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## Research Article

# **“A team wouldn’t be without a physio, so why miss mental health?”: Exploring the psychological demands of increased exposure and available support for female footballers**

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## Abstract

The increased profile of women’s football has been evidenced by greater fan presence and media exposure in England, which presents unique challenges for players, alongside an opportunity to explore the impact on players and psychological support provisions available. A total of 133 female footballers competing across the top four tiers in England volunteered to complete an online survey hosted on Jisc. The survey comprised of 42 questions, including open-ended and Likert-scale questions, developed around four themes: 1) general perspectives regarding increased attention; 2) performance; 3) psychological implications of increased crowd presence, and 4) player support and coping mechanisms. Open-ended responses were thematically analysed in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach. Players referred to inspiring others, career fulfilment, professionalisation, and mental health benefits (e.g. pride) as positives associated with the game’s progression. They also described negative consequences, including increased pressure and anxiety, heightened scrutiny and abuse, balancing multiple demands with limited resources, and inadequate infrastructure to support the rate of growth. Overall, 64.7% of participants stated they would like more psychological support from their club. Key stakeholders should therefore seek practicable solutions to enhance the often-neglected psychological support available.

**Keywords:** coping, crowd presence, stress, support, soccer.

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## **Introduction**

There has been a heightened appetite for watching women's football in recent years (Allison & Pope, 2021), following the re-administration of the women's football league by the Football Association (FA) in 1971, after it had been banned 50 years earlier, with the FA deeming that "...the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged" (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023). It was not until 2018 that the UK saw the topflight of women's football become professional, reflecting the relatively emergent stage at which the women's game remains (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023). At the time of data collection, the Women's Super League (WSL) (Tier 1) consisted of 12 fully professional teams, while the Women's Championship (WC) (Tier 2) comprised a mix of professional and semi-professional teams. The Women's National League (FA WNL) (Tier 3 and Tier 4) formed the third and fourth tiers of the women's football pyramid and comprised of six divisions. The Northern and Southern Premier Divisions acted as Tier 3, with the Division One North, Midlands, South-East and South-West leagues residing in Tier 4. There are significant differences in the provisions and financial resources available to clubs within and between leagues in the women's football pyramid (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023), demonstrated by some players competing within Tiers 3 and 4 remaining unpaid and of amateur status, while others are on full-time contracts. Since data collection, the league structure has evolved, with the top two tiers transitioning toward full professionalism (WSL Football, 2025); however, original terminology is retained here to reflect the competitive structure during the study period.

During the 2022-23 season, both the WSL and WC saw record attendance figures. Notably, the Women's FA Cup Final attracted a turnout of 77,000 (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023), and the Emirates Stadium hosted over 60,160 fans, setting a new WSL attendance record (BBC, 2024). Increased fan presence has also been evidenced within Tiers 3 and Tier 4, with attendances of over 28,000 recorded for Tier 4 matches during the 2022-23, with average attendances ranging from 40 up to 3,817 at the same level. This growth presents a unique set of challenges for players unaccustomed to heightened exposure, alongside a novel opportunity to explore the impact of increased interest and attention on female football players.

The increased profile of women's football has resulted in a growing number of international competitions, as well as professional and recreational leagues across age groups for female players. This expansion has provided more opportunities to compete in professional and/or semi-professional environments, in turn increasing performance expectations and associated physiological and psychological demands (Wheatley et al., 2023). Whilst research attention toward the women's game

has increased in response to these demands and heightened exposure (e.g. prevalence of anterior cruciate ligament injury), a recent government review, 'Raising the bar – reframing the opportunity in women's football' (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023), highlighted a substantial gap in research evidence focused on supporting female athletes both physically and psychologically (Cowley et al., 2021). Just 6% of sport and exercise science research focuses solely on women (Cowley et al., 2021) and to date, most investigations have focused on player characteristics and physiological demands (Martínez-Lagunas et al., 2014; Randell et al., 2021), negating important psychological considerations contributing substantially to player performance and wellbeing.

#### *Impact of Increased Attention on Performance*

Increased attention drawn toward the women's game in recent years has been evidenced by the higher crowd presence, increased media coverage (both in mainstream and social media), and heightened investment and commercialisation. Whilst there are many perceived benefits to this growth, it may also present challenges for players. When individuals are put under the spotlight, where skilled acts are socially evaluated (i.e., athletes) they may experience apprehension, even when drawing positive attention from others (Beilock & Gray, 2007; Chow & Mercado III, 2020). For some athletes, performance anxiety can lead to significant distress, negative effects on emotional state, and impair performance. For others however, apprehensive feelings may positively boost performance (Ruiz, Raglin & Hanin, 2017).

For some female footballers, performing in front of larger crowds (particularly when infrequent) or under a bigger spotlight (i.e. media coverage), self-efficacy may be low due to less experience in such conditions (Bandura, 1997). This may increase uncertainty regarding their ability to cope, negatively affecting perception of control and, in turn, on-field performance. The psychological and performance responses to the heightened attention are individualised. Factors such as individual personality traits (e.g. perfectionist), past experiences, as well as support available (Meijen et al., 2020), may all influence whether a player thrives or struggles under the additional pressure of increased exposure and heightened expectations.

Further, previous research has highlighted that athletes are likely to receive abuse on social media (Meggs & Ahmed, 2021), with reported increases in online abuse and dehumanisation following performance errors or regarding their personal life (Duggan & Brenner, 2012; Lenhart et al., 2010). This is especially prevalent for female athletes (Kavanagh et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2022), who may face additional gender-based discrimination compared to their male counterparts. Research by Fenton and

colleagues (2023), exploring the escalation of online gender-based violence in women's football by observing the social media accounts of two high profile teams in England, identified four key themes: 1. Sexism regarding women's place in football; 2. Misogyny and hatred of women; 3. Sexualisation of women; and 4. Demands for a male-only space. The authors also concluded that other dominant online comments frequently sought to objectify women for sexual desire, belittle professional competence, and showed outrage toward representation of female players on official club platforms. The increasingly prevalent additional gender-based discrimination and abuse described, in conjunction with the increased media profiles of many women's teams within the UK could have detrimental effects for players wellbeing.

Whilst there are many perceived benefits to the growth and increased attention drawn toward women's football, it is important to understand the contemporary demands of the game and to hear directly from players regarding their experiences of competing in the top four tiers in England. Importantly, increased attention and professionalisation should not be assumed to be exclusively positive for all female players. To date, however, there has been limited research exploring players' perceptions of how this growth has impacted both performance and psychological wellbeing.

#### Psychological Support in Football

Sport psychology is being increasingly recognised and accepted within elite football, despite historically being less prioritised than physical, technical, and tactical support (Dean et al., 2022). The role of a sport psychologist is diverse in nature, involving working with athletes, coaches, teams, and significant others to help facilitate performance and support factors such as injury, stress, emotional control, leadership, motivation, confidence, and career transition (Gilmore et al., 2018). Despite this, some resistance toward incorporating sport psychology services remains, but athletes' psychological skills are now understood to be crucial for sporting success and career progression in football (Gledhill et al., 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2018), though to date, research has focused predominantly on male footballers.

In 2012, the English Premier League mandated the inclusion of psychology within the Elite Player Performance Plan, incorporating psychological testing, lifestyle management, mental skills education, and psychological support from accredited (British Psychological Society or British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences) sports psychologist within male player development programmes (Dean et al., 2022). However, when hearing from practitioners responsible for delivering sport psychology within elite football academies in England, Dean et al. (2022) summarised that players reported ongoing

ambiguity regarding the psychologist's role, alongside a persistent stigma framing sports psychology as a service designed primarily to "solve problems", rather than to support performance and player development more holistically through education in development and execution of useful psychological skills to optimise players' psychological state.

Whilst progress has been shown with the inclusion of sports psychology within the men's game, no equivalent regulatory framework exists within women's football. Female footballers can currently only access wellbeing support through the Professional Footballers' Association if they are current or former WSL players, leaving many professional or semi-professional female athletes within the WC and FA WNL without access to any such support services. This is particularly concerning given evidence suggesting that female football players may be at higher risk of mental ill-health than their male counterparts (Perry et al., 2022). Perry et al. (2022) highlighted a worryingly low percentage of elite female football players (Tiers 1 and 2 in England), with just 28% of those surveyed, receiving psychological support from their club, despite 86% indicating a need and desire for psychological support. These findings highlight the importance of exploring both semi-professional and professional player perspectives further, particularly with the continued growth of the women's game. Therefore, there is a need to comprehensively understand the psychological demands faced and existing supporting provisions in place for female players, particularly across the top four tiers of the game, where individuals have been exposed to increasing demands over recent years. Athletes should be provided with necessary psychological support to ensure they are equipped with knowledge and skills to effectively cope and thrive in performance environments.

#### *Rationale and Research Aims*

The popularity of female football is growing rapidly, leading to heightened demands on players competing at high standards. Whilst a growing body of research has begun to focus on the elite side of the women's game, it remains sparse in comparison to the quantity of research in men's football. Most research in the field of women's football has focused on sports medicine, physiology, and sociology, with less focus given to psychological factors (Kryger et al., 2022). Indeed, a recent scoping review highlighted a need for a greater understanding of psychological phenomena within women's football (Gredin et al., 2023). Whilst elite level football has also dominated the existing research to date (Gredin et al., 2023; McCreary et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2022), it is equally as important to explore the perspectives of semi-professional female footballers residing within the WC and within the FA WNL. These players may experience different and/or additional stressors, (e.g. working multiple jobs and having reduced access to club resources). Moreover, the noticeable growth in popularity is

increasingly filtering through to these levels in recent times, placing greater demands and expectations place on players.

To date, it is understood that there has been no research exploring players' perspectives on the recent rise of women's football in England in relation to performance, psychology (and wellbeing), across FA WNL level and above. Therefore, the aims of this study were threefold:

1. Explore female footballers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with heightened exposure and increased crowd presence.
2. Examine the perceived performance-related and psychological (including wellbeing) implications of this increased exposure among players competing across Tiers 1-4.
3. Investigate players' access to psychological support and their views on what support is needed to help them cope with, and thrive under, the modern-day demands of the women's game.

## **Methods**

### *Research Paradigm*

This study is grounded in the pragmatic paradigm, which values flexibility in philosophical perspectives and conceptions of reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Pragmatism holds that reality is continuously shaped by human actions and experiences, prioritising practical problem-solving over a rigid division between mind and external reality (Weaver, 2018). This paradigm supports integrating pluralistic approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the study's aims and research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Shannon-Baker, 2016). Methodologically, pragmatism favours a mixed-methods design, blending quantitative and qualitative approaches to deepen insights into complex phenomena, thereby offering readers more assurance in the research findings and conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, as cited in Creswell, 2011). In line with this pragmatic approach, researcher positionality was actively considered, and reflexivity was practised throughout the study, informing decisions and interpretations across both quantitative and qualitative components, including the research design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

### *Research Design*

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design, enabling the simultaneous collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By employing an online survey for concurrent data collection, participants were able to quickly and conveniently share their experiences, requiring only a single engagement period. This process not only facilitated participation but also allowed the research team to reach a large sample size. From a reflexive perspective, the research team critically examined how their disciplinary backgrounds and experiences within football might influence research design decisions. The team comprised researchers with academic training in sport psychology and sport sciences, alongside varied experiential engagement across football contexts. The lead supervisor has prior playing experience within the FA WNL (Tiers 3 and 4) and is currently involved in coaching women's and girls' teams. This experiential knowledge informed the development of survey items and enhanced contextual sensitivity throughout the study. In contrast, the lead researcher has experience within men's football but no direct involvement in women's football. This positionality was regarded as a strength, as it helped mitigate assumptions rooted in lived experience of the women's game. These complementary perspectives informed the selection of a concurrent mixed-methods design, enabling quantitative breadth to be balanced with qualitative depth and ensuring participants' voices were foregrounded alongside statistical patterns. Additionally, integrating qualitative and quantitative data enriched statistical findings with detailed lived experiences, resulting in a nuanced understanding of how increased exposure in UK women's football affects female players' performance, wellbeing, and need for psychological support.

### *Sampling and participants*

The criteria that informed the purposive sample comprised individuals who competed in the WSL, WC, or the FA WNL during the 2022-23 season; were able to access the online survey; and were willing to answer openly about features of their profession. Following ethical approval (FHS 22-23.85) from the first author's institutional Research Ethics Committee, participant recruitment commenced using direct and indirect networks. Firstly, a direct approach was adopted, whereby the first author liaised with contacts within their existing football network (e.g. club managers, team captains, and players). This was followed by an indirect recruitment approach, with all members of the research team sharing the survey link and recruitment information on various social media platforms (i.e. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn). Snowballing sampling was adopted as a secondary recruitment strategy, whereby players were encouraged to share the survey within their local networks (i.e. with other players) who could potentially offer valuable insights. A target sample of 150 participants was set to

account for ~10% of the participant pool. Data collection was concluded when the research team determined that sufficient data had been gathered to address the research aims, alongside the pragmatics of conducting the research within a realistic timeline (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants provided electronic informed consent upon reviewing the participant information sheet. Respondents under 18 years of age were required to gain consent from a parent or guardian. All respondents were randomly assigned a unique participant code by Jisc Online Surveys upon completion to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The final sample comprised of 133 participants (See Table 1 for participant characteristics).

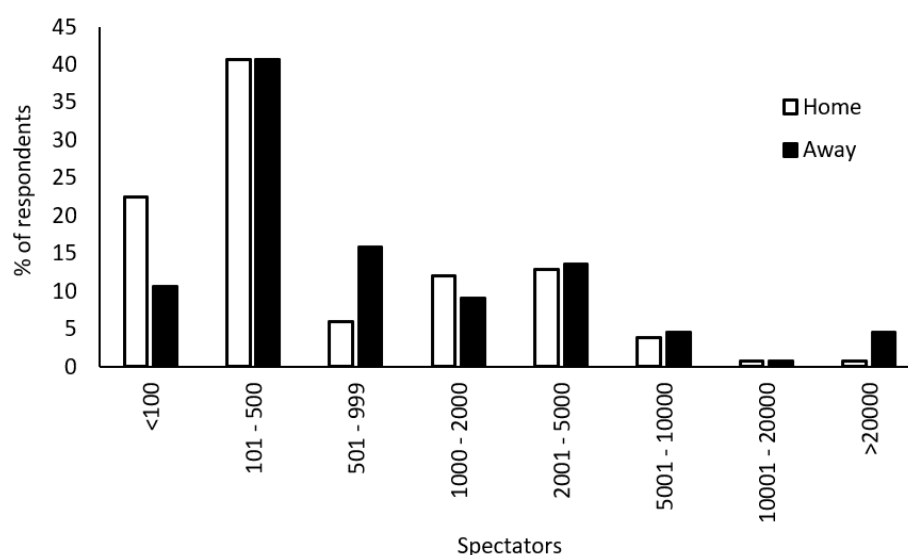
**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Total (n = 133)</b>	<b>% of sample</b>
<b>Age</b>		
16 – 17 years	2	1.5%
18 – 21 years	48	36.1%
22 – 25 years	37	27.8%
26 – 29 years	28	21.1%
30 – 33 years	16	12.0%
Over 34 years	4	3%
<b>Football League (22-23)</b>		
FA Women’s Super League	6	4.5%
FA Women’s Championship	8	6.0%
FA WNL Northern Premier	28	21.1%
FA WNL Southern Premier	10	7.5%
FA WNL Div One North	20	15%
FA WNL Div One Midlands	27	20.3%
FA WNL Div One South East	16	12.0%
FA WNL Div One South West	18	13.5%
<b>Position</b>		
Goalkeeper	12	9.0%
Defender	49	36.8%
Midfielder	40	30.1%
Forward	31	23.3%
Other	1	0.8%
<b>Years at WNL or above</b>		
1 to 2 years	43	32.3%
3 to 4 years	37	27.8%
5 to 6 years	22	16.5%
7 to 8 years	7	5.3%
9 to 10 years	10	7.6%
Over 10 years	14	10.5%

*Data collection: online survey*

Consistent with concurrent mixed-methods research approach, the online survey included both qualitative and quantitative elements. The qualitative component included open-ended questions, while the quantitative component consisted of closed-ended questions. To minimise unintended question-order effects (i.e. where the sequence of questions may inadvertently affect participants' responses), most open-ended questions were deliberately positioned at the beginning of each section (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). This arrangement aimed to reduce potential bias arising from the specific language or concepts introduced in the subsequent Likert-scale questions. For example, one open-ended question asked, "When reflecting on matches with a larger crowd last season, how do you feel this affected you psychologically?" This was immediately followed by a Likert-scale question: "A large crowd presence increases how much pressure I place on myself during matches."

Survey questions were informed through discussions within the research team, and prior research in the context of crowd presence and available psychological support in football or team-sport (e.g., Mason & Lovell, 2000; McCreary et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2009; Hill & Shaw, 2013). The final online survey included 42 questions, with the first 15 focused on demographic data (i.e. age, assigned sex at birth, gender, ethnicity, and country of birth) and football-related background information (i.e. years competing, level of competition, primary position, and the largest approximate home and away crowd presence prior to and during the 2022-23 season, Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Approximate crowd number reported for home and away fixtures in the 22-23 season.

The remaining questions addressed three key themes and featured a mixture of open-ended questions to encourage free expression of thoughts, experiences, and emotions (Sheppard, 2024), alongside closed-ended Likert-scale questions. These themes were:

1. Perceptions of growth of the women's game (four open-ended questions).
2. Performance and wellbeing implications of this growth (three open-ended questions and ten Likert-scale questions).
3. Preparation and support in response to this growth (three open-ended questions and three Likert-scale questions).

The survey concluded with one open-ended question inviting respondents to share anything additional that had not been drawn upon. The survey was anticipated to take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete, with data collection occurring over 5 months (August to December 2023). A debrief statement was provided upon completion, including participants' unique codes and contact details for the primary researcher for data withdrawal purposes. No incentives were offered to participants for partaking in this project.

#### *Data analysis*

Data supporting this study's findings are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author [DB], though they are not publicly accessible due to ethical restrictions (i.e. containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants). In line with concurrent mixed methods design, qualitative and quantitative data strands were analysed separately before being integrated to provide a comprehensive perspective account of participants' experiences. First, Likert-scale responses were exported to Excel for calculation of descriptive statistics (%) to highlight trends that were both immediately interpretable and actionable, such as improving support structures for female athletes, in alignment with our pragmatic orientation. When combined with qualitative themes, this approach offers a holistic understanding of participants' experiences, grounded in both concrete data and lived realities.

Second, all responses to open-ended questions (i.e. qualitative data) were exported from Jisc Online Surveys platform into Microsoft Excel before being analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) inductive thematic analysis approach. This consisted of six stages: data familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. This approach began with data familiarisation, during which team members individually immersed themselves in the responses in attempt to understand the complexity of participants' experiences. During this stage, the

research team engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, critically examining how their respective positionalities, including experience within men's and women's football, could influence analytic decisions and interpretations of participants' accounts.

Next, researchers individually coded extracts of text that they felt were striking or significant in relation to helping address the research questions. This individual engagement allowed for the recognition of varied perspectives, aligning with pragmatism's emphasis on embracing complex human experiences through diverse interpretations. Subsequently, the research team met to share and critically interrogate their initial interpretations, fostering collaborative dialogue consistent with a pragmatic approach. These discussions functioned as a deliberate reflexive checkpoint, through which team members explicitly challenged one another's assumptions, positional influences, and analytic judgements to ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. Through this reflexive and iterative process, the team collectively examined qualitative responses to identify recurring patterns (i.e. themes) across the dataset, allowing interpretations to evolve through sustained collaborative scrutiny.

Next, themes were refined through collective interpretation, with the research team exploring their meaning and agreeing on their naming and definition. Anonymised quotes were then selected to illustrate each theme. This stage was underpinned by reflexive dialogue, through which the team critically examined how their disciplinary backgrounds and experiential positions could shape both the framing of themes and the selection of illustrative excerpts. Across the broader analytic process, interpretations remained open to revision in response to continued team deliberation, reflecting pragmatism's emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness to the data. Interpretive decisions were also guided by consideration of how findings could inform practical strategies to better support female footballers, while drawing on relevant literature and theory to contextualise and deepen understanding. This reflexive and collaborative approach extended through drafting, revision, and production of the final report.

## **Results**

The analysis led to the identification of five themes; 1. Growth in the women's game, 2. Impact of crowd presence on performance, 3. Psychological impacts of heightened exposure, 4. Existing individual and group coping strategies, 5. Player wellbeing and support. These themes provide practical recommendations for stakeholders in women's sports, reinforcing the pragmatic goal of generating real-world actionable knowledge.

### *Growth in the Women's Game*

The consensus from those surveyed was that the increased attention towards the women's game in recent years (e.g. increased television coverage and social media exposure) is connected to the Lionesses who were crowned UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Champions and reached the final in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. Indeed, some of the participants described how this increased exposure has had a positive ripple effect on their respective *playing environments*:

“[There's] a better atmosphere for the players and for the fans... More fans and tickets sold means that more income can be generated which will help the game improve. It'll help the professionalism of the game if more funding becomes available, which will benefit us as players in terms of the things we have access to (e.g. facilities, wages, more staff). More people will be likely to invest in the game as well if the viewing figures continue to increase which will only help the game and the players more.”

**(Participant 122, WC)**

The participants also described how this increased growth resulted in several positive *social outcomes* such as bringing communities together and being a positive role model to inspire future generations:

“Seeing the younger generation grow and have the opportunities I never had at such an age is so enjoyable to watch... I never really had any female football role models since playing at 6 years old, now there's a tonne to look up too... For youngsters coming through, it's just amazing!... It's fantastic to see an increased support and participation of others who 2-3 years ago had never seen a women's football game.”

**(Participant 46, FA WNL Div One North East)**

Further, many participants shared a range of *personal outcomes* associated with increased growth such as “improved mental health” **(Participant 9)**, “a sense of achievement” **(Participant 59)**, “feeling valued” **(Participant 40)** and being “proud to be part of the process” **(Participant 17)**. Several participants acknowledged various career prospects, though this was mainly in relation to opportunities it could provide for future footballers. For some, this was bittersweet due to the length of time the growth had taken:

“It will give future generations a career path in football that I never had.” **(Participant 88, FA WNL Div One South West)**

“Having played in the first year of the WSL to playing in FA WNL now the growth of the game has been incredible. I almost wish I was 20 again and had my chance now with the backing the game is now receiving.” **(Participant 28, FA WNL Div One Midlands)**

Whilst there were several positive environmental, social, and personal outcomes expressed in relation to the growth of the women's game, there were some drawbacks identified. In relation to their playing environment, improvements in clubs' infrastructure appeared to be inconsistent within and across leagues. For example, the participants expressed concerns that the growth in and "...attention isn't being followed with the appropriate investment of time, money, and resources" (**Participant 108**) and there is "limited help for clubs to learn how to grow their club and community" (**Participant 76**):

"Where we play, there's limited car parking spaces for spectators... we are in a fairly rural area with limited transport links, so walking or cycling to a game becomes difficult for fans." (**Participant 60, FA WNL Div One South East**)

"As a player at Tier 3, the teams with the biggest crowds are often those who have a more significant backing from their club/men's team and that greater level of marketing support. For example, [three well-known clubs] all have consistently high levels of support, as they have marketed it well and have created an environment that supporters go back to every week. The team I played for in the 2022/23 season received little support from the club - we played [a significant distance] away from the men's home ground and our average attendance was around 50-75. So, it has been a noticeable increase when we play away at teams who have the backing of their club, but often very small crowds at those who don't." (**Participant 107, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

They also referred to challenges in relation to balancing the heightened demands and expectations due to the increased professionalisation, with other responsibilities (e.g. full-time work):

"It's great but does come with pressures on and off the pitch that at this level can be challenging as we work full-time." (**Participant 34, FA WNL Div One Midlands**)

Further, players also described some personal challenges experienced in relation to the game's growth. Increased awareness of the women's game has naturally increased attention toward players within stadiums, the mainstream media and across social media platforms. Some players conveyed a heightened sense of pressure in response to this: "not all the attention is positive...[and] increased attention has also led to increased exposure to negative people" (**Participant 85**), and there was particular reference to using it to "increase the stereotype of females not being able to play" (**Participant 26**). Indeed, 34.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that last season they 'received abuse from the crowd':

"We play against teams that are affiliated to large clubs and share highlights over social media. These highlights are watched by thousands of people who post negative

comments about players. Players are not trained to deal with it and have no one to help.” (**Participant 29, FA WNL Div One Midlands**)

“...with bigger crowds comes more things like hate whether that’s on media or at games. I think it can affect you mentally sometimes depending on who you are, especially as you have more responsibilities being in a bigger public eye.” (**Participant 119, WSL**)

Players also highlighted challenges in relation to fan and media engagement, noting that “fans expect the same level of interaction despite increasing crowds” (**Participant 112**). Players mentioned instances where they perceived a sense of entitlement from both the media, and some fans during post-game interactions. They conveyed that some of these expectations from the media and fans were overwhelming and felt there was a need for greater regulations in relation to this:

“Because we have always interacted so well with the crowd, the expectations from them are now greater, e.g. time spent with crowds after games, asking for things, asking to attend events within their club...we could be supported with not having to please all crowd members after a game; as they grow, the demand post-game will be greater.” (**Participant 38, WC**)

#### *Impact of Crowd Presence on Performance*

When exploring more specifically how increased crowd presence had impacted player’s performance, 53.4% indicated that the size of the crowd did have an effect on their performance. 69.9% of participants agreed that when they played in front of a larger crowd, they tried to impress them more. The positive impacts on performance were generally discussed when asked about crowd presence at home games, and revolved around playing with an increased work rate (e.g. increased energy and intensity), heightened arousal (positively appraised), improved communication, a greater determination to win and a sense that it made them want to ‘up their game’:

“It positively affected performance. I fully enjoyed it and buzzed off the atmosphere that they created... You want to impress the fans, so it gives you some extra motivation and energy to perform I think.” (**Participant 122, WC**)

“As a player knowing you’ve got a large crowd presence sets you right up for the game. It gives you an extra boost. You feel you have to perform to the best of your ability as always however more people are watching which puts pressure on you as a player, but personally I thrive off that. I think the bigger the crowd presence, the more positive effect it has on my performances.” (**Participant 29, FA WNL Div One Midlands**)

When asked about the impact of increased crowd presence during away matches, some reported that it influenced the way that they played. Specifically, there was reference to players approaching games more conservatively:

“It can be difficult when it is an away game. The fans often give you some grief and try to wind you up if they can but I kind of enjoy that as well... I think it makes me play safer and I am less likely to play risky or try things.” (**Participant 122, WC**)

For others, it had more of a negative impact on their performance which was perceived to be more of a frequent occurrence amongst inexperienced players. By way of example:

“The younger players get sucked in and get a little hot headed which leads to them getting yellow or red cards, all because a few people in the crowd said something antagonising.” (**Participant 41, FA WNL Div One North**)

#### *Psychological Impacts of Increased Crowd Presence*

It was also found that increased crowd presence had various psychological implications for the players. For example, 66.9% of players agreed that a large crowd presence increased how much pressure they placed on themselves during matches. One participant highlighted how “pressure” is inherently part of the game, and “sports people have to thrive under [pressure]” (**Participant 104**).

Of notable interest was how different players perceived this pressure. Some players appraised this additional pressure in a positive way as it led to enhanced self-determination, increased “confidence” (**Participant 65**), and provoked positive emotions:

“It gives me a thrill and as a player makes me want to play better for the big moments and games where there are more people are in attendance.” (**Participant 1, FA WNL Div One South East**)

“...The games are more exciting; I enjoy the pressure and I enjoy the reactions of the fans as it can be motivating when they spur the team on...” (**Participant 125, WC**)

However, for other players, the additional pressure was appraised negatively. Indeed, 58.7% agreed (or strongly agreed) that when they have played in front of a large crowd, they have felt more anxious. For some, this led them to “overthink every mistake” (**Participant 4**) and affected their ability to concentrate on the game:

“I think it negatively impacted me psychologically as it made me more nervous and distracted me from my performance as I was overthinking how I was playing as I was desperate to play well.” (**Participant 103, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

“When you do make a mistake the bigger pressure on you can affect your mental state and concentration in the game.” (**Participant 65, FA WNL Div One South East**)

“Personally, I feel my performances dropped significantly due to having a bigger pressure to perform for the crowd rather than playing my own game under less pressure and being able to enjoy it.” (**Participant 81, FA WNL Div One South West**)

The psychological implications of increased crowd presence were not limited to just those immediately preceding or during competition, though. Several players referred to overthinking following matchplay. In fact, 29.3% agreed or strongly agreed that a large crowd presence made them reflect more critically on their performance after the final whistle; highlighting potential negative implications which extend past the pitch and can be taken back into the home:

“...often, I will scrutinise my performance a lot more because of the amount of people that witnessed it... [if] I played badly, this may lead to feelings of embarrassment or a missed opportunity to show what I can do.” (**Participant 5, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

“...I would look back and think do they think I did well, will that crap pass I made not make them come back and think women’s football isn’t worth watching.” (**Participant 126, WC**)

#### *Existing Individual and Group Coping Strategies*

The majority (67.7%) of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that they believed “preparation for playing in front of a large crowd is important”. When describing how they coped when performing under pressure, players drew upon a range of *individual* preparation strategies. For some, this included visualisation techniques, watching motivational videos, listening to music, writing down thoughts or diary-like approaches, using cue words, talking with team-mates, or using relaxation strategies (e.g. breathing techniques and meditation):

“I always try to watch clips of where I’ve done something well the week leading up to a game, or a few days before because then I’m positively focused on things I’ve already done well and know I can replicate. I also think that focus is a massive thing when playing in front of big crowds and to regain focus after we score or we concede is crucial. To do this our team has a certain word that we will say to each other if we think we’re losing focus in the game. That always helps too.” (**Participant 60, FA WNL Div One South East**)

“I meditate the night before and go to the gym the morning of the game. I write my thoughts down to help me manage what I’m feeling.” (**Participant 107, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

“I visualise my performance before the game (night and pre-match). For example, scoring a goal or pressing the defenders to make mistakes, creating chances etc.”

**(Participant 71, FA WNL Div One South West)**

Players also drew upon several *collective* preparation strategies, that were implemented as a team or by coaching staff prior to games in front of a large crowd. While consistency in pre-game preparation was often emphasised, some players also noted that the team's preparation was “a lot more precise and organised as a squad” (**Participant 2**) in the week preceding the match, the tone of team talks from coaching staff changed with “more belief put into the team talks” (**Participant 25**), and some worked specifically on communication in the build up to matches that were expected to be well-attended:

“We just tried to focus on the football and not the crowds. I think we should have worked on preparing players more though.” (**Participant 3, FA WNL Div One North**)

“We would try to come up with other ways to communicate especially for larger crowds as we may struggle to hear each other and practice them during drills and training.” (**Participant 84, FA WNL Div One South West**)

Some players also highlighted a lack of understanding regarding how they could improve their ability to cope with increased demands. In fact, just 22.6% agreed (or strongly agreed) to using coping strategies as part of their preparation process, underscoring the necessity for both player and coach education in relation to the use of coping strategies:

“I don't use any [coping strategies] as I am unaware of what might help me.”

**(Participant 101, FA WNL Northern Premier)**

“Coaches would talk about being prepared but not say how to prepare.” (**Participant 114, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

### *Player Wellbeing and Support*

Some findings regarding players' wellbeing and support were concerning, highlighting the need for player support. For example, 18% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had “thoughts of self-harm, depression, or experienced overwhelming negative emotions after playing a football match in the last season”, with a further 6% responding that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Over half of the players who agreed with this statement (58.3%) were in the younger age bracket and aged under 21 years, with 25% aged between 22-25 years; somewhat supporting earlier notions that younger, less experienced players may find coping with these additional pressures more challenging than their more experienced counterparts:

“My past club I wasn’t supported from a mental side of it which is half the reason I moved clubs before the end of the season as I wasn’t getting the support I needed. Playing nationally, I think the psychological wellbeing and support needs to massively increase and is sometimes forgotten about.” **(Participant 39, FA WNL Northern Premier)**

Alarming, 65.4% stated that they had no opportunity for psychological or wellbeing support from a trained member of staff. A further 7.5% did not provide a response when asked ‘what psychological support do you receive from your club?’:

“... During the previous seasons in the championship, I do not feel that I have had any support unless I have sought it out myself e.g. via the PFA or paid for it. Staff have not been as supportive or have rarely been able to point me in the right direction. There has been no sports psych, no psych support, no player care provisions at all, hardly any access to a safeguarding person, and no wellbeing support or considerations for how we players may be feeling or what we may need. Things are always football orientated and I have experienced many times where player welfare has not been prioritised. This season 23/24 in Tier 3 is an exception to this, and I could not fault the support available to me now but know this is unfortunately not on offer at all clubs.”  
**(Participant 125, WC)**

For those who reported that they did not receive official psychological, or wellbeing support provided from the club, players often described seeking support from other individuals within the club for psychological support. For example, the players lent on their designated coaches, physiotherapists, or more senior players:

“We could definitely be offered more professional psychological help rather than just a manager, coach or experienced player.” **(Participant 15, FA WNL Div One Midlands)**

“The coaches always mention they are available to talk if I wanted and I talk with my teammates, but we do not have a designated person for psychological help within the club or externally.” **(Participant 5, FA WNL Northern Premier)**

Only 6.8% acknowledged having access to a safeguarding officer, who they could reach out to if they had any concerns when asked about available psychological and wellbeing support. Though there was some reference to uncertainty as to what support was available within clubs, and a need for this to be advertised more clearly.

“Like chaplaincy and safeguarding but that’s about it. We don’t have a psychologist.”  
**(Participant 131, WSL)**

“Minimal, it’s not very well marketed however if I really needed support, I’m sure there would be some available.” (**Participant 93, FA WNL Southern Premier**)

Just 15% of respondents reported having regular opportunity to access to an accredited psychologist through their club, who was available to provide them with one-to-one support. Some players (5.3%) referred to having limited psychological support, for example understanding that “there is a psychologist on the men’s side, but [we] have only seen them once” (**Participant 85**). There was some reference to this support being in the form of infrequent group-based psychological support, such as “monthly mental health sessions every now and again” (**Participant 123**). There was also frequent reference to players “completing a survey every session based on our physical and mental health” (**Participant 125**) or “self-evaluation sheets to fill out (including performance and psychological)” (**Participant 55**), however with often no psychologist or individual within a player-support role, it is unclear how this data is interpreted and used to inform practice.

Importantly, 64.8% of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they “would like more psychological support from my club as the demands of the women’s game continue to grow”. Many players expanded on these suggestions, advocating for the appointment of a trained club psychologist and someone suitably qualified to support players in relation to their psychological needs.

“Have a club psychologist. Have a dedicated professional; a team wouldn’t be without a physio so why miss mental health.” (**Participant 24, FA WNL Div One North**)

There were also suggestions around creating opportunities such as “open forum to raise concerns” (**Participant 114**) or an “anonymous ballot where [players] can ask questions and have them answered” (**Participant 83**). Further, there were several suggestions around clubs inviting trained psychologists to deliver mental skills workshops to provide players with a better understanding of how to “deal with pressure” (**Participant 123**):

“Psychology sessions about stress, anxiety, [and] confidence to learn how to manage the types of emotions that may come up in games with bigger crowds.” (**Participant 130, FA WNL Northern Premier**)

There were some additional suggestions focused more on prevention of psychological stress within the women’s game. For example, players described a need to “approach [the] delivery of criticism differently” (**Participant 62**) and wanted to see clearer regulations and sanctions for those being abusive such as a “zero-tolerance policy for abuse” (**Participant 123**). There were also some suggestions around providing opportunities for players to get used to playing in front of a crowd such as for clubs to “allow for spectators at training sessions so that a crowd becomes normalised” (**Participant 123**), through either attempting to simulate environment demands or providing opportunities for crowds at training sessions.

## **Discussion**

This study sought to gain player perspectives on the contemporary demands of women's football in England, specifically in relation to the increased exposure seen in recent years. Additionally, it sought to understand what psychological support was currently available to female footballers currently residing in the top four leagues in England. In particular, we wanted to hear from players as to whether a) they felt additional support was needed, and b) how that support may look. Firstly, we acknowledge the many personal, social, environmental and performance benefits that were drawn upon by players in relation to the growth of the women's game. However, the results of the survey also highlighted the many challenges that female footballers face such as pressure/anxiety experienced, scrutiny and abuse received both online and within stadiums, and a lack of psychological support provisions, which key stakeholders need to consider for female athletes to thrive under the contemporary demands of the game.

As anticipated, players expressed a sense of increased pressure in relation to performing on a bigger stage. For some, this pressure was appraised positively and benefited performance. Others felt their performances were inhibited due to heightened anxiety. This aligns with the Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (TCTSA) (Jones et al., 2009) which explains that competitive stress can influence athletic performance either positively or negatively, dependent upon the demand and resource appraisal of that activity. If an athlete perceives the demands as dangerous (e.g. to esteem) and they are worried and/or uncertain about the outcome then they would be more likely to experience a threat state (Jones et al., 2009; Meijen et al., 2020). There was common reference throughout the survey regarding players feeling concerned about performing well in front of a bigger audience (both in stadiums and online), with explicit reference to the pressure they felt to give a good account of the women's game. Some players referred to being fearful of making a mistake as they felt it may contribute to gender-based prejudice and discrimination (i.e. "there are some people who will always see football is a "man's game" Participant 46) which they were very aware of within the women's game, which resulted in some reporting that this inhibited their performance or changed the way they played (e.g. more conservative performances).

The second key consideration of the TCTSA is resource appraisal, which is thought to encompass three inter-related constructs; self-efficacy, perceived control, and achievement goals (Jones et al., 2009). Self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a task, is largely influenced by past experiences (Bandura, 1997). This could help to explain why there was frequent reference throughout the survey to younger players often finding a large crowd presence more psychologically

challenging, and there being reference to performances being more affected in less experienced players compared to their more experienced peers (e.g. showing a lack of discipline). Additionally, Lazarus' (1999) cognitive appraisal theory emphasises the importance of effective coping operations, where no or ineffective coping resources can result in high threat appraisal. This is important given that only a small number of players involved in the study agreed that they used coping strategies, with many stating that they were not aware of what might help them. These findings demonstrate the need for players to have the opportunity to gain support in developing evidence-based coping strategies (e.g. relaxation techniques, imagery, thought-stopping) (Kent et al., 2018), to help maintain or optimise performance under pressure, particularly for those with limited experience in performing on a bigger stage and/or with greater perceived stakes.

Performing in front of more people resulted in many players ruminating over their performances, being more self-critical and overthinking mistakes. Some players referred to a sense of feeling “overwhelmed” with so many opinions. Some of these concerns again revolved around players feeling a sense of responsibility to positively showcase the women’s game, at times referring to a worry of how their performances were perceived by the crowd and/or on social media, and some of the abuse that had been encountered particularly in relation to gender stereotypes. These findings reinforced the work of Fenton and colleagues (2023), highlighting the prevalence of gender-based discrimination and abuse experienced by women’s footballers. Players proposed a need for media training and football clubs putting in place zero-tolerance policies with regard to abuse online. These findings again highlight the need to provide players with the opportunity for specialised psychological support, particularly where these negative implications were not exclusive to just on the pitch, and players reported overthinking or worrying long after a match had ended.

Of more concern, nearly a fifth of respondents stated that they had thoughts of self-harm, depression or experienced overwhelming negative emotions following a football match in the 2022-23 season; a stark statistic which emphasises the importance of ensuring appropriate psychological support systems are in place. As identified in Player Wellbeing and Support Theme, there was some indication that younger, less experienced players may be more negatively affected by the pressure than those more experienced, perhaps due to lower self-efficacy influenced by less experience (Bandura, 1997). Though this was not always the case; some in the older player age brackets who resided in the top tiers (i.e. WSL and WC) of women’s football in England also agreed to the above statement. Importantly, 79.2% of those who had experienced thoughts of self-harm, depression or experienced negative overwhelming emotions, also stated that they had no psychological support, and stated that they

would like more psychological support. Of all respondents within the survey, nearly two thirds stated that they had no opportunity for psychological or wellbeing support (with a further 7.5% providing no response when asked about psychological support received). Whilst it may be expected that those residing in the higher leagues would receive greater levels of psychological and wellbeing support, it became apparent that these issues extend through to the highest level of the women's game (Harpur, 2024). Players referred to relying on a variety of informal sources of psychological support, namely from coaches, physiotherapists and more senior players. Coaches have long been considered a key source of psychological support, described as the "first line of defense" (Rees et al., 2012). This has increased interest in improving the reach and impact of psychology through non-professionals (i.e. coaches and support staff) and to improve their psychological literacy (Dean et al., 2022), particularly where risks of non-professionals sharing inaccurate psychological knowledge has been previously acknowledged (Murdoch, 2016). Whilst improved psychological literacy should be a priority for clubs, it should not replace the need for certified practitioners to deliver psychological support where financially and practically feasible. Importantly, 64.8% of respondents in the present survey wanted more psychological support as the demands of the women's game continue to grow.

The support players receive should also extend to helping players nearing the end of their football career, transitioning out of a player-role. Responses amongst older players referred to a little frustration and sadness that this growth was only occurring toward the end of their playing careers. We know that athletic retirement can often involve a significant change in identity, social support, questions over future career aspirations, and importantly risks to physical and mental health (Vorheis et al., 2023). Indeed, previous research focused on retired male professional footballers showed that 35% reported symptoms of anxiety and depression (Gouttebauge et al., 2015). In the only study to date that has examined mental health exclusively in retired professional female footballers (German First League), 9% of the respondents (n = 157) met the diagnosis criteria for clinical depression within the first 2 years of retirement (Prinz et al., 2016). However, more research is needed in relation to the challenges female footballers experience upon retirement across different leagues (e.g. in England) and the available support, particularly as female players may also face additional or different challenges to their male counterparts (e.g. financial positions on retirement due to lower salaries).

Whilst the best-case scenario would be that all clubs employ an accredited sports psychologist to work with and support players, which was encouraged by many of the survey respondents, it is acknowledged that this may not be feasible particularly outside of the WSL and WC, due to limited resources within some clubs. However, given the increased demands filtering through to the FA WNL

and the increased pressure and demands which players are facing, they should at a minimum have access to support staff who have engaged with psychological and/or mental health training resources, and at a minimum know where to sign-post players. This could be achieved through FA workshops, which could be made mandatory for some staff within clubs.

Additionally, as reported by several participants, a middle ground where group workshops (e.g. mental health support sessions) are delivered at different points throughout the season to help provide players with coping resources across all tiers could be a practicable and affordable solution to improve the available support. In some instances, it is likely where psychological support will be absent due to it being under-prioritised compared to other aspects of player support (e.g. strength and conditioning, nutrition). Research has highlighted some of the challenges associated with psychological provision within elite sport, for example, a focus on performance at the expense of everything else (McDougall et al., 2015). With this in mind, it is suggested that there needs to be greater education for football clubs on the importance of appropriate psychological provisions and understanding of both the physical and mental demands players face, particularly those placing great expectations on their players and expecting them to perform at professional (or semi-professional) standards. Further, the wellbeing services offered by the Professional Footballers Association, whom any male player that has been contracted to any English Football League club can access, are currently only available to female players who have played in the WSL. These services should be extended to those competing in high performance settings within the WC (as a priority) and FA WNL.

The concurrent mixed-methods survey design presents certain limitations, particularly in its inability to follow up on emergent and potentially significant participant responses. While the survey provided valuable breadth across players competing in different tiers, the use of an online questionnaire restricted opportunities to probe responses in greater depth or to explore nuanced experiences further. For instance, some participants referred to self-evaluation sheets that collected both performance and psychological data. However, it remains unclear how such data are interpreted, acted upon, or embedded within everyday practice at clubs. Therefore, future research would benefit from qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, to enable more detailed exploration of players' experiences. Additionally, hearing from coaches, support staff, and key decision-makers responsible for implementing player support systems would provide valuable insight into how psychological provision is prioritised, operationalised, and resourced within clubs. Capturing perspectives from both players and those involved in organisational decision-making would allow for

a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological support structures function in practice, and how they may be improved to meet the evolving demands of the women's game.

## **Conclusion**

As the popularity and standards of female football continue to grow, so too do the demands and expectations footballers are placed under. Whilst there are many benefits of the growth for players career prospects, the professionalisation of the sport, and personal benefits of gaining recognition for their achievements and positive impacts for the community, the additional psychological demands players now face should not be ignored. Key stakeholders in the women's game cannot expect female athletes to thrive (or continue) in environments where there is a disparity in resourcing, knowledge, and expert support. All of those working within a player facing role within football clubs within the top four tiers of women's football (and beyond) need to be aware of the psychological impacts of the increased attention and crowd presence alongside the other psychological demands of players' roles, they should also acknowledge players as individuals; where some may thrive under pressure, others may find some situations more challenging.

Football clubs need to consider what support they are offering their players, how this support is given (e.g. opportunity for one to ones), and who this support is given by (i.e. are they appropriately accredited). Where possible and resources allow, players should have regular opportunity to seek support from an accredited sports psychologist. Where this is not financially viable, clubs should seek practicable solutions with guidance from governing bodies (e.g. The FA) to provide the best possible player care in the absence of employing an accredited sports psychologist, for example through additional coach education and group workshops that can be delivered across the season in relation to mental health/wellbeing and to equip players with appropriate coping skills. Additionally, footballers, particularly residing in the WC, but also within Tiers 3 and 4, should be able to access the wellbeing support available through the Professional Footballers Association, where currently this is limited to current or previous WSL players, despite many within the WC and FA WNL being placed under demands and expectations comparable to professional football.

### **Data Availability**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to data restrictions, namely survey responses containing information that could compromise the anonymity and privacy of research participants.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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