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THE DREAM OF BEING A PROFESSIONAL SOCCER PLAYER

Insights on Career Development Options of Young Irish Players

Ann Bourke

Because of the improved fortunes in international competition of the Republic of Ireland soccer team and increased media interest in the game, many youngsters embark on their dream to be a full-time professional player. Soccer in Ireland is mostly played on a part-time basis, with few openings for full-time professionals. English clubs are now recruiting youngsters at an early age through their football academies, and competition for playing positions is intense. This article outlines the implications for youngsters in Ireland of recent market developments in England and draws on theory and evidence to shed light on the nature of career planning undertaken by aspiring professional players. Details are also provided on the social networks that best facilitate a youth's career development given her decision to "go international" (to England).

Keywords: career in sport; professional soccer; preelite players

C oakley (1998) asserted that, in general, the opportunities for satisfying and rewarding occupational careers in sports exist, adding that the number of opportunities for athletes is severely limited and that they are short term. A career in professional soccer is perceived by certain individuals to have many positive features such as high financial rewards, status, and so forth, and few entry barriers apart from talent, good health, and luck. Yet like other professions, it is demanding and has a high wastage or failure rate, especially during the early years (Hardwick, 1999; O'Donoghue, 1999). For many individuals, pursuing a career in professional soccer involves relocation, and some young players are being shipped to distant lands to chase career goals. Northcroft (2002) noted the increase in the number of young overseas players in the reserve teams at leading English clubs—Liverpool, Arsenal, and others. The practice of Irish players joining English clubs was established decades ago; consequently, developments within the English game also tend to have a significant affect on the game in Ireland, particularly in relation to youth policies (Hannigan, 1998). Maguire and Stead (1998) asserted that many English club personnel consider Ireland a fertile and relatively cheap source of readily available raw talent.

This article focuses on the earlier stage in the athlete's career with a view to shedding light on the factors that influence his/her career choice. Career development and sports labor migration theory are reviewed, and evidence from a study completed by the author is used to provide insights on the facets of career entry and development for so-called preelite¹ sports people, using soccer players from the Republic of Ireland as a case study.

The article consists of six parts. In Part 1, the main characteristics of the soccer industry from the perspective of playing personnel are outlined and a brief update on the game in the Republic of Ireland² is provided. Part 2 outlines details of the study and research methodology employed. In Part 3, the nature of career and essential elements of career-development theories are discussed, and their applicability in the case of preelite soccer players considered. In Part 4, the football figuration (proposed by Clark, cited by Dunning, 1999) is used to illustrate the interdependency ties that exist between personnel associated with the demanders and suppliers of playing personnel. In Part 5, migration patterns of Irish players to English clubs are briefly assessed and the main reasons for outward mobility among young players identified. In the final part, drawing on theory and practice, the key determinants of decision making among young professional soccer players are listed, and pointers for further research provided.

INDUSTRY CHARACTERISTICS

Labor markets in sports are in certain respects distinguished from most other markets for labor by the special arrangements imposed on the sale of labor power (Hargreaves, 1998). The market for professional footballers is the "spatial arrangement of playing opportunities or the points of consumption" (Bale, 1998). This simple model of production and consumption of players is complicated by the hierarchical structure of the market—from the 1st- to the 92nd-ranked club in the Football League. The larger and the more successful a club, the larger its budget for spending on players, and hence the wider its geographical catchment area. Szymanski and Kuypers (1999) asserted that the market for football players is inefficient, as the process of competition does not determine the wage of the worker (player) so that demand and supply are brought into balance. Davies (2000) and Bale noted that certain regions are associated with the production of professional sports players, citing the north of England as a case in point. Hargreaves (1998) contended that there is a *prima facie* case, that sports workers enjoy greater satisfaction from their work than the average industrial worker. Few occupations open to working-class people possess such prestige; few provide the equivalent opportunity for acquiring and exercising valued skills and abilities; few jobs can be played at for a living—a feature that sports workers readily acknowledge when talking about their work. However, it should be noted that sports workers seem to be the only category of worker to be routinely admonished publicly for rule infringements and whose punishment is also part of the spectacle. Discipline strategies such as

dismissal, suspension, and banning from sports events (incurring a loss of earnings for the player) are accepted as normal in most sports.

Professional football clubs are service enterprises engaged in the business of outperforming their opponents in League and Cup competitions. Like other service enterprises, football clubs engage in utility maximization subject to financial constraints (Dobson & Gerrard, 1999). The so-called grow-your-own policies put in place by professional football clubs for young professionals (via the nursery system of academies) and youth teams reflects a shift from a market-based solution to the problem of finding skilled labor, toward one based on internal hierarchical arrangements, which could be described as fledgling internal labor markets (McGovern, 1999). These exist when the pricing and allocation of labor are governed by administrative rules and procedures rather than by market forces that exist in the external labor market. Such arrangements are similar to those advocated by best-practice models of human resource management for high-tech industries.

Football academies attached to most English clubs may enlist children from the age of 8, for up to 3 hours a week, and as the children get older, the hours increase. In addition, these entities assume the responsibility of overseeing the continuing education of their charges and are obliged to employ a full-time education and welfare officer. According to Burns (n.d.), it is difficult (because of newness of the scholarship scheme) to assess its benefits. Bent, McIlroy, Mousley, and Walsh (2000) described the main features of a football academy and considered some of the reasons why certain individuals are not in favor of young children specializing in a sport at such an early age. Most English clubs have developed a sophisticated network of scouts who attend matches (both at home and overseas) at all levels with a view to identifying new talent. Northcroft (2002) mentioned the role of the Internet and satellite television in facilitating the identification of young talent worldwide. O'Donoghue (1999) charted the important role that club scouts play in recruiting both elite and preelite players. Williams, Reilly, and Franks (1999) maintained that this recruiting process is based on the subjective assessment of scouts and/or coaches supported by a shopping list of key criteria. The physical attributes of young players are important in talent identification, but they assert that it is necessary to consider the sociological (parental support, socioeconomic background, education, coach-child interaction, and so forth) and psychological (perception-cognitive skills and personality) background of the children being assessed.

In the case of many careers, seniority and experience would be the conventional basis for progression in the organization (Lovering, 1990, cited by Killeen, 1996). Playing personnel are a strategic resource for football clubs being employed on a contract (rather than permanent) basis with job-promotion prospects (youth/reserve teams to first team) contingent on the player's competency on the pitch and at the training ground. The yardsticks frequently used by club personnel to assess individuals' career progress

tend to center on such aspects as the player's financial package, international caps, trophies or medals won, and current club (premier or lower division). Every effort is made by the club to develop an individual player's football talent, and the player's personal and social development is facilitated through the Professional Footballers Association's (PFA—player's union) involvement in the football scholarship scheme (detailed earlier) in association with the clubs (Burns, n.d.). Career progression for certain players can be swift (Roy Keane, Michael Owen, Ronaldo, Xavier Saviola), but for those players who make it to the top, there are many others left on the scrap heap. As noted by O'Brien (2002), at the end of the 2001 to 2002 season, a large number of teenagers were released from football academies attached to Premiership clubs without being offered full-time professional contracts. Some of these youngsters were given the option of participating in exit trials at the National Sports Centre in Lillleshall. Despite the high wastage or failure rate in soccer, there is intense competition for positions at the leading clubs, and the supply of young talent available currently exceeds the demand.

SOCCKER IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND— A BRIEF UPDATE

Although soccer is the national sport in England, in Ireland, for many years, it was considered by various people to be anti-Irish and was commonly referred to as "the garrison game" (Hannigan, 1998). The game in Ireland is not fully professional as the majority of personnel (players, mentors, coaches, medical and administration, and so forth) attached to clubs are employed on a part-time or voluntary basis; few are employed on a full-time basis. The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has responsibility for the organization and management of the game in Ireland. An important aspect of any sport is its infrastructure—facilities (playing and training) and administration and organization of the game both at national and regional level. Also, close contact with key organizations such as schools (both primary and secondary) and schoolboy clubs is essential. At youth level, soccer in Ireland is based on the local community club and is dependent for management and administration in general on the efforts of voluntary personnel (usually parents of youngsters). The youth-development infrastructure (academies, coaching schools, and so forth) is poorly endowed when compared with that in other countries such as Australia, France, and England. There are schemes in place to promote the development of young Irish players at home such as the scheme Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FAS; Irish Training and Employment Authority), and soccer scholarships are offered at most universities and third-level colleges.

Soccer is a popular team sport in Ireland. During the 1998 to 1999 season, there were 187,000 players registered to play soccer in the Republic of Ireland with just over 4,000 clubs (FAI, 1999). The greater proportion of these players and clubs are located in the Leinster (which includes Dublin) and Munster (which includes Cork) regions. There are 86 leagues organized

in the republic, with ladies soccer leagues being one fifth of the total. The main league (Eircom National League) has two divisions involving 22 clubs. The premier division comprises 10 clubs, although there are 12 in Division One. The facilities at the Premier League club grounds have been upgraded recently, yet the overall quality of the infrastructure (playing, training and changing facilities, and so forth) at many clubs throughout the country is rather basic.

STUDY DETAILS

There are various methods of initiating a career in sports either through the school system or through the local club. In Ireland, the sports generally associated with schools are rugby and Gaelic football and hurling, whereas those associated with local community-based clubs include soccer, swimming, golf, tennis, and so forth. This research project was undertaken to gather evidence on the career decision-making strategies employed by aspiring sports professionals using preelite Irish soccer players as a case study. The project was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Irish youngsters plan their career choice or respond to opportunities as they arise?
2. Which social networks best facilitate the career development of aspiring soccer players?
3. What are the main factors that contribute to the outward mobility among preelite players?

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. The secondary sources used included FAI records, general publications and reports, newspaper articles, and various Web pages. Primary data (qualitative and quantitative) were collected by way of a self-administered questionnaire and personal interviews. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions and was administered to current players. The questions were designed to gain insights on the factors that influenced their decision to pursue a career in professional soccer and to so do in England. Stratified sampling was used in selecting questionnaire respondents, as only Irish-born players (as opposed to those being eligible to play for the Republic of Ireland) who have signed at least one professional contract with an English club were eligible for inclusion. Every effort was made to include players from all divisions, drawing on the list of Irish-born players provided by the Football League. The names of returnees were acquired from Irish club Web pages. There were 151 players who were contacted by mail in relation to the research project, whereas a further 30 players completed the survey in pre-arranged groups.³ Ninety fully useable forms were received (15 of which were completed by returnees), giving an overall survey response rate of 50%. There were advantages in using a self-administered questionnaire as it ensured confidentiality and encouraged players (particularly the so-called

less successful ones) who are not comfortable discussing their career decisions, to participate in the study.

Brief respondent details are provided in Table 1. The majority of study participants were born in Dublin, Ireland, and just fewer than half (45%) went to England aged 16 years or less without completing their formal second-level schooling. At the time the data were collected (during the 1998 and 1999 season), players were registered at 35 clubs, half of which were in the premier division.

To complement the questionnaire data, personal interviews were undertaken with personnel (players, managers, administrative personnel, and so forth) who have an interest in and are experts on the research topic. The interviews were semistructured and were undertaken in person, by telephone, or, in the case of 3 respondents, by e-mail. In general, they were 1 hour long and were designed to broaden the research prospective. Personal interviews added to the quality of the data, as it was possible to probe further on many issues from a variety of perspectives—feeder club, recruiting club, players, and managers. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees. These included 6 current players (4 playing in England, 2 returnees), 2 managers of Irish Premier League teams, the manager of a schoolboy team in Dublin, the operations manager of an Academy attached to an English club, a youth development officer in Ireland, and a sports management consultant. For various reasons, few players were willing to participate in personal interviews—those who agreed to contribute were either very successful in their playing career and/or were able to verbalize on their career paths and displayed a keen interest in the research project.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORIES: ISSUES AND EVIDENCE

There are numerous definitions of career in the literature as detailed by Collin and Young (2000) and Patton and McMahon (1999). One of the more commonly cited is that of Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989), who state that career is “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (p. 8). King (2001) and Savikas (2000) noted the importance today for career self-management given the many career transitions individuals are likely to experience. Sullivan (1999) highlighted the differences between the traditional and boundaryless career. Perhaps a playing career in soccer fits into the second category now, as players are likely to experience a sequence of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting. This is due largely to the player transfer system that operates in the game and the short duration of their playing career. Many factors influence the professional player’s life span, the most critical being injury. At best, a professional’s playing career may last up to 15 years; however, there are those who, for one reason or another (lack of progress at the club, being transfer listed, change in manager, lack of ability, and so forth), elect to, or are forced to, opt out at an early age.

TABLE 1
Respondent Profiles ($N = 90$)

Age (years)	17 to 18	19 to 20	21 to 22	23 to 24	25-plus
<i>F</i>	21	27	13	12	17
%	23	30	14	13	18
Place of birth	Dublin	Cork	Louth	Galway	Other
<i>F</i>	59	8	5	4	14
%	65	9	6	4	16
Age when joining soccer club (years)	7 to 8	9 to 10	11 to 12	13-plus	
<i>F</i>	59	22	6	4	
%	65	24	6	4	
Departure age to England (years)	15	16	17	18	19-plus
<i>F</i>	9	32	32	9	8
%	10	35	35	10	9
Educational qualifications	Third level	Leaving Certificate	Intermediate Junior Certificate	None	
<i>F</i>	2	25	60	3	
%	2	28	67	3	

Career-development theories aim to explain such aspects of vocational behavior as initial career choice, work adjustment, or life span career progress and are grounded in psychology and sociology. Gothard, Mignot, Offer, and Ruff (2001) provided a detailed review of the career-development literature, starting with the person-environment fit theories (Williamson, Holland), developmental (Super, Gottfredson), learning (Mitchell and Krumboltz), opportunity structure theory (Roberts), and community interaction theory (Law). They also include reference to Austin's (1984) sociopsychological model of career choice and work behavior, which focuses on career choices by women. A contextual explanation of career that emphasizes action and pays special attention to the role of narrative, dream, and myth along with the power relationships that exist when engaging in guidance and counseling is also presented. Patton and McMahon (1999) classified the main contributions in the literature as being those of Herr and Cramer (1992), Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996), and Osipow (1990). Although Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) claimed that trait theory, developmental stages to decision making (Ginsberg et al., 1951; Super, 1997), and social learning theory (Krombletz, 1979) are the dominant theories. In their view,

these models retain a strong sense in which decision making is fundamentally an individual process: It should and can contain large elements of technical rationality, and that the prime factors determining choice remain with the influence, if not the control of individuals.

Roberts (1997) cited by Gothard et al. (2001) differed in his opinion and argued that decisions are not determined by the individual but by opportunity structures in the youth labor market, which are strongly influenced by the nature of industrial organization and employment, government regulation, and social class. Maranda and Comeau (2000) examined career from a sociological perspective, highlighting such theories as status attainment theory, reproduction or allocation model theory, human capital theory, segmentation theory, and regulation theory. They asserted that the complementarity of the various sociological viewpoints regarding career become obvious when viewed from the perspective of understanding complex relations between individuals and context. In their opinion, people's employment situations are the result of both constraints due to economic context and more or less strategic individual and collective behavior. Auster (1996) asserted that individuals, when making occupational choices, are constrained by societal forces that have an affect on individual factors.

So why are many youngsters attracted to a career in soccer? Is it to use their talent and skills or their expectations of high earnings? Or is their career choice due to social and economic factors? Boon (2001) asserted that each player in the English Premiership is earning on average £400,000 per annum, thus the financial attractiveness of a career in soccer with an English club is apparent. Many media commentators suggest that this is the key motivating factor for young players opting for a career in soccer. Our study findings support the contention that the desire to make money is an important consideration in career decision making, but it was not identified as the most important one. From a given list of reasons, questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each one influenced their career choice, and their responses are as detailed in Table 2. Gothard et al. (2001) referred to the role that myth and dream play in our lives, often manifest in our attitude toward the world of sport. Many children (and adults) regularly dream that they are representing their country in the World Cup or that they scored the winning goal for their team in Cup or League competition. The questionnaire data affirm the importance of the dream of playing for Ireland as a key influence in career choice. Similarly, all player interviewees declared that it was their childhood ambition to represent Ireland in soccer. Young et al. (1996) cited in Gothard et al. (2001) asserted that the role of emotion in career theories has been undervalued as emotion energizes, regulates, and controls actions and provides the key to narratives of career. There was strong agreement among respondents in relation to emotive reasons (love of the game, dream of playing for Ireland, possibilities of winning trophies) for choosing soccer as a career. On the other hand, certain interviewees (managers, sports consultant, development officer) stressed the

TABLE 2

Reasons for Choosing Professional Soccer as a Career

Reason	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My love of the game	4.89	0.3886
The dream of playing for Ireland	4.87	0.4991
The possibilities of winning trophies	4.43	0.9836
The desire to make money	3.86	1.1436
The love of outdoor activities	3.45	1.5144
The club coach told me I was good at the game	3.23	1.4538
My father loved the game	2.91	1.6452
Hatred of school and study	2.42	1.3930
A scout assured me I was good at the game	2.20	1.4008
My uncle played the game	1.88	1.3958
My mother loved the game	1.82	1.1963

NOTE: All reasons measured on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*no influence*) to 5 (*strong influence*).

practical reasons (i.e., the opportunities to make money, develop one's talent, and gain experience and knowledge).

[Schulenberg, Goldstein, and Vondracek \(1991\)](#) and [Gianakos \(1999\)](#) referred to parental influence in prompting and facilitating career planning. The fact that a large proportion (65%) of respondents joined a community-based soccer club at an early age (see Table 1) is evidence of parental guidance with respect to the respondent's choice of sport. The players' view on this issue (drawing on questionnaire data) is less clear-cut. For instance, 41% of survey respondents acknowledged that there was a connection between their choice of career and their fathers' love of the game, and in the case of their mothers, it was 14%. All interviewees asserted that parental interest and involvement in the game does influence many youngsters' career choice, and such input is not confined to soccer. It is also prevalent in other sports such as golf and tennis—Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters being cases in point. Three player interviewees had positions with English clubs prior to completing their Leaving Certificate. But on the advice of their parents, and to retain the option of a full-time career in soccer, they commuted to England to participate in club matches during their final year at secondary school. It has been asserted that career decision making is context-related and could not be separated from the family background, culture, and life histories of the pupils. Armour (2000) contended that although Rugby Union Football is becoming less exclusive in its player profile, soccer still appears to seek its players in a notional working class. The socioeconomic status of the majority of survey respondents (based on parental employment status) confirms that this is the pattern in Ireland. According to Alan Hansen (2001), many professional soccer clubs deliberately target working-class families to recruit the next Michael Owen or Ryan Giggs.

Caplow (1954), cited in Osipow (1968), has suggested that the crystallization of a career choice may occur at any age: The particular timing that is observed usually reflects one's culture. This crystallization occurred for our research participants at an early age as questionnaire data (and confirmed during interviews with players) reveal that 50% of respondents decided on soccer as a career when aged 15 years or younger (mean age = 13.6 years), some when they were just 7 years old. According to Osipow and Auster (1996), vivid occupational images are held by the majority of youth in the process of making entry decisions about careers. For instance, youngsters may opt for a career in football to attain status, to make money, or to pursue the dream of being the next Roy Keane. Holland's theory (1997), cited in Swanson and Fouad (1999), is based on the underlying premise that career choice is an expression of one's personality and, thus, members of an occupation have similar personalities and similar histories. In this instance, it might be argued that the majority of players surveyed had fairly similar life histories (see Table 1), but any similarities in personalities (if they really exist) may be due to their socialization within the profession rather than their choice of career.

As stated earlier, many soccer players do not complete their formal education prior to embarking on their career. Among our sample population, just 2% attended third-level institutions, and one third completed second-level schooling. The lack of formal education will not unduly affect a player's career progression; however, there are social implications. Several interviewees asserted that professional players in England have too much free time, and that there may be little by way of intellectual stimulation unless the player decides otherwise. The perception exists that many soccer players decided on their career choice due to their dislike of school. Just over one quarter of survey respondents indicated this had a bearing on their career choice, and 1 interviewee (youth development officer) cited various instances of aspiring players' academic school performance deteriorating on hearing that an English club was seeking them. All player interviewees stressed the fact that they liked school—this was not entirely unexpected, as only 1 of them had not completed second-level schooling. The managers (operations and club) and 3 players are convinced that in life, it is important to take the opportunities as they present themselves. They would recommend that any Irish youngster who gets the option of a career in professional soccer with an English club should seize it, as he is unlikely to get a second chance.

SOCIAL NETWORKS—SOCCER FIGURATION

This section draws on figurational sociology with a view to providing insights on the various interdependent ties and relations that affect the youngster when deciding on a career in soccer. Although some theorists assert that career decision making is a matter for the individual, Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) noted that career decisions can only be understood in terms of the life histories of those who make them. In the past, the choice of

one's career may well have been predictable on the basis of what is known of a person's social class, sex, neighborhood, and family. Prior to the availability of career education in schools, almost all people got most of the information and help they needed about their life choices from family and neighborhood contacts. The many parties and factors that may influence youngsters in their choice of career include parents, family members, teachers, guidance counselors, friends, heroes, and current or prior experiences such as leisure interests and pursuits.

The concept of figuration refers to the webs of interdependencies that link and both constrain and enable the actions of individuals (Dunning, 1999; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994). With respect to football, a complex web of interdependencies exists as noted by Clark (cited in Dunning, 1999). It involves at the highest levels the following interlocking groups and organizations: the owners, sales and administrators and other nonplaying personnel of clubs; overall controlling organizations such as the Football Association (FA) and FA Premier League and the Football League; players, managers, and coaches; the mass media increasingly in recent years, television both terrestrial and satellite; and finally, the fans. These figurations stretch over time and space and are marked by a series of tension balances. Such tension or power balances are a feature of all human interdependencies. Figure 1 is a modification of Clark's football figuration set in an Irish context to illustrate the myriad of parties that are likely to affect a young footballer's career decision.

The choice of learning a sport is not a question of free choice and individual taste but is socially structured (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994). It is also linked to one's educational experiences as certain schools (especially at the secondary level) elect to offer specific sports to their students and participate in certain League and Cup competitions. A large proportion of survey respondents were given an early introduction to soccer (see Table 1) and, given their ultimate career choice (professional soccer), it would appear that parental influence superceded that of the school authorities as the majority (85%) had played Gaelic football and hurling while attending secondary school.

Students attending secondary schools have an opportunity to avail of career guidance services to seek advice and counseling and gather information on their chosen career. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) asserted that the reason why some young people vehemently reject career advice is that what is being said to them does not fit with their existing schematic view of themselves or their perception of appropriate career opportunities. Guidance counselors are available in all secondary schools in Ireland, but, according to Watts (2000), career guidance in schools is often marginal to the curriculum. The variation in players' responses in relation to the presence of a guidance counselor at their secondary school may reflect this. When questioned as to whether their secondary school had a guidance counselor, 82% of those surveyed answered *yes*, 8% answered *no*, and the remaining 10% did not know. Less than half (48%) of the players in the sample population availed of

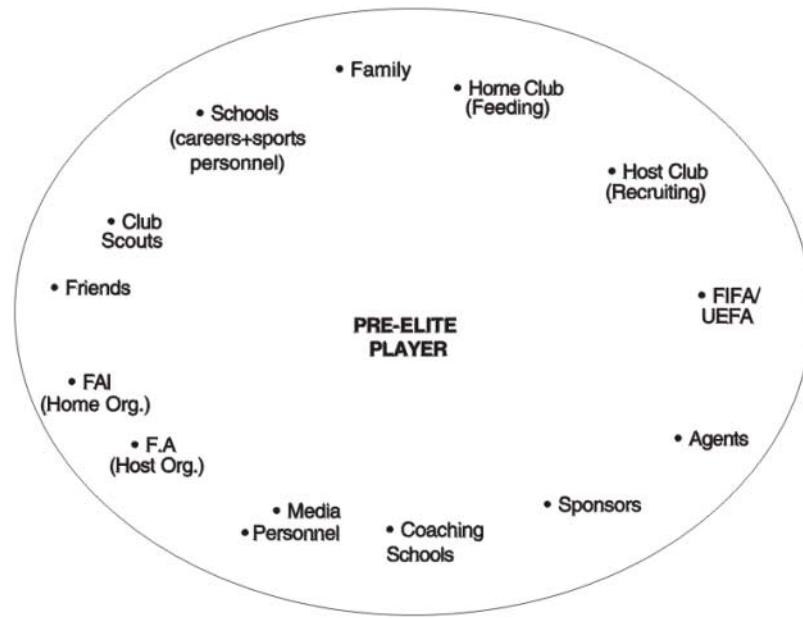


FIGURE 1: The Football Figuration.

SOURCE: Clark cited in Dunning (1999), modified.

NOTE: FAI = Football Association of Ireland; FA = Football Association; FIFA = Federation Internationale de Football Association; UEFA = Union of European Football Associations.

career advice while attending secondary school. Hodkinson and Sparkes contended that many young people are likely to consider one career option only and decide on a career drawing on partial information. The player interviewees availed of career advice while attending secondary school but asserted that no information was made available in relation to pursuing a career in professional sports. In their cases, career choice was based on partial information gathered outside the school setting as described later.

Patton and McMahon (1999), in their systems theory framework, draw attention to the dominant influences on career development for individuals at school-leaving age. Their framework identifies the existence of recursive interaction processes within the individual and within the context, as well as between the individual and context. Clark's football figuration (modified to take account of the Irish setting) reflects the contextual system as detailed by Patton and McMahon, but there are other dimensions to consider such as the employment market, geographical location, values, socioeconomic status, and historical trends. Various developments in the market (role of feeder clubs, club trials, international strategic alliances) are considered in the following paragraphs, although reference will be made to historical trends and location issues later in this article.

Given the competitive nature of the market for playing personnel, our study findings confirm that aspiring players engage in career planning but

do so outside, rather than within, the school setting. The main indications of this being the case are reflected by (a) the young player's choice of feeder club (club prior to departure to England) in Ireland, (b) the length of time spent at that club, and (c) the practice of attending for trials (entry) with English clubs. Several Irish clubs (Home Farm [now Dublin City], Shamrock Rovers, Shelbourne, Bohemians) have developed a reputation for producing talented youngsters and providing them with a route to leading English clubs (Manchester United, Leeds United, Arsenal, Liverpool). There is evidence to suggest that many respondents realized the importance of the feeder club in facilitating their move to England, as half of them were registered players with six leading Dublin clubs prior to their move. An interesting aspect of this clustering practice is the time spent at that club—more than one fifth (23%) of our respondents spent one season only or less with that club before joining an English club. Many schoolboys in Ireland are now electing to pursue their early soccer career (between ages 10 and 14 years) with a club outside their local community. Three interviewees (schoolboy team manager, youth development officer, and sports management consultant) maintain that an increasing number of young players are not playing football with their local club. They also assert that the practice of using Irish clubs as a springboard to English ones is likely to become more obvious during the next few years.

The custom of youngsters attending (entry) trials with English clubs is designed to facilitate career decision making and the choice of recruiting club. From the recruiting clubs' perspective, it provides a mechanism to decide whether the aspiring professional has the football traits required. It is estimated that in any one year, as many as 300 Irish youths travel to England to participate in club trials, resulting in as few as 30 being offered places at football academies (Malone, 2001). Among the players surveyed, the average number of trials completed was two, although a very small number of respondents did not participate in trials. The sports consultant expressed the view that attending club trials is a valuable exercise for the youngster and his parents, and he advises them to attend as many club trials (domestic and in England) as possible.

The formation of international strategic alliances between clubs in different countries allows the lead club to get information on potential overseas stars. Several English clubs have engaged in backward integration by forming alliances with clubs (usually schoolboy) in various countries, most notably in Ireland, Belgium, Australia, and South Africa. Such alliances benefit Irish clubs as, in addition to the finance invested by the English club, better quality coaching and training facilities and equipment are made available for Irish boys and girls at an early age. The cementing of these ties on a formal basis is further evidence that in the future, English club personnel are likely to influence an Irish boy's choice of home club. Details of the alliances between Irish and English clubs are provided in Table 3.

Despite the benefits for the Irish club, there are those who argue that the growth in the number of these alliances is further evidence to support

TABLE 3
Strategic Alliances Between English and Irish Clubs

English Club	Irish Club	Status of Irish Club
Blackburn Rovers	Bohemians	Premier
Charlton Athletic	Ardmore	Boys
Coventry City	Crumlin Utd.	Boys
Leeds	Home Farm (now Dublin City)	Division One
Leicester City	Cork City	Premier
Manchester City	Cherry Orchard	Boys
Manchester United	Shelbourne	Premier
Newcastle United	Bray Wanderers/St. Joseph's Boys	Premier/Boys
Tranmere Rovers	Stella Maris	Boys

McGovern's (1999) contention that the English football industry dominates the Irish version. This has implications for the quality of domestic football; nevertheless, as detailed in the next section, the dream of being a professional soccer player can only be realized by going international, and for many Irish youth, this means going to England.

GOING INTERNATIONAL

To advance one's career, members of certain professions (medical, legal, academic, and so forth) feel obliged to spend some time outside the home country. Coakley (1998) stated that soccer has higher rates of talent migration than other sports, although hockey, track and field, and basketball have high rates too. The phenomenon of sports labor migration and characteristics of the global sports labor market have been discussed in the literature (Bale, 1991; Maguire, 1999; Maguire & Bale, 1994; Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Maguire & Stead, 1998). As mentioned earlier, the soccer infrastructure in Ireland is poorly endowed in comparison to that of other countries (Spain, France, Italy, and England). Given the increased media exposure that English soccer receives in Ireland and the recent international success of the Republic of Ireland team, many individuals associated with the game here, plus youngsters (and their families), believe that to be successful, it is necessary to join an English club. Going international in all probability ensures that a doctor, lawyer, accountant, and so forth on his/her return is likely to be promoted. For the soccer player, there is no such comfort—there is no guarantee of success, and should he decide to return home, he is often labeled a failure and may find it difficult to resume his playing career (O'Brien, 2002).

Figure 2 provides details of the inward and outward mobility of Irish players during the 15-year period between 1984 and 1999. There was an increase in the outflow of Irish players to English clubs during the mid- to late 1990s. This trend has been sustained as during the 1999 to 2000 season, there were 126 Irish-born players attached to English clubs; in the following

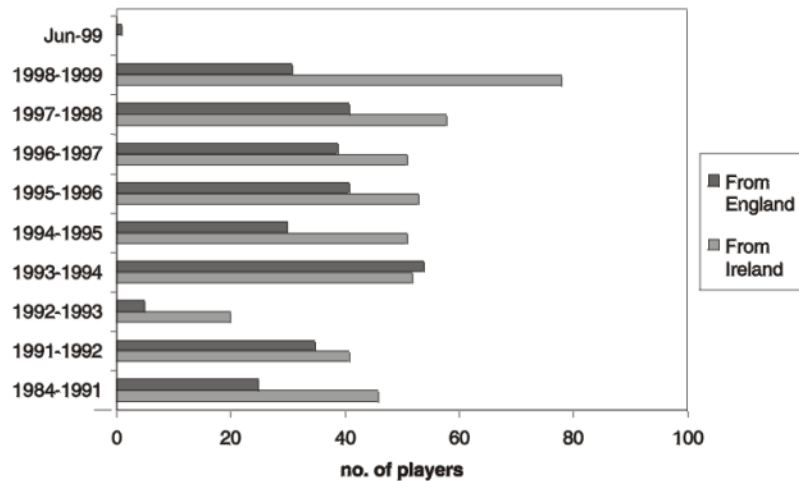


Figure 2: Player Mobility Between Irish and English Clubs, June 1984 to 1999.
SOURCE: Football Association of Ireland data.

season (2000 to 2001), the figure had risen to 166 (*Rothmans Football Yearbook*). It is also pertinent to consider the inflows—in most cases, these comprise Irish players returning home (being transfer listed, not getting a professional contract, injury, and so forth), although a small number would be non-Irish players joining Irish soccer clubs or players returning to finish out their careers at home. Due to the low numbers of returnees included in our sample population, it is difficult to establish the ease at which they resume their playing career on their return to Ireland.

Despite many clubs experiencing financial difficulties (Boon, 2001) and the intense competition for places at clubs, England continues to be an attractive destination for many current and aspiring soccer professionals. So what clubs are popular among Irish youngsters at the beginning of their soccer career? McGovern (2000) noted that over the years, Manchester United and Arsenal have been the leading importers of Irish players and detailed the reasons for this being the case. However, our study findings (see Table 4) reveal a shift away from these clubs. It is interesting to note that among our respondents (status of first club is determined by year of first professional contract for player), a larger proportion opted to join clubs in the Nationwide League rather than in the Premier League.

Both the operations manager and the sports consultant confirmed that many young Irish players are now keen to join clubs in the lower divisions in England. Although the financial rewards are not immediately available, they believe that youngsters have a better chance of developing their skills given the personal attention provided. During the 2000 to 2001 season, the clubs with the greatest number of Irish-born players were Leeds United (strategic alliance with Home Farm [now Dublin City]) and Nottingham Forrest (*Rothmans Football Yearbook*, 2001 to 2002).

TABLE 4
First Destination Clubs (*N* = 90)

Description	Premier League	Nationwide	Other	No Information
Number of clubs	14	20	2	
Number of players (<i>f</i>)	37	47	4	2
%	41	52	4	2

The former is in the Premiership whereas the latter is a First Division club; interestingly, both clubs have developed close personal ties with club personnel in Ireland through the years. The attractions of playing with leading clubs in Europe from the players' financial and social status perspective are evident, yet other dimensions such as employment rights, taxation, and host culture (club and country) will have a bearing on the players' destination choice and, ultimately, their playing performance. Interviewees (all players) assert that cultural similarity and geographical proximity, in addition to family ties in England, influence aspiring professional players (and their families) in Ireland to seek a club there rather than in France, Spain, or Italy.

From a given list, survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each one in deciding to pursue their soccer career in England. Their responses are detailed in Table 5. A large proportion of players surveyed agreed that career enhancement reasons (improve career prospects, 89%; gain international caps, 79%) are important reasons for moving to English clubs; however, 83% mentioned the opportunity to make money. Player interviewees tended to downplay the role of money, specifying that the possibility of a full-time career in football being available abroad and the superior facilities strongly influenced their decision to join an English club. Both Premier League managers and the sports management consultant maintained that for many players (and their families), the chance to earn considerable sums of money abroad makes joining an English club a very attractive proposition.

As a result of the steady flow of Irish players to English clubs over the years, youngsters today tend to follow English teams and have certain soccer heroes. Half the players surveyed and all of the players interviewed agreed that the fortune of their childhood soccer hero was an influencing factor on their initial decision to sign up for an English club. There are those connected with soccer in England who allege that the quality of the game is the best in the world. According to 5 player interviewees and the club operations manager, this is true; however, the remaining interviewees were not convinced. Questionnaire data are less conclusive on this issue, as a large proportion (30%) of respondents indicated that they are not sure. Despite the tradition of Irish players moving abroad (mainly to English clubs), it is evident from the data gathered that for a large proportion of the players surveyed, moving away from home and living in England are not the prime

TABLE 5
Reasons why Players opt to Join English Clubs

Reason	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank
Playing with an English club improves my career prospects	4.50	0.7734	1
Opportunity to make money	4.29	0.8118	2
Being with an English team helps gain international caps	4.15	1.0038	3
Standard of football is best in the world	3.41	0.9130	4
My football hero played football in England	3.23	1.5398	5
The opportunity to travel	3.20	1.3055	6
Better chance to meet new people	3.02	1.1910	7
Living in England is more exciting than living in Ireland	1.76	1.1656	9
Wanted to move away from home	1.83	1.4946	8

NOTE: All reasons measured on a Likert-type scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

motivating factors. This was specifically referred to during the interviews; nevertheless, all player interviewees considered the move to England an exciting adventure and one not to be missed.

Sports migrants (elite or preelite) as a group may experience varying degrees of exploitation, dislocation, and cultural adjustment (Maguire, 1999). They need to gain an understanding of the extent to which local norms/expectations regarding socialization differ from those in the home country (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997). Other cultural aspects to be considered by young players on the verge of joining an overseas club include the desired behaviors (both on and off the job), the initiation rites that are acceptable, and performance-appraisal methods employed. Segalla, Sauquet, and Turati (2001) referred to the problem of hiring international personnel that fit both the culture of European business and the culture of the individual firm. They asserted that foreigners often do not understand the rules of national culture therefore adding strain to relationships with local colleagues. Language proficiency (or the lack of it) may be a source of such problems. These aspects of going international are beyond the remit of this article, but the young players' awareness of their importance and his ability to deal with the new social and cultural environment is likely to have a bearing on the level of success achieved during his professional soccer career.

PREELITE CAREER PERSPECTIVE— CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Ultimately, career decision making is a matter for the individual, but there are many factors that may facilitate or complicate the process. In many professions (medical, legal, business, and so forth), there are specific entry requirements that are normally set out as educational prerequisites.

Candidates for entry into these professions normally strive to acquire educational qualifications to enhance career entry and career-development prospects. In the case of soccer, evidence from this study suggests that for a large proportion of people associated with the game, academic qualifications are unimportant. O'Donoghue (1999) noted that many club managers (mainly Premiership) are not happy with the amount of time young players are now obliged to spend in the classroom, as they maintain that clubs pay their wages to play football, not to study. A youth's ability to display technique, attitude, balance, and speed (TABS) during club trials can be the key to gaining entry into professional football. Other determinants of career entry include the scouts' report and recommendations from feeder club personnel. Unlike members of other professions, many aspiring professional soccer players leave school and home (due largely to the state of the game in the home country) at an early age to advance their career.

It is apparent, drawing on the study findings, that career planning is undertaken by aspiring sports professionals. But in the case of soccer, this occurs outside rather than within the school setting. There are many general publications that provide up-to-date information on career openings, and those that refer to soccer tend to stress the fact that few playing opportunities exist (Career Choice, 2001; Hardwick, 1999) and provide little by way of labor market information. It is hardly surprising that a large proportion of intending professionals opt to forego career advice in school and rely on external social networks to advance their career. The football figuration (see Figure 1) effectively illustrates the many parties that affect to a greater or lesser degree young professional's career choice and advancement (in the Irish context). The interdependency ties (figurations) that are deemed important include the player's parents, managers, and coaches from the feeder clubs and scouts (on behalf of recruiting clubs). The lack of full-time playing opportunities in Ireland and the poor infrastructure are important determinants of outward mobility among aspiring Irish players. However, individual factors must also be considered such as family ties in England, the player's dream and desire, along with the opportunity presenting itself.

Super (1957), cited in Gianakos (1999), posited that career choices are implementations of attempts to actualize the skills, talents, and interests reflective of one's self-concept and are based on the completion of developmentally appropriate vocational tasks between the ages of 15 years and 25 years. In the case of aspiring soccer players, vocational tasks are incomplete in view of the fact that many enter the profession when aged 15 years and few have academic qualifications on entry. Those who make an early exit, along with those who reach the so-called normal retirement age (mid-30s), must bear in mind the boundaryless nature of a soccer career (playing) and engage in further career planning. Further research needs to be undertaken to identify the shift in career-planning strategy during the course of a player's career and the sources of information used to facilitate his or her postplaying career plans.

NOTES

1. Preelite players for the purpose of this research are those who, in the normal course of events, are young and talented and played soccer with a club in their local community. Either personnel associated with soccer in Ireland or individuals associated with the game in England (scouts) identified the future playing potential of these youths.
2. This research study focuses on developments in the Republic of Ireland only.
3. The author wishes to acknowledge assistance received for this research endeavor from the national team managers—Mick McCarthy (Senior Manager) and Brian Kerr (under 18).

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