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Social support and the transnational migration of football players

by

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Declaration by Author

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Abstract

Intro - This research contributes to the existing literature of transnational migration in sport. In a globalized world, the transfer of players between competitions, countries and cultures is higher than ever. The purpose of this study was to learn about this geographical transition from the player's perspective. More specifically, the intent was to obtain a better understanding of social support for football players who migrate with the purpose of starting or continuing their career as a professional football player.

Methods –Semi-structured, retrospective interviews were the main method for data-collection. These interviews were held with six participants currently playing professional football after they faced at least one transition from one country to another with the purpose of playing football. The data were analyzed through the application of a continuous process of reading, reflective writing and interpretation. This resulted in a reconstruction of the participants' stories, from the perspective of migration and social support. This study uses a hybrid approach of thematic analysis, both inductive and deductive.

Results – The findings of this study showed that the participants of this study moved abroad with the aim of playing in a better league and competition. When moving abroad they were exposed to challenges in a new culture, challenges in a new community and challenges in their new sporting environment. The players' social network was helpful during this transition in order to cope with the challenges. The type of support that was given differed among these actors and complemented each other with the support of the family as perceived to be the most valuable.

Conclusion – Football players who move abroad to start or continue their career as a professional football player face several challenges. In order for a transition to be successful, a player's support network is of crucial importance. The type of support that should be provided is diverse but the players indicated that having the feeling of 'being treated like' family was the most valuable way of support they experienced. The latter is proposed as a guideline for the stakeholders in the support network when assisting these players.

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Introduction

The seed for doing this particular study was planted a couple of years ago. With the goal of becoming a professional golf player, an Olympian or just the next best athlete around, I booked a one-way ticket to Australia and left my home country. Although the dream of building a professional sports career quickly disappeared and instead I spent my time becoming a not so professional surfer, I learned that moving abroad was not the easiest hurdle to jump in life. The adaptation to a new environment, not only physically but also socially and culturally is very challenging and some of the difficulties I encountered were greater than expected. Athletes, that face this process in addition to the continuous stress of performing at their highest level, face a very complex task in their career. Given my love for football since a very young age, I wanted to learn more about the way that professional football players deal with this process. The current state of the sport, with thousands of players moving from one country to another to pursue a professional career, makes migrating experiences of players a very relevant topic. Every year, football clubs are paying an incredible amount of money to buy players from foreign countries and leagues. The importance of a successful integration of these new players in the team and their environment is crucial, not only from a sport, but also from a financial point of view.

The process of migration can be initiated by several factors. Among these factors a distinction is made between the factors to which a player might be attracted and the factors that make a player want to leave it's country (Olin & Pentilla, 2013). Although for some the journey might be unproblematic, leaving a country behind and settling into a new environment is for many a complex task that entails several challenges (Magee & Sugden, 2002). Athletes can have difficulties with their performance and/or their personal life. In addition to the struggle they might have to deal with, they have lost physical access to their family and/or community social ties (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Social support is a variable that has been frequently used in sport psychology research. It is a concept that describes a group of distinct yet interrelated phenomena (Goldsmith, 2004). Social support has been recognized as a significant factor in maintaining physical health (Malinauskas, 2010) and psychological health (Holt & Hoar, 2006). Social support from coaches, teammates, family, friends and staff can affect athletes' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects in a positive manner (Rees, 2007). Given the recognized

importance of social support for athletes in various domains and the lack of a clear definition it is proposed to look at the meaning of this concept in a particular situation. The purpose of this research is therefore to obtain a better understanding of the variable social support when a player has to deal with a transition from one country to another. More precisely, it is attempted to interpret and reconstruct the accounts of migrated football players and their experience of social support during the move from one league to another. In this way this study aims to answer the research question: “How can social support be understood in the context of migrating professional football players?” Social support as a variable is widespread in sport psychology literature but there are only a few studies that use it in the domain of migration. A better understanding of the role of social support in the migration experience of professional football players will help to fill this existing gap in the literature. This study focuses particularly on the migration experience of professional football players who moved to play in European football leagues.

In the following chapters, first a review of the literature is provided. Then, the methodological aspects of this research are discussed. Given to aim of this research, a qualitative approach was opted for. In the third chapter, an overview of the analysis and the findings is given. The last chapter contains a further discussion of the findings in a reflective manner in the view of the current scholarship. Limitations and practical implications are touched upon. I hope to provide you not only with an enjoyable read, but also with new insights and some practical tips and tools that can be useful when working with football players who dealt with or will be dealing with this particular transition in the future.

Review of the literature

Introduction

Artists, musicians, poets and scholars have long moved around European royal courts, salons, and universities. Since athletic labour has become an entity of global cultural exchange, a similar process can be encountered with sports talent today. Fueled by a capitalist world economy, which induced the commodification of sports, a socially and geographically mobile workforce is nowadays a feature of most modern industrial societies (Maguire, 1994). The migration of sports labour is nothing new, but it appears that the process is speeding up. The process is gathering pace and at the same time it is spreading over a bigger geographical area and within a greater number of sports subcultures (Bale & Maguire, 2013). In football, while there's a certain amount of truth in the contention that migration is as old as the game itself (Taylor, 2006), it has been during the game's more recent history that the intensification in the globalization of labour has become more evident (Poli et al., 2011). This was partly due to the judicial challenge of the football transfer rules by the former professional Belgian football player Jean-Marc Bosman, which led to the Bosman ruling in 1995. As a consequence of this ruling, individuals became free to move to another club at the end of their contract with their present team. Furthermore, it allowed them to go where they wanted within the European Union. The free movement of labour is part of European Union Law (Maguire, 1994). The movement of players is however not restricted to the geographical area of the European Union only. Players move between countries, continents and cultures to pursue their dream of becoming a professional football player. With leagues that are considered to be the strongest in the world, Europe is a popular destination for migrating players. Many carry within them the hope, of becoming the future star of the English Premier League, the German Bundesliga or the Spanish La Liga. Moving to these leagues or the leagues of their neighbouring countries, gives them the impression that they are coming one step closer to their goal. To start, I will take a closer look at the concept of migration.

Migration

At a conceptual level, migration indicates a movement of individuals and social groups between

two societies (Olin & Pentilla, 2013). Within the context of sport, Maguire and Pearton state that it involves the movement of athletes in various sports within and between countries and continents (Maguire & Pearton, 2000b). The athletes, who are crossing borders for professional reasons and for career purposes are commonly described as migrants (Bale & Maguire, 2013; Tiesler, 2013; Maguire & Falcoux, 2011; Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014) or sojourners (Maguire and Stead, 1996), because the period of their contract and their stay abroad is often limited or short term (Rial, 2014). To understand the experiences and activities of migrants who do not necessarily settle permanently, the concept of transnationalism was developed in migration studies (Schiller et al., 1992; Portes, 1997; Vertovec, 2004). Transnationalism refers to living everyday life across several physical and discursive borders (i.e. geographic, linguistic and socio-political), being simultaneously embedded in multiple cultural locations and social networks, and having a fluid mobile identity (Schiller et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2001). Ryba and Stambulova (2013) defined transnational athletes as “mobile subjects, who conduct cross-border activities on a regular basis and whose athletic and non-athletic development is transformed through transnational practices” (p.11). Schiller and colleagues (1992) speak in this context of transmigrants. According to them, immigrants are understood to be transmigrants when they develop and maintain multiple relations – organizational, religious, and political – that span borders. Transmigrants take action, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that connects their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement (Schiller et al., 1992).

The decision of an athlete to move from one country to another is influenced by several factors. The majority of these factors can be found in the literature within the so called ‘push and pull’ theory. A distinction is made between global and local, push and pull factors. Local push factors are the problems the players face in their donor country which could be assumed to facilitate the decision of a player to move abroad, for example because of a lack of opportunities (Olin & Pentilla, 2013). Global push factors relate to the difficulties the players face when they are abroad. Examples of the latter are among others, communication difficulties, loneliness and professional and personal challenges. Local pull factors are the aspects of their life the players have to learn to live without. These include a lack of family and friends and the lure of home soil. Global pull factors can be seen as elements from a different country or league to which an athlete is drawn. These are for example the higher quality of foreign leagues, the better developed

footballing infrastructures, the higher social status and significantly more money (Molnar & Maguire, 2008). Maguire (1994) proposed a typology as to why players migrate and distinguished several categories among players. These categories are mercenary, settler, ambitionist, exile, nomadic cosmopolitan, expelled. The method of construction of Maguire's typology is based on secondary interpretation and conjecture and therefore lacks grounded and interpretative substance. Despite the fact that it is drawn upon a number of sports, it still provides us with a useful classification of motives from football players and athletes in general. The *mercenary* is the migrant who is motivated, above all else, by earning capacity and thus has moved to a different league for the associated economic reward. The *settler* is someone who has moved to a different country to pursue his career in football and remained there for a sustained period of time, four or five seasons or more, and does not have a reason to move away anymore. Moreover, his extended stay can bring along certain advantages, such as bilingualism of his children for example. The *ambitionist* category has three elements to it. First there is someone who simply has the desire to achieve a professional football career. Secondly, there is the player who moves to a certain league because he has a high preference for playing there rather than elsewhere, for example because of high media exposure or associations with idol players. At last, the ambitionist can also be considered as someone who has the desire to improve his career by moving to a better quality league. The *exile* is someone who, for football-related, personal, or political reasons (either voluntarily or through domestic threats to his career, his liberty or his life), opts to leave his country of origin to play abroad. The *nomadic cosmopolitan* is someone who, throughout his senior playing career, is motivated by a desire to experience different nations and cultures. Finally, the *expelled*, is used to refer to a player who is in effect forced to migrate to a different country or league.

In line with Maguire and Pearton (2000a), Magee and Sugden (2002) argue that the former categorization indicates that players migrate for a combination of reasons. A player can for example migrate for economic reward (mercenary) but at the same time have the desire to experience other cultures (nomadic). Whatever the reason for a move to a different country can be, migrating to a new environment is often a process with ups and down. In the following paragraphs, I will therefore discuss some of the challenges football players may face when moving abroad.

A journey of challenges

Athletes migrated from a different country encounter many of the same organizational and competitive stressors that most of the athletes face, such as severe training sessions, a heightened level of competition and high performance expectations from coaching staff, teammates, and the public (Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005). For those relocated to another country, the cultural adjustments and the multidimensional personal and athletic demands are compounded. Although for some the process of migration may be enjoyable and unproblematic, others may encounter difficulties adapting to their new place of playing and living (Vasconcellos, Ribeiro & Dimeo, 2009; Magee & Sugden, 2002). Nesti and Littlewood (2011) state that the migratory journey is a complex and challenging undertaking during which an athlete has to deal with events and circumstances which may have an impact on the player, his support network and the subsequent decision-making.

Molnar and Maguire (2008) stated that the main issues and problems that migrants encounter during their period abroad are motivation, labour rights, off-field adjustments, xenophobia and national identity. Some authors have reported on social-psychological problems of dislocation and adjustment due to the constant back and forth between different cultures and ethnic or racial settings (Sekot, 2005). The integration into a new environment comes with several issues that can be political, cultural, economic and geographical (Maguire & Falcous, 2011). The athletes do not only deal with a new physical and social environment, they also need to stay in touch with their family and friends from their native countries. Ryba and colleagues (2012) speak in this context of “acute cultural adaptation” since the players can be seen to negotiate the extent of their immersion into local culture sustaining their psychological wellbeing through a range of material and imaginary practices of belonging in their own cultural, diasporic, and/or transnational communities.

Looking from a broader perspective, the challenges that the athletes face can be either related to their performance or to their personal life, although some overlap exists between these categories (Meisterjahn, 2011). In their study about the challenges encountered by immigrated athletes Schinke et al. (2011) make a distinction between three categories. The authors identified stressors based on qualitative inquiry and their applied experience as mental trainers (over 35 years together). First, they grouped the challenges the athletes faced in their new community. Secondly, the challenges they encountered in a new culture, but outside of sport and at last the difficulties in

sports context. In the first category challenges such as the physical distance from home, feelings of loneliness and homesickness and separation from family, friends and their community are typical. Further, included in what becomes suddenly unfamiliar are minimal social connection, in some cases limited access to a familiar diet and in all cases the basic knowledge needed to find what one is looking for in terms of shopping or technology (Schinke et al., 2007). The second category holds difficulties for athletes such as getting a sense of time, physical space, eye contact, getting insight in the views about gender roles, clothing, meals and learning a new language/dialects (Schinke et al., 2009). With learning a new way of communicating being probably the most problematic aspect. The last category of challenges for immigrated athletes, besides the community and general cultural practices, are found within their sport environment. Adaptation to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches of coaches, culturally foreign team dynamics, and feelings of alienation from mainstream teammates as a result of the foregoing are appropriate examples.

Forced to deal with everything at once, peer-helping and social support was found to be an essential component to help immigrants navigate unfamiliar surroundings and cope successfully with the challenges of their new environment (Schinke et al., 2011). Before zooming in on this important component of the migration process and discussing its different aspects more elaborately, the concept of transnational migration is grounded into a theoretical framework.

Framing the concept

In sport psychology literature, several models are used to look at the process of migration of athletes. Battochio et al. (2013) used Fiske's (2004) model of five core social motives to look at immigrated professional athletes support network during post-relocation adaptation. According to her theorization the core motive, which is the sense of belonging (i.e., being accepted), recognizes that people strive for social belonging and for being part of a social network. In order to obtain this, Fiske proposed five pathways to adaptation. She distinguished (a) understanding, (b) controlling, (c) self-enhancement, (d) belonging and (e) trusting. Fiske explored what elements promote adaptation and argued that, despite the adaptation state of an individual, the fulfillment of these five pathways contribute to a smooth adaptation. The challenges an individual faces define the pathway he/she is at. Even though the fulfillment of all pathways facilitates

adaptation, the fulfillment of all pathways is not mandatory. Moreover, there is no predefined sequence to do so since the processes to fulfill each pathway are different to each individual and are context specific. A concept, similar to adaptation and often used interchangeably in the context of migrating athletes is that of acculturation. According to Berry (1997), acculturation is the process where the immigrant or minority individual becomes acquainted with the host culture practices and skills. In a sports context, acculturation refers to the relocated athlete transitions towards the practices of the host culture (Kontos, 2009). Berry developed a framework, which distinguished several processes, which individuals follow in the same manner in order to acculturate. Whereas Fiske's model gives a detailed process of certain pathways that lead to adaptation with an emphasis on social motives, Berry's framework provides an understanding of what leads some people to integrate into the new environment, as opposed to others that prefer to marginalize themselves. More specifically, Berry (1997) coming from a cross-cultural perspective, posits that acculturation strategies may be used by migrant or minority people depending on the degree they want to embrace the culture or the host country and/or preserve their own cultural practices.

The model of acculturation from Berry was rejected in Ryba and colleagues' (2012) study of Finnish female swimmers' adaptation during their training camp in Australia. Instead the authors proposed the notion of acute cultural adaptation. This concept was used to describe the open-ended process of negotiation between maintaining a subjective sense of wellbeing and participating in acculturative everyday practices. In the research of Agergaard and Ryba (2014) this perspective was pushed even further by suggesting that developing transnational subjectivity and belonging is an important aspect of migrating athletes' adaptation in the process of temporal anchoring in new places. Instead of individual coping, transnational networks of power and athletes' simultaneous embeddedness in various "home" societies as framing athletes' opportunities, agency and constraints were emphasized (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). The research resulted in an interdisciplinary framework for studying transnational athletes' career transitions in professional sports. It is a socio-psychological model, which acknowledges that both social and individual factors play an important role in shaping athletes' experiences of migration. The model identifies three normative career transitions crucial for transnational athletes. First of all, transnational recruitment that draws on social networks as well as individual agency. The second career transition is the establishment as a transnational athlete that is connected to cultural and

psychological adaptation as well as development of transnational belonging. At last, they distinguish professional athletic career termination that for transnational athletes is connected to a (re)constitution of one's transnational network and sense of belonging.

In line with the model of Agergaard and Ryba (2014) which emphasizes three normative career transitions in the process of migration, the career transition perspective also informed this present study. The athletic career transition model of Stambulova (2003) provided the necessary framework. This model is designed to explain several types of transitions that occur during an athletic career. In what's next, I will take a closer look at research about the concept of migration from the perspective of career transitions and present the athletic career transition model of Stambulova.

Migration as career transition

Research in the domain of career development and career transitions has changed over the years. Historically, pioneer transition studies in sport focused on athletic retirement, which was considered analogous to retirement from a working career. The theoretical frameworks were derived from thanatology (stages of dying) and social gerontology (the study of the aging process) (Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavallee, 2004). Consequently, the post-career transition was often presented as a negative or traumatic life event. Within early athlete career literature a transition was defined as an 'event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviours and relationships' (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). Schlossberg (1981) explains the process of transition in terms of the interaction of four sets of factors including the situation (i.e. how the situation is perceived by the individual), self (i.e. the individual's profile), support (i.e., availability of different kinds of social support), and strategies (e.g., information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action). First of all, with regard to the perception of a particular transition, Schlossberg (1981) suggested that role change, affect, source, onset, duration, and degree of stress are all important factors to consider. This aspect of Schlossberg's model emphasizes the individualistic nature of transitions, since it is not just the transition itself that is of primary importance, but also the individual variables that have different characteristics depending on the transition. The variables that characterize the individual include attributes, such as psychosocial

competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, value orientation, and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature. These variables may show considerable differences across the populations of athletes facing a career transition. The model and theories of Schlossberg (1981) were not developed for the domain of sport, but were successfully adopted by sport psychology researchers. Swain (1991) employed a multiple case design with recently retired athletes and found support for Schlossberg's (1981) model in terms of the characteristics of retiring athletes, the perception of the career transition, and the characteristics of the environments. Further evidence in support of this theoretical perspective has been documented in Parker's (1994) study with retired collegiate football players and Sinclair and Orlick's (1993) study of Olympic-level athletes. Research by Lavalley (2005) has also used Schlossberg's model in an evaluation of the effectiveness of a life development intervention on career transition adjustment in retired professional athletes. Transition research in sport however also challenged Schlossberg's conceptions. The perception of an athletic career termination as an event/ non-event did not seem appropriate. Former athletes experienced career termination rarely as a negative life event. Moreover, studies showed that adaptation to the post-career took on average about one year (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Alfermann, 2000). This new understanding of a transition as a coping process with potentially positive or negative outcomes is well reflected in the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003). A second shift in career development and transition research was the departure from focusing almost exclusively on athletic retirement. Instead researchers started to study a range of transition within an athletic career, the so called whole career approach. This branch of research was mainly inspired by talent development theories and debates (Lidor, Coté & Hackfort, 2009). A third shift in career transition research is a change from focusing on transitions in sport only toward a 'whole person' lifespan perspective. In the latter approach athletic career transitions are viewed in their relation to developmental challenges and transitions in other spheres of the athletes' lives (Wylleman, Alfermann & Lavalley, 2004).

Taking into account the different evolutions in the domain of career transitions research, Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) state that career transitions can be normative (i.e. predictable) or non-normative (more idiosyncratic). As such they are turning phases in athletes' career development triggered by a set of demands with which athletes have to cope to continue successfully in their sport or to adjust to their post-sport career. Moving abroad to play

professional football is less sudden than an injury or a change of coach but could still be rather unexpected and therefore considered a non-normative transition. However, in some cases the player is timely informed about the upcoming move to a different country. The predictability of normative transitions creates an opportunity to prepare the athletes to cope with them in advance. Alternatively, the low predictability of non-normative transitions explains why athletes might find these more difficult to cope with. When there is a good fit between transition demands and the athletes' coping resources and strategies, the result will most likely be effective coping in which case the term successful transition is used. When the athlete has issues in meeting the transition demands, as a result of ineffective coping strategies or low resources or high barriers, the term crisis transition is used. A crisis transition does not necessarily lead to an unsuccessful transition. In case of an effective intervention a crisis transition may lead to a delayed successful transition. An unsuccessful transition is however associated with negative consequences such as premature dropout, neuroses, overtraining, eating disorders and substance abuse. Stambulova (2003) developed a model that includes the different types of interventions and their outcomes.

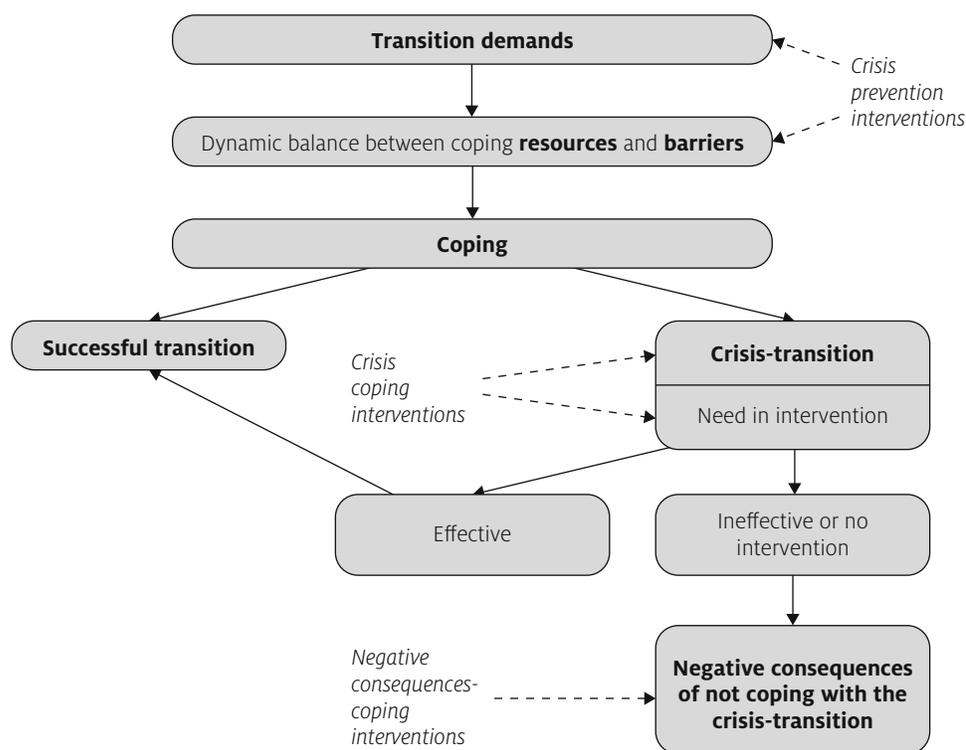


Figure 1.1 Athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003).

Throughout their careers athletes can get assistance in order to help them cope with normative and non-normative transitions. Two major perspectives in career transition interventions can be distinguished. On the one hand there is the preventive-supportive perspective, on the other hand the crisis-negative consequences coping perspective. The preventive-supportive perspective covers interventions aimed at enhancing athletes' awareness about forthcoming or current transition demands. These interventions help the athlete in the timely development of all the necessary resources for effective coping. Examples of preventive-supportive interventions are career-planning interventions, life development interventions and life skills, lifestyle management interventions, identity development interventions and cultural adaptation interventions (Ecklund & Tenenbaum, 2014). Crisis-negative consequences coping perspective on the other hand focuses on interventions that assist athletes in the analysis of their crisis or traumatic situations and finding the best available way to cope. Interventions that represent this perspective are crisis-coping educational interventions and clinical interventions (Ecklund & Tenenbaum, 2014). Given that the focus of this study will be on the element of support and more precisely social support as part of the transition of transnational migration in football, the following passage will zoom in on this concept and provides an overview of some relevant studies that included this variable.

Social support

Social support is a term used to describe a group of distinct yet interrelated phenomena (Goldsmith, 2004). It has been claimed that the essence of social support may be as simple as "Knowing that one is loved and cared for" (Sarason et al., 1990, p. 119). Caplan (1974) described social support as a system of formal and informal relations through which the human gets sources to master stress situations. According to Albrecht and Adelman (1987) the received social support is the recognition of another's attempt to say or do something in the service of trying to be helpful. This conceptualization is very appropriate because it deals with the psychological perception of received support as the result of another's communication and has been validated as a practical and beneficial understanding of social support. Also, the recipients' perceptions of perceived support are important indicators of social support, since "the support that counts is the behavior perceived by the subject as supportive" (p.68). Within the context of sport, several terms

have been used to describe the construct (or aspects of the construct) such as social network size, social integration, perceived, available or received support, quantity or quality of relationships. A clear definition is however lacking. As Veiel and Bauman (1992) noted, “if asked, almost every researcher in the field will present a more or less precise definition of support, but, more than likely, it will be different from that of his or her colleagues.” (p. 3). A review and synthesis of the research about specific stress and types of social support by Cutrona and Russell (1990) highlighted several dimensions to social support. The specific types of social support that have been suggested as particularly salient to athletes are tangible, informational, emotional and esteem.

Emotional support is defined as “the ability to turn to others for comfort and security during times of stress, leading the person to feel that he or she is cared for by others” (p. 322 in Cutrona & Russell, 1990). This could be reflected in general help, such as being there for someone, help in dealing with general sporting pressure, in dealing with feelings of loneliness or help with life direction issues regarding the future (Rees & Hardy, 2000). Cutrona and Russell (1990) defined *esteem support* as “The bolstering of a person’s sense of competence or self-esteem by other people. Giving an individual positive feedback on his or her skills and abilities or expressing a belief that the person is capable of coping with a stressful event are examples of this type of support.” (p.322 in Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Help with issues regarding confidence or getting pulled out of a slump are different examples of esteem support (Rees & Hardy, 2000). *Informational support* is defined as “providing the individual with advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem.” (p. 322 in Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Giving the specific situation informational support could be useful when dealing with a loss of confidence by receiving constructive feedback, it can help with performance concerns or performance catastrophes. Informational support can in such cases help to put things into perspective. *Tangible support* is defined by Cutrona and Russell (1990) as “concrete instrumental assistance, in which a person in a stressful situation is given the necessary resources (e.g. financial assistance, physical help with tasks) to cope with the stressful event” (p. 322 in Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Alleviate pressure and reduce worries about practical matters are good examples of tangible support for athletes (Rees & Hardy, 2000).

Social support within the context of sport has been widely studied by linking the concept to various aspects of an athletes' life. In the following paragraphs some studies are highlighted that used the variable of social support in a sports context.

Rosenfeld et al. (1989), considered the relationship between athletes, their support networks and stress reduction. It was found that the central source of support were teammates when stress pertained to sport or life outside of sport, while coaches were central followed by teammates when athletes encountered technical sport challenges.

Social support was also examined in relation to anxiety and injury (Bianco, 2001; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Malinauskas, 2010). Bianco (2001) interviewed 10 elite downhill skiers who had recovered from serious sport injury. They were asked about the sources of stress associated with injury and the role social support plays in the recovery from injury. Content analysis of the social support data revealed that the skiers needed various types of emotional, tangible and informational support from the occurrence of the injury through the return to full activity. In general the skiers were satisfied with the support received, indicating that it reduced distress and kept them motivated throughout recovery. Robbins and Rosenfeld (2001) assessed athletes' perception of social support provided by their head coach, their assistant coach and athletic trainers, pre-injury and during rehabilitation. Thirty-five male and female Division I collegiate athletes from various sports completed the Social Support Survey (Richman et al., 1993). Results indicated a significant difference between the athletes' satisfaction with the three types of providers and their impact on the athletes' overall well being during rehabilitation. Athletic trainers were perceived to provide more support than either the head coaches or assistant coaches. The findings of this study confirm the positive effects of athletic trainers' social support on injured athletes' recovery efforts, and the possible positive impact additional coaching support may provide. Yang et al. (2010) examined the pre-injury and post-injury social support patterns among male and female collegiate athletes. They found that the male athletes reported more sources of social support than female athletes, whereas female athletes had greater satisfaction with the support they received. Athletes' social support patterns changed after they became injured. It became obvious that injured athletes reported to rely more on coaches, athletic trainers and physicians for social support after they became injured. Athletes also reported greater post-injury satisfaction with social support received from friends, coaches, athletic trainers and physicians.

Malinauskas (2010) examined the associations among social support, stress, and life satisfaction as perceived by 123 college athletes who ranged in age from 18 to 25 years. Greater perceived stress was found to be associated with diminished life satisfaction for athletes with a major injury more than for those with a minor injury. The interaction between perceived stress and perceived social support was associated most with diminished life satisfaction for participants with a major injury.

Freeman and Rees (2007) studied the effects of received and perceived support on self-confidence of university athletes. Regression analyses found main effects for both, received and perceived support upon self-confidence, stress-buffering effects for both perceived and received support upon self-confidence. When both aspects of support were considered simultaneously, stress-buffering effects were primarily attributable to the influence of received support. The results demonstrated the beneficial impact of social support on self-confidence, both directly and by reducing the negative effect of stress on self-confidence.

Social support is also studied in relation to talent development. Morgan and Giacobbi (2006) interviewed eight collegiate athletes, twelve parents and six coaches in order to describe the major influences and experiences during the development of highly talented collegiate athletes. Overall, it was found that a favorable interaction between perceived genetic dispositions, practice, situational factors, and mental characteristics facilitated and nurtured the participants' talent development. The aspect of social support was an important theme when the athletes had to overcome adversity.

Zourbanos et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between the perception of received support provided by a coach and athletes' self-talk. The results showed that perceptions of support received from the coach were positively related to athletes' positive self-talk dimensions and negatively to athletes' negative self-talk dimensions, which was considered to be evidence for the role of social factors shaping athletes' self-talk.

In a study of Raedeke and Smith (2004) it was investigated in which way coping resources affected the stress/burnout relationship. They wanted to find out whether key internal (i.e. coping behaviors) and external (i.e. social support satisfaction) coping resources have stress-mediated or moderating influences on athlete burnout. Therefore the study examined in a group of senior level age-group swimmers whether coping behaviors and social support satisfaction had indirect stress-mediated relationships with burnout or whether they disjunctively (independently) or

conjunctively (in combination) moderated the relationship between perceived stress and burnout. The results revealed that perceived stress, general coping behaviors, and social support satisfaction were related to burnout. Structural equation modeling demonstrated that general coping behaviors and social support satisfaction had stress-mediated relationships with overall burnout levels.

In a similar area of research, DeFreese and Smith (2013) studied the relationship between teammate social support, burnout and self-determined motivation in collegiate athletes. Regression analysis showed that perceived support availability was inversely associated with burnout and positively associated with self-determined motivation. The results suggested that the perception of support availability from teammates, regardless of received support, was an important correlate of burnout and self-determined motivation in sport.

In the study of Silva et al. (2014) the researchers tried to identify the relative contribution of parental and peer social support on youth participation in moderate to vigorous physical activity. They found that parental social support had significant associations both with predisposing factors, enjoyment and self-efficacy, as well as a direct effect on moderate to vigorous physical activity. Peer social support had a direct effect on moderate to vigorous physical activity and also significantly influenced levels of enjoyment and self-efficacy. The study therefore provided evidence that both parental and peer social support exert a strong influence on adolescent moderate to vigorous physical activity.

When it comes down to migration and the transition from one country to another, studies recognize in general the importance of social support as a construct that is helpful in coping with the transition. Zaleská and colleagues (2014) surveyed several studies dealing with social support and its relation to the immigrants' mental and physical health and also integration. In their study (outside the context of sport) they stated that migration is a process that changes lives and is related to innumerable stressors. They found that social integration; social inclusion of the person into the social structure is a significant determinant of the person's psychic well-being and health. Given the innumerable stressors and the amount of new situations experienced by someone who is relocated into a new social and cultural environment, one of the preconditions of successful integration is the immigrants' social support. The researchers found that social support has three main functions, which are the promotion of physical health, the promotion of mental health and

development of integration (Záleská et al., 2014). In the context of sport there were also several researchers who studied the variable of social support.

Schinke et al. (2010) investigated how support networks contributed to the adaptation of Canadian Aboriginal athletes relocated off reserve. Three stressors were identified which were the promotion to a higher level of performance, relocation to a new region and unfamiliar cultural context and cross-cultural communication. For these aboriginal athletes, assistance from support networks such as teammates fostering constructive thinking when acute cultural stressors were experienced, such as loneliness or cultural misunderstanding were vital.

Campbell and Sonn (2009) also considered relocation challenges in terms of professional Aboriginal football players in the Australian Football League. They outlined that social support deriving from various sources (e.g. family, indigenous teammates, friends) was central in athletes' sense of 'kindredness' that enhanced the sense of self. Kindredness referring to the sharing of the same habitus or implicit experiences among indigenous players, facilitates trusting and consequently belonging, a founding consistent with 'relatedness', located in this inquiry. The authors found that relocated athletes managed relocation stress through team's acceptance and a fostered sense of belonging.

In the research of Schinke et al. (2011) the two senior authors engaged in research and practice with athletes immigrated to North America. The researchers stated that when the athletes were forced to learn how to be independent and manage multiple responsibilities at once, peer helping and social support was found to be of huge value. In this study they proposed Fiske's (2004) pathways of adaptation to overcome the challenges and unfamiliar circumstances. In this framework five pathways contributive of adaptation regardless of the athletes' current adaptation status are suggested. Each pathway can be employed to start the adaptation process. The different pathways are (1) understanding, (2) belonging, (3) trusting, (4) controlling and (5) self-enhancement. Understanding deals with certain aspects of the immigrant's new situation such as cultural practices, the community and how it functions and the structures and processes of the sport context. From what is known, the efforts directed at working through the aforementioned challenges require an understanding of oneself and the new cultural environment. In order not to feel alone, nor alienated in this new environment, there is a need for social support. Teammates, coaches or contacts from outside of sport can provide this and consequently a sense of belonging can be created. The pathway of "trusting" is critical to team cohesion and group synergy for all

athletes. From trust, people are more willing to express themselves and engage with their environment. This engagement is essential for all immigrated athletes in order to develop ties with their new community. To induce this engagement, controlling can be helpful from an athlete's perspective. Control conceived as the antithesis of passivity, can be facilitated by assertiveness. The decision to be assertive allows the athlete to engage actively, even when trust or belonging might not be fully established. At last, the pathway of self-enhancement implies the garnering of new skills, such as a new language or new cultural practices. The fulfillment of those aspects are facilitative of the athlete fitting in.

Falls and Wilson (2012) interviewed twelve female student athletes, who moved from Canada to the United States to pursue intercollegiate soccer. A first key finding from this study was that decision-making by student-athletes was a predominantly individualized endeavor that was influenced by various sport and non-sport-related factors. Secondly, the analysis of the interviews showed that the sport and non-sport-related transitions that accompanied the move to a new sporting and educational context were eased because of the (temporary and conditional) support of teammates. At last, it was found that the transition out of sport was especially difficult for many of the athletes, because the support structures associated with 'the team' quickly diminished – and because of the hyper – individualized identities that the student-athletes were required to renegotiate.

In the study of Richardson and colleagues (2012) five young players between 16 and 24, who moved from their home country to an English Premier League club were interviewed. The results of this study indicate that young migratory players face the challenges of leaving home and family while trying to establish themselves as a professional player in an environment that (still) appears to be beset with (traditional) English soccer culture (i.e. high temp, ruthless, macho, and aggressive). While the player's family was a significant source of social support, they indicated that there is still a need for qualified personnel (e.g. sport psychologists) and/or appropriately trained international recruitment staff and football agents (i.e. areas of social, psychological, and/or performance lifestyle) to support young players through their migratory transition.

Evans and Stead (2014) investigated the embodied experiences of southern hemisphere rugby players, playing professional rugby league in the United Kingdom. In this study it was found that migrant experiences prior to migrating were colored by the access to resources and by the formal and informal relationships developed through professional and personal careers. The centrality of

embodied migrant identity and habitus is noted in relation to acculturation strategies adopted over time and space in terms of established and outsider groups. Further, the paper highlights how subgroups within a more general group of labour migrants can emerge. The differences between these subgroups were considered in light of previous work on acculturation strategies and the existential nature of migration. In this study the concept of social support was touched upon and it was found that all participants described their relationships as vital.

Conclusions on the reviewed literature

The migration of sports labour has been around for a long time. Fueled by a capitalist world economy, which induced the commodification of sports, it seems that the process is speeding up. In football, it has been during the game's recent history that the intensification in the globalization of labour has become more evident (Poli et al., 2011). Schiller and colleagues (1992) introduced the concept of transnationalism to frame the experiences and activities of migrants who do not necessarily settle permanently. They speak therefore of transmigrants, to refer to migrants who take action, make decisions and maintain multiple relations that span borders. Ryba and Stambulova (2013) labeled them, in a sports context, as transnational athletes. An athlete can be motivated by several reasons to move to a different country. Maguire (1994) developed a typology with five categories under which an athlete in different sports can be classified in relation to his motivation to migrate. Although the typology is based on secondary interpretation and conjecture and therefore lacks grounded and interpretative substance, it was considered useful in this study. The suggestion of Magee and Sugden (2002) is also been taken into account, acknowledging that an athlete does not necessarily fit into one category only but a combination is plausible. The categorization proposed by Maguire (1994) can also be placed in a broader scheme which is the so called push and pull theory (Olin & Pentilla, 2013). This theory bundles the advantages and disadvantages and the attractions and the discouragements on the local and global level for athletes in their decision to move abroad to pursue their career. Both approaches are similar and can be useful to interpret stories of migrating athletes.

Several researchers (Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005; Vasconcellos, Ribeiro & Dimeo, 2009; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) indicated transnational athletes may encounter several problems when moving abroad. The problems ranged from xenophobia, labor

rights issues to socio-psychological problems of dislocation. While literature lacks a clear framework that distinguishes the different stressors transnational athletes face, Schinke and his colleagues made a proposition based on a qualitative inquiry and their experience as mental trainers. In the first category they grouped the challenges the athletes faced in their new community. In the second category, the challenges they encountered in a new culture but outside of sport. At last they grouped the difficulties in their new sports context. In order to deal with these challenges and cope with the difficulties, social support was found to be an important variable (Zaleská et al., 2014; Schinke et al., 2010; Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Schinke et al., 2011; Falls & Wilson, 2012; Richardson et al., 2012; Evans & Stead, 2014). Social support is a concept used to describe a group of distinct yet interrelated phenomena. Within the context of sport, several terms have been used to describe the construct or aspects of the construct. Cutrona and Russell (1990) provide a typology to distinguish several dimensions of the construct of social support that is particularly salient to athletes. They found that support can be emotional, informational, tangible and related to an athletes' esteem. This categorization is supported in sport psychology literature and adopted in several studies (e.g. Bianco, 2001). A clear definition of social is however lacking and as indicated by Veiel and Bauman (1992): every researcher will be able to present a more or less precise description of social support but this will most likely be different from that of his or her colleagues.

There are several frameworks to study the process of migration. Berry's framework provides an understanding of what leads some people to integrate into the new environment as opposed to others who prefer to marginalize themselves. This model was however rejected by Ryba et al. (2012) who proposed instead the notion of acute cultural adaptation. A model widely used in sport psychology literature to look at the process of migration is the model of Fiske (2004). This model of five core social motives looks at immigrated professional support network during post-relocation adaptation. In this study the process of migration is conceptualized as a career transition and the athletic career transition model of Stambulova (2003) provided the framework for this conceptualization. The model states that a successful transition is the result of a good fit between transition demands and the athletes' coping resources and strategies. Social support is considered to be a central aspect of these coping resources and a distinction is made between preventive supportive interventions and crisis coping interventions.

The review of literature showed that the migration experience can be understood as a career transition with social support considered as an important variable for a successful transition. There is however a lack of research in the domain of professional football which investigates this experience from a career transition perspective and which provides insight in the meaning of the concept of social support in this particular context. The following chapters aim to address this gap in the current research landscape.

Methodology and design

In the following sections, the methodology that is used in this research project will be presented. First, the research design is outlined and the choice for a non-experimental qualitative approach is supported. Secondly, the participants that took part in this research project are discussed as well as the way they were recruited. In the third section, the methods of data collection are presented, providing specific information about the procedure and the interview guide. After touching upon the data collection, details are given about the data analysis that is used in this research thesis. At last, the quality of this research is discussed by zooming in on issues of trustworthiness.

Research design

A non-experimental, qualitative approach is chosen for this study. Qualitative methodologies share a similar goal in that they try to understand a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Qualitative research aims to capture qualities that are not quantifiable such as feelings, thoughts and experiences. The experience of interest in this study is social support in the context of migration. Thoughts and feelings of the football players associated with this aspect of the process of moving to another country will be collected. This kind of information is difficult to meaningfully convert into numbers because they are portrayed with words or other non-numerical data. Although descriptive statistics could generate important information with regard to this topic, a qualitative approach results in data that can be considered 'richer' than the numerical data. Quantitative data can give a general picture of trends, associations, and relationships, but they do not tell us why people responded as they did, the

context in which they responded, and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that guided their responses (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is also used to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining (Creswell, 2007). Since the concept of social support has no clear definition and existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem, a qualitative approach is a better fit for this research. Qualitative methodologies are not a single research approach, but several epistemological perspectives and pluralism have created various ways of dealing with qualitative data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In this study, thematic analysis was used as an independent qualitative descriptive approach. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). It has been suggested that thematic analysis, is a flexible and useful research tool, which provides a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). As stated by DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across an entire interview or set of interviews.

Generally, qualitative approaches share a broad philosophy, such as person-centeredness, and a certain open-ended starting point (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Thematic analysis can be conducted within both a realist/essentialist and constructionist paradigm. In a realist research tradition, the informants' stories collected from the same milieu can serve as documentary sources for investigating the world "out there". Bertaux (1995) claims that by collecting many stories from the same milieu it is possible to uncover recurrent patterns concerning collective phenomena or share collective experiences in a particular milieu. When working from a constructionist or performative perspective, the issue of truth is approached differently. Verification of the facts of lives is not as important as understanding the changing meaning of events for the individuals involved and how these are situated in history and culture. Stories of participants are meaning-making units of discourse. They are interesting because narrators interpret the past in stories, rather than reproduce the past as it was (Riesmann, 2002). In this research, a contextualist approach is chosen. A contextualist method sits between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism and is characterised by theories such as critical realism (Willig, 1999). While retaining focus on the material, the ways individuals make meaning of their

experience, and the subjective reproduction of their lived story is acknowledged. In this way it is attempted to both, reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality (Riesmann, 2002).

Participants

Purposive criterion sampling was used to identify participants who would be appropriate for this research project (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is precisely what the name suggests. Members of a sample are chosen with the aim to represent a type in relation to a key criterion. The sample units have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes which the researchers wishes to study (Richie & Lewis, 2003). In order to give a detailed picture of a particular phenomenon, i.e. the experience of social support among migrated football players, a rather homogeneous sample was chosen (Patton, 2002). This allowed for a detailed investigation of this particular aspect of the migration process in the context of professional football. Through the method of purposive sampling it was however possible to include some diversity among the participants in order to explore more extensively the topic of research. This was obtained by the inclusion of football players from six different countries and three different continents. The aim was however not to compare subgroups but rather to find what is in common about the experience they shared in a specified context. The homogenous sample chosen for this study contained 6 participants who made a geographical transition with the aim to start or to proceed their career in football (soccer). A second criterion was that they were still actively playing at the highest level in the season of 2016-2017. The reason for this was that the year of their geographical transition was less distant compared to players who already retired. The experience of the event would thus be “more fresh” in their memory. The definition of highest level that is used in this research refers to the group of players that reached the status of professional football player and played in the Jupiler League, the highest football league in Belgium. The majority of the players moved several times in their career, one player had only one migration experience. This enlarged the players’ repertoire of migrating experiences which made it possible to compare the same process in different countries. Each migration experience of the players was discussed and the role of social support was investigated. To answer the research question, the tales of all the players were used. The various

stories shed a light on the concept of social support in different ways but similarities were found in each of their experiences. The final number of participants was determined by saturation in the data. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Walker, 2012), when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained (Guest et al., 2006) and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006). No new themes go hand-in-hand with no new data and no new coding (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). If one has reached the point of no new data, one has also most likely reached the point of no new themes; therefore, one has reached data saturation. This however is not related to the number of interviews conducted about a certain topic. As Bernard and Bernard (2012) stated, the number of interviews needed for a qualitative study to reach data saturation was a number that he could not quantify. The interview questions in this study were structured in such a way that multiple participants were asked the same questions. This, in combination with the use of probing questions, contributed to the achievement of data saturation, since it was not a constantly moving target (Guest et al., 2006; Bucic et al., 2010). Probing questions are questions that try to dig deeper than the surface. An effective probing question helps to get a person to talk about their personal opinions and feelings, and promotes critical thinking. In the subsection interview guide of the data collection, this will be discussed in more detail. The following table provides an overview of the different participants of this study, highlighting some of their important characteristics.

Table 1.1. Overview of the participants.

Name	Country of birth	Age	Number of migration experiences	Age of first transition
Europe A	Czech Republic	24	1	24
Europe B	Serbia	22	2	14
Europe C	Spain	24	4	18
Africa A	Tanzania	24	2	18
Africa B	Gambia	24	5	17
South America A	Chile	21	4	17

Data collection

Retrospective semi-structured interviews: introduction

To gather information from our participants retrospective interviews were used. A retrospective interview is a form of interview in which the researcher tries to get a respondent to reconstruct past experiences (Fraenkel et al., 1993). Interviews are a useful method when a research is exploratory. They assist in identifying information that could be used to refine and develop further investigation (Gratton & Jones, 2004). In this research the interviews started with a general and open ended question. Although it is reasoned that the answers on the specific questions would be more accurate and reliable than when individuals are forced to infer and reconstruct answers to general questions (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), the use of general and open questions with regard to the research topic and research design are essential. These types of questions encourage the participants for explanations and opinions and therefore a broader and more elaborate description of the meaning of this transition can be constructed (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Semi-structured interviews not only allow a focus on the meanings that participants give to their own lived experience, it is also an ideal method to gather information that expands or alters existing paradigms, as relationships and themes are allowed to emerge without being imposed by the researcher (Padgett, 1998). The method of retrospective interviews implies the recall of activities, encounters and events that took place months or years ago. Therefore the accuracy of the provided information cannot be taken for granted, regardless of the participants' motivation to provide accurate reports. Research on memory has shown that longer retention intervals lead to lower accuracy of recall of virtually all types of memory at uniform and predictable rates, unless the information is accessed and rehearsed during the delay (Bahrick et al., 1994; Rubin & Wenzel, 1996). What is of even greater concern is that the recall of information from past experiences is often systematically biased. Ross (1989) showed that reported memory in many studies is the result of reconstruction and inferences. Participants rely on their current feelings, attitudes and situations to extrapolate what they think they might have thought or experienced at earlier times. In this study, the accuracy of what exactly has happened is however of subordinate importance compared to what these events mean to the participant and to what kind of feelings these experiences evoke. In line with Smith and Sparkes' (2008) meaning is not considered to be an objective representation of the world, or a stable

objectification that originates from within us. The stories of the participants can be seen as a relational act between the narrator and the researcher that involve negotiations and reconstructions of meanings, that are intentional, interpretative and context and audience dependent. There is thus no claim that the story co-created in a specific time and place is less authentic and that there is a need for verification or accuracy of events and experiences.

Retrospective semi-structured interviews: procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the departmental Ethics Committee of the University of Thessaly where the researcher was enrolled as a student. Before interviewing the professional football players, two pilot interviews were conducted with test-subjects that experienced at some point in their life a migration experience for professional reasons. The first interviewee was a football player from Burkina Faso currently playing in the second league of Austria, the second one was a physiotherapist and physical coach who worked with football teams in Russia, Saudi-Arabia and Singapore. The purpose of these interviews was to get a better view on my own preassumptions in relation to the topic of migration in a football context. Notes of this preliminary interview were kept and contributed not only to a better understanding of my personal perspective for the reader, it also minimized the chance that they would influence my interpretation of the participants' comments (Ely, 1991). The pilot interviews also assisted in gaining experience with the interview process and helped to refine the structure and content of my interview guide.

Two professional clubs in Belgium were contacted by email and invited to participate in this research project. For one club a meeting was organised with the player counselor of the team to whom I presented my research project in more detail. Consequently, the usefulness and feasibility was evaluated by the board of the club before giving their approval. For the other club, the team manager, after reading the information overview in my invitation email, was willing to provide several players from the very beginning. The team manager and the psychologist/players-counselor remained the contact persons for both teams throughout my research. They arranged the meetings with the different players.

To get the interviews done was a complex task because of the busy schedule of one of the clubs who agreed to provide me the majority of the players. In the season of 2016-2017 this club played more official games (65) than any other team of any other league in Europe. Moreover,

the coach did not allow the players to participate in any activities two days before an official game. Given the fact that I was working a full-time job at that time, which was a restriction for my own schedule, the process of data collection took much longer than initially planned. The downside of this was that the interviews were spread out in time. This made it harder for the researcher to get in the flow of interviewing and to obtain the feeling of being fully endorsed in the topic since it felt like starting over time after time.

Before the start of the interview a form of consent was signed by the interviewee which allowed for audio-recording of the interview. Further, the form of consent guaranteed the confidentiality of the content of the interview and the anonymity of the participant. All the interviews were audio-recorded using the recording function of a smart-phone. Notes were taken to clarify certain answers.

The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. They were transcribed verbatim yielding a total of 79 pages of multiple spaced (1,5) text.

Retrospective semi-structured interviews: interview guide

When using semi-structured interviews the researcher has a set of questions in an interview schedule, but the interviewer uses this schedule solely as a guideline. Minimal emphasis is thus put on the ordering of the questions. Instead, the interviewer tries to enter as far as possible the psychological and social world of the respondent by following the respondents interests or concerns (Smith & Osborn, 2003). At the start, the researcher collected general information of the interviewee. This included the demographic details such as age, nationality and years of experience as a professional football player. This section was prepared by the interviewer using Google and Wikipedia. The information was shared with the interviewee in order to find inaccuracies or false information. The former served as an initial rapport building conversation to make the respondent feel at ease and to obtain some important information.

The second part, and the actual body of the interview continued, as advised by Smith and Osborn (2003), with the most general question possible in relation to the research purpose. The question asked by the researcher was: Can you go back in time and describe to me the process, of moving to another country? To give them some cues on how to start their answer, the researcher added: Like, how did it started? How did it went for you? Which people were involved? Basically, can you tell me everything you remember about it? Although these questions were added, leading

questions that influenced the athlete's responses were restricted to a minimum. The role of the researcher was to listen actively and guide the athlete's sharing of information. Flow and rapport between researcher and athlete was maintained by the use of positive body language such as head nodding and words of reinforcement which made the athletes feel that their contributions were valuable (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). When the open ended general question did not produce sufficient information, probing questions were used to elicit more information (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Probing questions are used throughout interviews for clarification and additional detail (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the probes were used to encourage the athletes to provide fuller descriptions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The probing questions included questions like "Can you tell me/explain more about that?", "Can you give me an example", "Can you describe to me a situation when this happened?", "Can you think of things that happened that made it easier for you?", "So, how did you deal with this?" In the second part of the interview, the focus was shifted to the concept of social support. The respondent was asked to talk about the people that were helpful during this transition and with regard to each of these persons it was asked "How did he/she help you?". Given the aim of this study, it was attempted to generate concrete accounts of actual experiences that occurred. Further, every attempt was made to follow the participants and understand their story rather than merely follow a standardized order of questions (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Data analysis

The thematic analysis in this study was approached in a hybrid manner, looking at the data in a deductive and inductive way. A deductive thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's analytic interest in the area and is thus more explicitly analyst driven. A deductive approach is useful when the general aim of thematic analysis is to test a previous theory in a different situation, or to compare categories at different periods (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This form of thematic analysis provides not a rich description of the data overall but more a detailed analysis of some aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 2002). Inductive thematic analysis is used in cases where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon and therefore the coded categories are derived directly from the text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Inductive analysis is therefore a

process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is important to note that the data in the inductive analysis was not coded in an epistemological vacuum. The researcher cannot free himself of his theoretical and epistemological commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this project inductive and deductive reasoning complement each other throughout the research process. My active role in co-constructing and co-participating in the narratives is evident, even though the identification of the themes was for a large part guided by theory. The selection of themes to be included in the analysis and re-presented to the audience is however a highly subjective process.

To start with, I collected concrete, naïve descriptions of the phenomenon from participants. These descriptions were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. All the names were changed and any information that could reveal the participants' identity was modified in a way the meaning remained unchanged. After the transcription, the typed documents were read for a first time to gain a feel of the whole. This was followed by an in-depth reading where the transcripts were read several times by the researcher in order to immerse myself in the content. During this process notes were made in the left-hand margin to reflect on interesting or significant comments. This reflected the first step in the process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark (2006) as familiarizing with the data. In a second phase meaning units which captured specific aspects related to migration and social support were identified and initial codes were given. This stage is named generating initial codes by Braun and Clarke (2006). Parallel to this, a template of codes was developed based on the theoretical framework regarding the concept of migration, migration as a career transition and the challenges common during this experience (Boyatzis, 1998). Using the template analytic technique (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), the codes from the template were applied to the text with the intent of identifying meaningful units of text. I coded the text by matching the codes with the segments of data selected as representative of the code. In the following phase, the codes were collated into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. The following stage illustrates the process of further clustering the themes that were identified from the coded text (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). At this stage, the previous stages were closely scrutinized to ensure that the clustered themes were representative of the initial data analysis and assigned codes. The interaction of text, codes and themes in this study involved several iterations before the analysis proceeded to an interpretative phase in which

the units were connected into an explanatory framework consistent with the text. In the following table, an overview of the different steps of the data analysis is provided.

Table 1.2. Guideline of data-analysis.

1. Developing the code manual	the	Making a list of codes out of the theoretical framework created about the concepts of migration and social support	E.g. - cultural similarities - career - loneliness
2. Testing the reliability of the codes on the pilot interview	the	Applying the codes of the code manual onto the transcribed version of the pilot interview to see if these codes can be applied on the content.	E.g. Social support agent: <i>“Because I have my agent, and he is the one who is responsible for me and who was taking care of me, he does everything.”</i>
3. Verbatim transcription of the material		Listening to the audio-recording of the interviews and typing them out word for word.	/
4. Familiarizing with the data		Reading and re-reading of the transcriptions of the interviews	/
5. Summarizing data		Making notes about the transcriptions of the interviews which allowed me to sense and take notice of the potential themes in the raw data	E.g. <i>Family is referred to by all the interviewees as a stakeholder in the process of migration</i> <i>Differences and similarities in the migration process of European and African players.</i> <i>Players experience difficulties when moving abroad to a different country</i>
6. Applying the template of codes + additional coding	the	Codes of the code manual were applied on the text with the intent of identifying meaningful units of text. Inductive codes were assigned to segments of data that described a new theme observed in the text.	E.g. Boredom: <i>“Otherwise, I go home and there is nothing to do...”</i> E.g. <i>“... it’s the second time I change, I know the change, you know. And obviously Portugal is more similar than Spain, the life, the people the language.”</i> →Subtheme: experience →Higher order theme: Facilitators of the migration process.

7. Making a coding file	The segments of text were then sorted and classified together in one document in order to bring together all the interviews in one place.	(Separate document created by author)
8. Connecting the codes and identifying themes	The broader categories were deductively created based on the two central themes of this study: migration and social support. Some subcategories were created inductively based on the emerging data, other sub-categories were derived from theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. The analytical process was flexible so that categories and sub-categories could be modified and refined until a satisfactory list was established and exhausted from all the data (Tesch, 1990).	E.g. Information, tangible, emotional and esteem support were connected and classified under the umbrella of 'Types of social support'. The codes that emerged out of the data as social support coach, social support family, social support agent,... were connected under the theme 'Stakeholders'

In the final stage of data analysis the result of the previous stages is reported. This stage is highlighted as the final opportunity of data analysis in thematic analysis. At the most abstract level, emergence of the theme/ themes can be considered to be the result or final product of data analysis.

Quality of the research

Overall, one of the best ways to judge the quality of findings is whether new insights in the studied phenomenon have been provided. The study should therefore have increased the understanding of a particular phenomena or informed practical actions (Krippendorff, 2004). Further, some actions were undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. The latter was achieved by focusing on the credibility, the transferability, the dependability and confirmability of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility for the findings and to enhance the accuracy of my interpretations, I made use of feedback from an experienced researcher who

played the role of “critical friend” (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). He made comments about the questions asked during the interview and the analysis of and the conclusions taken out of the experiences of the football players. To ensure transferability purposeful sampling was used in an attempt to obtain thick descriptive data. Each participant was permitted to speak freely on all of the research questions without any time constraints or limitations (Guba, 1981). Further, as much details as possible about the different steps that were undertaken in the process of this inquiry were provided. The dependability and confirmability was ensured through an external audit of the process and the findings. The overall trustworthiness of this study was enhanced through the use of a reflexive journal by the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, since he or she decides what to ask participants and what to observe (Richardson, 1994). In this reflexive journal I logged, whenever appropriate, a variety of information about the self, the method and the research topic. The main use of this reflexive journal was to help ‘bracket’ my personal experiences and consider the influence of my personal values and migration experiences on the research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). According to Etherington (2004), keeping a reflexive journal can help researchers focus on their internal responses to being a researcher and enables them to capture their changing and developing understanding of their roles and relationships within the study as well as on method and content. This, was assumed to add to the quality of the data analysis. Another strategy used to establish trustworthiness in this study was disclosing information about myself as a researcher so that the readers have an idea which biases or assumptions might have had an impact on the inquiry (Sparkes & Smith, 2012). In what’s next, I will therefore discuss in more detail my stance as a researcher throughout this study.

The researcher’s positioning and reflexivity.

By situating myself as an ‘active participant’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997) and highlighting the relational nature of this inquiry (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) I reflect on how my involvement in the storytelling process may have affected it.

Since I’ve experienced the migration process to a different country more than five times first hand, I personally hold a very close relationship to the topic of study. Although the context was different, whereas I was traveling for other reasons than professional football players do, I did

encounter many similarities in the stories of the professional football players. The familiarity with the topic had the advantage of easiness to connect to their experiences and an easiness to take an empathic stance in the specific situations they discussed with me. The downside was that it created a biased view and subjective opinions that may have had an impact on the research process. The use of a reflexive journal allowed me to write about some of the experiences that were part of my personal migration process such as the difficulties I encountered in adapting to a new country of residence and about the times that significant others helped me to cope with certain situations. This process of reflection helped me in avoiding to impose my view of what social support means onto the participants' accounts, or interpreting their words purely in the content of my own experiences. Through the relationship between the researcher and the narrator, I thus tried not to adopt an authoritative stance but to engage in self-reflection (Chase, 2005). The reason for employing this interactive strategy lies in the idea that "researchers have to understand themselves, if they are to understand how they interpret the participants' stories and that the readers need to understand researchers' stories (about their intellectual and personal relationships with narrators as well as with the cultural phenomena at hand) if readers are to understand narrators' stories" (Chase, 2005, p. 666). This is also reflected in the re-representation where the 'I' pronoun is used when writing the findings and analysis of the interviews. Although a valid way of presenting results it is still uncommon in qualitative research where a positivistic view is promoted. The latter holds the premise of a de-personalized researcher, being totally absent of her/his positioning and input – in terms of co-construction of the findings. The author of a study is therefore an objective observer/reporter of events, mentally and linguistically invisible. In this inquiry a different stance was opted for with the aim to utilize the participating role of the researcher as an enrichment and as a non-neglectable aspect in the construction of findings and results.

Analysis and findings

In this chapter the analysis and the findings of this study are presented. The aim of this section was to provide a concise, coherent, logical and non-repetitive account of the story the data tell within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The stories of the participants are presented

using small segments of the interviews brought together to form a longer excerpt or story, intertwined or followed by the author's interpretations (Chase, 2005). In this study, a lot of primary data was used in order to let the participants speak for themselves (Wolcott, 1990). The analysis began from the perspective of the participants and as such, it allowed the participants to provide a rich source of information separate from the interpretations of the researcher (Krane et al., 1997). After the presentation of these excerpts, my interpretation and analysis was provided. This procedure allowed to identify and acknowledge the multiple perspectives of the participants and the researcher, and as such the readers were able to consider all perspectives in their interpretation of the research (Krane et al., 1997). By merging the role of researcher as co-creator of the narrative with that of the participants' stories, the interpretative role of the researcher is highlighted but at the same time it separates him/her from a process of joint construction. Following Chase (2005) it is thus attempted both to connect and to separate the researcher's voice from the participants'. Also, the data was arranged with an eye for storytelling pursuing narrative logic. I tried to plot the data out in a way that allowed to transition from one exemplar to another, just as narrators arrange details in order to best relate the particulars of the story (Chenail, 1995). Further, the writing up of the analysis was guided by the themes derived from the theoretical framework. Although the themes were partly guided by theory, I, as a researcher played a crucial role in the co-construction of the narratives since the selection of themes to be included in the analysis was a highly subjective process. These themes did not just emerge inside narratives but they were dialogically co-constructed and they acquired relevance and correspondence with a theory through my understanding (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Azul, 1997). Each section of the analysis was used to locate and address the foci of the research question and enlighten our understanding. The presentation reveals a sequence of events which reflects the overall motives of migration, the difficulties along the way and the crucial role of social support in this career transition while taking into account heterogeneity of the participants. The following table gives an impression of the categories found within and imposed on the data.

Table 1.3. Overview of themes, categories and codes.

Central Themes	First order categories	Codes
Migration	<i>Reason / Motivation</i>	Moving for economic reward Moving to play in a better league or league of preference Moving to experience different cultures, countries Moving because of personal/political reasons
	<i>Difficulties / Problems</i>	Challenges in the new community Challenges in the new culture Challenges in the new sporting environment Insecurity
	<i>Facilitators</i>	Experience Cultural similarities
Social support	<i>Stakeholders</i>	Family Player Agent Coach Team Club Others
	<i>Types</i>	Informational Emotional Esteem Tangible

Migrating football players, living the dream or a road of obstacles?

Introduction and motives.

To introduce the interviewees, the following paragraphs give an overview of the participants of this study and their motives for migrating to a different country.

Africa B played as a youth player for a short period in France, later he moved to an MLS team in the US. He continued his career in Finland and Sweden before ending up in Belgium. He looked at his migrating experiences as a gradual process of improvement: *Yeah (smiles) it's not easy but that's all about football because uhm, the moves that I make, I mean they are the right decisions, they are the right moves because I was there in Finland, I was level one and in Sweden it's*

higher than Finland you know....(Yeahyeah) So I'm, I went to second level and Belgium is third level you know, so I mean (...) My target is to play in the Premier League or the Bundesliga or... but, but yeah I mean in Belgium now it's, it's good, I don't regret, I am happy here. Yeah, so it's like a stepping stone, if I told I was in Sweden, ok Sweden, then I go back to Finland, I would say maybe it's not the right thing to move, but I'm happy that I'm moving. I don't feel bad about it, I feel...

Europe B, who moved from Bosnia to Serbia as a youth player perceived the reason for moving abroad in a similar manner ...*uhm I went there because of football you know, I saw my chance to get something in life you know, I said to my parents, I go, I take a risk, we'll see what happened but also I go in school there you know because also I want to have my career in school and also football, you know... (...) Yeah always I have normal dream, you know. I don't want to dream to play in Real Madrid but maybe one day why not but you know I'm realistic guy you know and my dream was when I come from Bosnia to Serbia to play in Serbia and when I reach good level in Serbia, I see and I can go (One step) One step higher and when I came here, I also, when I play against Spanish club A, that is big club you know and I saw, maybe I can go one step ...higher.*

Africa A who migrated first from Tanzania to African country Y before getting transferred to a club in the Belgian League said during the interview: *Yeah...yeah... that was my dream, since I was young, when I was playing football, I was always playing to be a professional, I want to go to Europe, that was my dream and I was praying for that, so when Congolese club A come I say, I think it's a good way, yeah, because there is a difference between Tanzanian Club A and Congolese club A in Africa.*

Europe A who was playing for a well known team in Tsjech Republik before moving to Belgium had similar goals for his career. *It was always my aim, my goal to transfer somewhere to, to, to get in bigger quality, more quality (Higher level of football?) Higher level of everything, everything around this. Infrastructure...and professional...*

All of the above players could be defined according to the categorization of Maguire (1994) as *ambitionists*. Their primary reason to migrate to a different country was to become a professional football player and to play in a better quality league. Although they could also be seen as *mercenaries*, players who are moving abroad in order to obtain more money, this was never clearly articulated as one of their motives. As such, their motives of leaving their country behind were mainly driven by global pull factors and to some extent by local push factors.

Although there were similarities to the experiences of Europe C in comparison to the first players described, the context was different for him. Whereas his first move from Spanish club B to Spanish club C was with the purpose of playing in a better team, his move from Spanish club C to English club A had a different reason. *I saw in Spanish club C it is very difficult to arrive in the first team. Uhm I was uhm, just in the moment to go to the second team but English club A want me and uhm I feel, I, I can improve in England. Sign there four years and Name A, is the coach who, who watch me and uhm, and I was uhm, I sign to English club A, I think is the moment to, to change, to change something...* In this example the local push factors, i.c. the impossibility to reach the first team in Spanish club C, made him decide to leave his home country and try his luck in a different league. Europe C is therefore labelled as an *exile* on the one hand, since football related problems were an important motive to leave and *ambitionist* on the other hand since he was aiming to become a professional football player and this move could be beneficial for his career.

A word that was widespread in the responses of the players that were part of this study when talking about their migration experience was ‘opportunity’. The word, sometimes used interchangeably with ‘chance’, refers according to the interpretation of the researcher, to a feeling of having the possibility to improve their current situation or to follow their dream. Africa A said: *Yeah when you have a chance to go to the big club then you, I use it... and... Yeah, so I was waiting for it and looking for if I get a chance to go because my dream...* Participant Africa B, discusses this subject a bit more extensively. *Yeah because, the opportunity that I have, there is a lot of people who doesn't have this opportunity you know, to travel to foreign country and to be a professional footballer, you know it's not easy. So I have this here, why not I have to take it and then even work hard. That's my target you know... And I have the opportunity to be a professional footballer so, most of my colleagues don't even have and I remember it from my generation when I, when we were playing in the youth team, most of them are not even like... playing you know ... Only if you are playing in good leagues but not many maybe three or so and most of them are, I would say some of them are better than me but they don't have the chance so I had the opportunity so that's the reason why I keep on fighting so anytime I have to think about this I have to do whatever it takes you know to be good.*

Although South-America A recognized this aspect about moving abroad, he took a more biased stance about the opportunity that was given to him. When he was scouted at an international

tournament in Argentina, the player was taken over by a dual feeling about going to Europe. *(thinking) two feeling. One was like ooooh Europe, the dream for like every Chilean player. I want to go, I want to play there, like the other big player from Chile like blabla. And the other was I leave my family, I leave my friend, my brother, you know, everything who was supporting me, and then you know, you say, I stay, I go, I stay, I go.* It is therefore appropriate to note that this player experienced the attraction of both global and local pull factors. He had the chance to improve his social status by going to Europe and play in a better league. However, in exchange for this he needed to learn to live without certain aspects of his life to which he was accustomed. To some extent this player was already aware of the problems he could encounter when moving abroad. In what's next, a closer look at the difficulties the interviewees faced within their process of migration are zoomed in on.

The difficulties along the way.

When athletes move abroad in the pursuit of their career they face challenges in different aspects of their life. The participants in our study acknowledged this and provided numerous stories about the problems they had to deal with.

First of all, although not very prevalent in the existing literature about athlete migration, the interviewees portrayed the transfer from one league to another as a process with a lot of insecurities. When they are going or planning to go to a different country the players face the unknown, which brings along feelings of doubt and stress. Europe A said the following about this period: *Yeah but yeah you, you can imagine how, how stress and nervous was it the, the one month or two months of transfer window when, when every day I had a call from my agent maybe yes, maybe no like this. Name B (Technical Director Belgian club A) called me and like I wanted to leave because I really saw the interest from club and I wanted to make a chain, chan, change for me, like this...*

Europe B had even more doubts about his upcoming transfer because of previous experiences. *One, because uhm, I have two times uhm almost finished transfer and in last moment something happened and I don't go. One time I have to go in Polish club A, Poland. Almost I was on airport in Belgrade and my manager call me, my agent: you need, you have to go back, no inside, it's finished, we don't go. Ok and after that one year, I get call from my agent he said me, we have, we have uh Belgian club A they want you but don't speak to anybody, anything you know.*

Because in Serbia if you, if they heard you have some transfer, everybody call here to, to try to put his player you know. And I came here but still I don't, didn't believe I, I stay here because I was, I have two situation before I didn't sign it, you know.

South-America A who was certain of his contract experienced another type of insecurity. After signing with English club B he was not certain if he would stay there or if he had to go on loan to play for another club. *I stay there in the hotel, like one month. (Uhum) And then, just waiting for what they want from me. You know. (Uhum) They want me alone or stay with the under 21 or play like six months in Chile or one more year in Chile, I don't know. (...) And then they take the decision to put me in uhm in Holland, in Dutch club A.*

Africa B experienced yet another type of insecurity. *Yeah, (I met my agent) when we played with the youth national team. But I didn't take him serious so... you know... because it's, I mean, we had a lot of good players. Some of them left, we had a really good team so some of them they left to Spain, France, you know,... a lot of agents where there but I didn't take it so seriously you know but then afterwards he came to Gambia and he's from Sierra Leone, and he came to Gambia, you know, try to work on things, and then he get a pre-contract and told me well this is going to work, let's see. So the moment I was travelling to get a working permit I realized: OK, it's something....* According to him, getting approached by player agents with the promise of getting transferred to Europe is a general practice in Africa. Quite often, those people are unable to fulfill their promises.

Once the players overcame their initial problems of stress and insecurity, they were confronted with issues in their new country of residence. South-America A illustrated this by pointing out that the life of a professional football player also has a downside: *I think is easy life because we have everything you know, you have the money, you play football, in a professional club, you have some people to, to work with you, you know, the rent, the house in everything they help you but after the rest is(doubtfull facial expression).* By referring to 'the rest' he's not very precise about what these not so pleasant experiences that are part of the life of a migrated football player can be. Although each of the participants had an individualized experience and faced specific problems after moving abroad, there were some recurrent themes of difficulties throughout the interviews. The sub-themes that emerged were deducted from the categorization of Schinke and colleagues (2011).

First of all, in almost all of our cases, they needed to get used to a new culture, in particular a new language. *The reason why I said in the beginning it was very hard, it was because of the language, because if I go to the training, the coach is explaining I open my eyes and thinking what is he saying and try to figure it out in my head what he's saying, you know, so a couple of months it was difficult.* In Europe B's perception it was also the most difficult part of his move: *And that is maybe the most difficult thing when I came here, I know and I start to think what happen there if my English is not good, you know... that's also the reason why he considered moving from Bosnia to Serbia easier: it was uhm... not much but easier in Serbia because there everybody speaks the same language. I speak English but when I came here I didn't use English a lot you know. I understand everything you know, but when I start to speak you know almost now, I know I don't speak perfect but I speak, I can speak norm..., good. It's important to understand me, you know.* South-America A found getting used to English a challenging task and was very much aware of how this was beneficial, not only for football but also different aspects of his life *...but with the rest of the players in the change room, the first month I don't understand nothing, also the coach, you know uhm, but when you, you improve your language is more easy, for everything, to go to shopping, or everywhere and this help me you know for example we are talking now in English you know, because I move, maybe if I stay in Spain I...* The challenges of communication, and language acquisition in particular, with regard to migrated athletes have been acknowledged in several studies about athlete adaptation (Battochio et al., 2013; Ryba et al., 2012). According to the research of Schinke et al. (2011) learning a new language is a constant challenge as attempts are made to be understood without any connecting language. Adding to the challenge of learning new words and phrases is a self-awareness and concern by the athlete, as articulated by Europe B, that he/she appears less intelligent as their struggle proceeds in front of their team-mates.

Besides the language another problem the migrated athletes encountered in a new culture was a problem with a different climate. This was especially true for the African players who considered the European weather particularly cold. Africa B for example even mentioned *...and then I stayed only for about 6 months so I couldn't handle it, it was little bit cold, you know...* Evans and Stead (2014) also found this in their study when analyzing the experiences of southern

hemisphere professional rugby players moving to England for their career. They noted that the weather not only hugely affects the lifestyle of people, a divergence in climate conditions may cause stress to relocated athletes.

In the category of challenges in a new community, players needed to get used to their new environment. Europe B gave an example of how he experienced this: *First time I start to live alone and in Serbia I say like before it's almost the same as in Bosnia but I came from very small city in Bosnia, I come in big city, you know 300.000 people. That was very big difference for me.* A difficulty in line with this first example that was common for all the players that were interviewed was the problem of leaving their family and friends behind. During the interviews the players gave the impression of finding this aspect to be one of the emotionally hardest and toughest parts of their journey abroad (pausing and thinking quite some time before answering the question). Research detected athletes with feelings of alienation after the separation from their family, friends and their community of origin in several sports such as baseball (Kontos & Arguello, 2010), hockey (Schinke et al., 2011), boxing and intercollegiate sporting programs (Bartolacci, 2010). Issues of homesickness and loneliness surfaced also in Campbell and Sonn's (2009) study, and they were accounted by these authors as a part of the incitement of culture shock. Weedon (2012), in his research about migrant youth footballers' acculturation revealed that issues of loneliness arise especially in non-training periods. It is clear that problems with loneliness and lack of relatedness with family and friends is omnipresent in sport studies dealing with migration and a problems that deserves the amount of attention. Also in this study the aspect of loneliness was touched upon by several participants in their stories about the process of migration. When Europe B was asked if he could remember some of his experiences of moving abroad, the first thing he said was: *Yes I remember, every I think moment in Serbia because this is the first time I went from my parents you know.* To use the words of South-America A: *... for example eh I remember the first months was very difficult because you have to arrive there alone, go to the one hotel, you don't know nothing, the language, you don't know the new club, you don't know nothing and, and you start to, to create your life, you know. No friends, after training, you have too many hours alone. You know, I miss alot the, the family, friends,....* The players were not only missing their family, they also had to cope with the fact that their family was missing them. Europe B for example said *Ah, the most difficult because my parents they miss me*

a lot, you know... South-America A illustrated this a bit more detailed: *Jah for my mother was most difficult. Because we are three brothers. I am the younger. (The youngest) The youngest, jah. The oldest is twenty-seven, twenty-five and now I'm twenty one. But this moment I was seventeen. And my mother was, waaah, cry everyday. My father is, jahh, he want to be like strong man, but ...* The fact that they missed their family and their family was missing them made them aware of the loneliness they had to deal with. Following excerpts of the interviews were illustrative of this. *...because I was just alone in the hotel so sometimes you just feel bored, you want to step out, go see shops or what and maybe visit somebody, talk with somebody, you don't have friends, you are just alone.* The repetition of the word 'alone', as a complementing narrative device, the player highlighted the value that he placed on relationships. Not only Africa A but also South-America A recognised this feeling: *be alone I think (was the most difficult thing). When I go home and there is nothing to do. Before was nice, in Chile was very good. But when I move to Europe I feel like alone, you know...* Europe B agreed with previous remarks and noted: *That is, that was the most difficult for me. I fight alone there.* Being alone also meant dealing with aspects of a life away from your support group. As Europe B later in the interview points out *And uhm, you know, you can not believe to everybody you know, you have to speak with them but also to have distance from that people you know, you need to choose right way, where you want to go and that was for me the most difficult you know because everything what I get there, I get alone, with, without help you know... my parents just can call me how are you son, are you good but they cannot help me there you know.* According to Schinke et al. (2011) loneliness seems to be the most prevalent immediately after the relocation, especially the first 6-8 weeks. It also seems that these athletes never overcome their loneliness, but for those who persist in sport away from their home country, post-relocation loneliness is something that is accepted, or at least tolerated with time. This was articulated by South-America A who mentioned *I think only the year, the first year was difficult for me. And now, I'm fine.* Several social networking technologies such as Facebook, Skype, What's app are instrumental in helping immigrated athletes to stay in close contact and connected with their family and friends back home. A second problem which is reflected in the last interview excerpt from Europe B who struggled with getting close to people and keeping distance, is the challenge of establishing new social ties, either with people also relocated from their community of origin or those from the new community. At last, in line with the findings of Evans and Stead (2014), who suggested that athletes who move with a partner or a

family member find the settlement to be more smooth, the topic was less discussed by Europe A, who was joined by his wife only 3 weeks after his arrival and by Europe C, who moved to England together with his girlfriend.

Besides the stress and insecurity that comes along with a possible transfer, the difficulties with getting used to a new language, a new climate and at last coping with feelings of homesickness and loneliness, some players also had to deal with problems in their new sporting environment. This was articulated by Europe C, who had to deal with a transition from junior to senior on top of a change in football culture and playing style. *Maybe yeah, about football is a little bit different because uhm at Spanish club C uhm all the time is playing with the ball and I, I start to play with professional football players, I start to train with first team at English club A, you know. And it's a big change about everything, the changing room also you know. I'm 18 years but for example some have 32 years in the same changing room, was difficult you know. And I change a lot, the play with young guys, with some guys with my age and to play with professional football players, I have to work more, more than other players. Also my physical, now I'm ok but with 18 years I..., maybe 1.72 and 40 kgs, you know. And in England with this you can't play, imagine....*

Given the amount of roadblocks the players are confronted with when moving abroad and getting used to their life and career in a new country, in what's next, the transition to the concept of social support is made and the way in which and by whom they were helped in order to overcome these difficulties is described.

The safety net

Football players who migrate to a new country in order to play football always rely on a certain amount of people who help them to facilitate the transition. In what's next, I will therefore give an overview of who these different people are for them.

Family

First of all, all the players that were interviewed could rely on their family during the migration process from the one country to another. Although for some they were more involved than for others, each of the participants referred to them as an important, if not the most important stakeholder in the process of migrating to another country. Europe C described his parents as the most important persons in his career. *No, well obviously my family, you know. My, my parents was the, the most important persons for me. I still contact every days with them. Also they travel sometimes to there to, to, to stay with me you know. But no for long time, because they have to work in Spain. (...) Yeahh, every decision I, I make, I speak with him (my father) before, it's the most important and he know everything about football you know and... And he helped me a lot you know.* The family and in particular the mother or the father played a decisive role when the players faced difficult moments in the post migration period. South-America A referred to a moment not so long after he left Chili in order to become a professional player in Europe. *Jah, in Dutch club A, jah in the first, I think in the third or in the four months I was in my bed and I was like, pfff I don't play, I don't, they don't take me even in the selection. Just I train the week and I don't play anything. I was like ...(gestures of giving up). (...) It was an important moment when my father call me, my mother call me or my brother, and they look me like... I want to go back to Chile and they like, no you have to be strong blablabla, you have to stay we come to visit you, just try to play, be strong. And then you change your mind quickly...* Later on in the interview he repeated the message in a similar manner. The use of repetition may indicate that this meant a lot for him. *Yeah normally, my father, my mother was every time was say like, yeah you have to go, you have to do your dream, you have to take the chance, something like that. And then yeah...* The feeling of support in hard times was also articulated by Africa B. In his case, it was his mother that was of particular importance for him. *Yeah my mum, I talk to my mum every time, she's, I mean she's the reason why I'm still strong like this because she has, I mean she's really strong woman and uhm every time I talked to her she, she's like a role model you know, she encourages me, and she's always proud of me so, every time I call her, it's like I have a good feeling you know. If I go to training I have to just do my own thing and do better. So every time I talk to my family it's, it motivates me because of where I come from you know. So I think, because of this reasons that's why I'm, I'm strong and keep going.* Besides his mother, Africa's B brother has also significant value for him. Especially his brother's experience with living abroad was

considered helpful by Africa B. *Since I was a kid, he went there for studies and after he completed his studies he got married there (i.e. the United Kingdom) and he lives there with his wife and his kids so he always called me and try to talk to me about how it is, and how it feels like to be in a foreign country. You know, cause for yeah him he travelled I don't even know what age he was when he travelled but it was really long time ago, he experience, he got experience you know, more than me so talking to me gives me motivation you know. To me he was the reason why I kept going.* He also repeats this a bit later on in the interview which, similar like South-America A, can be an indication of the importance it has for him. *Yeah, he's the oldest and he has been in Europe for pfff over twenty years so and he's a European citizen you know as well so I think him talking to me it motivates me, it really motivates me, because he was there for studies and then for after I know he got some difficulties as well, maybe he took the experience, talk to me and tell me everything about it yeah.*

In the excerpts above, the majority of support can be labelled as emotional, informational and esteem. With their support, the members of the family tried to be there for them and comfort the football players in times of stress, they helped them with issues regarding the future, advised them to come to solutions for a problem they were facing and provided them with confidence. The participants' family played however also an important role in the more practical aspects of moving abroad and in this sense provided what is called tangible support.

Europe A mentioned for example during his interview that *Yeahyeahyeahyeah and also our parents help us a lot because first way here to me, my, my parents took my wife and daughter here to Belgium. Mostly, we are travelling by car. It's seven hours, it's not too much and you can pack everything yeah, because with daughter it's not so easy... (Uhum) But uhm so they help us on the start a lot and in another fourteen days her parents came again brings us another things for food for what we love there in Tsjech Republik so it was also easier for us not to buy everything and to, to...*

For Africa A the help of his family and particular his uncle had mainly to do with organizing a smooth transition from one club to another. *I think only my uncle was involved at that moment, because yeah I were believe in him and all my family they believe on him, so yah he's taking charge, he take me as his kid or own kid yeah. Yeah we were in negotiations with Congolese club A about everything, so he was just him. Not so much people around. (...) because I was very young and yeah my uncle take care of everything, he just take me to Congo, we were together, we*

negotiate together and until we sign a deal. He explained this a bit further by saying that I think it's at the start of my career, he play that role until now, yeah now I know everything, now I'm a bit enough to, to, to handle some things but... yeah but before I was, know nothing in football. Just go out and play football and it's ok for me but I wasn't know any things, just go in the pitch and play football. As for now the role of his uncle changed which we can conclude by following remark: Yeah yeah yeah sure, jah, now we talk and he just continu to advice me and help me when it's difficult, because now I have agent so he can help me in football issues.

Player Agent

In contemporary football a player agent has become a very important person, especially with regard to players who move to different countries in their pursuit of a career. All of the interviewees referred to their agents as someone helpful in the transition process, although for some this was more outspoken than for others. Europe B for example said *I have I think, maybe the best, the best relationship with agent in Serbia because that is my first and only my manager still now, you know. I sign contract with him before 6 years and still we are together.(...) And that is, he helped me alot, also that guy I forget to, to, to say about him, he helped me a lot in Serbia, because sometimes when I don't have money I ask him. He don't ask, why you need money, just he send me and when I came here he said me, you need to pay me, just only what we have in the contract. Other money which I give you in Serbia, forget that, that is ok, you know.* Whereas the latter is a clear example of tangible support provided by the agent of the player, other forms of support were also mentioned by the other participants. The participants perceived their agents for example as someone they could turn to for guidance and advice. In the case of Africa A, he considered his agent to be very helpful given his experience with bringing football players to Europe. *Yeahyeah, he tried to call me every day and ask me about how do you see the situation, the players, you need to be strong it's just a, it's normal in Europe you got, you going to get friends and everything if you feel bored than blablabla you can ask some players to go out with them or to visit them, it's just easy you know, European players are friends, you don't need to worry to ask somebody to visit him, don't worry about it and blablabla. Because he know about football, euro, European football so...* Africa B confirmed the role of an agent as advisor throughout the interview: *It's like, he's like my advisor you know, whatever I have to do in football, I have to talk to him, because from him, I mean, everything started through him I think,*

so.. He's not an agent, he's a manager, he has a lot of players but then I have contact with him so sometimes if I need advise I can send him a message and then he call me.. (Yeah) You know, we talk, regarding even my transfer to Sweden, to Belgium, I have to talk to him, because he knows a lot about football and...

Whereas South-America A recognized the economic nature of the relationship with his agent, he also pointed out that good agents according to him establish a different kind of relationship with their players. For him a good agent is therefore by definition someone, who does not only provide tangible support, but also gives the player support on different levels. *I think the agent move sometimes the football players, you know and this is, is true. But the more important if they are good friend, you know. He can help you in everything, no only in football, obviously in your life. If they know, they want the best for you I think it's the good agent, you know. But you know, in this work, in football, everything is this, you know, business...* The friendship between a player agent and his player is something that can develop over time as Europe A indicated. *And I think it starts when I really start to play in 2014-2015. When I start to play in Tsjech club A the best team in Tsjech Republik when we get the trophee, we won the league and like this, so after it starts more like a friendlyship because he called me oftenly and like this. (Uhum, uhum...) And this transfer it was really like, I can tell him everything what I have on my mind. (Yeahyeahyeah.) So now it was also easier to tell him every my feeling from this because it wasn't so easy but he also speak to me everything like what is clear and how he really see it and how he really feel it because sometimes I was really stressed and he say like hey stay patient now we don't need this to be so nervous and all this because you still have to play for Tsjech club A and you don't know. Sometimes he calm me down, yeah...*

Coach

In the direct environment of the player, a coach is a third stakeholder who can play a crucial role in helping a player coming from a different country with the challenges he faces. Similarly, a negative relationship with a coach can result in more difficulties to adapt to a new environment for a player coming from abroad. The ways in which a coach can help are widespread and is reflected in upcoming excerpts from the interviews. Europe B speaks fondly about his coach and is grateful for the help they gave him and therefore he considers him still as a friend at this moment in his life. *Yes, I have but also that guy, that same coach, now he's my friend, he helped*

me a lot in situation in my life, you know because sometimes when you are football player in Serbia a lot of girls they see you are football player, you start to be famous now it's money and here he start to tell me you know, you need to be careful with uhm, with girl. With your choose, you need to be, you, you cannot believe every girl, he, she can say I love you but maybe she love you just only because you one day you can be famous and you have money you know. That is maybe one situation and for example when I want to buy my first car he went with me, you know and he, he helped me about that because this is my first car I don't know a lot from car you know and he want to help me... a lot of situation he, he was that guy, he was like my second father there. Another example he gave was when he first played for the first team at a very young age. That, that was very big step for me and I remember one game we play qualification for Europa League. I get red card in 20 mins and I have 18 years, 17 years at that time, that was very difficult for me and I start to go out from the pitch and I start to crying and I remember ten days after that game I have that situation on the pitch in my head you know, sometimes I cannot sleep because of that and one my coach, now my friend he start to speak, like he start to speak about that situation to try to help me think about other situation this is only one game, this is not the end of your life or of your career... Another moment he referred to was the moment when he refused to sign a new contract at his club. Yes I have one situation that is very good situation in my life because my last, last year in Serbian club B, I don't want to sign new contract with them and they give me suspension, one, one month they didn't give me to play and that, that guy he played the most important help for me.. Because every day I train with my club but also with him, you know and uhm... I don't need to call him: when we have training? He call me, you know and he come to my appartement and take me with his car, he help me in some football situations to explain me what I can do better on the pitch... Or what... because my head in that moment was "kaput", you know... Ooooh definitely, and he start to speak every, every day with me. I didn't have one day to don't speak with him. He was like my private psychologe you know... The examples of support given by the coach were a clear mixture of emotional, esteem, informational and tangible support. He helped Europe B by being there for him, by giving him individual feedback on his football skills; he assisted him with advice and guidance to help him find solutions for the problems he faced and at last, he was of physical help by being his personal trainer when he was suspended by his club. The other players had similar experiences, each of them referring to a certain type of support given to them by their coach.

Europe C described the impact that a coach can have from his perception. *No, for example, I arrive in the first week and I start to play in the starter in the first week, you know. Ehm when some coach do this in the first week or first two weeks start to play, in the first team, in the team yah, is unbelievable, same that happened here. I arrive here and in the second game I start against Belgian club B. The first eleven you know, in that moment you see..*

Europe A also recognized the importance of a coach for a player coming from a different club. *In a football life, a coach is really important and for me I came under Name C, he was, he was the coach when I came, yeah, and he wanted me so after all, when he left the club I was really scary what's gonna be because I played and now uhm like uhm, second part of season gonna start, new start everything is changed and uhm new staffs and everything so I was scary a little bit and I think full of expectation of what's gonna be and like this and after all it's gonna be like that that I didn't play. I didn't start in first eleven and I was waiting I think one month when Player X he got injury and after I started to play and now I play all the time.*

Given the fact that South-America A played in several countries after leaving Chile, he experienced coaching behavior that was helpful for his integration and coaching behavior that was not. When English club B put him on loan to Dutch club A, the coach was not helpful according to him. *No, he was just interested in the eleven player or eighteen player every weekend and then the rest... (...) I think they think, like, oohh one more player, from English Club A so just hang around here... When he started to play for Belgian club B he had a different experience. With Name D and Name E (head coach and assistant coach), I feel like this. I was feeling good because I was playing, talk to me, sometimes speak alone, like how you feel, you are alone? No my wife is here. Ok be strong, not like second father but like they care about me you know. And jah, for me was perfect jah. AND Yeah uhms, jah, because few many times he call me to his office with his staff and jah they ask me like how you feel, you feel alone? When your girlfriend come, your father, your family? Your brother, everything ok? Your family in Chile, everything OK? You speak with him and yeah... His relationship with the assistant coach, who was moreover able to speak Spanish, was genuine friendship. *So with him was very close. Yeah very good friend, always respect, he's my assistant coach, but out of the field, like friend. Go to eat some days, the weekend free. Drive to Brussels, eat brazilian food or argentina food. Eat together.* South-America A also gave another example of how his coach made him feel good after his arrival in his new club. *He was putted example, you know, like uhm, like in front of whole the**

team like I want to see everyone training hard and hard like South-America A, something like that you know. Or after the game, after the game the video, see bambambam how he did it, see, that's what I want. Like him. Or yeah, like special things. Africa A appreciated a particular coach behavior when he arrived in his new club: Eehh just explain me, not shouting too much, because you know when you are new player then the coach shouting to you so badly you feel like a., but they just try to explain to me how we have to work and easily not like shouting, you know.

Team

Next to the family, the agent and the coach, teammates can also help facilitating the integration of migrated football players. During the interviews, most players referred to certain situations where their teammates were helpful in some kind of way. South-America A especially appreciated the company of some of his teammates during the times when he was feeling lonely. *Yeah sometimes when I was alone, in the beginning I get my apartment and he was still in the hotel. (Yeah) And I talk to him, if you want, you come, you come to sleep with me and you stay in my apartment and then you don't have to pay the hotel and then he say really?? Yeah of course and then he come to my apartment and he stay like one month and a half, or one month I think, and then my girlfriend come and... like one week before, he moved to his apartment. With the, with his father and, jah with his father I think, only he. And then, jah after that some days in the night, he was hé what are you doing? Oh nothing I'm just cooking or..., if you want you can come to my apartment, we can dinner together, my father we cook uh, watch Champions League or something like that, I say ah ok fine. I take my car, go to his place, sleep there sometimes. Something like that. After the game, dinner together and then go out party or small things like that. And now also in June, in England, I was in the hotel also, one month but I sleep like every weekend in his apartment, with his family, jah. They know me very well so. Yeah like that.* Africa A also pointed out that it was because of his friendly teammates and the warm welcome of the other players, he felt at home quite rapidly. *Yeah, but ahm, but when I come here, everybody, just from the first day everybody was friend with me. Yeah and just like a lucky guy or what I don't understand but they were just laugh with me and or like, just come today and they laugh with me. It's not like in Africa, you know, in Africa, the first day, you maybe not get friend, they just be busy. But here they were laughing with me, try to talk with me about Africa, about the stuff they don't know about me and I was ok that is good, I like it. In just a week I was like I can play here, settle already, because*

everybody was friendly, a good group. (...) And I don't know why but the first day when I come here, when we have lunch together I have to sing in front of them. I sing very bad and everybody was laughing and so they just like like me and yeah starting from there I were friend, everybody was happy with me and blablabla... The first contact with the team is an important moment as it can influence the later impressions about the team and atmosphere within. In this instance humour was a device that may act facilitating relatedness and create common ground through a shared positive climate. When Europe B was 14 years old he moved to an academy in Serbia. The fact that there were more international players in the academy, was according to him helpful for his integration. *And there is uhm, a lot of players from other country you know. You have, I have uhm player from also Bosnia, from Montenegro, I have one player from Slovakia and one player from uhm Croatia and everybody, we live together you know and in, in that academy we have restaurant you know and there, you know, for that seven years I met a lot of people, a lot of friends now I have from there and it, that is now it's my second, second city, you know.* Europe C found his friend in a Brazilian player when he moved to English club A. *Uhm, I have very good friend there is player Y, uhm, he, he played there at English club, now after English club B, after English club C. Is Brazilian player and he have maybe 27 years now, maybe it's three more years or four more years than me and he helped me a lot, a lot. You know, in the first months, I was with him after training every days, on his home, take coffee, drink, you know. Sometimes, you need to have company some friends, to enjoy, you know.* For Europe A, his teammates were especially important to help him cope with the lonely moments, which professional football players often face. *No no no, I was alone here just, it was the moment when the also was on the hotel Africa B, and Europe B so sometimes, I was there alone but sometimes I spent time with them to, to, to take a dinner, to take a coffee to uhm do something some afternoon because not every day you have two trainings a day so you have all afternoon...* Africa B did not have much time to adapt, since he started to play only two days after he signed his contract but was only positive about the helpfulness of his new team mates. *I have to play my first game so it was quite tense and so I wasn't expecting that I would just come and play you know, but then I came after two days I sign, after two days then I have to travel with team and but, but the team-mates during training they made me feel good you know. So with their support and the support of the management, the coach and his technical team, because of them I became part of the group, like within that two days.* He repeated the role his teammates played several times during the

interview. *And then it's a new team, everything is new, but I knew about that so I was ready for that you know. But the playing part, to be so quick into the system hmm yeah, that was because of the team, the players and the technical team made me like...AND Uhuhm, but because of yeah, but normally it's because of the team-mates, they make things easier. But here it's more, yeah more international players so... it makes it easier for me you know. Yeah...* Similar to Europe B, Africa B recognized the presence of several international players as a facilitator for his integration. In an early stage in his career, he played in Finland, where the majority of the players in his team were Finnish. When comparing both situations, he stated that he found it easier to integrate in a team where more players were coming from a different country.

In general, the interviews revealed that the type of support given by team mates was mainly emotional. More specifically, just being there for them in times of non-training was perceived as helpful by the participants. In this way, the other players helped them to cope with the challenge of loneliness and homesickness which is very prevalent among migrated athletes.

Club

An important stakeholder that was touched upon in the previous section by Africa B was the other persons that are involved in a football club, besides the coach or the teammates of the player. The roles of these persons can be different, ranging from club presidents to physiotherapists or team managers. Important however is that when the interviewees were asked to talk about the people that supported them when coming from a different country to their new club, also those persons, with different functions in a club, came to their minds. Africa A for example talked about the owner of his new club in Congo when he was transferred from Tanzania. *Congolese club A was a big club when I was expecting it will be difficult for me to, to settle down, you know. A lot of great players that time that were playing in Congolese club A, people I don't know, food was... but then after I found that all of them they were just like a family, you know, players they like each other and supporters, they like their players and also the boss was very good of me, he just took care of me like, you know, let's say, like small boy. He don't took me like the growing up, so I just have to work. No he try to help me, to get used on everything in Congo and yeah different tradition, culture and so many things. He tried to help me so I was like a, ah I think I can play football here and I will be comfortable, yeah.* Africa B also mentioned other persons that were supportive when he was transferred. *I think it started with,*

from the, from the board, when I met the sporting director first. He talked to me and we talked and told, he promised me a lot of things that they were going to take good care of me, whatever I need, I just have to talk to Name F you know and Name F, I didn't have a car then so when I first came they gave me a driver for the first two days so from that I met my teammates and then the first day I met them it was like I met them a few weeks ago, you know, it's like they made it easier for me, the players and the management. The reference to Name F, who was the player counselor/ team manager was also made by other players at the same club. Europe A said that after my arrival, I spent here three weeks on hotel and I was, Name F was helping me. He's helping for every new player with all things, like bank account, mobile phone and I was waiting three, four weeks for house, close from here, ten minutes because I have the wife, wife and daughter, so it was not easy for them to pack everything, to move here and like this but they know what is going to be, what is. So they have time, three, four weeks when I get the house in Opglabbeek and after they move after me. Later on in the interview he comments on a football club's policy of buying foreign players and repeats the importance of a player assistant / team manager in a club once more. Sometimes it doesn't work, yeah. They pay, they pay a lot and sometimes it's not good and you never know on the start so they are trying like Name F and other people to try to visit you, ask you every time, how do you feel, how are you, is it everything fine, do you have everything and it was, it was uhm pretty often he in this period so... This particular job, which involved taking care of the new players at the club, was also present in some other clubs. South-America A for example reported about a certain woman at English club A. Like a woman who work with the new players. She speaks a little bit spanish, not too much. (So what does she does? What did she do for you?) Yeah at the beginning was look, was look for some apartment or house and then the cart, car, open the, normal thing, open the bank account uhm.. who else, and then make the paper for my girlfriend to come uhm...(...) Sometimes make the translate with the coach. (Ah ok) But only few times eh, not like every time, next to me. Further, at Belgian club B, the teammanager / player assistant was Name G. Maybe Name G, he help, if you have some problems about anything ehm... you can call any hour in the day.

But even before a transfer is completed, persons at club-level can play a significant role in making the player feel at home. Europe A described this process and compared two clubs in Belgium that were trying to buy him. ... and we had lunch with Name B and we took a look for every places here, for stadium for training pitch, for inside the dressing room and Name B told

me how does it work and who is interested in my transfer and so it was like this. So it was the first thing what it, makes it really interest for me. If I compare it with Belgian club C, it was absolutely another level for me because they make for me really like easier to have a decide which club to choose or which way I will go because Anderlecht was little bit like a proud to do this transfer. Ok we will see, just like that, we have time for that but Belgian Club A and Name B they was like, they was they were more special more clear in the way how to find a way to to to get me. Earlier in the interview Europe A commented on the relation he built up with the fitness coach from his previous club. This significant other, different from his family, agent, coach or teammates still played an important role in his career to this day. It it it's a fitness coach from Tsjech club A. We were working together I think like four years and he's more like uh uh specific on these psychology and like this. (Yeah, yeah, uhum.) He was more like a mentor to help me to confidence and everything like this. (...) and we are in touch in the same touch we are now. We are talking a lot, in message and also it's still the same way he try to uhm make me confidence but also be constructive to my, to my plans. The person described by Europe A was providing emotional, as well as esteem and informational support. Out of all the interviewees, Europe A was the only one describing this kind of relationship with a staff person from the club and one could ponder if they are common in football. What it however does emphasize is the importance of specialized staff in a football club. They should not only focus on the tangible support such as finding housing, opening a bank account etc. but also pay attention to the different dimensions of the concept of social support. In this way they have a higher chance of covering the players needs regarding coping with their challenges.

Migration as a career transition

The migration experiences of the players were also looked at through the lens of the athletic career transition model of Stambulova (2003). To obtain a succesful transition, the players faced specific challenges or transition demands, with which they had to cope in an appropriate way. During the interviews it became clear that successful coping was dependent on a dynamic balance between the coping resources and barriers. Resources are the various internal and external factors that facilitated the transition. Social support received by the participants was according to them a very important aspect and essential resource. As indicated in the previous

sections, the given support was emotional, esteem, informational and tangible and provided by various stakeholders such as the family, the player agent, the coach, the team and significant others at the club. Another resource which is not discussed yet, but was articulated by several players was the factor of previous personal or athletic experience. Since the majority of the players already experienced several migration transitions, they pointed out that these previous experiences were helpful in coping with the challenges of a migration transition. Africa A for example said, when thinking about his plausible future career moves: *“like today, if I want to move to another country then I have the experience”*, referring to the knowledge he obtained from his previous transitions. When Africa B came back from France because it was too cold for him, he stayed for a while in Africa before moving to the United States to play for American club A. Looking back at this period his opinion was: *“But yeah because of that experience after I went back to Africa. So when I went to the US, it was cold there as well. Place A was really cold so because of that experience, I took it with me, it helped me, so from there I started being stronger and you know, try to be....”* When Europe C was asked about which career move he found easier, he mentioned it was the second one: *“Yesyes, I have maybe two more years and it’s the second time I change. I know the change, you know. And obviously Portugal is more similar than Spain, the life, the people, the language.”*

This last aspect, was another external factor that facilitated the transition according to the interviewees. Cultural similarities in their new environment made it easier for the player to adapt and integrate. Africa B said for example: *“Yeah because when I was in the States there were, they had some African players. They had a guy called from Sierra Leone and a guy Name H from Senegal, so they made it easier for me.”*

In relation to the barriers, internal and external factors that interfere with the coping process, a prime example was given by South-America A when he was put on loan in Dutch club A by English club B. When he described the relationship with his coach in Holland he said *“he was just interested in the eleven player or eighteen player every weekend and then the rest... (...) I think they think, like, oohh one more player, from English Club B so just hang around here...”* indicating that this was perceived as poor coaching. This endangered to some extent the successful transition of the player. Luckily, because of crisis coping interventions of his family back home, this turned out to be a delayed successful transition. When South-America A was feeling down, and he was asking himself the purpose of being abroad, his family encouraged him

to keep working and not to give up. The way a successful transition was secured was mainly by making sure that the internal and external factors facilitating the transitions were high and the barriers with regard to a transition were kept low. Social support, in its various formats, seemed to be an essential component of the resources available to a football player coming from abroad. Looking at transnational migration through the lenses of the athletic career transition model of Stambulova (2003) was therefore helpful since it highlighted the importance of social support and the usefulness of finding out more of its true meaning.

The story behind the story

Whereas the importance of social support was evident and the multidimensionality of the concept was illustrated by various excerpts from the interviews, the purpose of this research was to obtain a better understanding of the concept of social support in the context of migrating football players. Distilled out of the many pages of transcribed interviews, held against theoretical assumptions and filtered by my own experiences and interpretations, it appeared that social support in a context of transnational migration of football players was perceived by the participants of this study as *“being treated like family”*. Mentioned implicit by some of the players and explicitly by others, having the perception of being treated like family was found to be a correct understanding of this concept when coming from abroad to play in a new league. Examples were given by Africa A, who mentioned about his uncle: *“because yeah I were believe in him and all my family they believe on him, so yah he’s taking charge, he take me as his kid or own kid yeah.”* When he was asked to explain what he meant by being his own kid he said: *“But he were there for me and he tried so hard to help me until everything was ok”*. Africa B, also referred to it explicitly by mentioning about his host family when he was living abroad in France *“Well what motivates me I have the love from the family that I live it, they love me so much, the girls there, they are like my sisters, they always go out with me, they speak a little bit English”*. He considered the persons around him as family, which was crucial for his well being in a different country. This was similar to Europe C, who experienced the feeling of being part of a family on a different level: *“It’s easy to just be here, to play football, you know. No distractions, no... also every person was good, like a family, you know. It’s a family club I think.”* Europe B referred to one of his coaches in the following way: *“he want to help me... a lot of situation he,*

he was that guy, he was like my second father there.” When Europe B was asked to explain what he meant by this feeling of having a second father he answered among other things that this person was like a private sport psychologist to him. South-America A mentioned that the feeling of being treated like family as a form of social support was suitable for players from abroad when he used the terminology in an attempt to explain the way he was treated: *“not like second father but like they care about me you know.”* When he was asked to clarify this feeling he mentioned that his coaches were concerned with his emotional state in various aspects of his life and not just in relation to football. Formulated both implicitly and explicitly, trying to get an understanding of social support in the context of migrating football players was interesting and challenging. Building on the observation that players’ family are very if not the most important stakeholders with regard to social support during this kind of career transition, it became obvious that forms of support that appeared to have similar qualities to it were found to be valuable. This finding fits in Fiske’s pathways of integration model which found belonging to be a basic social motive (Fiske, 2004). When people interact with others, they want to know their intentions, capabilities of enacting them and to be ascertained whether the other is a friend or an opponent (Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005). There is a need to know if the environment is safe or unsafe for their psychological and physical integrity. *‘Being treated like family’* as a way of understanding social support responds to this aspect of belonging along the pathway of a player’s integration while at the same time providing not only general but also specific guidelines to the support group who has to deal with migrated football players.

Discussion

In this chapter the findings of our data analysis are discussed further in a reflective manner in the view of the current scholarship. Limitations of the inquiry are acknowledged and discussed. The last section gives an overview of the practical applications to contribute to the knowledge in the field of sport labour migration.

Social support and the transnational migration of football players.

In this study it was attempted to take a closer look at the concept social support in the context of the migration of football players. The aim was to provide an answer on the research question: How is social support understood in the context of migrating professional football players? This was achieved by framing the stories of migration and the stories of social support in this context provided by the football players inside a theoretical framework distilled out of the existing literature in this domain. Descriptions of the players that did not fit this framework were reported and latent meaning common across the different interviews were made explicit to meet the purpose of this study.

Migration of football players is a widespread career transition in contemporary football, especially on the professional level. The interviewees were perceived as transmigrants, since they took actions, made decisions and felt concerns within a field of social relations that connected their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement (Schiller et al., 1992). In line with the observation of Bale and Maguire (2013), the player's motivations for migrating to a different country could be framed within the local push and pull theory. The global pull factors, such as the desire to play in a better league and experiencing better infrastructure, were the main drivers behind a move to a different country. The categorization of Maguire (1994) fitted also with our observations, since most of the players that were interviewed could be labeled as *ambitionists*: players who had the desire to achieve a professional career or players with the desire to improve their career by moving to a better quality league. The players from outside of Europe could to some extent be labeled as nomadic cosmopolitans, since they were eager to experience different nations and cultures, although this was mentioned rather implicitly. In a similar way, they showed appreciation for the economic rewards they got for moving to a different country but never quoted it was one of their motives to move abroad.

Pursuing the dream of becoming a professional football player was not an easy task and the players were confronted with several challenges along the way. These challenges fitted into the categorization proposed by Schinke et al. (2011), with first of all the challenges in the new community such as feelings of loneliness, separation from family and friends and limited access to their familiar diet. These issues were found in several sports and confirmed once more in the context of football. In line with Weedon (2012), in his research about migrant youth footballers'

acculturation, it was acknowledged that the issues of loneliness arose especially in the non-training periods. Other challenges with which the players were confronted, fitted into the second category of adapting to a new culture (outside of sport). Especially the language seemed to be problematic for migrated football players. These challenges of communication and language acquisition in particular, have been acknowledged in several studies about athlete adaptation (Battochio et al., 2013; Ryba et al., 2012; Schinke et al., 2011). Besides the language, getting used to a new climate was also an issue, especially for the participants Africa A and Africa B coming from the African continent. With regard to the challenges in a new sports context, such as adaptation to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, culturally foreign team dynamics, the evidence was rather limited. Only South-America A described the problems he faced when discussing his transition from Spanish club C to English club A. *“Maybe yeah, about football is a little bit different because uhm at Spanish club C uhm all the time is playing with the ball and I, I start to play with professional football players, I start to train with first team at English club A, you know.”* (...) *“Also my physical, now I’m ok but with 18 years I..., maybe 1.72 and 40 kgs, you know. And in England with this you can’t play, imagine....”*

A topic however discussed by several players, was the issue of insecurity that came along with a transfer to a new club. This particular stressor was not found in current literature and moreover does not fit well into the suggested categories by Schinke and colleagues. Nonetheless it should be taken into account when football players are moving abroad to pursue a career in football.

The process of migration was framed into the athletic career transition model of Stambulova (2003). In order to go from one phase to another a successful transition is required. A transition can be seen as a process of coping with certain transition demands. These transition demands can, in the context of migration, be seen as the various challenges the players are confronted with throughout their move from one country to another. A successful transition is realized when there is an adequate balance between resources and barriers. In the model of Stambulova (2003) a distinction is made between crisis preventive and crisis coping interventions with regard to a successful transition. When looking for evidence of both types of interventions in the interviews, it became clear that certain types of provided social support, fitted into these categories. Especially the tangible support such as lifestyle management interventions (opening bank account, finding housing,...) provided by specific professionals at the club (the team manager / player counselors) matched with the model. Examples of crisis coping interventions were less

obvious since they could not be labelled as educational or clinical interventions (Ecklund & Tenenbaum, 2014). However, family support in the form of encouragement and motivational talks to avoid an unsuccessful transition was in this study perceived as a crisis coping intervention.

Given the scope of this research it was found that, the available resources, and in particular the social support for the migrating players was relatively elaborate and an essential component of a successful transition. In line with the findings of Schinke et al. (2010), data analysis showed that assistance from support networks such as teammates when faced with loneliness or cultural misunderstanding was vital. All the participants demonstrated this, since they referred to their teammates as helpful when they were struggling with being alone. Further, as stated by Richardson and colleagues (2012), who interviewed five young players between 16 and 24, who moved from their home country to an English Premier League club, the family was a significant source of social support. The finding was also prevalent in this research, where all the players referred to their family as an important, if not the most important stakeholder in the process of migrating to another country. The type of support the family provided also covered the several types of support as distinguished by Cutrona and Russell (1990). The participants indicated that they could rely on their family for guidance and advice; for concrete, instrumental assistance or for issues with their confidence or self-esteem. Most of all, their family was there for them at all times and in this sense providing them with emotional support.

Following Richardson and colleagues (2012), the study agrees with their conclusion that there is still a need for qualified personnel and appropriately trained international recruitment staff in a club to support young players through their migratory transition. This study found evidence for existing practices in football clubs with regard to the integration of migrating football players. However, the participants gave the impression that the nature of these preventive supportive coping interventions was restricted to concrete, practical assistance. Although the latter is indispensable, social support when dealing with migrating athletes, should be broader and attention should be given to the different challenges a football player faces. Moreover, during the interviews it became clear that social support is a shared responsibility, that should be taken into account by the various stakeholders. In this way, this research adds to the existing literature by providing a provisional overview of these particular stakeholders which are the player's family, the agent, the coach, the teammates and a variety of personnel at their new football club.

Given the content of the stories provided by the football players, the model of Fiske (2004) would have been an interesting lens to look at the migrating experiences. This model argues that a fulfillment of five pathways contributes to a smooth adaptation in the new environment. Although it is not necessary to fulfill each pathway, every single one of them can be helpful in order to achieve a sense of belonging. *Understanding* deals with unfamiliarity with the new environment and getting used to the new situation. Africa A was not used to play with the type of soccer boots they use here, since the pitches he played on in Africa were different than in Europe. Europe B was not used to play in a team with so many coaches. The first time Africa B moved abroad, he was not used to the cold climate in Europe, this made it very hard to adjust to a new situation. In this regard, Evans and Stead (2012) noted that unfamiliarity and unawareness of the new conditions was a factor that affected the players. They found that if the period of preparation was longer, the adaptation was facilitated. *Trusting* has to do with being able to rely on each other and the new circumstances. People who have trust are more willing to express themselves. A prime example about this pathway was given by Africa A who was forced to sing a song in front of the entire team on his first day of training. In this way he placed himself in a very vulnerable position but in a safe environment which was helpful for his intergration. This trust was useful with regard to the pathway of *controlling*. Controlling can be understood as the antithesis of passivity, which thus is facilitated by assertiveness. Assertiveness in the process of migration was understood in this research as attempts from the players to find connection with friends, team mates in their new environment. South America A actively looked for company in his free time after training in order to avoid being bored or feeling lonely. Obviously having feelings of trust towards the new people in their environment was helpful in this regard. In line with the lies the pathway of *belonging*. This theme emerged in the interviews as a sense of being part of feeling at home in their new community. Expressions by players as “*everybody here is like a family*” and “*the people here tried to help me so much with everything...*” endorsed the feelings of trust and control of the players. With regard to the pathway of *self-enhancement* examples were found in the sport related aspects and in the domain out of sports. Learning a new language can be seen as acquiring new skills as much as becoming a better player by playing in a better team and competition.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to obtain a better understanding of the concept of social support in the context of migration of football players. In order to do so, six interviews with professional football players currently playing in the highest league of Belgian football were completed. The majority of these players experienced several transitions from one country to another to become a professional football player and the information from each of these transitions was used in the data analysis. This data analysis revealed that players moving from one country to another to pursue a career in football face several challenges along the way. The challenges the participants discussed in the interviews were loneliness and homesickness, learning a new language and getting used to a new climate. Previous research in similar and other sports contexts confirmed these findings. New in this study was however the finding of insecurity among football players about the definiteness of their upcoming transfer. The fact that many factors that could influence the outcome of a possible transfer were outside of their control created a certain amount of stress for the players.

To cope with the challenges that were part of a transition from one country to another, the players relied on an array of resources in order to realize a successful transition. Among these resources were social support and previous experiences. The participants indicated that moving abroad for the first time was the most difficult and subsequent transitions were facilitated because of the knowledge they gathered during their earlier moves abroad. Social support remained an important resource for coping in each of their transitions. This study gave an overview of the most important stakeholders in the support group of a football player when he is moving to abroad to play in a different league. As a common aspect of their experiences the study showed that the football players' support group consisted out of their family, their football agent, their coach, their teammates and certain individuals of the staff at their new club. A strength of this research is that this common experience of the participants was made explicit. The proposed list of stakeholders in the support group of migrated football players can be useful for further research or in applied settings. Along with this provisional overview, a variety of examples of the types of support given by these different actors was provided. These examples gave us more insight in the nature of social support in the context of migrating football players. Although the support given by the different stakeholders varied, the multitude of stories allowed us to get a better understanding of this concept. A common feature that emerged in all of the interviews when

discussing the subject of social support was the idea of 'being treated like family'. On the one hand it reflects the feeling migrating football players experience when they were grateful for the support given during the process of migration; on the other hand it holds in itself the importance of the family as part of the support group in this particular transition. Although this interpretation stems from a position of interference from theory, it also is coloured by personal bias and personal beliefs from the researcher. Understanding social support in the context of migration of football players as a shared responsibility between the family, the coach, the player agent, the teammates and certain individuals at a club, with 'being treated like family' as an underlying understanding, is nonetheless a contribution to the existing literature and can be used as a guideline for professionals in the field.

Limitations

It should be noted that the participants in this study are by no way representative for the experiences of all the football players moving abroad to pursue a career in football. Although the amount of participants should be subordinate to the quality of a research produced, some extra participants would have been useful in this study. Especially because of the fact that the answers given by the football players were very often not very elaborate but rather short. This could be the consequence of being an emotional outsider. The fact of facing a complete stranger, might have refrained the players from sharing their deepest thoughts and feelings with the researcher. With regard to the interviews, the difficulties in arranging meetings with the participating clubs, resulted in time gaps in between the different interviews. It was therefore hard for the researcher to find a flow when doing these interviews since it felt like starting over time after time. At last, no other researcher was involved in the process of data analysis. Therefore, no discussions about the interpretation of the material took place, which would have added an extra dimension to process and most likely would have produced a different way of looking at certain aspects of the concept of social support in the context of migrating football players.

Applications

The practical applications of the findings of this study are primarily directed at the context of

football, although some insights might be useful in other sports as well. First of all, the study provides an overview of the challenges migrating players are confronted with when moving from one country to another, which allows the stakeholders involved to address each one of those issues more in depth. Given the fact that social support is a shared responsibility, all the parties should be informed about the transition demands that are inherent to a move abroad to pursue a career in football. This means that the family should be aware of the issues of loneliness and homesickness the player might face and agreements about frequent visits should be organized from the very beginning. Further, the coaching staff should be updated about the impact they can have on the integration process of migrating players by providing these players the appropriate support. Coaches, together with the other staff members involved with the team, should also evaluate if the new players are able to connect with their teammates, especially if they came alone. These friendships can help the player to cope with moments of loneliness and homesickness, especially at times of non-training, or solve initial difficulties with language or food. Specialized staff at football clubs helping these players to integrate as soon as possible should be aware of the fact that the tangible support they are offering with housing, transport, tax issues is just one aspect of their integration and the support given should be looked at more in a broader sense if they aim to address the different issues the players are facing. In a similar way, player agents should be informed about the fact that the support given by them should not be restricted to help with practical issues since the players benefit from different types of support when they move from one country to another. According to the findings of this research, a way to assess the provided support is to look at it from the player's understanding of 'being treated like family'. This can be used as a guideline for all the different parties involved, who aim to help with the process of migration from football players.

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Appendix 1.1

Informed consent form

1. Title of the study

Transnational migration in football: The role of social support from a phenomenological perspective.

2. Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to contribute to the existing literature of transnational migration in sport. More precisely, the purpose of this masters thesis is to get a better understanding of the role social support plays in the transition football players face when they move from one league/country to another.

3. Description of research activities

The research activity consists out of a 30mins-60mins interviews. In a later stage of this research, the transcripts of the interviews will be send to you in order to receive comments or suggestions.

4. Risks/ discomfort involved

There is no risk/discomfort involved in this study.

5. Expected impact

The insights and knowledge that this study will produce might enhance and facilitate the process of transnational migration for football players in the future.

6. Dissemination of results

You participate anonymously in this research. All the names of clubs, coaches, teammates, friends, relatives, agents, sponsors,... will be kept confidential.

7. Further Information

Do not hesitate to formulate questions regarding the aim of this study or the implementation of study design. If you have any doubts or comments, do ask for clarifications.

8. Freedom of consent

You are a volunteer participant. You are free to withdraw your consent now or later.

Participant's declaration

I read this form and I understand the procedures involved. I agree to participate in this study.

Date: __/__/__

[Name and signature of
participant]

Jochen Abrams

[Name and signature of
witness]

Appendix 1.2



University of Thessaly
Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences

Letter of invitation

With regard to the completion of my Master in Sport & Exercise Psychology I am currently doing the research for my masters thesis. This research is titled “*Social support and the transnational migration of football players*” , and is considered to be a part of the research domain of Migration in Sport. The purpose of this dissertation is two folded: on the one hand the aim is to contribute to the existing literature of transnational migration in sport by getting a better understanding of the role social support plays for football players in the transition from one country/league to another. On the other hand, the goal is to formulate practical tools and tips that can be used by people working in the field in order to facilitate the integration of players moving from one country/league to another.

To complete this research I am currently looking for several football players who are willing to participate. More precisely, I’m looking for players who moved from their home country to another with the aim of pursuing a professional career in football. Their participation consists out of one interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Date and location for this interview can be discussed.

Thanks in advance for you participation,

kind regards,

Jochen Abrams

2nd year MSc of Sport & Exercise Psychology

University of Thessaly, Greece

In cooperation with Prof. Dr. Marios Goudas and Prof. Dr. Stiliani Chroni

Appendix 1.3



Trikala: day / month
 /year
 Protocol Number.:

Application for approval of research entitled:

Social support and the transnational migration of football players.

Scientist responsible – supervisor: Marios Goudas / Stiliani Chroni

Main researcher – student: Jochen Abrams
 (if applicable)

Institution & Department: University of Thessaly. Department of Physical Education and Sport Science

The proposed research relates to a:

Research grant Postgraduate thesis Undergraduate thesis Independent research

Contact phone: +32 483 209403

Contact email: jochenabrams@hotmail.com

The applicant

Jochen Abrams

Appendix 1.4

Part 1: General information

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Nationality:
4. Country of birth:
5. Country of residence:
6. Position on the pitch
7. Date of the geographical move

Part 2: Migration

Your first move was from X to Y?

- Can you go back in time and describe to me how this process was initiated?
- Why did you move to another country?
- Did you consider the move to be easy/difficult and why?
- What did you consider to be the easiest thing about moving abroad?
- What did you find the hardest thing about moving abroad?
- Was the move to another country something planned or rather something which happened quite unexpected?
- What were your expectations about moving here and is the reality in line with this?

Part 3: Social support

Which people were involved in the move from one country to another?

- Did you move alone or with other people? If with people → Where they willing to come with you? If alone → which person(s) did you rely on the most?

- Which persons played an important role in your decision to move? How? Can you give me an example?
- Which persons played an important role in the process of moving? How? Can you give me an example?
- Which persons played an important role in the process of integration and adapting to the new environment? How? Can you give me an example?
- How did your move abroad changed the way you rely on people?
- Which problems did you encounter by moving to a different country and who were the people helping you to solve them? (Are this the same people as in your home country?)
- What kind of help did you receive in order to overcome these obstacles? How is the support from the people in your new team? Can you give examples?
- Which do you consider your home country? Why? Are you still in touch with the people from your home country? How?
- Can you compare your social life back home with your social life in your new country of residence?
- Can you tell me something about one or several persons that mean a lot to you? Why do you consider them important to you? How did your move to another country had an impact on these important people you mentioned?
- Which role did your coach play in this process?
- Which role did the medical staff play in this process?
- Which person on the club can you address if you encounter any problems? What does he/she do?