

An Analysis of Organizational Structure and Transition Outcomes in the Youth-to-Senior  
Professional Soccer Transition

### **Abstract**

The study critiqued whether the demands, resources, and barriers associated with the youth-to-senior sport transition in Stambulova's (2003) model help explain transition outcomes. Following initial screening, two professional football clubs were purposively selected for detailed case study analysis. Data collected included meeting minutes, websites, interviews ( $N = 17$ ) with players, coaches, support staff, and parents, and email communications. The club with the proactive program aligned with Stambulova's (2003) model had better transition outcomes (e.g., player financial value, retention rates) and spent less on player assistance compared to the club with no transition program. Future research and practical implications are discussed.

**Key words:** within-career transition; player development; career development

## An Analysis of Organizational Structure and Transition Outcomes in the Youth-to-Senior Professional Soccer Transition

Research reveals the youth-to-senior move challenges athletes. The youth-to-senior transition occurs when athletes move from age-grade competition to playing in open events where participation is unrestricted by age. During this transition, athletes move into the highest level of competitive sport (Wylleman, Lavalée, & Alferman, 1999). Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, and Wylleman (2004) found that following transition 17% of junior national champions became senior athletes, 31% reported stagnation in their development and became recreational athletes, 28% performed irregularly and inconsistently, and 24% dropped out. Additionally, Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, and Côté (2009) suggested that athletes frequently describe the youth-to-senior transition as the most difficult change they experience in their sport career.

To provide an overview of the transitional experiences, Stambulova (2003) proposed a youth-to-senior transition model that described transition as a process which has a number of demands, barriers, coping resources, outcomes, and long term consequences. Consistent with other stage-based models of development (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999), Stambulova (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2003) described transition as a process rather than a single event, throughout which athletes negotiate various internal and external demands. Athletes' success in coping with specific demands results from a dynamic balance between transition barriers and their available resources and supports. An adaptive transition occurs when athletes' coping mechanisms match transition demands. The model recognizes the value of psychological and other interventions in helping athletes develop, access, and use the skills and resources needed for transition.

In terms of its specific propositions, Stambulova's (2003) model identifies that transitions come with a set of specific demands or challenges, such as higher physical fitness

in elite sport, which need to be overcome to transition successfully. To cope with these demands, internal and external resources can be used. Internal factors, such as knowledge, skills, personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness), and motivation, and external factors, such as social and financial support, can assist the coping process (Stambulova, 2003). These ideas are supported by research (e.g., Murphy, 1995; Pearson and Petitpas, 1990; Taylor and Lavalley, 2010) suggesting the quality of adaptation to retirement is dependent largely on the internal and external resources available to athletes to help them overcome the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural problems which may arise.

Furthermore, the model categorized barriers interfering with coping processes as either internal or external. Internal factors, such as a lack of knowledge or skills, lack of preparation for transition, interpersonal conflicts, and external factors, such as an absence of good training conditions, a lack of financial and social support, and difficulties in combining sport and other commitments can have adverse effects on transition. Researchers (e.g., Coakley, 1983; Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) suggest that preparation for transition, which may, for example, increase athletes knowledge and skills, can help to improve the quality of adaptation because it can remove barriers to successful transition (e.g., a lack of knowledge or skill, and a lack of preparation).

Fundamentally, Stambulova (2003) suggests that coping with transition requires the creation of a dynamic balance between athletes' resources and barriers, to counteract the demands of change they experience. For example, when athletes have a plethora of resources such as transition knowledge, skills, personality traits, motivation, they are more likely to overcome barriers and move up to senior sport more successfully. Successful transition is associated with effective coping, when the athlete is able to recruit or rapidly develop all the necessary resources to overcome transition barriers and cope with its demands. Stambulova

(2003) suggested that when athletes are not able to deal with the demands of transition they experience crises, and may require assistance, which can include psychological interventions aimed at changing coping strategies. Changes in coping strategies could positively influence the long-term consequences of transitions (Stambulova, 2009). If interventions are unsuccessful or athletes do not receive any psychological help, there will likely be negative outcomes (e.g., a decline in level of sport performance, premature drop out, injury, overtraining, neuroses, psychosomatic illnesses, and alcohol or drug abuse).

Although differences exist between Russian and British talent development systems (e.g., Russia has professional coaches at all levels of sport, whereas in Britain there is a mix of amateur and voluntary coaches), there are many similarities which mean Stambulova's (2003) model is applicable to British sport. For example, there are similarities between the types and timings of transitions that occur in athletes' youth careers, as outlined by Wylleman and Lavalley (2004; in a British context) and Stambulova (1994; in a Russian context). Wylleman and Lavalley (2004) highlighted that around the age of 13 athletes will transition into the development stage of their career, and around the age of 19 into the mastery stage of their career, a development pathway paralleled with that Stambulova (1994) outlined. Additionally, both countries have institutes (e.g., Russian Institute of Scientific Researches for Sport Reserve Training Technologies in Russia, and UK Sport, English Institute of Sport, SportScotland Institute of Sport in the United Kingdom) designed to support athletes' development and elite career, providing financial, technical, research, and tangible support.

The organization within which the youth-to-senior transition occurs is likely to influence athletes' ability to cope with the demands of the change. Sport psychologists have discussed possible influential organizational factors. Martindale et al. (2005), for example, identified five key generic themes from the literature associated with organizational structure and the coaching environment believed to be associated with effective talent development

and transition. First, they identified that there should be several long term aims and methods within an organization's youth development program. Organizations should have a vision, purpose, and identity that is systematically planned and implemented (Martindale et al., 2005). For example, there should be a consideration of how factors such as perceived competence (Sternberg, 2000), long-term adherence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and cognitive and motor skills development (Ericsson, 1998) can influence individuals' sport development and senior team performance. Long term plans should be based around improving youth athletes' skills and competencies in these areas, to ultimately improve their overall performance.

Second, within a talent development program there is a need to provide coherent support networks and messages to athletes (Martindale et al., 2005). Utilization of role models and the availability of various support mechanisms (e.g., support for technical and emotional issues) are believed to be crucial to the development of young athletes (Martindale et al., 2005). A study by Moore, Collins, and Burwitz (1998) highlighted that although the provision of support for elite athletes was helpful to their sport career and performances, it was almost non-existent for developing athletes which may hinder their progression.

Third, characteristics required to become an effective senior team athlete are considered (e.g., drive and motivation to be successful; Bloom, 1985; Abbott & Collins, 2002). Martindale et al. (2005) emphasized that organizations need to focus on highlighting appropriate development and not early success. To this end, they proposed that there should be a developmental focus on the characteristics required to become successful athletes such as fundamental mental skills (e.g., concentration, attitudes, emotions, motivations), life skills (e.g., the ability to plan, monitor, self-evaluate), and physical skills (e.g., physical fitness and strength).

Fourth, to help promote talent success, Martindale et al. (2005) also suggested that individualized and on-going development, where athletes receive individual goal setting and

review, can be implemented in organizations. Csikszentmihalyi, Whalen, Wong, and Rathunde (1993) suggested that such support can help with the individual development of talented athletes as they have specific targets to aim for, and individual improvements to make. This form of support also ensures that athletes receive regular formal and informal communication, which relates back to the earlier point about ensuring athletes have appropriate support mechanisms and messages (Martindale et al, 2005; Siedentop, 1978).

Fifth, Martindale et al. (2005) specified that each of the four elements outlined above will help to create an integrated, holistic, and systematic approach to developing young players into successful professional athletes. Equally, should the athlete not achieve success in sport, such programs will help to develop life skills which may be transferrable to other walks of life or professions (Martindale et al., 2005).

Although Stambulova (2003) and Martindale et al.'s (2005) work offers suggestions regarding the relevant features to include within development programs, it is unclear whether or not such literature is being utilized in the applied context, or whether existing programs integrate features recommended by these theories and research. Individual clubs may have their own interpretations of how to develop and transition athletes, which may or may not parallel Martindale et al.'s (2005) recommendations. It is known that the people responsible for talent development and transition, along with their reporting hierarchies, vary across clubs (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010). These variations in structure allows for different philosophies and "ways" of developing talent to be implemented. There may also be additional involvement from others, such as boards of directors, who may influence talent development. For example, the board of directors can decide whether or not to invest in facilities for the youth players (Slack, 1997).

Given apparent variation in the ways soccer clubs approach the youth-to-senior transition, critiquing existing programs may present in situ evidence to support factors

associated with successful transition into senior sport. Additionally, examining existing clubs may help assess the degree to which Stambulova's (2003) model can serve as a basis for helping coaches and clubs foster and transition successfully talented youth players.

Given the dearth of literature documenting existing transition programs in professional sport, case studies that provide rich and varied data may be a useful starting point to help researchers identify relevant issues. Case studies have been utilised within various disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, and education, and cases can be individuals, organizations, processes, or programmes (Yin, 2009). Within sport psychology research there have been numerous examples of the use of case studies to advance knowledge, including: McKenna and Thomas (2007) who focused on individual athletes' career termination and transition from sport; Carson and Polman (2008) who provided a case study of the rehabilitation experience of a professional rugby player following anterior cruciate ligament reconstructive surgery; and Day, Bond, and Smith (2013) who provided case studies of sports coaches and the difficulties they experienced having witnessed serious injuries in athletes. Case studies allow factors relevant to a phenomenon to be studied in real-life contexts (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). The use of multiple sources of evidence, such as documentation (e.g., reports and letters), archival records (e.g., computer files and records), interviews, observations, and physical artefacts (e.g., technological devices or tools) may be integrated to analyze particular contexts. Additionally, Patton (2002) argued that methodological triangulation provides a single, well-integrated picture of the whole situation. By using a case study methodology in the current study, we were able to assess the robustness of the knowledge gained from the various data sources, because different types of data have varying strengths and weaknesses which, when utilised together, can complement each other (Patton, 2002). By adopting a case study methodology and studying the outcomes of two differing youth-to-senior transition programmes, initial



identification of good practice and whether or not the factors Stambulova (2003) highlighted may be associated with the successful change, were gleaned.

In the current research, soccer was selected for in-depth scrutiny for three reasons: (a) its professional nature within the United Kingdom (where the sampling was based); (b) prominence of current debate within the sport given the recent publication of athlete development instructions (e.g., Football League Youth Development Rules; The Football League, 2012), providing explicit policies for the governance, structure, and operational processes expected within youth academies; and (c) a legitimate claim of public interest given that the sport's governing body (The Football Association, England) receives public funding. Further, existing work focused on transitional experiences rather than outcomes (e.g., Pummell, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2008) provides preliminary evidence that Stambulova's model has relevance in this context. If Stambulova's (2003) model has validity when explaining the youth-to-senior transition in football, then there would be dissimilar outcomes in clubs that treat players differently, with clubs that have a development programme paralleling Stambulova's (2003) model experiencing better development and retention rates. That is, if its recommendations and implications have merit, adopting and operationalizing Stambulova's (2003) model should result in more effective player transitions. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to utilize case studies to explore, compare, and contrast soccer clubs' youth-to-senior support programs, identifying factors associated with transition outcomes that could represent best practice. The specific aims were to: (a) explore the degree to which contrasting clubs addressed demands, resources, and barriers associated with the youth-to-senior transition; (b) identify any initial evidence that factors listed in Stambulova's (2003) model may be associated with transition outcomes to justify future experimental research; and (c) highlight any additional factors which may promote successful transition. In the current study, aligned with previous research (e.g.,

Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alferman, 1999), it is considered that the players have faced the youth-to-senior transition when they have experienced the move from age-grade competition to playing in events where participation is unrestricted by age and moved to the highest level of competitive sport. In the current context, players moved from the under 20 year old age group squad to the senior team, where they trained and competed with senior players daily. Occasionally, the players who have just moved up to senior sport may still play with the youth teams as preparation for eventually being consistently picked for the senior team in competitions. In these situations, however, they are considered members of the senior squad and not the youth teams.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants from within the clubs were purposefully sampled to provide a broad spectrum of views regarding organizational practices and a range of experiences (Patton, 2002). Both clubs participated in a professional national all-male soccer league. The sample consisted of 14 males and 3 females aged 18 to 62 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34$ ,  $SD = 12$ ), with 4 respondents being coaches in the youth teams (all male participants), 2 respondents being first team managers and coaches (both male participants), 2 respondents being players who have recently transitioned to the first team (both male participants), 4 respondents being players in the current youth set up, 2 sets of parents (2 male and 2 female participants), and 1 respondent being a sport physiologist (female participant). Organization A had 8 respondents; the other case had 9 respondents. Those sampled for interview at Organization A were as follows: 2 youth team coaches, 1 first team coach, 1 first team player, 1 youth team player, 1 set of youth team parents (1 father and 1 mother), and 1 sport physiologist. For Organization B the sample consisted of: 2 youth team coaches, 1 first team manager, 1 first team player, 3 youth team players, and 1 set of youth team parents (1 father and 1 mother).

### **The Selected Organizations**

**Organization A.** Organization A was a club whose first team played in the highest professional national division (Premier League), with 37 first team players and 118 youth team players. The youngest youth squad was for players aged 11 years and under with the oldest youth squad for players aged 20 years and under. Across the teams there were 28 coaches, 4 physiotherapists, 4 physiologists, and 3 sport psychologists.

**Organization B.** Organization B was also a club whose first team played in the highest professional national division (Premier League). The club had 34 first team players and 112 youth players. The youngest youth squad was for players aged 11 years and under, with the final youth squad had players aged 20 years and under. There were 24 coaches, 3 physiotherapists, and 2 physiologists across the club.

### **Phase I Procedure – Screening**

After ethical approval for the study was gained, initial contact with managers of professional clubs was made by letter, informing them of the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study. Following provision of consent for initial contact, we screened five clubs to assess their suitability for the study. The first author telephoned the managers and interviewed them about their programs to support athletes moving to senior sport, including brief assessments of: (a) the demands, resources, and barriers associated with transition; and (b) the support they may have in place to help athletes. This initial screening highlighted whether or not the clubs demonstrated an understanding of aspects covered in Stambulova's (2003) model. The clubs representing the extremes of this assessment were selected for further examination, because according to Patton (2002), this allowed for a stronger analysis of the factors highlighted in Stambulova's (2003) model. The differences in the two clubs selected are discussed in the results and discussion sections.

### **Phase II Procedure – Data Collection**

In the second phase we collected multiple sources of data from the two clubs selected, including face-to-face interviews and relevant documents. Documentation included clubs' official webpages, reports of youth coaches' committee meetings, and supporting players' documentation (e.g., player development brochures). The interview schedule was based upon previous literature (Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2003). Topics included (a) what individuals believed were their obligations when developing young players, (b) exploring the programs currently available at the club, and (c) the possible benefits of the program. To highlight the questions list in the interview schedules, the one that was used with the support staff at the club is included as an appendix. Interview schedules were re-worded to suit the different personnel involved in the study (e.g., coaches and parents). Where required, the first author returned to the individuals for clarification on their responses. In total, 15 interviews occurred with the 17 participants (13 interviews involved a single participant, two interviews involved 2 participants). In terms of objective transition outcomes, player retention and development rates were also gained from a variety of sources, including the teams involved in the study, other franchises not directly involved in the study (but in the same league), and the league's governing body. These data were collected to answer the second research question, assessing whether or not factors Stambulova (2003) highlighted were associated with transition outcomes.

### **Data Analysis and Research Credibility**

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The average interview was 48 minutes (range: 35-84) long. A total of 127 pages of documentation were collected, including 21 webpages, 92 pages of youth team committee meeting minutes, and 14 pages of youth player supporting documentation. Data were arranged into chronological order, before a deductive thematic content analysis was conducted based on Stambulova's (2003) model and previous youth-to-senior transition in sport literature (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink,

2008). Driven by Braun and Clarke (2006), deductive thematic content analysis helped to summarize key features, highlight parallels and differences, and identify unanticipated insights. Data in the results section were grouped according to Stambulova's (2003) model; headings included demands, resources, and barriers of transition

To help ensure trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis procedures, following Smith and Caddick (2012) we have included thick descriptions of the cases used in the study, provided quotations to support our interpretation of the data, carried out member checking of the data, and at a strategic level, described all of the steps taken throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study. Member checking took place with all participants, eight of who responded and agreed with our interpretations. The current study used methodological triangulation (Yin, 2009), or the collection of multiple sources of evidence, to allow corroboration of the findings.

## **Results**

In the results we describe each organization's transition program in relation to Stambulova's (2003) model (demands, resources, and barriers), before comparing the two organizations and presenting transition outcomes measures. Table 1 summarizes the organizations in respect to the components of Stambulova's model.

### **Organization A**

Organization A's youth policy included a number of the factors emphasized in Stambulova's (2003) model, with the data collected suggesting these factors were perceived to be crucial in determining whether or not athletes successfully transition to senior sport.

**Transition Demands.** Organization A was proactive in assessing the demands athletes may face during transition. During the youth program development, Organization A had meetings where attendees focused on assessing transition demands and what they could do to help athletes overcome them (see Table 1). An extract from the minutes read:

After consulting with the players, and through personal experience of the coaches and management team, a list of problems the players may face when moving up to the first team has been drawn up. These stresses can include, but are not limited to, physical demands including the need to be quicker, stronger and have greater cardiovascular endurance, psychological demands including greater motivation, determination and drive, and working with new players who they see as ‘better’, and the need to impress others including new teammates, coaches, friends, and parents (April 2008, p. 2).

Supporting the value of the list of demands, during an interview, one of the youth coaches suggested the list was crucial as it allowed the club to put appropriate resources in place to help their players:

When the new academy manager came in, we had a terrible youth set up; the amount of players we had getting through to the first team was extremely low. . . . We created a list of things that were important and could potentially hold some of the players back. This allowed us to support players better. . . . It’s our obligation to look after and support these players.

Finally, one of the coaches highlighted that an additional demand was the level and type of fan interaction a player has after they move to the first team: “if the player gets a hard time from the fans straight away, they become disillusioned and struggle, but conversely the opposite can happen too, good support from fans can help the player.” This quote highlights the potential role fans have when athletes move to senior sport; they can help to create a supportive environment for players new to the first team.

**Transition Resources.** Organization A was also proactive in helping athletes appreciate the resources that were available to them in transition (see Table 1). Organization A’s program brochure suggested the resources their players could use to help with their transition. Specifically, it suggested players could use their:

Personal determination, motivation, and drive to be successful in the first team. You need to work hard, and listen to the advice given. Rely on, and listen to, your coaches, sport science staff, parents, and senior players. Above all, enjoy the experience, it only happens once!

In addition, Organization A educated parents on how they might help their sons become a better athlete. During a series of “parents’ nights”, coaches and sport science support staff educated parents on the potential difficulties their sons faced. Parents were also supported and educated on ways they could provide emotional assistance in a soccer context. A male parent suggested this support was helpful, saying:

The support given by the club was crucial to us as parents, as it gave us a better understanding of what our boy was going through. He came back from training [grumpy] on a number of occasions, but we sort of understood what he was going through and we let him deal with it in his own way. The club had told us to just try and be there for him, so we did that best we could.

Further, parents were also educated on the difficulties they may face as their son moves to senior sport, such as feeling helpless when their son was struggling. A parent said:

We never really thought it would affect us . . . but as soon as it started to happen, him moving up and stuff it did. Seeing him go through a rough time, and in some situations not being able to do anything about it must be one of the worst nightmares of a parent, isn't it? So we were struggling and falling out too, me and [wife's name]. But having that bit of knowledge from the parents night, it helped us, because we knew what it was associated with. . . we knew when he became a bit more relaxed and stuff in the first team that it would all settle down and we would get our son back!

This education and support was also implemented to staff throughout the whole youth system, with two coaches saying that they had been educated by transition “experts” (two sport

psychologists with previous transition experience) who had discussed many factors which they did not even realize may influence performance. For example, one of the coaches suggested that they were unaware how much influence athletes' backgrounds (e.g., parental set up) may have on their abilities to transition. Athletes were positive about these educational programs, suggesting that they allowed them to talk to supporters about how they were experiencing the transition, along with any difficulties. A player said:

Knowing that my parents had been through the education, and had some kind of understanding of the transition, it just made me feel more comfortable knowing I could talk to them about it. It wasn't even the act of talking to them, it was knowing that they had that knowledge.

One player had spoken to his father about moving up to senior sport when he was struggling. He suggested that his father's knowledge of some of the demands had meant they were able to have a conversation about the difficulties he was experiencing which made him more relaxed and able to manage the barriers and demands:

I was really struggling at one point and I knew because my dad had some kind of knowledge of what was going on I could talk to him. I was still nervous in case he thought I was weak and couldn't manage it, but I went and spoke to him, and we both talked through our thoughts and feelings and stuff and it definitely helped me relax and know that if I had problems the next time, [I could] go back and speak to dad again.

Similarly, the players received educational support about what to expect in the first team. A player, who had recently moved up to the first team said:

We are given support from the psychology guy, and he gives us, like, a realistic picture of what to expect. He doesn't gloss it up, you know? He tells you it is gonna be hard work, but that we can use our parents, and coaches, and friends and stuff to help



us, and moan at them if we need someone to moan at. I think that education really helped me, it really presented a realistic picture of what I needed to do, but also gave me ways to help myself too.

In addition to education for athletes, parents, and coaches, Organization A used a staggered entry system to support their athletes. Up to six months prior to permanently moving up, players trained once or twice a week with the senior team. This gradual introduction was introduced as athletes had previously said they struggled to integrate with the senior players as they did not know them, and in some situations felt intimidated by them. A coach said:

We brought it in so that they were a bit more comfortable around the guys, and so that after summer they could hit the ground running, they knew the guys, and they weren't going to be overawed in their presence or what they say to them. We are trying to get all those anxieties out of the road before they move permanently up to the first team.

One player said this approach had really helped him to become more integrated in the squad and understand how hard he would need to work:

I didn't know any of the boys prior to moving up, and one day when I came in the gaffer [manager] said to me, "you're training with the first team today." I hadn't prepared for it, I knew nothing about what I was doing, but it was a great experience and it made me realize how hard I needed to work to get that good. It also made me more comfortable round those guys, just getting to know and chat to a couple of them, something I had never done before. I done it once or twice a week right up till I moved up, and there's no doubt I became more relaxed and confident in the environment.

This quote highlights the potential value of using a staggered entry system; highlighting factors players may appreciate are important when moving to senior sport as a result of such a system (e.g., hard work).

**Transition Barriers.** Similar to transition barriers and resources, Organization A was also proactive in appreciating there were a number of transition barriers (see Table 1). The interviews and player development brochures highlighted that a lack of preparation, both physically and mentally, and a lack of appropriate support could be barriers. A coach said:

We need to try and get the appropriate support in place, and that's everyone, coaches, sport science boys, parents, the player, their friends. We all need to work together to create that support, but if they don't have it, of course it becomes a barrier.

Additionally, one of the players suggested that he had initially not followed the club's advice to talk to others about how he was feeling and to train harder and longer:

The club gave me a training program, and I never followed it, and the club also told me to talk to people about how I was feeling. I done neither of those initially, and it became a bit of a drain on me, and it became an obstacle to me moving up to the first team.

This quote, in addition to highlighting the difficulties the athlete felt he was experiencing by not following the program, also highlighted another strength in the club's approach to transition: providing support and encouragement throughout the process.

Overall, Organization A demonstrated awareness of the demands, resources, and barriers Stambulova (2003) associated with transition and explicit actions related to these. For example, Organization A appeared to take a proactive approach to supporting their athletes through the transition (e.g., providing parental education programs).

### **Organization B**

There were limited data suggesting Organization B's transition program recognized and responded to the elements presented in Stambulova's (2003) model to the same extent as Organization A.

**Transition Demands.** In contrast to Organization A, there was limited evidence in the club's committee meeting minutes to suggest Organization B's demonstrated an understanding of transition demands; an observation supported by the interviews (see Table 1). A senior team coach explained:

It's not something we have tended to pay much attention to. The academy manager suggests that the players we want are the ones who are able to deal with whatever is thrown at them, rather than us helping them through it ... He says that they are not going to get help all the way through their career, so they need to learn how to deal with that now.

Similarly, one of the players who moved up to the senior squad suggested that they were completely unaware of the demands they were likely to face when moving up, saying, "no one really spoke to us about the demands or whatever, it was more a case of deal with it."

Additionally, the parents interviewed suggested that they were unsure of what their son was going through when moving up to the first team and had no concept of how they could help:

We have heard nothing from the club, it's all seems a bit unclear and they don't always seem to know what they are doing. I think there are obvious things that could be demands, like the pace and fitness of the guys in the first team, but I am only guessing, surely the boys should be told?

Awareness that the youth players needed to establish themselves in the first team was shown, however. Prior to moving up to the first team permanently after the summer break, players were given opportunities to train with the first team squad once or twice a week, two or three months before their summer holidays. This exposure was designed to "allow the players to settle in better and establish themselves a bit more before they move up," according to one academy coach. He also explained that the exposure allowed the club to assess earlier if players could handle the expectations and demands. He also said discovering which youth

athletes were unable to manage the transition could save the club money, because the club would not offer them contracts. Athletes suggested that this introduction helped them assess their ability and fitness levels. A player said, “it made me realize that if I did move to the first team, I wasn’t going to be like a fish out of water and struggle to handle it.” This quote again highlights the potential value of a staggered entry system, similar to that used by Organization A.

**Transition Resources.** In contrast to Organization A and the use of multiple sport scientists to support all age groups, Organization B had two sport scientists to work with every club squad, including the youth teams (see Table 1). An academy coach suggested that this situation resulted in the academy players being left behind because: “they aren’t the priority, the first team are.” Similarly, one of the youth team players interviewed suggested that this lack of sport science support felt like an oversight on the part of the club:

It suggests the club don’t understand how important being physically fit at that age can be to their players. If they had fitter and better prepared players, perhaps they would cope better in the senior team, the boys all seem to get swamped physically when they move up, which isn’t fair on anyone.

Additionally, Organization B did not appear to use other social support sources, such as parents, to help athletes. One parent suggested he had no concept of how to support his son through transition, saying, “we [the parents] don’t get any help to support our son, we don’t know how to do it or what to say when he comes back feeling down after a hard session, so I don’t think we do support him properly.” They also added that they had never felt they could be a resource, because of this lack of club support. This dialogue highlighted that the parents wanted to support their son, but because they did not receive advice or support from the club, they could not do this appropriately. This is in contrast to Organization A that helped parents support their sons through the transition to senior sport.

**Transition Barriers.** In contrast to Organization A, Organization B did not show an understanding that a lack of appropriate resources may hinder transition (see Table 1). As discussed previously, there was a lack of social support given to the players moving from youth-to-senior sport. When this support is given to the players, it could be classed as a resource. In contrast, when this social support is not given to players, it may be understood as a barrier to successful transition. A youth team coach suggested that any support was largely provided by the coaches:

We don't really use much in terms of supporting the players apart from us coaches.

We can do most of the work required, like the fitness training and the like. With the amount of money and stuff that we have to work with, it's a case of us doing a lot of the work and it works well.

His view contrasts with another youth team coach, who said, "we, as coaches, need to realize our limits and bring in people like fitness coaches, and psychologists, people who can help these guys better than we can. Most of the other guys here don't understand that."

Additionally, one coach suggested that a lack of technical knowledge may hinder athletes moving to senior sport, saying, "without the knowledge of their position, they will have a difficult time."

### **Comparisons between Organizations A and B**

As presented above, there were differences between Organizations A and B in terms of the way they approached the youth-to-senior transition. Table 2 highlights differences in transition outcomes, using measures such as player retention and dropout rate, which may illustrate the effectiveness of the two programs. Table 2 suggests that these clubs have different outcomes when talent development rates are compared. Organization A engenders more successful transitional outcomes, as evidenced by a greater percentage of players transitioning to 1<sup>st</sup> team soccer, remaining in the sport, more first team appearances by

transitioned youth players, and greater value obtained on sale of their former youth players. This is despite the club spending less money on their youth development set-up.

### **Discussion**

The present study explored the youth-to-senior transition programs at two soccer clubs to: (a) assess the degree to which they addressed demands, resources, and barriers highlighted by Stambulova's (2003) model; (b) highlight any additional relevant factors; and (c) compare their transition outcomes. Many factors in Stambulova's (2003) model were being understood and utilized differently between the organizations, such as the support offered to parents. Additionally, some novel factors which may be associated with the youth-to-senior transition were identified, including athletes suggesting that when parents had knowledge of the transition process they felt more comfortable about the move to senior sport. The two clubs clearly differed in the patterns of objective transition outcomes. Organization A, which demonstrated an understanding of factors highlighted in Stambulova's (2003) model, had better transition outcome statistics in comparison to both Organization B, which did not appear to recognize factors to the same extent, and the league averages (where available).

The current study extended previous literature on the youth-to-senior transition (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008), by examining "live" transition programs implemented at two professional soccer clubs. In examining Organizations A and B, some suggestions of best practice emerged that may support previous literature and offer guidance to practitioners, coaches, teams, and clubs. Organization A, for example, took a proactive approach to discovering what factors influenced the youth-to-senior transition, creating a list of variables believed to contribute to the move. Many of the factors on this list paralleled previous studies and Stambulova's (2003) model (e.g., physical demands). Previous literature has discussed sporting organization's obligations to support athletes' career transitions, particularly around

retirement (e.g., Fleuriel & Vincent, 2009), but the current study is among the first to investigate how these responsibilities may be enacted at the youth-to-senior level and the possible consequences. Organization B did not believe they have an obligation, a viewpoint in contrast to much of the literature in the area (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008). The current study suggests a proactive approach to supporting transitions may yield positive consequences.

The current study adds to previous literature regarding coaches' role in the youth-to-senior transition. Previous work and theory, for example, has suggested that coaches can provide support, which the current study echoed. The current study also poses questions regarding the limits to which coaches can provide support, or when they provide assistance beyond their expertise. For example, some coaches in Organization B suggested they could offer much of the support provided to athletes (e.g., sport science support), although this was not echoed by all coaches interviewed. This view was in contrast to Organization A, who employed a number of specialist sport science supporters. Perhaps by providing this specialist support, Organization A is providing better assistance to the athletes moving to senior sport. The players may be receiving a more complete/comprehensive package of specialist knowledge and experience which one individual may not have. An experienced sport physiologist, for instance, may have a greater understanding of how to help players with their physical development when compared to a coach who may only have limited training in this field. Coaches may be constrained by financial restrictions within the Organization, which may mean, for example, that they are unable to employ sport science staff to support their athletes. If restrictions are being placed on coaches, ensuring they themselves have a greater education (on aspects such as sport physiology and sport psychology) may help them support the athletes transitioning from youth-to-senior sport.

As a third example, both organizations used a staggered introduction into the senior team as a way to help players, albeit for different reasons. Bruner et al. (2008) suggested that

previous exposure to senior sporting environments may have a positive effect on the transition experiences of youth athletes. The results of the current study parallel Bruner et al. (2008), suggesting that this type of entry into the first team helps athletes transition into senior sport. The athletes suggested that a staggered approach gave them the opportunity to assess their ability level against those they will be training with and integrate themselves into the squad. Of note, there was some indication that Organization B was using this staggered introduction as a further way of assessing player ability; such a message may undermine the utility of helping youth players feel comfortable in that environment.

In addition to supporting players, Organization A supported parents, educating them on the ways they could help their sons. The current study has helped to examine why educating parents may help athletes adapt to the transition. Athletes in the current study suggested that knowing their parents were informed about the youth-to-senior change helped them feel relaxed about the process and able to talk to their supporters. A similar finding emerged with coaches. In Organization A, where the coaches were taught about the youth-to-senior transition, athletes suggested that they felt more relaxed about the transition.

Additionally, Harwood, Drew, and Knight (2010) highlighted that the parents of players in youth soccer academies may also be exposed to stressors. Participants from Organization A reinforced this idea, and the current study demonstrates ways in which educating parents is beneficial to the mothers, fathers, and athletes. In contrast, the parents in Organization B appeared to suggest they would like to have more knowledge on the transition process. Further research is required to determine the effectiveness of such support strategies. These results, however, parallel the caring for the carer literature associated with the helping professions. Walshe, Payne, and Luker (2012), for example, suggested that when carers are not supported or educated appropriately in a medical context (i.e., educated so they had a knowledge of the medical condition they were helping manage, and how to help the person



with the illness), they may experience a lowering of their own health status and anxiety associated with how to support those they are helping. The results of the current study suggest that parents may be experiencing anxieties associated with their knowledge of the youth-to-senior transition (i.e., they wish to have more knowledge of the transition).

Finally, one coach in the current study highlighted that when players experience negative responses from the fans after moving up to the first team, they may struggle to become a successful athlete. Tauer, Guenther, and Rozek (2009) suggested that crowds at home were predominantly supportive of home team athletes. Although more research will add depth to the current findings on fans' influences on athletes moving into senior sport, and how to provide players the best support, perhaps playing them at home in their first match may help them adjust.

The design of the study does not allow us to suggest the variation in transition outcomes resulted from the two different transition programs. Ruling out alternative explanations for the differences in transition outcomes, however, will strengthen the case for the suggestion that the transition outcomes were influenced by transition programs, and justify further research. An alternative explanation for the differences in transition outcomes between Organization A and Organization B may be that Organization B has spent more money on their youth system. As illustrated in Table 2, Organization B spends more money on their youth set up despite having lower player development rates, and financial investment can be ruled out as an alternative explanation. Another reason may be that Organization A has better players. Although difficult to rule out completely, Organization B has had more players competing at youth international level over the past five years (seven players compared to five players from Organization A). This suggests that at youth level, Organization B may have better players than Organization A, but fewer players still make it to senior sport level. Caution over these figures is needed, however, because players capped

at international level are selected based upon the subjective opinion of a manager (or group of coaches) who may have a particular liking for a team or player, which can distort these results. A further alternative explanation of the differences between transition outcomes may be that the coaches within Organization A are better. Again, this explanation is difficult to rule out, but four coaches from Organization B had experience in first team and international level soccer, arguably one of the highest accolades as a coach in soccer. In contrast, Organization A had no coaches with any of this experience. These results may be because the coaches in Organization A had no motivation to coach in senior sport, and wanted to help support young athletes move to senior sport.

The study was conducted using a small number of participants from only two organizations, and the results are not generalizable to other clubs or youth-to-senior transition programs. The aim of the current study, however, was not to generate generalizable findings, rather to carry out an in-depth analysis of two clubs and their organizational views on the youth-to-senior transition, which may help others to reflect on, and develop, their own programs. This transfer of knowledge may allow clubs to reflect on areas which need improving, but equally may also highlight areas of good practice, such as introducing a staggered entry system into their first team squad. Similarly, although data was collected from a wide range of people from both organizations, this consisted of a small number of people from each group (e.g., only one set of parents at each club). It may be useful to examine more individuals from each club in future research.

Not only does the current study suggest that the factors raised in Stambulova's (2003) model may be able to describe and predict athletes' youth-to-senior transitional experiences, it also identifies avenues for future research. Longitudinal quantitative research, for example, which audits or manipulates provision of specific types and forms of support and measures transitional outcomes is warranted, because it will help evidence whether or not the model is

robust across a range of sports, teams, and levels, and which resources are most crucial in facilitating effective transitions.

Researchers may also focus on examining clubs in different cultures, religious backgrounds, and countries, to examine whether or not these differences may have an influence on the youth-to-senior transition programs in place. For example, some countries such as Spain and Holland invest greater finance in youth development than any other countries, as a percentage of their overall turnover each year (European Club Association, 2012). This financial investment may mean that they are able to provide greater support (e.g., sport science support, education programs) to youth athletes to help their development, which, in turn, may lead to a greater percentage of player retention. Such research may enhance the knowledge on the youth-to-senior transition in sport, and allow practitioners to support athletes from different backgrounds and cultures appropriately.

Finally, future research could be conducted within the frameworks of models other than Stambulova (2003), such as Schlossberg's (1981) and Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) approaches which have described potential outcomes to transition. Stress-based models may also add depth to the knowledge. For example, when considering overlaps between many of the models of transition and stress (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), there may be scope to develop a stronger understanding of the topic based upon a combination of these models should they all accurately predict transition factors and outcomes.

The current study built on previous literature by analyzing two operational youth-to-senior transition programs in professional soccer and the possible factors which may influence transition outcomes. Results highlight that despite a body of existing knowledge, individual clubs may not adhere to or utilize this literature. Nevertheless preliminary indications suggest that a proactive intervention program targeting demands, barriers, and resources associated with transition may be beneficial to youth athletes in terms of their

development and the club's success, both in terms of reputation and finance. Further understanding of the financial and reputational benefits may help persuade sporting teams to implement high quality youth-to-senior team transition programs.

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Table 1

*Comparison Between Organizations A and B Against Stambulova's (2003) Model*

<b>Model facet</b>	<b>Organization A</b>	<b>Organization B</b>
<b>Demands</b>	<p>Good understanding. Demonstrated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• club actively assessing and recognizing demands of transition in youth committee meetings</li> <li>• educating those involved in transition that parents, friends, and family may put pressure on players to be successful</li> </ul>	<p>Limited understanding. Demonstrated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• those interviewed did not highlight demands associated with transition and suggested players who cope effectively are the players they wish to keep for the senior team</li> <li>• players appearing unsure of demands of transition</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Good understanding. Demonstrated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• introduction of sport science support for all age group athletes</li> <li>• parents' nights to educate mums and dads on factors associated with transition and how they may help their child move to senior sport</li> </ul>	<p>Limited understanding. Demonstrated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited sport science support</li> <li>• no education given to supporters on how they could help with athletic development</li> <li>• perception that athletes who are able to move to senior sport without support are those who will be most</li> </ul>

- education of coaches from transition experts to discuss resources to aid transition
- introduction of an education brochure given to athletes on difficulties they may experience moving to senior sport

**Barriers**

Good understanding. Demonstrated by:

- acknowledgement in player brochure and meeting minutes that a lack of physical and mental preparation may hinder athletes as they move to senior sport
- acknowledgement in player brochure and meeting minutes that a lack of support may hinder athletes as they move to senior sport

Mixed understanding. Demonstrated by:

- a strong understanding of some of the barriers to successful transition, with the coaches suggesting a lack of technical knowledge may hinder athletes as they move to senior sport
- a limited understanding demonstrated by club as they believed coaches could undertake many of the support roles (e.g., physiological support)

Table 2

*Organization Player Development Program Comparison Table*

	Organization A (89 players)	Organization B (103 players)	League Comparison
Percentage of players offered contracts and who played for the 1 <sup>st</sup> team (over 5 years)	36%	12%	18%
Percentage of players who signed for the club and played over 20 1 <sup>st</sup> team games	24%	8%	No data
Percentage of players (over 5 years) who were released from their contract, but who subsequently competed in a 1 <sup>st</sup> team squad at an equivalent or lower level league club	39%	16%	No data
Percentage of players who were released from their contracts and did remain in professional soccer as a player	25%	72%	54%
Money made from sale of players developed in the youth system (over 5 years)	£3,460,000	£1,342,000	£1,100,000
Money invested in youth system over the past 5 years (excluding player wages)	£450,000	£520,000	£980,000

## Appendix

### Interview Schedule

#### Introduction

1. Can you describe your experiences of the youth-to-senior transition in football?  
Probe: How long have you known/worked with athletes who have transitioned?
2. What do you believe your role is in supporting athletes in transition?

#### Facilitating the Transition

3. Can you tell me what support your club provides prior to and during transition to support athletes moving to senior sport? Probe: Who from, what did it involve?
4. What else do the club do to support athletes moving up to senior sport? Probes: Psychological, physical, technical, social preparation?

#### Challenges

5. What do you feel are some of the challenges athletes' may face moving forward at senior level? Probes: What makes the transition hard? Psychological, physiological, technical, social demands?
6. What strategies have you/ your team employed to overcome these challenges?
7. Do you support athletes in overcoming these challenges? Probe: How?

#### Moving Forward

8. What do you think is important to athletes if they are to continue to make progress in senior sport after they have moved up to senior sport?
9. Do the club support athletes with these factors you consider important? Probe: How do the club help alleviate difficulties and support progression post youth-to-senior change?

#### Summary

10. Overall, do you feel that the programme you have at [club] helps athletes' transition more smoothly to senior sport? Probes: If yes, why? If no, why not?
11. Is there anything I should have asked you which I didn't, and you think is important to this interview?