**Optimising Onboarding for Success: Recommendations for Sporting Directors**

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**Abstract**

## Purpose

Exploration of the factors that contribute to effective onboarding processes for team sport players.

## Methodology

A convenience sample of elite invasion team sport players (*n*=8) participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic data analysis, after ensuring saturation.

## Findings

The research identified major areas of ‘player’, ‘organisation’ and ‘liminality’ with subsequent sub-themes. It emphasised the importance of players as both an individual and as part of a team, the organisational expectations and support of them and the reciprocal influence of each of these parties on each other in optimising the integration of players into a new organisation via an interim ‘liminal’ space between being ‘out’ and ‘in’ the organisation.

## Practical Implications

Nine simple practical steps for Sporting Directors to consider for player onboarding are provided, to support the period before the player joins the organisation, through to the transitional period and finally how best to provide ongoing support after they have joined.

## Research Contribution

The emergent importance of relationships and how the building of trust can underpin success in sports.

## Value

Sporting Directors are provided with recommendations for how to set up players for success through optimisation of the onboarding process that can directly impact sporting and subsequent business / financial success.

## Keywords

Recruitment; Induction; Knowledge Translation; Tacit Knowledge; Transition; Trust

# Introduction

While the scope of an individual Sporting Director is nuanced, subject to their own context and operational structure, it is true for all that rapid turnover of staff in elite sports creates instability and a subsequent discontinuity in strategy and culture. This can result in reduced operational performance such as an increased injury burden (Ekstrand et al., 2023; Parnell et al., 2023). This cycle often perpetuates further turnover as teams seek stability. The Sporting Director, frequently described as a 'custodian of culture,' is responsible for creating and sustaining a high-performing environment and managing recruitment practices for players and staff (Parnell et al., 2021; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Central to this role is the integration of newcomers into the organisation, which is achieved through onboarding practices.

Onboarding refers to the ‘formal and informal practices, programs, and policies’ employed to facilitate a newcomer’s adjustment (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268). The Sporting Director role is typically responsible for ‘how things are done around here’ (Parnell et al., 2023), (i.e. the routines, rituals controls, and behavioural manifestation of organisational culture; Johnson et al., (2005)).

The Sporting Director can leverage their network and relationships to their advantage in recruitment (i.e. operationalising their social capital; Parnell et al., 2018). While this can enhance strategic recruitment, it carries the risk of fostering nepotism or cronyism, with some Sporting Directors not recruiting staff unless they have worked with them before (Parnell et al., 2021) despite the conflict of interest (Hotho et al., 2020). This is less feasible with players given their finite number of years in the sport, and if strictly followed will result in an ever-decreasing talent pool to select from. Having selected and recruited players their success, or lack of it, has it’s foundations in how they are onboarded to their new environment (Byford et al., 2017).

A recent review shows that effective onboarding has been shown to enhance role clarity, satisfaction and organisational commitment (Frögéli et al., 2023) while accelerating a newcomer’s ability to contribute. Conversely, inadequate onboarding can hinder performance and prolong adjustment time. This can be because new concepts, rituals and behaviours are difficult to articulate, understand and conform to. It might be difficult for the members of the organisation (i.e. current players and staff) to communicate their tacit knowledge of ‘how things are done around here’ without the use of slang or inside jokes that develop with shared experiences (Benson et al., 2016). The unspoken norms, expectations and behaviours considered standard within an organisation define the ‘ritual and routine’ within the organisation’s own paradigm or ‘cultural web’ (Johnson, 1992). Understanding and enhancing this process of socialization, comprehension and integration can offer opportunities for enhancing sporting performance and in turn a greater return on investment for talent acquisition particularly if there is no prior relationship between individuals. This requires addressing challenges in socialization and knowledge transfer to bridge gaps in understanding and accelerate integration.

## Knowledge Translation

Knowledge translation is the process via which individuals are influenced by the experiences of others, either individuals or groups (Argote & Ingram, 2000). It consists of both knowledge reuse, the application of existing knowledge, (Markus, 2001) and knowledge contribution, the addition of their own knowledge to expand the collective (Bock et al., 2005), and hence is a two-way process. Knowledge contribution is grounded in social exchange theory, whereby individuals perceiving a benefit from the provided knowledge will contribute their own in a balanced circular way (Blau, 1964; Watson & Hewett, 2006).

Knowledge transfer, a critical component of onboarding, involves the application of explicit knowledge (codified and easily articulated) and tacit knowledge (acquired through experience and reflection) (Alam et al., 2022). Knowledge is an organisational asset and competitive advantage (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge is challenging to communicate but essential in elite sports, where unspoken norms and behaviours define organisational culture. The process of integrating newcomers can involve socialization (e.g., individual meetings with the Sporting Director), externalization (e.g., discussing tactics in small groups), and internalization (e.g., training sessions to translate explicit knowledge into practice). Optimizing this process offers a competitive advantage, as effective knowledge transfer can reduce errors, enhance performance, and align individuals with organisational culture through a ‘spiral evolution’ of knowledge (Nonaka & Konno, 1998).

## Contextual Environment

The environment surrounding a newcomer’s transition into a sporting organisation is shaped by multiple intersecting realities—their own experiences, the organisation’s existing culture, and the role of key figures such as the Sporting Director in facilitating their integration. This transition requires navigating a liminal space between being ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ the organisation, where both the newcomer and the organisation adapt to create a shared future reality.

Liminality refers to ambivalence, confusion, and/or disorientation experienced in a rite of passage (Van Gennep et al., 1961). In the context of career transitions, such as onboarding, this liminal phase can significantly influence an individual’s perception of job security (Mayrhofer & Iellatchitch, 2005). Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) reconceptualize liminality within career change, emphasizing that transitions into unfamiliar roles present greater psychological and professional challenges than other types of change (Caza et al., 2018).

Research has examined how individuals navigate this transitional state, highlighting the construction of new professional identities and the management of uncertainty as central to the process (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Liminality is increasingly understood as a fluid, process-oriented experience (Caza et al., 2018; Söderlund & Borg, 2018) , rather than a fixed stage. During this period, individuals have relinquished their pre-organisation status but have not yet fully assumed their new role within the organisational structure. Liminality is associated with crossing a threshold (Turner, 1995) and the actual transition comes with fully embracing the new reality (Bridges, 2001) for the individual. The duration and intensity of this liminal experience vary based on several factors, including the circumstances surrounding an individual’s departure from their previous role, the level of preparation undertaken before joining the new organisation, and their self-awareness in recognizing and managing their position within the transition (Edwards, 2021). Understanding liminality as an evolving and context-dependent process offers deeper insight into the complexities of professional onboarding and organisational integration.

## Aims

This investigation aims to 1) explore the factors contribute to an effective onboarding process within team sports, considering current good practices and 2) identify areas for improvement to provide actionable recommendations for Sporting Directors. These insights are derived from experiential reflections and evidence-based approaches to improve integration and performance in elite sports environments.

# Methods

This qualitative study adopted a design based on reflection to gain first person insight from players in accordance with studies portraying complex human experiences (Morgan et al., 2013).

## Participants

Participants were recruited to participate in a single individual semi-structured interview, based on their experiences as players in their sport. Eligible participants (n=8, Table 1) were current players or those who stopped playing less than 10 years ago. There was a focus on North America and the UK given the first authors’ network, but no exclusion based on geography. They were all players in popular invasion team sports, defined as successful due to their international careers (McKay et al., 2022). From the participant classification framework all participants were level 4 (Elite/International) or level 5 (World Class). Invasion team sports were chosen as their performance is highly dependent on the execution of team strategy by the players (Lamas et al., 2014) suggesting that individuals need to be part of the group to be successful (i.e., onboarded). The focus was on the transitions within their career and those that are memorable to them based on experience.

\*\*\*TABLE 1 NEAR HERE\*\*\*

To maximise validity and efficiency the initial targeted sample was purposely stratified by the variable factors of gender, sport and location (Patton, 2002).

## Procedure

Following institutional research ethics approval, participants were recruited via a convenience sample based on a purposefully stratified design (Patton, 2002). Participants provided informed consent. All interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom and recorded via Otter.ai to aid effective transcription of responses. They were approximately 60 minutes in duration. Participation was voluntary with no compensation and no penalty for not taking part. Withdrawal could be made at any time.

### Semi-structured interview guide

An interview-based approach was chosen to assimilate experiences across individuals and sports. A semi-structured style, asking open-ended questions offered flexibility for the researcher to ensure a conversational discussion and address topics as they emerged (Brinkmann, 2014). The conversational nature of the approach allowed variation in the ordering of questions depending on responses, whilst ensuring consistency and completion of all elements as well as follow up of both verbal and non-verbal responses, such as shrugs, smiles, and silence, to reveal hidden information. The mean ± standard deviation (SD) duration of the interview length was 64:45±10:30 min.

The interview was divided into sections of personal information, experience and expectations and reflections. This was pre-empted by a standard paragraph to set the scene and context for the questions around onboarding. The personal section was used to build rapport and encourage the interviewee to enter discussion by focusing on the individual and their professional journey (Bell et al., 2016).

## Analysis

Reflexive thematic data analysis is appropriate as it can summarize the key features of a large body of data and help identify similarities and differences across it, reflecting the aims of this research with the researcher taking an active role (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun and colleagues six-phase approach of familiarisation, code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and write up was used as a guiding framework (Braun et al., 2016). Interviewees were requested to elaborate or prompted for additional information as necessary. Recordings were listened to and checked for accuracy in advance of coding and further analysis [familiarisation]. Transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. These informed the interesting ‘units’ identified [code generation]. Each unit was then analysed in consideration of its context and coded as a high-level concept [domain summary identification]. Evolving concepts were continuously compared, grouped, and distinguished according to their properties [theme review]. As this evolved units were coded to themes or, if they did not fit, a new theme was created [theme definition]. Provisional hypotheses of coding were continuously revised until all transcripts were coded, and concepts grouped into lower and higher-order themes. The output reflects the dataset, the theoretical assumptions of the analysis and the analytical skills of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The authors stopped the organisation of new interviews when they observed and acknowledge data saturation based on the method of Guest and colleagues (2000). Briefly, saturation was checked using analysis of the number of unique concepts generated in each interview and a bootstrapping approach. A bootstrapping approach was warranted as each interview was a single case study, collectively, they had limited generalizability. Empirical bootstrap samples were drawn from the dataset to approximate population-level statistics. The bootstrap method is a resampling technique that uses the variability within a sample to estimate the sampling distribution, in this case saturation metrics, empirically (Lavrakas, 2008). This was achieved by extracting the thematic coding matrix from NVivo and performing the bootstrapping process with custom code in the R programming language. This analysed the number of unique themes identified sequentially across 10000 samples and then compared the ‘run’ length of subsequent interviews to the ‘base’ rate of the first 4 interviews (Guest et al., 2020). This allows reporting of where saturation occurs (<5% additional themes identified in subsequent interview) and the average number of themes and additional % from interviews. In this case with a base size of 4 interviews and a run length of 2, the saturation ratio after six interviews (4+2) was 0.96±0.01% and after 8 interviews (6+2) was 0.01±0.003% meaning we can be confident that amount of new information is diminished to a level where we could say saturation has been reached (i.e. 0% no new information after 8 interviews).

# Results

The aims of the study were firstly to explore what factors contribute to an effective onboarding process within team sports considering current ‘good practice’ and secondly, identify where improvements can be made. Specifically reflecting on prior experiences and experiential reflections. The presentation of results will initially focus on the thematic areas identified of the player, the organisation and the liminal space between them (Figure 1).

\*\*\*FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE\*\*\*

## Player: As an individual

The desire for status and to ‘fit in’ is a fundamental motive (Anderson et al., 2015): *“I came in knowing no one. And then on top of it moved by myself...I'm a very family-oriented person… I'd come home from training, just crying, missing my family and feeling alone.”* [S6]. It has been shown that being on the ‘outside’ mediates the gratitude once they are on the ‘inside’ (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2019): *“I was so grateful to be in the* [league]*. I was willing to do whatever I could.”* [S1].The context of a situation can change and influence individuals (Ramsden, 1988) and how they show up is an important learning around onboarding, *“I went to an open gym…the slowest guy in the history of guys made some move. I went one way, he went the other way and made a game winner shot on me, I remember I shot a 20-footer 12-feet and I remember walking out* [of the gym] *crying.”* [S1].Confidence grows through connection: *“I got a lot more confidence…just because I had a coach who backed me and trusted me.”* [S3], which enhances their performance: *“I only started really contributing as a player when I felt confident in the environment.”* [S8].

Onboarding should prioritize connection and clarity. Players highlighted the challenges of uncertainty: *“I felt like Nemo in the sea. I was just trying to listen, trying to be a sponge, trying to just make the most of it. I felt like the bottom of the pile.”* [S8].

The drive to defend (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002) often stems from fear, pushing players to improve: *“…the power of failure, the worry of not succeeding is powerful, and I didn't want to fail.”* [S1]. Secondary to the motivations and drives are the subsequent attitudes that they create. There was a recognition that sport is a business that drives the movement of players and the need for onboarding at each organisation: *“My phone rings at seven o'clock at night, we're at dinner. One of our favourite spots…it's my agent, “Hey, you just got traded”…“Sorry, what?”. You realize pretty quick that it's a business.”* [S1].

## Player: As a team member

A symbiotic relationship between player and organisation facilitates knowledge transfer; relationships are “*the gold dust”* [S8] and building them can precede gaining access to information about how things are done (Korte & Lin, 2013). The differentiating factor of onboarding may be speed of knowledge transfer to the newcomer. To help the player settle the organisation and Sporting Director should be proactive and not leave it all to the player: *“… the first couple of days are, figuring out where you're going, who you're meeting who you're talking to, who are the important people …all of those things that you're going to be talking to on a daily basis.”* [S1]. Organisational efforts to create social touchpoints can accelerate integration. While there may be a Goldilocks effect around relationship number (Dunbar, 2021) there should be a focus on creating the players’ network. Focusing on meaningful connections with those of a similar tenure may be sensible (Korte & Lin, 2013): *“…for most veterans, in any organisation you have a few people either on the team or within the organisation, and so you gravitate towards them.”* [S1], as well as a balance of relationship building and learning the technical skills of the role and regular assessments of progress by the organisation (Long & McGinnis, 1981).

Knowing what is expected and what defines success is important at a new organisation (Merriman & Freeth, 2022). Recruitment of players is typically for a superior set of technical skills that can’t be currently found in-house. It is important that players have a recognition of their ‘point of difference'. Players regularly mentioned their drive, work ethic and intrinsic motivation to comprehend and improve: *“It's your responsibility as a player to have the things that you need to work on planned out and know when you're going to do”* [S4]. Curiosity helps players integrate: *“The way I cultivate relationships is simply by wanting to learn about you. I think people appreciate other people taking an interest or caring about them.”* [S1]. Curiosity is a form of intrinsic motivation that is key in fostering active learning and spontaneous exploration (Oudeyer et al., 2016). Curiosity-driven learning and intrinsic motivation have been argued to be fundamental ingredients for efficient education (Freeman et al., 2014) and the same could be argued for efficient onboarding.

## Player: Transition

Failure to integrate can cause stress, particularly when social interaction impacts practice access: *“…building a rapport with the rest of the playing group can be tough, because you can't pull rank, if you're trying to get reps* [turns participating in practice or a drill]*,…if you don't know them you can end up spending the majority of the session on the sideline.”* [S3].

This can spill over into personal life and affect the self-efficacy of the player if there is not sufficient support or appreciation for the move (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). This can drive uncertainty in players and if it is not acknowledged during onboarding the transition can derail them. This may be in the form of knowledge transfer and the lack of externalization of specific assumed details: “*I remember being like really overwhelmed… Have I got this wrong, I felt really out of my depth because the level of stretch and the vocabulary used in the environment was so different from* [team]*, where I'd felt really confident. I was re-learning* [sport] *in a different way.”* [S8].

This may be driven by moving up a level which comes with inherent changes and demands such as the pace of play or an increased level of scrutiny: *“…it was such a step up, at* [previous team] *training if I didn't pass it exactly to where someone was, no one would really say that. Whereas at* [new team] *you'd have five different video angles showing it on a screen getting pulled up in front of the team.”* [S8].

The impact of the transition is important to acknowledge. Once they are integrated and feel an affiliation players perform better (Sage & Kavussanu, 2010) but with an increased level of cognitive anxiety, natural with increased scrutiny in a new environment, there is a negative impact on performance (Gabrys & Wontorczyk, 2023). Recognising that there may be a short-term reduction in performance is important in onboarding to support each individual player as a team member.

## Liminal: Player perspective

Players value structure and role clarity, which helps focus on performance: *“It was easy for me to know what's expected…it fit with how I am.”* [S4]. Understanding the culture beforehand can set up the player for success by providing clarity about how they can contribute: *“…explaining to them where they fit…make them feel like they belong.”* [S4]. Having clarity and measurement of cultural factors such as collaboration and alignment is particularly important for organisations (Barrett, 2023). Particularly when team members work in a highly interdependent manner, with others who possess unique skills and have different levels of authority (i.e., team sports). Reconciling peers’ behaviours and role clarity allows trust to be built through relationships for the newcomer and to allow identification of what is not yet known. Early connection and support are crucial to put players at ease: *“…the most important thing in that first week is making them feel settled.”* [S3].Connections and trust between team members enhances team performance (De Jong et al., 2016) and can happen with the first impression in the new environment.

Knowing the individual player and how they cope with stress is an important part of onboarding (Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000) as each player does this differently based on their experiences to date (Cowden, 2016): *“I was told turn up* [at a] *certain time, which was breakfast, all the players are in there, it’s a bit like right what do I do now. No one was telling me what I needed to do, and what kit to wear.”* [S4]. Players can excel if supported. Role clarity promotes greater effectiveness in their role. In some cases, organisations promote acceptance of a role (Benson et al., 2013), but this needs clear definition of the responsibilities. Ideally, expectations and success criteria are discussed prior to joining. Having joined, the onus is on the player to make it work for them: *“…the player has to adapt far more than an organisation.”* [S1].

Adapting requires learning and typically for players, establishing a routine and having frequent check-ins: *“…it needs to be little and often having that conversation with your players.”* [S8]. The literature gives examples of how to improve self-efficacy, in the use of positive language and role modelling (Gould et al., 1989) and that role clarity promotes greater effectiveness in their role (Bray & Brawley, 2002).

## Liminal: Organisation perspective

The organisation seeks confirmation that the player aligns with its values. Demonstrating a willingness to adapt reinforces the player’s commitment to the culture: *“…when people feel like you're invested…then they're way more open.”* [S3]. The Sporting Director and coach play key roles in shaping a culture that promotes adaptation and acceptance: *“I've walked into the* [team] *dressing room, and it was so easy to integrate, it was like the manager didn't even have to be there, the players were just taken under a wing.”* [S7].

Players’ actions will be reflected well if they feel that they have control, are effective and belong (Jowett et al., 2017) (i.e., they will have enhanced well-being and good mental health; Henriksen et al., 2020). This can typically be predicted by their relationship with their coach. Integration can be seen through actions. Some demonstrate a desire to get better at core skills and working hard. A culture of ‘doing extra’ promotes effective functioning of the organisation: *“…the more you play, and the better you’re doing as a player you get more respect”* [S7] and *“Outside of the scheduled training, you have to do more than what's required.”* [S4]. Others are light-hearted or ‘act the fool’: *“…make myself the butt of a joke or act like I was being silly.”* [S2].

The culture of the organisation is important in encouraging and reinforcing the behaviours it desires (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Though it must be remembered that there are layers within the organisation and teams within it (Storm et al., 2020). The team, to the players and staff and then specific position groups and small cliques within them and so each shadow culture (Popovic & Morrow, 2008) needs to be complementary to the overall organisational goal and there may be levels of acceptance within each.

The organisation expects timely integration and behaviours that align with the group’s culture. Communication starts when identifying a player as a potential recruit, and human and technical connection are crucial: *“…it’s important that the performance staff, the coaches, connect with the players, prior to their to them coming in,…not just on the technical stuff, but the informal and making them feel comfortable.”* [S4].

Establishing key points of contact and communication style is essential.: *“…who are the important people, who are the trainers, who is a strength coach, who are video people, who's your workout guy.”* [S1]. Outside of a group chat very few players had experienced written documentation to share information despite them being recognised as a powerful tool for integration of a new employee (Godinho et al., 2023). Most recommended a dedicated point of contact or player liaison that helped with the transition of the player to the new organisation. In almost all cases the communication focused on the non-technical skills and how to integrate into the new environment with cultural knowledge rather than clarity about what was expected from them on the field. Knowledge is grown through practice and aligning perceptions and activities (Woods & Davids, 2023). The explicit translation of knowledge, both implicit and explicit is critical for newcomer to internalise knowledge (Bartlett & Drust, 2021).

## Organisation: Culture

Culture is a set of shared assumptions and beliefs (Schein, 2010; Smith & Bond, 2019) which establish the overall paradigm of the organisation (Johnson et al., 2005). Social capital in turn has a strong influence on employees’ attitude, behaviours, and perceptions of employers (Korte & Lin, 2013). Socially complex knowledge that is diffused throughout an organisation can constitute a valuable and perhaps intangible resource. Operating within this paradigm allows the players perceptions to be matched with their actions. This can be encapsulated by various artifacts, values, and assumptions. Culture is foundational and should be evident to newcomers: *“What the culture and environment is about and our playing style, what was our identity… we always talked about it…because it was it was how we judged ourselves.”* [S3]. Having an organisational culture that supports knowledge management can lead to more effective performances (Al Saifi, 2015). A focus on developing this can lead to better performances and greater connection with newcomers.

As a newcomer, how these assumptions or tacit knowledge about the culture are communicated are important as they can define the expectations of you as a member of this group. It continually evolves and must be cultivated through communication and social interaction: *“…connection cafes, for connecting with the rest of your teammates to try and build, deeper bonds. Just spend time together…We could be training today, but instead…make an effort, engage with each other and not just be sitting in your room.”* [S3]. For players, culture shapes expectations. Values are upheld through demonstratable behaviours that players can follow rather than a list of rules or standards.

Once they are on the inside, organisations need to ensure they educate the newcomers to meet the values and assumptions of the organisation. This can be reinforced by making the player part of the fabric of an organisation with a ‘legacy number’ that identifies their place in the history of the team (Eastwood, 2021). Upholding the values may be done by demonstratable behaviours that players can follow rather than a list of rules or standards. The factors going into the communication of these are many and varied (Godinho et al., 2023).

## Organisation: Support for player

The functions of onboarding can include aspects of informing, welcoming and guiding (Klein & Heuser, 2008) with the goal being to reduce the ‘unknown’. This can be referred to as organisational socialisation. The role of the organisation in player support is foundational, creating the environment that allows players to thrive technically and on the field. It doesn’t always happen: *“… in terms of signing, I've never really had a sit down with a manager at all, which is bizarre really.”* [S7].

A key aspect is establishing clear points of contact who can guide players through their daily routines, increasing demands progressively: *“They kind of leave you to your own devices until you need the help.”* [S7]. This support, though sometimes informal, is essential for players to feel empowered and excel: *“There's no real excuses in that sense for the players, which is good…they* [staff] *genuinely care about the player off the field as well.”* [S4].

While formal induction events are rare, players often describe a sense of immediate support: *“…it's just unspoken, you're on our team now.”* [S2]. Social interactions also play a role, with teammates offering guidance through casual conversations: *“…they educated you just by being on the bus…I had some awesome veterans that took me under the wing.”* [S1]. Players who feel supported off the field tend to perform better on it:*“…*[sport] *becomes difficult when you don't feel like you've got the support around you. You’re not given the best opportunity to be the best player”* [S4].

To maximize player success, organisations should establish a consistent, systematic process for onboarding (Watkins, 2013), ideally in an informal and supportive manner. This allows newcomers to learn the ropes, build connections (Carucci, 2018), and feel safe to be their authentic selves (Walton et al., 2023), which accelerates learning, fosters peer interconnectivity, and enhances team performance (Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023).

## Organisation: Staged introduction

Upon joining it is unlikely that a player will play the same or next day. It is typical that there is a period of acclimation in their new surroundings: *“It probably takes a little while, because people are all looking to establish themselves as the best player.”* [S2]. Expanding this period (i.e., elongating the liminal space) can help players process the transition more effectively. Players appreciate gradual introductions to teammates and coaches, providing opportunities to ask questions and build rapport: *“…maybe a couple of younger players to look out for them…take them for a coffee…get a senior player to go through cultural things.”* [S3].

A structured yet supportive introduction from technical staff, outlining expectations and progress for the player, is also important: *“Where are you at now…this is what we think you can provide from a [sport] perspective, a bit more of a formal, MOT of your body and mind and tomorrow, we're going to be training and for the first couple of weeks, I just want you to focus on X, Y, and Z.”* [S8].This helps set a clear path for the player during the first few weeks and creates a foundation for ongoing performance improvement.

Encouraging feedback during this period helps players feel more integrated and valued: *“…if they've got anything that they think we could do better…they feel straightaway, like they're a part of it.”* [S3]. While feedback should be encouraged throughout the player’s tenure, having a formal, defined period during onboarding to establish expectations and invite feedback creates a solid platform for success moving forward (Carucci, 2018).

# Discussion

This study highlights key factors in the onboarding process within elite sports organisations, emphasizing the interplay between the player, the team, and the liminal process. However, onboarding is more than a structured integration; it is a psychosocial negotiation of identity reconstruction, performance calibration, and cultural alignment. The Sporting Director is crucial to the onboarding process from setting the policies and procedures, to acting as the custodian of culture and embodying core organisational values. While their actions can be supported by coaches, support staff and players it is the Sporting Director who might best be described as the hub of the wheel (Ashworth, 2020) connecting the spokes (departments) and setting the direction and culture of the team as the individual with strategic management responsibility for sporting operations (Parnell et al., 2023).

## Players

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Saks & Ashforth, 1997) provides a useful framework for understanding onboarding, yet it does not fully capture the complex social and psychological dimensions of player transitions. While reducing uncertainty enhances a player’s sense of belonging, it is also essential to recognize the identity shifts that occur during this process. Career transitions often involve the construction of a ‘possible self’ (Ibarra, 1999), where individuals explore new identities before fully adopting them. This implies that onboarding should not merely focus on skill adaptation or adaptation but should also create space for players to actively shape and negotiate their evolving professional identities.

Beyond technical integration, players also navigate the balance between autonomy and structured guidance. Theories of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) indicate that autonomy, competence, and relatedness drive motivation and performance. Accordingly, Sporting Directors should aim to provide structured yet flexible pathways that allow players to explore their roles within the organisation while maintaining psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). This approach aligns with research showing that elite players benefit from environments that encourage them to contribute to team culture rather than simply conforming to it (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2020).

Role clarity remains a critical component in mitigating transitional stress. Players who experience ambiguity in expectations frequently exhibit decreased confidence and impaired performance (Beauchamp et al., 2002). While role modelling and mentoring help to alleviate this, onboarding strategies should consider the importance of peer support structures (Burns et al., 2019). Social integration is often most effective when players connect with peers at a similar career stage, reinforcing the need for strategic relationship-building (Evans et al., 2022). These peer relationships transmit valuable tacit knowledge; the unspoken norms, expectations, and cultural scripts that define elite sport environments. As such, onboarding must be understood not just as an informational exchange but as an interpretive and experiential process. This expands the onboarding literature by underscoring the importance of informal, peer-led socialisation structures as vehicles for cultural transmission and psychological adaptation.

## Liminal

The concept of liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) is particularly relevant when considering how players transition into new environments. Rather than conceptualising onboarding as a linear process or procedural event, it may be more accurate to view it as a threshold moment; a space for or of ambiguity where identity reconstruction occurs before a new professional self is fully adopted. While high-performance environments often demand immediate adaptation, there is evidence to suggest that allowing players to navigate this temporary phase of liminality may yield more sustainable long-term performance outcomes (Ibarra, 2004).

The idea that players ‘go to people they know’ (Edwards, 2021) reinforces the importance of social capital in high-performance settings. Strong peer networks enhance resilience and performance (Rees & Hardy, 2000), and while formal mentoring has value, informal peer networks may play an even greater role in the psychological transition of new players. The onboarding process should therefore be designed to facilitate organic relationship development, and go beyond a reliance solely on institutionalized support mechanisms.

The impact of transition stress on performance is well-documented (Stambulova et al., 2020), and onboarding should therefore integrate proactive strategies to mitigate these effects. Edwards (2021) highlights that in elite sport, the pressure to ‘win now’ often conflicts with the need to give players time to acclimate. This creates a paradox; rapid integration is desired, yet a slower, more deliberate approach may lead to greater long-term success. The role of the Sporting Director is therefore to navigate this tension, as the hub of the wheel, deciding when to accelerate adaptation and when to create space for psychological adjustment. If they can create the conditions for players to safely dwell in liminality, legitimising transitional uncertainty as part of performance development the onboarding phase may be most successful.

## Organisation

Organisational onboarding is not merely an administrative process but a reflection of an institution’s underlying values. Transparency and trust-building behaviours are fundamental to effective leadership, particularly in elite sport, where uncertainty and high-stakes decision-making are prevalent (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). If an organisation fails to demonstrate authenticity in its onboarding approach, it risks creating an environment of misalignment, where players struggle to integrate due to hidden expectations and unspoken norms.

Organisational culture is often communicated through the spiral evolution of tacit knowledge rather than formal processes (i.e. routines, rituals controls, and behaviours). The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 2008) suggests that individuals internalize the cultural norms of their environment through repeated exposure to behaviours and interactions. The development of sporting habitus tends to be facilitated by social capital in the form of networks within which individuals become increasingly significant in shaping sporting repertoires (Johansen et al., 2024). In the context of sport and specifically onboarding, this means that organisations should not only articulate their values explicitly but also embed them into everyday practice. Regular ‘townhalls’ and open forums, as suggested in previous research (Burns et al., 2024; Salcinovic et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2024; Storm et al., 2024), can play a role in reinforcing a sense of collective identity and strengthening cultural coherence.

The changing demographics of elite sport also necessitate a modernised approach to onboarding. As organisations engage younger players, understanding the expectations of Gen Z players is critical. Research suggests that this generation values hyper-customisation, digital integration, and immediate feedback (Chillakuri, 2020). Traditional onboarding structures may not align with these expectations, requiring organisations and teams to adapt their communication and engagement strategies. In this sense, the onboarding process should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all approach but rather as an evolving framework that reflects the shifting needs of players and helps new players to internalise the team’s culture through participation, not just instruction, ensuring that they are co-creators of the environment they enter.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that onboarding in elite sport extends beyond logistical integration and technical adaptation—it is a complex psychological, social, and cultural transition. While the viewpoints here come from players’ experiences only Sporting Directors play a critical role in shaping this experience, with everything coming back to their central role, allowing them to act as both strategic architects and cultural custodians. While they can be assisted by coaches, support staff and even senior players in the process, onboarding frameworks must address role clarity and performance expectations and under the Sporting Director’s direction should also be designed to support identity formation, social integration, and long-term adaptation.

A key recommendation is the intentional structuring of liminal space, acknowledging that players require both time and support to navigate identity transitions. Additionally, teams should prioritize relationship-driven onboarding, ensuring that new players develop social capital within their first few months. Finally, onboarding strategies should be aligned with the evolving expectations of younger players, leveraging digital tools and hyper-personalized experiences to enhance engagement.

Future research should further explore the intersection of organisational onboarding and player psychological adaptation, particularly within different sporting cultures and team dynamics. As the role of the Sporting Director continues to evolve, so too must the strategies for effectively integrating players into high-performance environments.

## Conclusion

Limitations notwithstanding the data gathered leads to a targeted set of recommendations for Sporting Directors (Table 2) that could be implemented to navigate the complexities of onboarding in elite sports organisations, based on existing business recommendations (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). By adopting a player-centric approach, strategically prioritizing relationships, and embracing a holistic model, Sporting Directors can spearhead successful player transitions.

While all simple steps, they are equally hard to do and if not executed sufficiently can be detrimental. For example, if the wrong mentor is chosen (recommendation 2) then this could lead the player off-course and build the wrong culture at the organisation. The challenge for Sporting Directors is to set up the player for success in their first moments at the team so onboarding multiplies and amplifies their contribution and ensures they are set up for success, within a stable organisation and consistent strategy leading to maximising operational performance by transferring tacit knowledge effectively. The ability to guide newcomers through the onboarding process can be likened to teaching them how to ride a bike. Those Sporting Directors who articulate this journey with precision not only facilitate a seamless assimilation but also enjoy a tangible performance advantage in the competitive race for team success.

\*\*\*TABLE 2 NEAR HERE\*\*\*

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# Declaration of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Table 1:** Demographics of participants.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **[S#]** | **Age Bracket** | **Gender** | **Sport** | **Location** |
| 1 | 40-50 | Male | Basketball | North America |
| 2 | 30-40 | Female | Basketball | North America |
| 3 | 30-40 | Male | Rugby | UK |
| 4 | 30-40 | Male | Rugby | UK |
| 5 | 20-30 | Female | Soccer | North America |
| 6 | 20-30 | Female | Soccer | North America |
| 7 | 30-40 | Male | Soccer | UK |
| 8 | 20-30 | Female | Hockey | UK |

*[S#] denotes subject number used throughout the text*

**Table 2:** Practical Recommendations for Player Onboarding.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Number | Step | Expanded Detail |
| 1 | Establish relationship as soon as possible | Have senior leaders (e.g. head coach, captain, Sporting Director) reach out with a personal message as soon as signing is confirmed. Assign peer-led welcome groups based on shared language, nationality, or prior connections. In resource-limited settings, use digital welcome kits or video calls from senior players/coaches to replicate this connection ahead of arrival. |
| 2 | Appoint a mentor/POC | Appoint a player liaison or mentor - ideally an alumnus or senior squad member - who embodies the values and culture of the organisation. Mentors should be selected based on their leadership qualities, communication skills, and relevant lived experience. Prior to taking on the role, mentors should receive training in active listening, safeguarding, cultural awareness, and basic mental health literacy to ensure they can provide appropriate and informed support. The effectiveness of the mentoring relationship should be reviewed regularly through monthly check-ins with a designated welfare lead, along with periodic opportunities for mentees to provide anonymous feedback. In teams with fewer resources, group mentoring approaches or dual-role staff members may be used to deliver the same support in a scalable and sustainable way. |
| 3 | Focus onboarding on relationships | Maximise weak ties. Designate a staff member (e.g., player care manager, welfare officer) to gather personal history of incoming players and map potential connections with the team (e.g., schools, national teams, agents, social media follows). Use these to create natural introductions and integrate players intentionally into small groups. In smaller teams, involve team captains or community volunteers to take on this role. Be intentional with making time for this in the schedule. |
| 4 | Give back up reference materials | Provide an onboarding manual; physical or digital - covering logistics (e.g., training times, key contacts, team expectations, values). Include FAQs, diagrams, maps, and calendar milestones for the first 100 days. At higher-resource teams, this can be an interactive app; at grassroots level, a simple PDF or printed booklet serves well. |
| 5 | Have equipment ready on day | Ensure kit, locker, and training gear are sized and ready based on pre-arrival information. Conduct a short tour of facilities and help set up access to systems (e.g. ticket requests, wellness apps). Assign a staff member to oversee this checklist. At larger teams, this can be automated or coordinated via player care. At smaller teams, use a buddy system or local volunteer coordinator. |
| 6 | Formal Welcome | Hold a standardised, inclusive welcome for all players (first team, youth, or trialist), introducing key staff and giving a symbolic gesture (e.g., legacy number, jersey presentation). This is video recorded or photographed for organisational archives. In smaller setups, a team meal or informal welcome still reinforces value. Consistency is key. |
| 7 | Recognise the whole person | Identify and support logistical needs for the player’s family, partner, and/or pets. Offer housing assistance, local school connections, transport info, or pet care referrals. In well-resourced teams, this may be managed by player care specialists; for smaller teams, provide a community directory or connect with local host families or alumni. |
| 8 | Set expectations | On day one (post-orientation), conduct structured meetings with key staff (coach, physio, psychologist, analyst) to explain expectations and support resources. Define the ‘*liminal phase*’ length and developmental checkpoints. Tailor feedback to the player’s goals and personality. In smaller environments, streamline to a single meeting with multi-role staff. |
| 9 | Empower | Encourage players to reflect on what they need to thrive and help co-create their onboarding plan. Provide a checklist but let them own the process. Use weekly check-ins in the first six weeks, tapering to monthly. In high-resource settings, this may be tracked digitally; in low-resource settings, use simple worksheets or journaling prompts. |

**Figure 1:** Thematic Map of identified areas of ‘player’ [WHITE], ‘organisation’ [GREY] and ‘liminality’ [SHADED] with subsequent sub-themes

