

Small island mentality: Migratory experiences of elite level footballers

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Abstract

Football player migration has increased over the past years; however, players have reported experiencing a range of challenges during migration (Richardson, Nesti, Littlewood & Benstead, 2012). Twelve male footballers (aged 11-38) that made the migratory transition from the small island of Malta to a European professional football league were interviewed. Results indicated that players from this small nation characterised by a sheltered upbringing experienced more extreme challenges than players from bigger nations. These challenges included living alone abroad and trying to establish an identity within the highly pressurized environment of professional football. The findings suggest a need for practitioners in professional football to adequately prepare players for a potential migration to stronger European leagues. The receiving environment must also understand the culture from where the player is coming from and provide support to the migrant player to facilitate adaptive acculturation (Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova & Elbe, 2018).

Keywords: footballers, migratory transition, challenges, support, culture

Introduction

The increase in player migration has created a lot of interest in recent years, especially because it has been recognised that to improve career prospects, players may need to migrate for the purposes of work (Bourke, 2002^[6]; Elliott, 2016)^[13]. Migration here refers to long-term relocation across an international border (Ryba *et al.*, 2018)^[47]. When players move from their (donor) country to another (host) to play football, the transition has been described as complex and challenging (Richardson *et al.*, 2012)^[42] and many careers are terminated because the athletes were unable to adapt (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013)^[56]. The migrant's adaptability depends on whether the player has been prepared for migration, the motivation and effort they put into adapting to the new environment as well as how much the receiving club provides support (Ryba *et al.*, 2018)^[47].

Research into sports labour migration has developed from the work of Bale (1982), however, subsequent studies have not focused enough on the daily "lived" experiences of the players (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011)^[34] and how the challenges experienced might be overcome (Schinke, Yukelson, Bartolacci, Battochio & Johnstone, 2011)^[52]. Most research has also focused on the top football leagues or nations in Europe (De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Richardson *et al.*, 2012)^[42], and has appeared to neglect the experiences of individuals from smaller nations. As suggested by Ryba *et al.*, (2018, p 531), researchers and practitioners must "analyse sporting contexts to identify acute needs and transform them into new research lines (e.g. cultural transition and identity crisis, successful and less successful acculturating environments)."

This study, which forms the reconnaissance phase of an action research cycle, aimed to critically explore the migratory-based transition experiences of players from a small island nation to

playing professional football in nation states that are physically much larger in size and professionalism. It also aimed to examine the role and function of the "host" and "donor" nation cultures and how these may influence the transition process of players. Such a project is of special interest as it focuses on the cultural praxis of sport migration and intertwines different cultural settings with theories, research and applied work (Ryba *et al.*, 2018)^[47].

Transitions

Football clubs are constantly facing financial concerns (e.g. buying and selling of players, sponsorships, economic rewards), and thus, they are investing in "ready-made" (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a) players since these are more likely to be equipped and ready to immediately influence first (senior) team success (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010)^[40]. Increasingly, as a consequence of The European Union of Football Association's (UEFA) home grown legislation, clubs have been recruiting at the ages of 15-16, or even younger, to ensure players are eligible for home grown status by 18-19 years of age (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017^[11]; Relvas *et al.*, 2010)^[40]. Indeed, the period between 17 and 21 years is seen as one of the most critical periods of the players' development, and one that will have a direct impact on their professional careers in sport (Richardson *et al.*, 2012)^[42]. At this time young players are still developing, learning to deal with many life issues and also trying to manage the fact that they are gifted and could have a future in the game (Richardson *et al.*, 2004)^[41].

Research on the influencing factors for a young player moving overseas and how they cope with this transition is however limited. Egilsson and Dolles (2017)^[11], studied young Icelandic players in their transition from Iceland into senior-level professional football in European leagues. They found

that players are ill equipped and lack the knowledge and experience to perform well consistently in a new setting. Due to the many challenges including performance, identity and mental health issues as well as early career termination, the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) has called for a shared understanding of psychological phenomena coming about from transnational mobility in sport and joint efforts in developing research and practice that is culturally competent (Ryba, 2018) [47].

The transition from amateur to professional status, and to high achievement and adult sport, are described as the hardest periods of athletic development (Stambulova, 2000) [54]. According to Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavalle (2004) [60], a transition is the “occurrence of one or more specific events that brings about a change in assumptions about oneself, but also a social disequilibrium that goes beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life (pg. 8).” According to their developmental model on transitions, there may also be transitions in other areas of the athlete’s life, including psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational. Later studies have also considered the role of worldwide-social factors such as the sport system and culture (Stambulova, Stephan & Jarphag, 2007) [58].

In fact, Ryba, Stambulova and Ronkainen (2016) [48] came up with a temporal model of cultural transition. Their research provides support providers with a framework for improving the psychological wellbeing and adaptabilities of migrant workers. Ryba *et al.*’s (2016) [43] model shows that the cultural transition process is made up of three phases. The pre-transition phase is crucial in physically and mentally preparing the players for the challenges they will face when going through a cultural transition. A lack of awareness of the cultural differences they would face was linked with difficulties in adapting. Thus, this phase may provide the athlete and his/her family with time to negotiate necessary adjustments towards work-family balance. In the acute cultural adaptation phase, athletes are faced with the task of trying to understand and adapt to the cultural patterns of a new place. Ryba *et al.*, (2016) [43] found that those who struggled to adapt between the former and the new sociocultural context were likely to feel the loss of identity. Those who felt psychologically adjusted to the new culture were also more satisfied with non-sport related aspects of everyday life. Sport and non-sport contexts were interdependent and interlinked with the self in producing adaptability of their careers.

The implications of Ryba *et al.* (2016) [43] as well as Schinke *et al.*’s (2011) [52] work suggest the need for organisations to provide psychosocial support for transitioning athletes. Timing, as to when the transition happens and the time to prepare for it are important. There needs to be awareness amongst team staff members of the challenges transnational athletes face and how they could support them through transition. Transnational belonging is seen as essential for identity and self-concept formation.

Challenges of sport migration

Richardson and colleagues (2012) [42] found that the excitement of a new contract and moving country may distract from the reality concerning the actual role of being a footballer. Whilst some migrants may move from one culture

to another quite easily, for example if the host and donor nations share similar cultural and lifestyle factors (Bourke 2002) [6], others may experience culture shock; with feelings of loneliness (Schinke *et al.*, 2011) [52], fear, helplessness, irritability and disorientation (Bourke, 2003; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) [34]. Players have reported difficulties during the first months in a new country (Richardson *et al.*, 2012) [42], whilst trying to negotiate between their ethnic identity (values and customs they have been raised with in their country) and developing cultural identity (see what values and customs to adapt to from the host country’s culture), a process known as acculturation (Weedon, 2011 [59]; Ryba, 2018) [47]. Athletes have conveyed that acculturation must be reciprocal, shared; there must be negotiation and reflexivity with the receiving culture so that athletes and staff members are able to put themselves in different settings which contributes to or hampers inclusiveness (Ryba, 2009) [46]. However, there has been limited understanding of how immigrant players experience acculturation and this needs to be seen as a transition that requires coping processes and solutions. Such resources might be found within the player or else provided by the club (Schinke & McGannon, 2014) [50].

The players in Richardson and colleagues’ (2012) [42] study spoke about being homesick, differences in the style of play of the game, and they felt unprepared for this. Furthermore, players had to understand and handle the English football culture with its high tempo, machoism, and aggressiveness for which they were ill equipped. Players who have migrated to another country to play football may also feel somewhat insecure with the instability of their employment (Roderick, 2006) [44]. They may face de-selection, a lack of playing time, tough training, poor relationships with club staff, and issues with their contract, inability to play in their preferred position, and other players coming in to possibly replace them. Such challenges may cause psychological stress, which may result in players losing focus and motivation (Nesti, 2013) [31]. The way players perceive the transition, their perceptions about their individual characteristics, and that of the environment may all influence the way in which players cope and adapt (Schlossberg, 1981) [53].

This section has illustrated the various challenges that young players may face when going through a migratory transition to play professional football overseas. Players’ perceptions of their transitions are, however, instilled by their (host) cultures (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009) [57], which may not sufficiently prepare them for the experiences of a new environment and (donor) culture.

Social Support

Players may move from the perceived nurturing and protective youth environment to a less supportive first team culture that has been described as not tolerating failure and placing high expectations and demands on the players (Reilly, Williams & Richardson, 2003 [39]; Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013). Players are expected to cope with harder training, pressures of coping with sports and studies, life being taken over by the sport, taking the right career decisions, problems with coaches, lack of specialist knowledge, training alone, and family issues (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010) [41]. Players have to adapt to a new physical and social environment whilst also

trying to remain in touch with their families and friends back home (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014^[1]; Schinke *et al.*, 2011)^[52].

Sport psychologists may be able to provide support by facilitating communication between coaches and players from different cultures to help them be open-minded and adapt to the local setting (Ryba, Stambulova, Si & Schinke, 2013). However, it has been reported that practitioners' lack of cultural reflexivity may hinder the applicability of psychological support to players from different cultures and, in the process, compromise the clients' cultural safety (Ryba *et al.*, 2013^[46]; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014)^[45]. The cultural praxis of athletes' careers is seen as a challenge for researchers and practitioners to take into consideration when conducting studies on career theories, research and applied work. This approach supports cultural diversity and encourages sport psychologists to tackle issues of social exclusion, representation, and social justice (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013)^[44]. Service providers need to pay attention to players for whom culturally competent support is a necessity (Ryba *et al.*, 2013)^[44].

Morris, Tod and Eubank (2017)^[28] believed that there is a need for cross-cultural studies to define whether the experiences of within-career transitions are consistent in different cultures. The experiences of athletes from different cultural backgrounds, such as players in foreign professional football environments, may disclose more challenging transition experiences than players who are "home based."

Whilst the current literature provides rich and in-depth accounts of the transitional difficulties' footballers have faced when moving to the top professional leagues in Europe, little of this literature focuses on players coming from small nation states like Malta (with a population of 420,000) where they live in a much tighter knit community than most of Europe (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008)^[2]. The individuals' existence is also framed around a Mediterranean culture that is characterized by enjoyment and idleness (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008)^[2] and adapting to a highly pressurized professional football environment may be challenging. In this regard, the current paper examines the challenges faced by footballers from a small island nation state who experienced a migratory transition, and further explores the cultural difficulties between host and donor nations. In addition, the research also explored how players managed the associated challenges during the migration process and gives insight into how players can be prepared and supported to be able to cope with migratory transitions. Furthermore, the study aims to also address the lack of support provided by the receiving culture and to help in formalizing structures that would help receiving clubs open themselves up efficiently to new players (Ryba *et al.*, 2018)^[47].

Method

A qualitative approach explored the challenges experienced by Maltese footballers as they made the transition into elite football overseas. This approach gathers in-depth information and perceptions through interviews, and represents the perspective of the research participant (Hammersley, 2013)^[17]. It has been suggested that such an approach is becoming more popular in the sport sector, when the aim is to gain insight into athletes' entry experiences into elite sport (Leedy

& Ormrod, 2010)^[23]. It offers players the opportunity to share their knowledge, and for the researcher to try and achieve a deep understanding of the players' transition experiences.

Participants

To obtain rich, in-depth qualitative data, a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002)^[37] was utilized to select as many Maltese players as possible who had at some point throughout their career experienced a migratory transition. Few Maltese footballers have played overseas and thus a decision was taken to interview players of any age in order to have a representative sample. Twelve elite Maltese male footballers aged between 11 and 38 years, who at some point in their careers had played overseas, and who at the time of the interview were still active players, were interviewed using individual semi-structured interviews (Biddle *et al.*, 2001)^[4]. All interviews took place in Malta despite the fact that some players were still playing overseas. Participants could choose to have the interview conducted in English or Maltese since the interviewer was fluent in both.

The football environment is a typically closed environment and one that is skeptical about the presence and/or role of outsiders (Parker, 1995)^[36], therefore, it was of vital importance to guarantee confidentiality with regards to data collection, recording and presentation. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant University ethics committee.

Materials and Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to explore the participants' views in relation to the research questions. Previous research on the migratory experiences of sporting athletes (De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Richardson *et al.*, 2012)^[42] and within-career transition literature (e.g. Bourke, 2002^[2]; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011)^[34] was specifically utilized to inform the themes and associated questions. It was important to create an interview guide based not only on a thorough review of the relevant literature (Patton, 2002^[37]; see Relvas *et al.*, 2010), but one that also incorporated important elements of knowledge from the researchers' experiences in this area which enhanced the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis. Through peer triangulation (Biddle *et al.*, 2001)^[4] and pilot work with a player who had migrated at a young age, the first guide was arranged and refined until the researchers felt that the final version met the scope of this research.

Players (or their guardians in the case of minors) were contacted by phone or email (acquired through the Football Association), given details about the study, and asked whether they would accept to take part. Interviews took place at a venue of convenience for the player. Interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

All interviews were listened to and transcribed verbatim by the first author as soon as possible. In the case of interviews in the Maltese language these were translated to the English language. The transcriptions were then read several times by the authors to ensure familiarity was established with the transcriptions and participants. This was essential to avoid any assumptions and to provide as exact a representation as

possible of what happened during the interview (Roulston, deMarras & Lewis, 2003) [45]. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [7] was used to organize the raw data into meaningful themes.

The participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms (i.e., alternative names) to retain the participant's confidentiality (Krane, Anderson & Streaun, 1997) [21]. Relevant, contextual, verbatim quotes and consequent themes/headings were 'tagged' and aligned to the various players. The clustering process was first carried out by the first author and then discussed with the other authors in order to provide trustworthiness and credibility (Biddle *et al.*, 2001) [4]. The identification of key themes was based on whether it captures an issue of importance in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [7]. The authors strove to be reflexive and interactive with the data and focused on what the themes and subthemes revealed rather than on the number or prevalence of themes (Schinke, McGannon, Battochio & Wells, 2013) [51]. Representation of data adopted a thematic narrative approach in order to capture the unique lived experiences of each player, clarify particular moments in the player's story and aid the reader to become fully immersed in each player's journey (Richardson *et al.*, 2012) [42].

Results and Discussion

This section outlines the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews with selected verbatim quotes used to highlight the players' perceptions relating to the research questions. The dominant themes delineate the challenges that the players experienced during their migratory transition, exacerbated too, by Malta's perceived mentality and cultural existence. The need for support during this challenging period in their life is also discussed.

Most players had played football from a young age and moved up gradually to the first team of their clubs, made a name for themselves, were scouted by foreign clubs, and signed a professional contract. David, Jamie, Martin, Matthew, Steve and George experienced multiple (from two to nine) migratory transitions, whilst for Tony, John, Chris, George and Jean, the transition occurred whilst they were still at academy (youth) level. The countries these players migrated to were Cyprus, Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia, and Spain (See Appendix: Table 1).

Table 1: Player Demographics

Player Pseudonym	Age when player first migrated	Number of countries player migrated to (till time of interview)
Jamie	18	3
James	27	1
Chris	12	1
David	21	5
Jean	14	1
Martin	17	2
Matthew	18	3
Peter	21	1
Steve	19	7
George	10	4
Tony	10	1
John	14	1

Social and Cultural Challenges

An athlete's path to sporting success includes a number of transitions that hold the potential for crisis or growth (Mortensen, Henriksen & Stelter, 2013) [31]. For Jean (aged 14 at time of first transition), migration to England was very "painful," due to the many changes that took place in his life at a time when he was still growing up:

a very hard step for me...different friends... atmosphere...the hardest year of my life...moving country, house, school, my parents separated, dad moved out, had my first love...from going down to the "piazza" (village square) with my friends, training with my Maltese club, relaxed...the change was sudden...it all happened in one year...

Despite the many challenges, Jean perceived his transition as a positive experience. He moved abroad at a young age with his parents and felt that he was in a very supportive club (Schlossberg, 1981) [53]. However, other players felt that they had left their families and their associated support behind. They reported the absence of family ties and close friends as well as difficulty coping with and adjusting to living away from home as the prominent difficulties (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017 [11]; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011 [34]; Schinke *et al.*, 2011) [52]. Likewise, Bourke (2002) [6] reported that only 14% of the players in her study settled within the first month, even though Ireland is just a "short hop" from England. Furthermore, the participants reported being homesick. Homesickness for the Maltese may be more extreme due to the many cultural changes Maltese players have to face. These include large distances to be travelled unlike that experienced on the small island, living alone for the first time [since most Maltese youth do not move away from the family home until they get married unlike in most other nations], and a different language, food and habits they had to adapt to. For example, it took Jean and George a year or so to settle down whilst David states:

In the first three months I couldn't settle down. I used to feel very homesick, but after six months I started settling down a bit. I started making friends and I started getting used to the language, but also, I was spending a lot of time on my own. Sometimes we used to have two days off, I wouldn't go out, I was so homesick.

Matthew and Steve admitted to feeling even more homesick when returning to the club after having gone home for national team matches or holidays whilst Martin opted to not go back home to Malta for six months as "it's the worst thing one can do to go, come back, go...when you go, come back, go you are risking that you don't go back [to the host country/club]." However, Jean believed that to make it as a professional footballer, this is the game he has to play:

it's that good homesick...it doesn't make me feel bad...it makes me feel good because it shows me that yes, I miss Malta, it's my home, my true friends are there but my dream and my future lies here...so that's what keeps me heading forward.

The sacrifice is deemed as worthwhile if it helps him reach his goal. However, from all the players interviewed, only Jean interpreted homesickness in this way. Any change in a new environment can be seen either as a challenge, barrier or crisis (Richardson *et al.*, 2012) [42] and permanent migration and adaptation to a new work place and society can be crucial for

a player's career (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014) ^[1]. Players experienced a variety of difficulties at the club. George spoke about how during two different transitions, the club he was at went bankrupt and his contract was terminated, making him insecure with the instability of his employment because he needed to find another club (Roderick, 2006) ^[44]. The clubs David and Steve were at had financial difficulties, or were involved in corruption scandals whilst for John, Peter and James there was a change in management that influenced their existence. Due to managers short lifespan in clubs and the money available, managers are (generally) not working on long term youth development plans, but simply investing in "more finished" or readymade players from other clubs (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a) ^[26]:

[The club] was taken over by an Arab company, with a lot of money which definitely didn't work in my favour and for a lot of players. All of a sudden, they could go out and buy a 60 million player instead of focusing on a young player. (John) Given that the top clubs tend to bring in new players instead of training their younger players (Richardson *et al.*, 2012) ^[42], the migratory players believed that they were asked to work much harder to justify their existence and make progress within their club. John admitted to never expecting to return home after just three years. Peter recalled not only the excitement of being there for the first time, but also the doubts on whether he would make it or not:

I have two and a half years here. How are they going to pass? My dream has become a reality, but how will I live alone, without friends? I still remember my first training session...you never got tired in that air, I was very excited, could I handle it?

A number of players also found the changing room environment difficult to deal with. However, the environment differed according to the country and culture they were in. Jamie who went to Cyprus stated that he never had so much fun in a changing room. The culture in football clubs tends to be one inundated with banter, strong language and provocation (Parker, 1995 ^[36]; Richardson *et al.*, 2012) ^[42] and Jamie enjoyed this. On the other hand, James just did not get on with his team mates. He felt that, on a cultural level, they were different. Players may become isolated because of their behaviour (Roderick, 2006 ^[44]; Richardson *et al.*, 2012 ^[42]; Schinke & McGannon). George recalled others talking behind his back, not giving him the ball because he was a foreigner, and being just one of the rest, fighting to keep his place and in constant competition with other players. This contrasted with his experience in Malta, where he was regarded as one of the best players around. Shouldered acculturation, where new players are excluded and at times are faced with racism and damaging stereotypes may lead to maladaptive acculturation, the player returning back home or terminating his sport career (Ryba *et al.*, 2018). Such challenges warrant the need for support for the player as well as psychological preparation, including resilience and ability to handle different environments. Matthew summed up the changing room culture as follows:

In England the mentality is very much deal with most of it yourself. Football is a culture where the strongest will survive. Even the changing room is very much taking the mickey and having a lot of banter. You all try to be the best that you can

be if you're not particularly in the right frame of mind you'd be an easy target.

Adaptation may be seen as part of the process where player migrants develop their transnational belonging involving membership of groups in the contexts they are in (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014) ^[1]. In Agergaard and Ryba's (2014) ^[1] study, migrant players continued involving themselves in activities back in their home country through use of social media, however, they also involved themselves in cultural practices in their new country of residence. For players in this study, having a social life in the new country was hard due to the tough training regime and playing in the weekends and holidays and players felt they missed out. Five players mentioned that for the Maltese who are used to going out regularly to socialise not having enough time to do so makes it difficult. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) ^[2] stated that in Malta, if you are bored there is always somewhere to go. Chris, having gone abroad at a young age, felt he missed out on the Maltese social life and wanted to see what it was all about. He regretted the decision to return home because he missed out on making it as a professional player.

I went there at a young age and I didn't know what being a teenager in Malta was about and I wanted to try it... but now I regret not staying abroad because I believe it would have been life changing if I stayed there.

Thus, looking into the processes of adaptation to a new sociocultural setting is vital for the players' establishment in their transnational athletic career (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014) ^[1].

In a new country it wasn't just the language (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017 ^[11]; Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013; Schinke *et al.*, 2011) ^[52] you had to learn, but players had to adjust to other environmental and cultural factors which affected them (de Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Magee & Sugden, 2002) ^[24] including travelling, food, weather (Magee & Sugden, 2002) ^[24], culture and lifestyle as well as the host nation's personality characteristics (Bourke, 2003; Weedon, 2011) ^[59]. Jamie said:

It was very difficult to adapt when I went to Italy, it was horrible.... I was 18 years old, I lived in this complex...it was in the middle of nowhere. We didn't have cars, we couldn't do anything and the Italians are used to a different kind of fun. I wasn't into it... I was different you know...I was used to going out, meeting girls, having fun and the Italians used to stay in each other's room and talk about things I wasn't interested in. I struggled a lot and I think back today that it was a good opportunity... it was something that made me, that taught me a lot, but I didn't maximize it.

The immigrated player must understand cultural practices and push himself to engage even when he is not comfortable or is afraid he will not be accepted (Schinke *et al.*, 2011) ^[11]. Chris, John, Jean and Tony recounted the requirements for them to adjust to new schooling, a new syllabus, making new school friends (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004) ^[60, 61] whilst simultaneously coping with the social and psychological challenges of growing up (Weedon, 2011) ^[59]. They had to adjust to a new club, with a change in training style (de Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009). Participants in the Richardson *et al.* (2012) ^[42] study spoke about the differences in philosophy in how the game is played and they felt

unprepared for this.

The experiences of adapting to a new environment shows the intricacies of migration and the psychological challenges players may need to go through in order to succeed in their football careers (Schinke *et al.*, 2011) ^[11]. Many migrants seem keen to adjust to the new culture, however the stress they experience in the process may affect their career development (Bhagat & London, 1999). David had migrated to play in Cyprus after already playing in another country. He reported settling down most easily and was happiest in this country probably because Cyprus is similar in climate and culture to Malta. When a player moves from one country to another, one cultural viewpoint must not replace another but rather be fluid in order for the athlete to cope and adapt (Schinke, McGannon, Battochio & Wells, 2013) ^[51].

Each professional club also has a unique sub-culture (Relvas *et al.*, 2010) ^[44]. David, who, in his first migration played in Germany, felt thankful for the discipline the Germans instilled in him. He needed to be more organized and punctual because otherwise he would have lost his place on the team. Martin felt that Italy taught him what real football is, the pace of the game, technique and tactics. He also adapted to the Italian way of living with regard to dressing and behaviour. His identity changed in Italy.

A unique major issue that Maltese players experienced was adapting to lifestyle skills:

I changed my life totally....at home, not even a plate I would clean... I would leave it on the table. Then I found myself there and said 'What am I going to do alone here? I have never lived alone'. I was 21. (Peter)

In a number of small nations such as Malta, life may still be very traditional, the mother or wife (typically) does all, or most, of the chores at home and few young people live alone (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008) ^[2]. Players spoke about not knowing how to cope with living alone, they were not used to undertaking household chores, nor cooking for themselves. George found this particularly challenging and as a consequence of his inability to understand the technicalities of cooking, gave himself food poisoning, which unfortunately meant him losing his place on the team:

I wasn't comfortable, lots of gas in the stomach. I said well I have to do something, I started experimenting. The first couple of times it was shit... spaghetti. I took out one, all the rest came out. Then time after time you know, I spent about two weeks just eating pasta, it was the only thing I knew how to cook. Then I said let's try to do something else. I started feeling well again, I was eating the things I needed and basically, I was learning. I had to learn, there was no other choice. If I had a wife, a mummy it would have been much easier, but thank God most probably I didn't have them because probably I wouldn't have got to where I am, it was very hard.

George went on to say that he did not know how to use the washing machine and was taking his clothes to the laundry. Matthew and Chris also found it very hard to learn to do chores on their own and the question arises whether, on getting to know that they were migrating overseas, these players knew what they were really getting into. Nesti (2010) ^[33], Nesti & Littlewood (2011) ^[34] and Richardson *et al.* (2004) stated that a large number of players are not ready for

the post-academy transition and find it difficult to cope after the more caring environments they were previously in.

Pre and Post Transition Support

As stated by the players, a major factor in this study, unlike other studies, is the country's mentality and how it might hinder a player's migratory transition. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) ^[2] found that moving from Malta proved problematic, because players in Malta are used to an easy life where they find everything ready for them and where the football is amateur in nature. Eight players mentioned that there are too many mummies' boys in Malta, and seven of them admitted to being one. Maltese mothers are seen as dedicated, but ultimately submissive and tied to the home (Borg, 1986). They will do all the chores themselves and are at times overprotective. Whilst a number of players accepted that they needed to be better prepared for the transition, they believed that they were under-prepared as a consequence of being a "Maltese Boy." They felt that the way in which their parents, mainly their mothers, did everything for them needed to be changed. However, Chris believed that changing the parents' mentality is challenging.

My mother used to call me every day... you want to come back? It used to make me sometimes angry...sometimes I wanted to come back... I used to tell myself I want to go back...but ... the parents they just have to ...if you want your children to make it...you can't just ... keep them back from something they are really good at. (Chris)

To understand transitions better, players need to be seen in their cultural contexts (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009) ^[38]. The Maltese lifestyle may be a reason for the difficulties Maltese players experience in transition. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) ^[2] stated that Malta is one big community where everyone knows each other and people make themselves comfortable wherever they go. Horst Heese recognized that his problem, as Technical Director at the Malta Football Association (MFA) was compounded by "living in a holiday country with a population who were forever living a holiday" (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008; p.89) ^[2]. The players confirmed that the Maltese were laid back, and had too much of an easy life with David referring to the Maltese as having talent, but "everyone is sitting pretty in the sun" whilst Matthew suggested that to make it you need to have a lot of motivation:

Malta is a very comfortable nation to live in... most things are looked after.... its relatively cheap to live here, you can get by on whatever....and you have to have a lot of will and drive to do it especially if you're leaving the country.

For John, the Maltese mentality, the laidback attitude was his downfall. He did not take things seriously and lost his place at the club.

Being Maltese, when I got the chance to go to a big club I saw it that I have already achieved something big, when really, I never actually thought that listen, I am so close to making it. That was just the first step and that is where the hard work starts. Being Maltese that's what happened. I went there, was happy to be there, I thought I have already achieved a lot, and really and truly, I was nowhere close to making it.

Small nations or regions in particular countries may feel inferior to other nations due to their geographical and

population size and who feel that they can never reach the standard of bigger nations. In fact, in other sports, Malta participates together with Andorra, Monaco, Montenegro, Iceland, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and San Marino, all small nations with less than one million inhabitants, in what are known as the Games of Small States. The Olympic Committees of these nations believe that it is with these countries that they can compete on the same level. However, in football, in the year 2016, Iceland and Luxembourg, who have approximately the same population size as Malta had 93 and 48 players respectively playing abroad. Cyprus with a population of nearly 900,000 had 26 players abroad, whilst Malta had just five players playing abroad (Grima, 2016) [16].

According to Greenfield & Keller (2004) [15], culture is mostly inside us and influences how we think and act. People internalize meanings from their cultural contexts and thus it is impossible to separate their development and behaviour from these contexts. Also, cultural context is fairly rigid and cannot be readily changed by the individual (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). David told us that being Maltese, there was a sense that you needed to prove yourself more so than other players. He referred to Brazilian players, suggesting that there are stereotypes, people automatically believed that the Brazilians are good at football since Brazil has a series of successes in World football. He said in a hurtful tone, “but the Maltese... people do not even know where Malta is...”

For John, clubs would say to him, ‘Who from Malta has ever made it?’, while Jamie had to make all the contact with clubs “because being from Malta no one comes to pick you up.”

Players move from a protective environment to a less supportive first team culture that does not tolerate failure and puts high demands on the players (Reilly *et al.*, 2003) [39]. Whilst other small island nations, such as Cyprus, have a similar Mediterranean culture, geographically Cyprus is much larger than Malta and players are somewhat used to moving away from home to a new club within Cyprus itself. Also, Icelandic people are seen to be independent, ambitious and competitive and have a strong work ethic (Ólafsson, 2003) [45], whilst the Maltese are characterised by a Mediterranean and small island mentality. For the Maltese, when things are not going that great and high stress is experienced, career development may be affected (Bhagat & London, 1999) and the Maltese find it so easy to give up and go home. George states:

You come to a point when you say I want to go home. The only place that I can call home and that attracts me is Malta. When I played abroad I was always looking at the calendar of the national team so I can come and spend a week. It’s a magnet.

He went on to say that he would have stayed in Malta if the football was like other countries. James had the opportunity to go and play with another two clubs, but he felt that once he had not settled down after seven months it would be difficult. For Matthew and Jaimie, there were too many distractions in Malta, which hinder the players’ migration and career progressions.

I think Maltese kids find it a bit of a struggle to leave. I was young, I was starting to have a social life here in Malta and I found it a bit harder than I should have (Jamie).

There needs to be a culturally specific approach in applied

work to help players adjust to transitions (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009) [38] and thus, it is important for clubs to get to know the personal and cultural background of the player before they sign (Magee & Sugden, 2002) [24].

Chris wanted to come back, he missed Malta stating that he had the “Maltese gene” in him. However, Jaimie was determined to get away the time of his second transition “because I was done in Malta...socially, football wise, everything”. He needed a change from the sheltered island life.

Players need people around them who can give support (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017 [11]; Richardson *et al.*, 2012 [42]; Schinke *et al.*, 2011) [52]. Just like players in Richardson *et al.*’s (2012) [42] study, the Maltese players stated that the support of their families was crucial. However, certain football decisions had to be taken on their own since parents had little knowledge and there was no one to talk to. “We don’t have many players who played abroad, I ended up in situations that I do not know what to do and I didn’t know who to phone to give me their opinion” Steve stated. Similar to Egilsson & Dolles’ study (2017) [11], the players’ network including other players and agents was not really supportive, even at times being considered a threat. Thus, there is a great need for expertise to be provided by the Football Association, clubs or other stakeholders. Migrating players should be able to access a culturally competent service provider in the “host” country. The service provider should also have the possibility to communicate with the clients’ career consultants back home to be able to provide a better service (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014) [48]. Sport psychologists may be ideal to help players through transitions (Richardson *et al.*, 2012) [42] and some players mentioned that if you really needed support from a psychologist the club might provide you with one. However, there was not a psychologist present on a daily basis and only George spoke regularly to a sport psychologist, whilst Jamie sought his sport psychologist back at home when needed. Steve mentioned the trauma he passed through when two of his friends committed suicide, however the macho culture makes players hide their feelings (Roderick, 2006) [44]. He did not seek help because “when you are seeing the psychologist, you have a problem.”

Nesti & Littlewood (2010) [33] also found that players did not engage much in psychologically based support. Often players were not aware of the challenges that lie ahead (Mortensen *et al.*, 2013) [30], and John said:

I went through everyday never trying to improve myself but like in Malta everyone thinks I am playing with this club. It was three years that felt for me like it was a long holiday whereas the other players, I wouldn’t say they worked harder, but mentally they were much more prepared, they knew what was to come whereas I was always happy, looking forward to coming down for a holiday here.

Players from smaller countries and/or a sheltered upbringing may find themselves experiencing similar challenges and, thus, further research needs to be conducted in other small nations or island states as greater knowledge as well as support may aid players in their migratory transition. As suggested by the ISSP, the sharing of experiences between practitioners from different countries to serve both local players as well as visitors and the education of coaches on

how they can support athletes' basic psychological needs is a challenge that needs to be met (Ryba *et al.* 2018) ^[47].

Conclusion

In this study the researchers examined the experiences that players go through as they migrate from a small country to play professional football in a foreign country that is much larger in population size and professionalism. The participants' voice clearly evidence that the effect of the culture, in particular the laid-back attitude and the traditionally sheltered upbringing (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008) ^[2], had a tremendous effect on the players during the migration process within the host countries and the ability for footballers to handle psychosocial, psychological as well as cultural challenges is crucial (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) ^[11]. Thus, there is a great need for qualified sport personnel to support transitioning players (Ryba *et al.* 2018) ^[47].

Players moved from a sheltered family upbringing, where most players were still living with their families and where typically their mothers did everything for them, to living alone or with other players. They had to do house chores they had never done before; make new friends in a competitive environment. Most had to learn a new language and adjust to more intense training and a faster paced game. Furthermore, social and psychological support was not always available and although players turned to their families wherever possible, at times communication was not possible as they lived far away. Despite all the difficulties they had, participants found that the experiences they encountered helped them develop as players and as people too. On reflecting about their difficult moments, they could see the changes they underwent that were beneficial to them. Nesti (2010) ^[31] and Richardson *et al.* (2012) ^[42] also reported in their studies, that players were able to recognise difficult challenges, which at times helped them grow and face even bigger challenges further along the way. Acceptance, of thoughts and feelings related to the adversity they were facing is an inevitable part not only of a sport career, but of life itself (Henriksen, Hansen & Larsen, 2020).

This study has identified several areas of importance in understanding the character and challenges facing players coming from a small nation and a sheltered upbringing. The data highlight issues that players may face, and identify why they believe that these issues have either manifested or been heightened as a consequence of their upbringing. Acquiring knowledge into the fluidities and processes that come about with acculturation will help sport psychologists to understand better how to work with immigrant athletes in a way that supports their cultural identity (Schinke *et al.*, 2013). This study showed that parents need to be educated in terms of how to prepare their children for successful transitions to foreign soil. Parents, although supportive, may at times have been seen as obstacles to the players' development and careers (Harwood & Knight, 2009) ^[18]. Personnel working with players from a sheltered upbringing have a hard job trying to change the culture and instilling a competitive mentality and professionalism in the players. The relaxed lifestyle that might characterize small nations may be hard to tackle once the players are still at home. Coaching staff must be aware of the mentality and push players to their limits so as to enhance the way players look at their future career. Applied practitioners

must observe well how immigrant players and the host club members relate so as to see how the complexities of acculturation unfold and to be able to support all parties with shared learning (Schinke *et al.*, 2013).

Morris, Tod and Oliver (2015) ^[29] have suggested future research through longitudinal studies to gain better understanding of the changes and experiences of athletes, the delivery of specific types of support, and to measure transitional outcomes. As previously noted, this study forms the reconnaissance phase of a larger action research project to examine ways of preparing young players better for migration. Future research will focus on the views of parents of young footballers in this study as well as head coaches of top academies and the Football Association and work on suggestions that they put forward. Significant stakeholders, including, sport psychologists and other practitioners, may need to recognize issues brought up here when working with young players for migration from small countries who are characterized by a traditional upbringing. It may be wise to educate youth players on the process of transition, the physical and mental demands they may encounter, and the personal characteristics required in senior sport (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). As reported by Egilsson & Dolles (2017) ^[11], focus in clubs tends to be on the technical and physical aspects whilst the psychological and psycho-social dimensions tend to be ignored. Players need to be taught coping strategies related to their team culture and the stressors in that environment (Holt & Hogg, 2002) ^[20]. As Nesti (2010) ^[31] suggested, the support work provided should not just be focused on mental skills training but there should be focus on the person and lifestyle issues (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993) ^[9].

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