertaking semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences and concepts through their own words. They spoke openly and honestly about the challenges faced in youth football and how it affected their thoughts and feelings. It enabled the researcher to adopt a flexible interview guide by probing questions in relation to the answers given and building a positive rapport with the respondent, consequently gaining a deeper understanding (Jones and Gratton, 2015). This enriched the data, as participants reflected on their perceptions of mental health through verbal and non-verbal communication.

Analysis

Recordings and transcriptions were produced following the in-depth interviews to establish recurrent patterns or themes. As identified by McMullin (2023), academic transcribing can save time and facilitate the analysis process. Each participant had the right to modify or delete their transcript and ask for a copy if desired. In addition, a thematic framework analysis was utilised to identify, evaluate and interpret patterns across the data set. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that thematic analysis involves an active process of reflexivity, in which researchers demonstrate their experience to generate new concepts or insights derived from qualitative findings. This approach is beneficial to categorise large bodies of data particularly when looking for subjective information, such as individual experiences,

views or perceptions (Terry and Hayfield, 2021). During the analysis, initial annotations were produced after thoroughly reviewing the interviews, identifying themes of interest or significance. Following this, subordinate themes were summarised collectively under specific categories to generalise findings, along with relevant quotations. The whole process was conducted separately for each participant.

Ethical Considerations

This investigation has been ethically approved to protect the dignity, rights and privacy of research participants. According to Silverman (2024), ethics are fundamental principles which ensure integrity and transparency, as researchers must adhere to a respectable code of conduct when gathering data. Mental health is a sensitive topic, hence careful communication and moral standards were necessary to make participants feel at ease. For instance, post-interview support through a certified organisation was made available, anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained, and participants had the opportunity of withdrawing from the research at any given time avoiding repercussions. Furthermore, each participant signed a consent form and information sheet to understand their voluntary involvement within the study. Respecting the autonomy of participants and informing them about possible implications is crucial before commencing data collection (Smith and Sparkes, 2017). Documents relating to ethics can be found in the appendices.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Introduction

As Miles (2014) suggests, the purpose of examining results is to help researchers draw meaningful insights and evidence-based conclusions from their study. Discussing qualitative data tends to be a complex process, at least initially, due to a lack of commonly accepted methods for analysis (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Although researchers are able to embrace more flexible approaches, the success lies in their ability to formulate a coherent structure in which emerging patterns or themes are easily presented (Anderson, 2010). This investigation provides a range of significant extracts and quotations from the eight semi-structured interviews conducted, thereby comparing and contrasting the lived experiences of each participant.

Procedure

Single retrospective, in-depth semi-structured interviews were organised individually. The interviews lasted between twenty to thirty-six minutes and took place either online or in mutually agreed locations. As recommended by Barbour (2014), a flexible interview guide was designed to encourage dialogue and discuss new topics that arose. Initially, the participants were asked general questions about themselves to build rapport and formulate a sense of reciprocal trust. Each interview was audio-taped on QuickTime Player before being transcribed verbatim. A copy of a transcript from one of the interviews is available in the appendices. Pseudonyms have been applied to preserve the anonymity of participants and protect their identity. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) claim that pseudonyms in research studies are paramount to maintain data confidentiality and meet ethical requirements, especially when covering sensitive topics.

Participant Information

A brief contextual synopsis was provided for each participant. This allows the reader to grasp their unique paths and footballing journeys. It enables the researcher to interpret data more effectively, gaining a deeper understanding into the conscience of lived experiences (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Besides creating pseudonyms, the respective clubs and national teams of players were not named in order to protect anonymity.

Table 1. Player Biographies

<i>Name (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Background Information</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>
Keith	21	Signed for a professional Italian academy aged thirteen. Moved abroad to a well-known club. Decided to pursue higher education. Plays semi-professional football.	11
Oliver	42	Unsuccessful trials in youth football. Experienced anxiety on a regular basis. Began coaching at age twenty-four. Currently manages a professional Italian academy.	30

Adam	24	Represented his nation at youth level. Played three years for an Italian professional academy. Currently a professional footballer.	14
Tom	18	Comes from a family of professional athletes. Plays for an Italian academy since the age of nine. Recently graduated high-school.	9
John	19	Grew up playing overseas. Signed a two-year contract for an Italian academy. Aspires to become a professional footballer.	8
Arthur	22	Signed for an elite-level Italian academy aged fourteen. Never fulfilled his potential. Plays semi-professional football in the United States.	12
Mark	20	Moved several countries. Played one year in a professional Italian academy. Encountered numerous injuries. Currently a university student.	11
Ben	21	Gained international recognition with his nation at youth level. Played for multiple Italian academies. Released at age nineteen. Decided to temporarily quit football.	9

Table 2. Thematic Structure of Results

<i>Overarching Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Subordinate Themes</i>
Mental Health	Perceptions & Prior Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigmatisation • Lack of awareness
	Individual Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High pressure environment • Fear of underperforming • Massive expectations • Injuries • Substance abuse • Marginalisation by the club • Difficulties settling abroad
	Impact on Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced motivation • Sleep disturbance • Education affected
	Coping Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive rituals and routines • Mindfulness activities
	Initiatives & Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social sustainability campaigns • Funding and investments • Psychologists
	COVID-19 Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different reactions • Opportunity to improve • Isolation and stress
	Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guest speakers and leaders • Online counselling • Coaching qualifications

Perceptions & Prior Knowledge

Research conducted by Munizza and Coppo (2013) found that 98% of Italian men are aware of mental health and its definition. However, a large proportion of this percentage believe the subject is not taught or discussed enough across the country. In this study, all eight participants interpreted their views on mental health differently, but all considered the topic itself as extremely important and potentially harmful. Mark commented on his perceptions and opinions regarding mental health, indicating that Italian educational institutions provide limited knowledge on the topic.

“I’m aware of the importance... especially nowadays in this generation, but we never talked about it in school. There’s sort of a stigma in Italy about mental health and it’s rarely mentioned. If you share how you feel people might think you’re weak or you just want attention... this shouldn’t be normalised in my opinion.”

Tom also reflected on his thoughts and views about mental health.

“Well mental health didn’t really exist when I was growing up so I don’t have much information. I only learned about it through personal experience in football but I can say that it’s definitely a crucial topic.”

Individual Experiences

Players talked repeatedly about their dream of pursuing a career in professional football, however, the unpredictable conditions and the uncertain future added to feelings of frustration and anxiety. The physically and mentally demanding schedule, together with an overly-competitive environment, led to intense levels of stress. Five out of eight participants expressed their difficulties in managing unnecessary pressure and shared a common fear of underperforming. Keith summed up the massive expectations in Italian football academies.

“Coaches and sporting directors tend to put more pressure on youngsters. In some cases they even treat you like a robot. Some players find this method constructive, but for the majority it’s absolutely destructive. It made me lose motivation on a few occasions... I was afraid to make mistakes in training.”

This statement correlates with an investigation by CIES (2024) on the percentage of first team minutes played by academy footballers during the 2022/23 domestic season. Over four hundred clubs from twenty-seven European top divisions were analysed. The highest ranked Italian club, AS Roma, was 119th overall and provided only 17.7% of minutes played to academy footballers. Moreover, five Serie A clubs were at the bottom of the ranking without having fielded a single academy player throughout the season. Inevitably, young footballers in Italy are seen as a liability, potentially damaging their mental health and development. John openly discussed a mentally tough period from his youth career, in which he encountered symptoms of depression and anxiety due to a lack of minutes.

"We lost a few games and my confidence was very low. I struggled with the basics... short passes, ball control, communication and so on. I didn't know how to react because I wasn't used to this. I had problems falling asleep... I felt hopeless, tired, stressed... everything negative basically. Crying became a regular occurrence. For a long time I thought about taking substances... honestly, it was devastating."

Likewise, Ben recalled the mental challenges he endured whilst playing for a prestigious academy. He believed that speaking up would damage the stereotypical macho behaviour associated with him. During the interview, Ben got very emotional when talking about the role of his parents in supporting his football career. He regretted not being able to repay the sacrifices of his family with a professional contract and experienced feelings of sadness and guilt.

"Everyday I was fighting a battle in my head... I could've quit football before to prioritise my mental wellbeing but I didn't want to be seen as a failure. The pressure was difficult to handle because my whole life revolved around football, and when I realised it wasn't working out, I had trouble accepting it and fell into depression. It took me almost eight months before seeking support."

Mark came across similar difficulties after being forced out of multiple clubs due to his susceptibility to injury.

"Personally, the amount of stress was unbearable... injuries certainly didn't help. But I wasn't the only one struggling... a foreign teammate had serious issues being away from his family and couldn't adapt well at the club. He would stay locked in his room, skip training and take sleeping pills."

A few important points are made here. Throughout the interview, Mark repeatedly talked about stress being a major obstacle. This derived from a set of injuries which consequently halted his progress. As Gledhill and Forsdyke (2021) explain, injuries in football are a prominent risk factor for mental health. Putukian (2016) identifies possible origins, such as restriction from playing, failure to return to pre-injury levels of performance and being replaced by a teammate. The longer a player is sidelined, the likelier it causes them feelings of loneliness and solitude (Souter, 2018). Another element mentioned by Mark was the inability of his former teammate to settle in a new environment. Migrant footballers often lack the physical and face-to-face support from family members, potentially affecting their mental health (Elliott, 2022). On top of that, according to a survey published by InterNations (2023), Italy was rated one of the hardest countries for foreigners to settle in. Although subjectivity plays a key role, cultural barriers such as language, behaviours and bureaucratic procedures can affect the mental aspect of players moving abroad (Farrugia and Muscat, 2023). Lastly, Mark touched on the issue of substance abuse and its detrimental impact on both mental and physical wellbeing. His foreign teammate, along with many other players suffering from depression, generated a sleeping tablet overdose to escape emotional pain (Woods, 2022). Dele Alli, a prominent English footballer, also revealed his mental health struggles and sleeping pill addiction in a

noteworthy interview, shedding light on a broader problem that exists within top-level football (Goodall, 2023).

Impact on Performance

Seven out of eight participants claimed that performance levels notably dropped at some point during their careers. Mark recalled his issues with stress and how it affected his performances on the pitch. Throughout the interview, he regretted not performing well enough to earn more first-team appearances, but also discussed his interpretation of the situation and how a perceived lack of support deteriorated his mental health.

“I think the pressure suited my personality so it helped me, kind of, become a perfectionist but sometimes it affected me outside the pitch... like, if I didn’t play well I was less motivated and this had consequences on my school grades. Even in my social life, normally I’m quite a lively person but my mood depended on football and how it went.”

Research by Souter (2018) found that semi-professional footballers with a side job are concerningly less efficient at work after an unsuccessful game. The low morale leads to a lack of productivity. Participants feared losing their spot or being loaned out if their performances were not at a certain standard. On top of that, as Mark mentioned, prioritising football over education led to poor grades and arguments with parents back home. Despite Arthur admitting to not being talented enough to establish himself at professional level, he endured the stress and negative performances all alone, a point echoed by other participants.

“I couldn’t play freely due to stress... it’s easy when things are going well but after a bad game or a bad season people are quick to judge... I wasn’t performing at the highest level, fair enough, but neither did I have someone to, like, rely on.”

Coping Mechanisms

Most participants actively discussed a range of coping mechanisms which helped them manage stress or anxiety. Footballers often lean on these strategies to calm down and perform under pressure (Plaatjie and Potgieter, 2011). A clear pattern was not identified as each player implemented different coping techniques, however, they all claimed it was beneficial over a sustained period. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that carrying out a personal routine, ritual or task before a game was fundamental to ensure a positive mindset, as well as building up necessary experience to handle high-pressure situations. Adam talked about the positive distractions which helped him maintain a clear state of mind.

“I found positive distractions off the pitch to help me stay relaxed. For example, going for morning walks and listening to music were perhaps the most important... also getting enough sleep was essential because I felt more

focused. I just tried simple things, you know, and whatever made me feel more comfortable.”

Similarly, Oliver has dealt with anxiety both as a player and more recently as a youth coach. It was important to hear the perspective of a current manager on mental health, as the position is undoubtedly filled with pressure and criticism by the media, fans and club owners who share different views on tactics (Whitehead and Horan, 2020). Italian football has a reputation of sacking managers often, especially if they fail to obtain immediate results. To this date, eleven Serie A clubs have parted ways with their managers during the 2023/24 season, more than any other European top five league (Skudder, 2024). As shown below, Oliver claimed that mindfulness activities were key to unwinding his anxiety, which originated from the high-pressure environment of coaching.

“The least exciting thing about my job is that no matter the result, people will always have something to say... to be honest, my parents suggested meditation and mindfulness activities... I saw instant results... breathing techniques got me relieved... it became a natural habit, almost like a routine to overcome difficult scenarios. Now I can give useful advice to my players.”

Initiatives & Support

All participants claimed that Italian clubs and governing bodies did not proactively engage, but rather opted for a more reactive approach, in developing initiatives or programs. This is partly true, although several intriguing projects have emerged lately. A social sustainability campaign launched by the Italian Football Federation, which aims to tackle the stigma of mental health, is gaining more recognition (FIGC, 2024). The target by 2030 is an ambitious one, that is, to have all academy players complete awareness-raising and educational activities on their health and lifestyle choices. Likewise, a collaboration with UEFA was set up to inform and educate young Europeans about mental health. The campaign, Coaches for Health, involved a video clip with national team coaches who stood up against contemporary issues, such as poor physical activity, inadequate nutrition, anxiety and substance abuse (UEFA, 2024). Oliver, a coach himself, was asked whether funding similar campaigns would be enough for Italian football to combat mental issues.

“Not much unfortunately... the situation is complicated because only a handful of teams can afford to invest in their youth sectors, let alone in mental health awareness. It is, of course, a big issue and I try to tell my players as much as possible to train the mind before training the body, but this country doesn’t have the long-term vision required to take things to a whole new level.”

Oliver added that media outlets do not contribute usefully, portraying young footballers as superstars and placing excessive pressure on their careers. Antonio Conte and Roberto De Zerbi, both renowned Italian coaches, have claimed that pressure is much greater in Italy compared to England (Skudder, 2024). Another comparison, from a player perspective, was shared by Keith. He identified the differences in mental support between German and Italian football, emphasising that Germany is at a more advanced stage.

“When I moved to Germany, there was a psychologist working at the club, like, always available and followed the team everywhere... I was surprised but in a good way. She helped players remain calm and gain confidence. But, in Italy, players had to figure everything out themselves or talk to someone in charge, but nobody did that. A few initiatives were discussed although nothing happened in the end... there was less attention on the mental aspect... a psychological figure was missing.”

Players who lived abroad, including Keith, highlighted the positive aspect of being able to turn to senior figures for advice. For example, sports psychologists can help teams develop cohesion and implement a self-belief system (Mehta, 2022). This highlights the progress of foreign countries in terms of mental health support, whereas on the other hand, in Italy, players faced a close-minded environment.

COVID-19 Challenges

Players expressed contrasting views on the COVID-19 pandemic and responded differently in times of adversity. Whilst four out of eight participants struggled to cope during lockdown, others saw it as a beneficial circumstance to train individually and ease their minds. For example, Adam identified multiple factors under his control, allowing him to get the most out of an unprecedented period. His statement indicates that a break from football, caused by the pandemic, enhanced mental fortitude.

“I saw the pandemic as an opportunity to grow, like, improve my physical strength... it helped me become more disciplined. There was time to focus on new things rather than just football, which was good, you know, because I felt better mentally.”

According to WHO (2024), Italy was one of the hardest hit countries by the pandemic with almost two hundred thousand reported deaths. The population is still recovering from the devastating social, financial and political repercussions (Alicandro and Gerli, 2023). Given the recent nature of the event and its undeniable correlation with mental health, this particular section was necessary to include in the study. Findings by Ivarsson and McCall (2021) covered in the literature review strongly connect with Arthur. Throughout the pandemic, his motivation and focus significantly deteriorated, unlike Adam.

“At the beginning it was fine but after a few weeks it became stressful and affected me a lot... I remember during lockdown I wasn’t doing anything, I was too lazy to move and on certain days I had panic attacks... with the isolation, I wasn’t good at handling that... not knowing what could happen next gave me negative thoughts.”

Areas for Improvement

A few preventive measures and innovative solutions were mentioned during the interviews. Generally, players were creative in coming up with different suggestions. Some discussed the possibility of clubs implementing team building activities to promote mental

health in an engaging way, while others mentioned attending one-to-one meetings with a psychologist connected to the club. John recommended that hosting sessions with guest speakers or experts to discuss mental health risks may generate improvements.

"I think clubs should, like, educate their players by inviting guest speakers who talk about mental health and other related issues... then players will get involved because they'll see their club actually putting effort in... some clubs need to focus more on the human aspect rather than a business mindset."

Internet-based support was also included among the proposals. According to Dhillon and Verma (2022), the growth of online counselling has witnessed successful outcomes in contemporary society and serves as a more convenient and affordable alternative to traditional in-clinic therapy. The need for a detailed systematic exploration of online counselling warrants further attention to support academy players (Twizell and Hanley, 2021). Tom acknowledged this particular aspect.

"Online therapy can be a good solution for whoever has trouble seeing a therapist in person. Maybe each league could, like, develop its own app or website for young players to seek support... it's a much quicker and easier solution... whether at amateur or professional level, I'd suggest that coaches get trained with mandatory courses taking into consideration mental health."

In addition, Tom believes that coaches must receive adequate training to deal with the mental situation of players. This would foster a more supportive and safer environment for players, as well as improve the ability to quickly identify mental problems.

Chapter Summary

This section revealed the lived experiences of male academy players in regards to mental health struggles. Overall findings concluded that mental issues are prominent within Italian elite academies but do not receive the necessary treatment or support required. This study confirms that mental health stigma does exist and occurs at an increasing pace. Hesitation from players to seek help in fear of negative consequences is a concerning matter that must be addressed. Participants also expressed their respectable thoughts on mental health and provided areas for improvement moving forward.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study acknowledged that elite male academy footballers in Italy are exposed to a number of variables which can increase the probability of mental health issues. Although the topic is not discussed as much as it needs to be, the impact is clearly unequivocal. It is imperative to create an environment where youth players feel valued as human beings and their self-worth goes beyond football. Italian clubs and organisations have the potential to invest more in destigmatising mental health through strategic and systematic policy work, education and constructive dialogue between players and coaches, in addition to digital or face-to-face support provided by professionals outside the football context. Amplifying this argument to Italy as a whole could pave the way for a more socially connected and flourishing nation.

Recommendations

In research, recommendations are specific measures or directions proposed based on the findings (Bryman, 2016). A key suggestion for future research is to explore the generational differences in mental health trends between active and retired Italian players. It may shed further light on the evolution of mental health, as well as provide an understanding of the topic from different perspectives. Given the contentious decline of Italian football in recent years, it would be riveting to discover more deeply whether mental health has negatively contributed. Interviewing participants of all ages, rather than solely focusing on academy players, could also provide a wider range of data to analyse. Furthermore, a longitudinal cohort study over an extended period might be useful to determine the mental situation of players prior to, during and post season. This would help detect changes in characteristics and monitor reactions along the way, thus improving data reliability. According to Jones and Gratton (2015), longitudinal studies are more functional in representing patterns of a variable over time, establishing cause-and-effect relationships. A final recommendation is to identify and address numerous ways to promote awareness on mental health in youth football. Although this study included a section highlighting areas for improvement, additional research is needed. Hearing from players with mental health experiences and asking them to share suitable awareness-raising strategies could supply researchers with new knowledge. The more literature published, the more positive benefits for society as a whole.

Strengths & Limitations of Study

In any extensive research, a number of strengths and limitations shall always materialise, which must be clearly stated to demonstrate intellectual transparency and integrity, as well as provide guidance for future studies (Smith, 2010). This investigation appears to be the first that qualitatively explores the mental health experiences and perceptions of elite academy footballers in Italy. Given the increasing media coverage surrounding mental health, the timing of submission was ideal to promote further awareness and contribute academically with novel findings. Being able to recruit such a high level of talent optimised the opportunity to gain rich data. Nonetheless, a potential limitation was the risk of participants refusing or hesitating to talk more openly about their psychological situation, despite being aware of anonymity. It is understandable considering that

interview studies are vulnerable to social desirability bias, particularly with sensitive topics among elite male athletes (Daniel, 2012). Another possible weakness was the use of retrospective interviews, due to memory decay or inaccuracies from participants. Yet, these fading effects are less frequent when recalling major events, such as mental health issues (McGlinchey and Saward, 2022). All participants were not native English speakers and despite their fluency in the language, a couple of misphrasings have likely occurred. Lastly, this study featured a relatively small number of academy players, hence findings may not be representative of the entire population and further information could have been missed out, limiting the overall understanding of the phenomena.

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Appendices

Ethical Approval

Project status			
Status			
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Approved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Actions			
Date	Who	Action	Comments
16/02/09 22 November 2023	Kola Adeosun	Deputy supervisor	approved
13/05/09 16 November 2023	Rory Magrath	Supervisor	passed to standing panel
12/24/09 18 November 2023	Ethan Danièle Perotto	Principal investigator	Hi Rory, I have made the changes and it should be fine to send through now. Best regards, Ethan
15/57/09 15 November 2023	Rory Magrath	Supervisor	declined Before I pass this on, Ethan, please could you address the following: 1) where you mention that the area is under-researched in Italian football (compared to the UK), please add a couple of references for studies related to the UK. 2) where you discuss the research being confidential, please add 'anonymity'; you also need to extend this to say that confidentiality and anonymity will also be maintained in the final Dissertation (where you'll use a pseudonym). 3) the second objective - return it/reward to include that this refers only to participants' perceptions. 4) where you reference the Italian support network for participants, please ensure that this is added to your documentation (which you'll also need to forward again to the ethics email address).
12/15/09 15 November 2023	Ethan Danièle Perotto	Principal investigator	submitted
12/10/09 15 November 2023	Ethan Danièle Perotto	Principal investigator	viewed

[Get help](#)

Checklist:	
Question	Yes
Q1. Will the project involve vulnerable participants such as children, young people, disabled people, the elderly, people with declared mental health issues, or others, people in health or social care settings, adults, or those with learning difficulties or cognitive impairment either contacted directly or via a gate keeper (for example a professional who runs an organisation through which participants are accessed; a service provider, care-giver, a relative or a guardian)?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q1a. Will the project involve the use of control groups or the use of deception ?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q1b. Will the project involve any risk to the participants' health (e.g. intrusive intervention such as the administration of drugs or other substances, or vigorous physical exertion) or involve psychological stress, anxiety, humiliation, physical pain or discomfort to the participant(s) and/or the participant(s)?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q1d. Will the project involve financial inducement offered to participants other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q1e. Will the project be carried out by individuals unconnected with the University but who wish to use staff and/or students of the University as participants?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q2. Will the project involve sensitive materials or topics that might be considered offensive, distressing, politically or socially sensitive, deeply personal or in breach of the law (for example criminal activities, sexual behaviour, ethnicity, personal appearance, experiences of violence, addiction, religion, or financial circumstances)?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q3. Will the project have detrimental impact on the environment, health or welfare?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q4. Will the project involve living animal subjects?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q5. Will the project involve the development for export of 'controlled' goods regulated by the Export Control Organisation (ECO) (this specifically means military goods, so called dual-use goods (which are civilian goods but with a potential military use or application), chemicals used for torture and repression, radioactive materials) (Further information from the Export Control Organisation)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Q6. Does your research involve the storage of records on a computer, electronic transmission, or visits to websites, which are associated with terrorist or extreme groups or other security sensitive material? (Further information from the Information Commissioner's Office)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Project details	
Project name:	A critical evaluation on how mental health is perceived by male academy football players in Italy and its impact on performance.
Principal investigator:	Ethan Danièle Perotto
Faculty:	Department of Sport and Health
Level:	Undergraduate
Course:	Sports Management
Unit code:	S0BASPRO010CN
Supervisor name:	Rory Magrath
Other investigators:	

Declarations	
We, the investigator(s), confirm that:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The information contained in this checklist is correct.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> We have assessed the ethical considerations in relation to the project in line with the University Ethics Policy.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> We understand that the ethical considerations of the project will need to be re-assessed if there are any changes to it.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> We will endeavor to preserve the reputation of the University and protect the health and safety of all those involved when conducting this research/thesis/project.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If personal data is to be collected as part of my project, I confirm that my project and I as Principal Investigator, will adhere to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. I also confirm that I will seek advice on the DPA, as necessary, by referring to the Information Commissioner's Office further guidance on DPA and/or by contacting informationrightsdocuments.co.uk . By Personal data, I understand any data that I will collect as part of my project that can identify an individual, whether in personal or family life, business or profession.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> We have read the project agenda.	

Informed Consent Form

Project Title: A Critical Evaluation on the Mental Health Perceptions and Experiences of Elite Male Academy Footballers in Italy.

I confirm the following information:

1	I have been informed about the purpose of the project and I understand this.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I understand that I can leave the project at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be questioned about why I have left the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	The procedures regarding anonymity and confidentiality have been clearly explained to me (e.g. not using my real name, so that anything I contributed to this project cannot be recognised unless I give my consent, that only anonymised data will be shared outside the research team).	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	The procedures regarding data anonymity have been clearly explained to me (e.g. not using my real name, so that anything I contributed to this project cannot be recognised).	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	I agree to the use of voice recording if telephone, online or in-person interviews are used.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	I agree to the use of direct quotations in publications provided that my anonymity is preserved.	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	I understand what I have said or written as part of this project will be used in reports, publications, journals and other research outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	I, along with the researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant:

Name: _____
Date: _____

Researcher:

Name: _____
Date: _____

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to participate in a research study about mental health in football. This form is designed to provide you with information about the study. Please read the following information, and discuss it with others if you wish.

Title of Project:

A Critical Evaluation on the Mental Health Perceptions and Experiences of Elite Male Academy Footballers in Italy.

Principal Investigator:

Email Address:

Ethan Daniele Perotto

Speroe59@solent.ac.uk

Supervisor:

Email Address:

Dr. Rory Magrath

rory.magrath@solent.ac.uk

I understand the purpose of this research is to:

Investigate the mental health of academy footballers in Italy. The aim is to determine how mental health is perceived by youth male athletes and assess the extent to which mental distress (eg. increased anxiety or depression) may impact performance. This study will also explore the initiatives and steps taken by Italian youth academies to limit mental health issues, while attempting to reduce the stigma around mental illness within football. The research is conducted through formal interviews. These questions will cover personal experiences and opinions regarding the topic, coping mechanisms, impact on performance, and the role of governing bodies or coaches in supporting an inclusive environment. I understand that I may volunteer for an approximately 30 minute in-depth interview. Participation in this research is voluntary.

I understand that I may expect the following (physical, mental, and/or social) discomforts/risks:

I understand that while there are no known physical risks from this research, it is possible that discussing issues of mental health, stress, anxiety, or any other form of mental condition, could make me uncomfortable. I understand that I have the right to not discuss issues I am uncomfortable with and/or to end any discussion in which I feel uncomfortable. I understand there are no repercussions for opting out of a question, or indeed, the entire research project. I understand that the principal investigator will do their utmost to ensure a comfortable, free, and supportive environment for my participation in this research. I understand that I can seek support through my community mental health service, Progetto Itaca (022 900 7166), if I experience any mental discomfort post-interview, despite being very unlikely. I understand that this is a certified organisation with qualified individuals to deal with mental health issues. I understand that there are no repercussions should I choose not to participate, or to withdraw from this research before 24 April 2023. I understand that I must contact the principal investigator to confirm my withdrawal.

I understand that all information obtained from me will be kept confidential through the following actions of the researcher:

I understand that anonymity of all participants is assured in this study. Data collected during the research will be kept strictly confidential on a password protected computer. All names will be changed, and any other identifying information or characteristics removed. Data will not be discussed with other participants. Everything you tell the principal investigator is private and confidential. Any notes and/or transcripts taken as part of this research will be deleted after completion of the research. I understand that, should I desire, I will be given a copy of any transcript made from my discussion, and that I have the right to change transcripts, or add to them as I desire. I also have the right to be informed of the research when it is published.

I understand that benefits of taking part in this research may include:

Reducing the stigma surrounding mental health in Italy. Allow a safer and more inclusive pathway for youth academies moving forward. To provide revolutionary information that could enhance the mental state of young athletes. Be one of the first individuals to participate in a study involving mental health within Italian football.

Participation is voluntary:

I understand that I am free to refuse to participate in any procedure or to refuse to answer any question at any time without prejudice to me. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am entitled. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this research and signing this form I do not waive any of my legal rights. I understand that the research investigators named above will answer any of my questions about the research procedures, my rights as a subject, and research-related injuries at any time. I understand that I will be given a copy of this participant information form.

Signature of Participant:

Date:



Signature of Researcher:

Date: October 2023

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1) Player Biographies

Would you mind telling me about your football career and provide some general information?

2) Perceptions and Prior Knowledge

What are your perceptions and opinions regarding the topic of mental health?

Do you have any background knowledge?

Have you learned about the subject in Italy either at school or at your club?

3) Individual Experiences

What is your personal experience with mental health in Italian football?

Have you experienced any depressive symptoms, stress or anxiety problems throughout your career?

How often do you feel nervous, worried, unmotivated or angry?

Do you recall any of your teammates going through mentally challenging moments?

4) Impact on Performance

To what extent have mental obstacles such as pressure and stress impacted your performance, both and off the pitch?

Do you find it complicated to balance personal life and football in Italy?

5) Coping Mechanisms

How do you normally deal with a stressful situation or negative moment?

Do you have any specific coping mechanisms which help you maintain a clear state of mind?

6) Initiatives and Support

Did any of your previous Italian clubs or coaches develop initiatives or programs which improved mental well-being?

7) COVID-19 Challenges

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, did it affect your mental health in any way, shape or form?

How difficult was it for you to remain mentally strong during this period?

8) Areas for Improvement

What do you think should be done moving forward to help reduce the stigma of mental health in Italy and raise awareness on a sensitive topic, particularly for young players?

Sample Interview Transcript

[00:00] **Interviewer:** I'll begin by recording the interview if that's fine with you.

[00:04] **Participant Keith:** Yeah no worries.

[00:06] **Interviewer:** So, the first question I have for you is what are your perceptions and opinions regarding the topic of mental health? Do you have any background knowledge about this?

[00:18] **Participant Keith:** To be honest I don't know much about mental health in sports. I sort of touched on that when I was in Germany. There was a psychologist working at the club, like, always available and followed the team everywhere. She was managing our emotions and converting them into performing better rather than uhm possibly uhm just leave them and uhm yeah she was basically trying to tell us that our mental health could have an impact uhm both on our lives and our performance. Uhm personally I didn't have big issues with mental health at least related to sports uhm I mean not much as far as this I'd say.

[01:48] **Interviewer:** Yeah, this was my next question which is what is your personal experience with mental health in Italian football and in your case in German football also. So, for example, have you experienced any depressive symptoms, stress or anxiety problems throughout the career? Or if you can recall any of your teammates going through mentally challenging moments?

[02:21] **Participant Keith:** Uhm in answering to the last one I can say that I've met quite a few teammates that have gone through difficult moments due to injuries. In football when you're injured especially when you get injured to your uhm to your knee I have to say it's hard to come back from this injury at least well you need to have the strength and the patience to take it step by step so uhm I'm not really lived it personally but I believe it is not easy and I saw it on the side that it's a hard process to overcome. Accepting an injury and trying uhm trying your best to come back is always difficult and I could see it had an impact on their mental health as in they, you know, it was hard for them to feel motivated in what they were doing and uhm to feel happy because at the end of the day you play football for fun and if you're injured you don't play, you're not having fun and I could see that in those situations. It was hard to find the motivation to stay uhm mentally stable I'd say and uhm could you just repeat the first part of the question sorry.

[04:37] **Interviewer:** The first part was only related to your personal experience with mental health, if you had any problems.

[04:45] **Participant Keith:** I'd say it kinda depends on the context where uhm where I was playing. I can say that I've lived three different types of situations. So when I first uhm so let's say in my juvenile career I played for three different teams so I started in Juventus then I played from U13 to U16 for Juventus and then U17 and U19 I played for Eintracht Frankfurt and then I played one year for Turin U19. I sort of lived three different experiences from this mental level. In the first case when I was younger the only depressing thing was the expectations from the team. So, Juventus is a very competitive team and all they expect from their players is to win so uhm.

[06:09] **Interviewer:** Even at such a young age?

[06:11] **Participant Keith:** Even at such a young age yeah that's the impressive thing that even at thirteen, fourteen even twelve years old Juventus requires well aims to be the best in everything in every match and in all competitions and uhm and sort of treats young players like adults. They try to make young players grow and become adults early and this brings difficult challenges and pressures at a young age. So, uhm, in Italy coaches and sporting directors tend to put more pressure on youngsters. In some cases they even treat you like a robot. Some players find this method constructive, but for the majority it's absolutely destructive. It made me lose motivation on a few occasions. You're always expected to win and even if you tie or lose a few games it's, you know, you have coaches that try to push you to the best and, you know, if you don't get the results you're out and uhm you have to deal with it on your own.

[08:02] **Interviewer:** Yeah I can imagine there's a lot of pressure involved and it's not easy to always stay focused.

[08:08] **Participant Keith:** Yeah, and this kind of pressure for example didn't come when I moved to Frankfurt. When I was in Germany and I played for Frankfurt, which is still a competitive team, but had sort of different expectations because you know it's not as big as Juventus with all respect and there was uhm I found a much calmer and much more enjoyable uhm environment in terms of playing and enjoying football uhm because I could feel the difference making this change as in Juventus you were only expected to gain results whereas in Eintracht we were still trying to be successful but enjoying our mental health was more of a priority. It was a good feeling it wasn't sort of a must win situation or must always perform so that was nice. I was surprised but in a good way. What my difficulty was when I was playing in Germany, especially the beginning, I had uhm problems in adapting and integrating to a new environment and a new team. So although there were a lot of international players uhm it was difficult for me to fit within uhm the German players. I mean, I was sixteen I was living alone and I had to sort of adapt quickly where I didn't know a word of German so I couldn't communicate properly and uhm for the first six months I really felt as an outsider, not part of the team, and I could also feel those around me uhm although they were my age and maybe naive uhm they were sort of making fun of me just because I was Italian. I sort of felt the big cultural difference in those six months and I wouldn't call it racism or discrimination just because of my nationality but I could feel that they were not as genuine or inclusive with me as they were with other people. So I sort of felt that kinda loneliness. It was my first time going abroad on my own uhm well living abroad far from my family starting a new chapter uhm but it was definitely a kind of stressful period in terms of integrating in another team where, you know, I didn't speak the same language. But after those six months when I came back to Italy then for the winter break and I went back to Germany uhm I felt more uhm I lost that stress for integration and I felt more relaxed and from that I didn't have any more issues. I sort of accepted the situation I was in and tried to find my ways to be accepted by other people.

[11:12] **Interviewer:** Exactly I can imagine it's always tough to start a new adventure the first few months, especially by yourself.

[11:20] **Participant Keith:** Yeah, I just wanted to mention the last uhm so when I moved to Turin after Eintracht I experienced another type of stressful situation which is, again, a different context. So I played for U19 Turin and it's a very well known team because historically it's very competitive and successful for this age category uhm but that year we had a quite unsuccessful season and a quite unsuccessful coach. That year was tremendous, we were always trying uhm the matches were going bad we were trying our best but couldn't win. It was so hard to win. In that period we felt as a team, also individually, but I felt that it was more of a general feeling of pressure from the coaches and from the other managers within the club. They were putting us under a lot of pressure and a lot of blame on our performances and I could feel that we were not in the right conditions to perform well and they were still expecting us to win although there weren't the conditions to do so uhm and that was another tough experience to live it was sort of hard to face these challenges which I had never seen before because I was either in a very successful team or in a relaxed team and in that case it was the opposite of both.

[13:29] **Interviewer:** A completely different experience in terms of stress.

[13:31] **Participant Keith:** Yeah this was just to say that I lived three experiences but they were three very different ones uhm especially in terms of pressure.

[13:43] **Interviewer:** To what extent did this pressure, this stress, impact your performance, both on and off the pitch?

[13:52] **Participant Keith:** Uhm I'd say in the early years or so the pressure that I felt in Juventus it kind of helped me at the time. I became more of a competitive person in the sense that I always wanted to be the best version of myself, constantly improve and of course win every game. I wanted to make the most out of my performances and also the pressure instilled in me higher expectations probably because it was at a young age. I believe the pressure in Juventus uhm fitted me well because I know it didn't have the same effect on other players but for the person I am this helped me grow and motivated me. For the pressure that I felt with Turin on the other hand that was a very sad uhm it was discouraging because uhm as a team we were going into training giving our best so we felt confident but then during the games we arrived and it was different as we lost many games and the directors then gave us more blame and pressure. I was afraid to make mistakes in training. Also me personally I was giving my everything but the results just weren't coming so that kind of pressure was discouraging me to, you know, give my best.

[16:15] **Interviewer:** It may have been one of those seasons where you give everything but it doesn't go your way and it could be due sometimes to unlucky situations and uhm one mistake can cost the game so it's the small detail I think made a difference.

[16:32] **Participant Keith:** Yeah it definitely was for sure and this whole, you know, situation was sort of discouraging at times because uhm in yourself you think I'm trying my best but not getting results so what's the point of even trying but I didn't want to see it that way. So that was the hard part of accepting the situation uhm and it also had a negative impact on my performance due to his lack of motivation.

[17:10] **Interviewer:** I feel like the momentum didn't help the team and the morale was obviously low.

[17:14] **Participant Keith:** Again yeah the negative momentum didn't help uhm before every game we were feeling negative and thinking about the worst possible outcome but uhm, you know, that's part of football you don't always perform as you want to but I feel that the pressure they put on us was not fair because of the work we were putting in and they didn't try to change strategies or techniques of training to improve the situation.

[18:01] **Interviewer:** What about when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and many clubs in Italy had to, like, adapt to new training methods and find new solutions in a difficult context, did this affect your mental health in any way, shape or form?

[18:19] **Participant Keith:** So when it first started I didn't have big issues uhm in terms of mental health uhm I was living in Germany and at the time when everything began they stopped our championship and we didn't have the chance to finish the games so of course I was sort of disappointed by the fact that I couldn't play but it's something that I accepted quite quickly. I mean, I guess it had to happen and that was it. There was nothing I could've done to change the situation since it was out of my control so my last four months at Eintracht I was just uhm training as effectively as possible. There was less motivation though so the training was a bit more fun since they were different at home or away from the pitch. At the end of the year, when I moved back to Italy in Turin, uhm the problem of COVID was very stressful because we always had that fear of transmission so anyone could've gotten it at any time without knowing and then we would've seen our families and we started worrying. Even stepping into the dressing room was a mystery, you know, we always had to be careful so I'd say that the pressure from COVID added to the low morale we were having. The pandemic didn't have an impact on my performance on the pitch but it affected my mental health quite a bit outside the pitch uhm because we had so many regulations and norms. We had to test so many times every week uhm and I didn't feel safe to sit next to my teammates. If anyone was testing positive we had to reschedule the match or change the game plan and we also had to train in small groups so it really changed the dynamic of playing football. The fact that it was very unpredictable sort of created more pressure because you had to pay attention every instant and uhm to protect yourself and your family. So basically we were bringing that fear into and outside the pitch as well.

[22:04] **Interviewer:** Yeah it was a stressful period especially for most players. The final question I had is what do you think should be done moving forward to help reduce the stigma of mental health in Italy and to help raise more awareness on the subject, particularly for younger players.

[22:32] **Participant Keith:** Uhm well I think in Germany it was addressed quite well with the uhm figure of the psychologist. She was

always available, you know, she really was beneficial for us. I felt that having a psychologist who spent the whole season with us and, you know, she was coming to every match or training session so having that presence by our side was comforting. I knew that if I had a problem I had someone to help me. But, in Italy, players had to figure everything out themselves or talk to someone in charge, but nobody did that. A few initiatives were discussed although nothing happened in the end. This shouldn't happen again because uhm there was less attention on the mental aspect so clubs in Italy must emphasise this aspect more. For example, a psychologist would have helped us so much in the scenario in Turin since it was a difficult season and we needed someone to improve our mental health. A psychologist is uhm not only there to help you but it can also teach you about mental problems because, you know, sometimes players can't recognise these issues or the situation they're in and just deal with it alone. But if there is someone that understands them and recognises how they feel uhm I'm sure it can definitely be helpful. In Italy there was a lack uhm a psychological figure was missing. So uhm I'd say that the presence of a psychologist who travels and works along the team can integrate the players and staff members altogether. This is much needed in Italy at the moment.

[25:50] **Interviewer:** Perfect, I would say that Germany is more advanced in this aspect compared to Italy which is still a bit behind. But gradually things can change and eventually it will be better.

[26:09] **Participant Keith:** Yeah totally, I agree.

[26:12] **Interviewer:** So, thank you once again for your time and your responses, all the best for the future.

[26:18] **Participant Keith:** Thank you very much, no worries, see you.



ETHAN DANIELE PEROTTO

has been awarded the degree of

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE

with FIRST CLASS HONOURS

having followed an approved Honours programme in

SPORT MANAGEMENT

June 2024

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Solent University, Southampton

Date: 23rd February 2022 Course No: EFAW 22/10

Signed.....

Head of Medical Education

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