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Introduction: developing the research agenda in junior and youth grassroots football culture

Running heads:

Soccer & Society

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AQ2 According to data obtained from its 207 member associations, in 2007 the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) noted that an estimated 265 million people play association football (soccer) in organized or recreational settings worldwide. Of this number, 9.4 million youth under the age of 18 worldwide were registered in **soccer** football clubs.¹ In very many countries, the overwhelming majority of people who play football are children and adolescents who participate in various youth and junior grassroots settings, with varying degrees of formality, and for a whole range of purposes and motivations. The sport of football also has a great deal of social and cultural traction globally and much attention has been, and continues to be, paid to the professional level of the game. Most recently, particular attention has been paid to the allegations of corruption faced by the world governing body, FIFA, the hosting of the 2018 and 2022 World Cup in Russia and Qatar, and the relative success of the 2015 Women’s World Cup held in Canada. To these can be added many other matters which have been of long-standing concern in studies of the professional game, including talent identification and development, commercial sponsorship, fandom and player wages, spectator behaviour, racism, national identity and nationalism and standards of coaching and team success.

Much of the academic research – located in a variety of disciplines (e.g. sociology, psychology, sports management, business and media studies) – on professional football has typically been narrowly focused around the experiences of adult players and, increasingly, elite young footballers. Indeed, much has been written on a variety of matters relating to player and coach experiences of youth development programmes,² player welfare, (REF HERE), and identity³ and migration⁴ in professional youth football academies. In addition, the influence of parents⁵ and the experiences and education of elite level youth coaches have also received particular attention. Other work has focused on the organizational,⁶ cultural and environmental⁷ dimensions of elite youth player development.⁸ Most recently, Nesti and Sulley⁹ examined a selection of youth football development programmes around the world to offer recommendations for future improvement based on best practice.

Notwithstanding the bias in academic work towards professional football, the players, coaches and adults who are the focus of such work will have at some point participated in, and had their formative experiences shaped by, youth and junior grassroots football. The pre-occupation with elite youth level players and the governance of professional football¹⁰ has been accompanied by a relative academic neglect of football at youth and junior grassroots level. Even Giulianotti’s purportedly thoroughly sociological analysis of all aspects of football does not address junior and youth grassroots football,¹¹ while Golblatt’s¹² comprehensive history of football provides nothing other than a cursory acknowledgement of it. Some might argue that this academic bias is not surprising, though as the football historian James Walvin has noted, the cultural significance of grassroots football is crucial because in comparison to studies of the professional game:

there is another football story to tell; about ordinary, run-of-the-mill football, about boys in the park, schoolchildren driven to games by parents, older men (long past their prime) struggling on bleary-eyed Sunday mornings to recapture their footballing best, and millions more simply kicking a ball against a back wall. It is generally untold because it is part and parcel of the world we live in. We see it, know it, have taken part in it, as children, parents, as players or as spectators. At this level football is just another feature of life’s weekly routines and scarcely warrants a passing thought. Yet it is this massive, incalculable substratum of popular football that sustains the professional game; the millions of ordinary players who nurture the national (and global) interest in the high-powered, commercially driven world of successful professional soccer. More than that, this popular attachment to the game takes us right back to the origins of the game itself. This is how football has always been; a simplicity and ease of play embedded deep in the routines and habits of ordinary people. That is why the game of football remains the people’s game, however lavish and often absurd the antics of the wealthy minority.¹³

For Walvin and perhaps many others, youth and junior grassroots football is the lifeblood of the professional game that provides the foundations upon which future playing talent and paying supporters are often derived, and which has played a part in the development and increasing commercialization and professionalization of professional football. The grassroots level of football is also the environment in which children are typically introduced to the game at school and in junior clubs, and continue to play out their leisure time in the evenings and at weekends as adults. Grassroots football is also the source in many countries of political attention and public policy, not least because it is often seen as an important vehicle through which governments seek to achieve a whole range of social outcomes (e.g. improved community cohesion, positive youth development, enhanced social inclusion, and improved health and well-being).

This special issue of *Soccer and Society* seeks to address the obvious lacuna which exists in the social scientific literature by exploring a number of essential issues which are regarded as being significant in youth and junior grassroots football (which encompasses organized youth and junior football for males and females aged under 18 through to more informal leisure time participation). These issues are examined within particular sociocultural contexts and are expressive of the practice of grassroots football in a particular time period and space, but the various contributions included in this volume help to provide the foundations upon which future investigations may be based. The volume is necessarily selective and the contributions cannot be held to be representative of the complexity and diversity of topics which need to be better understood if we are to arrive at a more adequate understanding of grassroots football. Readers may be disappointed to see that particular topics have been omitted from the collection, and that articles have not been included from authors in a broader and more diverse set of sociocultural contexts, but this does not detract from an important fact: we currently know very little empirically and theoretically about the reality of grassroots football globally, and much work remains to be done on this important feature of the so-called 'people's game'.

The volume opens with a contribution from practitioners working for the English Football Association (FA). The article provides an account of the developments in grassroots football undertaken by one national association. The authors describe how The FA has adopted an increasingly strategic approach to football development at the junior grassroots level, and point towards the past and future challenges in implementing policies and innovations in the provision of youth football that are central to cultural change.

The paper by O'Gorman and Greenough builds on, and is located within the context of, the opening paper by [HoweHowie](#) and Allison. The authors extend the work of Pitchford et al.¹⁴ and seek to understand mini soccer from the perspective of the child in a social world which is increasingly shaped and structured by adults. As an alternative to the predominant developmental view of children that appears to dominate social science research,¹⁵ audiovisual methods are used to represent children's (aged under 7–under 10) views of critical incidents in mini soccer and their experiences of those incidents in a league in north-west England. O'Gorman and Greenough argue that children's experiences are shaped by the network of social relations in which they are enmeshed and illustrate the deeply entrenched cultures that exist within mini soccer, and the game more broadly which come to impact significantly children's experiences. The views and experiences children recalled of the same critical incidents were neither homogenous nor entirely heterogeneous as such, which as the authors explain presents a variety of challenges for advocates of the game wishing to introduce future innovations which enhance the experiences children have of football.

In the next essay, Tjomsland and colleagues provide an account of the sources of enjoyment in grassroots football by 12–14-year-olds in Norway. Set in the context of Norwegian grassroots football culture which, the authors suggest, is predominantly focused on participation rather than competition, the study reports data from participants recruited from the Promoting Adolescent Physical Activity (PAPA) project. The PAPA project seeks to encourage grassroots coaches to implement a supportive, engaging and enjoyable culture on the assumption that this will enhance and sustain long-term participation in football by children who, it is assumed, will subsequently engage in healthy physical activity through grassroots football.¹⁶

Dunn's essay also explores the cultural significance of grassroots football via her analysis of elite female footballers' perceptions of being role models and the role this is believed to play in stimulating participation by females in grassroots football. She argues that much research on female football generally has been driven by success and the increasing public profile of elite adult national clubs and teams.¹⁷ To date, evidence that role models have a positive influence on the propensity for children and adolescents to take part in sport has been scant but Dunn's contribution sheds light on two issues. First, Dunn explores elite women footballers' recollections about how female role models influenced their own participation in grassroots football. Second, this selection of footballers discuss how they perceive their role model status in influencing mass participation, and in doing so highlight some of the known cultural barriers to female participation in grassroots football. The paper offers a different insight than other studies that focus on girls' participation and provision.

Following on from cultural components that mediate participation in grassroots, Temple and Crane draw on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development to offer a systematic review of the literature on dropout among children and adolescents. The process of undertaking the review itself

is revealing regarding the lack of research and available literature on grassroots youth soccer more generally. Of the 137 studies identified by Temple and Crane, only 14 met the keyword search and inclusion criteria devised for the study. The majority of the studies simply investigated the personal characteristics of children and adolescents, and few recognized the contextual and cultural factors associated with dropout. While it is highlighted that the dropout rate of children from soccer is consistent with dropout in child and adolescent sport more generally, the authors suggest that future research on dropout needs to expand the scale and scope of enquiry to include, among other things, the interactions between the individual and the environment. This, they argue, will help develop a deeper understanding of the cultural constraints that help explain why children and adolescents dropout of football, and better inform future policy intended to stimulate participation in grassroots football.

The next two essays explore the significance of social stratification and various forms of social division which structure children's participation in grassroots football, though there is of course a need to better understand the intersection of these with other social divisions (such as sexuality and age) which also structure grassroots participation. Many of the issues explored by the authors in this volume are not new, and there exists a large body of literature which examines issues of 'race' and ethnicity within grassroots football,¹⁸ and which has pointed towards particular expressions and forms of resistance and identity in grassroots.¹⁹ However, as football is a global game in an increasingly global society in which cultural and human flows are becoming increasingly prominent and intense, the integration of groups from different cultural backgrounds in grassroots football remains an under-explored area of research. To this end, Mauro's contribution explores the nuances of social stratification that mediate the assimilation of immigrant youth expressions of identity, resistance and acceptance in the grassroots football arena in Ireland. Mauro suggests that, for the participants in his study, grassroots football provides an important arena in which their transcultural encounters find expression and are negotiated in the context of their relations with others.

Swanson then examines class-based production in girls' football in the United States (US). Drawing upon Bourdieu's work on the reproduction of social class, Swanson illustrates how young females' involvement in football is to a large extent shaped by intersections of class and gender in the US. Notably, grassroots soccer appears to be connected to the reproduction of pre-existing inequalities as participation is viewed as a symbolic indication of class and status, and as something which is socially desired by parents. As well as exploring the links between grassroots participation and inequality, Swanson draws upon the youth and politics of culture literature to examine the discrepancies that exist between the expectations of mothers and parents in shaping their children's participation, and the experiences and motivations of those children in participating in football. This disconnection between parents' desires for children's participation in football, it is held, represents a generational divide which is exacerbated by a misunderstanding of children's participation. A deeper understanding of the generational differences in experiences of youth football is therefore important if future policy and innovations in grassroots football are to be informed more adequately in their design and implementation.

In the final essay of this volume, Potrac and colleagues draw attention to adults who play an important role in the provision of grassroots football: volunteer coaches. Despite the scale and practice of grassroots football coaching in very many countries, little academic attention has so far been paid to grassroots coaches. Potrac et al. argue that coach education at the grassroots level is becoming increasingly important for a variety of groups seeking to realize a number of related aims and objectives, including the role coaches are believed to play in providing quality experiences which sustain participation, and enhance players' technical ability. The authors present a creative fiction as to explore their shared experiences of being coach learners in this context. In doing so, concepts from relational sociology are employed to highlight the emotional and (micro)political processes that shape the grassroots coaches experiences as learners in relation to significant others within their network of social relations. To date, little, if any, attention has been afforded to the interconnections between the multiple social networks in which grassroots coaches are embedded. A relational approach is identified as one particular way that may allow researchers to not only better understand how grassroots football coaches attempt to manage their various identities, but also the wider social demands that are placed on them in providing opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in organized football. In particular, the authors call for more empirically and theoretically informed accounts of grassroots football coaches experiences.

Overall, the collection of essays in this volume represent a preliminary consideration of what is already currently known about grassroots football and, no less importantly, point towards what remains unknown and under-researched but which deserves much more attention than has been given hitherto. It is clear, for example, that grassroots football is a fertile ground for future academic analyses which seek to use a range of methods that better capture the lived experiences and realities of grassroots football for young players and the adults (e.g. coaches) to whom their care is entrusted. The persistence of social divisions in structuring opportunities for participation (whether via direct participation or indirectly through spectatorship and other forms of support), and the individual and collective impact of these, also warrants much closer investigation. How young people's welfare can be best safeguarded within the cultures which surround football, and the roles played by significant others (e.g. parents) in that endeavour, should also remain at the forefront of research in junior and youth grassroots football. Above all, however, it is essential that future enquiries give much more emphasis to the voices and experiences of young people themselves, rather than perpetuating the dominant tendency for studies to investigate their life worlds from the

perspectives of adults.

Disclosure statement

AQ3 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. 'FIFA Magazine, Big Count 2007'.
2. Cushion and Jones, 'Power, Discourse, and Symbolic Violence in Professional Youth Soccer: The Case of Albion Football Club'.
3. Brown and Potrac, "'You've Not Made the Grade, Son": De-selection and Identity Disruption in Elite Level Youth Football'.
4. Weedon, "'Global Boys": Exploring Experiences of Acculturation among Migrant Youth Footballers in Premier League Academies'.
5. Harwood, Drew, and Knight, 'Parental Stressors in Professional Youth Football Academies: A Qualitative Investigation of Specialising Stage Parents'.
6. Relvas et al., 'Organizational Structures and Working Practices in Elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the Relationship between Youth and Professional Domains'.
7. Cushion and Jones, 'A Bourdieusian Analysis of Cultural Reproduction: Socialisation and the "Hidden Curriculum" in Professional Football'.
8. Mills et al., 'Identifying Factors Perceived to Influence the Development of Elite Youth Football Academy Players'.
9. Nesti and Sulley, *Youth Development in Football: Lessons from the World's Best Academies*.
10. Gammels, Gammelsæter, and Senaux, *The Organisation and Governance of Top Football across Europe: An Institutional Perspective*.
11. Giulianotti, *Football*.
12. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football*.
13. Walvin, *The Only Game*, 251–2.
14. Pitchford et al., 'Children in Football: Seen but Not Heard'.
15. Wyness, *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*.
16. Van Hoye et al., 'Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviours among Grassroots Football Players: A Comparison across Three European Countries'.
17. Magee, Caudwell, and Liston, *Women, Football and Europe*.
18. Bradbury, 'From Racial Exclusions to New Inclusions: Black and Minority Ethnic Participation in Football Clubs in the East Midlands of England'; Lusted, 'Negative Equity? Amateurist Responses to Race Equality Initiatives in English Grass-roots Football'.
19. Burdsey, *Race, Ethnicity and Football: Persisting Debates and Emergent Issues*.

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