



## **Sports Chaplaincy in Women's International Soccer Pastoral**

### **Care, Emotional Wellbeing, and Holistic Support**

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#### **Abstract**

In recent years there has been an increasing concern for the holistic wellbeing of elite athletes resulting in the introduction of psychologists, chaplains and other helping professionals into a variety of sports settings. This small-scale qualitative study examines factors affecting the emotional wellbeing of international women soccer players whilst on residential training camp and how sports chaplaincy might assist in providing support within this context. Placing the personal accounts of seven UK-based female players at the center of the analysis, findings demonstrate that performance, relationships (with coaches and other players), and social networks all affected the emotional wellbeing of respondents both positively and negatively. Interviewees believed that chaplaincy support had the potential to maintain emotional wellbeing for players especially in the case of younger athletes. The paper concludes by suggesting that whilst sports chaplaincy provision is dependent both on organizational and individual (athlete) consent, such support has the potential to play a significant role in elite women's soccer as part of wider mechanisms of player wellbeing.

Keywords: women's international soccer, holistic wellbeing, sports chaplaincy, qualitative research

## **Introduction**

Women's international soccer has witnessed a significant rise in popularity in recent years not least because of the professionalization of the game in the U.S. and the UK (Williams, 2003a, 2003b, 2013). National teams progressing to the final stages of tournaments experience a highly pressurized competitive environment whereby, alongside the excitement and privilege of representing one's country, players face various forms of stress both from within and outside of their sporting surroundings (e.g., individual and team success, family expectations, and interpersonal relationships). Likewise, the mental health of high-profile sports personnel has become a growing concern over the last decade (see Hemmings et al.: 1-9). As employers, sports organizations and governing bodies have a responsibility to safeguard the mental health and wellbeing of professional athletes. Moreover, an understanding of the impact of mental and emotional wellbeing on performance is essential for players and coaches alike (see Sarkar et al.; Schinke et al.; Hemmings et al.; Oliver and Parker).<sup>1</sup>

Over the last 30 years sports chaplaincy has made an increasing contribution to the holistic wellbeing of sports performers (Gamble et al.); this in line with a growing trend amongst helping professionals to cater for the spiritual needs of elite athletes (Hemmings et al.; Roychowdhury).<sup>2</sup> However, there is a dearth of literature on the work of sports chaplains within elite women's soccer. Drawing upon the findings of a small-scale, qualitative research project into the sporting lives of seven, UK-based female international soccer players, this paper seeks to act as some form of corrective in this respect by investigating the potential contribution of chaplaincy within this context. The paper begins with a brief history of women's soccer in the UK and the development of international competition. It goes on to examine the effect of emotional wellbeing on elite sports participants including how stressful situations might influence anxiety, self-confidence, and performance. Traditionally, sports chaplains in Britain have predominantly serviced the needs of all-male sports and there is little evidence of similar provision within female sporting locales (cf. Vickers). To this end, the data presented here contribute to an emerging body of research into the everyday activities of sports chaplains (see, for example, Hemmings and Chawner; Parker et al.) and wider studies concerning women's soccer in the UK and beyond (Williams 2007, 2013; Caudwell). The paper concludes by suggesting that whilst the provision of chaplaincy is dependent both on organizational and individual (athlete) consent, such support has the potential to play a significant role in elite women's soccer as part of wider mechanisms of player wellbeing.

## **Women's Soccer in the UK**

Historically, women have been denied equal opportunities in sport as a consequence of the masculine values which have dominated sporting discourse and the embedded cultural assumptions that these have spawned. Indeed, mainstream academic debate has long since acknowledged that women have historically faced structural opposition in their plight to participate in competitive sports (Hargreaves; Pfister and Sisjord; Hargreaves and Anderson).

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<sup>1</sup> Following the work of Dodge et al., we use the term "wellbeing" to denote the psychological, social and physical resources that an individual needs to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge.

<sup>2</sup> Within the context of sports chaplaincy, our framing of "holistic wellbeing" draws upon the work of Waller et al. 2016, who proffer a multidisciplinary approach to athlete support.

However, the emergence of muscular Christianity in the mid-1800s and the introduction of organized team games into the English public schools served to shape the expansion of physical education programs for both males and females and this, combined with the rise of feminism from the early decades of the twentieth century, facilitated a growth in sporting participation for both working-class and middle-class women (Hargreaves; Williams 2003b).

As soccer (association football) became codified and leagues and competitions evolved, late nineteenth century Britain witnessed the emergence of a plethora of men's and women's teams (Williams 2013). However, in 1921 the (English) Football Association (FA) banned women's games from football league stadia on medical grounds, believing that the sport was a danger to their health (Jacobs). Perhaps not surprisingly, other national governing bodies followed suit (Lopez; Williams 2003a). It was 50 years before these restrictions were lifted, allowing women's soccer to begin a slow recovery from half a century of marginalization (Williams 2003a). Although the most famous of the early women's teams – Dick Kerr's Ladies founded in 1884 and Manchester Corinthians formed in 1949 – competed overseas, they were not officially recognized at the national level (Lopez; Williams 2003b); and despite the fact that an international match between England and Scotland took place in 1881, it was 1972 before the first official game was played with England beating Scotland 3-2 (Williams 2013a).

In the wake of the success of the England men's national team at the 1966 World Cup, in 1968 the Women's Football Association (WFA) was founded and in 1971 the 44 clubs affiliated to the WFA competed in an inaugural cup competition, although a further 20 years would elapse before a national league was established (Williams 2003b). The popularity of the game in Britain was mirrored in other countries and international tournaments emerged (Lopez). Unofficial women's European tournaments were held in 1969 and 1979, but it was 1982 before the first official Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) competition for women's soccer was launched. The world soccer governing body, Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), hosted an invitational international tournament in China in 1988, and in 1996 women's soccer made its inaugural appearance at the Atlanta Olympic Games in the U.S.

In 1993 the WFA was merged into the FA with the aim of increasing accessibility to funding. However, until recently a lack of financial and societal support has hindered the development of the women's game. Bronze medal success for the England women's national team in the 2015 World Cup not only resulted in increased interest amongst players and supporters but also potential sponsors (Sport England).<sup>3</sup> More recently, media exposure around the 2019 World Cup has provided further momentum and it is widely accepted that women's soccer is expanding both at the domestic and global level (see FIFA; FA; Union of European Football Associations; Wrack). During the early years of international competition funding was limited and it was not unusual for players to partly finance their own travel and physical conditioning with little, if any, support around diet and fitness (Lopez). Nowadays, the importance of holistic player care comprising both physical and emotional wellbeing is recognized as a necessary component of elite athlete lifestyles including within women's soccer.

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<sup>3</sup> The more recent success of the England international women's team is expected to have a similar impact.

## **UK Sports Chaplaincy and Emotional Wellbeing**

In the UK, sports chaplains comprise individuals (both lay and ordained) who provide spiritual and pastoral care for those who inhabit sporting locales from grassroots to elite level.<sup>4</sup> Sport is one of a number of social contexts in which chaplaincy has been developed in recent years and, as Boyers (2016) and Weir have noted, Sports Chaplaincy UK (formerly SCORE) has been a key part of this trajectory (see Ryan 2015; on sports chaplaincy, see Waller et al. 2008, 2010). In line with broader models of chaplaincy (see Threlfall-Holmes; Ryan 2018), and under the auspices of Sports Chaplaincy UK, chaplains in professional football seek to serve the athletes and communities (of “all faiths and none”) who are connected with their respective clubs (i.e., players, coaches/managers, auxiliary staff), and may be called upon to deal with a range of issues that impact player wellbeing, (i.e., injury, career termination, bereavement or homesickness) and/or if ordained, to officiate over religious services and ceremonies (i.e., weddings, funerals etc.) (see Heskins and Baker; Gamble et al.; Waller). Within the UK context it is uncommon for sports chaplains to be remunerated for their work (Dupere; Maranise), and some have argued that this enables chaplains to maintain a greater sense of objectivity and distance from discussions with coaches and managers regarding player performance (Gamble et al.; Roe and Parker; Oliver and Parker). Like chaplains in a host of other secular spheres, sports chaplains seek to maintain a consistent presence and to build trusting relationships so that over time their role can be more fully understood and accepted (Paget and McCormack; Holm; Parker et al.; Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt).

It is against this historical and cultural backdrop that the present study is positioned, and in particular, the extent to which chaplaincy might impact the way in which female international soccer players cope with the stresses and pressures of their sporting environment.

## **Method**

The research reported here was carried out during the 2015-16 (women's) soccer season, the intention being to investigate the emotional realities of respondents regarding their experiences as female international soccer players whilst on residential training camp. A constructionist ontological stance was adopted in line with an interpretivist epistemology. In turn, a qualitative methodology was utilized to generate an understanding of the subjective opinions, views, feelings, and beliefs of respondents in relation to the potential contribution of chaplaincy to their emotional health and wellbeing (Bryman). The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Miles and Huberman) and identified according to the diversity that they provided in terms of age and elite sporting experience. The data collection cohort comprised seven females aged between 18 and 29 who played for three different nations across four different age groups. At the time of the research, five were current international players, the other two having represented their country during the previous four seasons. All respondents were familiar with the role of chaplain within the context of club or

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<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the work of Ryan (2018), we use the term “pastoral care” to denote a theological (as opposed to secular) approach to chaplaincy which is characterized by a witnessing of God's love through service and servanthood. For broader discussion on the constituent pastoral and theological elements of sports chaplaincy, see Kenney; Waller; and Waller and Cottom.

international team environments. In line with existing debate surrounding the problematic nature of small samples sizes in qualitative research (see, for example, Bryman; Patton; Robson) the respondent sample featured here is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. This was largely dictated by the restricted nature of the elite sporting environment in question and the logistics of researcher access. Despite the limited number of respondents, on completion of the interviews a reliable sense of data saturation (i.e., thematic exhaustion) and variability was evident.

Prior to the beginning of the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Gloucestershire, UK and clearance granted by the coaching staff of the team concerned. Verbal invitations to participants to take part in the research were followed up with the circulation of information sheets and consent forms, the latter of which were signed by respondents before data collection took place. During interview, players disclosed details of the stresses and pressures arising from their residential training camp experiences including interactions with staff (coaches and sport science support) and other players. Prior to these meetings the first author spent six days observing activities at one such training camp with the intention of becoming familiar with the environment itself. All respondents were asked the same open-ended questions and all lines of enquiry were directly related to the topic under consideration. Players were asked to recall events affecting their emotional wellbeing while in camp and subsequently encouraged to expand on particularly significant issues (Robson). Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed in full. In accordance with conventional practice concerning processes of respondent validation, all participants were offered the opportunity to view their transcribed accounts for accuracy (Bryman).

A grounded theory approach to data analysis was deployed in line with Strauss and Corbin. Grounded theory allows for the systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial, and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitates the presentation of participant experiences from their own perspective (see Charmaz). Data were analyzed in four stages by the first author. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was coded for the identification of generic data themes and subsequently revisited in order that an accurate indexing of these themes (i.e., including a more detailed capturing of the different aspects of participant experience) could take place. Third, these experiences were then categorized into a number of over-arching topics. The final stage of the analysis involved the triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and documentary sources and the consolidation of these topics in accordance with the aforementioned themes, all of which aligned closely with key debates in the extant literature. The remainder of our discussion is presented around these themes. The first reveals the effects of performance, competition, and confidence on emotional wellbeing. The second examines emotional wellbeing in terms of relationships with teammates and coaches. The final theme discusses emotional wellbeing within the context of social networks with specific reference to family support and chaplaincy provision.

### **Performance, Competition, and Confidence**

Within elite sport the importance of performing at one's best cannot be underestimated both for individual career progression and team success (Hemmings and Holder). Pressures

inherent in competition may either positively or negatively affect both emotional wellbeing and performance (Mesagno et al.). Likewise, a drop in performance may affect confidence and conversely a loss of confidence often causes a decrease in performance levels (Hanton et al. 2012). During interview both competition and confidence emerged as recurring themes affecting the emotional wellbeing of players. An emotion often experienced in competition is anxiety. Usually thought of as negative, a certain level of anxiety is necessary to provide the motivation and concentration required for peak performance (Hanton et al. 2012), a fact noted by Jess:<sup>5</sup>

The pressure will come from the result [of the game] and the performance we need to put in . . . I quite like games that have a lot [resting] on them especially when we're not expected to do well . . . There are a little bit of nerves . . . but it's mostly excitement.

As an experienced international player, Jess enjoyed high profile games, seeing them as challenges providing opportunity for success (Hanton et al. 2012). Player backgrounds, dispositions and the extent to which they control their environment can cause different appraisals of the same situation (Moore et al.). For example, Danni, who was younger and less experienced than Jess, had a different perspective:

Obviously game days there's a lot more pressure on you 'coz you just want to play well. There's always pressure individually; you're always trying to impress. In competition[s] it is more stressful like you are banking on the results you get . . . You feel more nervous as you know you need to up your game. I put a lot of pressure on myself . . .

Alongside pressure for success, Danni wanted to give a good account of herself in games in order to impress her coaches and further her career (Mesagno et al.). But players were also very much aware of the anxiety derived from making mistakes in public, something that carried with it the possibility of damaging one's longer-term prospects, as alluded to by Gemma:

It was a "friendly" [non-competitive game] and there just happened to be a massive crowd [1700 spectators]. I was so nervous walking out for that game . . . If I wasn't (sic) playing well it stresses me out as I want to impress at the beginning and I'm [thinking] "Oh no, they're not going to call me back [for future training camps]."

Through casual conversations with players, it was clear that the fear of not being selected for future training camps, either because of poor performance or injury, was a significant source of anxiety. Players wishing to succeed at the elite level must successfully handle emotions caused by disappointment and below-par performances (Hemmings and Holder). Both excellent and poor performances in competition can have a significant effect on confidence and emotional wellbeing (Hanton et al. 2012). Low self-confidence often caused players to recall past poor performances, creating doubt in their ability to play well in the future as Nicky explained:

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<sup>5</sup> In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

I think with me if I don't believe that I'm good enough to play with certain people then I won't. . . . Confidence is a big thing with me. A lot of people – even coaches – tell me “You're good enough to play with these people, you're at that level.” But if it's in my head and I don't believe these people then that's it, I won't be able to cope with the demands of playing with them.

That said, Nicky went on to articulate how she recognized the effects of maturity on managing emotions, confirming arguments put forward by Nicholls and Polman that stress management in elite performers often improves with age:

When I was 17 I was playing up a year for my country and they were pushing me . . . because they believed in me. But obviously there was some sort of self-doubt in my mind that I wasn't good enough . . . As I matured that's probably helped me to understand . . . helped me manage the self-confidence. I've took on board advice.

According to Arnold and Fletcher, the words and actions of coaches can considerably affect athlete confidence and wellbeing with a lack of feedback and/or continual criticism being especially problematic. However, if athletes take positive actions to deal with a drop in confidence, then there is the possibility that they will begin to believe that they can manage their environment (Levy et al.). Employing a problem-solving coping strategy in such circumstances (Kowalski and Crocker) was a method recognized as particularly helpful by Gemma:

If I made a mistake my head might go down and I'd make another mistake and they'd [coaches] keep going [saying to me] “So you've got to find a strategy that you can let it go and carry on or it will affect your game.” I've had games, even friendlies, when it's my first game . . . and I'm so nervous [and] thinking “I do want to play” but you're thinking actually “I'll just let them [peers] play as I don't want to mess it up.”

Even though Gemma understood the importance of managing pressure, her lack of confidence created self-doubt regarding her ability to perform at the expected level. A further area of tension affecting player welfare in elite sport is that of social interaction. Respondents noted that relationships with coaches and other players had significant effects on their emotional wellbeing and it is to a further exploration of these associations that we now turn.

### **Relationships, Collegiality, and Conflict**

According to Jowett et al., the ability of athletes to achieve their potential is partly dependent upon the quality of the coach/athlete relationship. Ideally, this relationship should be based on mutual trust, with players having ultimate confidence in their coaches (Lundqvist and Sandin). Fletcher et al. found that coaches who did not meet the expected professional standards failed to win the respect of their players. Good rapport combined with respect and confidence was something missing in Jodie's relationship with her coach:

Our head coach was very involved with the first team so we [Under 21s] got given a lot of coaches that hadn't been on camps before and weren't really up

to the standard of what we've had before . . . and I think that affected us and we were much more "relaxed."

Here the absence of pressure resulted in a more "relaxed" attitude amongst players which, in turn, created a lack of focus for Jodie and her peers, and this contrasted sharply with the following example of individual pressure experienced by Danni:

One coach in particular, which I didn't really get on with, put a lot of pressure on me. She'd always stop a session and it was always me doing something wrong. The coach would always kinda pick me out as doing something wrong and that got to me quite a bit.

In their studies on organizational stress in sport, Fletcher et al. found that pressure by coaches often negatively affected athlete wellbeing, especially if the athlete concerned perceived such pressure to be unreasonable or inappropriate. More specifically, Hanton et al. (2012) revealed that players may attach significant meaning to "throw-away" comments from those in authority and especially those who have the ability to influence their career. Negative remarks such as those experienced by Danni clearly had the potential to threaten her goals and lower her self-esteem:

We'd just lost the semi-final [of a major tournament] and the senior head coach walked in [to the locker room] and she was "Where are you? Yeah you're \*\*\*\*, you're a cop out, you're unfit, you're not good enough" pointing her finger at different people. Bearing in mind we were [only] 15/16 [years old]. It happened again when we were [with the] Under 20s. She came along [after we had lost in the final] . . . "You're not good enough, you should really be thinking about why you're playing football [soccer]." And this was at a time when my confidence was really low.

Contrary to these kinds of behaviors, previous research suggests that reassurance from coaches can increase confidence and alleviate anxiety (Lundqvist and Sandin) and it was clear that respondents perceived feedback from coaches in a variety of ways. For example, Jess saw advice regarding self-improvement as a challenge rather than a threat to her goals and values:

Personally I have never been disheartened by what I've been told and if it's something negative I normally know it myself anyway and it makes me want to improve that area even more. So, it's probably a good thing for me. I appreciate feedback whether it's positive or negative. It's an important part of international football [soccer], definitely.

Although players have minimal control over team selection, coaches have the power to affect their future goals, in the case of this research the goal of representing their country. In their comparison of competitive and organizational stress, Fletcher and Hanton found that the perception of injustice in team selection caused anxiety. Tensions surrounding team selection adversely affected Gemma as she witnessed seemingly biased behaviors from her coach:

It can be a bit weird when some people have known [the coach] a lot longer and you see favoritism. If you're a new player you've got more to prove to

yourself, the team, and the coach. If you've got someone who's next to you who you don't think is doing very well but the coach keeps praising them it can be sort of stressful.

Lack of encouragement and appreciation for players' efforts, public criticism, favoritism, coach incompetence, and negative feedback can adversely affect player/coach relationships and emotional wellbeing (Hanton et al. 2012). In addition to player/coach interaction, residential camps necessitate close associations between players often for extended periods of time. In these situations it is common for tensions to arise and for conflict and negative attitudes to create peer-group pressure (Fletcher and Hanton). Other sources of stress include: competition for places, the prioritization of self-enhancement over team success, unkind remarks, intimidation by older players, and lack of trust (Fletcher et al. 2012). Being the youngest player on camp certainly caused Nicky a degree of anxiety:

When I was in the U19s I was the youngest one there. Everyone was 18/19 and I was just turning 17 so they were all older than me and most of them were very close . . . [they] knew each other as they grew up through the England [team] set-up. It was one of those where I had come in and I didn't know anyone and I was so young and I was "Oh my \*\*\*."

Not only was age and unfamiliarity a cause of anxiety but so too was the existence of player cliques (Hanton et al., 2005), as Jess noted:

Some of them [fellow players] it was like they thought they were above me as they played for bigger [domestic] teams and there were a few cliques that you couldn't get into. I never felt comfortable in the [international] group of players or staff.

Age and experience were also issues for Gemma:

You get players who have known each other longer or who are in the same [domestic] club, or players who have been in the [international] set-up together. So you'd have the older more experienced players – there'd be about four or five of them – and they'd get on better and the newer ones kinda stick together rather . . . like in clubs.

Tension between player groups manifested itself in a variety of ways including heavy criticism and "back-biting" which, for Poppy at least, was a particular source of stress:

[Our manager] has mentioned that we tend to see the negatives in each other so if a player's been picked for camp it's sort of "She's been rubbish in camp" or "She hasn't scored in 10 games." That's what they say rather than "She's really fast." It has put added pressure on a trial environment. So if someone in your [playing] position comes in, you automatically try and look out for their weaknesses.

Fletcher and Hanton found that players may use negative comments about each other in order to enhance their own chances of team selection. Competition for places naturally creates anxiety and affects the way players support each other (Adams et al.). Poppy went on:

When we're away from the pitch and it's been a couple of days [after the match] and it's just a half-hearted informal chat you do talk about other players . . . and it's not always positive or constructive 'coz that person's not there. I don't think that negative energy, even though that person won't ever find out about it, is beneficial for the team.

Poppy recognized how such comments could damage the emotional wellbeing both of individual players and the team itself. Moreover, such behaviors had the wider consequence of making some players feel restricted in voicing concerns about their personal anxieties to other players in case this information was used against them (see Fletcher and Hanton 2012), as Poppy explained:

I don't like to voice my weaknesses to other people so I've never wanted to say like "I was rubbish today" coz it makes it real if I said it out loud. I would never want to give anybody a perception of myself in a negative light.

Likewise, tournaments or consecutive games requiring players to spend between one and five weeks together were a source of stress, a fact noted by Nicky:

Because there's 20-21 females being put in a hotel, seeing each other 24 hours a day there is bound to be stuff that goes on. I remember at [one tournament] there was a huge . . . argument between a couple of players 'coz there was a lot of bitchiness going on.

In contrast, Gemma and Georgie felt that relationships improved the longer the team were together. Georgie had this to say in response to the suggestion that players may get annoyed with each other if they are on camp for a long time:

No, we get more friendly. I think 'coz we're not all shy but it can be a different group of people each time and it took us a while to gel and things but as time goes on we have a good laugh. The longer the better really but it is tiring.

Although as these comments indicate, relationships on camp had the potential to be positive, the majority of interviewees recognized the importance of longer-term support from broader (external) social networks and it is to this topic that we now turn.

### **Emotional Wellbeing and Social Networks**

The contribution of social support networks to the emotional wellbeing of elite sports performers is well established (see Lundqvist and Sandin). Such support may be provided by friends, teammates, or parents/family (see Abrahamsen et al.) the latter of which was articulated by Jess:

I always feel pretty supported by people at home, my parents or my father who first got me into football [soccer]. I've always known if they can't be at a game they'll be thinking about it and what's going on.

Gemma had a similar positive experience:

Yeah, I think family is a big one. Even though I don't get homesick they are always there. Especially for me my mum always wants to know what's going on even down to who's in the starting 11. She'll text me 24/7.

Gemma had recently made the transition from junior to senior competition, and this had been a time when her parents had contributed significantly more emotional support than other social groups such as friends and peers (Adams et al.). However, although good family relations were a vital source of anxiety management for some players, for others parents caused stress levels to increase (Hanton et al. 2005; Lundqvist and Sandin), as Jodie described:

I love him but my dad is like the biggest "pressure putter" ever and he knows he is. . . . When he came to [country where I was playing] he would always say "You should be starting." Bless him. He thinks I'm like the best player in the world but I don't need to be molly coddled.

Nicky had felt similar pressures from her parents at a time when she really needed them to boost her confidence:

You can talk to parents but . . . I've found its very different talking to [them] because they're very "Why do you think like that? You should believe in yourself, you should be confident . . ." But that's not helping me. You're telling me to be confident but I can't. It's not something that's just going to happen when you're telling me to do it.

Both Jodie and Nicky's parents may have benefitted from training in player support as recommended by Hanton et al. (2012) and Adams et al. In their classification of organizational sports stressors, Arnold and Fletcher found that parental expectations commonly resulted in anxiety. Nicky continued:

. . . I didn't want to tell my parents [that I wasn't playing very well] as I didn't really want to disappoint them. As (i) I feel I've let them down in a sense, and (ii) they'd probably shout at me and I knew exactly what they'd say so I'd just be like "Fine, everything's going fine."

Danni had similar feelings to Nicky concerning self-presentation especially over her parents' perceptions of her performance:

Yeah, they're really supportive but I don't like to let them know that I'm not doing well. I like them to be proud of me and for me not to be playing, it's not a good thing.

Abrahamsen et al. suggest that although female athletes may be more aware of social support, they do not necessarily utilize it more than men, despite experiencing greater performance anxiety than their male counterparts. Although some emotions result from the competitive environment of elite sports, others, such as those arising from family issues, are unconnected. As these emotions can cause a loss of focus on competition (Hemmings and Holder) it may be useful for the sports performer to have access to alternative avenues of social support, one of which is chaplaincy.

As already noted, all of the respondents were familiar with the concept of chaplaincy provision either within the context of domestic (club) or international soccer. How and to what extent then did players see the longer-term potential of chaplaincy as a support mechanism at the international level? Jess was in no doubt:

Yeah, I do [think chaplains are useful], especially when you're away from home for a longer period of time. There might be things that people encounter that they need to deal with there and then or need to talk about but there isn't always someone you can talk to. You know, whether they've had news from home or something's happened while they've been away, I think it would be useful definitely.

Given the transient nature of elite sport, it is not unusual for sports chaplains to be called upon to provide reassurance, comfort, and encouragement in relation to problems and anxieties around "home-life" (see, for example, Wood; Waller; Waller et al. 2016). Jodie commented hypothetically on such issues:

I'd say it (a chaplain) would be useful. There were times when we would go off studying and I'd find it really stressful thinking "I'm just not going to pass these exams when I get back." Just having someone to speak to about that would be good and obviously for people who are homesick or upset.

It was clear from fieldwork observations that significant tensions existed for some players around work/life balance and especially the completion of school or college work. When asked if a chaplain would be useful on camp, Nicky replied in the affirmative:

100 per cent I would say. [A chaplain] would help massively especially with the younger age group where it's like between U17s even U19s. It would help massively at that age as you're still immature mentally and you're still coming to terms with being away from home and if you've got personal problems back at home and you're away with football [soccer] it can cause problems and you might lose focus etc.

Both Jodie and Danni also mentioned the importance of a chaplain within younger age groups. Jodie commented:

The earlier you introduce it the better as it would be more the norm . . . As soon as you could have one it would be ideal . . . So I think it should be involved but from as young as possible as younger players . . . Obviously, they [younger players] might not have as much pressure on them as in the weight of the game but they probably take things harder than older players.

Danni agreed:

Probably sort of 17, 18 or 19, or even 16. That's probably when it starts to get more serious and where other problems in your life start to happen about then. In terms of support and advice it [would] probably be from 16 onwards.

Previous research has demonstrated that chaplains are able to provide effective support around personal issues (Maher; Paget and McCormack) and that being present with time to

listen helps athletes feel supported and may even improve performance (Chawner; Hemmings and Chawner; Waller; Waller et al. 2016). Georgie emphasized this latter point when she said: “Yeah, it is like a comfort thing that you know if it is needed that it is there for you.” Jodie expressed a series of specific conditions which, for her, would be necessary in terms of effective chaplaincy support:

I would have thought [a chaplain would be useful], but only if [that person] already had a relationship with the people in the squad [team]. If it was the chaplain you've just met . . . even if you've got two weeks to get to know them, it would be so much harder to open up to someone about something even if you know they are there especially to be opened up to as opposed to having a relationship [with them] . . .

Like chaplains in other social settings, sports chaplains intentionally try to understand and get to know not only the athletes but also the coaches and support staff with whom they work (Mason). The central aim of this is the establishment of trusting relationships so that confidential, pastoral, and (where necessary and/or appropriate) spiritual support can be provided (Boyers 2011; Chawner; Hemmings; Hemmings and Chawner). Moreover, the non-performance based status of sports chaplains often enables them to act as objective and impartial confidantes as a consequence of the fact that they are not directly associated with (or motivated by) player success or failure (Gamble et al.; Waller et al. 2008). Jodie appreciated the chaplain's availability for confidential listening:

[If I was] struggling to deal with not starting [the games], I couldn't vent to my teammates because some of them were in the same position. Other people were starting in front of me and I couldn't say “Why are you starting in front of me?” and you [I] couldn't obviously vent to the manager but . . . [the chaplain] would have been the ideal person to be like “I'm a bit frustrated that I'm not starting or not playing or not getting involved.” It would've been nice to have someone to speak to.

Poppy had similar thoughts:

I think somebody, whether it's a chaplain or a sports psychologist [should be there]. Somebody who is impartial, who, you know, you could trust with confidentiality if needs be. If I wanted to tell the coaches something but not wanted to tell them myself, you could put confidence in that person [the chaplain] to pass the message on. If its stuff related to individual prep[aration] and wellbeing, I think a chaplain or a psychologist is essential. I definitely think off-pitch things directly effect on-pitch things.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to explore some of the issues affecting the emotional wellbeing of international female soccer players and to examine the potential of chaplaincy within this context. The paper builds upon and extends existing research into the role of sports chaplaincy in elite sports settings providing empirical evidence into how such provision might assist the work of other helping professionals (by way of referral and/or collaboration) in facilitating athlete holistic wellbeing.

In line with broader scholarly discussion in sports psychology and sports chaplaincy, findings suggest that the elite sporting environment within which respondents found themselves brought with it a series of internal and external pressures collectively comprising issues surrounding performance, relational conflict and social support. Whilst playing at the international level necessarily generated a series of anxieties and pressures, respondents presented varying perspectives on how this impacted their emotional wellbeing dependent on age, experience and maturity. Likewise, participants articulated the pressures surrounding their relationships with coaches (and general coach behaviors) noting the impact that this might have on individual and team performance. Negative feedback from coaches and perceived injustices in team selection (i.e., favoritism) were highlighted as particular concerns. Relationships with fellow players were also identified as a possible source of tension and anxiety. Conflict between players and negative attitudes within the training camp and general playing environment were cited as common causes of stress. Much of this stemmed from competition for team places, player self-promotion, the formation of relational cliques, and insecurities around team selection – all of which manifested in a lack of trust between players. Amidst such anxieties, respondents cited social support networks as crucial to emotional wellbeing. Perhaps not surprisingly parents and family members played a central role here although it was noted by some interviewees that familial relationships could, in themselves, bring their own tensions and pressures.

Against this backdrop, the contribution of the sports chaplain was welcomed by players as an alternative avenue of support with respondents recognizing the valuable contribution which chaplaincy could make to positively affect emotional wellbeing. However, despite the positive attitude of respondents towards chaplaincy, it is important to note that such provision is heavily dependent upon the support of managers, coaches and significant others at the elite sporting level. In turn, the building of trusting relationships with the chaplain is essential if players are to benefit from the pastoral and spiritual care available. The general perception of interviewees was that chaplains demonstrated unconditional support to all those within their sporting locales. In particular, respondents expressed enthusiasm for the potential to share their personal problems and concerns within the context of a non-performance-related environment where objectivity and confidentiality were prioritized.

The study brought with it a series of limitations. Sample size has long since been a point of contention for qualitative researchers yet, as noted, whilst respondent access was an issue evidence from semi-structured interviews confirmed that data saturation had been achieved. The protection of anonymity and confidentiality was critical given the small number of female international players in the UK. The majority of respondents were non-Christian but sympathetic to the work of the chaplains who they had experienced at the domestic and international level. However, given that the first author is a practicing chaplain and was known to the respondents, it is acknowledged that bias may be evident within the data on display. It is also acknowledged that a mixed methods or purely quantitative approach to data collection may have generated different results.

Notwithstanding these limitations and the lack of generalizability on offer, it is suggested that these findings have implications for policy and practice both within elite female soccer and sports chaplaincy per se. Firstly, sports chaplains should be encouraged to provide specialized services to women's soccer in order that players and staff within this setting might

benefit from their wider pastoral support. In turn, sports chaplaincy organizations should be encouraged to establish specific training and development events concerning the nuances of chaplaincy services to the women's game. It is also recommended that sports chaplains should better promote these services to host clubs and governing bodies (both at the domestic and international level) in order to emphasize their potential contribution. In addition, further research should be carried out into the role of sports chaplains at different levels within women's soccer and across other female sports in order to assess their potential to make a more strategic contribution to athlete wellbeing.

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