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Sport, Chaplaincy and Holistic Support: The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in English Professional Football

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A consistent lack of achievement by the England national football team in recent years has led to English football's governing bodies carrying out an overhaul of youth player development. This process was initiated by the Football Association in the late 1990s and eventually led to the English Premier League introducing the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012, a long-term strategy aimed at producing a greater number of talented 'home-grown' young players. The EPPP is designed as a system of 'holistic support' to produce not just technically proficient athletes but also good role models who understand the significance of professional football in contemporary culture. This paper comprises a small-scale qualitative study of how one Premier League football club utilized sports chaplaincy as part of its EPPP framework. Placing respondent accounts at the centre of the analysis, the paper seeks to illustrate how chaplaincy provision might enhance holistic support mechanisms within elite sporting organizations. The paper concludes by suggesting that the sports chaplain can play a key role in the non-performance aspects of youth player development which may ultimately benefit team success.

KEYWORDS sport, chaplaincy, holistic well-being, youth development, qualitative research, professional football

Introduction

Whilst academic literature surrounding the sport-Christianity interface has increased markedly in recent years (see [Ellis, 2014](#); [Harvey, 2014](#); [Parker et al., 2016](#); [Watson and Parker, 2014](#)), relatively little has emerged on the practicalities of chaplaincy within elite sport which, at times, has led to misunderstandings around the chaplaincy role itself ([Nesti, 2010](#); [Waller et al., 2008](#)). Indeed, to

date, the only real insight offered with regard to the day-to-day impact of chaplaincy within professional sport has emerged from the biographical accounts of chaplains themselves (see for example, [Boyers, 2000, 2006](#); [Heskins and Baker, 2006](#); [Woods, 2011](#)). Likewise, despite an increased focus on spirituality and well-being in sport in recent years ([Mosely *et al.*, 2015](#); [Sarkar *et al.*, 2014](#); [Watson, 2011](#)), there remains a dearth of empirical research regarding those who provide athlete support in these areas. Accordingly, the nature and extent of the support provided by sports chaplains to professional football has yet to be explored to any significant degree. Moreover, the interaction of chaplains with other sporting personnel, i.e., coaches, welfare officers, and wider support teams, requires further examination. The aim of the present paper is to act as some form of corrective in this respect by exploring the role of the sports chaplain in holistic player development in English (youth) professional (Premier League) football (soccer) and by identifying the extent to which such a role might facilitate athlete well-being within this context. Drawing upon the findings of a small-scale, qualitative study into the youth development programme at one English professional football club (Huntley Rovers¹), the paper reveals the contribution that the work of the sports chaplain might make to the holistic support mechanisms which have been implemented by the Premier League under the auspices of its Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) ([2012](#)).

Football, youth and the EPPP

The EPPP is a long-term strategy initiated by the English Premier League in 2012 which aims to improve football youth development and increase the number and quality of ‘home-grown’ players who come through the club Academy structure—the framework via which young players at the elite level are initiated into professional football as full-time workers. The vision and scope of the EPPP includes creating an environment that addresses all aspects of player development. The Premier League’s aim is that an increased focus on welfare, safeguarding, education, and mentoring will help facilitate positive and mature lifestyle choices, with holistic support viewed as an integral component to achieving these goals. Under the EPPP, academies are required to demonstrate through their philosophy, vision and actions, a comprehensive programme of personal and professional development which creates a safe and caring environment in which young players can flourish and achieve their full potential. This includes possessing the life skills necessary to become responsible and well-rounded members of society.

Given that player performance and progression may vary depending upon physical, cultural and emotional influence, researchers have been keen to investigate why young players behave and develop as they do. [Parker \(2000\)](#) argues that youth development in English professional football has evolved from relatively informal beginnings to a much more structured and institutionalized way of life, where young players are now strictly managed in terms of their everyday behaviours and routines (see also [Manley *et al.*, 2016](#); [Parker, 1995](#); [Parker and Manley,](#)

¹ In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

2016). Manley *et al.* (2012) concur with this view suggesting that such stringent managerial regimes run the risk of creating a ‘one-dimensional identity’ (p. 3) for young players, as their lives are primarily focused on sporting performance and often lack alternative roles or interests that may facilitate a healthy sense of self and personal value (see also McCready, 2015). In turn, Gearing (1999) argues that professional footballers are ‘immersed in an occupational world of intense emotionality and drama’ (p. 5), where the unique institution of the football club stamps a specific character and identity on young players as they pass through early adulthood in an occupational reality that is very different to the world of most other young people of similar age. In the same vein, Roderick (2006, 2012) has argued that whilst concepts of team cohesion and social solidarity are ingrained in football club culture, there remains a lack of understanding of the dynamics of personal and family/domestic life which has the potential to disrupt stability for young players. Such elements of stability would appear critical given that only around 5% of academy players go on to have a career as a professional footballer (Nesti and Sulley, 2015).

Football, chaplaincy and holistic support

Nesti and Sulley (2015) contend that the workplace culture within English professional football mainly focuses on mental strength and performance-based mind-sets with little attention to personal well-being. They subsequently go on to argue that the role of the chaplain is vital within this context as it provides a ‘highly skilled level of sensitive pastoral support’ which brings with it a unique level of confidentiality (p. 48). Nesti and Sulley (2015) also suggest that it is beneficial within the confines of a particular sports setting when all staff, including the chaplain, operate in clearly and consistently defined roles. This helps to build trust and to overcome potential barriers between staff and players. In English professional football the sports chaplain is often seen as a key provider of help and support for those experiencing adversity and as someone who players and staff respect in terms of trust and integrity (Gamble *et al.*, 2013; Nesti, 2010).

More recent research has suggested that there is a degree of overlap between the role of the sports chaplain and that of the sport psychologist, the former being viewed as someone who is primarily interested in the well-being of the person, the latter as being primarily concerned with the enhancement of player performance (Nesti, 2010). Gamble *et al.* (2013) observe that the sport psychologist and the sports chaplain bear similarities in their roles particularly concerning pastoral care, but that sports chaplains can also offer spiritual support which may facilitate discussion around specific faith issues as well as enhancing player contentment. Moreover, Nesti (2010) identifies an ‘overlap regarding issues of confidentiality and trust’ (p. 109) across these roles to the extent that a cohesive working relationship between the two would appear sensible (Gamble *et al.*, 2013).

Of course, coaches can also be viewed as a vital part of the holistic support network for players. For example, Harwood (2008) contends that young players who enjoy quality, nurturing relationships with ‘significant others’ such as their

coach, are more likely to develop the maturity and the resilience needed to overcome adversity. Harwood (2008) also observes that character traits such as self-discipline and commitment, coupled with a supportive family and social network, are parameters perceived to be associated with successful player progression. This view is supported by Nesti and Sulley (2015), who argue that coaches can be highly influential in terms of holistic support, particularly as they have significant contact with players and can positively influence their thinking and life choices. Coaches can also affect the psychological well-being of young players by assisting with non-playing issues such as domestic support and peer conflict. Keathley *et al.* (2014) endorse this standpoint by stating that perceived difficulties in the player–coach relationship constitutes a key reason why young players leave the game.

Chaplaincy provision has increased markedly in English professional football in more recent years. Indeed, it is now relatively rare not to have a sports chaplain working as part of the broader holistic support network in English Premier League clubs. As noted, the chaplain can offer practical, spiritual and pastoral support, and assistance with issues that are not specifically sport related (Gamble *et al.*, 2013; Nesti and Sulley, 2015). However, reticence on the part of players and staff to engage with chaplains can sometimes occur due to the mistaken perception that the chaplain's role is to proselytise their faith. The attitude of club managers may be influential in this respect. For example, in their study of the relationship between sports chaplains and sport psychologists in the English Premier League, Gamble *et al.* (2013) found that chaplains felt that their role may be either empowered or disempowered depending on the attitude of a manager towards them. Nesti and Sulley (2015) emphasize the significance of these facets of organizational culture, arguing that they often provide an unspoken set of rules that represent the club's collective morality, allowing or prohibiting certain types of behaviour (see also Parker and Manley, 2016; Manley *et al.*, 2016). Nesti and Sulley (2015) go on to argue that the chaplain's ability to function as an effective, yet distinct, part of a club's support networks is fundamentally reflective of the depth of relationships that they build with players and staff alike. In a similar way, Nesti (2010) contends that being a consistent, visible presence at a club makes the chaplain more easily accessible when players and/or staff require help with pastoral issues, particularly those relating to family and relationships (see Heskins and Baker, 2006).

The findings of the present study are located both against this wider cultural and conceptual backdrop and against the structural changes that have taken place within English Premier League clubs in relation to youth development as a consequence of the implementation of the EPPP.

Context and method

The research reported here was carried out between July and August 2014 at the start of the 2014–15 English Premier League season. The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews supplemented by participant observation and documentary analysis. The emphasis of the research was on exploring the perceptions of club staff towards the extent to which chaplaincy provision might

enhance the overall remit of the EPPP with regard to holistic player development and support. Interviews took place with key gatekeepers with whom the first author already had an established relationship having been chaplain at Huntley Rovers since 2005. As well as promotional documents concerning the Club's academy structure, internal (online) documentation was also made available by Academy staff which highlighted overall player development and provided additional information such as training schedules and nutritional/performance data normally circulated between coaches, players, and parents.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and were identified according to the experience that they had of working with young elite players. The research sample comprised seven participants: five were Academy staff members; one was the Welfare Officer of an elite football governing body, and one was a director of Huntley Rovers. All participants were male and were familiar with the role of the sports chaplain at the Club. Prior to the onset of the research ethical approval was granted by the University of Gloucestershire. Initially respondents were contacted informally/verbally regarding their willingness to participate in the research and then formally by e-mail to arrange interviews once consent had been obtained. Lasting between 30 and 90 minutes, interviews took place either at the Club's training ground or at the offices of the participants concerned and were audio recorded and transcribed in full. The questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses. Discussions focused on a range of issues surrounding the holistic well-being and/or performance of Academy players. In line with conventional practice concerning processes of respondent validation, all participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcribed accounts for accuracy (Bryman, 2015).

A grounded theory approach to data analysis was deployed in line with Strauss and Corbin (1998). 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, 2000, 2014). To this end, 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 whereby a capturing of the different aspects of participant experience took place. Thirdly, these experiences were then categorized into a number of overarching topics. The final stage of the analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into three generic themes in accordance with which the remainder of our discussion is presented. The first theme identifies the perceived impact of the EPPP on the lives of young players at Huntley Rovers. The second presents respondent perceptions of how, and to what extent, chaplaincy enhanced the holistic support network within the Academy environment. The third reviews how the overall culture at Huntley Rovers impacted chaplaincy provision. Prior to our detailed consideration of these themes, we present a snap-shot of the occupational profiles of each of our respondents and their histories in professional football.

Mike Jenkins

Mike Jenkins has been Head of Education and Welfare for a football governing body since 2009, having initially served on their Youth Development Education team. Prior to this Mike was a physical education teacher for 20 years and coach for a national football association, firstly at a club in the lower professional leagues and then at the elite level. Mike was integral to the establishment of the EPPP at Huntley Rovers.

Brian Southwick

Brian has worked as Huntley Rovers Academy Manager since 2011 having previously been employed as Head of Education at a football club in the English Championship. Prior to this, Brian worked for The Princes Trust helping young people aged 16–24 gain life skills and qualifications and also served as Head of Community Coaching at a non-league football club, having moved into coaching after playing at the semi-professional level.

Donald Maguire

Donald Maguire has been Head of Coaching at Huntley Rovers since 2012. During the four years prior to this he served in various roles at the Club including: Head of Education and Welfare, Assistant Academy Manager, and Operations Manager. Prior to this he spent 12 years working as a secondary school physical education teacher whilst playing semi-professional football at the non-league level.

Jeff Newton

Jeff Newton has been the Education and Welfare Officer at Huntley Rovers since 2013. He also has experience as a secondary school physical education teacher, a profession he moved into after having his professional footballing career at an English Championship club cut short by injury.

Simon Clarke

Simon is a successful businessman and has been director, shareholder and co-owner of Huntley Rovers since 2008. Simon has no direct responsibility for youth team affairs but as a lifelong supporter of the Club has always shown a keen interest in Academy matters and, in particular, the development of young players.

Ron Smith

Ron Smith has been Academy Head of Sports Science and Medicine at Huntley Rovers since 2012, having progressed to this position from Assistant Physiotherapist. Prior to this he was a semi-professional footballer at the non-league level and a football coach in the USA working with players aged 9–18.

Sports chaplaincy and the EPPP

As we have seen, the Premier League EPPP aims to improve youth development in English professional football. It is designed to address the fundamental issues of developing home-grown talent and therefore more players for the English national team (Nesti and Sulley, 2015). The EPPP also aims to enable young players to prepare more effectively for a career in professional sport and a mandatory requirement of the initiative is that clubs provide a 'structured programme that caters to the holistic needs of the players' (Nesti and Sulley, 2015: 40). In addition to more extensive and better quality training and coaching, the EPPP is designed to ensure that improved education and career support is available to young players in order that every aspect of their personal and professional development is catered for. The concept of holistic support is viewed as a key element in achieving the aims of the EPPP however what is meant by this appears to be loosely defined.

From the outset, the EPPP was fully embraced and implemented by Huntley Rovers and all of the staff involved in youth player development were familiar with its details. As a mandate of the Premier League, since 2012 it had become part of their working lives and something to which they were accountable through a clearly defined vision, strategy, and philosophy and measureable goals. In response to the EPPP, an analytical assessment carried out by the Club of the workings of the Academy resulted in a much more cohesive and intentional approach to achieving its aims, with improved facilities and additional staff being recruited. Football Welfare Officer, Mike Jenkins, talked about how the EPPP had enabled young players at Huntley to have more awareness of their responsibility both as individuals and as role models:

I often call it [the] '24 hour professional' rather than holistic development. It's about how you progress as a player on and off the pitch, and I don't think you can separate the two. Holistic development is about giving them [the young players] the skills to be a role model and to be good people, basically. It sounds simplistic. If you look at some of the top professionals in the world today, they're all good people. Football has huge impact, and nowadays a player can be more influential than a politician in terms of what they can do. We have to teach them from a young age that being a professional player means how you are as a role model, how you conduct yourself, and what you give back to your community.

Likewise, Academy Manager Brian Southwick expressed that, in his view, although holistic support covered a broad range of issues, it was essentially about training young players to be mature individuals:

Holistic support is really your all-round coverage of a player. It's about creating an individual for life. It's emotional, physical, well-being, welfare, education, knowledge and respect ... there's more to it than just trying to produce a footballer.

As we have already seen from the work of Nesti and Sulley (2015) in relation to youth development in sport, there has historically been an emphasis on helping players develop mental strength, but the idea that a holistic approach to player well-being might help enhance performance has become more popular since the

introduction of the EPPP. The concept of having an effective holistic support network was viewed as important at Huntley Rovers, and the role of chaplain was seen to sit comfortably within this framework. Academy Head of Sports Science and Medicine, Ron Smith, saw this wider support network as positive:

You can't force people to use the support networks but at the same time you want them to know that it's there. In general I think there's more support than there ever has been. Years ago your support network would be your coaches and your family and that was it.

In a broad sense, the responsibility for the holistic support of young players implicitly appeared to belong to a range of people at the Club. In fact, all staff were expected to be role models and to set a good example to others by way of their personal conduct. Nesti and Sulley (2015) affirm this implicit aspect of club culture, stating that there is often an unspoken belief in professional football that the deepest learning often happens in non-explicit ways. More specifically, the unique responsibility for holistic support was seen by the majority of respondents to come under the remit of three key individuals: (a) the Club's Welfare Officer, (b) the sport psychologist and (c) the Club chaplain. This was emphasized by Donald Maguire, Head of Youth Coaching, who suggested that the most effective way to initiate holistic support was for these three individuals to '... support and enhance each other'.

However, Mike Jenkins had more specific views on the delineation of the roles of the sport psychologist and the chaplain:

Psychology is a science not pastoral support. It gives you strategies to deal with situations that you're in. If you've got personal issues, psychology might teach you how to put it in a box or something like that, but at some stage you're still going to have to deal with the underlying issues. Psychology is important, but in my mind it's very different from pastoral support.

Education and Welfare Officer at Huntley, Jeff Newton, also spoke candidly about his view of the difference between the role of the sport psychologist and the sports chaplain:

The psychology aspect is more geared to helping the coaches make decisions and manage their players. The chaplaincy is specifically for the players and not for the coaches. That's probably why clubs will put more finances into the sports psychologist because it's specifically helping the coaches.

Nesti (2011) supports the view that, although players' understandings of the role of the sport psychologist can vary, the general expectation is that they are more specifically focused on player performance than the chaplain. Gamble *et al.* (2013) have noted that a further key difference between these two roles is that the chaplain can also offer spiritual support. As we have seen, sport psychologists and chaplains often share a number of practical duties, particularly in the area of pastoral care, but this can depend upon the quality of the relationship and level of trust between the two. However, Gamble *et al.* (2013) state that the sport psychologists in their study felt that they were able to offer 'superior pastoral support' to that of chaplains (p. 256). In the majority of English professional football clubs (where sports

chaplains are present), the chaplain is located uniquely as part of a wider holistic support network as an unpaid employee and therefore has no formal influence over, or vested interest in, performance-related matters. However, a potential difficulty which arises within this scenario is that the chaplain can often be left out of important communication processes concerning player welfare.

Chaplaincy and the holistic support network

As noted above, it is not uncommon for chaplains in English professional football to be part of broader holistic support networks, but this role is distinct in that they are rarely a key decision-maker or official member of staff, and therefore hold no position of authority or influence in relation to issues that may determine an athlete's future, such as team selection or contracts. Speaking within the context of his wider football governing body role, Mike Jenkins alluded to the particular benefits of chaplaincy support to players in this respect:

Football chaplains are part of the support structure; players find it very difficult to talk in depth about their feelings to any member of staff because they are part of the system that will make a decision about their future as a player. It's good to have someone to go to who's not got that baggage. It's confidential and you can talk to them [the chaplain] about a whole range of things.

In a similar way, Huntley's Head of Coaching, Donald Maguire, perceived the chaplain's more detached role to be a crucial part of the holistic support network at the Club. He believed that there should never be a situation where a young player had no-one to talk to, regardless of what kinds of issues they may be facing:

At any football club the chaplain is one person who is non-judgmental, a non-decision-maker who could maybe have a view, or support a young person, be it technically, tactically, physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, personally, or from a welfare point of view, that isn't attached to one particular department ... not a decision-maker in terms of contracts or whether or not a player is starting on a Saturday.

Theoretically at least, this gives the chaplain a different perspective on holistic support compared to other staff members which includes a unique level of confidentiality. To this end, there is often a heightened level of awareness amongst players that whatever they divulge to a chaplain will not be disclosed unless it contravenes health and safety regulations and safeguarding protocols. As we have seen, [Nesti and Sulley \(2015\)](#) support this kind of interaction, stating that players have a 'natural reservation about talking about these types of matters to people who are involved in player progression and achievement at the club' (p. 49). Education and Welfare Officer, Jeff Newton, talked about the importance of chaplaincy provision in relation to issues of personal disclosure and confidentiality:

In the great scheme of things I don't think it matters who they [young players] talk to as long as they actually talk to someone. They certainly know that I'm there for them; it's just that they don't trust that I wouldn't tell the coach, and I wouldn't blame them for that. The biggest thing is you need to get the players' trust, and I genuinely think they

need to be able to talk to someone who isn't going to influence any kind of decision on them. There's no question that if I heard stories from the boys that I would tell the coaches — I need to help the coaches manage them. There are things I have to share with the coaches to let them know what's going on, and I think deep-down they [the players] know that. I think it's important that the Club chaplain is external ... If you had the entire holistic support network in-house, it would be very difficult to get the boys' trust. As much as what they say to me in my office is confidential, a lot of it actually isn't.

Sports chaplaincy and football club culture

In English professional football the sports chaplain is generally accepted as an important part of the holistic support network inside a club, but this role can be empowered or disempowered to the degree that the club understands, affirms and/or promotes their services. [Gamble *et al.* \(2013\)](#) observe from their findings that where chaplains were not formally integrated into club structures they did not have as much impact as they would have liked in terms of the level of pastoral support that they could offer. Conversely, [Gamble *et al.* \(2013\)](#) argue that an advantageous aspect of not being part of the formal structure of a club was that they were likely to be viewed as being disassociated with the internal politics in play, which may make them more approachable. Academy Head of Sports Science and Medicine, Ron Smith, felt that, in addition to building trusting relationships, it was important that the Club gave the chaplain the necessary profile to make his role effective:

Although chaplains are slightly independent, it's important that they're still seen as part of the [staff] team. It's all about the Academy having confidence in their chaplain — that comes down to building individual relationships. It's also about profile; the chaplain's role is very dependent on how the club portrays him ... The chaplain is part of the community of the Club. Some clubs still marginalise the chaplain because that's where they feel comfortable. The chaplain's role of supporting people is quite critical. However, for the chaplain to build relationship and trust, that's not going to happen the minute you walk through the door — it takes time. Football clubs are very wary of people from outside.

As previously noted by [Boyers \(2006\)](#), the sports chaplaincy role can be fragile at times, with much good work ruined by one negative occurrence, resulting in the chaplain having to work hard to regain reputational credibility. In a similar way, Huntley's Head of Coaching, Donald Maguire, acknowledged the need for the chaplain's role at the Club to be affirmed:

Maybe it's part of our job as staff here to keep your presence and role front and centre. I think that spreading the word that you have had a profound effect on people in a much understated way is really important. We need to be making a fuss and showing how much we value it ... If it gets overlooked, that may be because of a mistaken perception by staff of what your role is. You'll only be able to offer holistic support if you get support yourself from the senior Academy staff to make it happen, because they can be 'make or break' for you, No matter how good you are, if they don't signpost

people and highlight what you do, and bring you on board, that could make it very difficult for you.

That the chaplain normally has skill and experience in providing ‘sensitive pastoral support’ (Nesti and Sulley, 2015) is an important asset within elite sporting environments. However, Nesti and Sulley (2015) note that inaccurate perceptions of chaplains may still exist which posit them as someone who may ‘aggressively promote a particular religious faith’ (p. 48). Huntley Rovers director, Simon Clarke, confirmed the role of the sports chaplain as being one that should primarily offer pastoral support as opposed to being overtly evangelistic:

‘Holistic’ is a more broad view of helping people with general life — it’s not just a religious thing, obviously ... Chaplaincy is definitely not somebody coming in trying to get people to go to church, or being very narrow: ‘If you’re not part of my denomination I won’t talk to you’ sort of thing. It’s got to be multi-faith, and have total respect for anyone who’s not religious, or is even against religion. It’s the caring side.

Watson and Nesti (2005) argue that a chaplain’s role is to help people to flourish and to enjoy a sense of meaning in life, a view emphasized by Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt (2011) who state that the essence of pastoral care is to affirm the value of people (see also Paget and McCormack, 2006). However, as Gamble *et al.* (2013) contend, the role of the sports chaplain within professional football is ultimately dependant on the attitude of the club manager who sets the tone and tenor of club culture. Simon Clarke acknowledged and affirmed the view that the chaplain’s role is likely to be either endorsed or marginalized depending on the attitude of those in positions of authority:

It’s good for parents who are considering putting their children into our Academy to know that the pastoral support network exists ... there should be people in place like you [the chaplain] and the Academy Director. It’s got to come from the top I suppose.

Nesti and Sulley (2015) emphasize the importance of culture in this respect, stating that it ‘represents the collective morality of an organisation; it provides the framework that prescribes and prohibits particular types of behaviour’ (p. 6). The Premier League’s long-term strategy of youth development has identified that holistic development is a vital component of player welfare that, when functioning effectively in the context of a club’s overall structure, can ultimately serve to enhance team performance and success (Nesti and Sulley, 2015). The sports chaplain can play a crucial and distinct role as part of this network, offering confidential pastoral support that is focused on the well-being of the person as opposed to sporting performance, this amidst a culture that is now so obsessed with success that a player’s individual needs are often viewed as relatively unimportant (Gamble *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to investigate the impact of the role of the sports chaplain in English professional (youth) football, and specifically, how chaplaincy provision might enhance the holistic support network of the EPPP. In turn, the paper has

provided an indication of how sports chaplains might best facilitate holistic support for young athletes, examining how the outworking of this support is negotiated and implemented. To this end, the findings build upon and extend existing research in the area of chaplaincy and professional sport.

The data presented suggest that participants perceived the work of the sports chaplain as a valuable asset within the context of athlete support and that this kind of chaplaincy works best when consistent, trusting relationships are built between staff and players. The role was also seen as an important part of the holistic support network at Huntley Rovers, whereby the chaplain worked closely with the Club's Welfare Officer, sport psychologist and, to a lesser degree, Academy coaches to help young players manage and negotiate the day-to-day rigours of life within a highly competitive context. The consistency of regular, informal contact with players was also seen to be integral to effective working practice, whereby confidential pastoral support focused on general player well-being as opposed to sporting performance. The main challenges to the effectiveness of sports chaplaincy at Huntley were: (a) the understanding and attitude of the Club towards the role, (b) whether or not chaplaincy was affirmed, intentionally integrated and promoted at an internal level; and (c) the attitude of the Club manager towards the chaplain.

Despite previous research suggesting that a degree of overlap may exist between the levels of pastoral support offered by a range of staff within professional football (i.e., Welfare Officer, sport psychologist and chaplain), the findings of this study indicate that such overlap is largely dependent on the extent to which trusting relationships exist between the people who inhabit these respective roles. However, what is clear is that where such staff work coherently together, levels of holistic support are enhanced thereby benefitting the players concerned and, ultimately, the club itself. It may be the case that the somewhat insular institutional culture prevalent within English professional football might contribute to the lack of cohesion between these roles, although this was not the case at Huntley Rovers.

These findings have implications for sports chaplaincy in practice because, although the role of chaplain is valued by a number of English professional football clubs, elite football is becoming progressively more demanding in relation to the qualifications of those working within its confines. It is recommended that sports chaplains explore ways to either remind clubs of their relevant experience of pastoral work, or to gain additional qualifications that will enhance their credibility, thus reducing the possibility of the role eventually becoming obsolete (see Waller *et al.*, 2016). This is particularly relevant as the outcomes of pastoral ministry, with its emphasis on discrete interaction and confidentiality, often proves difficult to quantify in measurable terms.

Of course, because the present findings focus solely on one English professional club and a small number of respondents, issues of representativeness arise. However, whilst recognizing these limitations, the study does identify a series of key tensions and contradictions in relation to the football industry's more general approach towards chaplaincy provision some of which have been highlighted previously (see Gamble *et al.*, 2013). In this sense, there is a need for further research (qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed method) into the extent to which such tensions and contradictions exist within professional football and across other

professional sports both in the UK and elsewhere. In turn, there is a specific need to investigate the potential impact that chaplaincy support may have on the lives of young athletes within a range of elite (professional and non-professional) sporting contexts.

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