Japanese female professional soccer players’ views on second career development

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze professional, Japanese, female soccer athletes’ views on second career development and perceived support from the Women’s Empowerment (WE) League, Japan. This study was underpinned by occupational socialization theory and utilized a qualitative, collective case study design through demographic questionnaires, in-depth face to face semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. Participants were six current professional soccer players of one professional team of the WE League. Three themes were generated from the data: (a) avoiding washout effects in second career opportunities, (b) the importance of dual career pathway opportunities, and (c) professional development and second career training. These findings reflected how participants’ first career as a professional athlete became ingrained within their identity and shaped future desires and preparations for second careers. They also reflect the difficulty participants experienced balancing a professional athletic career with part time office work for financial stability as well as planning for a second career linked to soccer. Players expressed a need for second career preparation to be facilitated by their clubs and the WE league, and we provide implications and recommendations to support this work.

Key Words: Soccer, Women, Second Career Development, Professional Athletes, Japan

Words: 187
**Introduction**

In general, professional athletes have much shorter careers than non-professional athletes due to the physical and psychological demands of elite level performance sport (Stambulova et al., 2020). When the time comes to terminate their professional sporting career, athletes enter a transitional period of retirement (Yao et al., 2020), often at a much younger age relative to the general working population (e.g., retirement age in Japan is the early 60s, professional athletes tend to be mid to late 30s). Despite this age difference, athletic retirement has been analogously compared to work retirement (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) and the associated psychological adjustments this transition requires. But rather than transitioning to a life without work, most athletes must transition to another career. Reasons for career transition can be divided into two criteria, transition predictability and life domain. Transition predictability is the most common reason for athletic retirement and career transition (Stambulova et al., 2020) encompassing personal choice, performance decline, lack of motivation, falling social status within an athletic domain, and decreased physical capabilities (Taylor et al., 2005). On the other hand, retirement and transition may be forced and beyond the athlete’s control, such as career ending injuries and deselection (Taylor et al., 2005; Reifsteck et al., 2013). Life domain is a far less common reason for retirement and associated with retiring to focus on other spheres and interests within life such as families or other careers. Regardless of which mechanism triggers retirement, the vast majority of professional athletes (excluding perhaps the most successful male soccer and tennis players as examples) must pursue a second career to support themselves and such transitions can cause mental exhaustion, and professional stress that reduce quality of life (Nowak et al., 2021).
Such an experience can cause grief and the triggering of poor mental health. Indeed, Stambulova et al. (2009) concluded that 15-20% of retired athletes experienced psychological distress upon career transitions that necessitated professional intervention and psychological support. This may be attributed to general anxiety accompanying dramatic changes in employment status and job role, self-identity, self-confidence, a shift in social status (e.g., from having experience and being respected in one job, to being inexperienced and having to earn respect in another), and forms of intra-and interorganizational mobility (Yao et al., 2020). Further, McKnight (2007) stated that the significant dedication and value players assigned to a prolonged sporting career resulted in a struggle to develop interests in other domains or professions. As such, when they were forced to retire, players had few non-sport related interests to define themselves which ultimately led to a restricted vision of themselves as a person and their position in society. In soccer, attempts to prepare athletes for retirement have been undertaken by professional leagues and player unions; these have primarily focused on training for second career recruitment and socialization through development programs for athletes based on past studies (e.g., Lawson, 1983; Templin & Schempp, 1989; Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004). Further, such a focus on career transition has dominantly focused only on elite male athletes.

Over the last decade much has changed in the sporting world, especially with regards to increases in participation, media presence, and level of elitism in female soccer. For example, women’s soccer has enjoyed their biggest TV audiences. The 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup in France generated record viewership with 993 million people watching via television and a further 482 million accessing via digital platforms (Lee et al., 2020). There is also a positive trend of professional women’s soccer leagues
being started such as England (the Women’s Super League) in 2017/18 and Japan (the Women’s Empowerment League) in 2021/22. Despite this growth in the women’s game, there are still substantial inequalities compared to the men’s game (Harrison et al., 2020). For example, at the highest level of English soccer, female players earned an average of £27,000 ($40,000) per annum while their male equivalents received an average salary of £2.64 million ($3.5 million; Harrison et al., 2020). Conversely, most professional female soccer players in the world require dual careers (additional employment: work and/or education) to make a living income as well as manage the lifestyle of a professional athlete. Further, despite a desire to stay within soccer, the post retirement career pathway for women is much less certain despite acquiring the same level of skill and knowledge about soccer as male players (McCormack & Walseth, 2013).

Thus far, research and training on how to support and prepare professional sports persons, in particular female athletes, transition to a second career is lacking, perhaps due to the historically gendered bias towards male athletes compared to female (Bekker et al., 2018). There is also a dearth of research regarding professional female athletes compared to male in general which may be attributed to both a much shorter legacy of professionalism within female sport (Lovse et al., 2020), but also patriarchal systems and norms that situate male sport as superior to female sport (Norman & Simpson, 2022). This is still evident through the inequitable wage gap that exists between male and female athletes in many sports (Agha & Berri, 2021). Female athletes tend to be paid much less than men and are thus afforded a much shorter gap between retirement and finding a second career to financially support themselves. Indeed, the potentially poor wages female soccer players receive throughout their career compared
to men may necessitate the need for a dual career pathway to ensure survival, working another job at the same time as a professional career.

Professional female athletes’ transition to second careers is still underrepresented in sport and kinesiology literature, and this limits practitioners’ ability to adopt and apply second career support and preparation when working with these athletes (Emmonds et al., 2019). Within the wider context of female employment in Japan (the focus of this paper), female soccer players’ career trajectory post retirement is even more important as, according to Assmann (2014), 60 to 70% of women in general have non-regular employment (part time) and low salaries (as little as 2 million yen ($18,000)) resulting in many social and psychological disadvantages. As professional athletes may be at a further disadvantage to gain regular employment with a liveable wage having spent the first part of their working life playing sport, an exploration of how female, Japanese, professional soccer players may be supported to establish a second career path is essential.

**Japan’s Women’s Empowerment Professional Football League**

Historically, there was no professional soccer for women in Japan. A semi-professional women’s league, the Nadeshiko League, has been in existence for over 30 years and currently consists of 32 teams over 3 divisions. While a few Nadeshiko players were paid, the majority were amateurs. In June 2021, the Japan Football Association (JFA) announced the first fully professional women’s football league in Japan would have its inaugural season in 2021-2022, with the league starting on September 18th after the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic games. The Japan Women’s Empowerment Professional Football League (called the WE league) was founded with missions to (1) contribute towards building a sustainable society through promoting
female social participation, and (2) enhance diversity and choice in sport (The WE League, 2021). By example, one of the WE league policies is that each team must consist of at least 15 professional players that are signed to professional contracts, and five of these 15 players must make at least $50,000 annually. Furthermore, one team executive member must be a woman and hold a measure of power and influence within the club (The Washington Post, 2020). Though not full equality, these stipulations are a start and highlight a progressive shift regarding professionalism within female soccer in Japan. This also brings the opportunity to explore retirement transitions to sustainable second careers among a newly professional athletic group and lay a foundation of knowledge regarding how professional clubs can best support athletes when they reach retirement. It important to consider, however, how players’ desires and aspirations for a second career are shaped by their first. For that, we can use occupational socialization theory.

**Occupational socialization theory**

Occupational socialization is a complex, longitudinal process in which an individual acquires the necessary skills and knowledge base to perform the tasks required of their profession (Brown, 2012). Occupational socialization theory is not linear but has been described as a time-orientated continuum that includes acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization (Richards et al., 2014). Acculturation refers to learning through initial interactions with more experienced, important others within the career context (e.g., coaches, senior players) that shape initial impressions, perspectives, behaviors, and beliefs (Lawson, 1983). Professional socialization occurs when individuals are ready to commit to a certain career choice and they work towards achieving and developing necessary skills and knowledge to do their
job role well (e.g., qualifications, workshops; Lawson, 1986). Occupational
socialization focuses on the ongoing socialization one experiences as one’s career
develops and advances (Woods & Lynn, 2001).

Utilizing this theoretical framework within the context of sport allows researchers
to explore the acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization
of a professional sport team, and explore influential factors that contribute to an
athlete’s behaviors and decisions (such as choosing to retire; Richards et al., 2014). By
exploring the occupational socialization of professional female soccer players, we can
better understand their social situation and perceived norms and values in a ‘workplace’
(in this case a professional soccer team) that may be disrupted when they are required to
transition to a second career. Further, by understanding how athletes see their
professional world, we can use occupational socialization theory to facilitate athletes’
transition from their first career to their second in a positive manner. That is, if a
professional female soccer club can integrate professional and organizational
socialization practice whereby athletes are encouraged to adopt a retirement decision
based on ‘life domain’ or choice (noted above), this may facilitate a fluid and positive
pathway transition. Indeed, Reitzes and Mutran (2006), stated there are two mechanisms
by which organizations can positively influence athletes’ career transitions and lead to a
less traumatic retirement experience. First, professional athletes who have planned for
their retirement were better prepared for their second careers, and more likely to make
an empowering decision to retire (Drawer & Fuller, 2002). Second, career planning may
reduce some of the anxiety and uncertainty associated with employment changes that
may cause professional athletes to ‘hang on’ to their first career such that the decision to
retire may be taken away from them and made instead by a coach or board.
With these respective examples, athletic career termination may serve as an
opportunity for social rebirth (if planned and the decision is underpinned by
empowering factors of life domain) rather than a form of social death (if forced and the
decision is underpinned by social identity or relations being taken away). Therefore,
utilizing an occupational socialization approach allowed us to investigate the
acculturation, professional, and organizational socialization of female Japanese
professional athletes and explore factors that influence their decisions and behaviors
regarding transitioning to a second career (Richards et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study was to analyze professional, Japanese, female soccer
athletes’ views on second career development and perceived support from one
professional team of the WE League. The central questions were: (a) What were
professional athletes’ aspirations for second career development? (b) How were players
desires for a second career influenced by their first? and (c) How did players perceive
professional teams and the WE League should better support players’ retirement
transition?

Method

Research design and origins

We adopted a case study design to explore this group as we sought to holistically
study players’ perceptions and experiences of retirements within the confines of their
current career as a soccer player and realistic future development (Hodge & Sharp,
2016). In this way, we could embrace multiple perspectives from players as well as the
complexity, and uniqueness of the phenomena under investigation (second career
development) within the cultural norms, policies, institutions and systems they are
experienced within the WE League in Japan (Simons, 2014). Underpinning this design
were assumptions of ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism
whereby we held that reality for each person (and the researchers) was unique and
relative to their own social standing, background, perception and history, and that
knowledge was crafted through interactions between other people, social institutes, and
wider social norms.

The lead author is currently a dual career athlete, balancing professional soccer with
her role as an assistant professor of health and sport sciences at a public university in
Japan. She could, therefore, approach the research from an insider’s perspective
exhibiting empathy, understanding, and validation of participants’ experiences. There
are advantages when a researcher is also a member of the group under study as this
helps with accessing and recruiting participants, building trust, more in-depth
understanding of the phenomena under investigation and providing interpretations that
may not be possible without lived experience (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). There, is
however, care to be taken and a critical self-reflection required to ensure ethics,
criticality of thought, and avoidance of taking for granted that one person’s experience
is the same as another. There is also a danger of the researcher being susceptible to
confirmation bias and unconsciously shaping questions and coproduction of data with
participants inequitably (McSweeney, 2021). To ensure the first author did not overly
influence research findings, she continuously reflected upon and challenged her
preexisting assumptions and experiences to appreciate how these may influence the data
collection process, and drew upon her co-authors challenges and critiques of data
regarding interpretations of data.

**Sampling and participants**

A convenience and criterion-based sampling strategy was used, which meant cases
were sampled meeting a predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria for this study were Japanese, female, professional soccer players that expressed interest in discussing their own second career and career transition. Specifically, we identified and selected all players (n=9) who were considering second career plans and belonged to the lead author’s affiliated team of the WE league. Although the lead researcher attempted to interview these nine players, three refused to participate due to not being comfortable with their current medical and life conditions. Six participants were selected for this study. Pseudonyms of the six participants and their demographic backgrounds are indicated in Table 1. All participants (MH, KA, SB, NR, SR, SM) were Japanese, female, professional soccer players who belonged to one of the professional teams of the WE league. The lead researcher received approval to conduct this study from the University’s institutional review board and secured signed consent forms from all six participants.

**PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

**Demographic questionnaire**

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect background information from participants. The data included information about age, soccer experiences, injury history, professional contract conditions, and past experiences of second career training. These details are provided in Table 1.

**Online face-to-face interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into professional and social phenomena experienced by individuals in sport contexts (Seidman, 2006), such as second career training and transitions. The questions were constructed according to conceptions of occupational
socialization theory by exploring participants career trajectories (from acculturation to
organizational socialization), and informed by previous research in this area (e.g., Sato
& Haegele, 2017; Sato et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted online using the
Microsoft Teams communication and collaboration platform, in line with safe, best
practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90
minutes each (average length = 75 minutes). Interview questions included a) When
thinking about joining the WE league, what were your thoughts in relation to retirement
and second career opportunities? What kind of knowledge and skills (that you learned
from soccer) do you think are important for seeking a second career? Why? c) How
important are professional retirees (former athletes) from your professional league in
progressing your career and future employment opportunities? and d) When you
became an elite athlete, how well were you prepared for second career opportunities?
All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Team software and an audio recorder.

Translation process

To prepare the data collected in Japanese for analysis and reporting in English, a
cross-cultural translation technique developed by Banville et al (2000) was applied. The
technique involved a group of researchers proficient in both languages working
individually and collaboratively to ensure that meaning is retained through the
translation process. In this case, the process began with three Japanese-English bilingual
researchers individually translating the interview transcripts and the supplementary
artifacts. After this, they formed a committee with an established researcher to critically
compare and discuss their translations to ensure that the meanings of the original items
were preserved, making edits as recommended. Finally, all members were sent a copy of
the completed translation for final comments and critiques.
Data analysis

To analyze data, we adopted a deductive, latent reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2021) and Braun et al (2016) method. Here we loosely and iteratively followed a 6-stage guide that incorporated immersion, open coding, theme building, development, naming and report writing. Themes were crafted with consideration of occupational socialization theory and analyzed without a further layer of interpretation beyond participant testimonies or the underpinning theory.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through member reflections and peer-debriefing. Member reflections were used to ensure findings resonated with participants’ lived experiences (Patton, 2015). The researcher sent electronic files of the interview transcripts and crafted themes to respective participants. We used member reflections rather than ‘checking’ in line with our ontological assumptions that there are different, subjective realities unique to each person. As such, there is no one interpretation of an experience. What is important is that results and interpretations resonate and represent participants – even if that were not the interpretation they may have made. Indeed, member reflections and sharing different interpretations can be an enlightening and empowering exercise as participants may learn a different way of viewing the world. Peer-debriefing is a process of exposing oneself to a knowledgeable peer in a way paralleling an analytic session; with the purpose of exploring aspects of inquiry that might remain only implicit in the inquirer’s mind (Patton, 2015). For this study, two professional colleagues who had expertise in qualitative research agreed to serve as peer-debriefers. These individuals reviewed the established themes and agreed with the findings of the researchers, as they deemed the interpretations of the data to be
meaningful, evidence-based and representative.

Results

We will present the ‘what’ of participants’ perceptions of second career opportunities in the results section and expand upon the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of these perceptions through occupational socialization theory in the discussion section. Three major recurrent themes were crafted from the data analyses; (a) avoiding washout effect in second career opportunities, (b) importance of dual career path opportunities, (c) professional development and second career training.

Theme I: Avoiding washout effect in second career opportunities

This theme captures the range of desired second careers expressed by female, professional, Japanese soccer players and the various anxieties associated with these respective paths. First, some players were interested only in receiving training that would lead them to continuing a career in soccer (i.e., coach, referee, sport scientist, etc.) and were disinterested in professional training unrelated to this domain (e.g., business, therapy, education). Participants explained that they were afraid the skills and specialized knowledge they had developed through soccer such as skills to perform the sport itself, self-discipline, social control, teamwork, mutual respect, and fair play within a soccer context (Simons, 2014) would be wasted or of no use within a second career. For example one participant, Ms. MH, explained her second career plans after retiring from professional soccer league:

I want to be a soccer coach after retiring professional league. I am anxious and afraid that when things may not go well in the future and I do not have any plan B. In order to prepare my second career, I have a certified soccer coaching license of official class B (issued by Japan football association) at this moment. I needed to complete intensive training spending a few days, this means that I needed to skip some practices and got permission from my head coach. I feel that I would only be able to select future professions that I may be able to use and apply my specialized knowledge and skills of soccer for my second career opportunities.
It is apparent that Ms. MH takes her future second career seriously and embraces opportunities to expand her coaching qualifications in soccer. The JFA organizes and runs various training courses and issues coaching licensure that Ms. MH committed to maintaining and advancing. She sacrificed time in her first career to prepare for her second (e.g., missing practice), completed various renewal process and paid annual fees. Arguably, her motivation was driven by fear that this was her only option and that ‘things may not go well in the future’. We termed this phenomenon the “washout effect” as participants feared they may be perceived as a ‘washout’ having achieved significant success as a professional athlete but may not experience the same degree of success in a second career. They were afraid, anxious, and nervous moving away from soccer; and were therefore hesitant to explore ventures in other life domains about which they perceived they had no experience, skills, or knowledge.

Expanding this further, the power and social status of professional sport as a first career may have influenced players’ desire to have a second career associated in some way with soccer. For example, Ms. NR held a master’s degree in Kinesiology and aspired to apply for a doctoral program. The area she specifically wished to study, however, was biomechanics in soccer performance with the hope of a second career as a higher education faculty member of soccer coaching in Kinesiology:

I would like to have my second career of professorship in higher education. I have seen my teammate who recently became a faculty member in Kinesiology. I like to focus on research study of biomechanics and soccer. I do not want to have unfamiliar or unrelated field of soccer. I believe that my current profession as being a professional member and national team member become successful until this moment, so I hope my second career would have some success, so I cannot abandon soccer in my life.

Similar to Ms. MH, Ms. NR explained that the success she experienced as a professional athlete was something she wanted to build from in order to have a similarly
successful second career (thereby avoiding the ‘washout effect’). In her specific situation, Ms. NR aspired to combine her qualifications in biomechanics and her lived knowledge of performance soccer to foster new research skills and techniques that may enable her to explore her desired topic deeply with specialized insight. Therefore, she believed that pursuing a doctoral degree may help increase her professional credibility and improve the quality of her second career, but still desired that second career to be within the realm of soccer. Of note, Ms. MH and Ms. NR were only two out of five athletes who signed fully professional contracts that are not subject to a salary cap. Therefore, they felt that they were no longer treated as amateur athletes and were motivated to maintain high levels of performance: For example, Ms. MH said that Two differences between Amateur and professional athletes are that I am motivated to improve my performance rather than health. When I was amateur athlete, I wanted to play longer as much as I can, but now I am motivated to improve my performance. This is the reason that I want to deal with soccer after my retirement. Some participants who did not have fully professional contracts expressed a desire to expand a focus on health to a second career, and though not specifically within soccer, still linked in some way to performance sport. For example, Ms. SB explained that she was motivated to learn sport nutrition in relation to athletic performance: When I close to age of 30, I felt that I was interested in studying about the relationships between food intake and athletic performance. I am assessing time schedule when and how I should take protein, calcium so on. I checked the place of production and nutrition facts. I would like to have a second career of food master (consultant) if it is possible. Though not specifically focusing on soccer, this again shows that some participants desired a second career that was linked in some way to their first and were not interested in exploring second career ventures in other work domains.

**Theme II: The importance of dual career pathway opportunities**

As noted in the introduction, most female soccer players required a ‘dual career’
where they held another job and/or education pathway in addition to playing soccer. This was encouraged by the teams of the WE League, and was something participants placed importance on. Dual career arrangements were perceived to be important for financial and career stability. That is, participants felt their professional contracts and annual salaries were not financially adequate. Four participants (Ms. SB, Ms. KA, Ms. SM, & Ms. SR) maintained a dual career, and had differing perceptions of how work outside the soccer field would fit within future second career plans. For Ms. SR and Ms. KA, the office work they did to supplement their income was a temporary means to an end, and desired a second career involved in soccer post retirement. Ms. SR, for example, said:

> Since I joined in this organization, I was encouraged to have dual career, so I worked as an office worker in this team. I chose this way, because I was unable to afford myself without dual career arrangement. Honestly, this career was not what I wanted, but I learned how to do office management work. This was helpful. At the same time, my colleagues (office work) always respect, support, and encourage my career as being a professional athlete. My colleagues asked me I may stay after retiring from this team, but I do not think I would stay, because I would like to have my second career opened.

Similarly, Ms. KA said:

> I was not interested in my duties and responsibilities as being an office worker, but I devoted myself for my professional soccer player. I worked from morning until 3:00 pm and began to practice soccer after that. I loved soccer very much, so I watched the clocks and wanted to practice soccer as soon as my office duties were over, that is my motivation. I cannot see myself working with second career without soccer fields. I want to be a coach or analyst. I appreciate my current work environment. Without dual career arrangements, I do not think I would not be able to continue as being the professional athlete. I appreciate that this organization prepared me to have the job of office work.

Ms. SR and Ms. KA were professional players, but whose contracts were subject to a salary cap requiring additional work to supplement income. Though their salary was capped, these players were instructed to train full-time and work in an office part-time. This led to concerns that fulltime office work post retirement would be difficult to find:

> I wanted to have an opportunity to have professional contract without a salary cap, but it was unfortunate, but this means that I had to think my second career seriously. My concern is
that when I retire as being professional athlete, my job status will be a part time. I am
anxious that I will not be able to find full time job after the retirement (Ms. SR, interviews).

Though some players viewed dual careers as a temporary means to an end or a
potential disadvantage, other players described health (e.g., balanced lifestyle),
developmental (e.g., development of personal identity), and social benefits (e.g.,
expanded social network) from undertaking a dual career and perceived a different skill
set opened the possibility of pursuing a second career outside of a sporting context:

I believe that many professional athletes would like to continue and work with soccer for
their second careers, but I am willing to have more options opened, because I have been
more confident to work various fields in second career opportunities, because I had multiple
jobs in my career experiences. I worked as a gymnasium facility manager, a sales of life
insurances, a soccer coach of youth sport, and a clerk of health clubs. Honestly, I want to
learn something else. I am interested in working at apparel companies, so I hope I would be
able to apply my knowledge and skills to my second career (Ms. SM, interviews).

Though appreciative of the skills, friendships and support provided by dual careers
in offices, players were not analogous in their consideration of making office work
rather than continued involvement in sport the focus of their second career. This may,
perhaps be linked to different messages and contrasting working cultures (explored in
depth in the discussion) between office work and professional soccer.

Theme III: Professional development and second career training

Participants stated their belief that the WE league or professional soccer teams
should help players facilitate second career transitions. The participants believed that
professional development should fit their existing schematic views of themselves and
desires for appropriate second career opportunities, otherwise they may reject career
advice from the WE League and professional soccer teams. As most participants desired
to continue within the realm of soccer, they suggested that licensed coach training
courses may help participants gain the required knowledge, communication skills, and
leadership styles to coach youth or professional athletes and build coaching excellence.
This would facilitate desired transition from playing career to a second career while staying in their desired realm of soccer. Ms. NR explained:

I think it is important that WE league and professional teams should organize professional development of second career for professional athletes. I recommend that one of professional development opportunities should focus on soccer related coaching license workshop. Japan Football Association offers various official classes of D, C, B, A, and S coaches. This professional development opportunities may allow to understand coaching skills. If it does not work, they may change their mind and find alternative career opportunities as being referees. The WE League and teams should find various career sources to introduce the career choices (Ms. NR, interviews).

Another participant, Ms. SR explained the importance of discuss and sharing future plans with teammates, even though such conversations may be frowned upon:

It was taboo to ask about second career with my teammates, because we need to focus our performance. I am not sure that this is called as professional development, but we should have a group conversation and other teammates’ opinions about their future career or educational plans. I think it is important to share with resources of college education and job search (Ms. SR, interviews).

Another participant, Ms. KA went further suggesting that the WE league and professional teams needed to focus on helping players earlier in their career as she believed many professional athletes from overseas considered a second career while they were immersed in playing professional sport. She also advocated for development workshops exploring how to balance a second career and family:

I learned that many professional athletes in overseas are preparing their second careers before they retire. They attend colleges and universities when professional season is over and are preparing their second career development. Plus, many of them have families and children and they consider and return as professional athletes again. I do not think I would be able to return as professional athletes and have family, but I need to learn this type of life and career options (Ms. KA, interviews).

Ms. KA further explained, “I have college education before joining in the professional teams, but many professional athletes in the WE league joined in professional league after graduating from their high schools. Therefore, I believe that it is important to offer second career internship or workshop opportunities when they are in off season.”

All participants hoped that the professional governing body would facilitate
meaningful professional development opportunities so that players could significantly
increase their knowledge and skills before their eventual transition to a second career.

Discussion

Participants generally desired and envisioned a second career linked to their first
as a professional soccer player. Though this perhaps looked different to each player
(e.g., coaching vs higher education vs nutrition in athletic performance), it is apparent
that the sociological influence of professional soccer culture got under participants’ skin
and directed their desires for a continued career path within soccer. How and why this
occurred can be explored through an occupational socialization theory lens.

Occupational Socialization of professional, Japanese, Female Soccer Players

Occupational socialization is a longitudinal process involving acculturation,
professional socialization and organizational socialization in which, it is argued, an
individual can acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed at their chosen
profession (Brown, 2012; Richards et al., 2014). By exploring more deeply participants’
perceptions of second career options through these 3 tenets, we can better understand
why and how such opinions are formed.

First, acculturation refers to how participants' initial impressions, behaviors,
beliefs, and perspectives were influenced by their interactions with other players,
coaches etc., within the professional soccer club (Lawson, 1983). Focusing specifically
on retirement, participants were told such discussions were “taboo” and focus should be
redirected to soccer performance. This is a problematic finding as female soccer players
being acculturated to focus on retirement or a second career only after their professional
career has come to an end can lead to disempowerment, anxiety and uncertainty
(Drawer & Fuller, 2002), significantly exacerbating an already difficult and potentially
traumatic life transition (Stambulova et al., 2020). Though literature states (male) soccer structures afford time and training to prepare for second careers (e.g., Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004), it appears that the culture in professional, Japanese, female soccer pressures current players to focus only on their current career. Again, this has potentially dire consequences as the inability to develop other interests, skills, or experiences outside of professional sport can result in players struggling to develop themselves beyond sport, and a resulting collapse of their self-concept and self-identity when retirement does inevitably happen (McKnight, 2007). Without higher level organizational support for second career discussion, and shifting the player culture from focusing only on soccer performance to considering life after soccer, players may remain acculturated and define themselves only in regards to being a successful, competent athlete (Harrison et al., 2020). This increases the risk of long-term negative consequences for players, as rather than being prepared or deciding to retire themselves, they may be forced into retirement through nonautonomous factors such as contracts being terminated or injury (Reifsteck et al., 2013) and experience a crisis of self.

Progressing to professional socialization regarding second careers, when individuals were ready to commit to a career choice and work towards developing the necessary skills and knowledge to do this job role well, there was noticeable overlap between participants first and second career desires. All except one participant desired a career progression into another realm of soccer involvement or athletic performance. At this point, however, it is important to consider the 2 different paths of professional soccer players in this study as these paths had significantly different ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of participants’ professional socialization and, resultantly, significantly different implications for the research.
Ms. NR and Ms. MH were the only participants that earned enough to make soccer their one and only career. Being exposed only to one career and culture may have influenced their decision to work towards a second career that was also within soccer. This supports previous literature that stipulated a first career in professional sport grounds and informs professional athletes’ values and desires firmly within that sphere (Bourke, 2003) and that second career options that maintain an identity as a professional soccer player are considered (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Though still playing professionally, both Ms. NR and Ms. MH were already planning and working towards desired second careers (undertaking qualifications, targeting appropriate education courses). Such preparation has been highlighted as a positive choice in previous literature as this may result in less distress, identity crises, and a more empowered retirement transition compared to other players that focus on second career after retirement (Stambulova et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2020). That being said, professional players that desire and work towards only a second career in performance soccer may be at risk should they fail. This is very real possibility in female soccer players as, even within professional women’s soccer, men tend to dominate higher levels of organization, coaching, and management (McCormack & Walseth, 2013). As noted, the gendered nature of soccer may cause additional difficulties for ex-players to fill leadership roles, but this may be even more difficult in Japan where the wider population of females in work tend to be in part-time irregular work (Assmann, 2014). The compounding of a male-dominated and gendered work-space within a country where women struggle to find regular full time work may result in a failure to fulfill a desired second career in soccer. This may result in distress, a crisis of self and identity, anxiety and depression, in addition to potential financial difficulties as professional
soccer players need a second career to live (Sambulova et al., 2009).

The participants that required a dual career experienced different professional
socialization, perhaps due to their exposure and immersion within a working space very
different to professional soccer; the majority of these participants worked part-time in
an office. The balance of part time office work and full-time soccer training may have
professionally socialized some participants towards desiring a second career, not
necessarily within soccer, but within athletic performance. These individuals still
identified as a professional athlete and, arguably, viewed the skills they learned as a
soccer player as more important to carry forward than skills learnt in an office. This
may also be informed by the status colleagues and society gave to their professional
career (encouragement, support) that positioned a soccer career as more successful and
impressive than an office career. These participants may have also been acculturated
within office work and influenced by their colleagues treating them well and with
reverence because they were professional soccer plays. The value placed on this identity
through relational interactions with others may have shaped the self-perception that a
second career within performance sport or athletic performance is desirable to maintain
social status and respect; thereby avoiding ‘wash out effects’ and a second career less
successful than their first. Exposure to other work domains does not necessitate a
change in career in professional athletes as they commonly maintain the values,
sensitivities, skills, and knowledge of their first professional career when in pursuit of
their second (Harrison et al., 2020). Akin to the soccer only participants, there is no
guarantee of working in sport as a second career (Santos, 2013), particularly given the
gendered employment world of soccer and Japan as a whole, so these participants too
may experience a difficult path when they retire.
One participant was professionally socialized to work outside of sport through her experience of a dual career. Ms. SM was perhaps unique in that she had a depth of experience in different careers beyond soccer and expressed a desire to learn and develop beyond the sports sphere and was open to adopting a second career before she ‘needed’ to retire. As noted by Stambulova et al., (2020), a decision to retire to pursue a new career was deemed a much more positive, but rare, transition pathway undertaken by professional players. Thus, encouraging players to pursue dual careers through their playing tenure may facilitate opportunities for more fluid pathways and positive transitions from first to second careers (Ritzer, 1998). We could argue with prolonged and varied exposure to different careers, female soccer players may become more adept at reshaping their self-concept beyond soccer and gain confidence that they are able to ‘fit’ in different spheres. That is, with more experience in different working environments, the more confidence a player may gain that they can succeed in different careers and perhaps perceive more (successful) career path options beyond just soccer or sport.

Finally, occupational socialization focuses on the ongoing socialization one experiences as one’s career develops and advances. At this point, participants noted that the courses and personal development they had undertaken towards their second career were undertaken through their own initiative and expense. They expressed desires for WE League and their own professional club to do more as an organization to not only support second career development, but facilitate this through trainings, opportunities, and education. Past research has highlighted the importance of organizations supporting athlete’s transitions to second careers through development opportunities and preparations (Day-Garner, 2017). Works have further discussed the importance of
integrating professional and socialized practice that emphasize life domain transitions (Stambulova et al., 2020). Players further indicated that support for balancing a career with other life domains was lacking as they expressed uncertainty regarding family life and career. This highlights that preparation for a second career should start as soon as an athlete participates in sport including academy level (e.g., age 16+), because it may be too late when they wait until they reach the end of their soccer career. Therefore, more career training may be done to emphasize the importance of life outside of sport for positive transitions from first to second career. Moreover, concerns were raised regarding the lack of timely interventions for players that are acculturated in professional sport (i.e., those that transitioned from high school to the WE League). Without socialized support for other life or work domains, concerns were raised regarding the welfare of such players upon retirement.

**Recommendations**

Our study identified that the majority of players were desirous of having a second career within the professional sports realm. This is not surprising as prior socialization can strongly influence second career choice and adjustment, particularly in professional sport (Nicholson, 1984). Indeed, participants noted, that opportunities to work towards a second career in professional sport within the WE League was limited to coaching qualifications where they had to sacrifice their own playing time and training, or were reliant on players creating their own opportunities through previous qualifications (e.g. University degrees). The primary recommendation from this study is that the WE League and teams design and implement second career opportunities for meeting professional athletes’ needs and interests. More specifically, professional development should use a systematic delivery of culturally influenced content with
sufficient duration and intensity to promote clear goals and objectives (Maurer, 2000). The following additional recommendations are intended to enhance the quality of second career opportunities and the athletes’ learning experiences.

First, career decision making is a matter for each athlete, but athletes, teams, and others should know that there are many factors that may facilitate or complicate the process. In many soccer professions including referees, facility managers, medical, business, there are specific entry requirements in soccer industry (Bourke, 2003). Although many team managers may not be pleased with the amount of time professional athletes are obligated to spend time studying or in their dual career (O’Donoghue, 1999), all teams and the WE League should establish and provide second career services including lifestyle support (how to balance soccer and education), support for coaching certificate and licensure, and other training (i.e., nutritionist) for the professional athletes.

Second, it is important to explore professional athletes’ dual career experiences, but the WE League and teams should consider educational development for them. Capranica and Guidotti (2016) explained that engaging in higher education allows these professional athletes to continue their personal and professional development outside of soccer, so that the professional athletes may have a tenable path in post-retirement or after sport at colleges and universities. Therefore, the WE League and teams should provide flexibility in career paths and education that is an important component in achieving sport-education balance (Brown et al., 2015).

Lastly, this study recommends that the WE League and teams may use experiential learning approaches (e.g., internship or field experiences) for professional athletes during the off season. The purpose of experiential learning is to prepare the
professional athlete to be a contributing part of society outside of soccer. The professional athletes who did not study or prepare for their second careers do not learn how to transfer learning from one situation to another or one discipline to another (Inkster & Ross, 1998). Therefore, connecting and applying their second career preparation to internship or field experiences may increase their opportunities for future employment or entrepreneurship.

To facilitate these recommendations, a collective effort is required that involves not only the WE league but coaches, managers, staff members, and medical persons (Duffy et al., 2010). For example, coaches and managers do not only manage and help athletes improve technical, tactical, physical and mental capabilities, but also develop their personal, social, and lifestyle capabilities through educational and career pathways (Johnston & Baker, 2020). To do so, Swanson and D’Achiardi (2005) suggested that athletes’ professional development should have three different constructs in second career development including interests/needs, values, and abilities that lead athletes to make an empowered second career decision (Savickas, 2002). Once the professional athletes explore and learn the details of these three constructs, team coaches and managers can encourage the professional athletes to explore vocational opportunities and training through experiential learning opportunities such as internship or externship during off season (Navarro & McCormick, 2017). In occupational socialization theory, Keith and Moore (1995) suggested that when professional athletes develop professional socialization while studying their second career development, mentoring and counseling are key factors of their professional development. The amount of contact between professional athletes and mentors (e.g., coaches, managers, and career counselors) allow them to exchange guidance of particular behaviors and patterns that align with other
personal and important values (Navarro & McCormick, 2017). This study confirms that it is important to provide professional development opportunities and empower professional athletes during sporting careers. Thus, the professional athletes may be able to facilitate a continued career path and avoid negative and crisis-transition scenarios (Duffy et al., 2010).

**Study limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, the participants were purposefully selected from one team from the WE League in Japan, such findings are therefore culturally specific and may have limited applicability to other domains and countries. From a qualitative perspective, however, the reader may consider transferability to the contexts of the other teams elsewhere (Leininger, 1994) where female players are required to hold dual careers. Second, the number of participants was small, and they had rather diverse backgrounds and experiences. However, qualitative inquiries, typically use small samples with the intent of uncovering, describing, and explaining the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2015). Our intention was to uncover common themes reflective of the professional experiences about second career of Japanese women’s professional athletes matriculating at the WE league.

**Conclusions**

Past research has highlighted the often traumatic transition of professional athletes’ sense of self and purpose when they are forced to retire (Stambulova et al., 2020). In sport culture where there are gendered inequalities regarding financial and further employment opportunities (Dunning, 2017), this is particularly important. By exploring the experiences and perceptions of female, professional Japanese soccer
players regarding second career opportunities, we could identify (a) how being a professional athlete shaped second career aspirations and perceptions of development, (b) how players believed the WE League supported them, and (c) how players believed professional teams and the WE League should better support players. This study helps researchers explore workers’ behaviors and decisions based on values of occupational socialization (Richards et al., 2014).
References


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8525.2006.00048.x


Table 1 Characteristics and Work Context of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Experiences of playing soccer</th>
<th>Injury history</th>
<th>Second Career Training</th>
<th>Current status of career contract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 years (Professional) 16 years (Amateur)</td>
<td>Hamstring damage</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 years (Professional) 10 years (Amateur)</td>
<td>Anterior cruciate ligament rupture</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player &amp; Office worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11 years (Professional) 13 years (Amateur)</td>
<td>Bone fracture (elbow and foot)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player &amp; Office worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 years (Professional) 10 years (Amateur)</td>
<td>Right Foot Sprain</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11 years (Professional) 13 years (Amateur)</td>
<td>Recurrent dislocation of peroneal tendon</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player &amp; Office worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 years (Professional) 10 years (amateur)</td>
<td>Meniscus tear</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professional soccer player &amp; Office worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonym.

*Note. Ms.SB, Ms.SR, and Ms.SM had high school diplomas. Ms.MH and Ms.KA held bachelor degrees. Ms.NR held a master of science degree in Kinesiology.