

Whistleblowing of bullying in professional football: to report or not to report?

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Published version

NEWMAN, James, WARBURTON, Victoria E. and RUSSELL, Kate (2022). Whistleblowing of bullying in professional football: to report or not to report? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 61.

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1 Whistleblowing of bullying in professional football: To report or not to report?

2 Despite the claim that professional football (or soccer) clubs take “safeguarding
3 extremely seriously,” and provide “significant reporting mechanisms” for raising concerns,
4 recent allegations have highlighted that staff have been unable to disclose abusive and
5 bullying behavior (BBC, 2018, 2021a). This inability to “blow the whistle” may partly be
6 explained by the normalization of abusive and intimidatory practices in professional football
7 (Kelly & Waddington, 2006), which often leads to feelings of anxiety, isolation, and
8 occupational uncertainty (Parker & Manley, 2016). Worryingly, the football industry assumes
9 players will avoid expressing discomfort with practices such as abuse and bullying, due to
10 their lack of status within their organizations (Parker & Manley, 2016).

11 The lack of whistleblowing of bullying is a concern, as bullying leads to higher levels
12 of burnout, physical symptoms of stress, turnover intention, and lower levels of subjective
13 wellbeing in the workplace (Hewett et al., 2018; Verkuil et al., 2015). In sport, bullying leads
14 to feelings of lowered self-esteem, isolation from teammates, and other mental health issues
15 (Jewett et al., 2019). Despite these concerns, sporting organizations have highlighted how
16 they often do not have policies to address bullying or deal with sensitive whistleblowing
17 cases around harassment and abuse (Verschuuren, 2021). Furthermore, despite recent
18 examples of research being undertaken that explores whistleblowing experiences of bullying
19 in the workplace (Park et al., 2020), to our knowledge, there remains no study of this within
20 elite sporting contexts such as professional football. This is alarming, given that bullying can
21 often be “celebrated” in this context (Parker, 1996) which may reinforce the “code of silence”
22 that some in football have suggested acts as a barrier to reporting wrongdoing (Moriconi &
23 de Cima, 2020). Therefore, the present study sought to explore the lived experiences of
24 whistleblowing within the professional football context.

25 **Defining Whistleblowing**

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26 Whistleblowing is defined as “the disclosure by organization members (former or
27 current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to
28 persons or organizations who may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). This
29 definition can be further categorized into internal and external whistleblowing (Verschuuren,
30 2020). As Verschuuren (2020) summarized, internal whistleblowing covers reporting through
31 systems that have been formally instructed by the organization itself to manage these
32 allegations, even if reporting is situated outside of the organization. Using professional
33 football in the United Kingdom (UK) as an example, this could be through official channels
34 such as the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA). External whistleblowing by contrast
35 occurs through reports to parties that are not tasked by the organization concerned with
36 managing these complaints, for example, the media (Verschuuren, 2020). To date, while
37 some sporting organizations have set up internal whistleblowing reporting procedures to
38 safeguard their participants, others have not (Verschuuren, 2021). Furthermore, disclosures
39 made by athletes to these systems are problematic when allegations revolve around
40 institutional corruption, harassment, and abuse (Verschuuren, 2020). For the whistleblower,
41 internal whistleblowing poses potential risks around ostracism, threats, and career damage
42 (Miceli et al., 2008).

43 **The Drivers of Whistleblowing**

44 While research on whistleblowing in sport is sparse (Erickson et al., 2017), findings in
45 organizational literature conceptualize a range of individual, contextual and organizational
46 determinants of this behavior (Verschuuren, 2020). On an individual level, reporting
47 wrongdoing appears to revolve around aspects such as moral identity, organizational power
48 and status, and organizational commitment or identification (Alleyne, 2016; Fieger & Rice
49 Bridget, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Those with stronger moral and ethical values, who hold
50 greater status and power within an organization are more likely to whistleblow, although no

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51 single profile of a whistleblower exists (Verschuuren, 2020). Though this profile does not
52 exist, an individual's perceived status within the stratified hierarchy of power proposed by
53 Foucault (1977) may help understand potential whistleblowing in sport. Foucault's (1977)
54 propositions on disciplinary power may be important here, as individuals may feel they have
55 little power to speak out about culturally accepted wrongdoing within the wider culture of
56 professional football. These propositions, coupled with the micro-political perspective in
57 sport (Gibson & Groom, 2018) whereby individuals' central concern is with their
58 professional self-interests (e.g., selection on the team), may also drive the degree to which
59 individuals whistleblow in this context.

60 From a contextual standpoint, whistleblowing of negative behavior is more likely if
61 the evidence is available for the observer, such as frequent, intentional, and noticeable acts of
62 serious harm (Chen & Lai, 2014; Keil et al., 2018; Miceli et al., 2012). In sport, this may
63 make reporting wrongdoing problematic, as this type of evidence may not be available. Also,
64 behaviors such as bullying, do not conform to established definitions of this concept in sport.
65 For example, bullying in football has been found to result from "one-off" acts which do not
66 necessarily carry an intent to harm (Newman et al., 2021). In contrast, Olewus' (1993, p.8)
67 much-cited definition of bullying highlights the repetitive, intentional nature of this "negative
68 action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another." Thus the targeted view of bullying, in
69 the workplace literature (e.g., Sprigg et al., 2019), contradicts findings in sport where
70 participants are unaware that their behavior is abusive (Stirling, 2013). This raises questions
71 about the degree to which bullying is noticeable. Even if sporting participants are aware of
72 these negative practices, they are often bound by a "code of silence" where they suppress
73 deviant, unethical behaviors for the "benefit" of their group or organization (Moriconi & de
74 Cima, 2020). This has been described as a form of intense organizational loyalty (Adler &
75 Adler, 1988). The result is that individuals may end up trading the morality of fairness (e.g.,

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76 what is seen as right irrespective of the individuals in the situation) for the morality of
77 loyalty, where they avoid whistleblowing to safeguard individuals or their sporting group
78 (Erickson et al., 2019).

79 Organizational variables relate to whether a whistleblower perceives an ethical
80 climate or culture, and the subjective norms around the social pressure to engage in
81 whistleblowing (Verschuuren, 2020). For example, an organizational culture supporting and
82 protecting potential whistleblowers encourages whistleblowing intention and behavior
83 (Alinaghian et al., 2018; Cho & Song, 2015). In other workplaces, individuals may receive
84 greater bullying resulting from whistleblowing (Park et al., 2020). Initial findings in sport
85 appear to corroborate this finding, as whistleblowing schemes often do not protect
86 whistleblowers and instead leave them vulnerable to greater harassment (Verschuuren, 2021).
87 This effect may be exacerbated in the potentially volatile context of professional football,
88 where players are already expected to “put up” with excessive banter and derogation (Parker,
89 2006), meaning they may be even less likely to report their concerns for fear of retribution.

90 **Reporting Welfare Concerns in Sport**

91 To date research in sport has tended to focus on how whistleblowing is reported, the
92 consequences and emotions of reporting, as well as the cultural barriers against this behavior
93 (Erickson et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2019; Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). While these sources
94 provide an important contribution to whistleblowing research in sport, they have tended to
95 focus on areas such as doping, match-fixing, and corruption, rather than abusive and bullying
96 behaviors. This is an important limitation given issues have recently been highlighted within
97 reporting systems for safeguarding concerns relating to abuse (G. Kerr & Stirling, 2019).
98 Despite interventions in the form of online manuals and educational programs to prevent
99 maltreatment of athletes (R. Kerr & Kerr, 2020) and a global strategy to safeguard children
100 against abuse in sport, policies can be seen as reactionary and tokenistic in their response to

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101 safeguarding (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). This mirrors findings in professional football,
102 where even with the introduction of Education and Welfare officers (Brackenridge et al.,
103 2004), players still do not engage with safeguarding programs (Parker & Manley, 2016).
104 Here, safeguarding programs may highlight a paradox where the risks a whistleblower might
105 face are highlighted to the players in situ (Verschuuren, 2020). This challenges the view that
106 education around whistleblowing promotes a rise in reporting of wrongdoing (Caillier, 2017).
107 The risks individuals face may be even more pertinent to team sports where initial findings
108 suggest participants face a moral dilemma, compared to individual athletes, around reporting
109 teammates and are more likely to adhere to a code of silence to protect them (Whitaker et al.,
110 2014).

111 In summary, research has tended not to focus on whistleblowing as a contextually and
112 socially bound behavior (Verschuuren, 2020). To this end, men's professional football
113 appears to be an ideal context to explore experiences of whistleblowing of behaviors such as
114 abuse and bullying. Football's legitimization of abusive behaviors (Kelly & Waddington,
115 2006), as well as its inherent power differentials around bullying (Newman et al., 2021), may
116 create vastly different experiences of whistleblowing depending on where individuals fit
117 within their club's hierarchy. Furthermore, the sense for footballers that they need to align
118 their values to their club for the sake of the collective organization (Parker & Manley, 2016),
119 raises questions around the degree to which whistleblowing is possible in this context.

120 Therefore, the present study answered an important call to explore whistleblowing in
121 climates where power differentials exist and where the perception of support (or not) within
122 an individual's organization shapes reporting (Verschuuren, 2020). Specifically, our study
123 aimed to explore professional footballers' individual lived experiences and perceptions of
124 whistleblowing of bullying, within the professional football context. Through utilizing
125 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) our study unearthed the individually

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126 nuanced (J. A. Smith et al., 2017) nature of professional footballers' lived experiences of
127 whistleblowing. The focus on perceptions of whistleblowing also aligned with IPA's
128 appropriateness for identifying how individuals view situations they encounter (Reis et al.,
129 2021). Furthermore, as whistleblowing is individually and contextually determined
130 (Verschuuren, 2020), IPA was seen as the ideal approach to explore this behavior. IPA
131 prioritizes how the researcher and participant make sense of the interdependent relationship
132 between the person (e.g., the footballer as a potential whistleblower) and their world (e.g., the
133 context of professional football) (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This was relevant to the current
134 study as footballers may perceive a vastly different status around their ability to report
135 wrongdoing due to the inherent power differentials within professional football (Newman et
136 al., 2021).

137 **Method**

138 This study was part of a larger research project which explored bullying within
139 professional football.¹

140 **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

141 The study was guided by the principles of IPA, which was ideal for addressing
142 concerns that experiences within the professional football workplace are varied (J. A. Smith,
143 2016). Whistleblowing experiences are dependent on perception and context-bound
144 (Verschuuren, 2020), making IPA ideally placed to address participants' subjective
145 experiences of reporting abuse and bullying (Shinebourne, 2011). Through unearthing
146 whistleblowing experiences specifically within professional football, the present study
147 maintained the "contextualist" position of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006), whilst a broadly social
148 constructionist stance was adopted (Shinebourne, 2011). The present study was consistent

¹ To date a previous research article focusing on conceptualising bullying in football has been published from this research project and a second paper has been accepted for publication at the time of writing. The data presented in the present study are unique from this previously published research as is the focus of this work.

149 with IPA endorsing social constructionism's claim around the centrality of sociocultural and
150 historical processes in how individuals experience and understand their lives (Eatough &
151 Smith, 2008). For example, it was important to explore how experiences and understanding
152 of whistleblowing were shaped by the expectations of the professional football context.
153 Moreover, the present study echoed the agreement between IPA and social constructionism
154 that understanding the language used by footballers was important to this enterprise (Eatough
155 & Smith, 2008). Finally, utilizing IPA offered a detailed examination of each participant's
156 lifeworld, which was crucial for understanding their lived experience of whistleblowing,
157 rather than being limited to objective measurements of it (J.A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). This
158 idiographic commitment unearthed convergent and divergent features of participants'
159 whistleblowing experiences, within and across accounts (Brown et al., 2018) providing rich
160 meaning to their data.

161 **Participants and procedure**

162 Consistent with IPA guidelines a purposive sample (J. A. Smith, 2016) of 18 male
163 professionally contracted footballers ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 2.96$, range = 18-31 years) from three
164 English professional football clubs were recruited (see Table 1). Clubs were in the English
165 Premier League or English Championships divisions at data collection. This study was
166 contextualized to men's professional football as abusive and intimidatory practices have been
167 specifically reported in this environment (BBC, 2018, 2021a). In keeping with recent
168 research in workplace bullying (e.g. Sprigg et al., 2019), there was no requirement for players
169 to have been a whistleblower, but they needed to be sufficiently experienced within this
170 context to discuss their views of whistleblowing. The players had between 2 and 14 years of
171 experience as professionals.

172 Following institutional ethical approval, gatekeepers were contacted at professional
173 football clubs to seek permission to recruit players. Participants were then briefed and those

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174 who were willing to take part were given information sheets before providing their informed
175 consent. Given the nature of the study, a semi-structured interview guide was utilized, which
176 retained the phenomenological commitment to meaning-making (Eatough & Smith, 2006).
177 Questions were created in such a way that participants' experiences of whistleblowing could
178 be explored "can you tell me about the degree to which you can report bullying in football?"
179 Probing techniques were also utilized to better understand experiences of whistleblowing
180 (e.g. "Can you tell me more about that?") so researchers could help the participant make
181 sense of their account (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). To authenticate the contextual focus of
182 the study, interviews were conducted at the matchday stadium or training ground of the
183 participant. Interviews lasted between 35-70 minutes ($MDuration = 44.11, SD = 10.81$). To
184 maintain participant confidentiality, all names were replaced by pseudonyms.

185 **Data Analysis**

186 Data were analyzed in accordance with the idiographic commitment of IPA, whereby
187 a detailed examination was undertaken for each case before data were compared cross-cases
188 (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Throughout, the transcripts were analyzed for points of descriptive,
189 linguistic, or conceptual note (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Stage one of the analysis involved
190 familiarization with the accounts involving repeated listening to audio plus re-reading of
191 transcripts while maintaining an open mind and exploratory attitude to the data (J. A. Smith
192 & Osborn, 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 2017). At this stage the focus was on exploring the
193 experiential nature of whistleblowing, the language used by the participants (e.g., the
194 negative view of "snitching"), and how these interpretations were contextualized (e.g., how
195 "snitching" or reporting might be seen in professional football). Stage two (see J. A. Smith et
196 al., 2017) involved returning to the notes and transforming them to emergent, experiential
197 themes (e.g., the institutionalized nature of football). Next, emergent themes were clustered
198 into superordinate (e.g., professional football's influence on whistleblowing) and constituent

199 subordinate themes (e.g., the unique, institutionalized nature of football). This was developed
200 within and across cases, using the processes of abstraction and subsumption (J. A. Smith et
201 al., 2017). Finally, once all transcripts were analyzed a master table of themes (see Table 2)
202 was created which linked all participant accounts (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). Through
203 identifying superordinate themes around whistleblowing in professional football, concerns
204 were addressed for both convergences of views across accounts and divergence of views
205 within individual accounts (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Furthermore, this fulfilled the
206 idiographic commitment of IPA (Brown et al., 2018) by conveying individual perceptions of
207 whistleblowing (the person), within professional football (the context).

208 **Research Quality and Rigor**

209 Within the present study, the researchers adopted a relativist, rather than criteriologist
210 position to maintain data trustworthiness (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Although it is
211 acknowledged that there is no pre-defined “checklist” of what constitutes good quality IPA
212 research (J. A. Smith, 2011), the present study followed the latest guidance for researchers to
213 produce excellence in IPA papers (Nizza et al., 2021). First, a “compelling, unfolding
214 narrative” was constructed (Nizza et al., 2021). In the present study, a story that conveyed a
215 sense of progression was prioritized over a narrative, with carefully selected participant
216 quotes and interpretation of these accounts in the discussion section. As subordinate themes
217 were presented below the superordinate themes, the organization occurred at this level,
218 creating a sense of coherence (Nizza et al., 2021). This was achieved as the themes of the
219 unique, institutionalized nature of football and the efficacy in education and welfare linked to
220 the overall narrative around professional football’s influence on whistleblowing in an
221 interconnected manner (Nizza et al., 2021).

222 Second, following Nizza et al.’s (2021) guidance a “vigorous experiential account”
223 was developed. Here the present study paid close attention to the experiential and existential

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224 significance of what the footballers were reporting by paying particular attention to their
225 meaning-making. For example, in “the unique, institutionalized nature of football” theme,
226 players discussed a normalization of workplace practices in football which would not be seen
227 in other domains. Through strong data and interpretation (Nizza et al., 2021), it was possible
228 to demonstrate that players may find bullying difficult to identify and report here.

229 Third, the present study engaged with a “close analytic reading of the participants’
230 words” (Nizza et al., 2021). To achieve this, quotes were not left to “speak for themselves”
231 and instead were analyzed and interpreted to reveal the further meaning to the data. Using
232 Nizza et al.’s (2021) recommendation features such as the choice of words and phrases were
233 considered (e.g., “snitching”) as well as the use of repetition and emphasis (e.g., Kevin’s
234 account within the lack of efficacy in education and welfare subordinate theme).

235 Last, convergence and divergence were attended to by illustrating similarities and
236 differences across the participants (Nizza et al., 2021). Specifically, a balance was struck
237 between commonality and individuality, by generating superordinate themes across the
238 participants such as the challenges of reporting bullying, whilst reflecting the idiosyncratic
239 characteristics of the participants in their ability to report (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).
240 Participants were quoted across the sample, allowing for “representation, prevalence, and
241 variability within the analysis” (Nizza et al., 2021).

Results

243 Participants highlighted two superordinate themes: (a) “professional football’s
244 influence on whistleblowing” including the subordinate themes of “the unique,
245 institutionalized nature of football” and “the efficacy in education and welfare” and (b) “the
246 challenges of reporting bullying” comprising the subordinate themes of “the ability to report”
247 and “witnessing and bystanding.” The themes hosted divergent perceptions around the degree
248 to which the professional football workplace shaped whistleblowing and the extent to which

249 players felt they could report bullying.

250 **Professional Football's Influence on Whistleblowing**

251 A consistent theme was the influence the professional football context has on shaping
252 whistleblowing behaviors. Players portrayed an environment perceived to be unique from other
253 industries. More specifically, football was characterized as being laden with institutionalized
254 practices which negatively shift the tolerance of banter, so it becomes more extreme and where
255 bullying becomes accepted. In this sense, football can be viewed as a large social institution
256 where disciplinary regimes are prevalent to the extent that players become subservient and
257 normalize bullying as well as more severe forms of banter (Foucault, 1977; Jones & Denison,
258 2016). This had implications for the degree to which players felt they could report wrongdoing.
259 Subsequently, despite efforts to address education and welfare in this context, players held
260 inconsistent views around the efficacy of these channels.

261 *The Unique, Institutionalized Nature of Football*

262 Despite the variation in players' ages, experiences, and clubs (see Table 1) they
263 unanimously saw professional football as different from other workplaces. Seemingly,
264 expectations regarding behavior are shaped by the encompassing tendencies of professional
265 football as an institution (Goffman, 1961). There is also a lack of standardized protocols to
266 address bullying. Greg provided an initial sense of how the football workplace normalizes
267 behaviors that might not be appropriate elsewhere, raising questions around how much players
268 might report wrongdoing:

269 But the way we talk to each other on the football pitch probably wouldn't be right in
270 another job, but we know that in the football environment it's just talking because they
271 want the best for the team and each other to do well.

272 Greg's intimation that "it's just talking" as well as framing potentially inappropriate
273 communication as wanting the best for each other, provided evidence for "situated learning"

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274 in professional football (Parker, 2006) where players may have misguidedly learned that these
275 behaviors are acceptable. Charlie reaffirmed that this unique cultural expectation is ingrained
276 into professional footballers' experiences within this workplace environment by stating, "you
277 have to get used to taking a bollocking², and if you can't take a bollocking then..." Players'
278 seeming acceptance that potential abuse is inevitable (and necessary) in football, highlighted
279 issues around what bullying is in the first place (Newman et al, 2021). This acceptance would
280 certainly raise questions around the extent to which they would go against the expectations of
281 the sport to whistleblow.

282 The ritualistic nature of professional football, which places an expectation to go through
283 initiation ceremonies, added weight to the sense that any form of reporting of bullying would
284 lead to severe sanctions. Rob provided a vivid account of this:

285 An example could be like in the young kids, if you go into the first team you have to
286 sing. If you go into an office or a workplace, if you make someone sing, you'd probably
287 be sacked the next day, 'cos it's not right it's not appropriate to put someone in that
288 situation. But in football, that's just part of the job, you have to do it...Or otherwise,
289 I've heard stories where players are like "I'm not gonna sing" and the manager's said
290 "well I'm not gonna play you then" and they've had to leave the club because they won't
291 become part of the team.

292 Rob's account raised various issues. It demonstrated that any form of reporting would
293 lead to potentially career-ending dismissal, reasserting a sense of potential fragility on behalf
294 of the players. It also revealed the disciplinary power coaches and managers hold to prevent
295 this reporting (Foucault, 1977). Meanwhile, it maintained a thread across players' accounts that
296 the situation is *different* in the football workplace compared to others. This implies a feeling of

² A 'bollocking' is British slang for being reprimanded.

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297 entrapment to football's demands or even a passive, perhaps willing, subservience that players
298 and managers hold towards bullying.

299 The perception of a general lack of adherence to standard workplace conventions in
300 professional football was evident from James:

301 (Bullying) would never go on in a workplace. Because...is it HR? Or there are things
302 that can be done about it, if people are talking badly to you or you think you're being
303 bullied in a workplace you can say something.

304 This account was damning of the lack of formalized workplace policies and practices
305 available to players and the belief that support services do not exist. As such, professional
306 football clubs appear to operate outside of the practices of appropriately functioning
307 organizations with players feeling helpless to bullying behavior. James reaffirmed this view
308 when discussing discriminatory bullying:

309 I talked about this PFA (Professional Footballers' Association) thing and there are all
310 these words you can say about race, religion and all that you can't...you
311 wouldn't...you'd never because you're not allowed to say anything like that outside,
312 you'd get arrested.

313 Here despite the intervention of bodies such as the PFA, players feel that discriminatory
314 bullying can go unreported in a way not permitted in other contexts. Interestingly, the use of
315 the term "outside" drew potential parallels with prison-like conditions. The enclosed,
316 segregated nature of professional football shapes the working lifeworlds of players (Goffman,
317 1961; Parker & Manley, 2016), leaving a sense of helplessness that shapes beliefs around the
318 extent to which bullying occurs in other occupations.

319 *The Efficacy in Education and Welfare*

320 Despite notable attempts from professional football organizations to educate players,
321 introduce codes of conduct, and boost player welfare (see Parker & Manley, 2016) players held

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322 mixed views of these potential reporting channels. Some felt that the support on offer has been
323 beneficial, yet others were less certain about the efficacy of the delivery of these approaches
324 and were damning of them. Mickey outlined a positive view:

325 There's a lot more awareness of what you can and can't say, religions and races 'cos
326 there are so many people from different countries, so you just have to be fair to different
327 people. People do come in from the Premier League and give speeches and
328 presentations on what is bullying, and what is banter, and what is racism and stuff like
329 that.

330 From Mickey's perspective, it was clear effort has been put into considering player
331 welfare and education about bullying and banter. Engagement from key stakeholders such as
332 the Premier League was important in distributing safeguarding material to players. At 20 years
333 old and with three years of experience as a professional, it may reflect that these programs have
334 been efficacious for younger, less experienced players like Mickey. This was supported by the
335 view of Dave who was of a very similar age and experience:

336 We've got a website xxx. You can go on and read and go and check. You can go and
337 speak to the safeguarding officer, and she can give us leaflets... There are leaflets dotted
338 about the classroom, signs everywhere about bullying.

339 While on the surface this was encouraging as Dave talked positively about the resources
340 available to footballers which raised their awareness around bullying, other players were more
341 dubious about the quality of the resources available to them. This potentially explains why
342 codes of conduct may be limited in encouraging whistleblowing and that safeguarding
343 strategies in UK sports do not effectively target those over the age of 18 (Moriconi & de Cima,
344 2020; Rhind et al., 2015). The apparent skepticism around the efficacy of the presentations
345 delivered by the Premier League and other organizations reinforced this.

346 Phil discussed specific issues around the appropriateness and quality of the delivery:

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347 Some are engaging, some aren't. I think you've gotta engage the group. If you don't
348 engage the group, I don't think you'll benefit. The team won't benefit and you won't
349 benefit, cos what you're trying to implement won't be implemented. So you've got to
350 entice the group into your session and make them come out thinking. You want the
351 session to be that memorable and some of them are. "Do you remember this da da da"
352 a few months ago?

353 Taken on face value, Phil's view may be reflective of educational provision in
354 professional football being viewed as survival management for those leading the sessions
355 (Parker, 2000). Moreover, in saying "do you remember this da da da" a few months ago, Phil
356 conveyed the mundanity of a professional footballer's world (Parker & Manley, 2016), where
357 educational provision lacks stimulation and impact in terms of benefiting the team. This may
358 create a larger cultural problem within the sport in which belief in the value of the sessions is
359 low and therefore not worthwhile.

360 A teammate of Phil's, Kevin delivered an even more damning assessment of potential
361 inadequacies within the delivery of programs. For Kevin education programs promoted explicit
362 and implicit messages around bullying:

363 (The PFA) give presentations and they'll be asking the whole team. What person is
364 going to put their hand up to say something in front of the whole team? When
365 subconsciously they're going to hold back because what I say everyone's gonna hear it
366 and what reaction are they going to have? They're gonna have a reaction...Cos'
367 football's a team environment, you need to do everything as a team.

368 This was interesting as, despite the similarity of players' ages and experience across
369 this subordinate theme, they held markedly different views of the education programs available
370 to them. Kevin revealed deeply ingrained cultural beliefs around remaining silent, where the
371 presence of internal whistleblowing mechanisms adds to the reluctance and fear to speak out

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372 about inappropriate behavior. It is noteworthy to consider whether this represents a failure of
373 wider organizations such as the PFA or is something more specific to players' clubs.
374 Seemingly, the issue may be with the former based on Kevin's quote. Nonetheless, the views
375 of Kevin and to a lesser extent Phil were markedly different from the earlier views of Mickey
376 and Dave. The pairs of players were from different clubs (see Table 1), questioning the degree
377 to which whistleblowing behavior may be encouraged or not depending on the organization.
378 For some players, perceptions of whistleblowing may be grounded in their experience of
379 socialization to their club's expectations around behavior, working practices, and the
380 conformity to norms around disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) within their organizations.

381 Kevin delivered a further indictment around the education and welfare on offer to
382 players:

383 We could have a meeting this week, have a presentation this week, next week you don't
384 remember anything we've talked about and next week nothing's changed. You just talk
385 about things (racism) or raising awareness about something, but you'll have forgotten
386 about it next week...

387 This assessment is worrying on a couple of levels. First, these programs do not maintain
388 long-term engagement and behavioral change. Second, despite this education, it suggests
389 bullying remains commonplace rather than being reported. The degree to which Kevin
390 suggested that players return to normal, despite this awareness, suggested a deeply
391 institutionalized prejudice that may be particular to his club. Alarming, this was reiterated
392 with Kevin's overall assessment that:

393 There's nothing set up where if you are being bullied in football that there's no form of
394 solution to it. It's more like it's in control of the people being bullied or the people doing
395 the bullying... I think the club likes to think they employ people, not many people; they

396 like to think they employ people to help with that kind of stuff. But a coach is not there
397 to stop you from getting bullied.

398 This reflected a sense of abandonment on behalf of some players that there is nowhere
399 to safely report bullying. It also suggests that despite professional football's attempts to address
400 inappropriate behaviors, the welfare "people" Kevin referred to, are perceived to be a
401 tokenistic, reactionary attempt to safeguard players. Kevin's assertion reaffirms the sense that
402 both the potential to whistleblow in football, as well as bullying itself, is governed by
403 disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). As coaches do not protect players from being bullied, it
404 reinforces wrongdoing such that it becomes expected and rewarded, rather than prevented
405 (Jones & Denison, 2016). Moreover, from a Foucauldian perspective, professional football acts
406 as a panopticon, where players appear to be coerced from speaking out, particularly as those
407 responsible for maintaining discipline in coaches do not provide any support. This dangerously
408 leaves the resolution of bullying to bullies and victims. However, given the range of views
409 across cases within this theme, it was unclear whether this issue is particular to certain clubs
410 such as Kevin's or is more of an issue for the wider professional football context.

411 **The Challenges of Reporting Bullying**

412 This theme provided a genuine depth of convergence and divergence in participants'
413 accounts. Significant tensions were reflected across and within participants around whether the
414 bullying act can be reported. It also highlighted potential outcomes for the whistleblower and
415 the contextual influences which may act as a barrier to reporting.

416 ***The Ability to Report***

417 Kevin was a powerful voice in the discussion around whistleblowing. He drew on a
418 seemingly culturally accepted view of "banter" to illustrate how for some, reporting
419 wrongdoing in football is regarded as forbidden:

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420 You'd never go and tell someone or go and complain to the coach about someone getting
421 banter. I've seen people getting banter to the point where I feel sorry for them and they
422 still won't go and say anything just because of the football culture you won't, you can't,
423 it's a really hard thing... because you're selling out your teammates in a way. You can't
424 it's meant to be a team thing and in the same way, you can't sell them out. You can't get
425 them in trouble when really, you're meant to be able to take it, so you've got to find a
426 way to combat it without going to the coach. If you speak to most lads, they won't think
427 of going to the coach to deal with banter or tell him or anyone at home.

428 The unease in Kevin's account where he recounts "you won't, you can't, it's a really hard
429 thing" illuminates a sense of imprisonment for victims of bullying and shows how some players
430 believed reporting behavior akin to this is a "no-go" area. Kevin's experiences reinforced a
431 sense of entrapment within the enclosed world (Goffman, 1961) of professional football. This
432 shapes a collective identity where players cannot show weakness and must accept banter,
433 regardless of their feelings. Thus banter acts as a form of "discipline" which reinforces both
434 expected and accepted behaviors around conforming to a particular identity as a professional
435 footballer (Jones & Denison, 2016). Equally, reporting a teammate is seen as treachery and
436 contrary to the team dynamic, as supported by Ed:

437 'Cos you're a team and you're with each other every day. Cos you're with each other,
438 relying on each other. So, if someone's getting bullied, even though it shouldn't happen
439 and they go and tell someone, they might see it as someone going against the group and
440 stuff like that and feel like they shouldn't be part of their team.

441 For Ed, breaking from the group and reporting bullying would leave the player
442 disowned from their team with surveillance acting as a mechanism for disciplinary power
443 (Foucault, 1977). As Foucault (1977) described whistleblowing would represent a departure
444 from correct or accepted behaviors. In football the result of this is that players are punished

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445 through ostracism from the group. This ultimately acts as a subtle form of “discipline,” which
446 prevents each other from speaking out. Charlie concurred:

447 If a coach stepped in to defend a player who is being bullied or bantered maybe. I think
448 that could make the situation worse.....'Cos the person who's doing the bullying or
449 banter could stick on them saying “why's the manager sticking up for you?” It’s like
450 [he is] his pet of whatever.

451 Language such as “snitching” used by players such as Kevin and Dave supported an
452 underlying perception that reporting bullying would leave the whistleblower as an outcast. This
453 acts as another form of punishment with the player receiving further bullying for breaking from
454 the group's order. These dominant cultural beliefs which players passively or actively accept,
455 strip individuals of the ability to report. This is to avoid further bullying because of
456 whistleblowing (Park et al., 2020).

457 On a wider and perhaps even more alarming level, players illustrated that despite
458 knowledge of different potential supporting organizations, reporting bullying to these would
459 be avoided at all costs:

460 We have the PFA don’t we and you have a phone number you can ring but how many
461 people have the balls to admit they're being bullied because if that ever got out, you’d
462 get bullied even more. (James)

463 Do you know like even if you were to ring up the PFA to say someone's bullying me,
464 you wouldn’t actually get someone to come in and do something about it cos we're all
465 men? People laugh and all that and (would) be like 'he's not being bullied.' You know
466 what people are like 'we're only having a laugh; we're just having banter'. That's when
467 people sweep it under the carpet, they try and hide it under the banter carpet. (Kevin)

468 Kevin provided one of the most disturbing quotes within all the participants’ accounts,
469 as it highlighted a potentially systemic, organizational failure across professional football to

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470 support victims of bullying and instead to conceal this behavior under the guise of banter. Our
471 participants viewed organizations responsible for players' welfare and education, such as the
472 PFA, as complicit in the bullying process. As such this reflects what Ahern (2018) articulates
473 as an institutional betrayal of victims. In addition, at the individual level the image of victims
474 being laughed at reinforced a highly degrading feeling for them. Pertinently James' reference
475 to having the "balls to admit" being bullied demonstrates the high stakes risks around reporting
476 in football. Despite their differences in terms of age and experience, Kevin and James (see
477 Table 1) reaffirmed the secluded environment of football leaves them with the feeling that
478 reporting these behaviors is futile.

479 It should be noted though that this was not the case throughout participants' accounts.
480 Elsewhere, Ed and Dave highlighted contradictory views to other cases (as well as their own
481 within this theme) which suggested that you cannot go against the team:

482 The coaches do come and have a lot of talks with us and say obviously there should be
483 no bullying but if you do have a problem, come talk to us or the head of welfare and
484 stuff like that. (Ed)

485 Obviously, it's not a nice thing. It needs to be stopped...but that's why it's a safe
486 environment and you can go and speak to someone. (You can go to) the safeguarding
487 officer and say I'm not comfortable. (Dave)

488 These views offer more encouragement in that reporting channels are available for the
489 players and that some individuals feel a greater ability to report. Nonetheless, the views only
490 express a potential to report from individuals who claimed reporting would be challenging
491 elsewhere in their accounts. This creates doubt around the ability to speak out. Moreover, these
492 accounts were only indicative of players at one club (see Table 1). While this was encouraging
493 for this club, it suggests there may be issues with reporting in other organizations and
494 professional football more broadly.

495 *Witnessing and Bystanding*

496 Although most participants framed whistleblowing from the context of challenges and
497 potential outcomes for the victim of bullying, it is important to note that some players also
498 addressed the potential challenges for witnesses and bystanders. In some cases, as James
499 alluded to: “even if you feel sorry for people it's hard because if you are seen to be sticking up
500 for them, then you're in danger of getting the brunt of it as well.” Thus, whistleblowers are at
501 the risk of ending up as victims of bullying themselves for speaking out, reinforcing a code of
502 silence (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020) in professional football.

503 Some did, however, suggest wrongdoing could be reported with other players acting as
504 intermediaries to help resolve the situation. Alfie promoted a more positive view of
505 surveillance as an enactment of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977):

506 I think in our changing room we've got a lot of bonding from the younger lads and older
507 lads, so I think if there was a problem, they'd say to me or one of the older lads. I think
508 it would be resolved.

509 One potential explanation for this contrasting opinion may be that this is a result of
510 individual differences around reporting. Alternatively, Alfie's and James' views may reflect
511 differences in their experiences in the operation of power differentials at their clubs, which
512 shape the ability to speak out within a team. Alfie's teammate Phil concurred with this more
513 positive view of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), where whistleblowing was possible and
514 the responsibility of the whole team, not just the victim of the behavior.

515 Because as a team you need to know when it's all banter and then you need to understand
516 when someone's fully overstepped the mark. 'Cos then as a team if you understand what
517 boundaries...you can push and what you can't, and you can all clamp it out together it's
518 much better, well it's much easier, 'cos you can't let one person get away with it.

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519 Players like Phil may feel an obligation to avoid organizational bystanding and instead
520 engage with the process of altruistic bystanding, acting from a compassionate subjective state,
521 to prevent harm to the victim of bullying (Linstead, 2013). This may be shaped by the moral
522 atmosphere of specific clubs or is reflective of individual differences in moral values and
523 personalities from club to club. Nonetheless, the framing of Phil's quote is potentially
524 problematic as it infers that the players are left responsible for determining the appropriateness
525 of behavior. This may only be effective if the players adopt higher-level moral reasoning and
526 leave a lingering doubt about professional football's attempts to address bullying.

527 **Discussion**

528 Our study aimed to explore professional footballers' individual lived experiences and
529 perceptions of whistleblowing bullying, within a professional football context. Players
530 revealed important findings around the influence professional football has on potential
531 whistleblowing of bullying through its unique, largely institutionalized culture. Furthermore,
532 players held inconsistent views around the efficacy of professional football's attempts to
533 provide education and welfare to address bullying. Consistent with this, players identified
534 convergent and divergent accounts around the challenges with reporting bullying, as well as
535 some of the potentially severe outcomes of whistleblowing in the professional football
536 context for victims, witnesses, and bystanders alike.

537 The present study extended previous research by providing empirical evidence for
538 how individual, organizational and contextual factors (Verschuuren, 2020) play a crucial role
539 in the degree to which whistleblowing occurs in professional football. From a contextual
540 stance, players largely discussed how the encompassing tendencies (Goffman, 1961) of
541 professional football serve to legitimize behaviors that would be inappropriate in other
542 industries and act as a barrier to potential whistleblowing. Professional football serves, to
543 some degree, as a "total institution" where players follow both formal and informal rules such

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544 that any deviation from these (e.g., reporting wrongdoing) can be seen as a major infraction
545 (Goffman, 1961). Seemingly what is “legitimate” or “illegitimate” in professional football
546 depends on who defines wrongdoing, meaning that behaviors that may be seen as deviant, are
547 widely accepted in the culture of this sport (Young, 2019). This reflects potential
548 overconformity to the sport ethic (Coakley, 2015) in professional football, whereby tolerating
549 deviant behaviors like bullying may be seen as a necessary part of team membership.

550 Furthermore, players’ accounts reinforced the coercive power of managers and
551 coaches (Anderson & White, 2017) to punish those who offer an individual view that differs
552 from the institutional perspective of these rules (Goffman, 1961). Grounded within
553 Foucault’s (1977) theoretical propositions, players feared disciplinary punishments such as
554 being deselected from the team for those who may want to speak out around bullying during
555 initiation ceremonies. This finding carries a potentially important implication for other
556 workplaces which are characterized by initiation ceremonies. For example, although attempts
557 have been made to address hazing behavior in contexts such as the military (Keller et al.,
558 2015), the current study highlights questions around the degree to which individuals can
559 report wrongdoing in certain industries. There may still be a perception that whistleblowing
560 leads to greater bullying (Park et al., 2020), especially when organizations like professional
561 football remain underpinned by authoritarianism, subservience, and “rule-bound” behaviors
562 (Parker & Manley, 2016). Therefore, in industries such as professional sport, individuals
563 appear to trade the morality of principle around reporting wrongdoing, for the morality of
564 loyalty (Erickson et al., 2019). The result is a level of commitment to their organization that
565 goes beyond other occupations (Adler & Adler, 1988) which may be problematic in creating
566 a psychologically unsafe climate. Here whistleblowing wrongdoing may be viewed as a
567 “risky” interpersonal behavior that receives a negative response from other team members
568 (Edmondson, 2004).

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569 The contextual and organizational influence of professional football on reporting
570 bullying was also reflected in participants' views of education and welfare systems in place.
571 Players at certain clubs talked favorably of the implementation of education and welfare at
572 clubs to facilitate reporting wrongdoing. This was consistent with Caillier's (2017) research
573 demonstrating positive associations between whistleblowing education and reporting. For
574 some in the present study, football clubs are seen to be keen to address wrongdoing, and
575 individuals feel supported in raising concerns about bullying. These players highlighted a
576 preference for using internal whistleblowing mechanisms should they need to voice their
577 concerns (Caillier, 2017).

578 Nonetheless, others were much less complimentary about their clubs' ability to
579 manage concerns, as well as the other internal whistleblowing mechanisms which
580 professional football promotes. This adds important empirical evidence to claims that
581 whistleblowing training programs may have a counterintuitive effect by highlighting the risks
582 a whistleblower might face (Verschuuren, 2020). There was a worrying trend in the data that
583 professional football that organizations who are leading on players' welfare such as the PFA,
584 indirectly perpetuate the issues of failing internal disciplinary systems and victim silencing
585 (Nite & Nauright, 2020). Most graphically, players feared ridicule for reporting bullying,
586 which reinforced the sense that reprisals are a taken-for-granted response to whistleblowing
587 within sports organizations. This further represents the enactment of disciplinary power
588 (Foucault, 1977), whereby players potentially surveil one another from the bottom up and
589 preserve bullying as a mechanism to maintain the group's order in professional football.
590 Furthermore, the apparent worthlessness of the education on offer highlighted by certain
591 players demonstrates a potentially systemic failure of professional football to address
592 concerns with educational provision (Parker, 2000). Thus, the present study challenges the
593 view that whistleblowing education can help change whistleblowing culture in sport, by

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594 signaling that an organization values reporting wrongdoing and protects whistleblowers
595 against retribution (Erickson et al., 2019). The present data reveal that until proper
596 mechanisms are in place to protect whistleblowers, the process of raising awareness becomes
597 delegitimized (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020).

598 Furthermore, it was evident from the players' accounts that organizational and
599 contextual factors not only determine (Verschuuren, 2020) but also interact to impact players'
600 ability to report bullying. Professional football promotes a code of silence (Moriconi & de
601 Cima, 2020) where an individual's need to demonstrate "intense loyalty" to their club (Adler
602 & Adler, 1988) means whistleblowing of bullying remains more difficult than in other
603 workplaces. Alarming, attempts to report wrongdoing increases the relationally abusive
604 element of ostracism (Newman et al., 2021), which underpins bullying in football. Through
605 "situated learning" it appears players absorb informal rules within professional football
606 (Parker, 2006), which in this case means they do not report bullying for fear that
607 whistleblowing may affect their survival within this workplace. Once more this may reflect
608 more broadly, workplaces that are similar to professional football such as the army and
609 prisons (Parker & Manley, 2016).

610 It should be noted though that in occasional cases players contested this notion.
611 Players appeared to provide evidence for the claim that an individual's perception of power
612 (see Verschuuren, 2020) is a potentially important determinant of whistleblowing in sport.
613 Given that characteristics such as age and experience appear not to drive this view within the
614 present findings, alternative mechanisms may be in place. An individual's perception of
615 power to report wrongdoing may instead be determined by their apprenticeship to the cultural
616 norms of football when they are socialized as an academy player (Parker & Manley, 2016).
617 Furthermore, personality traits such as high extraversion and dominance and low
618 agreeableness (Bjørkelo et al., 2010) may fuel agency in reporting, as well as an individual's

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619 morality (Zhou et al., 2018), though further work is required to corroborate this in
620 professional football. Nonetheless what was more apparent was that when clubs provide
621 supportive conditions, the process of reporting is facilitated.

622 Although there appear to be some isolated signs of encouragement regarding the
623 potential to whistleblow in professional football, the potential outcomes for the whistleblower
624 as either the victim, witness, or bystander to bullying are central in preventing reporting of
625 wrongdoing. In the present study, players gave a sense that a whistleblower would be
626 dismissed by internal organizations which are set up to protect them such as the PFA. For
627 some, the PFA was almost seen as part of a silent discreet mechanism of disciplinary power
628 (Foucault, 1977), which prevents rather than supports players to whistleblow wrongdoing.
629 These findings may help explain why sporting participants are less likely to report their
630 concerns to authorities connected to their sport, but rather highlight the wrongdoing to
631 another individual such as a coach (Erickson et al., 2017). Albeit potentially indirectly, these
632 organizations such as the PFA appear to maintain the culture of victim silencing (Nite &
633 Nauright, 2020), rather than leaving individuals with a strong sense that they will be
634 protected. This potential failure represents institutional betrayal whereby footballers'
635 expectations for safety and at work are violated (Ahern, 2018), which may explain why some
636 individuals are driven to the point of considering suicide (BBC, 2021b).

637 The present findings also add to limited previous research (Richardson & McGlynn,
638 2014) which has explored the potential retaliation that may take place for whistleblowers in
639 hypermasculine, highly competitive sporting environments. For many victims, witnesses, and
640 bystanders of bullying in professional football, it is evident they go through a cost-benefit
641 analysis (Richardson & McGlynn, 2014) where the risks of reporting are too great in terms of
642 further bullying or threats to their position on the team. These beliefs appear to be
643 exacerbated by the hypermasculine culture of professional football, where players determine

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644 that their “professional” identity and “will to win” needs to be displayed by conforming to
645 these practices (Parker & Manley, 2016). The tolerance players are expected to display to
646 severe banter means that their need for closeness, intimacy and respect gets converted into a
647 narrow form of group-oriented bonding based on competitive one-upmanship, self-
648 destructive behaviors, and silent conformity to group norms (Messner, 2002). Furthermore,
649 this adds to the sense that codes of silence (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020) become more
650 entrenched in team sports, where the primacy of culture and hierarchy means that
651 subordination is more likely and individuals may be less willing to speak out (Verschuuren,
652 2020). On occasions, though this view was contested, offering some hope that altruistic
653 bystanding is possible, which could address some of the negative impacts of organizational
654 bystanding for both witnesses and victims (Linstead, 2013).

655 **Practical Implications**

656 The present study provided key practical implications concerning whistleblowing of
657 bullying in professional football. First, within historically masculine, authoritarian industries
658 such as professional football, education programs need to challenge the prevailing
659 organizational culture which may be a barrier to reporting. Players’ accounts suggest that
660 many do not speak out for fear of going against implicit and explicit rules within this sporting
661 workplace. To address this, interventions need to take place at the organizational level,
662 including key stakeholders such as the PFA, boards of directors, managers and coaches,
663 players, as well as sport psychologists. Sports psychologists especially can play a proactive
664 role in facilitating these educational efforts (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017) to challenge the issues
665 highlighted in the present study. Importantly these interventions need to reassure individuals
666 that they will not be ridiculed for reporting wrongdoing such as bullying.

667 Second, professional football needs to raise the confidence in players of the quality of
668 its educational and welfare provision. In the present study, players reflected a view that

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669 education programs are something which to survive and “get through” (Parker, 2000). Future
670 educational programs need to offer clearer guidance on how to whistleblow and its benefits
671 (Erickson et al., 2019) but these need to be accompanied by proper mechanisms to protect
672 whistleblowers to act on their complaints (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). Organizations such as
673 the PFA, need to provide clear evidence of how allegations are responded to and how bullies
674 are addressed. Sport psychologists are potentially critical here in creating psychologically
675 safe and respectful environments (Edmondson, 2004; Fisher & Dzikus, 2017) which can
676 address fears that players will be ridiculed for reporting wrongdoing.

677 Finally, the inconsistency in the players’ accounts around their ability to whistleblow
678 within their club, as well as the sense that it may be difficult to report concerns to outside
679 organizations such as the PFA, suggests that education and welfare programs need to be
680 tailored more to the individual organization. From the participants’ data, it further reflects
681 that classroom education programs are too remote and not effective in professional football
682 (Higham et al., 2021), resulting in players not having the courage to call the PFA to report
683 their concerns. By involving coaches, players, and sports psychologists to co-construct
684 education and welfare policies at a club level, it may better integrate empirical and
685 experiential knowledge (Stone et al., 2020) to address bullying within their organization. In
686 this regard, sports psychologists can assist in developing ethical guidelines, policies, and
687 practices for their club (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). This may raise the profile of bullying to
688 coaches who can be seen to originate abusive behavior, whilst also regulating who can
689 whistleblow in the first place (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Verschuuren, 2020).

690 **Limitations and Future Research**

691 Common with recent research into safeguarding in sport (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere,
692 2020), the present study may have been limited by the sensitive nature of the topic area and
693 the degree to which participants may have been apprehensive about sharing their data. This

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694 effect may have been exacerbated, given the concerns highlighted by players about their
695 careers and fear of ridicule for reporting bullying behavior in professional football. While
696 these are notable concerns, significant efforts were made to build rapport within the
697 interviews to reassure players through the process of gaining consent (Rhind & Owusu-
698 Sekyere, 2020) and to remind the players of the confidentiality of their data. Importantly, this
699 study also addressed limitations highlighted by previous research (Newman et al., 2021) by
700 exploring the degree to which education and welfare provision supports players in their
701 ability to report bullying.

702 An additional point worthy of consideration for future research to consider is to focus
703 on the views of various stakeholders concerning whistleblowing of bullying within
704 professional football. The present study was limited to the expressions of players, whereas
705 recent research into workplace bullying has advocated a broader sampling strategy (Sprigg et
706 al., 2019). It might be useful to employ this approach within an organization to recruit
707 participants other than the players. This aligns with beneficial advancements around
708 safeguarding in sport where an organizational focus has been adopted (Rhind & Owusu-
709 Sekyere, 2020). To address concerns raised by some players regarding the involvement of
710 coaches in terms of preventing whistleblowing, it may be useful to involve the views of this
711 group. By doing this it may sensitize this group (Newman et al., 2021) to the issues with
712 reporting bullying in professional football, while hopefully encouraging their moral
713 engagement to administer protection for whistleblowers (Verschuuren, 2020).

714 **Conclusion**

715 The present study makes an important contribution to whistleblowing research in the
716 sporting workplace while demonstrating the potential for understanding this behavior in
717 organizations and workplaces more broadly. It demonstrates the importance of organizational
718 and contextual factors and the degree to which these shape the reporting of workplace

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719 bullying in professional football. Furthermore, it highlights the need for relevant, tailored
720 education and welfare programs that individuals feel they can access. The present study also
721 illustrates the important interaction between these organizational and contextual factors and
722 an individual's perceptions around their ability to whistleblow and the potential ramifications
723 for them of doing so. Overall, the findings present a vital challenge for sport to develop
724 appropriate policies and procedures for whistleblowers while providing safeguards for those
725 wishing to report wrongdoing.

726 **Acknowledgments**

727 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial,
728 or not for profit sectors.

729 **Disclosure Statement**

730 The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Table 1: Participant ages and years of experience as a professional football player

Participant	Age	Years as a professional	Club	Division of club
James	31	14	A	Championship
Oli	21	6	A	Championship
George	20	3	A	Championship
Charlie	19	4	B	Championship
Alfie	19	2	B	Championship
Ricky	19	2	B	Championship
Peter	19	2	B	Championship
Jamal	19	9	B	Championship
Paul	18	4	C	Premier League
Ed	18	7	C	Premier League
Dave	18	2	C	Premier League
Grant	20	5	C	Premier League
Mickey	20	3	C	Premier League
Greg	20	3	B	Championship
Lenny	18	2	B	Championship
Rob	19	2	B	Championship
Kevin	21	3	B	Championship
Phil	18	2	B	Championship

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Table 2: Master table of themes in relation to whistleblowing of abuse and bullying

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Professional football's influence on whistleblowing	The unique, institutionalized nature of football The efficacy in education and welfare
The challenges of reporting bullying	The ability to report The outcomes for the whistleblower Witnessing and bystanding