

# An inferiority complex: Managing semi-professional clubs

© Simon Day & Elsa Kristiansen<sup>1,2</sup>

University College of Southeast Norway (1)  
Norwegian School of Sport Science (2)

*Published on idrottsforum.org 2017-04-28*

Although researchers have typically focused on professional teams due to their revenue generating power, to reach these teams, athletes usually go through semi-professional clubs first. Maximizing management activity effectiveness and efficiency, therefore, becomes critical in such organizations to examine organizational factors and elaborate on the experiences of semi-professional athletes that can affect organizational and athletic performance. This is our aim in this paper when investigating a (semi-)professional women's football team. Qualitative data highlighted two primary (partners and players) and seven secondary (coaching staff, women's football, media, volunteers, Norwegian Football Association, fans, board) stakeholders in the club's environment. The players reported 34 organizational stressors, demonstrating both organizational and individual level factors affecting club and athlete performance, with many perceived stressors directly related to boardroom decision-making. Athletes' dual careers seems to be an additional managerial element in this context – especially since women have

less opportunities than men do to reach a professional level.

SIMON DAY is a former master student at the Norwegian School of Sport Science, where he wrote his master thesis *A football player's perception of organizational stress: a management and athlete point of view*, with Elsa Kristiansen as his supervisor. He currently works as Equipment Manager for the Football Association of Norway, where he facilitates all of the national teams from youth to senior elite.

ELSA KRISTIANSSEN is an Associate Professor at the University College of Southeast Norway (USN) where she is the Research Manager at the Center for Emergency and Crisis Management. She has published over 50 articles and book chapters, the majority of which are in the areas of sport psychology (e.g., motivation, coping with organizational issues and media stress, coping with youth competitions) and sport event management (e.g., volunteerism, Youth Olympic Games, stakeholders involved in talent development).

A club's success depends on both managerial/organizational and athletic/individual success. With the professional standards that the male clubs have experienced for several years, their experience could be used to elevate women's football<sup>1</sup> to a new level. Especially in Europe, women's football leagues are becoming more professional, with England, France, Sweden and Germany being in the forefront throughout the last decade. This professionalization may also be attributed to the increasing number of competitions for women – also at the junior level (McCormack & Walseth, 2013). However, the monetary rewards in women's football are still quite small. This can be seen in the Champions League, where the winner of the women's Champions League gets €250 000, while the winner of the men's Champions League gets €10 500 000 (UEFA, 2013a, 2013b). In general, an increasing number of clubs are seeing the benefits of doing well in both men's and women's football; e.g. Arsenal, Lyon, Wolfsburg, Everton. These clubs have seen that women's football can lead to a stronger relationship between the supporters and the club. What type of challenges do female players face compared to male players?

Women's football have been investigated from a sociological angle and with a focus on for instance mediated constructions of contemporary females athletes (Shugart, 2003), intersections of gender, masculinity, social class, and sexuality (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003; Kristiansen, Broch, & Pedersen, 2014), as well as content media analyses and discourses (Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002). A psychological angle has focused on the female athletes' perceptions of stress and coping (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012), the challenge of dominant notions of 'appropriate' female sports (Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999), and international feminism and football (Barlow, 2000). Despite this body of research on sport, gender, and media, more directed research is needed on the gender dynamics and experiences of professional female footballers (Liston, 2006) – and what it means to be 'professional' without funding.

In this article we combine a sport management and a sport psychology perspective and we aim to (a) map the different stakeholders and their importance for the football club, and compare their resources with the men's professional team within the same club, and to (b) investigate how the club adapt for optimal performance based on player experiences.

---

1 Whenever "football" is used in this paper it refers to association football, sometimes called soccer.

## Women's football and the Norwegian sport context

Of the 365,000 licensed players among Norway's 5 million people, 30 per cent are active female players (Nygaard, 2012). This makes women's football the third biggest sport in Norway with its 115,000 players, after football for men and cross-country skiing (Sætren, 2011). Regional leagues for female players in Norway have existed since the 1970s, though the creation of a First Division in 1984 made the league system more structured. *Toppserien* (Top League) has been the name of the highest division since 1996, and it now consists of 12 teams. Furthermore, the Football Association of Norway (FA) organizes women's football in Norway with its own women's director. The clubs also have an organization called *Serieforeningen*, whose purpose is to look after the clubs interests.

There is a huge difference between the organization of women's football and men's (Norwegian Top Football, NTF) football in Norway. In the newspapers the differences in salaries are often commented upon – such as the average income for a female player is between 0-90,000 NOK compare to the men's 800,000 yearly (Nygaard, 2012). This makes it hard for a female player to play professionally (i.e. with a sole focus on sport), and as a semi-professional athlete they are forced to pursue a dual career (EU, 2012). This means that they depend on governmental scholarships (for taking an education full-time), or working, full-time or part time, in a regular job. Only the most merited players at the national team make enough to keep a normal living standard. Two teams have dominated the league the last two years, and naturally, they have a clear advantage with a much higher budget than the rest of the teams. However, some of the clubs have recently managed to improve their financial situation, with the Norwegian FA being a big contributor with 20M NOK to be divided between the clubs. While the men's organization NTF have a joint company with the Norwegian FA to facilitate the sale of media rights, the women's organization have no such thing. This is because women's football is not seen as a strong product; therefore, the only TV channel to air women's football is the public service channel (NRK).

## Theoretical framework

This study combines stakeholder and organizational stress literature. The rationale for this approach is to apply stakeholder theory as a point of departure when identifying the actors potentially influencing the football players' perception of stressors.

### *Stakeholder theory*

The *stakeholder theory* as described by Freeman (1984) was used to analyse the relationship between the players and the club. This perspective allows for descriptive, instrumental, and normative analyses of the stakeholders; that is, the various individuals, groups and organizations that affect or are impacted by the actions of a focal organization (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984, 1994; Parent, 2008; Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003). Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as “[...] any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (p. 46). By using this definition, there can be a large variety of stakeholders for an organization. To classify stakeholders, Clarkson (1995) used the terms primary and secondary stakeholder:

A primary stakeholder group is one without whose continuing participation the corporation cannot survive as a going concern. [...] Secondary stakeholder groups are defined as those who influence or affect, or are influenced or affected by, the corporation, but they are not engaged in transaction with the corporation and are not essential for its survival (p. 106-107).

An organization can have more than one primary stakeholder and the relationship between the organization and its stakeholder is usually mutually beneficial (Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). Certain attributes would have to be present to define whether a stakeholder is a primary or secondary stakeholder (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). The three attributes that Mitchell and colleagues define are: 1) Power, the ability for the ones having it to get the results they want; 2) Legitimacy, the perception that an organizations actions are desirable within a given set of rules and a social system; and 3) Urgency, to what degree a stakeholders needs demand an immediate reaction from the organization to handle it. These attributes are, importantly, not constant, but instead dynamic and changing in strength (Mitchell et al., 1997). In this context it is important to be aware of this aspect, as the player's experiences and responses will vary from season to season, and previ-

ous successful demands and relationships may later turn into a stressor that could impact the club's performance.

### *Organizational stressors*

Recent sport psychology research on *organizational stressors* (e.g. sport organization politics, coach strategies, team selection criteria, and planning) has focused on the “critical issues surrounding, and cognitive processes underpinning, a performer's relationship with his or her sport organization” (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 327). Organizational stressors can be quite detrimental for an athlete's performance (Fletcher et al., 2006; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), and recent findings from 34 studies has resulted in a taxonomic classification of the environmental demands which consists of four categories; leadership and personnel, cultural and team, logistical and environmental, and performance and personal issues (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012).

Previous research into football has revealed important stressors as the structure of contracts, geographical distances between the teams in the leagues, the number of athletes fighting for a spot, and living in the shadow of more entrenched American sports. Additional stressors, including coach issues and team issues cited by participants, belonged to a *core* group of categories found in previous research on football players and players participating in other team sports (Kristiansen, Murphy, et al., 2012). Among female football players, media images and the invisibility of the female footballer has also been pointed out as a stressor (Kristiansen et al., 2014). Women's entry into sport has been a struggle against gender stereotyping, and structural and organizational barriers (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2002). This is apparent in media coverage as media producers simply devote more time and resources to male sports (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013), resources that are paramount for a league to succeed or an athlete to earn money (Kristiansen et al., 2014). It is essential for sport organizations to adopt a systematic and strategic approach to better understand the role the leadership play in preparing elite athletes for competition (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2008). However, there exists a lack of research addressing performance management in elite sport (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), which we intend to address by using a women's team as an example.

## Methods

The empirical investigation was conducted during the 2013-2014 season by means of observations and qualitative open-ended, in-depth interviews with female professional football players. After obtaining approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, informed consent was obtained from all participants in the first meeting with the team.

### *Participants*

A convenient and purposeful sampling procedure was conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to recruit football players and manager from one of the 12 elite clubs in the Norwegian Top Division Toppserien. The chosen club also has a men's team in the Premier League for men. All 19 players were eligible, so we chose to interview half of them after the following criteria a) status as being a full-time 'professional' player or splitting her time between sport and school/job; and b) experience in the premier division. 12 interviews were conducted; nine athletes (player B, E, J, R, S, T, W, X, Y) and three club representatives (C, M, P). The age of the volunteered players ranged from 18 to 30 (Mean age=23, 5, SD=3.8). Three of the nine players had played professional football in European premier divisions; four of nine players had represented their respective national teams.

### *Observations*

A qualitative case study is often characterized by researchers spending time in the environment and being personally in contact with persons and activities of the case (Stake, 2005). The first author conducted field observations during the season by attending practices and games. Through his role as participant-observer (Yin, 2014), he was considered a part of the group before conducting the interviews. During the analysis, field notes were manually sorted by thematic relevance. These notes were later important for contextualizing interviewee responses during the analysis as well as for the creation of the interview guide. The observations were also used to clarify the interactions between different stakeholders and their effect on the players.

### *Interviews and the interview guide*

In-depth interviews were chosen because the method allowed the team players and leaders to articulate their own feelings about being a female elite athlete, and it has also been deemed the most appropriate methodology in studies of stress (Jones, 1995). The reason is that detailed information helps to understand how athletes function within the complex system of club, organization and society as a whole (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). We wanted to stimulate communication, meaning extensive elaborations of a topic and how the topic influenced the life of the chosen athletes and their dual workload. Stories were spontaneous and the episodes spread throughout the interview were considered narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and later given a meaning analysis.

The interview guide consisted of three main sections. The interviews started with: (a) introduction and the player's background; (b); a discussion concerning possible stressors that affected the players on and off the field (c) a review of the stressors that had been mentioned and to what degree the players felt affected by them. In the interview guide, there was flexibility to change the order of questions and probe areas that arose to follow the participants' perspectives. The interviews were carried out at the training location, and they lasted from 40 to 90 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed that the information they provided would remain confidential, and that the club administration was not aware of which athletes were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 206 pages of single spaced raw text. Of this, 166 pages came from the player's interviews, 27 pages from the team leaders' interview, and finally 13 pages from the control interview.

### *Data analysis and procedures*

The researchers read and reread the transcripts in order to become familiar with the data. Data were analysed through content analysis and pattern matching (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). The process was done manually by the research group, after the first coding a few cases were discussed and agreed upon before the final coding. Stakeholder classification by Clarkson (1995) was used to analyse each stakeholder group. We also compared information between stakeholders to examine stakeholder similarities and differences in needs, perceptions, and experiences. In regard to organizational stressors and athletes focus, themes, quotes and paraphrased quotes representing a meaningful point/thought were individually identi-

fied and discussed and consensually validated into patterns of similar responses in the data (e.g., players having work or school outside of football, lack of feedback from coaches) and a summary label for the category was determined (e.g., communication). The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and the first author who is fluent in both Norwegian and English, translated the concepts and quotes to illustrate themes into English at the time of writing this paper.

### *Trustworthiness*

In accord with Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness (1985), the first author spent prolonged time in the field to build trust with the participants. Further, we used analysis triangulation to help establish accuracy in the interpretations (Patton, 2002), and also conducted a control interview after thorough readings of the transcripts. After the first coding, the first author had a meeting with the club leaders and presented the preliminary findings. Here the club representatives were also able to comment and clarify details. The implications of stakeholder's classification and effect on the club were found to be meaningful and followed by a discussion. In addition, the coaches' role and impact on the players was noted as important for the club to improve for the next season.

## Results and discussion

One of the differences between a professional and semi-professional team is that in the latter, several of the people who have administrative duties also have a role on the team's staff. The women's team does not have a full-time sports administrator, but they share one with the men's team. Furthermore, it was quite common that a person in the administration not only had one job and focus area, but would have to contribute in several areas. Where the men's team has diversified and has people working with all the areas that goes into running a club i.e. finance, marketing, sports, HR and media, the women's team does not. For the women one person would be the assistant coach and sport manager. The most notable difference is ownership of facilities. The women's team does not own anything. They rent either from the male club, who does own a stadium and training pitch, or from the local government who has public pitches. It is also quite clear that the women will



have a tougher time when we see the huge difference in budgets. This is the foundation that allows for the huge differences between the two teams.

**Table 1** *Resources for the clubs female and male team*

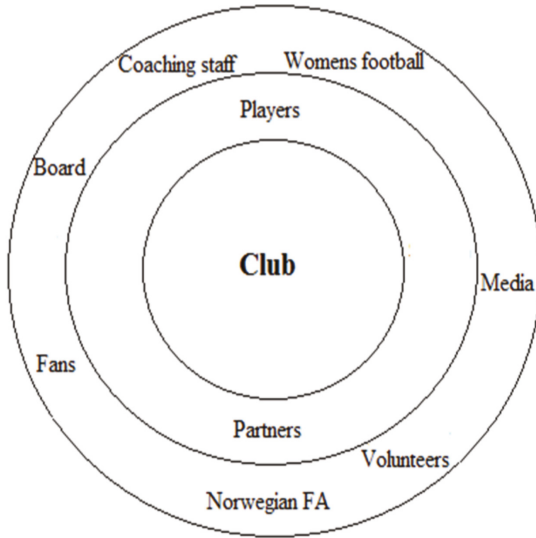
|                          | <i>Male club</i>   | <i>Female club</i>   |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Coaches</i>           | 5  | 2 (Head coach full-time, assistant has admin role as well).              |
| <i>Administration</i>    | 13   | 7  |
| <i>Budget</i>            | 64m NOK  | 9m NOK   |
| <i>Full-time players</i> | 24 (non of the players in the A-squad have work in addition to football, except youth players who go to school). | 2 (All players either have work or school in addition to football).      |
| <i>Facilities</i>        | Owns stadium and locker-room facilities.   | Rents public field and locker-room facilities from the local government. |

### *The Stakeholders*

We used the stakeholder approach and identified and classified nine primary and secondary stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Our findings indicate that there are two primary stakeholders (partners and the players) and seven secondary stakeholders (Coaching staff, women's football, media, volunteers, Norwegian FA, fans, board).

In order to understand the constraints upon players and the stressors these constraints generate, we focus on the two primary stakeholders' relationship to the coach and the board. The stakeholder that holds the most power was the partner (i.e., sponsors and investors); 'without partners there also wouldn't be a club, they're an extension of that' (club admin. C). Due to the difficult economic situation in Norwegian women's football, the club has to rely on economic support from partners to survive, as they do not have the same opportunity to make money on player sales and ticket income as male football. The women's league in Norway had an average attendance of 196 in 2012 (Kringen, 2014), which means that game revenue isn't the clubs' biggest income. This allows the partners to exude their power over the club. The partners can dictate their demands and push them through with little resistance from the players. For the athletes, this may result in more stress, for

example when they are used in marketing, as actual decision-making will be adapted to the partner's needs and demands to the cost of the players.



**Figure 1** *Classification of the clubs stakeholders; two primary (players and partners) and seven secondary*

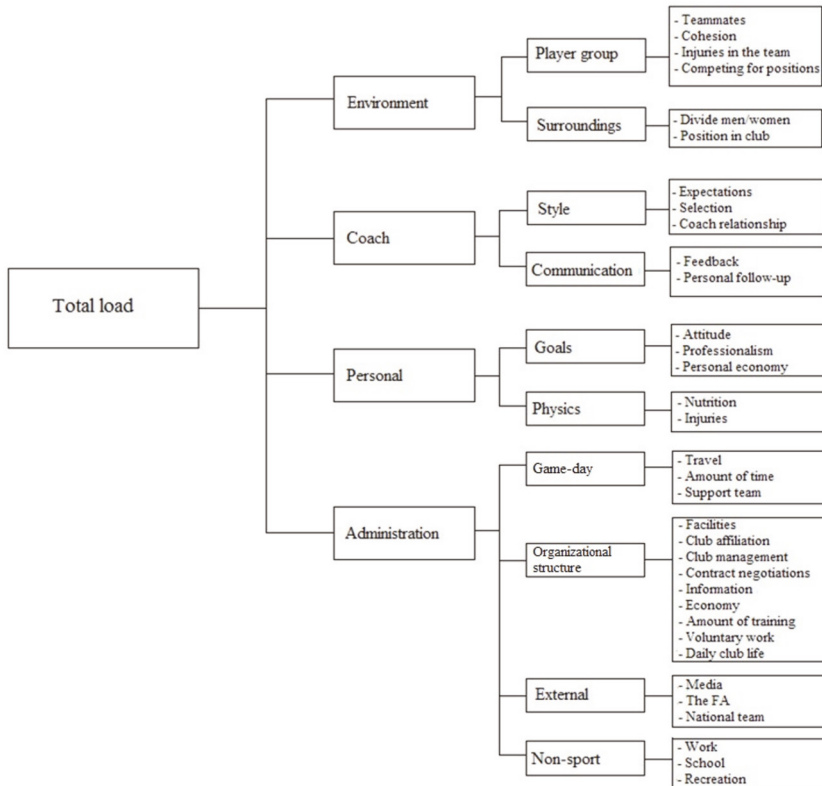
The most interesting primary stakeholder, for the club administration, found in this investigation was the players; ‘if we didn’t have them [i.e. the players], we wouldn’t have anything to exist for’ (club admin. C). This classification of the players as primary stakeholders is based on their importance defined by the attributes power, legitimacy and urgency (Freeman, 1984). For the club, the players are the best tool to communicate with its surroundings, as club admin. M described in the interview: ‘our players are our most important tool; they are the ones selling the club [as a product]’. With this in mind, one would think that the players influence over the club would be more substantial.

We found an insufficient relationship between the two primary stakeholders. There is also restricted interaction between coach and partners. However, in women’s football, due to the lack of financial means, the coach is sometimes drawn into the administration and management of the club. In this capacity, the coach and partner would have some direct interaction with each other. Therefore, players can feel that the demands are stressful and forced upon them by the club, even though the demands actually originate from the partners. When asked about situations they perceived as sub-optimal, and what they themselves could do to improve it, almost all

players answered similarly; ‘there’s very little I can do about it’ (player X). The players are ultimately the ones who ‘suffer’ with this scaled down organizational structure. When adding to the mix that only two female players were full-time players, which means they can live off what they are paid for playing, the differences between the genders’ situation (in the same club) is obvious.

**Player’s experience**

The players reported 34 organizational stressors, and the data analysis procedure organized these into four general dimensions and ten higher order themes: environment (player group and surrounding); coach (style and communication); personal (goals and health); and finally, administration (game-day, organizational structure, external and non-sport issues). These demonstrate both organizational and individual level factors affecting club/athlete performance (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Classification of the player’s perception of organizational stressors in the interviews into 34 first order themes, ten second order themes and four general dimensions.

## **Environment**

Environment consisted of two second order themes: player group and surroundings (see Figure 2). Tension within the player group was frequently mentioned in the interviews as a source of strain within the player group; the players felt that competing against teammates for the same positions were causing differences. The pressure was also observed and obvious in relation to injuries, a stressor that is both personal and also affect the entire team as it reduce team cohesion. Being injured could be crucial as if ‘you did not play you lose your place on the team, and that got very tiring after a while’ (player Y). Teammates being injured could also be a source of strain, especially if the injury was on a player considered a ‘key player’. Player J described the situation in the group when teammates were injured: ‘we don’t focus on it on the surface in the group, and it’s really good, but of course one thinks of the situation, I think everyone believes that we are hampered’. The replacement is sometimes regarded as inferior to the ‘key player’, which could have a negative effect on the team as a unit. If a replacement is performing better than expected in a match, this could be a positive contributor to the cohesion of the team. In addition to being a source of strain, the team is also a support for the individual player. Helping and giving positive feedback to the players who do not play can be important to strengthen team cohesion.

The comparison between women and men was mentioned and perceived as a stressor among the footballers (see Table 1), both in the lack of media reporting as media producers simply devote more time and resources to male sports (Cooky et al., 2013), but also the actual comparison had a negative impact on the players. Since this was a club that had strong ties to a male team in their respective top division, there was a perception of an internal hierarchy between the male and female players. As player X has come to terms with, ‘we will never be equal to them (men’s football)’. Some players found it annoying that people at all took the trouble to compare, as the players themselves see it as two different, and therefore incomparable sports. It is a stressor that most of the players have learned to cope and live with (Kristiansen et al., 2014).

## **Coach**

Coach consisted of two second order themes, style and communication (see Figure 2). Style consisted of three first order themes, such as expectations, selection and coach relationship. One player’s experience was that she felt that ‘the coach feels I don’t prioritise football enough’ (player X). These feelings would make the player feel pressured into changing her priorities

and adding to the total load. Like the findings by Fletcher and Hanton (2003), the coach's selection criteria also proved to be a stressor that affected the players. Some players felt that being the best in training did not necessarily mean that they got to play the game: 'it doesn't matter how well I do in training, the coach has already selected the team in his/her head' (player X). When the criteria for selection is not clearly presented and formulated, these circumstances create an uncertainty that will elevate stress due to a constant normative comparison (Kristiansen, Halvari, & Roberts, 2012). Other stressful aspects of coach-athletes communications was perceived lack of feedback. Positive feedback was something that was very important for the players: 'well maybe a little lack of feedback and a little lack of positive things. There is more focus on things that need to be better' (player B).

On the positive side, all players felt that the coach had the quality and ability to do the job that was required. They put a lot of trust in the coach and had high expectations that the coach could improve their development. This is important as the coach is responsible for the everyday development of the player and represents the player's first meeting with the organization. In contrast, the general management are people who have little effect on the players' everyday work on the football field. One of the factors that make women's football differ from men's football is that the coach is much more part of the club's management in women's clubs. Such as contract negotiations became difficult for the players because the coach, with whom they had a personal relationship, participated in addition to the club management. A few of the players pointed out that taking their personal relationship with the coach on the field and into to the boardroom was a tough transition that reduced their intensity when negotiating with the club. Due to multiple roles, communication (the second first order theme) turned out to be an issue in the coach relationship.

The players expressed that it was especially difficult to combine football with school or work as the players felt that the coach's focus was too much geared towards football – and that other arenas were not considered important by the coach. Knowing what the coach feels about their prioritising put the players in a difficult situation as they have such high regards for the coach. This struggle between what the player wants to prioritise and what was expected of them to prioritise is therefore a very demanding and constant stressor.

## Personal

Personal consisted of two second order themes, goals and health (see Figure 2). Goals consisted of three first order themes – attitude, professionalism and personal economy – all important for their view of themselves as athletes. The players and the organization operate at the highest level in this sport for female athletes, even though the club views itself as a ‘semi-professional club’ (club admin. C). When players spend over 30 hours a week in training (club management P), in addition to school, so it goes without saying that this is players at a high level. What made them semi-professional was that they almost did not get paid for their services. As player X so clearly puts it, ‘we don’t do this for the money’. Many of the players fared okay financially because they had a job in addition or received support through family or student loans. Some players felt that this created an additional burden. At the same time it also created frustration for some players that others on the team got paid more than them. In this setting, higher wages seem to be related to competence. Consequently, the players without monetary recognition of their skills felt it as demotivating, a finding that has been reported in the literature previously (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

Health (e.g., nutrition and injuries) was also a constant personal source of strain. Some players play when they are injured and one of them ‘feel like the world’s worst football player when I play like that. But it goes on your conscience, we have no players and I feel like I have to play’ (player Y). It has been noted that playing with injuries and pain is a central aspect in professional football (Roderick, Waddington, & Parker, 2000), and it shows the manager that the player has what is regarded as a ‘good attitude’. There are exceedingly more demands put on the players every day to perform day in and day out. Furthermore, athletes that are long-term injured may experience a loss of self-confidence, because they feel isolated, marginalized and cannot take part in the daily activities (Roderick et al., 2000). On the other hand, the dual daily workload is reduced, and as the player in the control interview reported about being injured; ‘in some way it’s good to be injured because then you can focus more on school and work, but on the other hand you have to train harder with physiotherapy and weights, so that gets tiring as well’ (control interview). The player’s normal life is so demanding that it also affects their nutrition. The players feel guilty when they do not have time to make food and be prepared for practice. Instead they all told stories about how they usually eat their pre-training meal: in the car, on their way to practice from work or school.

### **Administration**

Administration consisted of four second order themes: game day, organizational structure, external, and non-sport issues (see Figure 3). Game day included issues such as travel (often the cheapest fare, occurring on game day, and paying for the after game food yourself), amount of time they spend on this was also mentioned in addition to a wish for a larger support team. These stressors are largely a result of a restrained economy, which also apply to organizational structure, the next second order theme.

Organizational structure was the secondary theme with the most stressors because this is the theme where the organizations' structure comes into play. The players live for football, and they organise their whole lives around football. However, the financial situation in the club demanded that they had a primary income outside of football. The players who play on national teams managed to work less because of economic stipends they got from the national football association. Consequently, the players survive due to tremendous planning. When the club occasionally fails to inform the players about changes, it creates problems for the players in other arenas – and they felt as though the team did not care about the other arenas they attend. The players felt that all their decisions were a compromise to make sure that football got enough attention, which was easily observed by the body language. A frustrating 'sigh' was the most commonly used expression by the players while talking about this stressor: 'I've had to learn that I cannot succeed in all the arenas I want' (player B).

## **General Discussion**

For a club to secure its existence, it is vital that it understand the primary stakeholders' needs; otherwise, they lose them. While the club administration has no problem with understanding the partners' needs and accommodate them by letting them use players in promotions, our investigation revealed that the club management seem to be more unaware of the players' perceptions or needs. However, they did discuss that they felt the overall impact of the combination of football, school and work, was what stressed the players most: 'When there is a hectic period, it must be the experience of stress because they [the players] also have another life outside of football' (club admin. P). One way to reduce the players perception of sources of strain is to increase their salaries, so that they can cut down on other activities outside of football. Yet, the players feel that 'work is work; football is

in a way what we are allowed to do outside everything else' (player Y). This mentality seems to be connected to an acceptance among the players that they will never be paid enough to focus solely on football. It appears that the player's are unsure about how to position themselves in the organizational landscape.

The combined theoretical perspective also revealed that the power attribute that define a primary stakeholder shows that there is an unbalance in the clubs favor as well (Mitchell et al., 1997). The player's potential power over the club is not being used, so the club is allowed to keep putting pressure on the players which they end up perceiving as stressor (see Figure 2). This pressure is experienced through their coach, especially when combining football with school and work. 'The coach will never be satisfied with how I prioritise, and that is tiring' (player X). The club has such great power over the players because they know that these women will do anything to play football. These football players look at themselves as professionals, the club expects them to be, and they are professionals in every sense of the term, except for payment. Therefore, their football activities may come in conflict with their everyday-work. The fact that they cannot focus solely on football inhibits them to become even better and professional in a 'cut-throat' sport.

The semi-professional slant is obvious in the players' perception of the negotiation of contracts, salaries, and results. Our findings resemble in some ways the four categories found by Arnold and Fletcher (2012) in their meta-interpretation of organizational stress investigations, although, due to being a semi-professional team, there are also differences. The category 'environment' has been highlighted and found vital in this investigation due to the dual perspective, and may be compared to 'cultural and team issue'. The category 'coach' is comparable to Arnold and Fletcher's 'leadership and personnel' and 'cultural and team issues' – but we chose the label it coach due to his/her importance. 'Personal' may be compared to 'performance and personal issues'. Finally, 'administration' resemblance 'logistical and environmental issues'. In accordance with Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) meta-analysis, we found that environment and administration consisted of the most subcategories. It is clear that an organization's programs, planning, infrastructure, and strategies are a potential source of strain for performers. As a semi-professional team lacking the appropriate resources to solve the aforementioned perceived issues for the athletes, the sport organizations may easily negatively influence the athletes performance if not properly addressed (e.g., De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). The results revealed that many of the



perceived stressors are directly related to boardroom decision-making. Due to the limited economic resources, organizational stress seems to be an important factor to consider when managing semi-professional clubs.

The interpersonal interaction between athletes and coaches is a common stressor amongst participants and a critical stressor to analyse (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Kristiansen, Murphy, et al., 2012). Furthermore, the player's issues with the coach can be seen in light of the clubs organization and prioritisation with limited resources. For instance, the clubs' economy makes it difficult to hire more staff that could help out in the communication and interaction with the athletes – and to give them needed support (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). Consequently, the coaches must partake in activities outside their general job description that leads to an inadequate prioritisation where the player's needs are unfortunately neglected. The way the club is organised now, it puts the players second– even though the player is a primary stakeholder (Mitchell et al., 1997). As all the players have different schedules and activities outside football, it was seen as very hard to adapt in order to please all the players. The players admitted that they tried to talk to the coach about their stressors, but they also argued that there was a barrier stopping them. One of these barriers was the fact that the coach is a person with much power over the players. The coach is the one that decides who plays and who doesn't. Another barrier was the perceived expectations. The same issues were discussed during the control interview with a player from another club. 'I've never gotten anything for free, and I've benefitted from that in women's football' (control interview). Her description of having to 'fight' for what she wants is a good representation of what women's football is in Norway. However, it is clear that even after fighting her way to the top, proving she has the skills on the pitch, she is faced with so many obstacles outside of the pitch, that staying in the top becomes the most stressful part of her life.

## Final thoughts

Given that a multitude of stakeholders are required to run a female club, using a stakeholder approach helped to organize and analyse the data, provide an overview of the female experience within the world sport of football. Moreover, the findings revealed that sport performers encounter a range of performance and personal issues that the sport organization may better plan

for to minimize the perception of perceived stressors. This adds to the concept of organizational stressors to a sport management perspective.

The club under scrutiny did very well during the season of investigation, and even better after feedback from this investigation – several measures has been taken in order to improve the athletes conditions. As the financial situation has not changed, the measures taken have not been financial; instead, the clubs awareness of the tightly knit relationship between the economy, club, coach and players has helped them to understand the athletes' perspective and enhance the communication with the football players. Knowledge about an often forgotten primary stakeholders' situation, here the athletes, is vital for administrator of minor sports with tight budgets. Too often the human side of coaching and communication is overlooked, but the evidence suggests that the economy puts the club in a position where they have to rely on the player's willingness and motivation to go above and beyond what should be expected of them. This knowledge is not only important for coaches and other professionals dealing with professional football players, but also for the organizations themselves both at the individual team level and national sporting organization level.

In conclusion, though there are some similarities between professional and semi-professional teams (e.g., coach and leader impacts), the dual career of semi-professional athletes seems to be an added element in this managerial context. Thus, researchers should not equate all for-profit sports teams as being the same. Further research is needed to better understand professional/semi-professional club differences.

## References

- Arnold, R., & Fletcher, D. (2012). A research synthesis and taxonomic classification of the organizational stressors encountered by sport performers. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 397–429.
- Barlow, T. (2000). International feminism of the future. *Signs*, 25(4), 1099–1105.
- Christopherson, N., Janning, M., & McConnell, E. D. (2002). Two kicks forward, one kick back: A content analysis of media discourses on the 1999 Women's World Cup Soccer Championship. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 19(2), 170–188.
- Clarkson, M. B. E. (1995). A stakeholder framework for analyzing and evaluating corporate social performance. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, 92–117.
- Cooky, C., Messner, M. A., & Hextrum, R. H. (2013). Women play sport, but not on TV: A longitudinal study of televised news media. *Communication & Sport*, 1, 203–230.

- Cox, B., & Thompson, S. (2000). Multiple bodies: Sportswomen, soccer and sexuality. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 35, 5–20.
- De Bosscher, V., De Knop, P., van Bottenburg, M., Shibli, S., & Bingham, J. (2009). Explaining international sporting success: An international comparison of elite sport systems and policies in six countries. *Sport Management Review*, 12.
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(5), 627–668.
- Donaldson, T., & Preston, L. E. (1995). The stakeholder theory of the corporation: Concepts, evidence, and implications. *Academy of Management Journal*, 20, 65–91.
- EU. (2012, September 28). EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes. European Union. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/sport/library/documents/dual-career-guidelines-final\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/sport/library/documents/dual-career-guidelines-final_en.pdf)
- Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2003). Sources of organizational stress in elite sports performers. *Sport Psychologist*, 17(2), 175–195.
- Fletcher, D., Hanton, S., & Mellalieu, S. (2006). An organizational stress review: Conceptual and theoretical issues in competitive sport. In S. Hanton & S. D. Mellalieu (Eds.), *Literature reviews in sport psychology* (pp. 321–373). New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Fletcher, D., & Wagstaff, C. R. D. (2009). Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 10(4), 427–434.
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Boston, MA: Pitman.
- Freeman, R. E. (1994). The politics of stakeholder theory: Some future directions. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 4, 409–421.
- Hargreaves, J. (1994). *Sporting females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of sports*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Holt, N. L., & Hogg, J. M. (2002). Perceptions of stress and coping during preparations for the 1999 women's soccer World Cup finals. *Sport Psychologist*, 16(3), 251–271.
- Houlihan, B., & Green, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Comparative elite sport development: systems, structures and public policy*. Oxford, UK ; Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Jones, G. (1995). More than just a game: Research developments and issues in competitive anxiety in sport. *British Journal of Psychology*, 86, 449–478.
- Knoppers, A., & Anthonissen, A. (2003). Women's soccer in the United States and the Netherlands: Differences and similarities in regimes of inequalities. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 20(4), 351–370.
- Kringen, G. (2014, February). *Attendance league matches*.
- Kristiansen, E., Broch, T. B., & Pedersen, P. M. (2014). Negotiating gender in professional soccer: An analysis of female footballers in the United States. *Choregia: Sport Management International Journal*, 10(1), 5–27.

- Kristiansen, E., Halvari, H., & Roberts, G. C. (2012). Organizational and media stress among professional football players: Testing an Achievement Goal Theory model. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 22, 569–579.
- Kristiansen, E., Murphy, D., & Roberts, G. C. (2012). Organizational stress and coping in US professional soccer. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 24(2), 207–223.
- Kristiansen, E., & Roberts, G. C. (2011). Media exposure and adaptive coping in elite football. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 42, 339–367.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews. Learning the craft and qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Liston, K. (2006). Women's soccer in the Republic of Ireland: Some preliminary sociological comments. *Soccer & Society*, 7, 364–384.
- McCormack, C., & Walseth, K. (2013). Combining elite women's soccer and education: Norway and the NCAA. *Soccer & Society*, 14(6).
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men and sports*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.
- Mitchell, R. K., Agle, B. R., & Wood, D. J. (1997). Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: Defining the principle of who and what really counts. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(4), 853–886.
- Nygaard, R. (2012, October 29). Om KVINNEfotball av en kvinne [About female fottball by a woman]. *Glomdalen*. Retrieved from <http://www.glomdalen.no/pepper/article6314226.ece>
- Parent, M. M. (2008). Evolution and issue patterns for major-sport-event organizing committees and stakeholders. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22, 135–164.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.
- Phillips, R., Freeman, R. E., & Wicks, A. (2003). What Stakeholder Theory is Not. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 13, 479–502.
- Post, J. E., Preston, L. E., & Sachs, S. (2002). *Redefining the corporation: Stakeholder management and organizational wealth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Roderick, M., Waddington, I., & Parker, G. (2000). Playing hurt: Managing injuries in English Professional Football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 35(2), 165–180.
- Sætren, L. (2011, May 22). Haavik: Damefotball er handikapidrett [Haavik: Female soccer is disabled sport]. *Dagbladet*. Retrieved from [http://www.dagbladet.no/2011/05/22/nyheter/innenriks/knut\\_haavik/kringkastingsradet/kvinnefotball/16624000/](http://www.dagbladet.no/2011/05/22/nyheter/innenriks/knut_haavik/kringkastingsradet/kvinnefotball/16624000/)
- Scraton, S., Fasting, K., Pfister, G., & Bunuel, A. (1999). It's still a man's game? The experiences of top-level European women footballers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 34(2), 99–112.

- Shugart, H. A. (2003). She shoots, she scores: Mediated constructions of contemporary female athletes in coverage of the 1999 US women's soccer team. *Western Journal of Communication*, 67(1), 1–31.
- Sotiriadou, K., & Shilbury, D. (2009). Australian elite athlete development: An organizational perspective. *Sport Management Review*, 12, 137–148.
- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case study. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443–466). London, UK: Thousand Oaks.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- UEFA. (2013a). UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE: Distribution to clubs 2012/13. Retrieved from [http://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/Finance/01/97/52/97/1975297\\_DOWNLOAD.pdf](http://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/Finance/01/97/52/97/1975297_DOWNLOAD.pdf)
- UEFA. (2013b). UEFA Women's Champions League: Factsheet. Retrieved from [http://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/EuroExperience/competitions/General/01/72/39/64/1723964\\_DOWNLOAD.pdf](http://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/EuroExperience/competitions/General/01/72/39/64/1723964_DOWNLOAD.pdf)
- Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2001). A case study of organizational stress in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 13(2), 207–238.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

