EDUCATION, RETIREMENT AND CAREER TRANSITIONS FOR 'BLACK' EX-PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLERS

From Being Idolised to Stacking Shelves

Paul Ian Campbell

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Sean-Paul, Josh, Aaron, Ava, Ethan, Olivia and all the next generation…

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A Level   (General Certificate of Education) Advanced level
BAME   Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BME   Black and Minority Ethnic
FA   English Football Association
GCSE   General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ   General National Vocational Qualification
NVQ   National Vocational Qualification
PFA   Professional Footballers' Association
UEFA   Union of European Football Associations
YT   Youth Training programme
YTS   Youth Training Scheme

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INTRODUCTION

This short monograph attempts to do three things: (1) It provides a critical account of 16 'black' British male ex-professional footballers' preparedness for, and experiences of, retirement and transition into mainstream work during the period between 1988 and 2014.[1] (2) It examines how their experiences of retirement and transitions into non-sport-related work were influenced and often complicated by the cultures, processes, practices, routines and expectations that these men were exposed to during their time as football professionals in England. (3) It offers an account which illustrates how, when and in what ways this experience was complicated by issues of race.

In the summer of 2015, dual-heritage (African-Caribbean and white British) and ex-Burnley Captain and Professional Footballer's Association (PFA) Chairmen, Clarke Carlisle attempted to take his own life by walking into the path of an oncoming lorry. This was after battling with depression and

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1 The terms 'black', African and African-Caribbean, 'black-British' and 'blackness' will be used interchangeably throughout. This will also be the case for the terms 'Football', 'Association Football' and 'Soccer'.

an addiction to alcohol and gambling, which accompanied his retirement from playing professional football. He survived the collision but sustained severe internal bruising. *The Independent* reported:

> *[Upon waking up in the hospital after the collision, Carlisle explained that he was]* "totally devastated… I wanted to go [die]," [after] realising he was alive. "I was convinced it was the right thing to do and I was angry I was still living. They asked me my name and date of birth and I was annoyed I could remember – I didn't even get amnesia…

> …

> *[Carlisle]* believes it is all too easy for footballers' lives to spiral out of control once their playing days are over. [He] said: "This is the ticking time bomb. At the top end, wages are through the roof. But in League One, say, wages are still good, but not good enough to set you up for the rest of your life.

> "A lot of players just do not know what it takes to do a normal grand-a-week kind of job. No qualifications when they leave, no alternatives, nothing to replace what went before. You are living your dream – a dream you have had since you were a child – and you are elevated to such a status. There is adulation, you are mollycoddled and, when you leave, you don't go from that to a status the same as others, but you go below… (5 May 2015)

In 2017, Carlisle relapsed. He disappeared and was found by a stranger sitting on a park bench in Liverpool moments before he attempted to take his life again. Carlisle's ongoing battle with mental ill-health and attempts to end his life bring

into sharp focus the fact that many sportsmen experience some form of psychological and social crisis when their playing careers come to an end (Lally, 2007; Brown and Potrac, 2009; Gearing, 1999). This episode significantly impacts on athletes' 'roles and relationships', according to Souter et al. (2019, 2). Carlisle's account may be extreme, but it reminds us that we must also give consideration to the fact that elite athletes who have enjoyed the fame and well-publicised financial benefits of playing for clubs in England's Premier League or Football League Championship often face very different post-career challenges to those of players who pursue their careers in England's lower professional leagues (League One and Two and National League).

Curran (2015) has observed that professional players operating outside the cash-rich Premier League find retirement often brings with it significant financial difficulties, which force them into the world of mainstream work simply in order to make ends meet (this is employment that does not require elite sporting proficiency). It has also been argued that in making this career transition – for which footballers and other elite athletes are often underprepared – the possession or non-possession of easily transferable general and formal qualifications along with the capacity to call on accrued social capital are significant factors in determining outcomes (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). In particular, they impact either positively or negatively on each individual's capacity to negotiate a smooth career transition at a critical juncture in their lives.

All this has not gone unnoticed by the Football Association (FA) in England, which in 2012 reorganised its youth football division and related educational provisions. Pointing to the early results achieved under the then new Elite Player Performance Plan, Director of Education Pat Lally highlighted the 90% NVQ pass rate achieved by professional youth scholars in 2012 – NVQ being the current mandatory

benchmark qualification for those in football club academies (*The Times Education Supplement*, 2 January 2015). These figures are clearly encouraging and may help smooth the transition to work *outside* the arena of football for some current trainees and future professional players. According to Curran (2015), however, the situation for previous and current generations of transitioning professional footballers is that most have left the game with insufficient transferable knowledge or qualifications of any kind.

The majority of scholarly research in the area of retirement, career transitions and elite sportspersons has taken place in the US and across Europe, within the discipline of psychology (Wolff and Lester, 1989; Gearing, 1999, Lavellee, 2005; Lally, 2007, Brown and Potrac, 2009). Typically, investigations have concentrated on sports such as American Football, Basketball and the myriad sports encapsulated within the broader category of Athletics (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). The emergent consensus is that retirement from elite sport is, perhaps unsurprisingly, an extremely traumatic period for most athletes. Consequently, career termination has been widely implicated as a causal factor for substance abuse, depression and suicide among retired elite athletes (see, for example, McPherson, 1980; Wolff and Lester, 1989; Giulianotti and Gerrard, 2001; Fleuriel and Vincent, 2009).

This patchwork picture does, however, provide a number of other useful insights, contexts and points of departure for non-psychology scholars interested specifically in the area of retirement, career transitions and ex-professional footballers in England. Psychological investigations have, for example, demonstrated the ways in which the sporting identities of elite athletes are often the most salient and consuming (Beamon, 2012). The decision to prioritise sporting identities above all others predominantly by young working-class men has been connected to various factors, such as: elite sport is often a way

for the individual to achieve positive affirmation from peers and significant others; it is an avenue by which to achieve significantly higher than average salaries; it often facilitates a celebrity status at the local, national and international level (see, for example, Adler and Adler, 1991 and Torregrosa et al., 2004). Beamon (2012) surmises that the importance of sporting identities to elite and *male* athletes is further accentuated by the fact that it is often the central factor upon which their wider constructions of masculinity are formed. It is also central in the formation of the athletes' wider social and friendship networks (Beamon, 2012). Subsequently, Wolff and Lester (1989) assert that the time and energy required to sufficiently cultivate this significant aspect of self often leaves athletes with little time, motivation or desire to develop alternative and academic identities. It also leaves little time for them to accrue wider and marketable skills that are suitable for careers outside of sport.

There are relatively few works, psychological or otherwise, on the experiences of retired male ex-professional footballers and of male ex-professional footballers who have experienced career transition in the UK. Cecic Erpic et al. (2004) assert that this is quite peculiar given the fact that in England and perhaps in Europe more widely, professional soccer players possess the most pronounced and consuming of all athletic identities, and that individuals with strong athletic identities usually have the most difficulty with post-sports career life (2004, 56). Nonetheless, the majority of existing work in this more specific area has tended to concentrate on either the effectiveness of medical rehabilitation and psychological support for players whose careers have ended prematurely through injury or de-selection (Drawer and Fuller, 2002; Brown and Potrac, 2009; Souter et al., 2019), or on explorations into identity (re)construction, management and loss as they move from footballer to non-footballer

(Gearing, 1999; Lavallee, 2005). These studies have, however, focused primarily on the experiences of injured and young professional footballers and on ageing ex-players who have had full careers in the highest tiers of professional football in Britain.

The levels of financial reward offered at the 'top end' of the professional football league pyramid in England suggests that for many ex-footballers who have operated at this level, retirement represents a significant cultural, symbolic and social loss, but it does not impact significantly on their financial security (The *Daily Mail* reported that in 2015, the average Premier League, Championship, Division One and Two player earned £1.7 million, £324,200, £69,500 and £40,300 per year, respectively. See Harris, 2016). Or more accurately, it does not impact on this aspect of their lives in the same way that it would for players who operate in England's lower-level professional leagues, who earn around 30 times less than their Premier division counterparts.

This focus on elite-level professional football and its players leaves us with a lack of empirically substantiated answers to rather routine questions. For example: What is the career termination and transition experience for players who have spent the majority of their careers at the lower levels of professional football in England, and especially for those who have not earned enough wealth to retire from all forms of work? How has working in this particular industry contributed to the issues faced during transition? What wider social and retraining issues do these ex-elite athletes face alongside symbolic issues and loss of identity? What ways are these issues exaggerated by the need to find alternative employment, usually shortly after retirement, and often in more conventional work? What social, cultural and skills-based issues do they face when accessing and inhabiting these new workspaces?

One possible reason why the answers to these kinds of questions have not been forthcoming from this body of work is because, according to Fleuriel and Vincent (2009), psychological investigations often over-individualise the retirement process.

> [O]n reflection, psychology is a way to individualise a difficulty and make it thought of as strictly personal, when in reality the issues facing sport result from a collective construction. (2009, 186)

To extend upon Fleuriel and Vincent's points, adopting a psychological position usually does not allow the researcher to examine and account for issues which may stem from these men's exposure to the specific cultures, cultural practices, routines, lifestyles, expectations, structures and discourses that shape the subcultural world of professional football in England. The tendency to underplay or overlook the cultural discourses and hegemonies which shape this professional sporting space is surprising when, according to Gearing (1999, 44), football clubs in Britain 'stamp a certain character and identity on young men.' Thus, scholars interested in also accounting for what we might describe as the social and cultural forces that shape the professional soccer industry in England, and the ways that these processes complicate and influence career termination and transition into mainstream work for professional footballers, have also employed a sociological lens.

Since its emergence as a serious area of scholarly enquiry nearly five decades ago, sociology work on football in England has examined myriad social issues. These have included masculinity, deviance and hooliganism (Williams, 1991), gender and exclusions (Caudwell, 2011), fan culture (Brown, 2008) and so on (Dart, 2019). More recently, football has been employed as an analytical lens to explore, and

recognised as a cultural activity which influences, wider social and exclusionary forces (Carrington, 1998, 2010, Burdsey, 2004, Harris, 2009; Cashmore and Cleland, 2011a, 2011b; Bradbury, 2013; Campbell, 2016), class transformations (Campbell, 2019), the experiences of minority ethnic and refugee groups (Doidge, 2018; Campbell, 2019) and newly emerging cultural fusions between host and migrant populations in Britain (Bradbury, 2011; Ratna, 2014). Against this backcloth, Roderick's (2006) observation that despite a growing general academic interest in professional (and local) soccer, too infrequently have the experiences of those who play the game (its workforce) been the central focus of scholarly work, remains apt and applicable nearly 15 years on – albeit in a general sense.

Importantly, there have been a number of recent scholarly works which have examined issues that are related to preparedness for and career transitions. For example, Platts and Smith (2018) have examined formal education training and scholars in professional club academies. Bradbury (2014) has examined the processes which stymie pathways into coaching and management work in professional soccer for retiring black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) players. Likewise, Parnell et al. (2019) have begun to explore the place and centrality of networks and networking for securing work in professional football and related industries in the UK. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Jones and Denison (2017) trace a number of continuing issues experienced during retirement for ex-professional players, brought about by their exposure to specific disciplines, routines and surveillances imposed upon them when they were soccer professionals. These were designed to transform them from undisciplined bodies into elite professional athletes.

Historical studies of the post-playing career experiences of sportsmen in general in Britain are also scarce. Vamplew's (1984)