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Transitions, trajectories, terminations: exploring career pathways of children and young people in high-performance sport using LEGO® Serious Play®

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how to better support the social and psychological impacts of career transition upon children and young people (CYP). The study navigates these challenges using the creative methodology of LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP). Data was collected from 18 young male athletes in the academy system of an English Premier League (EPL) Association Football club. Findings provide insight into better understanding the nuanced, every day, lived experiences of young athletes within high-performance sport environments. This study contributes new knowledge for leisure through the creation of the 'Career Transition for Children and Young People (CYP) in High Performance Sport Matrix.

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LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP); Association Football; career transition; social world; children and young people (CYP)

1. Introduction

This study is based in an elite high-performance sport setting where children and young people (CYP) embark onto the first rung of the career ladder in sport, seeking professional careers in Association Football where they are frequently placed within highly pressurised settings (Mallows, 2025). However, to forge a desired career trajectory in professional sport will inevitably face change, fluctuating pathways and challenging sport environments, depending on whether these young elite footballers are either retained or released from their contracts with the professional football clubs. In the context of Association Football, hereafter referred to as football, the current, blunt measurement of career success or failure remains whether the players are either retained or released at the end of their two-year probationary contract (*BBC*, 2025). The research approach seeks to advance our understanding on how best to support children and young people (CYP) on their early career journey in these challenging environments and highlights the importance of a bottom-up approach, one co-created amongst both the young elite athletes and academy staff. The outcome of the 'retention' or 'release' metric of the academy system will fundamentally influence the social world and experiences of these

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young players within their chosen sport and leisure activity. Importantly, there are subsequent mental health challenges for these children and young people (CYP) as they navigate their sport career settings, be that as an 'insider' or 'outsider' within Association Football. The stark reality is that for many young elite athletes who are released by professional football clubs, their sporting and leisure social world will encounter a fundamental realignment of the actors, organisations, events, and practices which had previously 'coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement' (Unruh, 1979, p. 115). This disruption occurs during their early and formative years within sport settings. The decisions made by professional football clubs are life-changing and transformative for elite athletes at such an early stage of their sporting careers.

The research approach adopted also demonstrates the potential for using creative play-based learning methods within a diverse range of leisure settings, and advocates exploring creative approaches that contrast with mainstream, traditional research methods within leisure (Jones, 2022). This study adds value through providing insights into the perspectives of young elite athletes and identifies strategies to help support children and young people (CYP) navigate and negotiate the career transition processes as they embark on their career pathways and adapt to complex high-performance sport environments.

2. An overview of the literature

Whilst the term 'career' extends beyond paid work to career volunteering (see Stebbins, 1996) and serious participants in leisure (Stebbins, 1992) who might be at different stages, the focus of this study is upon children and young people (CYP) as early-stage professionals in high-performance sport. Their career trajectory will change, based on the outcome of their 2-year probationary period within the English academy system in football, and this will subsequently impact upon their position and standing within the broader football ecosystem (Diouf et al., 2024). The decisions made by their employers, the professional football club, will be both life changing and transformative, in both positive and negative ways (Mallows, 2025). For this reason, this demographic, of young professional athletes, merits further scrutiny to monitor their career trajectories and influences over time. This study commences at the start of this journey.

2.1. Serious leisure perspectives on career development

Getz (2008, p. 416) proposed that leisure-based participants follow a career pattern in terms of their involvement and commitment to leisure activity. Several of these characteristics are prevalent amongst the footballers in this study, most notably a potential lifetime pursuit of a sport activity and participation in highly pressurised settings that develop over time. Buning and Gibson (2015) noted that when individuals progress along a career path, it progresses over time connected to motivations, preferences, and modified behaviour. Similarly, Lamont et al. (2012) indicated that the development of a leisure career can be limited by priorities that interfere with daily life such as domestic responsibilities, finances, leisure, well-being, work/education, and family relationships. Buning and Gibson also highlighted that lifelong devotion towards participation in

leisure, such as football, is innately linked to wider benefits including mental and physical health, identity and social connectivity.

To advance understanding of the career pathway for children and young people (CYP) within high-performance sport, it is useful to critique the concept of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982) and the six distinctive qualities that distinguish it from mainstream, everyday forms of leisure activity. Shipway and Jones (2008) indicated that the most important quality of serious leisure emerged when participants had a strong sense of identification with their chosen leisure pursuit. For our study participants, their social identity is linked to being a footballer, their interaction with their peers, and how they exhibit their identities on the 'platform or stage' of sport (Mitchell et al., 2020). This sense of identity has been discussed at length by Green and Jones (2005) who suggested that serious leisure could create its own social identities, including family relationships, expenditure, and patterns of time allocation. Too frequently young elite footballers become enveloped in their own, and often their parents' social media profiles, lose their own individual identities, and become known primarily as the 'kid who plays football' (BBC, 2025). This study prioritises the 'voice' of the athlete and explores their career trajectories within sport-related settings, in the context of children and young people (CYP).

2.2. Social world transitions and football career trajectories

Stebbins (2018) observed that the social worlds of serious pursuits, like those of the children and young people (CYP) involved in high-performance sport environments, are complex phenomena. The ecosystem of the football academy system is a serious social world (Stebbins, 1999, p. 267), and one which inspires the young elite athletes more to stay in them, once they have joined in the first place, as they establish their own attractive football lifestyle amidst the presence of networks of likeminded regulars and insiders (Shipway & Jones, 2007), and it is constituted of a substantial subculture. One distinctive quality of the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) (Stebbins, 1992) is the opportunity to follow a career shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement and involvement (Stebbins, 1992).

Unruh (1980, p. 277) described social world as 'an amorphous, diffuse constellation of actors, organisations, events, and practices' where for participants, their social world is highly identifiable by their group's 'own unique and distinct set of norms, values, beliefs, behaviours, styles, communication mediums, moral principles, performance standards, and even language' (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 299). According to Unruh's general types of involvement, the young participants in this study, based on the roles they play and the football settings which they inhabit, would be classified as 'insiders', who demonstrate exceptional devotion to the social world they share, and who in this case of high-performance sport are engaged in 'hardcore' leisure (Scott & McMahan, 2017). It is the verbal and non-verbal sharing of their overriding values, beliefs, and actions that create the unique ethos of their football social world. Social world theory provides a useful framework to examine the career paths and transition process of children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport.

One of the distinctive characteristics of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992) is that participants, like these young high-performance athletes, tend to strongly identify with their chosen pursuit, football. This involves notable perseverance and effort linked to a distinct

sense of an emerging football career with many durable benefits all which are framed in the social world and ethos of the football academy environment. These qualities underlie the distinctive identity that emerges during their 2-year probationary period with the professional club. The young players display evidence of coalescing into a social world based around their shared interest, sporting values, and the distinctive core activity of football. Their relationships with peers and academy staff occur in small groups and social networks and indirectly through certain means of communication from the professional football club, and communication with their like-minded fellow players. In their everyday environment, as with most other sports and leisure activities, there is a culture consisting of shared values and knowledge (Getz & Patterson, 2013; Stebbins, 2018).

The culture of a football academy environment as a serious pursuit (Stebbins, 1992), incorporates a range of distinct elements incorporating patterns of behaviour, norms, roles, and values which are learned as an integral part of the football social world. This culture is based around standards of excellence in highly pressurised sport settings which evaluate performance (Shipway et al., 2013). Excellence in the core football activities is a main value lying at the foundation of this social world, and excellence becomes a primary source of motivation to engage with activities and to experience them. Buning and Gibson (2016, p. 268) suggest that 'admission to and withdrawal from a social world is fundamentally considered voluntary although some social worlds may require individuals to possess specific characteristics to gain admittance'. However, for the athletes in this study, their admittance to a social world is largely based on an assessment of their performance and perceived level of 'excellence', by staff and coaches within the football academy system.

Ultimately, if the young players are not retained within that football academy system, then admission to this social world is effectively retracted, and they are denied access to the very places they had inhabited previously. Their football journey will effectively end. The career paths of these elite young footballers are shaped by their own contingencies (Goh et al., 2022), also known as 'turning points', which can be progressive or regressive in nature. For the footballers in this study, we are terming these turning points as '*sport sliding doors moments*.' These moments are effectively when decisions are taken by the professional club to either retain or release them from the academy system towards the end of their probationary period which for those released, will inevitably lead to the upheaval of their social world.

2.3. Everyday activities in the academy system in Association Football

A football academy is described as an establishment for the coaching and education of academy players operated by a club in accordance with the rules and regulations set by the Professional Games Board (PGB) (English Football League, 2024). It is a training scheme where professional football clubs recruit young football players, with the aim of progressing and developing them into professional footballers (Webb et al., 2020). An academy can enrol players from the under-9-year age group through to professional players of adult age. In the English academy system, at the end of their probationary term with a professional football club the young players will either be offered professional contracts, retained for an additional period within the academy system, or released by their 'employer', the professional football club.

The football landscape and high-profile nature of football make talent identification a strategic and tactical decision (Ryom et al., 2020). There are low transition conversions, where only 180 of the 1.5 million players (0.012%) who participate in England's youth development football pathway secure a professional contract, and route towards a professional career path with an English Premier League club (Mallows, 2025). There is significant turnover as half of all academy players leave the system before turning 16, and less than 10% secure a professional contract (EFL, 2024). In the English football academy system, there are high levels of shock, trauma, disappointment, and anger amongst young players released from their football clubs (Diouf et al., 2024).

There is increasing concern regarding the academy experiences facing young players, particularly those who are prematurely released at various stages of the development pathway (*BBC*, 2025; Mallows, 2025; Mitchell et al., 2020) and find their professional sport 'careers' effectively terminated. Potential mishandling of this process can lead to adverse psychological and emotional effects (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Following deselection, Sweeney et al. (2021) observed young players questioning their identity, athletic capabilities, and the significance of their involvement in sport in everyday life. For those young high-performance athletes, their football social world and career are often thrown into complete turmoil, they are excluded from their everyday activities, and their sporting identities are fractured (Shipway et al., 2013). This study explores the perspectives of young elite athletes and identifies how to best support their early career journey and transition processes in often complex and challenging high-performance sport environments.

3. Research methodology

Using an experiential, interactive, play-based method, LEGO® Serious Play® allows children and young people (CYP) to build and forecast their preferred career pathways in professional sport. It enables coaches, parents, and sport administrators to better understand the pressures and requirements associated with career progression, retention, or release of young athletes within high-performance sport.

3.1. The creative methodology of LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP)

LEGO® Serious Play (LSP) is a multifaceted methodology that harnesses various sensory and cognitive processes to enable creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration (Blair & Rilo, 2016). By integrating auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual elements, it engages participants in a holistic experience that enhances learning and innovation (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). The hands-on, tactile nature of building with LEGO® bricks activates kinaesthetic intelligence, allowing individuals to physically manipulate concepts and ideas (Bab & Boniwell, 2016). It allows participants to explore complex issues and to generate novel solutions more effectively. LEGO® Serious Play® creates an environment where participants can think, build, and share in ways that are deeply engaging and profoundly productive (Henderson & Shipway, 2026).

The rationale for using LEGO® Serious Play® as a creative methodology was for the elite young footballers to actively co-create discussions relating to their future sport careers and pathways and to further explore their everyday challenges. This study

illustrates the 'real-world' opportunities to build scalability for creative play-based methods in high-performance sport environments and more broadly within leisure contexts.

The LEGO® Serious Play methodology enables creativity, collaboration, and deep reflection through four well-defined phases of (i) challenge, (ii) build, (iii) share and (iv) reflect (Blair & Dröge, 2020). Henderson and Shipway (2024) indicate the process helps to further frame the phenomenological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). At its core, is ensuring every participant builds and shares their unique perspectives, promoting an inclusive and respectful environment (Blair & Rilo, 2016). Effective LEGO® build questions steer participants to create tangible representations of abstract ideas. Through structured exercises, participants develop essential skills such as constructing metaphors, storytelling, and articulating abstract concepts through tangible models. Wengel et al. (2016) propose that LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) facilitates the expression of tacit 'hidden' knowledge, experiences and confers deep metaphorical meanings not achieved through alternative qualitative research methods. Rather than being mere spectators, the footballers in this study become partners in the creative process (Henderson et al., 2025).

3.2. Using LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) with children and young people

This study was designed to foreground the individual lived experience (Shipway & Henderson, 2026). Access to participants was limited to a single 60-minute, club-controlled session, which represents a condensed LSP cycle. Within this constrained timeframe, implementing alternative extended collective stages of LSP such as (i) shared landscape construction, (ii) model interconnections, and (iii) iterative systems-level reflection were unrealistic and risked superficial engagement, reduced participant voice, and compromised data quality.

As specified by Shipway and Henderson (2024), prioritising individual model building and metaphor-based storytelling ensured that all the young footballers could meaningfully engage within the available time, while still maintaining psychological safety and feasibility in a high-performance youth sport environment. The use of LEGO® bricks was methodologically purposeful rather than decorative, functioning as an embodied and metaphor-based elicitation tool to support the reflection and articulation of experiences that may be difficult for the young players to express verbally (Henderson et al., 2026).

A core epistemological principle of LSP is that meaning resides with the model builder and not the facilitator or researcher (McCusker, 2014). In line with established LSP practice, metaphors were generated, owned, and articulated by the young players themselves. Imposing external metaphorical interpretations risks misrepresentation, adultification of meaning, and the projection of researcher assumptions onto the lived experiences of the young players (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). As highlighted by Shipway and Henderson (2024), this is particularly important when working with youth athletes, where safeguarding, voice and authenticity are paramount.

In the leisure context, Henderson and Shipway (2024) highlighted that metaphors in LSP do not need to be abstract or opaque to be valid; simple or literal forms can function as powerful symbolic representations when they effectively bridge participants' tacit understanding and explicit articulation (Wengel et al., 2021). In this study, metaphor

operated through the combination of model construction and participant-led explanation, and not through researcher-imposed symbolic decoding. Like the approach adopted by McCusker (2014), the study intentionally privileged participant narration over researcher interpretation.

Models were not analysed independently of participants' accounts, nor were they treated as artefacts requiring symbolic translation by the research team. This approach aligns with more recent participatory and constructivist qualitative traditions (Shipway & Henderson, 2026), where the analytic unit is the meaning-making process articulated by the young participants, rather than the visual form of the model itself. The approach represents a deliberate, theoretically grounded, and contextually appropriate application of LSP principles (Wengel et al., 2016).

3.3. Research sample and data collection

Data collection took place on two occasions in April 2024 at the training ground of an English Premier League (EPL) club, prior to their bi-weekly training session. Football academy age groups fall within three phases; foundation (U5-U11), youth development (U12-U16) and professional development (U17-U21). This study assessed the youth development phase using the Under-12 age group cohort, aligning with national governing body framework for player development (Football Association, 2014). Workshop recruitment was led by the Premier League football academy manager and head of player safeguarding, and incorporated a total of 18 players, from a total squad of 20. Ethical approval was granted by the ethical committee of the lead University (Ethics Approval Number 54,881). The required consent and information documentation was signed by parents or guardians, and young footballers, including participant agreement forms, assent forms, and information sheets (Shipway & Henderson, 2024). Participation was entirely voluntary, and did not influence player selection or progression within the academy structure. It was also explained directly prior to the workshop that players could withdraw at any stage.

Each footballer received an identical LEGO® Windows Explorer kit (Figure 1) and created individual models from their own perspectives, promoting that diversity was not only included, but valued (Shipway & Henderson, 2024). The LEGO® Windows Explorer kit was deemed well suited for workshops with young people (Henderson et al., 2025). The Explorer kit is a deliberately constrained and widely used facilitation tool. It has been designed to promote metaphorical thinking, accessibility, and rapid engagement particularly in time-limited, applied contexts. In a 60-minute time constrained, club-controlled youth academy session, the small, standardised kit supported equity of participation, reduced cognitive overload, and avoided privileging technical Lego familiarity over meaning-making (Henderson et al., 2026). Furthermore, Rillo (2019) highlighted the importance of particular bricks in pre-made kits for metaphors, which was an observation further justified by Wengel (2020).

Both authors led the workshops, supported by the football academy manager and head of player safeguarding, who ensured that appropriate safeguarding protocols were adhered to (Henderson et al., 2025). The workshops were facilitated by one certified LEGO® Serious Play® facilitator and an experienced qualitative researcher with over 20-years of experience in participatory research with youth populations. Both Facilitators



Figure 1. A LEGO® Window Explorer pack.

were independent from academy management and coaching staff and played no role in player evaluation.

Data collection at the football academy allowed for informal observations of LEGO® interactions in a familiar, natural environment. The LEGO® Serious Play® method progressed through repeated phases, guided by the session facilitator (Henderson & Shipway, 2026), who presented a challenge to the footballers known as 'build' questions. Blank cue cards were provided, and participants were asked to write a short statement or explanation of the model they had constructed. The 60-minute workshop was divided into four sections, aligned with the LEGO® Serious Play® approach, incorporating both Skills Build *(SkB)* and Session Builds *(SB)*

activities (see Henderson & Shipway, 2024 for further explanation). The footballers could reflect on their feelings, perspectives, and emotions towards the academy system and any underlying concerns and issues. Pseudonyms were given to protect their anonymity. McCusker (2014) proposes four basic guidelines for participants, which are (i) trust your hands; (ii) trust the process; (iii) everybody builds; and (iv) everybody takes part.

The key questions surrounding academy systems, transition process for young footballers, and career aspirations were embedded in the build questions. Participants were asked to complete two LEGO® session builds; (i) the 'Story Telling' Build and (ii) the 'Outcome Build', linked to the academy transition process and career development. Following the initial Skills Builds (SkB), the footballers progressed to more targeted and focused questions, in the main Session Build (SB) stage (Henderson & Shipway, 2026).

3.4. Analysis and interpretation of qualitative LEGO® data

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted following iterative coding of both the visual models and the accompanying narratives from the footballers. To ensure the models and written comments could be coupled, photographs were taken of both LEGO® models, and the cue card comments (Henderson & Shipway, 2024), and the cards were then collected for additional thematic analysis. The unit of analysis for the data was extracted by examining (i) the written comments and narratives on the blank cue cards and (ii) the models built by the young footballers. The photographed models were linked with the transcribed explanations. This supported the development of the coding stages for the analysis, which were initial coding, theme development, and refinement (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Wengel et al. (2021) acknowledge that LEGO® Serious Play® can produce similar critiques and limitations of a constructivist paradigm which include a lack of generalisability and replicability of data.

To ensure consistency and reflexive rigour, the data was reviewed amongst the research team and academy staff to agree the codes, themes and sub themes that had emerged from both the cue card comments and photographic images of the LEGO® models built (Shipway & Henderson, 2024). The use of cue cards, where the young footballers could further articulate thoughts, values, perceptions and meanings proved helpful for adding further detail on the meaning of the constructed models (Henderson & Shipway, 2026). Once confirmed that the data collected reflected the perspectives and views of the young footballers, reconciled codes, key themes and sub themes were established (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. An overview of preliminary results

The results highlight key themes surrounding how to better support young elite athletes throughout the academy registration, help manage their sport experiences, and their career retention and progression processes within a challenging football environment. From the outset, the importance of protecting the mental health and physical well-being

of children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport settings was a dominant overarching theme underpinning the findings. The initial scoping 'story telling' LEGO® Skills Build *(SkB)*, illustrated in both Figures 2 and 3, addressed challenges and barriers to the player registration and progression process within the academy system. These initial LEGO® Skills Build *(SkB)* models and cue card statements collectively portray a narrative of personal growth, perseverance, and the importance of family and support in better supporting young footballers to help achieve career goals.

Following the preliminary story telling skills builds *(SkB)*, the primary LEGO® session builds (*SB*) led to seven themes emerging from the data suggesting how to better support young players (see sections 4.2 - 4.8). As highlighted above, the main recurring issue linked to career transitions and trajectories were the importance of protecting the mental health and physical well-being of children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

4.2. Creating and supporting a positive environment for young athletes

The need to create a positive environment was frequently cited, with an emphasis on fostering fewer intimidating spaces and focusing on positive and supportive atmospheres conducive to career growth and learning. Jamie built a LEGO® model suggesting, *'to make a fresher environment, so it's not scary and I'm not so nervous during training and matches*'. This aligns with Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety and the work of Vella et al. (2024) exposing the importance of creating an environment where individuals feel safe to take risks and express themselves without fear of negative consequences. Brown and Potrac (2009) highlighted that potential mishandling of this process can lead to adverse psychological and emotional effects. Timothy reinforced the importance of a positive environment and supportive social world by stating *'it's good when we have a good team spirit, and we are all friends, and feel together as a team, both for training and during our matches'*. This observation

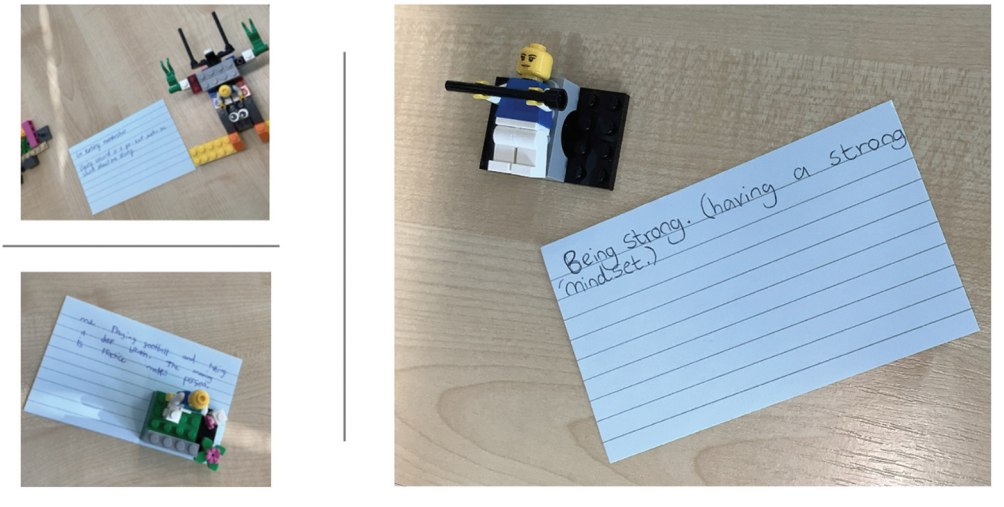


Figure 2. Samples of story telling skills build (SkB) to better support young footballers.



Figure 3. Samples of story telling skills build (SkB) to better support young footballers.

reflects the 'norming' stage of Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development, where establishing trust and camaraderie strengthens team cohesion and social world bonding.

Several players displayed optimistic attitudes and determined mindsets towards their sport careers, emphasising the importance of resilience and positivity even in the face of challenges. This resonates with Dweck's (2016) growth mindset theory, which suggests that viewing challenges as opportunities for development, enables perseverance and long-term success. It also aligns with the notable perseverance and effort framed in the social world and ethos of the football academy system (Stebbins, 1992). Furthermore, it establishes that the positive outlook of the players reinforces Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, which proposes positive emotions can expand cognitive and social resources, enabling individuals to cope more effectively with career demands, both on and off the field of play, within often highly pressurised sport settings.

4.3. Feedback to facilitate player improvement

The centrality of feedback and improvement was the second theme, with players indicating a desire for constructive criticism to enhance their performance and career progress. Daniel stated, *'I want to know what my performance is like, both on and off the pitch, and for the club to go into more detail on how we are all doing'*. Similarly, Stuart called for '*more warnings when I'm going wrong during training and in matches, with more honest*

feedback and ideas on how to progress, and where I should be'. This corresponds with Kolb's experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984), emphasising the importance of reflective feedback in the learning process which helps individuals assess their experiences and develop actionable insights. Additionally, the theory of feedback intervention (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) highlights how effective feedback should focus on task learning and improvement rather than just performance outcomes, enabling the players to refine their football skills and career development strategies. The players' consistent requests for detailed and honest feedback connects to Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT), as constructive feedback fulfils their need for competence and supports their intrinsic motivation to excel at football within the confines of their social world.

Similarly to some characteristics of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 1982), clear evidence of perseverance and hard work were evident which were emphasised through metaphorical imagery within the LEGO® builds which depicted climbing mountains, practicing football-based skills or navigating staircases to represent their individual personal career journeys and challenges. Thomas highlighted the way in which the players personal narrated meanings was visible through metaphorical imagery when he built a mountain and commented '*you have to just keep climbing, even when it gets harder and other players are dropping off*'. Similarly, Kai's model of a staircase (see Figure 5) demonstrated participant-led meaning-making and the way in which metaphors reveal how young footballers were able to understand issues linked to uncertainty, risk, support, belonging, and progression within the academy environment. Such imagery aligns with the perspectives advocated within career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), which posits that individuals use metaphorical narratives to make sense of career pathways, overcoming obstacles, and celebrating progress.

4.4. Honesty and transparency in academy football settings

Closely aligned to feedback were consistent requests from the young footballers for honesty and transparency. The emphatic calls were for academy staff to be more open and truthful about strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Two players, Aaron, and Xavier, were succinct with their cue cards comments, requesting '*honesty*' and for the coaches '*to be more honest'* respectively. Aaron used the LEGO® bricks to make the word '*honesty*' in his build (Figure 4).

Freddie reinforced this perspective when asking for the professional club to '*be fair with us if we do something, and if you need to work on something, tell us to'*, and Jake also requested the academy staff to '*be honest and be truthful, and tell us what we're doing wrong in important matches and training and how we can solve it'*. This correlates with perspectives advocated in self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasises the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Honest feedback enables competence by helping young athletes understand their performance and identifying areas for improvement. Similarly, transformational leadership approaches (Lawrason et al., 2019) highlight the importance of open communication and individualised attention in building trust between coaches and players within the academy system.

Creating a culture of transparency also enhances psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). When exploring feedback intervention approaches, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) emphasise the importance of honest, behaviour-specific feedback in improving

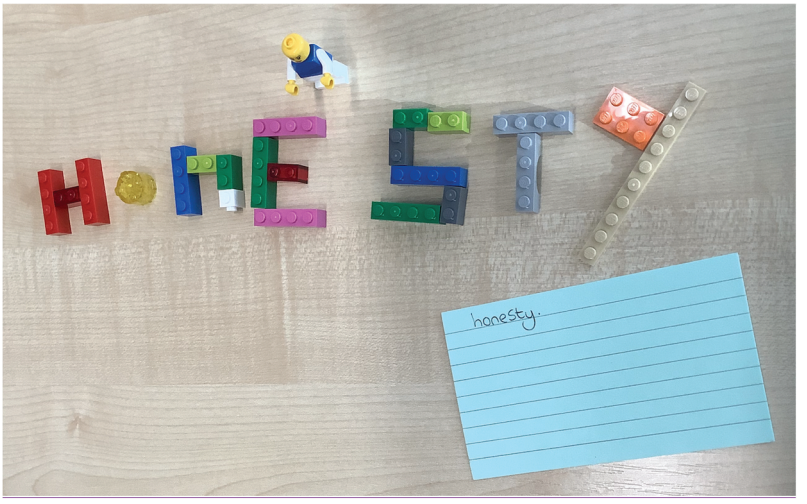


Figure 4. Example of a LEGO® Session Build (SB).

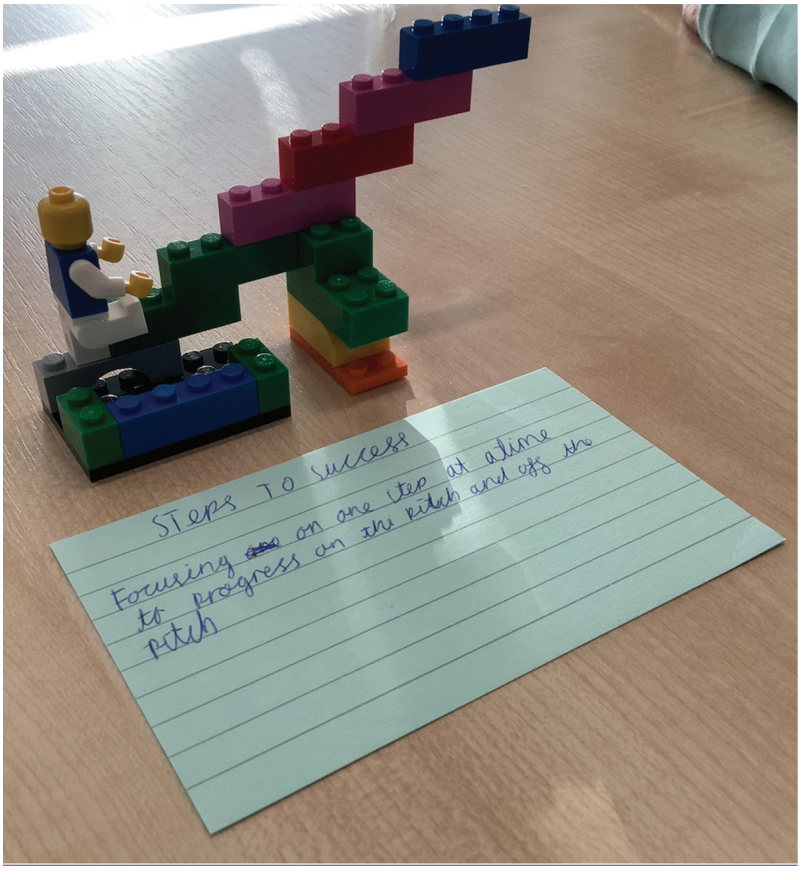


Figure 5. An example of a Session Build (SB).

performance and motivation. Cross and Lyle (1999) stress that coaches have an ethical responsibility to create an environment of trust and openness, which aligns with the young footballers' requests for fairness and integrity. They also advocated athlete-centred coaching, where involving players in their development builds ownership and engagement.

4.5. Personal happiness and satisfaction for young elite performers in stressful high-performance sport

A fourth emerging theme was the importance of personal happiness and satisfaction for young athletes. The apparent expressions of happiness and contentment suggested a focus for players on their career pathway was personal well-being and fulfilment. Paul built a LEGO® model in the shape of a smiley face with a supporting cue card comment saying, '*I am happy when things go well in training and during the game*'. Kai indicated that it would be helpful if coaches and staff had '*regular check in events to see that I'm doing ok with stuff*'. The players were looking towards final career goals and feeling happiness when things went well, indicating a focus on the centrality of setting and achieving career goals.

For young athletes, their happiness may reflect the satisfaction they gain from pursuing their sporting career goals with a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The player calls for 'regular check-ins' align with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), by supporting requests for autonomy and relatedness. This correlates with the positive psychology views of Seligman (2002) and the PERMA model, with its focus upon the five core components of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. For young athletes, balancing personal needs with the academy's expectations is crucial for long-term satisfaction. Their focus on happiness suggests they seek this, aligning with the findings of Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) on pursuing happiness.

4.6. Goal setting and progression

Goal setting and progression was crucial for many young players. There were numerous references to *'steps to success'* (Henry) (see Figure 5), '*progression on the pitch*' (Matty), and reaching milestones they referred to as *'green'* (from both Thomas and Kai). These views reflect Locke and Latham's (1990) goal setting theoretical perspective, which emphasise the importance of setting specific, challenging, and measurable goals to improve performance. The players' focus on progression aligns with the notion that specific and measurable goals lead to greater motivation and sustained effort, particularly when goals are deconstructed into smaller and more manageable milestones.

The LEGO® builds and discussions signified a focus on goal setting and making incremental progress towards success. Aaron made one long piece of LEGO® with his bricks to symbolise his gradual career progression over the two-year period with the club. This representation echoes Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which highlighted the role of self-efficacy in goal achievement. Aaron's long LEGO® model also indicates a commitment to a long-term sport career goal, built incrementally over time, and a process that strengthens his belief in his ability to succeed on his sport journey. In contrast, Paul built three smaller models from his bricks and argued *'I find it easier when*

things are broken down into smaller, and more manageable chunks, so I can see my progress and my development'. This approach can be understood considering Gollwitzer's (1999) implementation intentions theoretical perspective, which prioritises the importance of creating specific plans, such as 'if-then' strategies, to help achieve goals. Paul's preference for breaking down larger goals into smaller, actionable tasks reflects this strategic approach, enabling him to track his own progress and build momentum.

The players revealed the need for player adaptability in problem-solving particularly in overcoming obstacles or finding alternative solutions within their career journey. These two outlooks link to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) approach, which suggests that players will flourish when they are supported in tasks which are just beyond their current abilities, but remain achievable, with guidance. The emphasis on mentorship and skill development in our study recommendations is an application of Vygotsky's concept, where young players can move through their ZPD process, with the right support and resources.

4.7. Player support and encouragement

The professional club used a traffic light system of red, amber, and green for assessing player development. This system, focusing on progression and achievement, could be observed through the lens of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The use of green LEGO® bricks was prevalent, and Xavier frequently mentioned his commitment to '*reaching green by the end of the season with the right support and encouragement'*. This correlates with SDT's concept of competence, where receiving the right encouragement leads to players feeling both capable and motivated to reach career goals. This aligns to the centrality of support and encouragement, with several LEGO® builds and discussions mentioning support, encouragement, and fair treatment towards the players. This highlighted the importance of positive reinforcement and provision of a supportive network in helping young players achieve career goals.

The concept of player support reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) perspectives on ZPD, where players' development is supported by a more knowledgeable other. For example, this might be a family member, football coach or academy member of staff. Here, the scaffolding from both coaches and peers plays a critical role in bridging the gap between the young athletes' current abilities and their potential career development.

The presence of family and parental figures identified the significant parental role in career guidance and mentorship. Wider references to family interactions and bonding highlighted the importance of family relationships and support systems in achieving career goals. Ben explained '*my Mum drives me to training three times each week. It's about one hour each way. She also takes me to every match. Thanks Mum . . ..I owe you!'*. This statement aligns with SDT's relatedness component, as the emotional and physical support provided by Ben's mother fosters a sense of connection and belonging, which is essential for motivation. Similarly, Jamie placed emphasis upon explaining that '*Dad and Mum help me with my homework when we get back from training and games'*. This support moves beyond sport participation and playing in high profile sport, reinforcing the broader role of parents in nurturing the holistic career development of young athletes (See Figure 6). Whilst beyond the scope of this study, there is a clear role for parents, coaches and administrators to provide support and guidance on the multitude of

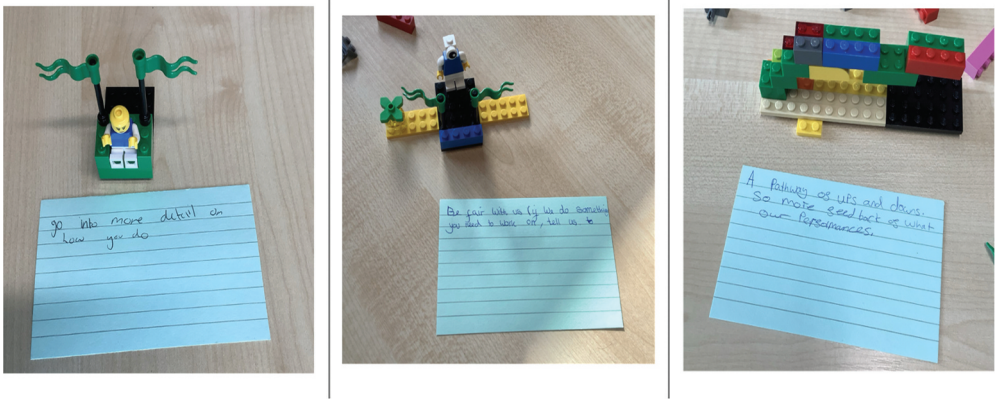


Figure 6. Samples of Session Builds (SB) to better support young footballers.

alternative career pathways available for children and young people (CYP) beyond the confines of elite, high-performance, professional sport.

4.8. Professional development in high-performance sport

The seventh theme emerging from the data was the importance of professional development in high-performance sport environments, even at such a young age. Henry previously mentioned the concept of 'steps to success', as illustrated in Figure 5, whilst Theo mentioned the need for '*taking the steps to make it to pro*'. Several players mentioned their own aspirations for personal advancement, with a focus upon career growth and success. Henry requested opportunities to meet current professional players from the club, noting *'I'd like to hear from some of the first team players about how they coped with things when they were our age'*. Insightfully, Connor stated *'Personally, I'll make it to the pro ranks, but it would be good to hear about our other options, outside of football, as not all of us will make the first team'*.

The concept of 'steps to success' can be understood through social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), which emphasises how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals shape career development. Henry and Theo's reflections illustrate their belief in their ability to succeed and their need for clear(er) goals, which can be facilitated by structured career development opportunities, such semi-formal meetings with current professional players and other sporting role models (See Figure 7). This aligns with notions of fostering self-efficacy and outcome expectations to help athletes visualise their career progression.

4.9. Protecting player mental health and physical well-being

The main recurring thematic issues linked to career transitions and trajectories were the central importance of protecting the mental health and physical well-being of children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport settings. This primary issue can be connected to component elements of both the Dual Continuum Model (Tudor, 1996)

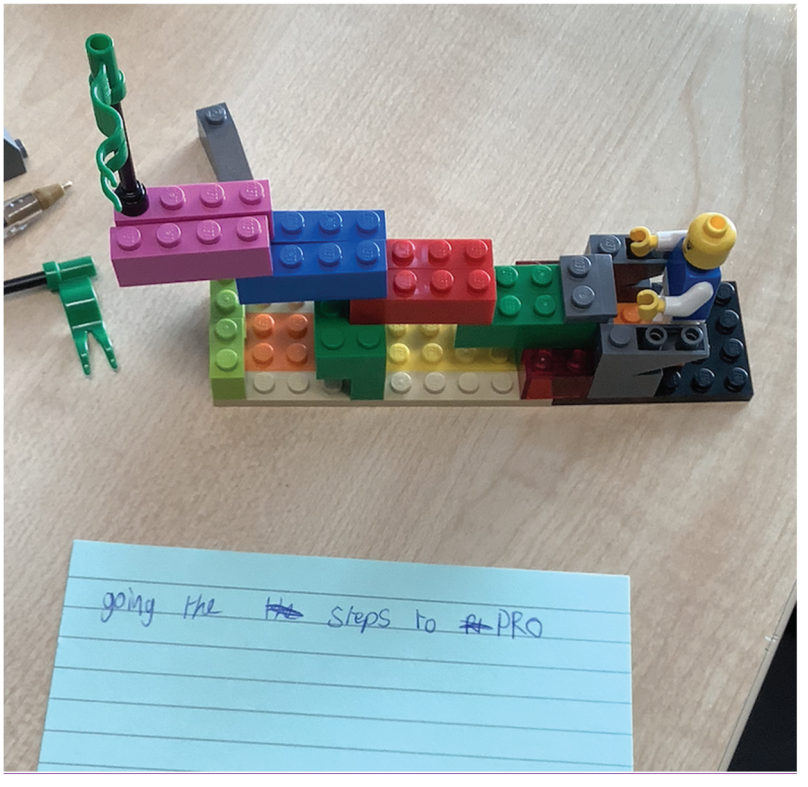


Figure 7. Session Build (SB).

and the Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977). The Dual Continuum Model posits that mental health exists on a spectrum, where well-being and illness are distinct yet related constructs, and each can influence the other, in the context of youth athletes (Keyes, 2006).

In high-performance sport settings, where the pressure to excel can be overwhelming, maintaining psychological well-being is crucial to avoid negative effects of stress, anxiety, and burnout (Gould et al., 2002). Similarly, the Biopsychosocial Model, which emphasises the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, and social factors, reinforces the importance of addressing not only the physical health of children and young people (CYP), but also mental and social development within high-profile, high-performance and pressurised sport and leisure settings (Engel, 1977). Both models advocate holistic approaches in sport, recognising that mental health, physical health, and social environments should be considered together by football academies, to ensure the well-being of their young athletes.

Given the centrality of managing player mental health and physical well-being, the LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) themes that emerged from the data were mapped against the English Football Association (FA) Four Corner Model, which provides the framework for the national player development performance pathway (Football Association, 2014). The model is a multidisciplinary framework to enhance player identification and

development (Diouf et al., 2024). We propose that it is a useful framework to help benchmark and guide the career journey of young athletes.

The LEGO® Serious Play® themes reinforce the primary advantage of the Four Corner model, which is its depiction of various factors rather than focusing solely on individual determinants (Ryom et al., 2020). The Four Corner model is suitable for understanding career transitions and trajectories facing children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport. As such, we have adapted elements of the model, in Figure 8, to integrate with our main themes, to create the *'Career Transition for Children and Young People (CYP) in High Performance Sport Matrix'*. The matrix highlights the importance of providing holistic technical, physical, psychological and social career support for children and young people (CYP) as they commence their career journeys within high-performance sport.

Prior to the high probability of a career in high-performance sport for young people ending abruptly, there is a pressing need for implementing enhanced support mechanisms, like the proposed *Career Transition for Children and Young People in High*

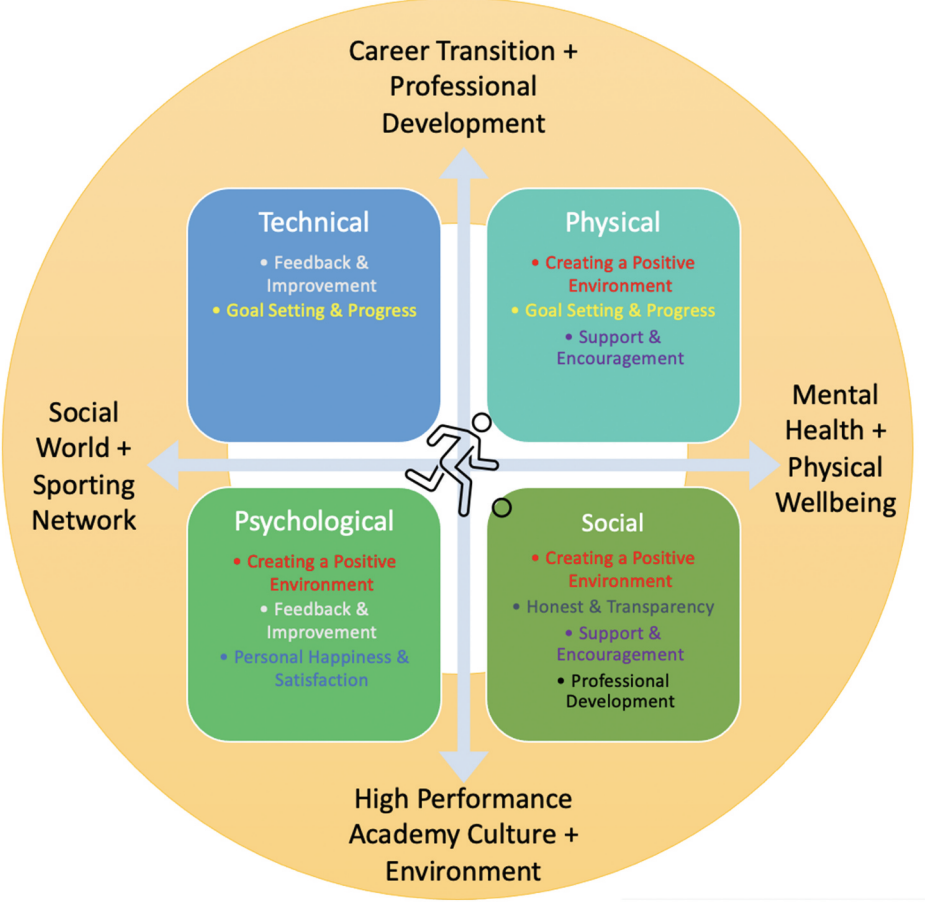


Figure 8. Career transition for CYP in high-performance sport matrix (adapted from Diouf et al., 2024; FA, 2014).

Performance Sport Matrix. This would help protect those children and young people who have spent multiple years migrating through the academy system and whose personalities and identities are often primarily linked to being an elite young sportsperson (Mitchell et al., 2020). As such, football academies should better protect these children and young people whose everyday living and social identity (Shipway & Jones, 2008) is embedded within a sport social world. This is a prerequisite to enable them to feel 'worth for being themselves' and help safeguard their mental health and well-being (Reverberi et al., 2020), should their upward sporting career trajectory be curtailed, delayed, or even terminated.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes new knowledge by using the creative methodology of LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) to better understand and support children and young people (CYP) as they navigate the complex and often stressful social worlds of high-performance sport settings. The findings add value to leisure studies by highlighting the multifaceted benefits of LEGO® Serious Play®, including its ability to enable deep learning, enhance engagement amongst children and young people (CYP), and to facilitate a hands-on, minds-on, learning environment that encourages active participation and critical thinking (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). The scaffolding structure provided by LEGO® Serious Play® allows flow, sharing, and reflection (Shipway & Henderson, 2024).

The findings highlight the benefits and future potential for using LEGO® in sport and indicates that a creative approach like LSP can potentially be replicated within a diverse range of leisure environments to address complex 'real world' issues and challenges facing the broader leisure sector. The study addresses previous calls for the inclusion of new alternative experiential approaches that contrast with more mainstream, traditional research methods used in leisure studies (Jones, 2022).

The first study limitation is the focus on the Under 12 cohort of an English Premier League (EPL) professional club. There is scope for future exploration linked to the full spectrum of age ranges of players and across a wider selection of sport settings. A second limitation is the focus upon male footballers. Given the increased expansion and profile of women's football (Culvin, 2023), we advocate future studies that employ closer scrutiny of women's football environments to better understand how they navigate, and progress through various stages of their football careers. The third limitation is the focus on sport environments, rather than using LEGO® Serious Play® within the broader spectrum of leisure settings.

The Under 12 players from the professional English Premier League (EPL) club were integral partners in this co-created process. The study also contributes new knowledge by highlighting the power of LEGO® and other creative, play-based approaches, to both complement and contrast with the more traditional, conventional learning approaches used amongst children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport settings and to help unlock their true feelings, values, thoughts and perspectives (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). Some professional football clubs do not always look beyond their own immediate environment to gain insights or to fully scope areas for future career development.

This study highlights the importance of bottom-up approaches within high-performance sport settings, which are co-created with the young players rather than the academy staff, to help explore issues surrounding career progression. This is important, as early interventions can help reduce the probability of these issues developing into more substantial and broader mental health and physical well-being challenges and issues for the academies of both English Football League (EFL) and English Premier League (EPL) clubs. The findings also position the football academy structure as a lived leisure space.

The findings partially address the relative paucity of studies linked to creative methods and approaches amongst children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport, and within leisure studies more generally. There is added value in enabling children and young people to express their often complex, affective sport and leisure experiences through metaphor and model-building. The study provides a potential avenue for sport clubs, federations, teams and sport businesses to (i) further adapt, respond and utilise this learning process as an effective pedagogy, and (ii) act as a platform for future studies of children and young people (CYP) in high-performance sport environments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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