

PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN SOCCER PLAYERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

John Joe DAWSON-SQUIBB* & Helgo SCHOMER**

**University of Cape Town Child Guidance Clinic, Cape Town, Republic of South Africa*

***Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, Republic of South Africa*

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates and describes themes surrounding the subjective perceptions of success in players and coaches at a professional South African soccer club. Literature around this topic is limited, particularly concerning the qualitative understandings of South African sportsmen and women, providing ample motivation for this investigation. Semi-structured interviews about success were conducted with professional (n=11) and academy (n=12) players and questionnaires completed by coaches (n=5). This information was coded, drawing out and comparing themes amongst the players, coaches and literature in this field. Results suggest a number of perceptions, as compared with success as an achievement and in the attainment of future goals, therefore success as a likely outcome.

Key words: Soccer; Success; Professional; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative psychological literature surrounding South African football, given the popularity of the sport, is surprisingly limited. This project as a case study, therefore focuses its efforts on describing and expanding upon the various themes and issues raised by soccer players and coaches at a professional South African club.

The investigation concentrates on understanding the concept and construction of success. Considering the nature of the subject and scarcity of previous literature, examination of the players' perceptions gave rise to multiple themes. These included their beliefs and understandings surrounding success in South African football, the role models, what exactly constitutes success and thoughts about their own experience of success.

These themes allowed for a rich insight into the analysis of success given by the sample that represents a designated population – a Cape Town based professional football club. The investigation concentrates on putting it into the context of South Africa as a third world country. Such an environment, it was hypothesised, explains many of the opinions given by the players. It is important to note the general understanding of soccer within the structure of a professional era. The recent evolution of sport, specifically soccer, from hobby to past-time, to job and to career, provided much interest from the population and it led to subsequent analysis and discussion. Further insight was gained in this regard around the top professional leagues in Europe that have taken the sport of soccer and its players to increasing heights of deification and financial gain. The contrast of South Africa as an impoverished country in relation to Europe and the high salaries commanded by the players there provided a topic of important discussion and a platform for future study.

AIM

The study aims to broadly address the scarcity of qualitative literature in the realm of South African soccer. As already mentioned, such a deficiency is not only surprising, but reveals negligence, considering the importance of soccer, particularly professional soccer, in the culture and social structure of the country. This study is in no way intended to reverse the research deficit, but rather to provide a foundation for future studies in this field. As such, it specifically delineates and discusses the themes provided by the players and coaches, rather than supplying answers. It intentionally explores a very important area, that of the creation of work through this sport.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined in the introduction of this paper, one reason for this study was to address the scarcity of literature that surrounds the perception of success in sportsmen and women in South Africa. The other is the identified problem that South African soccer players, as a population, have been almost entirely unexamined, either quantitatively or qualitatively. There is, however, enough literature to provide some background to the area in which this study will proceed.

Psychological literature around sport has, to some degree, dealt with the issue of what is necessary for success. Success itself, however, has not been sufficiently explored or predefined. The different areas in question are, for example: optimal state performance, personality types, emotions, family support, goal setting, self-esteem, etc. (Silva & Weinberg, 1984; Ungerleider, 1996; Lazarus, 2000). This study aims to investigate the perception of success by players and not what success is in an objective sense. It is also not the aim of this study to investigate what it takes for such players to become successful. It is for this reason that much of the existing literature is only partially useful to the current research.

Other important aspects of literature concerning this study include the influence of multiple cultures on sports performance, as well as the influence of family on the players and their development on their athletic achievement (Burke, 1999; Cote, 1999; Martens *et al.*, 2000). These two factors, mostly descriptive in nature, have a bearing on what constitutes success for the individual and what is required for an individual to attain success. This study deals with a diversity of cultures and family backgrounds. Such awareness is vital if it is to describe accurately and fully the understandings of professional soccer players in South Africa.

In terms of this literature review, it is relevant to note the lack of qualitative research in present-day sport psychology. A recent article suggested that 80% of published articles over the past decade, in three established sport psychology journals, were quantitative in nature (Culver *et al.*, 2003). Such concerns around the need for both interpretative and descriptive work was also raised by a meta-analysis of sport psychology journals conducted by Streat (1998). The limited work in this genre as well as the small base of contributing authors provides motivation for future research. Finally, both studies propound that qualitative research in this area of psychology is not only under-utilised, but more importantly, that it is both a credible and valuable source of knowledge necessary for furthering the role of psychology in sport.

In the context of this identified deficiency, it is also important to note the lack of psychological literature around the advent of professional sport, particularly the impact of soccer's development, and how the attitudes of the players, their motivations and behaviours have been almost completely neglected. This shortage of research is due, at least partially, to the recent move of South African sport into a professional era.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of twenty-three male soccer players and five coaches from a Cape Town football club. The club was established in 1958 and is one of sixteen professional football clubs in South Africa competing in the Premier Soccer League. It is made up of a youth academy and professional team, comprising in total of ninety-five players. Drawing on the nature of the aims set out in the introduction, it was established that the sample would be divided equally amongst the two groups. The sample consisted of both academy (n=12) and professional (n=11) players, with respective mean ages of 16.2 and 22.2.¹

The academy players ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen, and had been with the club an average of two years and eight months. Ten of the twelve interviewed were at school, while the remaining two had recently completed Matric. It is noteworthy that although they were not professional players in the strictest sense of the word, they were all, at the time of writing, in contractual agreement with the club.

Such arrangement ensured that, where necessary, the club provided food, accommodation, and education. The entire group was from South Africa and mostly, though not exclusively, from the Western Cape. They all played in the youth teams of the club, in different soccer competitions around the province at appropriate levels, i.e. U15, U17 and U19. The majority had played for a provincial age group team at some stage in their careers, and had been selected for the club's youth academy programme on the basis of their skill and perceived potential. It should be stressed that these were exceptional players all of whom had been specifically chosen by talent scouts or through rigorous trials.

The professional players by contrast, were between eighteen and thirty-two, and had been at the club an average of one and a half years. All twelve were contracted to the club and soccer constituted their sole source of income. The club also provided accommodation and food. Two of the players were from Zimbabwe, while the other nine came from four provinces in South Africa (only two of the players were from the Western Cape). Six of those interviewed had previously played for other professional clubs. Although the two Zimbabweans were the only ones to have represented their country at senior level, the rest had all achieved varying levels of success in their age groups.

All the players spoke English at some level of competency, but only one of those interviewed spoke it as a first language. This clearly had an impact on the process and specifically on the

¹ It is important to note that at the time of writing a number of the sample were having their ages verified - as there are concerns around fraud in this regard, particularly in South African soccer.

ability of the interviewee both to understand the questions and respond in an authentic and comprehensible manner. In particular cases such difficulties severely inhibited the participants communication.

It should also be emphasised that although no information was gained regarding specific demographics, the players made reference on several occasions to their low financial status. This is clearly neither methodologically sound nor indeed accurate. Yet, a sense of the harsh economic circumstances surrounding this group is crucial to providing the previously mentioned context.

As has been explained in the introduction, this project in no way sought to produce a sample that inferred or implied representation of any specific population other than the players at the club. As a case study, thus, and in terms of size and selection, the sample was chosen both with convenience and accessibility in mind, essentially using the principles of non-probability (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Materials

From Millar *et al.* (1992) it was established that a semi-structured interview would provide an appropriate amount of direction, guidance and freedom for the participants to express themselves. The interview was accordingly structured, and drew on the knowledge gained from an initial pilot study. Finally, it comprised of approximately four sub-sections, all dealing with the construct of success in various forms. The interview schedule itself and surrounding themes used in the study were necessarily broad; e.g. What does success mean to you? Who do you think is successful? Are you successful?

A further questionnaire was compiled specifically for the coaches of the teams and was designed to draw out their understandings of success. Apart from questioning their perceptions of success and its related aspects (e.g. attribution), it also asked them to speculate on which of the players interviewed they thought would be successful, and why. It was hoped such triangulation would provide a broader context from which to understand the perceptions of the players and the club in general (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Method of analysis

As explained previously, this study is restricted by the lack of specific literature in certain of the areas. Such deficiencies inhibit the ability of the authors to draw out specific and accurate themes. With this in mind, the process drew heavily on many of the themes found in the initial pilot study as well as more established foundations derived from psychological literature dealing with success in sport, including journals and other current literature. Importantly though, it was the interviewees who provided and created the themes under discussion. Thus, particular attention is given to those themes that are expanded upon by the majority of the subjects. Triangulation and comparison of those themes with both the questionnaires completed by the coaches and the literature discussed previously, allows for both a richer and more detailed understanding of the material presented. This paper, in its limited scope and restricted by resources, provides a foundation from which to document and delineate certain emergent themes and codes for the purposes of discussion within the context of South Africa (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Procedure

The twenty-three interviews were all conducted at the football academy of the club and took place over a period of three months. The academy also serves as a boarding house for many of the players while the rest attend training sessions at the grounds of the club at least three times a week. Each interview was taped with the permission of the participants, done on a one-to-one basis and in a closed room that allowed for the recording to be done without much interference. All interviewees were given an explanation of the interview, including purpose and structure, with particular emphasis laid on their answers being valuable and confidential. To prevent experimenter effect it was also clarified that the information presented would in no way alter or influence their position in the club, and that any further papers or publications would provide them with complete anonymity (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). There was no set time frame given to the participants, and the interviews ranged from between ten and twenty-five minutes before coming to a natural conclusion.

Having completed the interviews, the five coaches² were asked to complete the questionnaire expounded upon previously. In that process they had no knowledge of the content of the interviews conducted with the players. All five made some attempt at completing it, although it is notable that this part of the process was not nearly as successful as the interviews conducted with the players. The coaches were not adequately aware of the aims of the study and this was reflected in their responses, which were, for the most part, only partially completed.

RESULTS

Coding

It appears superfluous to mention again the lack of literature in this field, yet for the purpose of the coding and analysis this proved problematic. Since little theory exists on players' perceptions of success there were few markers or previously used codes that the interviews could be compared to or adjudged against. As explained previously this put great significance on the responses, but additionally, in terms of analysis, on the coding process.³

Analysis

The meaning of success

There was a great deal of repetition in response to the question, 'What is success?' The majority of academy and professional players suggested that success was reaching some kind of goal or dream. It did not appear important to them to define what those concepts meant but rather that they should be fulfilled. They believed that they should set their own goals. A typical response, for example, was AA, who said, "To me, success is when I fulfil my goals, all my aims in life. Ja, when I can see them fulfilled, that's success". It was interesting to note

² The coaches included the senior 1st team coach, assistant coach, youth director, U17 coach and U15 coach.

³ For confidentiality the players will be given letters as names - particularly when providing direct quotations within the text.

that few players (18%), actually spoke about soccer in their responses. Rather, success was understood and defined as a concept removed from their role as soccer players.

All players appeared, on further analysis, to have almost identical dreams and goals. With no prompting, thus, 95% of the respondents outlined the same hopes for their careers in soccer. Players hoped to play for a professional team in the Premier Soccer League (PSL), if they weren't already, and afterwards to get a contract with an overseas club. There was little specification about which country overseas, but Europe was mentioned most often. Furthermore, each of them wanted, at some stage, to play for their national team at a senior level (only two of the players interviewed had represented their country at senior level). In the words of BB, "It is the dream of each and every youngster who plays football in South Africa - he wants to be in the national team or play overseas".

Another trend that arose in terms of success was "having". Many of the respondents saw financial or material possessions as important in displaying success. For some it included more abstract elements such as education. BB, spoke around this point fairly extensively when saying, "So you don't have to have lots of money, but if you have a better life, then you are good. Money they might steal it from you, so to me education is an important thing, I don't think there is someone who can take that away from you".

Additionally, there was a theme of helping others that appeared in many of the answers given to "What is success?". Many players spoke about wanting to help others once they had achieved success. CC, for example, explained, "I think my goal is to play overseas, ja, and building a house for my parents, for my father, and then doing a lot of things for the community". Such philanthropy seemed not only an affirmation of, or requirement for success, but also an indication of their awareness of the need for such action.

A final theme expounded on by the players suggested a certain ambiguity surrounding the length and period of success in soccer particularly. While players saw success as being limited in terms of a career, due to the physical capacities of the body, they did not see the profits from that success ending with the termination of their soccer career. Many players spoke about financial benefit in this regard and the consequences of being successful in soccer as continuing for decades after they finished playing. For the players who valued wealth, for example, this would necessarily confirm and support their initial success. Also, in relation to the theme of duration, many players saw success as possible at any time, thus the prospect of suddenly "making it" seemed a plausible hypothesis. The definitive boundaries, however, of when players were successful or not, appeared to be fluid and dynamic. Players appeared uncertain about the exactitudes of success or seemed content rather to leave the definition at the simpler conclusion, "The achievement and fulfilment of goals", which ironically, is in itself, inevitably vital and transient.

Who is successful?

In response to the question: "Who is successful?" the majority of players (75%) gave the names of current footballers, while the balance indicated that teams or coaches could be successful, but that individuals on their own could not be. Only the first group will be elaborated upon, precisely because of its prevalence.

Within that group a split emerges in respect to local and overseas players mentioned. Predominantly, overseas players were given – David Beckham, Luis Figo, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho and Zinedine Zidane. Lucas Radebe, a South African, was also identified, though it is worth noting that he too, plays in Europe. Overseas players were named far more than local players (78% vs 22%) were.

It is also important to note that it was only academy players who mentioned local players as being successful. This is not surprising as the professionals saw themselves at the same level as local players, and therefore equated success with overseas soccer, something to which they still aspired.

When asked why the players they had mentioned were successful, the differing levels of achievement in soccer were further elaborated on. All the players denoted had represented their country, and the majority played for an overseas club. Furthermore, they were seen “to have achieved all they wanted to”, “they had fulfilled their dreams”. They were also leading “a better life” and “had everything working for them”. A number of examples were given around certain famous players who had come from difficult circumstances. Moving from such harsh environments to “earning millions for just playing football”, was an aspect with which many strongly identified. Lucas Radebe, Steven Pienaar and Ronaldo in particular were cited and often referred to later in the interviews as providing hope or encouragement for younger players who associated with poor, disadvantaged or violent upbringings. DD commented in this regard that Ronaldo was definitely successful, “Because he came from a very hard background, and he worked himself to the top, he got as far as you can get. Ja, he will always be successful in soccer”.

Finally, certain tournaments and competitions were seen as confirming or recognising success – performing at the World Cup, or major European competitions, as well as getting the world “Player of the Year” title. All these were seen as hallmarks of successful players. Equally, it should be mentioned, that little was said about local soccer competitions or South African individual player prizes and it might be concluded that only limited value was attributed to such awards and titles.

Are you successful?

Only four of the players interviewed answered positively to this question, particularly surprising given the fact that the majority had played at provincial or even national level. Most common reasons cited for this were not having reached the goals of playing for an overseas club or representing their country at a senior level. Many players believed they were on their way to being successful, but saw their current achievements as being only a step further towards success, rather than success itself. All players concerned saw their progression towards success as very likely, if not inevitable and the majority suggested that if they kept up their hard work and good habits they would almost definitely fulfil their dreams.

By way of comparison the coaches were also asked to comment on which of the interviewed players they believed were, or would be, successful. It was both concerning and enlightening to note that all together only five of the twenty-three players were thought to have the necessary qualities it would take to succeed. And only two of those were consistently selected

by more than three of the five coaches. In conclusion, while all the players believed themselves destined to succeed, the coaches, so influential in that path, were less optimistic.

DISCUSSION

There are clearly numerous areas of discussion surrounding the results. Besides putting it more directly into the context of South Africa, the discussion will also address the difficulties inherent in the dreams of many of these aspiring soccer players who stand as a motif for many thousands of others. It will also briefly address the construction of soccer as a profession, and in so doing, broadly outline the polarities of South African and European soccer.

What is success?

In discussion around the concept of success it is imperative to note the unified and overwhelmingly similar response of the players in answering the question – “What is success?”. Responses focusing on achieving goals rather than specifically winning were perhaps surprising from sportsmen who, it might be assumed, correlate success with victory. That said, the concept of achieving goals could, and probably does, involve winning (that scoring goals in soccer allows for the achievement of goals is perhaps no coincidence of the English language).

It is interesting, nonetheless, to note the rather broad-minded approach of the players who, in defining success in such abstract terms, seemed to include rather than alienate football or even sport, in other pursuits. The assumption was that everyone could be successful in fulfilling his talents and pursuits. In this regard it is important to note that by constructing success through the identification of goals, players could be in control of, regulate and gauge their own success. Such strong concern with an internal locus of control was a noticeable feature of many of the players who seemed intent on being in control of their own destiny.

Also revealing in this question, was the difference between specifically winning and achieving goals. As alluded to, there is probably an overlap between the two approaches – football players are unlikely to achieve their goals if they are not in winning teams. The difference in attitudes between coaches (winning) and players (achieving goals) points towards a subtle difference in beliefs. This is also in keeping with professional sportsmen and women in general who, literature suggests, attempt a life of relative normalcy, and are not so qualitatively different from the rest of the global population as might be expected (Hemery, 1986). Seeing success as the achievement of goals is perhaps an understanding of success that many people might take on, and is not confined to sport or soccer. The competitive goals of the coaches are primarily based around winning and are perhaps also not entirely incompatible. Perhaps they explain a more soccer-orientated direction. The coaches might then, have looked at success within the context of football and not, as the players did, more holistically.

Role models

The fact that so many players considered overseas players to be successful is no surprise, given the status of European football within global sport (to be explained in detail later). What is more notable in this discussion, however, is to observe the anecdotes of players surrounding those role models. There were numerous stories of current soccer heroes coming from difficult

backgrounds to overcome all the odds and play for the richest and most prestigious clubs in Europe. It was easy for those interviewed to identify with these players whose influence on them should not to be underestimated. The point of this discussion, however, is to stress the difficulties of succeeding in professional soccer. It would seem that while it is understandable that so many stories of success should be elaborated upon, their significance should be viewed within context. For the players concerned, it seemed that these stories were hugely valuable as a source of motivation and hope for their own progress and this is reasonable. Yet the stories became powerful anecdotes in some of the interviews. Such implication therein suggested that rather than being the exception to the rule (as the likes of World Player of the Year, Ronaldo must surely be), their successes were the result of hard work - within the grasp and realm of possibility. Such overly optimistic understanding must be cause for concern and was the first of many similarly simplistic perceptions reflected by several of the players.

It is also noteworthy to mention the importance placed on the financial prosperity and general living style of the successful players. While some significance was placed on the ability of the role models to play soccer, it is certainly more noticeable that emphasis was placed on their affluence. Given the disparity in lifestyle between the players interviewed and those deemed to be successful, this is understandable. It does, however, indicate and emphasise the importance of money in the lives of football players in South Africa.

To understand the context of South Africa, its social and economic conditions are clearly key to the examination of the population under scrutiny. This is perhaps a moot point, and yet it is vital in a field such as sport, which is so often seen out of context or isolated from social influence (Kew, 1997). Further discussion to that effect will be given later in the paper.

South African football in context

It is very important to understand the players' perceptions of success within the context of South African football. Not only does it explain more fully the allure of European football to the players interviewed, but it also provides insight into the common conception of soccer as a career or profession.

In the initial analysis of local soccer, recent figures suggest that approximately four hundred and fifty soccer players earn a living from playing in either the South African Premier Soccer League (PSL) or the 1st division (Dawson-Squibb, 2003). The league began in 1996 (after taking over from the National Soccer League) and is made up of sixteen teams. Squads comprise roughly twenty-five players in each club, and average salaries are around R8 000 per month, although top players can expect an upper limit of around R22 000-25 000 (Maguire, 2003; Dawson-Squibb, 2003). Contracts usually require players to stay with a club for anything between one and five seasons. The majority of clubs in the PSL employ a range of personnel, including coaches, PRO, doctor, biokineticist, physiotherapist and psychologist (Maguire, 2003). Clubs are essentially run as businesses, since the introduction of professionalism in sport, globally. In their structure these clubs have directors, owners and CEO's. The amount of money involved makes them potentially lucrative. Local soccer, however, has been troubled by shortages in sponsorships, bringing into question the longevity of some smaller clubs as business ventures (Maguire, 2003).

Soccer leagues overseas and specifically in Europe, including English, Spanish, German and Italian leagues, all represent the pinnacle of global professionalism in sport. Clubs, particularly in the premier divisions, are growing exponentially in terms of net worth and enjoy the benefits of TV rights as well as massive marketing campaigns. This translates into enormous wages, particularly to the players, gained from both the clubs and image rights or endorsements. South African players, by contrast, can expect to earn an average around R10 0000⁴ a week. More accurately and at the top end of the scale, players like David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane (rated the no.1 and no.2 paid soccer players in 2003) are being paid R120 million⁵ a year, or R2.3 million a week (including endorsements) (Anon., 2002).

Cost of living and exchange rates may account for some of the differences, though quite obviously, there are vast discrepancies between local and overseas football salaries. The reason for the obsession with securing an overseas contract by all the interviewed players therefore, becomes increasingly clear. As HH remarked, "Ja, it is every player's goal to play in Europe, imagine playing alongside Zidane, Raul, the Beckhams. They are the greatest players in the world and they play there, so everyone wants to go to Europe". GG added, "If you play overseas you're successful, they're getting money, they can look after their families, they're style of living is much higher ... 'cause here at the moment in South Africa we're still struggling ...".

At the end of the 2002/2003 season there were sixty-three South Africans playing overseas in eighteen different countries (Maguire, 2003). The countries were predominantly in Europe but also included the Lebanon and USA. The majority played in England, Germany or Russia (though not necessarily in their respective premier leagues). At the time of writing it was not possible to determine the specific earnings of these players but judging from the statistics provided above, they would be considerably higher than most of those players in the PSL. Important to note is not only the fairly high number of South African footballers in Europe, but also the wide range of countries in which they play. It would appear, therefore, that there are role models to be found abroad for South African players, equally it is important to acknowledge that the opportunities are seen vast, possible and attainable.

Having put some of global professional football into context and incorporated the South African interest in that elucidation, the focus of local footballers on playing overseas becomes more apparent. It is important that their own individual backgrounds be understood in the context of their need for wealth, as it is important to put into context their need to understand wealth. Many of the players interviewed spoke at length about fiscal issues, with particular reference to their own upbringing. Football was mentioned as a way out of their impoverished circumstances. The difficulty of gaining employment in South Africa was obvious to many players and football appeared as an easy way to earn huge amounts of money in a short space of time.

Basic ratios suggest that playing in the PSL greatly increases the chances of playing in Europe, and consequently earning the astronomical salaries previously described. Indeed, if there are four hundred players in the PSL, and sixty-three overseas there is roughly a one-in-

⁴ Exactness in this area, because of the volume of players, is clearly difficult and knowledgeable experts in the field, rather than published papers have provided rough figures.

⁵ Exchange rate given as R8.00 to the Euro.

seven chance of PSL players going overseas. This should certainly be viewed in relation to the responses of almost all the players (many of whom had not even progressed to the PSL) who believed they were going to get a contract with an overseas club. It is clearly simplistic to suggest that one-in-seven PSL players will get a contract overseas. The realistic figure would be much higher. And yet such basic ratios give an indication of the difficulty faced by players wishing to succeed in a sport where the winners are millionaires and the losers retire at thirty to a life of potential unemployment and financial destitution.

What then of the players' beliefs in their own success? Are their convictions the result of naive greed at the prospect of financial independence or is it a kind of optimism borne of necessity, an optimism that is required in a sport in which it is so difficult to achieve? Have they been raised in a society that encourages the successful but disregards the losers? Not one of the players interviewed referred to anything other than successful anecdotes. There was never a mention of the many hundreds who never played for their country or overseas clubs. Equally, however, these players might suggest they are being entirely realistic, particularly considering that many of them have achieved so well in junior football divisions and given their current placing with a PSL club.

It is clearly a complex task to place their beliefs around success with any certainty on a continuum of realism and idealism. And yet this is essentially the conundrum. Previous literature surrounding American Football suggests that people are overly optimistic when considering their chances of playing professionally. Yet, as stated, this select group of talented soccer players might have good cause to be optimistic (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). That said, the value of the coaches' responses in predicting the future success of players should not go unnoticed. They are certainly more experienced and qualified in this field. It is thus of concern that amongst them, only two of the twenty-three players have been marked as likely to achieve. Such dire warning obviously contradicts the players' thoughts. This, in itself, is no doubt, of considerable importance.

This investigation is unable to solve emphatically, or even with any certainty, the many questions posed by the ambitions of the players interviewed. However, such inability should by no means devalue the importance of such answers, particularly considering that the implications are so crucial. If failure is as likely as this study suggests, then why is so much effort, time, money and hope being put into the building of future soccer stars? The twenty-three players interviewed stand as a motif for many hundreds and even thousands of other football hopefuls and yet the psychological, emotional and social consequences of expecting success and ending with failure, are surely devastating. This section of the paper is intended to emphasise the importance of more research in this area. Discussions around the likelihood of success in South African soccer and the consequences of failure - so obviously overlooked by the sample - are clearly important issues and could have great implications for aspirant soccer players, or footballers as they would be known in Europe and Brazil.

Culture and its influence in the South African context should be noted, although for the purposes of this essay, not expanded upon. Much literature suggests that culture and in particular, the environment of multiple cultures, can have a direct influence on team performance, particularly if the cohesiveness of the group is affected as a result (Jarvie, 1991; Burke, 1999; Martens *et al.*, 2000). It is remarkable that in a team of so many diverse cultures, including Greek, Zimbabwean, Dutch and the many sub-cultures within South Africa, not one

of the players mentioned or even hinted at its significance. Such influence and importance is related to much of the recent political history of South Africa, the eclectic melting pot of this country cannot be confined to political debate (Jarvie, 1991). The sports field is inextricably linked to South African culture and its impact on the social mobility, economic situation, attitudes, motivation and behaviours of the players interviewed should not be ignored.

Football as a profession

Another theme appeared repeatedly within the transcribed interviews and, as such, requires some discussion. In the opinion of former Manchester United coach Matt Busby, "Football is no longer a sport, it's a profession" (Dawson-Squibb, 2003). Football has, thus, become a professional enterprise globally and in South Africa. Even more important is that the players' attitudes and answers reflect a knowledge of that situation. There was a constant referral to their football "career" and life as a "professional". Many arduous activities and sacrifices were accepted because that is what is expected of "professionals". Indeed, success itself was closely linked to being a professional and many players used that term to explain the complexities of what it took to succeed.

"Being a professional" was both an attitude and a motivation, an encompassing term that incorporated a great many facets of what interviewees expected from themselves as successful soccer players. Furthermore, most of them saw soccer as just another profession. While people might naturally be good at a variety of occupations, they were specifically good at soccer. This meant acting professionally in their chosen occupation, i.e. being disciplined, putting in the hard work, etc.

Whether soccer can, or should, reasonably be thought of as a profession, in the same genre as, for example, law or education (as some of the players suggested) is questionable. Is there not a qualitative difference in a job that demands such high levels of physical fitness almost ten months of the year? A job that brings with it huge public scrutiny and pressure, that can reasonably bring in millions of rands a year, but that lasts at the most fifteen years, should there be no injury or loss of form? The analogy of soccer as a profession brings with it multiple concerns, particularly for the players who have, at least in this study, taken on a mantle that forces them to work increasingly hard. Its unpredictability, so well documented by the players, should be of specific interest. That soccer has moved from past-time to hobby to career. That it is no longer played for fun but that it now rather represents the financial hope and livelihood of families, accompanied by all the pressure that brings, is surely an area for reflection.

It is interesting to note that very little research has taken place to investigate the influence of professional sport on the attitudes and behaviours of the players concerned. Yet even the limited study done for this paper, intimates that the understanding of sport as a profession has had massive repercussions on the players and their motivation. It is evident that more investigation should be done in this area, particularly with the growth of professional sport globally and in South Africa. This paper has merely attempted to draw attention to this developing trend while, simultaneously, elaborating on some of the complex considerations that must be entertained when analogising sport and professionalism.

Limitations and cautions

Limitations of this study surround three specific areas that had a profound impact on both the discussion and ability of the paper to generalise to a wider population. The sample, their language difficulties and the lack of literature in this field all contributed, to varying degrees, in restricting the potential of this research.

As explained both in the introduction and the methodology, this paper intended from the outset to define itself as a case study. The sample adequately reflected the population of the Football Club under question but was unable to extend the findings beyond that group. However, by contextualising the club within South African professional football, as the study did, the temptation is to include all sixteen of the PSL teams into the findings. This inference should be managed with some caution, as all of the clubs operate within different environments and parameters. This obviously influences the players concerned.

Language also proved a concern in the interviews and their subsequent analysis. Although reflected upon at some length in the methodology, it is nonetheless relevant to mention its influence on the procedure and specifically in the examination of the transcripts. As Roberts *et al.* (1992) explain, language can create numerous forms of discrimination and segregation that are in turn reflected in the analysis of research and study. For this paper, which was focused primarily on the content of the interviews and not on investigating the more complex nuances of discourse, many of the difficulties surrounding language were alleviated. A great deal was almost inevitably lost, particularly in the analysis of the meetings. The extensive use of colloquial phrases, expressions and maxims by the players was one example, and appeared to come from a limited English vocabulary. A lot more information would have surfaced had the players been able to engage in their mother tongue in the interviews. Awareness in this regard is the most that can be expected, although future study should take such limitations into account.

The final comment surrounds the lack of prior research or literature, which created much difficulty in delineating “correct” or applicable themes. Specifically, the scarcity of qualitative study in either South African football or the impact of professional sport on players’ perceptions, meant that much emphasis was placed on the responses of the sample. This, coupled with the difficulties created by language, meant that certain themes may have been given differing importance had more definitive literature been available. The advantage of such study is that new themes are able to develop and knowledge is gained in an area that requires much attention, particularly given its prominence in South African society. That it cannot be gauged or measured against previous work is limiting. Yet, this is a difficulty that hopefully will be altered with increasing study in this field.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this case study has emphasised the need for further qualitative work in this area by expounding upon and discussing the various perceptions of success in talented soccer players. Limited by the size of the sample under investigation, the study drew out, nonetheless, numerous themes that might, with further research, provide useful assistance to psychologists working with soccer players in a specifically South African setting.

The relatively distinct themes that emerged throughout the study, surrounded success including its definition, construction and achievement. The understanding of success, as perceived by the players, was the attainment of personally determined goals and was pervasive throughout the interviews. Players were reluctant to classify themselves as successful at present, although they equally expected success to come in the future. In particular, players optimistically believed that through hard work and a professional approach they could and would fulfil their dreams of playing in Europe and for their country.

Success, though, is a complicated and dynamic construct, and its attainment equally so. The responses of the players, although often resolute and determined, depicted complexity through their detailed and, at times, ambiguous conclusions. Putting into context the themes raised by the players that intricacy was reflected. The influence of South Africa and Europe on the players as well as the rise of professional football globally, was discussed in some detail. It became evident through such deliberation that those particular circumstances certainly played a role in determining the perceptions of the players involved. Perhaps most emphatically, however, this paper has created awareness around the neglect of qualitative research in soccer, and, in so doing, has attempted to provide a platform for future research in that area.

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