Navigating management dismissal and COVID-19 in a professional football club: a trainee sport psychologist finds her way through
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Abstract

In this case study, we report the experiences and reflections of a female trainee sport and exercise psychologist who navigated the dismissal of a management team and COVID-19 in a professional football club. The trainee delivered an educational intervention to a group of ten players transitioning from a youth academy into the first team at a professional football club. This formed part of a larger organisational intervention to integrate sport psychology into the club. During the delivery, her mode of working changed from face-to-face to online support (because of the COVID-19 pandemic) and the management team, except the first author, were dismissed from their duties after lockdown. We discuss the challenges of integrating and working within an organisation, experiencing the dismissal of the management team, the effect of the practitioner’s gender as a female working in a male-dominated sport, and the unrelenting football culture and how we, as practitioners, may choose to navigate it. We supplement personal reflections and notes from client work with learning logs and supervision as part of coursework components on a doctorate in sport and exercise psychology. This case study contributes to the literature by presenting and reflecting on challenges novice practitioners might face working within a professional football organisation.

Keywords: Trainee, football, female, dismissal, gender, organisation
Working in Football

The primary concerns for a football team are to achieve results, win games and meet the expectations of their fans, the media, and their sponsors (Storm, 2012). The commercialization and globalization of football has created a unique outcome-oriented culture (Nesti et al., 2012). Short-term approaches have developed (i.e., need to win, avoid relegation); there is a requirement for sustained team performance to maximize profitability and status (Solberg & Haugen, 2010) which erodes the cooperative culture within each organization. Within professional football, there is often a high turnover of head coaches and first team managers (League Managers Association; LMA, 2015) which has created a precarious working environment (Gilmore et al., 2018). Limited research has discussed the influence of the dismissal culture on the practitioner (Bentzen et al., 2020a; Bentzen et al., 2020b; Gilmore et al., 2018). The literature that exists explores experiences of the English Premier League and Danish football. Though we may argue these cultures are similar, there is a significant difference in the financial implications of the dismissal culture between these leagues and those in Scottish or lower-level English Leagues.

Working as a sport psychology consultant in professional football, the research has highlighted the challenges of the masculine and highly competitive culture (Champ et al., 2020; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006). The research states that the organizational culture that football players and managers are constantly trying to negotiate and operate within (Nesti et al., 2012). Gilmore et al. (2018) highlighted some key concerns of the sport psychologist working in this precarious environment and the challenges of keeping your job, meeting managerial demands, and staying true to one’s sense of self. The literature has not yet explored the feelings of loss that a practitioner may experience with the dismissal of management or coaches and how they navigate the expectations placed upon them whilst working organisationally remaining on the edge of the management team.
The applied sport psychology literature covers client preferences for the practitioner (Blom et al., 2003), specifically dress (Lovell et al., 2011), credentials (Thelwell et al., 2008), and individual personality (Cook & Fletcher, 2017). Woolway and Harwood (2020) recently found that a consultant of the same gender, race, and age of the client, with a high athletic background and sport-specific knowledge and interpersonal skills, was the most preferred. Even though gender matching preferences exist, female sport psychology consultants may still positively influence male athletes. Yet, the contributions and experiences of female consultants working with male athletes and in male dominated sports, remains understudied.

Similarly, there is also a lack of case studies that discuss working with organizations as opposed to individual clients. The British Psychological Society Practice Guidelines (BPS, 2017) note “the client may be … a private or public organisation… who are in receipt of the services of the psychologist” (p.4). Much of the case study literature in sport and exercise psychology focuses on individual clients, when in fact “athletes do not live in a vacuum; they function within a highly social and organisational environment, which exerts major influences on them and their performances” (Hardy et al., 1996, p. 239-240). Most times, although the sport psychology consultant may work with individual athletes, they are employed by the organization/team who is the ‘real’ client (Coumbe-Lilley, 2011; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Schwarz, 1994). Organizational dynamics have been relatively unexplored in the sporting environment despite reporting of international athletes seeking advice on organizational issues (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006; Jones, 2002; Males, 2006; Terry et al., 1997; Timson, 2006) and sport psychology consultants and researchers encouraging more on the organizational level (Champ et al. 2020; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Gardner, 1995; Neff, 1990; Ravizza, 1988, 1990).

This aim of this case study is to offer first-hand reflections of a trainee sport and exercise psychologist working within a professional football club in Scotland. We shall
discuss the challenges of working organisationally, dealing with the dismissal of management, and the role of gender in this environment. We also offer deliberations for practitioners and trainees working, or considering working, in male football and organisationally.

**Context**

I (first author) completed this work as part of a placement on a postgraduate doctoral degree in sport and exercise psychology. As guided by the university program, practice undertaken during this period of training was encouraged to follow a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT; Beck, 1995) based approach. CBT encompasses all therapeutic practices that follow the assumption that all psychological problems occur because of interaction between physiology, emotions, behaviour and distorted thinking patterns. The core components of CBT include negative automatic thoughts, underlying assumptions, and core beliefs. CBT seeks to create behaviour change and empower clients to control their own thought processes (Poczwardowski, Sherman & Ravizza, 2004). CBT is most frequently applied within the sporting domain via Psychological Skills Training (Whelan, Mahoney, & Meyers, 1991) and has been claimed as ideal because of its practical and short-term nature (Claspell, 2013).

Whilst CBT was the prescribed therapeutic framework, my personal beliefs and values align more towards a humanistic approach. My style of practice whilst engaged in working with this client was therefore CBT that embraced humanistic features, such as personal choice, collaboration, and a holistic overview (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented lockdown and postponement of sport in Scotland, suspending all face-to-face client work. Before this lockdown, I was present on site two days a week and attended home matches. When professional sport returned, client work occurred via online support, and I worked closely
with the management team. Shortly after the return from lockdown, the club board dismissed
the management team.

**Client introduction**

The client is a professional championship male football club in Scotland (2nd tier),
that was established over 140 years ago. A report published that the club generates £8.6
million a year for their local community. For anonymity, I shall name the club Arendelle F.C.

At the beginning of the current season, a new player/manager was appointed. The club runs
15 academy level teams and has around 30 members of support staff. I interacted with many
of these staff regularly, including the coaching staff, physiotherapist, chaplain, and education
officer; however, other than the chef and office manager, I was the only female member of
staff and the only sport psychology practitioner working with the team.

**The Case**

This case study uses an ethnographic approach to discuss and critically reflect upon
the experiences and practice of a trainee sport psychology consultant, as she implemented an
educational intervention as part of a larger organisational intervention within a professional
football team (Gardner, 1995; Neff, 1990; Ravizza, 1988, 1990). Three target areas of the
intervention included working with players to improve sporting performance, providing
personal counselling, and helping to drive the team’s long-term strategy (Eubank, Nesti &
Cruickshank, 2014; Neff, 1990). I employed multiple tools in this process, including humour,
observation, Socratic questioning, and psychological skills training (PST).

Within my role as a practitioner, engaged in reflective practice it was necessary to
reflect and take notes not only on the intricacies of my individual client work, but also to
reflect on the daily demands of sport psychology practice, including the building, maintaining
and loss of relationships with athletes, coaching staff, and key stakeholders (Eubank, Nesti, &
Cruickshank, 2014; Maharaj, 2016). All of which are essential for practitioners to consider
before engaging in work with a sporting organization. I collected the data as evidence for my logbook and comprises field notes and reflections during my time with the organisation (Maharaj, 2016).

**Intake**

As part of a university program, I reached out to the newly appointed assistant manager (AM) at Arendelle F.C., with whom they had connected with during training and queried about the possibility of a placement. I knew that the Assistant Manager had previous positive experiences working with a sport psychology consultant and this may assist me in gaining entry, credibility, and trust (Ravizza, 1988).

Regarding the initial assessment questions, I was sure to address, ask myself and the client (the assistant manager): What are the presenting issues? Can the client’s needs be realistically met? What would success look like for the client? Am I the right person to work with this client? No predetermined structure for assessment was suitable for use with this client; instead, the assessment process took four stages. First, an email chain with the AM established the initial therapeutic relationship. The AM and I worked closely to manage each other’s expectations, regarding time on site, the role of the sport psychologist, and available resources. (Wills, 2008). Second, I arranged a face-to-face meeting to discuss the structure and setup of the club and identify any issues perceived by the management team and areas for improvement. Third, I attended training at the club to observe interactions between players and coaches. Last, a meeting took place with a select group of 10 players whom were currently transitioning from the reserves into the first team. Their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years old, where I asked questions regarding their thoughts and knowledge of sport psychology. Forming an alliance with the individuals was a significant portion of the assessment (Orlick, 1989).
I co-constructed a formulation with the AM to make sense of the information gathered and link it to psychological theory (Harper & Moss, 2003). I met the AM to review his log notes and identify areas for improvement. The principal topics that arose from these discussions related to team cohesion (Carron et al., 2002), and the mental skills of the select group of young players (Thelwell, Greenlees & Weston, 2006). This group was experiencing varying difficulties during training with the first team (i.e., confidence (Vealey, 2009), communication, negative feedback and remaining focused after mistakes). Specific individuals were highlighted as struggling with issues of perfectionism (Stoeber, 2014) and low self-esteem. Specific assessments and formulations were developed for individual players who later opted to participate in one-to-one sessions. Assessment and formulation were ongoing throughout my time with Arendelle F.C. (Wills & Sanders, 2013).

**Negotiating a contract and therapeutic aims**

The main therapeutic aims for working with the club were: to assist the organisation in moving towards integration of regular sport psychology services, development of mental skills for performance enhancement, to facilitate cohesion between the first team and transitioning players, and to encourage personal counselling. This was to be achieved through a four-stage plan. Having collaborated with the AM on the therapeutic plan, the negotiation of a contract was straightforward.

**Therapeutic Plan**

Stage one involved me attending and observing training and matches. This immersion within the team would help develop strong interpersonal relationships (Barker, McCarthy, & Harwood, 2011) and the client-therapist relationship accounts for a larger variance in client outcome than expectancy effects and therapeutic techniques (Lambert & Barely, 2001; Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015), and so I made it a priority to build trusting, respectful, and honest relationships. Stage two included the delivery of five
PST workshops with a group of young players. The workshops focused on imagery, goal setting, mindfulness, self-talk, and the last session took a group therapy style (Yalom, 1995). Each workshop was based on a different psychological skill, chosen by the group, and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Workshops took place post-training sessions in the club board room, with on some occasions also utilising the main pitch to put skills into practice. I provided a definition and examples of each psychological skill before I gave the individuals time to relate the skill to their own practice. In the first session, individuals worked together to create ground rules for the workshops which were self-policing. The final workshop modelled a group therapy styled session (Yalom, 1995) where the trainee asked open questions to the group and facilitated their discussions. During this session, individuals opened up and discussed their shared frustrations in more depth.

After completing the five workshops, I asked the group to take part in a one-to-one session (an individual assessment). One-to-one sessions were then voluntary and were based on the needs of the individual. The last stage was to offer one-to-one sessions to first team players. The ultimate intervention goal was performance enhancement.

**Therapeutic process**

Formulation highlighted that a key issue was the lack of cohesion between the first team and the transitioning young players. Team cohesion is critical to successful sporting performance (Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002; Eys et al., 2010; Loughead & Hardy 2006). For the group of young players, their transition from youth to senior sport is one of the most difficult challenges they will face, partly because it may last up to four years (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Stambulova et al., 2009). The highly competitive and masculine football culture (Cushion & Jones, 2006 exacerbated this struggle; Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Parker, 1995).

My supervisor (second author) and I considered a Personal Disclosure Mutual Sharing (PDMS) activity as an appropriate intervention for this group, because researchers have
demonstrated how it increases cohesion and performance in elite football (Windsor, Barker, & McCarthy, 2011; Holt & Dunn, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2009). I had not yet developed a strong enough relationship with all members of the first team. It was therefore noted this was worth revisiting before a ‘high stake’ game once this relationship had been developed (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Holt & Dunn, 2006). I decided to work with this group as a unit and focus on their development of mental skills primarily based on the desires of the club management. They hoped these workshops would increase the cohesion within this small group and encourage them to support each other through the transition into elite football together, whilst also educating them about mental skills that may enhance their performance on the pitch.

Although in this case, I agreed with the suggestions made by the management team, this highlighted the constant balancing act that is required by Sport and Exercise Psychologist’s working within an organisation, to improve performance and maintain positive relationships with key stakeholders, as they ultimately make the final decision regarding one’s employment/placement (Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014).

During the PST workshops and one-to-one sessions, I used humour, allowing myself to “look the fool” and for the participants to make fun of my lack of football knowledge to show genuineness and transparency (Watson, Greenberg & Lietaer, 1998; Pack et al., 2020). Because of gender difference I hypothesised that this was socially acceptable. Had I been male, I believe my limited footballing knowledge may not have been received so well. Upon reflection, I believe it is more in line with socio-cultural norms for a female to hold less knowledge surrounding football. Through allowing myself to “look the fool”, I explicitly stated that I was not an expert on football, I allowed the clients to be the expert, thus facilitating a collaborative relationship where we could work together to combine my knowledge of sport psychology with their experience and knowledge of the football context, to best benefit the individuals and develop a strong working relationship. I believe my
willingness to be vulnerable and say “I do not know this” demonstrated that the environment was a psychologically safe space and would allow clients to do the same.

I used Socratic questioning and guided discovery (Siemonsma et al., 2013) to help individuals reduce distress (Beck, 2011), develop critical thinking (Padesky & Beck, 2003), increase engagement in the session (Overholser, 1993) and to allow them to reach conclusions on their own (Clark & Egan, 2015). The Socratic method is “a method of guided discovery in which the therapist asks a series of carefully sequenced questions to help define problems, assist in the identification of thoughts, beliefs, examine the meaning of events, or assess the ramification of particular thoughts or behaviours” (Beck & Dozois, 2011, p.401).

To continuously gather information, evaluate change and build relationships, I observed training, competition, and social environments. Observation is a skilled practice that can provide evidence of an individual’s overt behaviours, gestures, and interactions in the natural sporting environment (Martin, Winter & Holder, 2019; McMorris, 2015). This took the form of note taking and voice recordings. In the beginning, it provided me with an overall understanding of the specific football culture, the critical subtleties that drive the performance environment, and to help build relationships with support staff and key stakeholders (Brown et al., 2005; Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Holder & Winter, 2017, Holder, Winter, & Orr, 2018).

Throughout my time with the club, observation became more of a tool to note specific behaviours and body language in moments of success, defeat, and error. After sessions, coaches would frequently ask what I had spotted during the session, and I would feedback and discuss my observations with the staff and how they believed they could get the best out of each player. I believed that my display of enthusiasm at training and games assisted in the integration with the team, perhaps gaining greater respect from athletes, management, and support staff (Martin et al., 2017).
The clearest change that occurred with my appointment, regarding long-term club
strategy, related to player Individual Development Plans (IDPs). Previously, IDPs had
focused on technical, tactical, and physical aspects of football. With the addition of
psychological support and the education provided by the PST workshops, they included a
psychosocial aspect in the IDPs. This encouraged players to see the importance of the
psychological aspect of the game and to think about their own psychosocial development.

The unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 meant all work and contact with players
came to an immediate halt. Individual psychological support continued online for individuals
that requested it. The pandemic and resulting restrictions affected the four-stage plan
working with this client such that the trainee could no longer attend and observe training and
matches. As a result, I could not fully immerse myself in the new working team and engage
in conversations as a resultant of “hanging around” (Andersen et al., 2001). All my attention,
post covid return, then became online working with the select group of transitioning players.
Not being present at training and matches made it more challenging to be aware of the day-
to-day ongoings within the club and with individuals. I attempted to reach out more to the
AM and to individual players because I knew I was on the edge of the team, looking in.

After professional sport could return and the new season began, I reached out to the
assistant manager, who was understandably under a lot of stress, ensuring the club met all
COVID protocols, organising training, and reaching out to players. We decided that the best
course of action was for my work with players to move to an online format. I offered sessions
out to a larger group because some players from the previous season had now parted ways.
Sadly, I did not experience a “tidy” ending with these players. I re-contracted with this new
group, which included some of the previous players and some unfamiliar faces. We agreed
that they would together select topics for discussion or psychoeducation, running a two-week
cycle (one to learn and discuss and one to reflect and report back).
During this time, I also worked more closely with the AM meeting every fortnight to discuss his challenges and personal development. This was initially quite a daunting experience. I viewed the client as a mentor and so began incredibly tentatively in these first sessions, believing he was far wiser than me. Through reflection and discussion in supervision, I realised I could provide this client something rare in football, a space that was safe and free from judgment in which he could share his honest thoughts and reflections and work through his own processing. I believed that as a result, the AM and I developed a unique and mutually beneficial relationship, whereby I provided the client with this safe space to explore, and he shared his honest lived experiences working in the environment.

**Difficulties**

Pain and Harwood (2004) highlighted the necessity for consultants to deal with the environment and banter of football players, using appropriate language to integrate. I was transparent about my lack of football knowledge and found players appreciated my honesty and were happy to explain things; I allowed them to be the expert on football. Being female and not trying to force my knowledge or show that I was an expert in football was less threatening to their masculinity and, as a result, I did not find the integration as difficult as I had expected. Had I been male, I feared my lack of football knowledge might have been viewed as abnormal or disrespectful. I integrated into the environment at training, passing the ball back to players as other support staff did. I struggled with embracing of “unprofessional” player nicknames, although this developed over time with the development of relationships with individuals.

I frequently considered and debated how close I wanted to be to the coaching staff. It was they who decided whether I remained at the club, but I wanted to assure players of their confidentiality. Equally, I believed it was good to show that I was “one of the team”. To resolve this dilemma, I reassured clients before every session of their confidentiality.
Management would often ask what I thought of players and if they were working well with
me. My usual response in these situations was to state “perhaps you could have a
conversation with X about that”. The coaching staff respected my boundaries and
accommodated my needs. Despite the respect of the coaching staff, at times it was
challenging to remain silent whilst players' characters, abilities and circumstances were
discussed. I found myself on a handful of occasions biting my tongue and encouraging others
to reach out to the individual in question and seek the truth.

Physical constraints included the lack of a private space on site. I knew I could hear
the man in the next-door office and so he could probably hear me during consultations. This
is a common issue in sport psychology (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001). To address
this issue of confidentiality, I asked clients if they were comfortable in the space before each
session. One benefit of the COVID restrictions meant that all therapeutic work moved online,
offering greater privacy and confidentiality to our work. Working online, however, meant I
could not pick up on as many subtle non-verbal cues (Barak et al., 2008;Sucala et al., 2014)
and technical issues and timing delays often interrupted the flow of sessions and that the
home environment was distracting for clients too (Geller, 2020). I also faced unanticipated
challenges when working one-to-one with players, including lack of emotional literacy,
understanding of one’s emotions and emotional intelligence (Meyer & Fletcher, 2007; Myer
& Zizzi, 2007).

The therapeutic ending

As outlined, the COVID-19 pandemic created an unexpected immediate ending of
client work for the foreseeable future. Despite the importance of endings and the occurrence
of ‘messy endings’, there is limited literature that discusses this process in the sporting
context (Wills & Sanders, 2013). The ending of therapy might induce feelings of loss and
grief (Safran & Murran, 2000). In an ideal world, I would have had time to prepare and
discuss endings with each of the individuals who did not return to the team. Thankfully, I could have a therapeutic ending with the AM. During this session I was transparent sharing with him the personal loss I felt, knowing that I would a) no longer be working with him in the same capacity and b) I would no longer have his wisdom, support and backing within the organisation. I continued working with the player-group, but with the appointment of a new manager, my role may also come to an abrupt ending. I was back on the edge.

*Evaluation*

As is often the case in sport psychology, it is challenging to evaluate the overall influence of the appointment of a trainee to the organisation. However, a self-report evaluation was completed by players after the initial PST workshops similar to a Qualitative Helpful Factors Design (Elliott, 2001; Anderson et al., 2002), asking them what they found helpful, what they wanted more of and what they didn’t. The results of these assisted in the development of the second seasons, topics discussed. The take up of voluntary sessions by six players suggested positive relationships had been built and clients were engaged with the sport psychology process. Positive feedback was received from coaching staff about changes in specific individuals’ behaviour and attitudes, I also noted this in my observations. Perhaps the willingness of a first team player to display help-seeking behaviour demonstrated the integration of sport psychology services to the team. After the dismissal of the management team, the trainee chose to re-contract with the players and select working group. They displayed a clear preference to continue this working group, noting that they found it “very beneficial”, this view was supported by the Academy and interim manager.

*Reflections*

*Working within an organisation*
Whilst this case study does not follow the typical format, the authors believe it highlights an area that is currently under appreciated within the sport psychology literature; the challenges of working with, and integrating into, an organisation. Having reflected while writing this case study, whilst at Arendelle F.C., although the trainee worked one-to-one with individual players, we believe her presence and daily interactions with individuals at the club had a more significant influence. For many of the players and support staff, meeting the trainee was their first experience of a sport psychologist. The trainee could demonstrate to them that psychologists are not ‘mind readers’ or ‘gurus’ but normal people. We believe the trainee’s presence at the club normalised the notion of a sport psychologist. The trainee explained why she was wanted to be a sport psychologist, and how she thought it could help their performance and lifestyle, and many players seemed genuinely surprised and eager to know more. We also believed that, as a female, the trainee brought another dynamic to the staff. She provided a safe space where players could step aside and share with her thoughts and feelings which they may not have felt comfortable sharing with male coaching staff or their peers for fear of judgment. Having contact and a relationship with a sport psychologist will increase the likelihood of individuals to seek help when they need it. Just as we believe this was helpful for the players, we also believe this organisational intervention brought an additional support to the coaching staff.

Whilst working with the coaching staff, the trainee provided a “non-football” perspective, a different lens through which she viewed players. After training sessions, she and the staff would consult and discuss anything relevant that we had noticed in individual’s and collectively. They agreed and disagreed. In these situations, the trainee and support staff worked well together, each sharing their observations from their perspective.

The dismissal
For many of the younger players working with the trainee, this dismissal of the management team was a critical moment (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006, 2006a, Nesti et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016). They were losing a manager who believed in giving young players a chance to prove themselves, and they were losing a mentor with whom they had formed a close relationship with. The appointment of the new manager was viewed by them as an opportunity to start a fresh and prove themselves worthy of a place in the starting eleven, so much so that as a practitioner the trainee was shocked at how quickly these players appeared to move on from this news. They described tears and high emotions during their last farewells with the management team, but turning up the next day, and going back to work. The trainee understands the need to return to “normal” regarding performance, but it left her questioning whether these players had a chance to properly experience this change and grieve this loss? Or were they so accustomed to this ever-changing cycle and management turnover that it had less of an effect?

One of the major issues/dilemmas that an applied sport psychologist will face in their career is who is the client and whose interests must I consider here? So often we assume that the individual in front of us is the client, when in reality it is the employer or team that is paying your wage or signing off our placement. The decisions we make in practice will ultimately be affected by the culture, organisation and politics that surround us in the same way that an athlete would. We believe it is critical that, as applied practitioners, we note how these factors affect our decision making, as discussed in this case study. You cannot be of any help to an athlete if you are no longer a member of staff; however, it is critical that as practitioners we can hold on to our philosophy and values within this volatile environment. We therefore encourage practitioners working or considering working organisationally or in the professional football environment to consider how do we as practitioners stay us when involved in extreme cultures and organisations? How can we look after ourselves and hold on
to our values? For the trainee, she found that by staying open and honest in these situations, expressing her values with those around her protected her. I wonder if that is also been the case because those around me were accepting of me. Or were they accepting of me because of my openness and honesty? I have tried to continue being me and letting the environment exist around me.

A female in football

Being a female working in this male dominated environment provided me with an advantage in that I am not a male that is expected to fall in line with the cultural and social norms of following football. I am different. I was forgiven, and it was accepted that I would not understand the finer details and intricacies of professional football. I was free to be myself and so were my clients. I could meet clients where they were, and work with coaches to incorporate their knowledge into my practice and my knowledge into theirs. In addition, I perceived there to be an advantage being a female working within this highly masculine culture, as the typical stereotype of a female as being more empathetic, caring, and willing to listen, may have reduced any barriers I may have experienced with individual clients fearful of opening up and disclosing.

Conclusions

Working in football brings its own unique challenges, the unrelenting and precarious nature of the sport. English professional football has been recognised as domineering, authoritarian, uncertain and volatile (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006; Nesti et al., 2012). Scottish professional football holds many of the same characteristics and there is a genuine need for more case studies to explore how we as sport psychology practitioners can work in and navigate this unique environment (Mitchel et al., 2016).
The dismissal of management at any level brings a loss. Much of the literature and research surrounding this has focused on the loss players may experience or the manager’s loss, but we as practitioners also need to recognise our grief in this process. Are we prepared for it? Can we be better prepared for it? Before entering the world of working in football, practitioners should ask themselves, how do I feel about the culture within football? How does it sit with me, my values, and my basic assumptions? How, when working in this environment, will I hold on to and stay true to my values if they do not match the needs and wants of the client? To what extent will my philosophy as a practitioner work at this organisation?

This case study recounts some of the many challenges faced by a sport psychology consultant creating her role within a professional or semi-professional sport. It highlights the potential advantages of working as a female practitioner in a male dominated environment and offers questions for practitioners to consider before engaging in work in professional football. This case study discusses the structural and organisational challenges of applied sport psychology and acknowledges the reality of working in sport where everything is precarious. Unlike other sport science provisions, it was the responsibility of the trainee sport psychology consultant to create/find time, space, and a role within the organisation's structure for herself. It was the presence and integration of the sport psychology consultant (whilst still on the periphery) that was the intervention.

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