Article

Christianity, Identity, and Professional Football

Graham Daniels and Andrew Parker *

Ridley Hall, Cambridge CB3 9HG, UK
* Correspondence: ap2230@cam.ac.uk

Abstract: Empirical research on the lives of Christian elite athletes has focused primarily on their appropriation of faith-based behaviours and practices, and the ways in which their value and belief systems impact their performance. While these accounts provide useful insight into personal experience and practical application, they are largely devoid of theological underpinnings. Drawing on the findings of a small-scale qualitative study of the faith journeys of 15 ex-professional footballers, this paper seeks to present a theologically informed understanding of identity formation within elite sport. We begin by problematising the disjuncture between theocentric and anthropocentric approaches to the ways in which the specific identities of Christian elite athletes are often formed. We then explore the key issues that shaped the contours of the respondents' experiences as they sought to negotiate their faith amidst the harsh realities of professional footballing life. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of appropriate support networks to identity formation in Christian elite athletes.

Keywords: Christianity; identity; English professional football; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Whilst the academic literature surrounding the sport–Christianity interface has increased markedly in recent years (see, for example, Harvey 2014; Ellis 2014), relatively little has emerged on the theological underpinnings of identity formation in elite sport. Moreover, those engaged in the study of Christianity and sport have routinely acknowledged that, paradigmatically, theology and the social sciences have traditionally belonged to opposite ends of the research spectrum (see, for example, Ward 2012). They suggest that, despite an increasing body of academic literature in this field, and regardless of the clear understanding that belief systems impact social relationships, theologians have been somewhat reluctant to recognise the value of empirical research and work in the interpretive tradition (Parker and Watson 2014). Drawing on the findings of a small-scale qualitative study of the faith journeys of 15 ex-professional footballers, this paper seeks to present a theologically informed understanding of the lived experiences of four of these players, all of whom experienced similar career and faith trajectories.

Utilising the work of Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b), we begin by presenting a foundational theological framework for identity formation in elite sport. This theocentric perspective distinguishes between a "received" and "achieved" identity, emphasising the precedence of God's initiative in conferring a sense of value and self-worth in athletes. Complimentary to this notion is the idea that God also provides and sustains athletic talent, to facilitate sporting attainments. Our central argument is that this alignment of personal worth and athletic performance may enable the Christian athlete to integrate faith and sport, leading to a workplace witness to Christianity. We then move to an exploration of identity formation within elite sport culture, thereby problematising the disjuncture between the theocentric and anthropocentric approaches. In so doing, we outline the social processes through which identities have traditionally been formed within the cultural confines of elite sport (including English professional football), which typically represent an anthropocentric, achievement-orientated (performance-based) approach (see Jones et al. 2020). To this end,

the paper uses a theocentric lens to analyse the influence of Christian faith and the role of significant others in counteracting the institutional demands of professional football. We do this by exploring the faith journeys of respondents, and how Christian theology and the role-modelling of a "received" identity by Christian peers assisted them not only in coming to faith, but in navigating some of the harsh realities of professional footballing life: namely, team deselection and personal injury.[1] The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of appropriate support networks to identity formation in the lives of Christian elite athletes.

2. Christian Identity and Elite Sport

Writing from the perspective of sports theologian and practicing sports chaplain Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b) reflects on the challenges facing modern-day, elite Christian athletes. Drawing on the seminal work of Niebuhr (1951) regarding the ways in which the Christian message has been understood through a range of cultural perspectives, Null identifies how Christianity has traditionally been represented in sports culture via two conflicting theological ideas—that the faith of the Christian athlete is either predicated on being "driven" or being "called". For Null (2008a), a "driven" approach is one whereby redemption can be "earned" through personal effort or achievement, whilst a "called" approach sees redemption as being "received" as a free gift, simply as a result of a commitment to the Christian faith. Null (2004, 2008a, 2008b) views these two approaches as mutually exclusive and demands theological rigour in separating and clarifying them in relating Christianity to elite sport. Null maintains that to be "driven" is to fall into line with the default perspective of elite sport, whereby personal worth is "achieved" as a result of sporting performance. This manifests itself in the tendency of elite Christian athletes to try to prove their personal worth and value to God via sporting achievement and success. Null maintains that such an approach is theologically inconsistent and should be challenged, advocating, instead, for a "called" relationship with God, which is predicated on the belief that personal value is not found in one's sporting achievement, but in God's unconditional love and acceptance. Null's suggestion is that understanding and experiencing the unconditional nature of being "called" is critical to developing and maintaining a healthy identity as a Christian athlete, given that the context of elite sport is one where, amidst the intensity of public competition, it is normative for personal worth to be accredited solely based on personal achievement. The result of being "called" is that the athlete obtains an assurance that, regardless of their personal effort, success, or failure, she or he is in a relationship with, and "received" by, God.

For Null, a failure to question the normative assumptions embedded in elite sports culture is likely to lead to Christian athletes being "driven" to earn God's favour, in a similar manner to that in which they have imbibed the obligation to prove themselves of value to their coaches, fellow competitors, and fans. In turn, failure to differentiate between "driven" (achieved) and "called" (received) identities may make it more difficult for athletes to experience liberation from seeking personal worth through performance in the sporting arena, rather than in the unconditional acceptance of God. For Null (2008a), it is theologically axiomatic that this premise be thoroughly rejected. An identity formed and maintained upon being "driven", i.e., what we can earn from God, is the theological antithesis of being "called", i.e., what God has freely given us. To this end, Null argues that critical to helping elite athletes understand the relationship between Christianity and sport is the premise that they are acceptable to (and accepted by) God through their faith, and that such divine acceptance is entirely unrelated to sporting success or failure. In this view, it is only in the clarity of God's grace that athletes can gain and experience an identity congruous with this "calling". Taking Null's argument one step further, we contend that such a theological approach has the scope not only to assist Christian athletes in negotiating and recalibrating the relationship between their faith and their athletic identity, but to inform the everyday practices and behaviours of Christian sports coaches, mentors, and

chaplains in terms of their contribution to the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the athletes with whom they work.

3. Athletic Identity and Elite Sport

Those working at the interface of Christianity and sport have long since offered critiques of the values and practices of elite sporting sub-cultures (see Jones et al. 2020). Secular writers have raised similar concerns. For example, several studies have sought to understand the harsh realities of employment within professional football, with specific reference to the way in which historically embedded values and practices can adversely affect the identity formation of its employees (see, Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2012, 2014; Brown and Potrac 2009; Manley et al. 2016). The main thrust of this literature is that "professional football is such an all-consuming and physically demanding career that it is inevitable that self-identity is, essentially, determined by it" (Roderick 2006a, p. 17). In essence, the prevailing institutional norms of professional football mean that career achievements define player identities. Related literature shows how football as a vocation can limit the holistic development of personal identity, preventing the emergence of a healthy sense of self.

Roderick (2006a) draws on the work of Goffman (1959), who portrays everyday social life as a staged drama in which social actors attempt to form favourable self-impressions before different audiences. This notion of "dramatic realization" (1959, p. 30) suggests that, while in the presence of others, i.e., when "front stage", individuals strive to behave so that the "audience" can grasp what might, without a good "performance", remain unapparent or obscure (1959, pp. 15–16, 128). The suggestion is that the "presentation of self" is a carefully (stage-)managed process. Individuals interact by displaying themselves through many differing "fronts" to conform to various social and institutional roles and norms (1959, p. 225). Within any given culture, identity management promotes the appearance that individuals adhere to normative group practices and values. Central to the possibility of developing alternative personal identities is that, whilst presenting the requisite front-stage behaviours, individuals simultaneously possess the capacity to engage in conduct contrary to the dominant norms in play. Roderick (2006a) uses this dramaturgical framework to analyse how the professional footballers in his research developed their personal and professional identities. Specifically, he shows how players attempted to distance their back-stage selves from workplace, front-stage performances, finding discrete ways to dissociate from a total commitment to organisational expectation (see, also, Roderick and Schumacker 2016).

To further our understanding of the factors that might determine the integration of back-stage and front-stage identities, Hickey and Roderick (2017) combine Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework with Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of "possible selves". They analysed the formation and workplace exhibition of alternative personal identities amongst male professional footballers aged 18 and 26 who had experienced a career transition from the English Premier League to other clubs, higher education, or alternative employment outside of the professional game. Hickey and Roderick (2017) argue that, in the case of their respondents, the flexibility of identity formation and the public presentation of self were continually being adjusted and negotiated based on a vision of whom they wished to become. Several factors contributed to attaining such a future ideal, especially legitimisation and support from work colleagues, family, and friends, which had the potential to positively impact an individual's willingness to realise the public presentation of a possible future self. Participants who did not receive such affirmation struggled to realise alternative identities. In such cases, the desire of participants to sustain a career in professional football inhibited the expression of a non-footballing identity.

To summarise the discussion so far, the literature considered above indicates that the identities of Christian elite athletes are continually negotiated amidst a number of competing narratives, some faith-based and some culturally embedded. Moreover, these identities are complex, multifaceted, and subject to a range of external influences. Before exploring

further how this process of negotiation played out in the personal and working lives of the professional footballers in the present study, it is to a consideration of methodology and method that we initially turn.

4. Methodology and Method

The data featured here derives from a small-scale qualitative study of 15 ex-professional footballers, all of whom spent the majority of their playing careers in the UK. The central research question and overall aim of the study was to identify the impact of the Christian faith on identity formation within the professional game. Data were collected in three phases between December 2017 and June 2019, and a total of 43 interviews were undertaken. Phase 1 comprised one-to-one, in-person, semi-structured interviews with all 15 respondents. Phases 2 and 3 comprised one-to-one, semi-structured interviews via Skype or Zoom with 14 respondents.[2] In the interests of coherence and brevity, the empirical data presented in the following sections are confined to the experiences of four of these respondents, all of whom experienced similar career and faith trajectories. A qualitative methodological approach was deployed, which was, necessarily, grounded in a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, thereby enabling an in-depth exploration of the experiences of respondents (Berger and Luckmann 2011; Flick 2018). Questioning style was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify participant responses (Bryman 2016). The initial round of discussions enquired about respondents' career histories and how they became Christians. The second focused on how Christianity had impacted their workplace and domestic relationships and their broader social lives. The third centred on notions of identity formation and, more specifically, the role of Christian peers in supporting their faith journeys. The overall aim of the study was not only to generate a rich description of the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences, but also to explore the meanings that they attached to these experiences (Bryman 2016).

Participants were purposively selected, all having experienced becoming a Christian during their footballing careers (Creswell 2009). In turn, respondents needed to have sustained a playing career long enough after becoming a Christian to observe how faith and football had impacted their sense of self and their workplace and social relationships. At the time of the research, all respondents had retired from playing football. Following their playing careers, six respondents continued to work full-time within the professional game, one had managed a number of semi-professional teams, one combined management in professional football with a charitable role, one directed a charity, and five had become church pastors. Twelve of those interviewed lived in the UK, and two overseas (in the USA and Canada, respectively). The age of respondents ranged from 42 to 66 years, and this facilitated an exploration of the process of identity formation both during and beyond their playing careers. Notwithstanding the range of denominational nuances in play, all respondents identified as Protestant Christians.

Prior to the onset of the research, ethical approval was granted by The Faculty of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. All respondents were contacted directly via email or telephone in the first instance, and each was issued with an information sheet and consent form regarding the collection of data prior to interviewing. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Interview questions were derived from the related academic literature and framed in line with the specific focus of the research topic and the extant literature. In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), a grounded theory approach to data analysis was deployed (see, also, Charmaz 2014). Data were analysed in four stages. Firstly, transcripts were read in full to gain a comprehensive overview of the data. Secondly, each transcript was individually coded and indexed, allowing the different aspects of participant experience to be captured. Thirdly, these experiences were then categorised into a number of overarching topics. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organisation of these topics into generic themes, two of which provide the focus for the remainder of our

discussion. The first explores the trials and tribulations of team deselection, whilst the second focuses the practical and emotional consequences of physical injury.

5. Faith and Deselection

As we have seen, one of the stringent cultural expectations in English professional football is that players position the game at the core of their identity. In turn, they must adopt attitudes and behaviours that demonstrate an acceptance of their achievement-orientated, performance-based environment. Indeed, the success of players is, at least partly, contingent upon their achievement of conforming to these cultural expectations and norms. Crucial though these attitudes and behaviours are, they mean little if players fail in their ultimate goal to gain first-team selection (see Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2014). Achievement and performance are the normative hallmarks of personal success and fulfilment within this scenario. Conversely, team deselection has the potential to breed a sense of disillusionment and rejection, as Colin Adams and Phil Lee experienced.

When Colin began his career as a trainee player at a First Division club in 1980, he was already guaranteed a three-year professional contract when he reached the age of 18. Phil Lee also completed a successful trainee period at a First Division club and made his first-team debut at the age of 19, in the inaugural year of the Premier League in 1992. Despite such promising starts, neither had consolidated a first-team place by the end of their first full season. Subsequently, Colin was loaned to a Third Division club, while Phil found himself out of contract.

In his in-depth analysis of the careers of professional footballers, Roderick (2006a, 2014) outlines the impact of team deselection and club transfers on the self-worth of players, indicating that moves to clubs higher up the football league necessarily represent career progress (and, thus, equate to an enhanced sense of personal value and worth), whilst transfers to less prestigious clubs typically result in players feeling unwanted and undervalued which, in turn, often manifests as a loss of self-esteem and heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty about their status and future. In such situations, players often seek to regain workplace approval by other means. Common here is an increased determination to re-establish oneself by finding a new club and, in so doing, proving their old club wrong in their decision to reject them. This process is a product of the cultural conflation between player identity and individual achievement. Phil exemplified this:

> It [being released] was like from 'hero to zero', a real shocking experience. It hurt . . . I think the only way I can describe it now looking back was that it was my first real rejection from [the Manager] saying, "Look, you're not good enough". So that hurt. It took me a number of years to get over that, without me knowing it, because my thought process after that was, "Prove them wrong".

Colin did not have to leave his host club but chose to make his loan into a permanent move to ensure regular first-team football. However, rather than enhancing his sense of self-worth, the move proved to be a harrowing experience:

> It was a nightmare, really. Surviving in a team losing all the time as a wide player [playing in a wide, forward position] is just impossible. I feel for anybody who goes through that. Because you're not the player who's going to change that. And therefore, you get battered by something that you haven't got the armoury to stop . . . Because nobody can bring the best out of you . . . So, you're just the wrong player in the wrong place at that time. So, I do remember that as being my hardest period in football.

Though he managed to establish a successful career, the passing of time only served to exacerbate Phil's disenchantment and declining sense of contentment and fulfilment with the professional game. After leaving his original club, he signed a three-year contract with a Third Division club. He then spent another three years at a First Division club, where, in his final year, he was offered a new contract, but at a salary level below that offered to

less experienced players, a situation which made Phil feel that he was no longer valued or wanted:

> Football, at that point, wasn't the most important thing anymore. There was too much around it that made me think, "Actually, even though you're doing it, do you really enjoy it?" I was 25. Am I really enjoying it [a career in professional football]? Is it all it's set out to be? I've now proven to myself that I can play professional football. Now what? What is it about? I thought it was about the money, in all honesty . . . but it wasn't, and it still didn't satisfy me.

As Hickey and Roderick (2017) note, the pressures of dealing with the cultural demands of having to demonstrate a level of enthusiasm for football whilst privately feeling unhappy may be alleviated by access to, and affirmation of, alternative senses of self. Following this model, and amidst an increasing sense of disillusionment with the professional game, Christian peers began to have an influence on Colin and Phil by demonstrating an alternative source of identity via their portrayal of the mission of God through a combination of authentic relationships and an articulation of the Christian message. Colin described the influence of the Christian player he was replacing at his new club. Colin was surprised that this person, whose footballing career was now under threat, could respond positively to such a situation. Rather than showing signs of jealousy and despair, his teammate demonstrated genuine friendship and encouragement towards Colin and a sense of optimism and hope for himself, all of which presented Colin with a vision of a different kind of identity, one which was counter to the driven, performance-based norms of the professional game, and to which he now aspired:

> [During] the first 19 years of my life, my football seemed to be essential to who I was. So, my identity was strained for me because I wanted to be more than that. And so, faith was not an escape from that . . . But faith answered some of the more imbalanced stuff of my upbringing.

Phil found himself being influenced in a similar way. Having rejected the unpalatable contract offer made to him, he moved to another First Division club for the 2000–2001 season. There, he met the club chaplain, Martin Morgan:

> I got introduced to Martin Morgan. And he helped me with questions, with situations . . . He'd always keep saying to me, "The Bible's alive today, you know, it's relevant for today". And I'm thinking, "Oh man, I think you've got it wrong. But I don't quite know if you're right. You know, you're the real deal [I respect you]. I don't know".

The testimonies of these two respondents resonate with the theocentric framework of Null (2008a, 2008b), which suggests that fulfilment cannot be discovered merely through athletic achievement. Further, the role of significant others, particularly family and friends outside of work, in accessing and appropriating alternative visions of oneself (Hickey and Roderick 2017) was evident in the Christian experience of both. It is evident that the Christians who Colin and Phil encountered conveyed an alternative and somewhat inspirational version of identity formation, based not on personal and professional success but on theological commitment and alignment. Amidst a growing unhappiness and disillusionment with the professional game, the non-performance-/achievement-based routes to personal fulfilment demonstrated by their Christian peers served to influence both Colin and Phil to come to faith. In turn, and as their relationships with Christian peers developed over time, both became familiar with, and subsequently incorporated, a "received" theological outlook, thereby facilitating the formation of healthier identities. As we have seen, the pressure placed on professional players, propagated by institutional culture, often correlates the achievement of workplace goals with personal value. Contrary to this, the sense of fulfilment experienced by Colin and Phil through becoming Christians aligns fully with Null's (2004, 2008a, 2008b) analysis of the theocentric approach to identity formation. Given the sense of disillusionment involved, it is perhaps not surprising that

this same trajectory was present in the lives of respondents who became Christians during times of injury.

6. Faith and Injury

As is the case with deselection, the drive to restore one's place in the team is prevalent when players are injured. In his analysis of ageing and injury in professional football, Roderick (2006c) highlights the need for players to return to action as quickly as possible after injury in order to mitigate feelings of career uncertainty and to restore levels of respect and trust with teammates. The pressure of not performing is ostensibly easier to manage when the injury is physically external or visible. However, things become more complex when the damage is internal or psychological. Typically, players will return to action before they are ready, in order to avoid stigmatisation. They may even conceal pain from medical staff and coaches (Roderick et al. 2000). This cultural norm, once again, highlights the pressure placed upon players (both by themselves and others) to play when not fully fit, whatever the risk to their future health and wellbeing, since the failure to perform due to injury can be a direct challenge to notions of personal value and worth (Roderick 2006a).

James Walters and Ben Morris both became Christians whilst dealing with severe injuries. James made his professional footballing debut for a First Division club in 1987, at the age of 18. Shortly afterwards, he moved to a Second Division team and played 130 games before picking up a career-threatening injury aged 22:

> Just before my 23rd birthday, I did my cruciate [knee ligament]. It was a difficult time . . . I had nothing to fall back on . . . I was just finding life a struggle, even before the injury . . . I was in a bad place even though on the pitch everything was great . . .. It was rumoured that [a major First Division club] were watching [me] . . . But it was a tough period . . . I saw a [clinical] specialist, and he said, "You may never play again". That was a real shock.

James faced a series of immediate difficulties, as his contract was due to expire two months after the injury, and the Club put pressure on him to continue playing without undergoing surgery. He planned to mask the seriousness of the injury so that the Club might release him without needing to fulfil any obligation to finance the required surgery, as well as an extra six months' salary to cover the requisite period of recuperation. However, wanting to demonstrate his commitment to the cause, James agreed to play on, despite the considerable risk to his long-term health. The attempt failed, and the club released him at the end of the season, a factor which contributed to his growing cynicism towards the professional game:

> They tried to get me back playing without doing the operation [to limit the club's financial liability]. They said, "Oh, your leg's got a lot of stability". But every time I got to a certain stage in my rehab [rehabilitation], and I tried to check or twist, it just collapsed under me and literally made me feel sick . . . They released me at Christmas, halfway through my rehab [rehabilitation] . . . I was living at my cousin's house at the time. Back then, I had lost [my] house and all that sort of thing [due to financial constraints].

Like Chris and Phil, James was attracted to Christianity through the influence of a Christian colleague who stood out by way of his practical concern for James when he faced the trauma of severe injury. James started attending a Christian meeting with his colleague after leaving the club, and it was during this time of recovery and career re-establishment that he experienced the emergence of a new sense of fulfilment in his life:

> Somewhere deep inside me, I just knew that I would play again, which was amazing . . . That period of playing for [a Third Division club] was a transition period and being prayed for. I was trusting the Lord that I'd be alright in that first game with the Reserves, and I was wanting to know more about Christianity, and I was travelling to see that gentleman who had prayed for me over that 12-month

period . . . And then I'm signing for [a Second Division club], that's when I . . . gave my life to the Lord.

The process through which Ben Morris become a Christian was also the result of a severe injury. Ben made his debut for a First Division club in 1987, at the age of 17, only for his flourishing career to suddenly come to a halt in 1988:

I had torn my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament] and posterior cruciate [ligament]. Now in 1991, those were career-threatening injuries . . . I went to the medical] specialist, who said, "Look, we're going to give you an injection, but if that doesn't work, your career is over". . . . And after he said, "Your career is over". It was like his mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear anything. All I could think of was, "What am I going to do now?"

Like James, Ben was terrified about what the future held, and his injury contributed to a growing sense that he could not attain personal fulfilment through football. During his long recovery, a trusted senior professional at his club supported him. Shortly after getting back into action, Ben was purchased for a substantial fee by a rival club. At this point, his colleague offered practical advice regarding insurance against future career-threatening injuries and introduced him to a financial advisor who was also a Christian:

Before we even spoke about financial stuff, [the Financial Advisor] said to me, "Do you believe in God?" And I thought, "What on earth has that got to do with you looking after my finances?" And I said, "Yeah". And then we cracked on with the conversation, with the financial stuff, and it was just weird. And then he said to me, "We have this group meeting at [a London church], a sports fellowship. Come down".

Ben did not initially respond to the offer, but over time started attending the Christian meeting for elite athletes, through which he came to faith. Collectively, the experiences of James and Ben encapsulate the central tenets of the present discussion. Both came to faith as a consequence of adverse personal circumstance and a growing disillusionment with the professional game. In turn, both found a heightened sense of personal fulfilment in and through an engagement with a "received" Christian theology that transcended the performance-based narrative which, until then, had "driven" their pursuit of footballing achievement. As they transitioned from schoolboy players to full-time trainees, gradual exposure to these alternative lifestyle experiences via Christian role models and peers challenged and, ultimately, usurped the institutional expectations and demands of professional football as the primary formational source in their lives.

Once again, we see how those who helped identify and re-affirm an alternative route to identity formation were pivotal in the faith journeys of both of these players (Hickey and Roderick 2017). James and Ben learnt how dispensable they were and how quickly they could find themselves out of work. The fragile nature of a footballing career and the commodification of players can lead to an increasing dissatisfaction with the professional game (Roderick 2006a). Nevertheless, because of the counter-cultural influence of other Christians, James and Ben found an alternative source of self-worth beyond that of being a footballer. In contrast with the precarious nature of an identity premised on a professional career, both found a more definitive fulfilment in the Christian faith.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to present a theologically informed understanding of identity formation within elite sport whilst, at the same time, problematising the disjuncture between the theocentric and anthropocentric approaches to the ways in which the specific identities of Christian elite athletes are often formed. Utilising the empirical reflections of retired professional footballers, the paper has provided an analysis of how these respondents navigated the complexities of their career trajectories amidst the harsh realities of football culture and how, having become disillusioned in their everyday work, they found

an alternative (faith-based) source of hope and fulfilment by way of their Christian peers and support networks.

As we have seen, the requirement that professional players maintain a paramount love for football is problematic since the daily pressures of the job make it difficult to sustain such enthusiasm. The data suggest that, when a sense of career uncertainty or threat arose, respondents became anxious as a consequence of the levels of uncertainty in play, and this was exacerbated by the pressures of professional club culture, which demanded a continuous demonstration of enthusiasm and commitment. In turn, respondents became disillusioned with the achievement-orientated, performance-based narrative prevalent in their working environment, which served to diminish their sense of personal fulfilment, and led them to question the basis of their identity. Added to this were the challenges of career downturn, i.e., deselection and injury, which further tarnished the ability of respondents to maintain their passion for football (Roderick 2006a).

Presenting an alternative—and, in many ways, counter-intuitive and counter-cultural—basis for identity formation, findings also indicate the significance of Christian peer networks on respondent lives, especially during times of career downturn. Portraying an outright rejection of anthropocentric notions of identity formation based on "achievement" and "performance", these individuals manifested the adoption of a faith-based mindset, which, by default, reconfigured their identity construction in line with Null's (2004, 2008a, 2008b) theocentric offerings around a "received" identity. In so doing, they actively demonstrated to respondents an inspirational vision of "future self", which brought with it an altogether more palatable sense of personal fulfilment (Hickey and Roderick 2017). In one way or another, and over time, all four of the featured respondents (and, indeed, all 15 of the wider respondent group) came to faith as a consequence of their connection to a fellow Christian in the professional game. On becoming Christians, respondents then incorporated this theocentric mindset, gradually moving from finding fulfilment through football to fulfilment through the Christian faith. From this point on, footballing achievements were no longer the core of their identity. Instead, their relationship with God became the foundational source of their self-worth.

These findings build upon and extend existing research on the effectiveness of Christian chaplains and mentors in elite sport (see Parker et al. 2016), and have implications for sports ministry and sports chaplaincy organisations in relation to the ways in which Christian peer networks are supported and resourced. To this end, we recommend that these organisations come together to explore how such networks can be consolidated and expanded.

We acknowledge that the present findings focus on retrospective data from a small cohort of respondents and that this, necessarily, raises issues of representativeness. Whilst recognising these limitations, we contend that the data do identify the need for further research not only into the lived experiences of Christian elite athletes but also into the theological underpinnings of identity formation within this cohort.

Conflicts of Interest: All 15 original respondents were known to the first author prior to the onset of the research and, in some cases, faith-related conversations had taken place over time.

Notes

1   We use the phrase "coming to faith" here to indicate an explicit commitment to the Christian faith, and the adoption of a commensurate world view and associated lifestyle practices and behaviours.

2   One member of the original cohort passed away in the period between Phases 1 and 2.

References

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 2011. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.

Brown, Gavin, and Paul Potrac. 2009. 'You've not made the grade, son': De-selection and identity disruption in elite level youth football. *Soccer & Society* 10: 143–59.

Bryman, Alan. 2016. *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.

Creswell, John W. 2009. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.

Ellis, Robert. 2014. *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion and Sport*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

Flick, Uwe. 2018. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th ed. New York: Sage.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.

Harvey, Lincoln. 2014. *A Brief Theology of Sport*. London: SCM Press.

Hickey, Colm, and Martin Roderick. 2017. The presentation of possible selves in everyday life: The management of identity among transitioning professional athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 34: 270–80. [CrossRef]

Jones, Luke, Andrew Parker, and Graham Daniels. 2020. Sports chaplaincy, theology and social theory disrupting performance-based identity in elite sporting contexts. *Religions* 11: 660. [CrossRef]

Manley, Andrew, Martin Roderick, and Andrew Parker. 2016. Disciplinary Mechanisms and the Discourse of Identity: The Creation of 'Silence' in an Elite Sports Academy. *Culture and Organisation* 22: 221–44. [CrossRef]

Markus, Hazel, and Paula Nurius. 1986. Possible selves. *The American Psychologist* 41: 954–69. [CrossRef]

Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1951. *Christ and Culture*. Manhattan: Harper and Brothers.

Null, J. Ashley. 2004. *Real Joy: Freedom to be Your Best*. Ulm: Ebner and Speigel.

Null, J. Ashley. 2008a. "Finding the right place": Professional sport as a Christian vocation. In *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*. Edited by Donald L. Deardorff II and John White. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, pp. 315–66.

Null, J. Ashley. 2008b. Some preliminary thoughts on philosophies of sports ministry and their literature. In *The image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*. Edited by Donald L. Deardorff II and John White. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, pp. 241–54.

Parker, Andrew, and Nick J. Watson. 2014. Researching religion, disability, and sport: Reflections and possibilities. *Journal of Disability & Religion* 18: 192–208.

Parker, Andrew, Nick J. Watson, and John B. White. 2016. *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*. London: Routledge.

Roderick, Martin. 2006a. *The Work of Professional Football: A Labour of Love?* London: Routledge.

Roderick, Martin. 2006b. Adding insult to injury: Workplace injury in English professional football. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 28: 76–97. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Roderick, Martin. 2006c. A very precarious profession: Uncertainty in the working lives of professional footballers. *Work, Employment and Society* 20: 245–65. [CrossRef]

Roderick, M. 2012. An unpaid labour of love. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 36: 317–38. [CrossRef]

Roderick, Martin. 2014. From identification to disidentification: Case studies of job loss in professional football. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 6: 143–60. [CrossRef]

Roderick, Martin, and James Schumacker. 2016. 'The whole week comes down to the team sheet': A footballer's view of insecure work. *Work, Employment and Society* 31: 166–74. [CrossRef]

Roderick, Martin, Ivan Waddington, and Graham Parker. 2000. Playing hurt: Managing injuries in English professional football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35: 165–80. [CrossRef]

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.

Ward, Pete, ed. 2012. *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.