

The dark side of perfectionism: Links to burnout and mental health in football

Kurt Briffa

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Abstract

The Dark Side of Perfectionism: Links to burnout and mental health in football

Football environments often place athletes under intense psychological and performance-related pressure. Increasing awareness of athlete mental health has highlighted concerns surrounding perfectionism, burnout, and emotional well-being in competitive sport. This research explores the links between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health among Maltese professional footballers, with particular emphasis on the role of educational interventions in supporting psychological well-being. A qualitative research approach was adopted within an interpretivist paradigm. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight male footballers competing in the Maltese Premier and Challenge Leagues. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that perfectionism operates as a dual construct, acting as both a source of motivation and psychological strain. While having high personal standards helped support performance, maladaptive tendencies such as self-criticism and rumination were strongly linked to emotional exhaustion and burnout. External pressures within the close-knit Maltese football environment further intensified fear of judgment and reduced psychological safety. Burnout was experienced as a gradual process linked to persistent overthinking, difficulty disengaging from performance, and challenges in balancing football with external demands. Educational interventions were identified as a key protective factor, with players emphasising the need for early and preventative mental health education. The study emphasises the importance of incorporating education-based psychological support within football systems to promote adaptive coping, reduce maladaptive perfectionism, and support long-term athlete well-being. It reinforces the role of education in fostering psychologically supportive sporting environments.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Burnout, Mental Health, Football, Education

Dedications

This work is dedicated to all footballers who silently struggle with mental health.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Inspiration

In recent years, there has been growing attention to the psychological experienced by athletes in elite sport environments. Football, in particular, is characterised by high expectations and pressure to perform consistently at a high level. While these demands can enhance performance, they can also expose players to a range of psychological challenges that extend beyond the physical aspects of the game (Reardon et al., 2019).

Former professional footballer Clarke Carlisle has spoken openly about the psychological challenges he experienced throughout and following his football career. Carlisle described how football became closely tied to his sense of self-worth, contributing to intense self-criticism and perfectionistic thinking patterns. He stated that “I was a perfectionist as a footballer, critical of things that I would do” (The Sun, 2025). Reflecting on his experiences with depression and mental health difficulties, he explained that he often viewed situations in terms of success or failure, with little middle ground. He further highlighted how the pressure to maintain exceptionally high standards contributed to emotional distress and difficulties coping psychologically. Carlisle’s experiences demonstrate how maladaptive perfectionism within football environments may negatively affect athletes’ mental health and reinforce harmful beliefs surrounding performance, identity, and self-worth.

Within these psychological demands, perfectionism has become more recognised as a significant factor influencing athletes’ experiences. Although often associated with positive attributes such as discipline and motivation, maladaptive forms of perfectionism have been linked to negative outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Hill et al., 2018). Within competitive football settings, where mistakes are highly analysed and performance standards are continuously reinforced, perfectionistic tendencies may increase vulnerability to burnout and mental health difficulties.

Burnout in athletes is typically characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Despite awareness surrounding mental health in sport has increased, a large proportion of existing research has concentrated on identifying and describing these challenges rather than examining practical strategies to support athletes in managing them.

In this context, educational interventions have been proposed as a potential means of promoting athlete well-being. Approaches such as sport psychology education, mental health awareness programmes, and coach-led support initiatives may help equip players with the knowledge to navigate the psychological demands of elite sport (Rice et al., 2016). However, despite the increasing focus on psychological support in sport, limited research has explored footballers experiences such interventions, particularly within the Maltese football context. Considering the cultural importance of football in Malta and the unique pressures associated with competing at a professional level, it is important to explore how players understand and manage the psychological aspects of their sporting experience. This study therefore seeks to investigate the relationship between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in footballers, while also examining the role of educational interventions in supporting athlete well-being.

A review of existing literature further highlighted a limited focus on how educational interventions can support footballers in coping with psychological pressures, which provided the basis for undertaking this study.

1.2 Aims and Objectives/ Research Questions

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in footballers, with particular attention to the role of educational interventions in supporting players' psychological well-being. While much of the existing research has primarily focused on identifying the negative psychological outcomes associated with high-performance sport, this study, examines how footballers experience and manage these challenges and whether educational support mechanisms have contributed to their ability to cope with such pressures.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do footballers define perfectionism, and what aspects of perfectionism are most closely linked to burnout in footballers?

- How can educational interventions in the form of sports psychology sessions, coach training, and athlete well-being workshops- help in mitigating the negative effects of perfectionism?
- What educational interventions, if any, have players experienced that have helped them manage psychological challenges as an athlete?
- How can such educational interventions be integrated into football clubs, sports schools, and sports career development programmes in schools' awareness to support footballers' well-being and resilience?

To explore these questions in greater depth, semi-structured interviews were utilised as the primary method of data collection. This approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed responses while also allowing participants the flexibility to discuss their personal experiences and perspective on the research topic.

1.3 Motivation

The motivation for this study emerged from both personal experience and academic curiosity regarding the psychological experiences of athletes in competitive sport. Having been involved in football myself, I have experienced many of the pressures associated with performance and the constant desire to avoid mistakes and achieve high standards. These experiences increased my awareness of how easily football environments can contribute to stress, self-criticism, and emotional pressure, particularly when players feel that their value is closely linked to performance.

Throughout my years in football, I also became aware of the limited education and open discussion surrounding mental health, burnout, and perfectionism within local clubs. While physical preparation and performance were consistently prioritised, psychological well-being was rarely addressed in a structured or educational manner. Players were often expected to cope with pressure independently, with little guidance on how to manage stress, setbacks, fear of failure, or the emotional demands of competitive football. These experiences

contributed significantly in shaping my interest in exploring the relationship between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within the Maltese football context.

As an aspiring Physical Education teacher, this research has also provided an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of athlete well-being and the importance of creating supportive sporting and educational environments. It is hoped that this study will contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding mental health in Maltese football and provide insights that may support future educational and well-being initiatives within local sporting environments.

1.4 Dissertation Layout

Figure 1.1 presents the structure of the dissertation which consists of five chapters. Following the introduction chapter, Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature related to perfectionism, burnout, mental health, and educational interventions within sport and football contexts. The chapter examines existing research surrounding the psychological demands placed on athletes while also identifying gaps within the current literature relevant to the present study. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework adopted for the research. This includes the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and the process of data analysis employed throughout the study. Chapter 4 presents the analyses from the findings generated from the semi-structured interviews. The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and existing literature explored within the literature review. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the conclusion of the study by summarising the key findings, discussing the strengths and limitations of the research, and offering recommendations for future research and practice within football and athlete well-being contexts.

Chapter 1- Introduction
Chapter 2- Literature Review
Chapter 3- Methodology
Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussion
Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Figure 1.1: Layout of the dissertation

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Mental health in professional football has been as a significant concern, with research and player perspective highlighting the psychological stresses of modern competition (Gouttebarga & Kerkhoffs, 2018). Numerous footballers have publicly shared their experience of depression, anxiety, and performance-related stress, contributing to a gradual reduction in the stigma associated with mental health issues in professional football. Nevertheless, these underscore the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that make athletes vulnerable to psychological distress. Professional football is characterised by unique challenges such as short career durations, recurrent injuries, contract instability, and relentless media attention, which all can significantly impact players' well-being (Rice et al., 2016). These pressures, combined with a culture that often values toughness, create a unique context in which mental health challenges can thrive.

In this context, perfectionism and burnout are interrelated psychological constructs that help explain the struggles faced by athletes. Perfectionism has been widely examined in sport psychology, differentiating between adaptive forms that might improve motivation and performance, and maladaptive forms linked to anxiety, self-criticism, and mental health issues (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionism is broadly defined as a multidimensional construct characterised by the pursuit of exceptionally high standards accompanied by excessively critical self-evaluations (Frost et al., 1990). In high-performance settings like sports, maladaptive perfectionism is particularly problematic due to its strong association with burnout and overall psychological distress. Burnout, defined by emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation, has been shown to undermine both athlete well-being and performance sustainability (Gustafsson et al., 2017).

The focus on mental health in football has intensified in recent years, with studies revealing the widespread occurrence of depression, anxiety, and other psychological issues among players (Gouttebarga et al., 2019). The distinctive challenges of professional football such as career instability, injuries, competitive transitions, and public scrutiny, along with perfectionist tendencies, elevates the players' vulnerability to mental health challenges (Hill et al., 2010). The increasing recognition of these issues requires a closer look of how perfectionism and burnout intersect with the sport's demands, potentially increasing vulnerability to outcomes like anxiety, depression, and disengagement. Despite enhancing

awareness, stigma and persistent obstacles still frequently hinder athletes from seeking or receiving adequate help for mental health concerns (Reardon et al., 2019).

This chapter begins by discussing perfectionism in sport, addressing its forms of adaptive vs. maladaptive and causes, as well as methods of measurement. It then examines burnout, detailing its characteristics, prevalence, and strong correlation with perfectionism. Following this, the chapter explores the broader topic of mental health in football, including the stigma surrounding help-seeking and obstacles to support. Finally, it assesses the impact of educational interventions, emphasizing the potential benefits of mental health literacy and psychological skills programs in helping athletes, coaches, and support staff minimise maladaptive perfectionism and burnout.

2.2 Perfectionism

Perfectionism is described as a multidimensional personality disposition defined by striving for flawlessness and setting high standards accompanied by overly critical self evaluations (Stoeber & Gaudreau, 2019). It is commonly distinguished as a personality trait involving the setting of high personal standards and a tendency toward critical self-evaluation (Frost et al., 1990). While striving for excellence can be motivating and rewarding, perfectionism goes a step further, it makes self-worth feel conditional on flawless performance (Guy-Evans, 2025).

Perfectionism is a well-recognized psychological construct that influences how athletes train, compete, and evaluate their performance. In professional football, where performance is constantly analysed, perfectionist tendencies can drive athletes toward excellence but may also contribute to emotional strain. Perfectionism, which is frequently seen as a driving force behind high performance in sports, has also been found to increase the risk of burnout. Maladaptive types of perfectionism can result in increased stress, emotional tiredness, and disengagement from sports, while adapted forms may improve performance (Crowell & Madigan, 2021).

Over time, various conceptual approaches have been developed to study perfectionism, converging into a higher-order framework that distinguishes between perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Madigan, 2016). Perfectionistic strivings reflect the motivation to pursue exceptionally high standards and perfect performance,

whereas perfectionistic strivings reflect the pursuit of exceptionally high standards. Perfectionistic concerns are characterised by excessive worry about mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and enduring dissatisfaction with performance. (Stoeber, 2012). While perfectionistic strivings may be linked with high motivation and achievement, perfectionistic concerns are consistently associated with maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety, burnout, and reduced well-being (Hill & Curran, 2016; Madigan et al., 2022).

Some scholars argue that this two-dimensional distinction can be overly simplistic, as adaptive and maladaptive features often coexist in the same athlete, blurring the line between healthy ambition and self-defeating pressure (Gotwals et al., 2022). Nonetheless, this framework is valuable in sport research because it highlights how similar perfectionist tendencies can produce very different psychological outcomes depending on context and orientation.

Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model expands on the personal and the evaluative perspective by including social and interpersonal dimensions of perfectionism. This model identifies three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented. Self-oriented perfectionism involves setting and striving for unrealistic personal standards; socially prescribed perfectionism occurs when individuals believe others expect perfection from them; and other-oriented perfectionism entails imposing excessively high standards on others. The key differences among these forms lie in who the perfectionistic expectations are directed toward. The multidimensional model underscores the interpersonal nature of perfectionism, which is particularly relevant in team sports such as football. Hewitt and Flett introduced the concept of perfectionistic self-presentation behaviours like promoting one's supposed perfection or hiding any imperfection (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Recent studies suggest that even perfectionistic strivings, sometimes viewed as adaptive, can lead to chronic dissatisfaction and mental exhaustion when coupled with intense external pressure to perform (Stoeber, 2023). This ongoing debate reflects the complexity of perfectionism's dual potential to both enhance and undermine performance and mental health in professional athletes.

The development of perfectionistic tendencies in athletes arises from a combination of personal, social, and cultural influences. Studies indicate that children raised in environments with high parental expectations, conditional approval, or frequent criticism are more likely to internalize perfectionistic standards (Hill et al., 2020). Within sport, the coaching climate plays a central role: controlling or authoritarian coaching styles have been linked to higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism in young athletes (Appleton & Curran, 2016), whereas autonomy-supportive coaching which encourages effort, personal improvement, and self-reflection can help protect athletes from the negative effects of perfectionistic concerns (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016).

Broader cultural and social factors also contribute to perfectionism. Elite sport often promotes a culture that values flawless performance and results above all (Hill, 2018). Social media has amplified these pressures by exposing athletes to constant evaluation and public commentary, contributing to the rise of socially prescribed perfectionism (Tamminen et al., 2022). Together, these environmental influences demonstrate that perfectionism should not be viewed solely as an individual characteristic, but a socially shaped construct embedded within the high-pressure culture of sport, sustaining standards that increase vulnerability to stress, burnout, and reduced mental well-being among footballers.

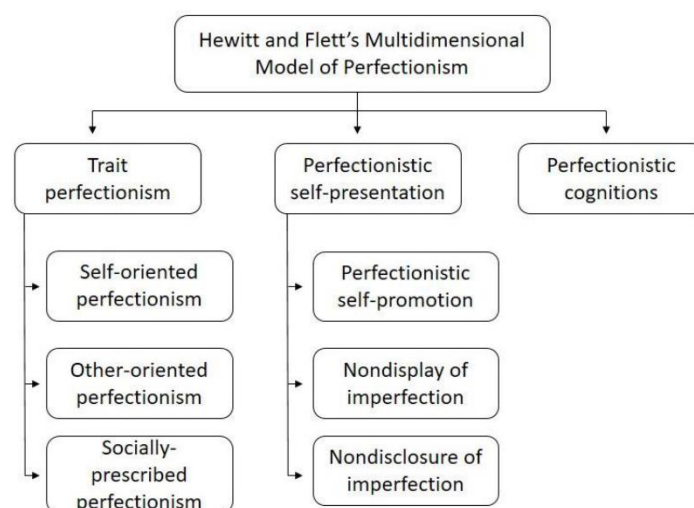


Figure 2.1: Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model of perfectionism

2.2.1 Self-orientated perfectionism

Self-oriented perfectionism involves setting extremely high standards for oneself and engaging in intense self-criticism. It has been linked to serious maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Smith et al., 2018). Research suggests the mechanism often includes feelings of social disconnection and isolation, which amplify an athlete's vulnerability (Magson, 2019). While older views (Burns, 1980) regarded self-oriented perfectionism as purely maladaptive, more recent work highlights its dual nature: when managed and balanced it may enhance motivation and persistence, but when paired with severe self-criticism it often leads to distress (Hill et al., 2018).

Self-oriented perfectionism is defined by self-imposed performance standards, continuous self-monitoring, and frequent self-blame when expectations are not met (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This form correlates with many maladaptive outcomes, yet also with some seemingly adaptive qualities like persistence and goal-driven effort (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Importantly, recent studies suggest that self-compassion can moderate the negative impact of self-oriented perfectionism on athletes' mental health which higher self-compassion is associated with reduced self-criticism and buffering of stress in perfectionistic athletes (Kuchar et al., 2023). In contrast to other-oriented perfectionism, which externalizes blame and frustration onto others, self-oriented perfectionism turns the high standards inward, often fuelling dedication and resilience but also increasing the risk of loneliness, relationship conflict, and emotional exhaustion. This observation aligns with recent findings that perfectionists' self-imposed pressure can lead to social withdrawal, which in turn contributes to burnout.

2.2.2 Socially prescribed perfectionism

Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to the perception that others demand perfection from oneself, imposing unrealistic standards that one feels obliged to meet. Athletes high in socially prescribed perfectionism often feel constant external pressure, fear harsh evaluation, and sense that acceptance by others is conditional on perfect performance. This fosters negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression (Smith et al., 2017). Since these perceived expectations are outside the athlete's control, those with high socially

prescribed perfectionism frequently experience helplessness and chronic stress (Curran & Hill, 2019). Individuals with elevated socially prescribed perfectionism exhibit a heightened fear of negative evaluation, prioritizing external approval and dreading disapproval.

A controlling, critical feedback environment can further wear down their intrinsic motivation and increase negative affect (Madigan et al., 2016). The gap between the “actual self” and the “ought self”, which is internalized external expectations, often results in feelings of shame, and inadequacy (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Recent sport psychology studies consistently identify socially prescribed perfectionism as a particularly maladaptive form that is strongly associated with fear of failure, anxiety, and burnout (Madigan et al., 2022). In fact, socially prescribed perfectionism is widely regarded as the most harmful type of perfectionism in sport.

Footballers commonly describe perfectionism as a double-edged sword – motivating achievement yet causing intense psychological strain. Many report that while perfectionism pushes them to excel, it simultaneously damages relationships, increases stress, and undermines well-being (Hill et al., 2015). Recent evidence confirms that athletes high in socially prescribed perfectionism have greater vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and burnout compared to those high in self-oriented perfectionism (Tamminen et al., 2022). This underscores the particularly toxic effect of external pressure in the context of elite football.

2.2.3 Other-orientated perfectionism

Other-oriented perfectionism is characterised by imposing unrealistically high standards on others while maintaining a sense of one’s own elevated performance standards. Research links other-oriented perfectionism with antisocial behaviours and reduced prosocial tendencies (Stoeber, 2014). Unlike self-oriented perfectionism, which is primarily self-critical, other-oriented perfectionism involves harshly judging and criticizing others when they fail to meet one’s expectations. Recent studies suggest that other-oriented perfectionism may contribute to interpersonal difficulties and conflict in team sports like football, where cooperation and cohesion are essential (Hill et al., 2018). This form of perfectionism often manifests as a “dark” trait, given its associations with entitlement, low empathy, and antagonism (Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015). For instance, other-oriented perfectionism

correlates with aggressive tendencies, including verbal aggression and hostile humour as socially acceptable outlets for disapproval (Shoss et al., 2014).

Athletes high in other-oriented perfectionism may undermine group cohesion by blaming teammates for mistakes, demanding unrealistic standards from others, and showing low tolerance for error (Madigan et al., 2022). While some evidence suggests that in certain contexts other-oriented perfectionists might take on leadership roles, pushing teammates towards excellence by holding high standards (Stoeber & Sherry, 2016), any potential benefits are often outweighed by the negative impact on team relationships and psychological safety.

2.3 Adaptive vs Maladaptive Perfectionism

While the pursuit of excellence can foster achievement, perfectionism is increasingly recognised as a rigid and often unhealthy drive for flawlessness (Burns, 1980). Early classifications distinguished between “normal” (adaptive) and “neurotic” (maladaptive) perfectionism (Hamachek, 1978). Later refinements re-framed this distinction as positive strivings versus maladaptive evaluative concerns (Rice et al., 1998). Adaptive perfectionism involves setting high standards but remaining flexible and accepting of mistakes, whereas maladaptive perfectionism entails relentless self-criticism, intolerance of errors, and preoccupation with shortcomings (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). However, recent evidence questions whether adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism are truly distinct categories or rather points on a continuum. Even positive strivings can lead to distress under extreme pressure or without healthy coping mechanisms (Madigan et al., 2022). This suggests that the adaptive–maladaptive contrast may oversimplify how perfectionism functions in elite sports.

Perfectionistic worries that are typically linked to maladaptive perfectionism, signal self-deprecating thought patterns and psychological maladjustment (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). For instance, self-compassion has been identified as a protective factor that can weaken between maladaptive perfectionism and depression (Mehr & Adams, 2016). Research indicates that children raised by parents who display perfectionistic behaviours or employ

authoritarian parenting practices, marked by high expectations and limited emotional support, are at greater risk of developing maladaptive perfectionism (Carmo et al., 2021).

In football, athletes' personal accounts often illustrate the thin line between striving and suffering. Everton's Idrissa Gana Gueye once admitted, "I am a perfectionist. I do not appreciate losing possession of the ball at any time" (The Guardian, 2016). This attention to detail can enhance performance, yet it also increases psychological strain in an environment of constant scrutiny. Such examples show how adaptive striving like focus and motivation can quickly shift toward maladaptive concern when errors are magnified by coaches, fans, and media (Krämer et al., 2021).

Indeed, self-compassion interventions are being explored to manage perfectionism. Athletes with greater self-compassion experience less self-criticism and more resilience despite their perfectionistic tendencies (Mosewich et al., 2019). This suggests that programs fostering self-compassion might transform a maladaptive perfectionist mindset into a healthier one by softening harsh self-judgment. Umandap et al. (2020) showed that self-compassion training helps people high in perfectionism to cultivate gentler self-responses, reduce self-criticism, and improve psychological flexibility.

In sports like football, pathological perfectionism can hinder both individual well-being and team dynamics. A player fixated on flawlessness may struggle to accept feedback, blame themselves or others for every mistake, and eventually experience emotional exhaustion or disengagement from the sport. The relentless drive to meet excessively high standards and the distress from failing to meet them can lead to issues such as anxiety, depression, and even eating disorders (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Slaney et al. (2001) contributed a useful concept in this area by differentiating between perfectionist standards that is high personal goals that can be adaptive and perfectionist discrepancies, which are perceived gaps between one's expectations and actual performance. It is the discrepancy aspect, the sense of always falling short, that reliably predicts adverse outcomes, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychological distress (Slaney et al., 2002).

In football, external evaluations from coaches, fans, and media heavily influence perfectionistic concerns (Tamminen et al., 2022). A comprehensive understanding of maladaptive perfectionism, thus, requires integrating both individual dispositions and

societal factors. Experimental studies support distinctions between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism; for instance, Moate et al. (2016) found that athletes classified as adaptive perfectionists reported lower stress and burnout compared to maladaptive perfectionists, who exhibited higher anxiety and fatigue. Similarly, Noble et al. (2014) showed that a focus on potential failures (a maladaptive mindset) impaired depression and disengagement. Meta-analyses reinforce that maladaptive perfectionism is a strong predictor of burnout in sports, whereas adaptive perfectionism shows more variable associations (Hill & Curran, 2016; Madigan et al., 2022). In other words, the effect of perfectionism on athlete well-being is highly context-dependent. In supportive coaching environments and with resilient mindsets, striving for excellence may be beneficial, but in high-pressure, punitive settings, even “adaptive” high standards can become maladaptive.

2.4 Cultural and Social Influences on Perfectionism in Football

Cultural norms and expectations in sport profoundly influence the development and expression of perfectionism. In traditionally male sports like football, attributes such as emotional resilience and discipline, are often emphasised over openness about mental health (Rice et al., 2016). Consequently, athletes may inhibit distress and internalize perfectionist principles as part of their identity as “elite performers.”

In professional football, the rise of social media and 24/7 public scrutiny has added another layer of pressure. Mistakes on the pitch are no longer private, they are broadcast and debated by spectators, commentators, and journalists. This persistent visibility can increase socially prescribed perfectionism, especially among younger players still developing their identity and confidence (Krämer et al., 2021).

Within football academies that identify from an early age, the system can unintentionally promote perfectionist tendencies. Youth players are continuously evaluated on performance, attitude, and potential. This can instill a belief that perfection is required for success and that any failure risks career prospects (McArdle & Moore, 2012). Without sufficient psychological support or coping strategies, such an environment can result in persistent stress and compromised psychological well-being. Donachie et al. (2019) found that in youth footballers, perfectionistic thoughts before competition predicted an elevated

level of anxiety, anger, and depression, mediating the link between trait perfectionism and emotional distress. This suggests that interventions targeting athletes' cognitive processes, such as how they frame mistakes or pressure, could minimise the harmful effects of perfectionism in sport.

Perfectionism as a personality trait may also foster an extreme work ethic that borders on workaholism. Falco et al. (2014) argue that setting extremely high standards, together with sensitivity to others' evaluations, can drive individuals to become overly committed to work or training. Indeed, socially prescribed perfectionism has been associated with emotional exhaustion and a sense of inefficacy at work, as well as with role conflict and chronic fatigue over time (Childs & Stoeber, 2012). Maladaptive coping strategies used by perfectionists, such as denial or self-blame can further impair their ability to manage stress, ultimately contributing to burnout.

Burnout in athletes is often described by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Flett and Hewitt (2020) note that perfectionism can lead to a work-life imbalance characterised by insufficient rest and neglect of social relationships. Over time, the mismatch between a perfectionist's constant striving for achievement and the realities of sport with its inevitable setbacks, injuries, and losses may precipitate feelings of defeat and withdrawal.

Additionally, certain roles in sport and beyond show higher vulnerability to burnout when combined with perfectionism. Professionals in high-pressure roles with perfectionistic tendencies may experience compounded stress from both the demands of the job and their own perfectionistic tendencies (Pines et al., 1981). The combination of intense external demands and the perfectionist's internal pressures can create a situation where stress exceeds coping resources, setting the stage for burnout.

Cultural and social contexts, from the ethos of a sport to the structure of a team or academy, significantly shape how perfectionism affects athletes. High-performance football environments can unintentionally foster maladaptive perfectionism by rewarding flawless performance and harshly punishing mistakes. Recognizing these influences is crucial for developing strategies to support athletes, such as fostering team cultures that encourage

learning from mistakes and providing mental health resources that address both individual and systemic pressures.

2.5 Emotions related to perfectionism

2.5.1 Fear of failure

The fear of failure has been identified as a core motivational factor underlying perfectionism, particularly in competitive sport settings (Jackson, 2017). Perfectionistic beliefs activate cognitive patterns that enhance sensitivity to mistakes and reinforce self-evaluative fears. Frost and Henderson (1991) described this as a severe influence, where athletes' desire to avoid errors often undermines enjoyment and performance. Perfectionistic athletes tend to experience intense anxiety about making mistakes or disappointing others, which can diminish confidence and impair focus during competition. Early research by Stoeber and Becker (2008) found that, among football players, perfectionistic strivings were positively associated with optimism and achievement motivation, whereas perfectionistic concerns were positively associated with fear of failure. Similarly, Sagar and Stoeber (2009) reported that athletes high in perfectionistic concerns exhibited greater fear of humiliation and embarrassment, while those with stronger perfectionistic strivings showed lower fear levels. These findings suggest that not all perfectionist tendencies are consistently harmful; under certain conditions, striving for excellence may coexist with resilience to failure-related anxiety.

Recent evidence has enhanced understanding of this relationship by identifying fear of failure as a key mechanism linking perfectionism to adverse psychological outcomes. Sagar and Jowett (2015) found that controlling coach–athlete relationships intensified athletes' fear of failure, particularly in those with high perfectionistic concerns. Similarly, Correia and Rosado (2019) demonstrated that young footballers who perceived mistakes as unacceptable showed greater fear responses and lower enjoyment. Hill (2020) further established that fear of failure partially affects the relationship between perfectionism and burnout, suggesting that this fear acts as a psychological bridge through which perfectionism contributes to exhaustion and reduced well-being. Recent longitudinal findings reinforce this pattern, showing that athletes who chronically fear failure are at greater risk of emotional strain and diminished motivation over time (Kuchar & Hill, 2023). Collectively, these findings

indicate that fear of failure is not just a consequence of perfectionism but a central process through which perfectionistic tendencies can put down athletes' mental health and long-term performance.

2.5.2 Stress

Stress refers to an individual's psychological and physiological response to perceived pressure or challenge, often arising when personal resources are deemed insufficient to meet situational demands (Mind, 2022). In football, success depends heavily on performance outcomes, which exposes players to constant evaluation and pressure to win. Stress in football can come from multiple sources including coaching expectations, performance feedback, opposition behaviour, and environmental conditions all of which interact with athletes' personal characteristics. Notably, the presence of perfectionistic traits can intensify stress perceptions, as perfectionistic players tend to explain minor setbacks or criticism as personal failures.

Excessive stress has significant implications for athletes' physical and psychological functioning. It can disrupt sleep patterns essential for recovery, impair concentration and decision-making, and reduce reaction speed during competition (Arnold et al., 2017). More recent research suggests that stress responses in football are not purely situational but are also influenced by personality factors. Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) argued that athletes face constant performance pressure in high-stakes competitions, while Hill et al. (2018) found that perfectionistic concerns predicted a high stress response of external conditions. This indicates that psychological tendencies, such as perfectionism, can be as influential as environmental demands in determining stress levels. Importantly, moderate stress may enhance focus and motivation, unmanaged stress often contributes to emotional exhaustion and performance decline (Arnold & Fletcher, 2021).

Recent studies highlight the interaction between perfectionism, stress, and coping. Madigan and Hill (2023) demonstrated that athletes high in perfectionistic concerns tend to appraise stressors as more threatening, leading to elevated anxiety and burnout risk. On the other hand, those with higher perfectionistic strivings may experience stress as a challenge rather than a threat, suggesting an adaptive function when balanced. Furthermore, interventions promoting mindfulness and cognitive restructuring have been shown to lessen the negative

effects of perfectionism on stress regulation and well-being (Birrer & Morgan, 2022). Overall, these findings reinforce that while stress is an inevitable aspect of elite football, its impact depends heavily on how athletes interpret and manage it a process strongly influenced by perfectionistic tendencies.

2.6 Burnout

Burnout is a growing mental health concern among athletes, with research indicating negative impacts on performance, relationships, and overall well-being (Madigan et al., 2022). According to Maslach and Leiter (2019), burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome developing as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal challenges on the job or any activity. The football environment is often unforgiving, with players constantly assessed, evaluated, and at risk of being cut from squads. This pressure can foster perfectionistic tendencies that increase vulnerability to burnout and depression, especially in academy and early-career footballers (Smith et al., 2018).

While some earlier research suggested perfectionism could occasionally reduce the risk against burnout under very specific circumstances of high personal standards combined with strong coping skills (Flett & Hewitt, 2016), more recent longitudinal studies consistently link maladaptive perfectionism with higher burnout risk. Fu et al. (2025) provides strong evidence that self-oriented perfectionism is not just correlated but predictive of subsequent increases in athlete burnout. In that study, self-oriented perfectionism at the start of a season significantly predicted greater burnout symptoms at later follow-ups, and importantly, there was no evidence that burnout led to increased perfectionism like the causal direction appeared to be from perfectionism to burnout. Fu et al. (2025) also identified loneliness as a key mediator where higher self-oriented perfectionism led to increased feelings of loneliness and social disconnection, which in turn were associated with greater burnout. This finding suggests that athletes with excessively self-imposed standards may withdraw or feel isolated from others, and that this social isolation make worse the burnout process. Such evidence strengthens the argument that maladaptive perfectionism is a significant risk factor for athlete burnout, operating in part through emotional and social mechanisms.

Football has often been characterized as a profession in which players are expected to perform at exceptional levels constantly (Mellick, 2017). Studies indicate that footballers report elevated levels of anxiety and depression relative to the general population (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Recent surveys also show that feelings of burnout and psychological distress remain prevalent among professional players despite growing awareness of mental health in sport (Gouttebarga et al., 2019). This suggests that structural factors such as short career spans, injury risk, and job instability continue to increase mental health risks in football.

Maslach and Jackson (1986) provided a framework for understanding burnout in the workplace, identifying emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and depersonalization as the three core dimensions. In sports, Raedeke and Smith (2001) adapted these ideas to the athlete context, defining burnout in terms of exhaustion, reduced achievement, and devaluation of the sport. Athletes suffering burnout may feel drained of energy, view themselves as inadequate, and become negatively detached from their sport.

Sport psychologists have pointed out that general burnout theories did not fully capture the sporting context, leading to sport-specific models like Smith's (1986) cognitive-affective model of burnout. Smith's model frames burnout as essentially a chronic stress response, it suggests that when situational demands high expectations from coaches, fans, or oneself, chronically exceed an athlete's perceived resources to cope, the resulting stress can lead to burnout symptoms over time. In this model, an athlete's personality and motivational factors influence how they appraise stress and whether they cope effectively to burnout. Not every athlete who experiences stress will develop burnout (Gustafsson et al., 2011), but those with certain tendencies like perfectionism or poor coping are at higher risk.

Athlete burnout has drawn increasing empirical focus over the past decade. Correlational studies and meta-analyses have demonstrated a robust relationship between perfectionistic tendencies and burnout (Hill & Curran, 2016). Longitudinal evidence goes further to show that perfectionism can precede and predict burnout in athletes (Madigan & Stoeber, 2016), with researchers delving into the processes underlying this relationship. Coping styles have been identified as a potential factor: maladaptive perfectionists often employ poor coping strategies such as avoidance or rumination that accelerate burnout, whereas more adaptive

perfectionists might use problem-solving or support-seeking to safeguard against stress (Hill et al., 2010).

Athlete burnout arises from multiple factors, including high-performance demands, intensive training loads, and maladaptive perfectionistic cognitions (Auer et al., 2020). It has been shown that negative perfectionism increases athletes' mental distress and sense of disempowerment, especially when it is associated with worries about errors or outside expectations (Volkers, 2021). It is significantly associated with psychological characteristics and the social context of athletes' lives. Burnout is a multifaceted issue where perfectionism and personality factors on one hand, and environmental factors on the other, jointly contribute to an athlete's burnout risk. A recent study by Ji et al. (2025) illustrates this interplay between individual and environmental factors. They discovered that the athletes perceived fit with their team moderated this relationship. When athletes felt a strong alignment with their team's values and felt supported within the team, the negative impact of a poor sport-life balance on burnout was significantly reduced. A supportive team environment where players feel they "belong" can help the effects of external stress on burnout. This finding underscores the importance of team culture and organizational support aligning with Person-Environment Fit Theory in protecting athletes' well-being.

Preventing burnout in football requires addressing both personal and contextual risk factors. Maladaptive perfectionism, fear of failure, and ineffective coping strategies on the personal side, combined with factors like sport-life imbalance, lack of social support, and harsh team climates on the contextual side, create the path for burnout. Interventions focused on reshaping perfectionistic thinking, improving coping skills, and fostering a healthier team culture are therefore essential for preventing burnout and protecting players' mental health.

Eccles et al. (2025) have highlighted the value of cognitive recovery and detachment. Professional athletes who deliberately "switch off" from sport during their downtime through adequate sleep and engaging in relaxing off-field activities can replenish their psychological resources and are less likely to experience chronic mental fatigue. By contrast, athletes who remain preoccupied with their sport even when physically resting may continue to accumulate mental exhaustion, as worrying about performance can be draining even off the field. Thus, incorporating mental rest strategies teaching athletes the

importance of truly disconnecting from performance pressures at times is a key component of burnout prevention programs.

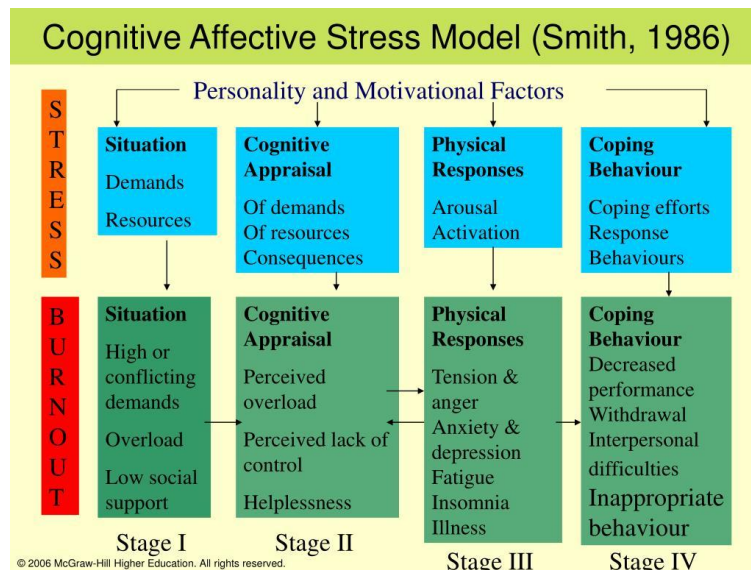


Figure 2.2: Smith's (1986) cognitive-affective model

2.7 Mental Health

The World Health Organization (2014) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community.” In general populations, mental health disorders are common, for instance, about one in four people will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime (Department of Health, 2011). Within football, mental health education and awareness can be particularly beneficial by helping players, coaches, and support staff to identify issues like maladaptive perfectionism early, foster resilience, and implement coping techniques to protect well-being and performance.

Football, the world’s most popular sport, imposes distinct psychological demands on its athletes that set it apart from many other elite sports. Unlike individual sports where outcomes rest primarily on personal performance, footballers operate in highly visible team settings. Mistakes are often amplified in front of large audiences, scrutinized by media, and debated by global fans online. Research shows that professional footballers experience

similar or even higher rates of mental health issues compared to the general population, despite their peak physical fitness and access to medical resources (Rice et al., 2016).

Several career factors unique to football contribute to psychological strain. The limited duration of a playing career (often 8–12 years, with prime performance in the mid-20s to early 30s) creates a constant sense of urgency (Hautzinger & Beckmann, 2016). Athletes know their window for success and financial security is short, which can breed anxiety. Those without long-term contracts or regular playing time may experience chronic insecurity about their future, which is linked to elevated anxiety and depression (Torregrosa et al., 2015). Approaching retirement or being in contract uncertainty is significantly associated with psychological distress among footballers.

Injury is another major factor affecting mental health in football. Beyond the physical demands, injuries can shake an athlete's identity and self-worth, as so much of their self-concept is tied to their role on the team. Long-term injuries have been found to increase risk of depression, anxiety, and even substance misuse, some studies report prevalence of mental health issues up to three times higher in injured athletes than in uninjured peers (Gouttebauge et al., 2015). Injured players often feel isolated when separated from the team during recovery, which can worsen negative psychological outcomes (Podlog & Eklund, 2007).

Career transitions also pose challenges. Transfers to new clubs (often in different countries) disrupt social networks and family life. Adapting to new languages, cultures, and expectations can increase loneliness and uncertainty (Aquilina, 2013). Young players who move abroad early face particular vulnerabilities, juggling developmental challenges with elite competition. The pressure to prove oneself during these transitions can intensify stress, especially when combined with homesickness and identity trouble.

Perhaps one of the most significant overarching issues in football's mental health landscape is the culture of masculinity and stigma. The sport has historically embraced masculine norms that emphasize toughness and emotional restraint. While these traits can foster resilience, they also discourage players from acknowledging or addressing psychological problems (Bauman, 2016). Studies show that athletes frequently underreport symptoms of distress because they worry about appearing weak, or harming their reputation (Christensen

et al., 2014). This stigma is especially pronounced in men's football, where mental resilience is often conflated with silent endurance of any psychological pain. Although in recent years some high-profile players have spoken out about their experiences with depression and anxiety, challenging the old narrative stigma remains a formidable barrier to seeking help (Henriksen et al., 2020).

With these observations, a recent qualitative study by McLoughlin and Arnold (2025) shed light on how stigma and cultural norms impact help-seeking among athletes. Using a reflective "letter to my younger self" method, they found that many elite athletes tend to "bottle up" their emotions as a way to protect themselves and maintain resilience. These athletes often failed to notice the signs and symptoms of their own mental health struggles and were reluctant to seek support until problems became severe. Participants noted that despite improvements in the availability of sport psychology support in recent years, access remains limited and often insufficient to meet the psychological needs of athletes and sometimes inaccessible. Critically, McLoughlin and Arnold (2025) highlighted that athletes are individuals and should be treated as such one-size-fits-all approaches don't work and that the sporting environment needs to develop greater cultural competency and openness regarding mental health.

Support services must be tailored to individual needs, and organizations must foster a culture where seeking help is normalized rather than stigmatized. The study's findings led to recommendations for providing athletes with earlier and more tailored support, as well as creating an environment that proactively reduces stigma through education and confidential services. These insights underscore that stigma continues to represent a significant obstacle to help-seeking in sport, resounding other evidence that athletes fear being seen as weak or harming their careers by admitting to mental health issues. Even as awareness grows, cultural change is needed so that footballers feel safe to access the help they need without judgment. Addressing this issue will require not only educating players, but also engaging coaches, managers, and institutions in promoting a supportive atmosphere.

The structural and organizational environment of football also influences mental health outcomes. There is considerable variation in the resources clubs dedicate to psychological support. Top-tier teams often have sport psychologists and player welfare officers on staff, whereas players in lower divisions or in smaller football nations may have little to no access

to mental health professionals (Gouttebarga et al., 2019). This inequity highlights the necessity of interventions that reach athletes at all levels of the game, not just those in elite clubs with ample resources. It underpins the importance of broad educational programs and support networks via players' unions or federations to ensure no athlete is left struggling in silence.

Despite the challenges outlined, there are signs of progress. Organizations like FIFPRO (the international players' union) and national football associations have begun implementing initiatives to raise awareness, provide educational workshops, and improve access to confidential support services (UEFA, 2025). The impact of these programs depends on their consistent integration into club and league structures rather than isolated, one-off events. Continuous mental health education and readily available support can help footballers manage the unique psychological pressures associated with their sport more effectively.

2.8 Educational Interventions

Educational interventions in sports seek to improve the psychological challenges footballers encounter, especially those related to perfectionism. In professional football, characterised by intense performance demands and constant public analysis, such interventions are essential for sustaining mental health and resilience. Instead of striving to remove perfectionism completely, effective programmes emphasise the identification of its adaptive and maladaptive aspects, providing athletes with strategies to reduce its potential negative effects while maintaining high performance standards.

Education acts as a catalyst for dismantling mental health stigma and promoting a more informed society. Structured learning environments provide students with information that clarifies mental illnesses and promotes proactive management strategies. The integration of mental health education into school curricula fosters the development of emotional intelligence, coping skills, and resilience among students from an early age, resulting in notable enhancements in student well-being (Kutcher et al., 2016). Educators are essential in promoting mental health awareness within the student population. Equipping individuals with training to recognise signs of emotional distress and provide suitable guidance can enhance student outcomes.

Programmes have effectively equipped educators with the skills necessary to support students experiencing mental health challenges (Kelly et al., 2011). Mental health awareness involves the identification, understanding, and regulation of psychological well-being. The ability to recognise symptoms of mental health disorders, seek appropriate assistance, and offer support to individuals in distress is included. Lee and Thompson (2023) investigated the efficacy of digital learning platforms in advancing mental health awareness and determined that online mental health courses substantially improve mental health literacy among various age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. Barbara (2022) emphasised the significance of mental health education in the workplace, noting that organisations that integrate mental health training into their professional development programmes observe decreased absence, increased job satisfaction, and heightened productivity. Patel and Kim (2019) introduced the concept of "Holistic Mental Health Education", which rise above conventional classroom learning to include psychological well-being across multiple life domains.

Effective integration of mental health education requires collaboration among policymakers, educators, and professionals to secure funding, policy support, and enhanced awareness. Enhancing mental health awareness in education requires increased financial resources for teacher training, hiring mental health professionals, and improving digital tools (Fazel et al., 2014). Mental health topics such as stress management and resilience ought to be integrated into school curricula (Weare & Nind, 2011). Collaborations with NGOs and healthcare providers can enhance the quality of mental health services in educational institutions.

2.9 Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Malta

Cultural and contextual aspects must be considered while adopting educational initiatives. In Malta, similar to other smaller football nations, the resources allocated for mental health care within clubs may be constrained, and the levels of mental health knowledge among stakeholders may differ evidently. The stigma associated with mental health continues to delay progress, especially in male-dominated sports such as football, where attributes like

emotional resilience and independence are frequently prioritised above vulnerability (Rice et al., 2016).

Although there is an increasing volume of research, the majority of studies on perfectionism have been performed in larger countries such as the UK, USA, and Canada, predominantly utilising quantitative methodologies (Donachie, 2022). This reveals a deficiency in comprehending the dynamics of perfectionism within smaller football environments, such as Malta, and underscores the necessity for further qualitative insights that reflect athletes' lived experiences.

To tackle these problems, interventions in Malta may require adaptation to the magnitude and framework of the local football system. This may entail incorporating mental health courses into existing training programs, providing bilingual resources, and guaranteeing culturally appropriate delivery. Cooperation among clubs, educational institutions, and the Malta Football Association could facilitate the integration of mental health education into youth development programmes, guaranteeing that players receive support from the onset of their careers.

Malta has achieved substantial advancements in enhancing the health of its general public. The Maltese healthcare system has made significant advancements in reducing preventable death and sustaining minimal levels of unmet needs. Significant advancements in key health indicators have occurred during the past decade, positioning Malta well in comparison to other European nations (Sammut, 2019).

Educational mental health interventions for Maltese football must consider the country's size, resource availability, and the sporting culture. Malta's national health strategies focus on transitioning care to community settings and enhancing literacy. This framework aligns with proposals for football-specific education, as evidenced by the prioritisation of mental health and prevention in the National Mental Health Strategy 2020–2030 and the National Health Systems Strategy 2023–2033 (Camilleri, 2021). Integrating club and academy workshops into this national framework will enhance feasibility and sustainability. (Donachie, 2022).

Players' unions and governing bodies are initiating practical entry points at the sport level. The Malta Football Players Association (MFPA) has launched complimentary, club-orientated

information sessions that integrate first aid, integrity, and mental health awareness and skills. Its strategy for 2023–2026 specifically aims to address stigma and offers personalised support to players in need of assistance. The MFPA's 2024/25 annual report emphasises these sessions as a consistent opportunity, indicating a pathway to rapidly enhance mental health literacy among teams and personnel. Integrating perfectionism content, such as distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive striving and reframing mistakes, within the current MFPA delivery channel presents a straightforward approach to implementation.

The cultural landscape of Maltese football may reflect broader masculine norms commonly observed within European football environments, where emotional toughness and self-reliance are often prioritised over help-seeking behaviours. In smaller football communities such as Malta, the close-knit nature of relationships among players, coaches, and administrators may further intensify concerns surrounding reputation, social judgment, and fear of failure. Recent Maltese research has highlighted how stigma, limited psychological support, and concerns surrounding public perception may discourage footballers from openly discussing mental health difficulties or seeking professional support (Attard & Muscat, 2025). Similarly, Maltese football coaches found that mental health awareness and support structures within local football settings remain limited, while cultural expectations surrounding resilience and toughness continue to influence attitudes towards psychological well-being (Muscat et al., 2024). These dynamics can contribute to socially prescribed perfectionism and discourage athletes from openly discussing psychological difficulties. The sporting cultures characterised by strong masculine expectations may increase stigma surrounding mental health and reduce athletes' willingness to seek support (Gulliver et al., 2012). Furthermore, professional footballers have identified limited social support, injury pressures, and performance expectations as important contributors to psychological distress (Gouttebarga et al., 2015).

Design implications for Malta emphasise the necessity of culturally sensitive and resource-efficient methodologies. Interventions must be normalised through the involvement of trusted educators, such as MFPA professors and senior players, whose credibility can lessen barriers to engagement. Incorporating brief modules on mental health and perfectionism into the coaches continuing professional development requirements and academy schedules would facilitate integration without imposing additional problems on clubs, especially if

complemented by the accessible UEFA resources. To enhance accessibility, materials must be provided in both Maltese and English, utilising brief sessions scheduled seasonally to align with the training and competition cycles.

Educational content should extend beyond general mental health awareness to specifically address perfectionism, providing athletes with sport-specific coping strategies such as reframing mistakes, focusing on process-oriented goals, and developing self-compassion during post-match evaluations. According to Muscat et al. (2024), mental health literacy and psychological support structures within Maltese football environments remain limited, highlighting the importance of implementing educational initiatives that equip athletes with practical coping mechanisms and emotional regulation strategies. Education should also be integrated with accessible monitoring and referral pathways, including confidential check-ins and clearly established routes to professional psychological support, in line with broader national mental health strategies.

Furthermore, interventions should acknowledge workload such as fixture congestion, performance expectations, and travel demands, positioning mental health as an issue influenced not only by individual coping capacities but also by systemic and organisational conditions. Attard and Muscat (2025) found that stigma surrounding mental health, fear of judgment, and cultural expectations related to toughness and resilience continue to discourage help-seeking behaviours among Maltese footballers. This further emphasises the need for football organisations to adopt preventative and educational approaches that normalise psychological support and promote athlete well-being within the Maltese football context.

2.10 Conclusion

Perfectionism can serve as a motivational asset in football. Its maladaptive form is closely linked to burnout and other mental health challenges. The literature emphasises that perfectionist concerns, along with the distinctive challenges of football such as brief career durations, recurrent injuries, relentless public scrutiny, and cultural stigma, put players more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue. Despite increased recognition of mental health in sports, considerable obstacles persist.

Stigma, underreporting, and restricted access to psychological treatment persistently hinder effective help-seeking, especially in smaller football systems where resources are limited and confidentiality is more challenging to ensure. Educational strategies, such as mental health literacy programmes, coach training, and peer-led efforts, demonstrate significant promise to tackle these difficulties. Nevertheless, the literature provides limited information regarding their long-term efficacy and studies relevant to football, particularly in smaller country contexts such as Malta. These deficiencies emphasise the requirement for further examination of the adaptation of educational treatments within football contexts to mitigate the adverse impacts of maladaptive perfectionism, safeguard against burnout, and foster enduring mental health.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework supporting the study, detailing the philosophical orientation, research design, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis procedures adopted to explore the relationships among perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in Maltese professional footballers. The methodology was guided by an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative research design, as this approach best facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences and meanings within their sociocultural context. Each section of this chapter explains and justifies the methodological decisions made, highlighting how they align with the study's aims, ethical considerations, and commitment to transparency and trustworthiness.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

This study explored the relationships among perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in Maltese professional footballers while examining the perceived role of educational interventions in reducing psychological distress and promoting well-being. This focus comes from growing concern regarding athlete mental health, as footballers have been identified as experiencing increased levels of psychological strain than the general population (Gouttebarga et al., 2015). Although perfectionism has been researched in sport psychology, the majority of studies adopt a quantitative perspective and focus primarily on larger footballing nations such as the United Kingdom and Canada (Donachie, 2022). These studies provide valuable statistical evidence but often disregard the lived experiences of athletes, particularly in smaller and culturally distinct contexts like Malta, where social and organisational pressures may differently shape athletes' mental well-being.

To address this gap, the study explores how footballers perceive and experience perfectionism, considering both its adaptive and maladaptive dimensions, and how these traits may contribute to burnout, disengagement, and psychological distress. It further investigates footballers' perceptions of mental health awareness and stigma, identifying the barriers that may prevent help-seeking and the coping mechanisms athletes employ to manage competitive pressures. Additionally, the research examines how footballers perceive educational and psychological support interventions including mental health literacy programmes, workshops, and psychological skills training and the potential benefits these

may offer in fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and overall well-being (Purcell et al., 2019).

The findings of this study were analysed to develop a clearer understanding of the strategies and educational interventions that may enhance awareness and understanding of mental health within football environments. These insights may assist coaches, clubs, and other sporting stakeholders in better supporting athletes experiencing psychological difficulties such as burnout, anxiety, and maladaptive perfectionism. In addition, the study aims to contribute to the development of more psychologically supportive football cultures within the Maltese context. The primary research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- 1) How do footballers define perfectionism and what aspect of perfectionism are mostly linked to burnout in footballers?
- 2) What educational interventions, if any, have players experienced that have helped equip them to deal with the psychological aspect challenges of being an athlete?
- 3) How can educational interventions in the form of sport psychology sessions, coach training and athlete well-being workshops, help in mitigating the negative effects of perfectionism?
- 4) How can such educational interventions be integrated into football clubs, sports schools and sport career development programmes in schools awareness to support footballers' well-being and resilience?

Through this exploration, the study aimed to produce contextually relevant insights and develop practical recommendations for integrating education-based mental health support within Maltese football structures. Given the exploratory and interpretivist nature of the research, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was chosen as the most suitable method. This approach enabled participants to express their experiences and perspectives in depth while allowing for flexibility in exploring emerging themes. It also aligns with the study's philosophical stance that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent, allowing for the interpretation of footballers' experience of perfectionism, burnout and mental health.

3.3 Research Design and Method

The research employed qualitative methods to investigate how footballers experience perfectionism and burnout and their mental health challenges. The study focused on a qualitative perspective because it aimed on understanding participants' subjective experiences and emotional responses rather than producing statistical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research design matches the interpretivist approach because it studies how people construct reality through social interactions while seeking to understand their lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative methods research design enables researchers to study individual and group narratives which provides the necessary depth to understand mental health dynamics in competitive football.

The research used semi-structured interviews as its qualitative method because this strikes a balance between structured and flexible data collection. The researcher chose semi-structured interviews because they enable participants to share detailed personal experiences while allowing the researcher to explore new themes and clarify their meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The research method works best for studying mental health issues because it requires both empathy and trust and flexibility to obtain genuine and honest participant responses (Tamminen et al., 2021). The interview guide used existing research on perfectionism and athlete well-being but maintained flexibility to capture spontaneous participant responses and contextual differences.

The individual interviews created a protected space which allowed footballers to share their thoughts freely while thinking deeply about their experiences. The research method followed reflexive thematic analysis principles, it maintained a direct link between data collection and analysis procedures. The research methods share common characteristics, which include flexible data collection, deep interpretation, and contextual understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to reveal meaningful patterns based on participant experiences.

The research data collection process adhered to both the study's philosophical framework and its ethical standards. The research method produced detailed and genuine information about Maltese footballers' mental states which showed how perfectionism and burnout affect their mental health in the specific Maltese sports environment.

3.4 Research Philosophy

This research is based on an interpretivist paradigm, which argues that reality is socially constructed and that comprehension arises from the subjective interpretations' individuals attribute to their experiences (Bryman, 2016). This perspective is particularly suitable for examining how footballers understand perfectionism, burnout, and mental health, as these are complex and highly personal processes influenced by social, cultural, and organisational factors. The study takes a relativist ontological perspective, acknowledging the presence of numerous realities instead of a singular objective reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Each participant's narrative is regarded as a reasonable interpretation of their experiential reality.

This study is epistemologically based in interpretivism, viewing knowledge as co-constructed through interaction and reflection between the researcher and participant (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This perspective prioritises depth and context above measurement, highlighting the significance of comprehending how meaning is generated rather than quantifying it. Thus, the selection of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis embodies the philosophical principle that knowledge is optimally developed through contact, empathy, and interpretation. The integration of ontology, epistemology, and technique enhances the coherence and integrity of the research design, ensuring that the study accurately reflects footballers' experiences within their distinct sociocultural context.

The study's methodological decisions were informed by the concepts of interpretivism, based on this philosophical background. This paradigm prioritises qualitative methodologies in the research design to highlight understanding participants lived experiences, facilitating depth, reflection, and contextual awareness. The next part outlines the participants, sample methodology, and recruitment protocols employed to include a variety of experiences within Maltese football that these methodological choices align with the interpretivist perspective that knowledge is most effectively generated through discussion, meaning-making, and the collaborative production of understanding between researcher and participant.

3.5 Participants and Sampling

This study focused on male footballers competing in the Maltese Premier League and Challenge league in the season 2025-2026. These athletes are particularly exposed to performance expectations, cultural pressures, and media scrutiny that may contribute to

perfectionism, burnout, and mental health challenges. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling strategy, a non-probability method frequently employed in qualitative, interpretivist research to identify individuals whose lived experiences are most relevant to the study's aims (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach prioritises depth, aligning with the interpretivist principle that meaning is contextually constructed rather than generalisable (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

To ensure diversity and representativeness within the qualitative context, a maximum variation sampling technique was applied, selecting participants across different age ranges, playing positions, and experience levels (Palinkas et al., 2015). This allowed for the identification of both shared and divergent perspectives across players' professional journeys. Recruitment followed a snowball sampling, in which players referred others meeting the inclusion criteria. This approach proved particularly effective within the Maltese football environment, where access to participants often depend on peer endorsement and relational trust (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

A target sample size of 8–12 participants was established, consistent with guidelines for qualitative studies employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18 or above and have a minimum of five years' competitive experience, ensuring sufficient exposure to the professional and psychological demands of elite football. Minors, retired athletes, and amateur players were excluded.

From a critical standpoint, the chosen sampling approach offered several strengths. Purposive and snowball techniques facilitated access to participants with first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon, enabling the collection of rich, detailed data that quantitative methods could not capture. Moreover, the flexible recruitment process promoted trust and openness, crucial for discussing sensitive topics such as mental health. However, the limitations included potential selection bias as participants may share similar networks or perspectives and limited transferability due to the focus on male athletes within a specific cultural context. These limitations were mitigated through maximum variation sampling, reflexive awareness, and transparent reporting of context-specific findings.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their suitability in exploring participants lived experiences and personal interpretations in depth. This method aligns with the study's qualitative and interpretivist framework, which values the subjective meaning individuals attribute to their experiences rather than objective measurement (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Semi-structured interviews enable both structure and flexibility ensuring key topics are consistently addressed while allowing participants to guide the discussion in directions meaningful to them. This approach is particularly well suited to sport psychology research, where athletes' emotional and psychological experiences often unfold in the context-specific ways (Tamminen et al., 2021).

An interview guide was developed from existing literature on perfectionism, burnout, and athlete mental health. It included broad, open-ended questions designed to produce rich narratives while enabling the researcher to use prompts for clarification or deeper exploration. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face depending on the participant's preference and logistical feasibility. To ensure comfort and confidentiality, interviews were conducted in private settings, and informed consent was obtained before audio recording. Field notes were taken to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and reflections after each session. These notes contributed to the reflexive thematic analysis, supporting transparency and interpretive depth.

From a critical standpoint, semi-structured interviews offer several strengths. They allow for an authentic exploration of participants' perspectives, build trust and facilitate the emergence of unanticipated themes (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Moreover, they are adaptable, enabling the researcher to tailor questions dynamically according to participants' responses, which is particularly advantageous when dealing with sensitive topics such as mental health. However, limitations include the potential for interviewer bias and inconsistency in questioning, as well as the reliance on participants' verbal delivery and willingness to share openly (Brinkmann, 2018). Additionally, interviews are time-intensive to conduct and analyse.

Despite these limitations, semi-structured interviews remain the most appropriate data collection method for this study. They provide the flexibility and depth necessary to uncover

the complex interplay between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in the context of Maltese football. This approach ensures that participants' voices remain central, offering insights that are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful.

3.7 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted prior to the primary data collection to assess the feasibility of the interview process and to refine the interview guide. Pilot studies are acknowledged as an essential phase in qualitative research, enabling researchers to clarify unclear questions, resolve logistical issues, and enhance data collection quality before interacting with the complete sample (Polit & Beck, 2017). The pilot interview for this study was conducted with a player who had traits similar to those of the target population. A mutually agreeable time and location were established, and the draft interview protocol based on the literature on perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in sports was used to organise the interview.

The pilot study emphasised multiple areas for enhancement, especially with the clarity and order of questions. The participant's feedback was particularly important in identifying areas where questions could be reworded to eliminate confusion and in suggesting ways to facilitate more comprehensive responses. A question initially focused broadly on mental pressure in football was revised to specifically address experiences of perfectionism and self-criticism, while another question concerning coping strategies was amended to encourage participants to reflect on both personal and educational forms of support they had experienced throughout their careers. In response to this feedback, modifications were implemented to ensure that the questions corresponded with the research aims and were phrased to promote participants' truthful reflection on their experiences. The pilot study confirmed the suitability of the anticipated interview duration (45–60 minutes) and provided the researcher with practical experience in conducting the interview, emphasising the significance of attentive listening and sustaining a conversational flow.

By amending the interview guide, the pilot study enhanced the reliability and credibility of the research design, ensuring that the data collection instrument was both well-structured and tailored to participants' experiences. This initial phase established the foundation for the efficient conduct of the primary interviews, while also enhancing the reliability and

validity of the study by assuring the consistent use of a clear and effective methodology across all participants.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted according to the ethical standards set by the University of Malta, and comprehensive clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee, EDUC-2025-00520, before data collection commenced. Every participant received an information letter outlining the research's goal, the voluntary nature of participation, and the possibility to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was acquired using a consent form that specified the study protocols, potential hazards, and participants' rights as specified by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, including the rights to access, or request the deletion of personal data.

Participants were invited to engage in a semi-structured interview lasting roughly 40 to 60 minutes, scheduled at their convenience, with the option to refuse to answer any question. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with explicit consent. Participants could request to see sections of their transcripts.

Confidentiality was carefully maintained through the use of pseudonyms in transcripts and reports, while any potentially identifiable information, such as club names or playing positions, was removed or modified to minimise the risk of participant identification within the small Maltese football community. Identifiable raw data was encrypted and securely stored offline on a password-protected external drive, while any physical copies were kept in a locked cabinet. Data will be preserved until December 31, 2026, after which it will be securely destroyed.

With regard to the delicate nature of the subjects, it was recognised that participants may encounter distress while addressing perfectionism, burnout, or mental health. In such instances, the interview was suspended or terminated. Participants also received a list of professional and complimentary support resources, including counselling and mental health organisations, to contact if needed, so as to safeguard their well-being. This research aims to safeguard participants' welfare through strong data protection protocols, explicit informed

permission, and supportive frameworks, while upholding the integrity and rigour essential for ethical investigation.

In alignment with the University's ethical standards, all documentation related to ethical approval and participant recruitment is included in the appendices for transparency. The official email confirming ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee is presented in (Appendix 1). Supporting materials including the Participant Information Letter (Appendix 2), Consent Form (Appendix 3), and Interview Questions/Protocol (Appendix 4) are also provided. These documents collectively ensure that participants were fully informed, voluntarily engaged, and ethically protected throughout the research process.

3.9 Data Analysis- The 6-step framework

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This approach was selected for its methodological flexibility and interpretivist orientation, which align with the study's focus on understanding footballers' subjective experiences of perfectionism, burnout, and mental health. Thematic analysis allows for both structured and creative engagement with qualitative data, offering the depth required to explore complex psychological and social phenomena (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun et al., 2021).

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected over other qualitative methods such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis because it offers a balance between structure and interpretive freedom. Whereas grounded theory focuses on theory generation and interpretative phenomenological analysis on individual sense-making, thematic analysis allows for both descriptive and interpretive depth, making it ideal for exploring shared patterns across participants while still valuing individual nuance (Clarke & Braun, 2018)

3.9.1 Familiarisation with the Data:

The researcher deeply engaged with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and reviewing field notes to identify patterns of meaning and tone. During this stage, preliminary reflections and memos were documented to capture early interpretations and connections between participants' experiences.

3.9.2 Generating Initial Codes:

Each transcript was coded manually to highlight meaningful segments of text related to perfectionism, burnout, coping strategies, and support mechanisms. Both semantic codes (explicit ideas) and latent codes (underlying meanings) were generated. A colour-coded system was employed to organise the data efficiently and maintain consistency across participants (Caulfield, 2019).

3.9.3 Searching for Themes:

Codes were then grouped into preliminary themes that reflected broader concepts within the dataset. This stage involved identifying patterns across participants while remaining sensitive to unique individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All related coded extracts were collated under these emerging themes to develop a comprehensive understanding of recurring narratives.

3.9.4 Reviewing Themes:

The initial themes were reviewed and further developed to ensure coherence and relevance. This iterative process involved reviewing whether each theme accurately represented the coded data and the dataset as a whole. Redundant or overlapping themes were merged or removed, ensuring a clear and logically structured thematic map (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

3.9.5 Defining and Naming Themes:

Each theme was then defined clearly to capture its essence and contribution to the overall research question. Concise and descriptive names were assigned to ensure accessibility and conceptual precision (Caulfield, 2019). At this stage, subthemes were also identified to capture nuanced variations within broader thematic categories.

3.9.6 Producing the Report:

The final step involved synthesising the refined themes into a coherent narrative that reflected participants' lived experiences. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate key findings, ensuring that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation. The results were structured to provide a holistic understanding of the

relationships between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within the Maltese football context.

A reflexive stance was maintained throughout the research process, acknowledging that interpretation is co-constructed through the researcher's perspective and engagement with the data. A reflexive journal was used to document analytical decisions, emergent insights, and potential biases, promoting transparency and trustworthiness (Berger, 2015). Thematic conclusions were also subjected to peer debriefing, and themes were checked against original transcripts to ensure consistency and credibility.

While thematic analysis does not aim for statistical generalisability, transferability was enhanced through detailed contextual descriptions and thick data presentation, allowing readers to determine the relevance of the findings to similar sporting environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive thematic analysis thus provided both rigour and flexibility, enabling a nuanced interpretation of footballers' experiences within their cultural and organisational realities.



Figure 3.1: Six-step analysis framework

3.10 Reflexivity

Reflexivity formed a crucial element of this qualitative research, supporting its interpretivist basis and enhancing the credibility and ethical integrity of the results. Reflexivity indicates the continuous critical self-assessment of the researcher's role, assumptions, and impact during the research process (Finlay, 2021). It acknowledges that qualitative information is created through the interaction between researcher and participants, rather than being objectively uncovered, necessitating transparency and self-awareness in all methodological choices.

Reflexivity involved critical reflection on positionality and power dynamics in interactions with participants. The researcher intentionally aimed towards creating an environment of transparency and equity, acknowledging the possible impact of professional experience and perceived authority. Through the development of humility, empathy, and active listening, the researcher guaranteed that participants' perspectives were important in the data interpretation process (Dodgson, 2019).

By incorporating reflexivity at every phase of the research, including design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, the study attained both methodological rigour and ethical transparency. This continuous reflective involvement enabled the researcher to balance an insider perspective with academic objectiveness, generating findings that genuinely reflected participants lived experiences. Ultimately, reflexivity functioned as both a methodological instrument and a moral and epistemological position, enhancing the depth, validity, and authenticity of this interpretivist qualitative research. At all points of the research, the researcher was in contact with the supervisor to discuss the various stages of the study.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and justified the methodological approach adopted to investigate footballers' experiences of perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within the Maltese context. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative design, the implementation of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis ensured a deep exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining methodological and ethical

rigour. Through careful consideration of sampling, reflexivity, and trustworthiness, the chosen methods provided rich, contextually grounded data that align with the study's aims.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and critically discusses the findings from the eight semi-structured interviews conducted with Maltese football players. It explores players' experiences of perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within football, while examining the role of educational support in helping them manage these psychological demands. In addressing the study's research questions, the chapter identifies key patterns within participants' experiences and relates these findings to existing theoretical and empirical literature.

Table 4.1 presents the football-related background of the participants involved in the study. The sample includes players competing in both the Maltese Premier League and Challenge League, with ages ranging from 22 to 33 years. Several participants also had experience representing Malta at youth or senior national team level, allowing for a range of perspectives based on different competitive experiences and career stages.

Footballer	Age	Level of Playing	National Team Level
1 David	22	Premier League	U21
2 Micheal	22	Premier League	U21
3 Joseph	33	Challenge League	Seniors
4 Mark	27	Challenge League	U21
5 Andrew	24	Challenge League	U21
6 Luke	29	Challenge League	U21
7 Daniel	23	Challenge League	U21
8 Nathan	23	Challenge League	U19

Table 4.1: Participation of footballers

The chapter is structured into six interconnected themes that together reflect the complexity of players' experiences. It begins with the dual nature of perfectionism (Theme 1), showing how high standards can act as both a source of motivation and psychological pressure. This is followed by Theme 2, which explores external expectations and fear of judgment within the Maltese football context. Theme 3 then examines how perfectionism and pressure contribute to burnout, while Theme 4 places burnout within wider life demands such as work, education, and identity challenges. Theme 5 focuses on mental health awareness, stigma, and coping strategies, highlighting the gap between

understanding psychological challenges and accessing proper support. Finally, Theme 6 considers the role of education as a protective factor, exploring how structured interventions can help reduce the negative effects identified in earlier themes.

Themes	Sub Themes			
The Dual Nature of Perfectionism	Self-Oriented Perfectionistic Strivings	Perfectionistic Concerns and Self-Criticism	Rumination and Conditional Self-Worth	
Socially Prescribed Expectations and Fear of Judgment	The Maltese Football Culture	Fear of Mistakes and Behavioural Consequences	The Role of Coaches in Shaping Pressure	
The Pathway to Burnout, Perfectionism and Overthinking	Inability to Switch Off	Emotional Exhaustion and Mental Fatigue	Reduced Accomplishment and Motivational Decline	
Burnout Beyond Football- Life Balance, Dual Demands, and Athletic Identity	Dual-Career	Lack of Recovery	Injury and Deselection	
Mental Health Awareness, Stigma, and Informal Coping Strategies	Awareness of Mental Health	Stigma and Cultural Barriers	Selective Help-Seeking and Psychological Safety	Informal Coping Strategies
Education as a Protective Factor	Limited and Reactive Psychological Support	The Value of Early and Preventative Education	The Role of Coaches and Systems in Delivering Support	

Table 4.2: Interview themes and sub-themes

This study presents findings as lived experiences shaped by individual perspectives and the social and sporting context in which participants operate. Interpretivism recognises that reality is socially constructed, with individuals assigning meaning to their experiences based on personal and contextual influences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The chapter contributes to the field of Education by emphasising the importance of equipping athletes with the knowledge, skills, and support systems necessary to manage psychological demands effectively, thereby promoting both performance and long-term well-being.

4.2 Theme 1: The Dual Nature of Perfectionism

This theme explores how footballers defined and experienced perfectionism, highlighting its dual role as both a performance-enhancing characteristic and a source of psychological strain. In this study, perfectionism is not inherently maladaptive, rather, it operates as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by individual interpretation, environmental demands, and performance expectations. While high personal standards were associated with motivation, commitment, and continuous improvement, they were also closely linked to self-criticism, rumination, and emotional fatigue experienced by the footballers.

4.2.1 Self-Oriented Perfectionistic Strivings

David, Micheal, Luke, Daniel and Nathan described perfectionism as an internally driven pursuit of excellence. This directly addresses Research Question 1, as it is evident from participants' accounts that footballers primarily define perfectionism as self-imposed striving rather than externally imposed pressure. For many, setting high standards was viewed as essential within the competitive demands of football. Micheal explained that even after strong performances, expectations were immediately elevated, stating that:

Even if I play the best game of my life, I still think I can improve. I always look at the things I could have done better instead of focusing on what went well.

Sometimes it feels like no performance is ever enough because I immediately start thinking about the next thing I need to improve on.

He further reflected that his focus was consistently directed toward identifying areas for improvement, suggesting that satisfaction was rarely achieved. Similarly, Luke described perfectionism as the pursuit of excellence taken to an extreme. He said:

You always want to be better every time and you keep pushing yourself more and more. At first it helps because it motivates you, but sometimes it becomes too much mentally because you feel like you can never be satisfied with yourself.

This highlighted how striving can extend beyond healthy ambition. He referred to constantly trying to be “better every time” and “pushing yourself more and more,” indicating that the expectation to improve is continuous rather than situational. This perspective was reinforced by Daniel, who emphasised that he consistently raises his standards, even following strong performances. Collectively, these illustrate how striving for perfection is normalised within football environments, where continuous improvement is both expected and reinforced.

These findings support the work of Smith et al. (2022), who define perfectionism as a multidimensional construct linked to a variety of important outcomes. Similarly, existing research distinguishes between adaptive perfectionistic strivings and maladaptive perfectionistic concerns, with the latter more strongly associated with psychological distress and burnout (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Hill & Curran, 2016).

However, while striving for excellence was initially framed as beneficial, participants’ accounts indicate that this process was rarely experienced as purely positive. Instead, high standards were often accompanied by ongoing pressure to maintain or exceed previous performances. This supports recent research suggesting that perfectionistic strivings and concerns frequently coexist rather than operate independently (Gotwals et al., 2022; Stoeber, 2023). Critically, this creates a tension where the same characteristic that drives performance may also contribute to psychological strain.

4.2.2 Perfectionistic Concerns and Self-Criticism

This tension was particularly evident in how players responded to mistakes. David explained that he would replay mistakes for several days, reflecting on what he should have done differently. Similarly, Nathan added that:

After a poor performance, I would replay the moment repeatedly before attempting to refocus. Even when the match is over, I still keep thinking about what I did wrong and what I should have done differently. Sometimes it stays in my head for a long time before I can finally move on from it.

These comments demonstrate that athletes' responses to mistakes are not always proportionate to actual performance, but are shaped by internal standards and expectations. In addition, Andrew described:

I get frustrated easily, even when I have actually done well. Most of the time I focus more on the mistakes I made rather than the good things in my performance. Even if others tell me I played well, I still think about the things I could have done better.

This highlights how perfectionistic thinking can distort performance evaluation and reduce satisfaction. However, Mark believes that football players are not perfect and that everyone can make mistakes. He stated that "we are all human, and we all make mistakes. Sometimes things don't go as planned, and I have bad performances." This suggests that athletes may rely on excessively high or unrealistic standards when judging their performance, leading to a persistent sense of underachievement regardless of objective success.

This can be explained by cognitive models of perfectionism, which propose that individuals with high perfectionistic concerns engage in biased self-evaluation, focusing disproportionately on mistakes while discounting positive outcomes (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Egan et al., 2011). As a result, performance is interpreted through a negative cognitive filter, where even successful performances are perceived as inadequate. This process contributes to ongoing dissatisfaction and reinforces self-critical thinking patterns.

These findings also align with research indicating that the perceived discrepancy between actual performance and personal standards is a key predictor of negative affect, rather than performance level itself (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Hill & Curran, 2016). It reflects perfectionistic concerns, characterised by fear of mistakes, doubts about actions, and harsh self-criticism (Stoeber, 2012). In this context, it is evident that emotional responses are shaped more by how athletes interpret their performance than by objective outcomes.

This is important because it suggests that perfectionistic athletes may remain vulnerable to frustration and emotional fatigue even when performing well, limiting the protective effects typically associated with success. Therefore, without appropriate psychological strategies to regulate expectations and promote more balanced self-evaluation, athletes may experience reduced satisfaction, increased pressure, and a heightened risk of burnout over time.

4.2.3 Rumination and Conditional Self-Worth

A central feature of participants' experiences was the presence of rumination, particularly following mistakes or poor performances. Players consistently described difficulty disengaging from football-related thoughts, with negative reflections persisting long after matches and training sessions. David described becoming mentally exhausted due to constant overthinking, recounting:

I would overthink it for several days after underperforming. Even after training or matches finished, I would still keep thinking about the mistakes I made and what I could have done differently. Sometimes it became mentally tiring because I found it difficult to switch off and stop analysing my performance.

Joseph also explained that:

Mistakes stay on my mind for a while. Even when I try to move on from a game, I still replay certain moments in my head and think about how I should have reacted differently. It can affect your confidence because you keep focusing on the negatives instead of letting it go.

This finding aligns with literature identifying rumination as a key mechanism linking maladaptive perfectionism to burnout (Madigan et al., 2022). Research has shown that repetitive and intrusive thought patterns can prolong emotional responses to failure and increase vulnerability to psychological distress (Smith et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2023). However, this study extends existing research by illustrating how rumination manifests in football-specific contexts, where errors are highly visible and perceived to have significant consequences for selection, reputation, and self-worth. It is evident that such environments

may intensify cognitive engagement with mistakes, increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion.

Importantly, rumination was not only evident after performance, but also influenced behaviour during competition. Some participants described adopting a more cautious style of play, prioritising error avoidance over expression. David explicitly described playing “not to disappoint,” rather than with confidence and freedom. This reflects a shift from intrinsic motivation toward fear-based regulation, where performance becomes driven by avoidance of failure rather than pursuit of mastery. This aligns with self-determination theory, which suggests that such motivational shifts reduce autonomy, enjoyment, and long-term engagement (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Participants also highlighted how football performance influenced their emotional state beyond the sporting context. Andrew tries to control his emotions separately, where as much as possible he keeps the job and football separate and not let one affect the other. He express that “ instead, I use one as a getaway from the other, which helps me refocus and perform at a better standard.” On the other hand, Micheal explained that underperformance made him feel “more angry or not interested in other stuff,” indicating that negative performances affected his broader daily functioning. Similarly, Luke described how both positive and negative performances significantly influenced his mood, suggesting that football outcomes played a central role in shaping his emotional well-being.

These experiences reflect conditional self-worth, where self-esteem becomes dependent on performance outcomes (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). Research suggests that athletes who base their self-worth on achievement are more vulnerable to emotional instability and burnout (Madigan et al., 2022). The present findings reinforce this relationship by demonstrating how performance outcomes extend beyond the pitch, influencing overall psychological well-being.

This can be explained by identity-based models, which suggest that when self-worth is heavily invested in one domain, setbacks can disproportionately affect emotional well-being (Flett & Hewitt, 2005). The impact of this is significant, as athletes may experience fluctuations in mood, motivation, and engagement based on performance rather than a stable sense of self.

In addressing Research Question 1, it is evident that footballers primarily define perfectionism as a self-driven pursuit of excellence. However, the elements most strongly associated with burnout were not high standards themselves, but the accompanying processes of self-criticism, rumination, and conditional self-worth. This supports existing literature identifying perfectionistic concerns as key predictors of burnout in athletes (Hill & Curran, 2016; Gustafsson et al., 2017).

Educational strategies that promote self-compassion, reflective practice, and effective coping mechanisms may help athletes maintain high performance while reducing vulnerability to burnout (Mosewich et al., 2019; Kuchar et al., 2023). Embedding such approaches within football development programmes may therefore support both performance and long-term well-being.

4.3 Theme 2: Socially Prescribed Expectations and Fear of Judgment in a Small Football Culture

This theme explores how externally imposed expectations shaped footballers' experiences of pressure, perfectionism, and psychological strain. While Theme 1 focused on internally driven standards, this theme highlights the role of socially prescribed perfectionism, in which players perceive that others demand perfection in performance and that acceptance is often contingent on success. Participants indicate that these pressures were substantially intensified by the close-knit nature of Maltese football, contributing to fear of mistakes, heightened self-monitoring, and emotional strain. This aligns with findings by Chroni et al. (2026), who highlight how dense relational networks and culturally reinforced expectations of loyalty and commitment reputation in Mediterranean sport contexts can normalise pressure, discourage disclosure, and intensify athletes' psychological burden.

4.3.1 The Maltese Football Culture

A particularly significant feature of the Maltese context was the lack of anonymity, with David explaining that:

Everyone knows everyone in Maltese football, so performances are quickly recognised and discussed. If you play badly, people will talk about it immediately, whether it is teammates, coaches, supporters, or even people outside football. It feels like every game is a judgment because one performance can completely change how people see you.

Thus, that performances are quickly recognised and discussed within the football community, suggesting that each performance carries implications beyond the match itself. Mark stressed that:

Even a small mistake can become the talk of the week in Malta. People speak about it everywhere, whether it is on social media, at training, or even outside football. Because the football community is so small, it sometimes feels like every mistake follows you for days after the game.

It is evident that players are not only concerned with their own performance, but also with how it is perceived by others, increasing pressure to consistently meet expectations. In the present study, these processes appear to be intensified by the specific characteristics of the Maltese football context. As highlighted by Daniel, where “word spreads fast,” both positive and negative performances are rapidly communicated across a closely connected football network, making it difficult for players to escape judgment or redefine their reputation over time. Andrew also explained:

After a poor performance, I feel like people already made their opinion before you even get another chance to play. Sometimes it feels like one bad game stays with you because people continue talking about it and judging you before you can prove yourself again.

Such experiences closely align with findings by Muscat et al., (2020), who describe Malta as a tightly knit football context in which “everyone knows each other,” increasing social visibility and reinforcing pressures to prove oneself. This dimension of perfectionism has been consistently associated with heightened anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and increased vulnerability to burnout in athletes (Hill & Curran, 2016; Madigan et al., 2016).

It is evident that in such environments, limited anonymity may reduce opportunities for psychological detachment and recovery, thereby reinforcing pressure and increasing sensitivity to mistakes. The impact of this is that athletes may experience sustained cognitive and emotional strain, as they are unable to distance themselves from evaluation. This may contribute to reduced confidence and impaired recovery, ultimately increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and burnout. This creates a gap in understanding how cultural and structural variables, such as community size and interconnectedness, influence the experience of pressure and perfectionism in sport.

4.3.2 Fear of Mistakes and Behavioural Consequences

A recurring feature across all the participants was the fear of making mistakes and the behavioural consequences that followed. David revealed that:

Sometimes I felt like I was playing not to disappoint rather than just playing naturally. Instead of focusing on enjoying the game or expressing myself, I was more worried about making mistakes and letting people down. That pressure stayed in my mind during matches and affected the way I played.

This suggests a shift in focus from confident and autonomous performance toward error avoidance, where players prioritise not making mistakes over actively contributing to the game. Such a shift may reduce creativity, limit risk-taking, and ultimately affect performance quality.

Similarly, Joseph explained that external expectations made him feel anxious, noting that pressure sometimes led him to hesitate in decision-making. He stated “I would think twice before doing certain things on the pitch because I was worried about making mistakes. Instead of reacting naturally, I started overthinking simple decisions during games.” These findings indicate that fear of judgment not only affects emotional responses but also directly influences behaviour during competition which may result in slower decision-making,

reduced confidence in executing skills, and a tendency to avoid risk-taking, all of which can negatively affect performance effectiveness.

This pattern reflects a transition from mastery-oriented performance toward avoidance-based regulation. Rather than focusing on skill execution and improvement, players become preoccupied with avoiding negative outcomes. This aligns with research linking socially prescribed perfectionism to fear of failure, performance anxiety, and reduced enjoyment in sport (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009; Madigan et al., 2016). The impact of this is significant, as it can disrupt performance flow, reduce creativity, and limit players' ability to respond effectively in dynamic game situations.

Participants also highlighted that expectations varied depending on club context, league level, and organisational culture. Micheal, in contrast, noted that expectations at lower-level clubs were more flexible, suggesting that tolerance for mistakes may vary across contexts. He explained that:

When you play for a top-level club, winning is the only acceptable outcome. People do not really focus on the effort or the way you played if you do not win. There is always pressure to get results, and after every game you feel like you are being judged based on whether the team won or lost.

Daniel similarly emphasised that expectations increase with progression, stating that "the higher you get, the higher the expectations." This suggests that pressure intensifies as players advance through different levels of football, reflecting increased accountability and scrutiny. However, despite these contextual differences, pressure remained a consistent feature across all levels, indicating that expectations are embedded within football culture rather than limited to specific environments.

4.3.3 The Role of Coaches in Shaping Pressure

Coaches emerged as central figures in shaping players' experiences of socially prescribed perfectionism. Participants described how communication style, feedback, and selection decisions influenced their perception of pressure. Joseph explained that limited feedback following non-selection led to increased self-doubt, as players were left to interpret decisions independently. Similarly, Luke described how pressure from coaches extended beyond the pitch, affecting his mood and overall well-being. Within the framework of Self-

Determination Theory, Woods and Parry (2022) highlight that when coaches fail to support athletes' psychological needs, particularly competence and relatedness, motivation may be weakened.

These findings are in line with research on coach-created motivational climates, which emphasises that coaches play a significant role in shaping athletes' motivation, confidence, and psychological responses through their behaviours and interactions (Woods & Parry, 2022). In particular, Woods and Parry (2022) argue that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship, including trust, communication, and feedback, directly influences players' perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are key determinants of motivation. Mark explained that:

When coaches do not really communicate with you after mistakes or when you are not selected, you end up thinking about what you did wrong all week. Sometimes you start creating your own explanations in your head because nobody tells you clearly what the problem is.

This increases uncertainty and self-doubt. Similarly, Andrew described how some coaches focused almost entirely on results and performances, which made players feel that “you are only valued when you play well.” Daniel also highlighted that inconsistent feedback from coaches created confusion, as players were often unsure “what the coach actually expected” from them. Mark's experiences appear to reflect this, as he explained that supportive communication from coaches increased his confidence, whereas limited interaction made him question his ability and place within the team.

This is supported by Attard and Muscat (2025), who found that players in Maltese football experience pressure from coaches, while also highlighting that coach behaviours such as communication, empathy, and understanding contribute significantly to athletes' ability in managing psychological demands. These findings are consistent with existing literature emphasising the role of controlling coaching behaviours in fostering maladaptive perfectionism and fear of failure (Appleton & Curran, 2016). This is relevant to the current study because it emphasises that the psychological climate created by coaches can either reinforce or reduce perceived pressure.

In addressing Research Question 1, it is evident that socially prescribed perfectionism plays an important role in linking perfectionism to burnout among footballers. While internally driven striving was often viewed as motivating, externally imposed expectations and fear of judgment were more strongly associated with psychological strain. This study suggests that it is not high standards alone, but the belief that others demand perfection, that most substantially contributes to emotional distress.

Educational initiatives should focus on promoting autonomy-supportive coaching, process-oriented feedback, and psychologically safe environments. Henriksen et al. (2019) suggest that such approaches can reduce maladaptive perfectionism while maintaining performance standards.

Within smaller football systems such as Malta, these interventions may be particularly impactful, as changes in coaching practice and organisational culture have the potential to influence the wider sporting environment. Embedding such educational strategies may therefore play a critical role in reducing fear of failure, improving well-being, and supporting sustainable athlete development.

4.4 Theme 3: The Pathway to Burnout, Perfectionism and Overthinking

This theme explores the psychological processes through which perfectionism and external pressure develop into burnout-related experiences among footballers. While the previous themes examined the nature and sources of perfectionism, this theme focuses on how these pressures accumulate over time, contributing to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and disengagement. This study suggests that burnout does not emerge as a sudden outcome, but rather as a gradual and cumulative process shaped by ongoing cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors. In doing so, this theme directly addresses Research Question 1 by identifying the mechanisms linking perfectionism to burnout.

4.4.1 Inability to Switch Off

Players consistently reported difficulty mentally disengaging from football, with negative thoughts persisting long after matches and training sessions had ended. David noted:

After a bad performance, I would replay the mistakes in my head for the next few days. I keep thinking about what I should have done differently and sometimes it becomes difficult to switch off mentally because those moments stay with me.

He further implied that these thoughts would return repeatedly, even outside football-related settings, suggesting that the impact of performance extended beyond the immediate context of the game. The impact of this is considerable, as prolonged rumination may lead to mental fatigue, reduced concentration, and impaired psychological recovery, limiting the player's ability to perform consistently in subsequent training and matches.

In addition, Daniel described withdrawing socially after matches, explaining that he would become quiet while processing mistakes internally. Similarly, Mark explained that after poor performances he preferred to stay alone for a while because he would continue thinking about specific moments from the game and questioning his decisions. Andrew also reflected "one performance might affect whether you play again or how people see you as a player. You keep thinking about those moments and wondering if you could have done things differently." He further explained that even during everyday activities, his mind would return to moments from matches that he believed he "should have handled better." It is evident from these comments that players are not merely reflecting on performance in a constructive manner, but are engaging in repetitive thought patterns that contribute to emotional fatigue and social withdrawal.

Cognitive models of rumination propose that such processes are linked to difficulty disengaging from threat-related stimuli, increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion over time (Hill et al., 2023). This study therefore suggests that without appropriate intervention, rumination may become a sustained pattern that reinforces burnout rather than alleviating it. Sustained engagement with negative performance-related thoughts may impair recovery, reduce concentration, and increase emotional fatigue, ultimately affecting both performance consistency and well-being (Smith et al., 2018; Hill & Curran, 2016). Over time, this may lead to a cyclical pattern in which rumination reinforces self-criticism and stress, further increasing vulnerability to burnout (Madigan et al., 2022).

These findings strongly align with existing literature identifying rumination as a pivotal factor connecting maladaptive perfectionism to burnout (Madigan et al., 2022). However,

compared to other studies, this research provides more context-specific insight into how rumination manifests within football environments, where errors are highly visible and perceived to have significant consequences for selection, reputation, and progression. It highlights that burnout risk is not only driven by personal characteristics, but also by the evaluative nature of the performance environment, which can amplify cognitive engagement with mistakes. The impact of this is considerable, as sustained rumination may impair psychological recovery, increase emotional exhaustion, and reduce performance consistency over time (Hill & Curran, 2016).

4.4.2 Emotional Exhaustion and Mental Fatigue

Participants also frequently described mental fatigue as more challenging than physical tiredness, highlighting the psychological nature of burnout experiences. David reflected on a period where intense training combined with limited match opportunities made football feel like “another obligation instead of something I loved,” indicating a shift from intrinsic enjoyment to a sense of duty. Similarly, Mark stressed that:

There were periods where I felt mentally exhausted before training even started.

When the pressure to perform consistently stays there every day, it becomes difficult to switch off because you are constantly thinking about football, performances, and expectations.

He described how constant self-evaluation and worry about mistakes left him feeling drained, even when physically rested. Andrew also reflected that emotional fatigue often affected him more than physical tiredness, stating that “the body can recover quicker than the mind. Physically I might feel ready again after training or matches, but mentally, the pressure and frustration, stay with me for longer.” He further explained that ongoing pressure surrounding performances, selection, and criticism made it difficult to feel mentally refreshed between matches. Daniel additionally described feeling emotionally “empty” during difficult periods of the season, where repeated disappointment and frustration reduced his motivation and enjoyment of football.

These findings align with the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, defined as feelings of being mentally and emotionally drained by sport demands (Gustafsson et al.,

2017). Significantly, this study suggests that emotional exhaustion is driven more by psychological processes, such as rumination and self-criticism, than by physical workload alone. While previous research has emphasised training load as a contributing factor, these findings highlight the critical role of cognitive and emotional variables in shaping burnout experiences (DeFreese & Smith, 2014). This reinforces the need to consider burnout as a psychologically driven process rather than purely a physical outcome.

4.4.3 Reduced Accomplishment and Motivational Decline

Another key element identified was a reduced sense of accomplishment, particularly during periods where effort was not matched by opportunity or reward. Luke described the challenges of balancing football with work commitments, noting that “managing both demands required significant sacrifice, which over time led me to question whether continuing in football was sustainable.” Similarly, David reflected on periods where he found it very difficult stating:

There were times where I felt like I was giving everything, but it still felt unnoticed. Even when I was working hard and trying my best, sometimes you do not get the recognition or opportunities you expect, and after a while it starts affecting your motivation and enjoyment of football.

This moment gradually reduced his motivation and enjoyment of football. Mark also explained that repeated setbacks and limited opportunities made him feel as though “nothing was really progressing,” despite the effort he was investing both physically and mentally. Andrew further described:

There were moments where football started feeling more like pressure and responsibility than enjoyment, especially during busy periods of the season. Instead of looking forward to training and matches, sometimes it felt mentally draining because of the constant expectations and pressure to perform.

Athletes may experience increased frustration due to the demands of balancing academic and sporting commitments, which can lead to mental stress, fatigue, and difficulties in managing competing responsibilities (Xerri, 2024). Over time, this imbalance may also contribute to emotional exhaustion and intentions to withdraw from sport, particularly in dual-career contexts where competing demands further strain psychological resources

(Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2021). According to self-determination theory, reduced autonomy and increased controlled motivation are strongly associated with burnout and decreased well-being (Curran & Hill, 2019). Within the context of football, where external pressures such as performance expectations, selection decisions, and perfectionistic standards are prominent, these conditions may limit players' sense of control and shift motivation from intrinsic enjoyment to obligation. This is important because when athletes no longer feel that participation is self-directed, their psychological needs for autonomy and competence are undermined, increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Several participants described moments where prolonged fatigue led them to question their continued involvement in football, with David reflecting on considering stopping during demanding periods and Luke questioning whether the sacrifices required were sustainable. The impact of this is significant, as sustained controlled motivation is associated with reduced persistence, lower performance quality, and a higher likelihood of dropout from sport (Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2021; Stambulova et al., 2021). Over time, this may lead to withdrawal intentions, highlighting how motivational shifts not only affect well-being but also long-term participation in football. However, this study highlights that such warning signs may go unaddressed in the absence of structured psychological support.

In addressing Research Question 1, this theme demonstrates that burnout is not a direct consequence of perfectionism, but rather the result of ongoing psychological processes. Perfectionism and socially prescribed expectations act as contributing factors, intensifying mechanisms such as rumination, emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and loss of autonomy.

From an educational perspective, these findings suggest that athletes should be supported in developing psychological skills to manage rumination, regulate self-criticism, and promote recovery. Interventions such as sport psychology education, reflective practice, and mindfulness-based strategies may help athletes recognise early signs of mental fatigue and develop more adaptive coping responses. Importantly, these interventions should be proactive rather than reactive, addressing psychological processes before they develop into more severe burnout symptoms.

4.5 Theme 4: Burnout Beyond Football – Life Balance, Dual Demands, and Athletic Identity

This theme explores how burnout experiences were shaped not only by football-related pressures, but also by broader life demands, including employment, education, and personal responsibilities. While previous themes identified the psychological processes linking perfectionism to burnout, this theme extends the analysis by situating these experiences within the wider context of players' lives. This study suggests that burnout cannot be understood solely within the boundaries of sport, but rather as a multifaceted experience influenced by the interaction of multiple roles and responsibilities. In doing so, this theme addresses Research Question 2 by examining how external life demands contribute to burnout risk among footballers.

4.5.1 Dual-Career

Participants described difficulty managing football alongside employment or education, highlighting the challenges associated with maintaining dual careers. Luke described working full-time while continuing his football commitments as mentally draining. He said:

Working full-time while still managing football became mentally draining at times. After long working hours, I would already feel tired before training had even started, and sometimes it felt difficult to recover properly because there was very little time to rest physically or mentally.

He further reflected that this constant cycle of work and football led him to question whether continuing was worth it, suggesting that the cumulative demands were not only physically exhausting but also psychologically overwhelming. Similarly, Micheal described:

Trying to balance intense training with everything else outside football became difficult at times. There were periods where the workload felt overwhelming, especially when I was training hard every day but not getting the playing opportunities you expected. That made it mentally frustrating because it felt like all the effort was not always being rewarded.

Mark also explained how balancing football alongside work responsibilities often left him physically and mentally fatigued.

Trying to balance football with work left me constantly tired because there was very little time to recover or switch off mentally. Most days it felt like everything was focused on either work or football, so it became difficult to properly rest and reset.

Similarly, Andrew reflected on the stress associated with trying to meet expectations across multiple areas of life.

Trying to manage expectations in both football and work created a lot of stress, especially during busy periods of the season where everything starts building up at once. Sometimes it felt overwhelming because there was pressure coming from different directions at the same time.

Dual-career frameworks suggest that competing demands across sport, work, and education place significant strain on athletes' time, energy, and psychological resources (Stambulova et al., 2021). Furthermore, effort–reward imbalance theory proposes that sustained investment without corresponding outcomes undermines motivation and well-being (Siegrist, 1996). The impact of this is considerable, as athletes may experience mental fatigue, reduced performance quality, and decreased motivation, alongside growing frustration and disengagement. Over time, this may lead to withdrawal intentions and reduced long-term participation, particularly in semi-professional contexts where external demands are unavoidable (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2021). However, compared to other studies, this research suggests that the psychological impact of dual-career demands may be intensified in semi-professional football contexts, where institutional support is often limited. This creates a gap in understanding how structural support systems influence athletes' ability to manage competing demands effectively.

4.5.2 Lack of Recovery

Participants consistently identified a lack of recovery time as a critical factor contributing to burnout. Micheal highlighted:

My routine was basically work, training, and recovery every day, so there was very little time to mentally switch off from football. Even outside training, I still felt focused on performances, fitness, and expectations, which became exhausting after a while.

Similarly, Luke explained how the psychological demands associated with balancing football and external responsibilities often became more exhausting than the physical demands themselves. He stated that:

Even when I tried to manage my schedule properly, I still felt mentally tired more than physically. Physically you can recover with rest, but mentally the pressure, expectations, and constant thinking about football stayed with me for much longer.

While physical fatigue is an expected part of sport, this distinction suggests that mental fatigue may be more difficult to recover from, as it directly affects focus, motivation, and emotional stability. Within the context of football, where players are constantly exposed to evaluation and performance demands, this type of fatigue may persist beyond training and competition, limiting opportunities for full psychological recovery. This is important because mental fatigue has been shown to impair decision-making, reduce concentration, and negatively affect performance, even when physical readiness is maintained (Van Cutsem et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

Research also emphasises the importance of recovery in preventing burnout, particularly the role of psychological detachment in reducing stress accumulation (Kellmann et al., 2018). In this study, the difficulty players experienced in “switching off” suggests that they remained mentally engaged with football-related concerns even during rest periods. The impact of this is significant, as inadequate psychological recovery can lead to cumulative stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced motivation over time (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings highlight that recovery in football must extend beyond physical rest to include strategies that support mental disengagement, as failure to do so may increase vulnerability to burnout and negatively affect both well-being and performance consistency.

4.5.3 Injury and Deselection

Injury and deselection emerged as particularly critical moments where the risk of burnout appeared to intensify. Micheal reflected on returning from a long-term injury while simultaneously managing personal challenges as mentally exhausting.

Coming back from a long-term injury while also dealing with personal problems was mentally exhausting. It was difficult trying to focus on recovering and getting back to my best when there were other things affecting me outside football as well.

This suggests that the impact of injury extends beyond physical rehabilitation, affecting psychological resilience and the ability to respond to ongoing demands. From a theoretical perspective, injury can disrupt the athlete's sense of identity and competence, both of which are central to motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When players are unable to train or compete, they may lose a key source of structure and purpose, making it more difficult to stay motivated during recovery. Consequently, the psychological strain associated with injury can lead to reduced confidence and emotional disturbance. (Borg et al., 2021).

A corresponding pattern was identified in experiences of deselection. Nathan explained that being excluded from the starting line-up led to a noticeable decline in motivation and engagement, reducing his enthusiasm toward training. He suggested that "repeated exclusion made it increasingly difficult to remain committed, as the lack of playing opportunities diminished my sense of purpose within the team." In line with self-determination theory, such experiences may undermine basic psychological needs, particularly competence and relatedness, which are essential for sustaining motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Curran & Hill, 2019). When these needs are not met, motivation may shift away from intrinsic enjoyment toward more controlled forms, increasing the likelihood of disengagement. Over time, this may result in reduced training intensity, lower performance readiness, and increased emotional fatigue.

Overall, these findings align with existing research identifying injury and reduced playing time as significant stressors in athletes' careers (Ivarsson et al., 2017). The increasing demands of the Maltese football calendar, characterised by fixture congestion and frequent match schedules, suggest that psychological processes may contribute to a cumulative experience of fatigue and strain over time, as players are required to perform repeatedly

with limited recovery, increasing both physical and mental load (Malta Football Players Association, 2023; Times of Malta, 2026).

In addressing Research Question 2, it is evident that burnout is not only a product of football-related stress, but is significantly influenced by broader life demands. Compared to other studies, this research provides a more holistic understanding of burnout by incorporating the lived experiences of athletes managing dual careers. These findings highlight the unique challenges faced by semi-professional footballers, where support structures may be less developed.

Educational interventions should focus on time management, recovery strategies, and psychological skills that support balance across different domains, as these competencies enable athletes to cope with stress, manage conflicting responsibilities, and sustain performance across both academic and sporting contexts (Xerri, 2024)

4.6 Theme 5: Mental Health Awareness, Stigma, and Informal Coping Strategies

This theme examines footballers' understanding of mental health, their willingness to discuss psychological challenges, and the coping strategies they relied upon in the absence of consistent, structured support. While participants demonstrated increasing awareness of mental health and its importance for both performance and well-being, this awareness was often accompanied by stigma, selective disclosure, and reliance on informal coping strategies. This study suggests that a critical gap exists between recognising mental health as important and having access to sustained, structured support within football environments.

4.6.1 Awareness of Mental Health

David described mental health within football as the ability to remain psychologically balanced and resilient during challenging periods. He stated:

For me, good mental health means being able to approach training with a clear head and effectively handle setbacks. Even when things are not going well, you can still stay focused, motivated, and not let mistakes affect you too much mentally.

This suggests that psychological well-being allows players to remain focused, composed, and resilient in demanding situations. Andrew reinforced what David said and he explained:

Mental health means maintaining a healthy and balanced mindset that allows me to perform at my best both on and off the field. It is about being able to manage pressure, stay focused, and still feel emotionally stable in different areas of life.

Similarly, Joseph emphasised that mental health influenced “confidence, focus, motivation, and overall performance,” highlighting its role across cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains, and reinforcing the multidimensional impact of mental wellbeing on athletic performance (Attard & Muscat, 2025). Within the context of football, where players are regularly exposed to evaluation, uncertainty, and high expectations, this understanding reflects the recognition that mental health underpins not only well-being but also performance consistency.

This is important because psychological well-being has been closely linked to athletes’ ability to regulate emotions, maintain concentration, and respond adaptively to pressure (Watson & Kissinger, 2007; Hill et al., 2018). In particular, Hill et al., (2018) highlight that athletes with more adaptive psychological profiles are better able to manage setbacks without engaging in maladaptive responses such as rumination or excessive self-criticism. Similarly, Donachie et al. (2019) argue that mental health and performance are closely interconnected, with poor psychological well-being negatively affecting motivation, confidence, and decision-making in sport.

Stable mental health may support consistent performance, effective recovery, and sustained engagement, whereas disruptions in psychological well-being may lead to reduced focus, emotional instability, and increased vulnerability to burnout (Gouttebarger et al., 2019.) Within competitive football environments, this may manifest in inconsistent performances, decreased confidence, and difficulty coping with mistakes or external pressure. This aligns with research indicating that while mental health awareness in sport has increased, the implementation of structured and sustained support remains limited (Purcell et al., 2019;).

4.6.2 Stigma and Cultural Barriers

Despite this awareness, participants consistently described mental health as a sensitive and, at times, uncomfortable topic within football environments. David noted that:

Mental health is acknowledged but not really talked about properly, especially when it comes to coaches or situations related to selection. People know it is important, but it still feels like something that stays in the background instead of being openly discussed within football environments.

This was particularly evident in relation to coaches and selection contexts, suggesting that although awareness surrounding mental health exists, it is not yet fully embedded within everyday football culture. As a result, players may feel uncertain about when or how to raise such concerns, especially within environments where performances are constantly monitored and evaluated. Similarly, Nathan highlighted that although awareness is improving, there remains an expectation that players should be mentally strong and cope independently. This reflects a broader cultural norm within football, where resilience is prioritised and vulnerability may be perceived as a weakness, as players often avoid expressing mental health concerns due to stigma and fear of being viewed as weak (Muscat et al., 2024)

This is especially significant within the Maltese sporting context, where mental health remains stigmatised and players are often reluctant to speak openly about their struggles due to fear of judgement and negative consequences (Attard & Muscat, 2025; Muscat et al., 2024). As a result, athletes may be less likely to access appropriate support, increasing reliance on self-regulation strategies that may not always be effective and potentially heightening vulnerability to burnout.

4.6.3 Selective Help-Seeking and Psychological Safety

Participants described being selective about whom they spoke to regarding psychological difficulties. David explained that:

I feel more comfortable speaking to teammates about mental health because they understand what you're going through. They experience the same pressures, expectations, and frustrations, so it feels easier to talk openly with people who can relate to it.

However, he was more cautious when speaking to coaches, indicating that openness depended on perceived attitudes and the potential risks associated with disclosure. Joseph similarly noted that he preferred speaking to family or close friends, as these relationships

felt safer and less judgmental, suggesting that support outside of football may provide a more secure space for expressing vulnerability.

These findings can be understood through help-seeking models, which emphasise that individuals are more likely to disclose difficulties in environments perceived as safe, supportive, and non-evaluative (Doherty et al., 2019). In football, where coaches are directly involved in performance assessment and selection decisions, athletes may be more cautious about sharing psychological concerns due to fear of negative consequences. It suggests that access to support is not just determined by availability, but by the perceived safety of the environment in which that support is offered. Athletes with higher levels of perfectionistic concerns may be particularly sensitive to evaluation, making them less likely to disclose difficulties in performance-driven settings, particularly in environments that lack psychological safety, where individuals may feel unable to speak openly or share vulnerabilities without fear of negative judgement or consequences (Wagstaff, 2023).

In contrast, some participants described a tendency to internalise difficulties rather than actively seek support. Luke explained that “I usually deal with my mental battles on my own. Even during difficult periods, I prefer handling things independently instead of speaking openly about them because that is what I have always been used to.” While this may provide a sense of control in the short term, it may also limit access to effective coping strategies and external perspectives. Reliance on self-management may increase emotional strain, reduce opportunities for early intervention, and contribute to the accumulation of stress over time (Donachie et al., 2019).

4.6.4 Informal Coping Strategies

In the absence of structured support, participants relied heavily on informal coping strategies to manage stress, pressure, and emotional fatigue. David described listening to music as a way to “switch off” and reduce overthinking. He stated that “listening to music helps me switch off mentally. When I start overthinking performances or stressful situations, it helps me relax and stop focusing on football all the time.” Nathan emphasised that he is a bit superstitious and described:

Rest, organisation, and routine are very important for me because they help me feel more stable and in control. When everything becomes too busy or unorganised, I notice that my stress levels increase much more easily.

Similarly, Luke described intentionally creating distance from football through time with family, disengaging from social media, and engaging in non-sport activities, suggesting that psychological detachment played an important role in helping him mentally reset. These behaviours align with recovery and coping frameworks, which highlight the value of psychological detachment in reducing stress and supporting well-being (Kellmann et al., 2018). Within the context of football, where players are exposed to ongoing evaluation and performance pressure, such strategies may help to temporarily regulate emotional strain and prevent immediate overload.

However, this is important because reliance on informal, self-directed coping alone may not be sufficient to address more complex or prolonged psychological demands. While these strategies may provide short-term relief, they do not necessarily equip athletes with the structured skills required to manage deeper cognitive patterns such as rumination or perfectionistic self-criticism (Hill et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2022). Donachie et al., (2019) similarly highlight that without appropriate psychological support, athletes may face challenges in maintaining effective stress management strategies, particularly in high-pressure environments.

David recalled attending occasional mental health talks during difficult periods, “There were a few mental health talks and they helped create some awareness, especially during difficult moments. But most of the time they were not something that happened regularly.” Similarly, Luke described:

Working with a psychologist helped me a lot mentally, especially when dealing with pressure and overthinking. The problem is that this kind of support is not always available because it depends on the club and the season.

Nathan also noted that workshops provided initial awareness but lacked follow-up, limiting their practical value. These experiences suggest that psychological support within football is often episodic and dependent on organisational context, rather than being systematically embedded. This aligns with broader critiques in the literature, which argue that mental

health provision in sport is frequently reactive, fragmented, and not integrated into daily training environments (Purcell et al., 2019; Moesch et al., 2022;). Without continuity, athletes may struggle to apply what they learn in isolated sessions, reducing the effectiveness of interventions and delaying help-seeking behaviour (Gulliver et al., 2012; Breslin et al., 2022).

In addressing Research Question 2, it is evident that while players demonstrate awareness of mental health, access to consistent and structured support remains limited. As a result, responsibility for managing psychological challenges often falls on the individual athlete, contributing to reliance on informal coping and selective disclosure.

This study contributes to the literature by illustrating how awareness, stigma, and structural limitations interact to shape mental health experiences within football environments. From an educational perspective, these findings emphasise the need to move beyond awareness-raising toward structured mental health education and support systems. Educational interventions should aim to normalise conversations around mental health, reduce stigma, and provide athletes with practical tools for managing stress, pressure, and emotional responses.

4.7 Theme 6: Education as a Protective Factor

This theme examines the role of educational interventions in reducing the adverse effects of perfectionism, burnout, and mental health challenges among footballers. Building on the previous themes, which highlighted the psychological and contextual pressures experienced by players, this theme focuses on how structured education and support systems can function as protective factors. While some exposure to mental health and sport psychology initiatives was reported, these were typically limited, rather than embedded within long-term development pathways, with only a small proportion of clubs engaging in available educational sessions and a general lack of structured, ongoing mental health support within Maltese football (Attard & Muscat, 2025)

4.7.1 Limited and Reactive Psychological Support

Participants consistently described psychological support within football as fragmented and often introduced only during periods of crisis. Daniel explained that “mental health sessions or sport psychology talks were typically delivered when the team was struggling,” suggesting

that support was used reactively rather than as part of a preventative strategy. Similarly, Nathan noted that while workshops were occasionally provided, they lacked continuity, explaining that although they raised awareness, they were not followed up or integrated into regular training. Within the context of athlete development, this reflects a broader tendency to position psychological support as an intervention for problems rather than as a core component of performance preparation.

This pattern is in line within the literature, which highlights that mental health provision in sport is often inconsistent, reactive, and insufficiently embedded within daily training environments (Moesch et al., 2022). From a theoretical perspective, holistic and ecological models of athlete development emphasise the importance of integrated, continuous support systems that address both performance and well-being across an athlete's career (Henriksen et al., 2019; Wylleman et al., 2013). This is important because when psychological support is delivered only in response to crises, athletes are less likely to develop the proactive coping skills required to manage ongoing pressure, increasing reliance on reactive strategies and limiting long-term psychological resilience.

Participants consistently framed sport psychology as an educational tool rather than a remedial or clinical intervention. Micheal explained that “working with a psychologist helped me better manage pressure and regulate the emotions during competition”, indicating that psychological support contributed to increased self-awareness and emotional control. Similarly, Luke described how ongoing psychological support enabled him to recognise when to rest, reframe challenges, and maintain focus under pressure. These suggest that sport psychology can provide athletes with transferable skills that extend beyond immediate performance contexts.

Importantly, the participants emphasised that psychological support should be normalised within football environments. When positioned as optional or only for those experiencing difficulties, athletes may be reluctant to engage due to stigma or fear of negative judgement. This reinforces findings from Theme 5, where stigma and selective disclosure limited help-seeking behaviour. It is evident that normalisation is a critical factor in increasing engagement with psychological support.

Research supports integrating psychological skills training into everyday training environments, highlighting its effectiveness in reducing rumination, improving emotional regulation, and enhancing performance (Mosewich et al., 2019; Baltzell et al., 2020). Compared to traditional reactive approaches, embedding psychological education within routine practice may lead to more consistent and sustained benefits for athletes.

4.7.2 The Value of Early and Preventative Education

Despite limited exposure to structured education, participants strongly emphasised the potential value of earlier and more consistent interventions. David reflected that “learning about perfectionism, pressure, and coping strategies earlier in my career would’ve helped a lot,” particularly during periods characterised by intense self-criticism. Luke also highlighted the importance of recognising early signs of burnout and addressing them proactively, rather than waiting until psychological fatigue becomes severe. These perspectives can be understood through preventative models of athlete development, which emphasise the importance of equipping individuals with psychological skills before difficulties become entrenched (Stambulova et al., 2021). Within the context of football, where players are regularly exposed to performance pressure, evaluation, and uncertainty, early education may provide athletes with the tools to better interpret and manage these demands.

Without such preparation, Athletes may engage in maladaptive coping behaviours, such as persistent rumination, avoidance, and excessive self-criticism, which are associated with a greater risk of burnout (Madigan et al., 2022; Hill & Curran, 2016). In contrast, psychological skills training and mental health education have been shown to enhance emotional regulation, resilience, and self-awareness, enabling athletes to respond more adaptively to pressure (Mosewich et al., 2019). Consistent educational interventions may not only improve performance, but also reduce vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and support long-term engagement in sport.

4.7.3 The Role of Coaches and Systems in Delivering Support

A particularly strong finding was the perceived role of coaches as key educational agents. Participants repeatedly identified coaches as central figures in shaping expectations, communication styles, and the psychological climate of teams. Micheal argued that coaches should be better educated to understand individual differences and the psychological impact

of feedback, rather than focusing solely on results. Luke emphasised the importance of coaches recognising early signs of burnout and creating environments where players feel safe to communicate concerns, reflecting on the findings of (Muscat et al., 2024) that coaches play a crucial role in identifying mental well-being concerns and facilitating open communication, particularly when strong, trusting relationships are established.

However, this study further suggests that coach education should be positioned as a central component of mental health support systems, rather than as an optional addition. This highlights the importance of adopting a more comprehensive approach to coach development, where psychological awareness is embedded alongside technical and tactical training.

Participants also emphasised the importance of embedding psychological education within football clubs and academies as a routine aspect of player development. Nathan suggested that “clubs should provide regular check-ins and confidential access to psychological support,” ensuring that players have safe and accessible pathways for seeking help. David similarly argued that mental health should be treated with the same importance as physical injury, advocating for continuous monitoring rather than reactive intervention.

These perspectives reflect a shift toward more holistic models of athlete development, where psychological well-being is integrated alongside physical and technical training. Such approaches are supported by ecological models of sport development, which emphasise the importance of coordinated and multi-level support systems (Henriksen et al., 2019).

Beyond club environments, participants’ experiences highlight the need for educational interventions within sports schools and broader career development pathways, reflecting emerging initiatives such as the Sports Career Development Programme in schools, which demonstrate progress in integrating holistic athlete development, including mental health awareness, into educational settings (Attard & Muscat, 2025).

Luke noted that balancing football with work or education was something he had to navigate independently, without formal support. This lack of structured guidance suggests that many athletes develop coping strategies through trial and error, which may increase vulnerability to burnout, particularly during early career stages. Research on dual-career athletes indicates that educational programmes addressing time management, identity development,

and career transitions can significantly reduce burnout risk and support long-term well-being (Stambulova et al., 2021; Kuettel et al., 2023).

In addressing Research Question 3, it is evident that educational interventions can mitigate the negative effects of perfectionism by targeting the cognitive and emotional mechanisms identified in earlier themes, including rumination, self-criticism, and fear of failure. Sport psychology sessions, wellbeing workshops, and reflective practices may support athletes in developing more adaptive responses to pressure and imperfection.

In relation to Research Question 4, the findings suggest that effective integration of educational interventions requires a multi-level approach involving clubs, coaches, governing bodies, and educational institutions. Rather than relying on isolated or short-term initiatives, psychological education should be embedded across development pathways, from youth academies to senior teams and school-based sport programmes.

Importantly, this study contributes to the field of Education by reframing perfectionism and burnout in football as educational challenges rather than just performance issues. It is evident that helping athletes with psychological knowledge, coping strategies, and supportive environments can function as a protective factor against burnout, while also enhancing performance and long-term engagement in sport.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined footballers' experiences of perfectionism, burnout, and mental health through six interconnected themes, providing a more detailed understanding of the ways in which these constructs interact within the context of Maltese football. By integrating findings with existing literature, the chapter has moved beyond description to offer a deeper interpretation of the psychological and contextual factors shaping athletes' experiences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by reflecting on the key findings regarding perfectionism, burnout, mental health, and educational interventions in football. Drawing upon the findings and discussions presented in the previous chapter, this chapter summarises the main insights generated from the experiences of Maltese footballers and considers their implications within both sporting and educational contexts.

The chapter also presents recommendations aimed at supporting athlete well-being and improving psychological support within football environments, particularly through educational and preventative approaches. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the study are critically discussed, followed by recommendations for future research on mental health, burnout and athlete support systems in football.

5.2 Summary of results

The findings indicate that perfectionism is more accurately understood as a dynamic and context-specific process rather than a stable personality trait. While high personal standards were frequently associated with motivation, discipline, and performance enhancement, maladaptive aspects of perfectionism particularly self-criticism, rumination, fear of judgment, and conditional self-worth were consistently linked to emotional exhaustion and reduced well-being. These findings reinforce the existing literature suggesting that perfectionism concerns, rather than striving alone, are more closely associated with burnout, and they also provide qualitative insight into how these processes are experienced in real football environments.

Importantly, burnout did not emerge as a direct or isolated outcome of football participation. Instead, it developed gradually through the interaction of internal psychological processes and external contextual factors. Repetitive rumination, perceived pressure from others, and difficulties disengaging from performance-related thoughts contributed to emotional fatigue, while broader life demands including work, education, injury, and limited recovery time, further intensified this process. These findings highlight the need to conceptualise burnout as a multifaceted and cumulative experience, shaped by both individual and environmental influences rather than a single causal factor.

The chapter also identified a clear gap between increasing awareness of mental health and the availability of structured support within football environments. While players demonstrated an understanding of the importance of psychological well-being and its impact on performance, stigma, selective disclosure, and reliance on informal coping strategies remained evident. In many cases, athletes managed psychological challenges independently, often without consistent guidance or access to professional support. This reflects a broader issue within sport, where mental health is recognised but not yet fully embedded into everyday practice.

In addressing the educational dimension of the study, the findings emphasise the potential of education to function as a protective factor against burnout. Structured and continuous interventions such as sport psychology education, coach development programmes, and mental health literacy initiatives may help athletes develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills required to manage perfectionism more effectively. Furthermore, embedding such interventions within training environments may support early identification of psychological strain, encourage the willingness to seek support and reduce the negative perceptions of mental health in sport.

Importantly, these findings suggest that effective support requires a shift from reactive to proactive approaches. Rather than responding to psychological difficulties only when they become severe, football environments should prioritise preventative education and ongoing support as part of athlete development. This includes equipping coaches with the knowledge and skills to create autonomy-supportive environments, as well as providing athletes with accessible and confidential pathways for support.

5.3 Recommendations

Drawing upon the findings of this study, several recommendations emerged regarding how football environments can better support athletes experiencing perfectionism, burnout, and mental health challenges.

- The Malta Football Association should integrate compulsory mental health and emotional intelligence education within coaching licence programmes to improve coaches' understanding of burnout, perfectionism, and athlete well-being.

- Educational initiatives focusing on coping strategies, emotional regulation, perfectionism, and burnout awareness should be introduced from early stages of athlete development within football academies and youth systems.
- Football clubs should provide more consistent access to psychological support services, including sport psychologists, mental health professionals, and confidential support pathways for players.
- Coaches and club stakeholders should receive training focused on autonomy-supportive communication, recognising early signs of burnout, and creating psychologically safe environments where athletes feel comfortable discussing psychological difficulties.
- Greater collaboration between football organisations, schools, and educational institutions should be encouraged to promote mental health literacy and reduce stigma surrounding help-seeking behaviours from a young age.
- Additional support should be provided for semi-professional footballers managing dual-career demands, particularly in relation to recovery, time management, and balancing football alongside work or education commitments.

The findings of this study suggest that psychological support within football environments is often reactive rather than preventative, with many players only receiving support during periods of crisis or significant psychological difficulty. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of earlier and more structured educational interventions that could help athletes better manage pressure, perfectionism, and emotional fatigue before these develop into more severe burnout experiences.

In particular, coaches were identified as playing a significant role in shaping athletes' psychological experiences. Consequently, improving coaches' mental health literacy and communication skills may contribute towards the creation of more supportive and autonomy-supportive football environments. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of normalising conversations surrounding mental health within football settings to reduce stigma and encourage earlier help-seeking behaviours.

The findings also highlighted the challenges associated with balancing football alongside employment and educational responsibilities, particularly within semi-professional contexts. As a result, greater attention should be given towards supporting athletes in managing dual-career demands and maintaining adequate psychological recovery.

Overall, the findings suggest that mental health and well-being should be viewed as fundamental components of athlete development rather than secondary concerns addressed only after difficulties emerge. Embedding psychological education and support within football environments may therefore play an important role in reducing burnout risk, promoting long-term well-being, and supporting more sustainable engagement within sport.

5.4 Strengths and Limitation of the study

This study presents several strengths that enhance the depth and relevance of the findings. One significant strength is the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to discuss their experiences in detail and provided rich qualitative insights into perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within football environments. The flexibility of this approach enabled participants to elaborate on personal experiences and reflections beyond the predefined interview questions, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes explored within the study.

Additionally, the purposive sampling enabled the recruitment of participants met the specific criteria relevant to the research aims, allowing the findings to draw upon the lived experiences of footballers competing within the Maltese football context. By focusing on players with direct experience of competitive football environments, the study generated valuable context-specific insights relating to pressure, burnout, and educational support systems.

A further notable strength of the study lies in its contribution to the growing body of local research exploring perfectionism, burnout, and mental health within Maltese football. While existing literature has explored mental health in sport more broadly, this study contributes qualitative insight into how these psychological experiences are understood and managed by footballers within a semi-professional sporting environment. In addition, the study extends beyond identifying psychological challenges by examining the significance role of educational interventions as protective factors against burnout and emotional strain.

Despite these strengths, the findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study involved a relatively small sample of eight male footballers, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to wider sporting populations. As the experiences of female footballers were not explored, the findings may not fully represent how perfectionism, burnout, and mental health are experienced across different gender contexts within football.

Furthermore, the study focused specifically on footballers competing within the Maltese football system. While this provided valuable context-specific insight, the unique characteristics of Maltese football may limit the transferability of findings to larger or fully professional football environments. In addition, the reliance on self-reported experiences may have introduced subjectivity and the potential influence of social desirability bias, particularly when discussing sensitive issues such as discussing mental health and burnout within sporting settings.

While acknowledging these limitations, the study still offers important insight into the psychological experiences of footballers and contributes to the growing discussion surrounding mental health, burnout, and educational support within sport. The findings also contribute to the development of future research exploring athlete well-being and preventative support strategies within both local and international football contexts.

5.5 Recommendations

Recommendations for future research include exploring perfectionism, burnout, and mental health across different levels of football participation, including youth, female, and fully professional football environments, with the aim to gain a broader understanding of how these experiences may differ across sporting contexts. Future research could build upon these findings by examining the perspectives of coaches, sport psychologists and other stakeholders involved in supporting athlete development to offer a comprehensive understanding of the support systems surrounding footballers.

Additionally, comparative research across different countries and sporting cultures may help identify how contextual and environmental factors influence experiences of perfectionism and burnout within football. Future research could also explore the long-term effectiveness of educational interventions, such as sport psychology programmes, mental health literacy

initiatives, and coach education, in supporting athlete well-being and reducing burnout risk over time. Finally, further research comparing football with other sporting environments may contribute towards a broader understanding of how psychological demands and support systems differ across sport contexts.

5.6 Final Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health among footballers within the Maltese football context, while also examining the role of educational interventions in supporting athlete well-being. The findings showed that perfectionism is not always harmful, however, when linked to self-criticism, fear of judgement, rumination, and conditional self-worth, it can contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced well-being, and burnout-related experiences.

The study highlighted that, within the Maltese football environment, players often face pressures that extend beyond football itself. Many athletes are required to balance training and competition alongside work, studies, injuries, recovery, and personal responsibilities, reflecting the unique realities of football in Malta. Although awareness of mental health within sport is gradually increasing, the findings revealed that psychological support remains limited and inconsistent, leading many players to rely on informal coping strategies and selective help-seeking behaviours.

Importantly, this research emphasised the value of educational interventions such as mental health education, psychological skills training, and supportive coaching practices in helping athletes manage pressure more effectively. Within the Maltese setting, these approaches could play an important role in creating football environments that value player well-being alongside performance.

This dissertation contributes to the limited local research surrounding perfectionism, burnout, and mental health in Maltese football. More importantly, it provides insight into the lived experiences of Maltese footballers and highlights the need for more psychologically supportive and educationally informed practices within local football culture to ensure both the athletes' psychological and physical welfare, as well as their sustained participation in sport.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: FREC Form



**L-Università
ta' Malta**

Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

16th July 2025

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2025-00520 Kurt Briffa

Dear Kurt Briffa,

With reference to your application EDUC-2025-00520 Kurt Briffa for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Gravina', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Appendix 2: Information Letter

Dear _____

My name is Kurt Briffa and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Masters in teaching and Learning in Physical Education. I am conducting a research study for my thesis titled The Dark Side of Perfectionism: Links to Burnout and Mental Health in Football; this is being supervised by Dr. Adele Muscat. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to examine the negative aspects of perfectionism and its relationship to the mental health and burnout of football players. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationships between perfectionism, burnout, and mental health, offering practical insights into burnout prevention and mental health education/interventions within elite sports settings. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an in-depth semi-structured interview to explore experiences with perfectionism, its influence on performance, and its impact on mental health, particularly in relation to signs of burnout. Data from the interviews will be transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. This will take approximately 40-60 minutes to complete.

Anonymity will be strictly maintained throughout the research process. Raw identifiable data will be encrypted and stored offline on an external hard drive or flash drive, or a secure UM server. Any material in hard copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor and myself (and in exceptional cases, examiners) will have access to this data.

The findings which emerge from this research may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings). Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear when the findings are reported, a pseudonym will be used instead.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. In the remote chance that you may feel distress during or after the interview, the researcher will provide you with details of supports services you may access.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

All data collected will be will maintain the confidentiality of the research records and data and will be destroyed on the 31st of December 2026.

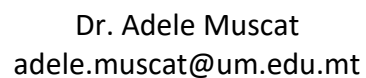
A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,



Kurt Briffa
Kurt.briffa.24@um.edu.mt
79449667



Dr. Adele Muscat
adele.muscat@um.edu.mt

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Participants Consent Form

The Dark Side of Perfectionism: Links to burnout and mental health in football.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Kurt Briffa. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a semi-structured interview where the researcher will ask me questions related to perfectionism in football. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 40 to 60 minutes. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by: helping to create the development of educational interventions to better support athletes in maintaining both performance and well-being.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and on completion of the study and following publication of results, data will be destroyed on 31st of December 2026.
8. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research. Pseudonyms will be used to replace my name.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this Interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ I would like to review extracts of my interview transcript that the researcher would like to publish and/or present, before these are published/presented.
- ☐ I would not like to review extracts of my interview transcript that the researcher would like to publish and/or present, before these are published/presented.

11. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data. Raw identifiable data will be encrypted and stored offline on an external hard drive or flash drive, or a secure UM server. Any material in hard copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor and myself (and in exceptional cases, examiners) will have access to this data.

If there is a risk of participant distress:

12. If I feel that the interview has distressed me in any way, I may make use of the support services information that Kurt Briffa will give me at the beginning of the interview. I am aware that this document comprises a list of free services. The document also includes fee-paying services which I understand I will have to pay for, should I decide not to use free services.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Kurt Briffa
Kurt.briffa.24@um.edu.mt
79449667

Dr. Adele Muscat
adele.muscat@um.edu.mt

Appendix 4: Interview Questions

Introduction

Thank you for taking part in this study. The aim of this interview is to explore your experiences as a football player in relation to performance expectations, perfectionism, burnout, and mental health. Everything you share will remain confidential, and your name will not appear in any reports. There are no right or wrong answers, I am interested in your personal experiences and views. You can skip any question or stop the interview at any time. The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be audio recorded with your permission.

Section 1: Background and Context

1. Can you tell me a little about your football background, how long you have been playing and at what level?
2. How would you describe the environment and culture within Maltese football?

Section 2: Perfectionism (Self-Oriented and Socially Prescribed)

3. How would you describe Perfectionism? Do you ever feel that you set very high standards for yourself? How do these expectations affect you?
4. Do you feel that coaches, teammates, supporters, or others place high expectations on you?
5. When things don't go as planned, for instance, after a poor performance or mistake, how do you usually respond?
6. To what extent do you think perfectionist, either your own or others' expectations, impacts your performance and well-being?

Section 3: Burnout and Motivation

7. Can you describe a time when you felt mentally or physically exhausted from football?
What do you think contributed to those feelings?
8. Have you ever felt detached or less motivated to train or compete?
9. How do you usually balance football with other areas of your life, such as work, studies, or personal relationships?

Section 4: Mental Health and Coping

10. What does "mental health" mean to you as an athlete?
How do you think mental health is viewed in Maltese football?

11. Have you ever experienced times when football affected your mental health, either positively or negatively?

What factors contributed to this? How did you manage those experiences?

12. How comfortable do you feel talking about mental health with others (teammates, coaches, or family)?
13. What strategies or coping methods do you use to manage stress, pressure, or burnout?

Section 5: Education, Awareness, and Support Systems

14. Are you aware of any mental health or well-being programs or initiatives within Maltese football?

Have you ever taken part in any talks or sessions on mental health or coping skills?

Have you ever received any guidance or education, formal or informal, on managing perfectionism or performance pressure? If so, what was it like, and did you find it helpful?

15. How do you think education or awareness programs could help players deal with perfectionism, burnout, or mental health challenges?
16. In your opinion, what role should football clubs, coaches, and governing bodies play in supporting players' mental health?

Section 6: Closing Reflection

17. Looking back at your experiences, what advice would you give to younger players about managing pressure and maintaining good mental health?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences or suggestions for improving support in Maltese football?

Appendix 5: Highlighting the main information

Interview 1

- 1) The football culture in Malta is starting to get more competitive than before. People care a lot about the sport, and now there is a strong focus on results and performance. Sometimes the environment can feel supportive, but other times it can be demanding, especially when expectations are high. There is pressure on us players to perform well, and this can affect the atmosphere within teams and clubs.
- 2) To me, perfectionism means always wanting to do things perfectly and not accepting mistakes. I often set very high standards for myself, because I want to improve and show that I can perform well. When things are going well this motivates me even more, but other times it makes me stressed. If I don't reach the level I expect of myself, I feel disappointed and frustrated. This sometimes has an effect on my performances.
- 3) Yes, I do feel that others sometimes expect a lot from me. Coaches want consistent performances, teammates rely on me, and supporters can be demanding, especially if things aren't going well for the club. These expectations can push me to work harder, but they also add pressure.
- 4) After a bad performance, I usually feel disappointed with myself. I replay the moment in my head about a million times. I think about what I should have done better. Sometimes I take it personally. After some time, I try to calm down, reflect, and use it as motivation to improve in future training sessions or matches.
- 5) Perfectionism affects me in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, it pushes me to work hard, stay focused, and keep improving. On the negative side, it can cause stress and self-doubt. When the pressure becomes too strong, it affects my confidence and performance.

Interview 4

- 3- Perfectionism is the pursuit of excellence taken to an extreme—a feeling that whatever you do is never enough. Personally, I do feel that I have some perfectionist traits, in the sense that whatever I do, I always strive to aim high and perform at my best in all aspects of life. Of course, I accept that there will always be someone who outplays me, out-trains me, or performs better than I do. I use this as an opportunity to learn from them and adapt, so that I can always become the best version of myself.
- 4- Sometimes coaches tend to put pressure on me personally, as well as on the team I'm part of. At times, this can be stressful and even affect my personal life. However, I always try my best not to let it impact me too much. I do this by keeping things simple in my gameplay, and if things aren't going the way I want them to, I focus on the basics to help rebuild my confidence and gradually improve my performance.
- 5- We are all human, and we all make mistakes. Sometimes things don't go as planned, and I have bad performances. The way I deal with this is by reflecting on what I did well and identifying the mistakes I made—then I move on and forget about that game. I approach the next match with a clear mind, focusing only on the positive performances I've had in the past and recalling key moments. This helps me maintain a positive mindset, which often leads to a better personal performance.
- 6- I think what happens with extreme perfectionists is that, after having a bad performance, they allow it to continuously affect them, even in their daily lives. What often ends up happening is that they become so focused on avoiding the repetition of their mistakes that they miss out on opportunities to improve other aspects of their game, which could help them develop overall.
- 7- Since I started working full-time, keeping up with football has been a challenge, and I've thought about quitting many times over the past few years. The long hours at work, the pressure to always perform at my best in training and matches, and my busy schedule have all contributed to me feeling both physically and mentally exhausted. On top of that, missing out on many life events and opportunities has made me question daily whether it's all worth it in the end. One way I've found to

Appendix 6: Separating Codes

replay the moment in my head many times (P1)	Overthinking mistakes
never feel fully satisfied where achievements do not result in lasting fulfilment (P4)	Chronic dissatisfaction
fear of making mistakes makes me anxious which can negatively influence confidence and decision-making during performance (P7)	Fear-driven performance
pushes me to work hard acting as a motivational factor that encourages increased effort, discipline, and commitment to improvement (multiple)	Motivational effect
causes stress and self-doubt leading to high levels of stress and self-doubt, particularly when personal expectations are not achieved (P1)	Psychological strain
not playing at my usual level resulting in a perceived decline in performance, potentially influenced by pressure or overthinking (P2)	Negative performance impact

Appendix 7: Creating Themes

perceiving football as an obligation rather than a source of enjoyment, indicating a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation (P8)	Loss of enjoyment	Football becoming obligation
question whether continuing is worth it (P5)	Withdrawal thoughts	Questioning continuation in sport
less motivated when not selected reduced motivation in response (P2)	Selection-related demotivation	Motivation linked to playing time
motivation is not constant recognising that motivation fluctuates over time, rather than remaining stable. (P4)	Fluctuating motivation	Motivation not stable over time
my mood depends on performance where it's directly influenced by success or failure (P2)	Performance–mental health link	Mood tied to performance
discussing mental health may be viewed as a sign of weakness within the sporting environment (P4)	Stigma around mental health	Fear of being judged
not discussed much indicating a lack of open dialogue surrounding mental health within the football context. (P2)	Lack of open discussion	Mental health not openly talked about