

## The Impact of Homesickness on Elite Footballers

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### Abstract

Globalisation has resulted in increased migration for sports participation. Leaving home and moving to a new city or country requires adjustment and may increase levels of stress experienced by players. The impacts of the move may have consequences for the player both on and off the field. This study looked at ways in which moving to a new city or country impacted players and what mechanisms helped them cope and adjust to the new surroundings. The sample consisted of 41 football players (male N=20; female N=21) ages between 17 and 42 years old. Players came from eleven different countries across five continents all playing at the highest level of the game. The study found that the players had both football-related and non-football related consequences as a result of the move. Things like missing family and friends, adjusting to a new language, and adjusting to a new style of football were the most prominent difficulties experienced by the players. Keeping in touch with family and friends made the move easier, as did the support played within the team set-up. Most players who had made more than one move found the first move the toughest to adjust to, and lessons learnt during that move made subsequent moves easier.

**Keywords:** Stress; Sports; Globalization

### Introduction

Sport can be regarded as the most universal aspect of popular culture which has captivated participants and consumers from all over the world [1,2]. Football is the world's most popular sport with approximately 4.1% of the world's population plays the game professionally [3,4]. Globalization of the football market has led to clubs scouting for players in other cities, countries and continents [5]. The 1995 Bosman Ruling of the European Court of Justice accelerated football migration [6]. In European leagues- such as that of Italy, England, and Spain- foreign players make up to between 23% and 60% percent of squad members. On the African continent, the South African league draws many players from across the continent [6]. While there are rules dictating the number of foreign players allowed to play, player migration is now an integral part of the football world [7]. This has led to an increase in players experiencing different countries and cities. Travel and relocation is now a common part of the game.

A football career is short-lived and players often move to new clubs. Reasons for moves vary and can include financial rewards, seeking new challenges, not having contracts renewed, family reasons, better commercial opportunities for the club and player, wanting a new environment, opportunity to fulfill individual goals etc. [8-10]. Regardless of the reason for the move, it is likely that the players will be exposed to challenges which come with adjusting to life in a new city or country.

Moving to a new environment can result in both positive and negative stress. There are many opportunities, and challenges that are involved in such a transition. Once a player takes a decision to go to a new city or country they need to adapt to settling in the new city, living away from places and people that the player is fond of, adapting to

different cultural codes both on and off the field and identifying with the new team in the new host city [11].

Homesickness is a depressive-like reaction or the distress related to a move away from home and the impact it has often been studied in populations such as labour migrants, people in the defense force and international students [12-14]. There is very little that has been done based on homesickness and the impact of adjusting to a new city has on elite footballers. Transitioning to a new environment is regarded as a step in personal growth, and footballers often make these moves more often than in other professions.

Players are often required to move to join new teams and frequently may spend periods away from home for matches, training camps and tournaments. Homesickness is a complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state that leaves a player yearning for his previous environment. Moving away from home can be accompanied by different symptoms related to homesickness. These can be physical (such as increased susceptibility to illness, muscle tension, headaches, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fatigue etc.), cognitive (stress and anxiety, lack of focus and attention, negative thoughts etc.), behavioural (lack of initiative, procrastination, apathy) and emotional (feeling depressive, insecure, dissatisfied, nervous, lonely etc.) [13,15].

Female players are often required to migrate out of need rather than want. Currently female players can only make a living out of playing football in twenty-two out of 147 countries in the world [11]. Female players may also move because culture and tradition in their home cities may frown upon women playing football, and women's football might not get the political, economic and other support required for players to develop [8].

While this migration is not limited to players with a large number of teams having foreigners as part of their technical teams, this study was limited to players.

## Methodology

### Research design

This study was based on a qualitative descriptive research design with participants completing a homesickness questionnaire.

### Sample

The sample consisted of 41 football players (male N=20; female N=21) ages between 17 and 42 years old. Players came from eleven different countries across five continents. The breakdown of continents and number of players can be found in Table 1. All players were playing in professional football leagues. Every player had either moved to a new city (N=9), country (N=22) or continent (N=10) to have played football, with some players having made more than 1 move (N=26).

The questionnaire was broken into three sections.

- Section 1 covered different things players might have experienced when they moved.
- Section 2 covered different coping mechanism that the players might have used.
- Section 3 covered players who made more than one move and whether subsequent moves were easier.

The results of the study addresses each of these sections based on the questions asked.

Continent	Number
Europe	30
Africa	8
North America	1
Australasia	1
Asia	1

**Table 1:** Continental breakdown of participants.

### Ethics

All players were informed of the research consent and provided their permission for the information to be used in the study.

### Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted.

### Results

	Parameter	No	certain extent	great extent	Yes	% yes
1	New style of football	4	30	7	37	90.24
1	Fitting into the team	9	21	11	32	78.05
1	Adjust to media culture	7	32	2	34	82.93
1	Different kick-off times	17	22	2	24	58.54
2	Missing immediate family	1	20	20	40	97.56
2	Missing extended family	9	20	12	32	78.05
2	Missing friends	1	22	18	40	97.56
2	Stress of moving possessions	8	27	6	33	80.49
2	New culture off away from the club	7	29	5	34	82.93
2	Unsure what to do with time off	10	26	5	31	75.61
2	Learning way around the city	15	24	2	26	63.41
2	Unfamiliar grocery shopping	7	30	4	34	82.93
2	Social withdrawal	12	24	5	29	70.73
2	Loneliness	11	24	6	30	73.17
2	Feeling people didn't understand my culture	13	24	4	28	68.29
3	New language	8	23	10	33	80.49
3	New dialect	14	19	8	27	65.85
3	Weather	7	22	12	34	82.93
3	New diet	12	20	9	29	70.73

3	Lack of appetite	11	27	3	30	73.17
3	Sleep disturbances	10	21	10	31	75.61
3	Self-doubt	13	24	4	28	68.29
3	Susceptibility to illness	14	26	1	27	65.85
3	Increased stress	20	11	10	21	51.22
1=Football						
2=General						
3=General but can directly impact football						

**Table 2:** Impacts of the move.

Parameter	No	Certain extent	Great extent	Yes	% yes
Family who moved	8,00	18	15,00	33	80.49
Friends who moved	10,00	16	15,00	31	75.61
Visits from family and friends	4,00	9	28,00	37	90.24
Familiarity with coach or technical team	10,00	18	13,00	31	75.61
Old teammates	5,00	17	19,00	36	87.80
Teammates from same country	8,00	13	20,00	33	80.49
Teammates from same continent	12,00	9	20,00	29	70.73
Help from teammates	1,00	15	25,00	40	97.56
Help from other club members	2,00	15	24,00	39	95.12
Moving into my own place	5,00	23	13,00	36	87.80
Travelling for matches or camps	19,00	17	5,00	22	53.66
Pre-match and pre-training routines	7,00	22	12,00	34	82.93
Keeping up with news from home	17,00	9	15,00	24	58.54
Staying in touch with family and friends	2,00	15	24,00	39	95.12
Looking for positives in new situation	15,00	11	15,00	26	63.41
Self-confidence	2,00	16	23,00	39	95.12
Reminders of why I moved	3,00	9	29,00	38	92.68
First training session	4,00	22	15,00	37	90.24
First match	4,00	22	15,00	37	90.24
First team public appearance	10,00	19	12,00	31	75.61
First team media appearance	15,00	17	9,00	26	63.41
Love for football	15,00	5	21,00	26	63.41
Team goals	15,00	8	18,00	26	63.41
Being open to new foods	20,00	7	14,00	21	51.22
Finding places that prepare meals from my home	20,00	11	10,00	21	51.22

Meeting new football people	15,00	7	19,00	26	63.41
Meeting new non-football people	15,00	7	19,00	26	63.41
Mental strength	20,00	6	15,00	21	51.22
Integrating into the team	13,00	11	17,00	28	68.29
Taking language classes	10,00	18	13,00	31	75.61
Care packages from home	10,00	17	14,00	31	75.61
Having a translator	20,00	16	5,00	21	51.22
Short term football goals	4,00	11	26,00	37	90.24
Long term football goals	6,00	11	24,00	35	85.37
Short term non-football goals	8,00	12	21,00	33	80.49
Long term non-football goals	9,00	13	19,00	32	78.05

**Table 3:** Coping mechanisms of players.

From the 26 players who had made more than one move, 24 of them found that their first move was the toughest and it was easier to adjust during subsequent moves.

### Discussion

Sport has often been used as a vehicle to bring together people. In sport there may be a desire to be part of a cohesive unit and attain the feeling of belonging [16]. Football is a truly global game, with player migration to different cities, countries and continents a normal part of the game. Teams often scout for players across the world in their quest to acquire and develop the best players at their academies or recruit the best players for their senior squads. When players migrate to another city or country, this feeling becomes more important as the main focus of the player and all their social interactions in the beginning may be linked to the club. In addition to individual traits, organization culture and social climate also plays a role in the manifestation of confidence. Social climate and organization culture can be subjective with different individuals in the team perceiving things differently. This can be based on objective actual events (certain players being treated differently to others) or emotional and subjective interpretations of events.

A study based on international students found that the adjustment or areas of concern when moving fall into three categories. These are adjustment issues, academic concerns and psychosocial issues [17]. This is also applicable for football players who are faced with non-football related adjustments such as cultural changes in the new city, needing to move possessions etc. Footballers are also faced with challenges that may impact their football such as climatic conditions that may impact their level of training, football culture, media and fans etc. Psychosocial issues related to relationships with teammates away from the field and creating a new social network are also challenges. Table 1 shows the results of this study by highlighting which factors may have had an impact on players.

Team cohesion is an important part of success in football [18]. But this also presents a challenge to a new player who may feel as an outsider when initially exposed to a group of players who may have been together for a long period, and may be in tune with each other both on and off the field. Often a new player could be replacing a

former player or be seen as competition for an existing player and it is important that the team has tools in place to socialize the new player into the team set-up.

In this study 78% of players indicated that trying to fit into a new team was one of the challenges that faced them when making a move. In some instances players may opt to move to clubs where they have worked with or developed some relationship with the coach or another member of the technical team. This familiarity can make the move easier with 75.61% of players in this study showing that it played some role in helping them cope. This can be due to the fact that the players feels less pressure to prove him/herself to the coach since the coach will be familiar not only with the play but character of the player.

Having played previously with new teammates whether at a previous club or national team set-up also assists the players in adjusting (87.80%) and this could be because the familiarity makes the new surrounding feel less strange. Teammates from the same country (80.49%) or continent (70.73%) can also assist in the transition. This can be due to them having similar cultures, languages, and a greater understanding of each other. In some ways having such teammates is like a having a piece of home with them.

A player who has just transferred to a team carries with him the task knowledge. He still has his understanding of football and his football skill but he is required to gain team knowledge and team work where he understands the actions of his teammates [19]. Adjusting to a new style of football impacted 90.24% of the total sample in same way.

In order to make a player fit in with his teammates a professional understanding must develop. This includes sharing team goals, and getting to know and understand each other and their roles and ability on the field. This is enhanced by spending more time together and by fulfilling performance outcomes to meet set goals. While team goals only served as a coping mechanism in 63.41% of players, individual football goals were far more relevant. Both short-term (90.24%) and long-term (85.37%) football goals were important for coping, with players more likely to be able to use these goals as motivation for them and their understanding that this move and making it a success will be vital to achieving these goals.

Teammates (97.56%) also plays a big role by advising players, or just making them feel welcomed or integrated into the club family. This assistance is not restricted to other players but also other members of the club (95.12%). This advice and transition extends beyond the training center. Establishing relationships with teammates off the field is also important and enables teammates to act as part of the social support structure. They can then share their experiences of adjusting to the city, the club history and culture and other information that might make a player adjust easier [20]. An important part of team chemistry relates to the interactions between players and the technical team led by the coach. Game style and planning play an important role in building team chemistry and one of the things new players might need to adjust to is a new or different style of play and different coaching styles and planning of training sessions [20]. This could impact the player both in terms of emotional and psychological responses but also in terms of physical responses.

The team environment is not limited to the teammates and technical team but also includes the administrators, fans and internal and external media [19]. All of these groups can help a player feel welcomed and increase their confidence which will make the transition easier.

The impact of the media and fans is not always positive and can add to the pressure felt by the player not just in their actions on the field, but their behavior off the field and ways that they might go about adjusting to the new city including in their social life. In this study 82.93% of players found that to some degree adjusting to the specific media culture of the new environment was a challenge to them. The media can also impact how welcomed a player feels in his new home. Often people within the media and football may blame poor growth and progress of their National teams on the number of foreign players playing in domestic leagues. This could make foreign players feel unwelcomed or doubt whether they are wanted [7,10].

Having fans welcome a new player and also show their support, even if a player does struggle to adjust initially, is important in helping players feel that the fans believe in him and ultimately motivates the player to work harder to fulfill their belief.

Teams can also have people who can assist the player in the logistics of the move and help advise when it comes to things like where to buy a house, good places to shop and eat etc. The stress related to moving things like material possessions (80.49%), and understanding the new non-football culture (82.93%) in the new environment are also challenges. This is helped (87.80%) by players moving out of temporary dwellings such as hotels and into a permanent residence which they can decorate to feel like home.

Relocation can be stressful and like other stressors can lead to either a positive or negative response. Often the move can be a combination of responses. Stress responses can be both cognitive and physical. Cognitive responses may be worrying, negative thoughts; fear of failure, loss of confidence, and feeling like the player doesn't fit in. Physical responses can lead to sleep disturbances, increased susceptibility to illness, increase in muscle tension and loss of appetite.

In this study players indicated that they had experienced both cognitive and physical responses to stress that occurred as a result of relocating. Physical symptoms such as susceptibility to illness (65.85%), sleep disturbances (75.61%), lack of appetite (73.17%) and cognitive and psychosocial responses such as social withdrawal (70.73%), loneliness (73.17%), self-doubt (68.29), and increased stress (51.22) manifested in some extent in players in this study. Loneliness, adjusting to a different transport network and learning the way around

a city tend to be prominent in the first twelve months after a move [17].

Culture shock can also be applicable. This is usually applicable to players who move to different countries but in some instances can be experienced when moving to a new city. Culture shock could work both ways where players experience a psychological or physical response to a new culture. But players may also experience the opposite where they feel that people do not understand their traditions and culture. Culture also impacts decisions of players [20]. Turning to religion as a means for homesick adults to cope. This was similar to what some of the players stated here. Players indicated that things like halal food sources (for Muslim players) and distance relative to places of prayer as well as finding a community that consists of people from the same country or even continent plays a role in making players find the adjustment easier.

Coping methods are essential to minimise the impact of homesickness. Goals are important in the adjustment [20]. Implementation and practice of goal setting has shown to have a positive impact in players performance on the field and would be expected to relate to their adjustments off the field. Setting both football and non-football short and long term goals help players strive towards something and if they meet those goals, they are left with more confidence and a feeling of self-efficacy which can be transferred to other aspects of their life and make the transition easier. Short (80.49%) and long (78.05) term non-football goals also help make the adjustment easier for players.

It has been advised that goals set must be difficult but realistic. Unrealistic goals lead to a person failing to achieve their goal and can be very demotivating thus affecting future performance. A timeline for the achievement of the goals must be set. Long term goals are too future oriented and do not also have an immediate significance. Thus, it is important that both long term and short term goals are set.

Motivation has also been a strong indication of better performance in competitive football. Footballers who are highly motivated show more commitment and remain dedicated in their quest to achieve their goals. They are harder working and put in a greater effort to achieve those goals. They will also persist throughout their task even when things get tough or they experience setbacks and failures.

Achievement motivation is a personality trait and is usually indicated by the competitive nature of the individual. Different players are motivated by different things. These are usually a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors and the level motivation varies during different phases of the season or based on what else may be happening in the players life. The motivation behind a players move is key in making the transition easier. Most of the players (92.68%) indicated that when they were feeling stressed out about the move or had any doubts they reminded themselves about the reason behind the move.

One theory related to reasons for homesickness is that it is a response to disruption of the person's lifestyle and routines. This was covered in the questionnaire and 82.93% participants felt that getting back to their pre-training and pre-match routines helped them with the adjustment to their new team. This could be because getting back to routine gives a player a greater sense of [13].

Adjusting to a new city improves with time. After twelve months there is a trend where adjustment issues become minimised [18]. Players might feel more comfortable being themselves and become

more talkative and expressive as they get used to the people and environment at the new club.

Social support is one of the most recognized tools in combating homesickness [15]. This can include visits from friends (75.61%) and family (80.49%) as well as using technology to keep in touch with friends and family at home (95.12%). It also extends to developing a social structure in the new city. This includes people involved in football (63.41%) but extends to people who are not connected to football (63.41%). Developing friendships with people from within the host city can enhance feelings of belonging and contentment [21].

The nature of the relationships between players and their families and friends is also critical. Players coming from close-knit families where they might have had family gatherings often, are more likely to feel isolated when the rest of the family is together and they are far away. Occasions such as birthdays, religious holidays, anniversaries, graduations etc. might compound these emotions, since player's schedules and visits back home are dictated by the football season and calendar. Unlike in other jobs where employees are entitled to specific number of leave days, footballers are bound by fixtures and are required to show commitment to the team. While technology can compensate a little, there is no substitution for actually being in the company of one's family or friends, especially at times when a player might be seeking comfort.

One key thing that leads to feeling homesick is a preoccupation with the previous environment, and constantly comparing the new environment to the old one [22]. Given this, it is interesting to find that only (58.54%) of participants used technology to keep up with events and news from back home. It seems that it is not the environment that one yearns for, but the social network and people are more important. Getting care packages (75.61%) from home also gave players the feeling that their new environment was a home away from home.

Coping with homesickness can quicken the player's ability to adjust to a new environment. Engaging in fun activities is one of the ways in which players can feel better. This can extend to training sessions and matches on the field of play and exploring the city and finding newer experiences off the field of play with (75.61%) of players indicated that being bored and not knowing what to do with time off affected them when they made the move.

Positive thoughts can also help players with the change (Van Tilburg, 1999). In this study 63.41% of players said looking for the positives helped them cope while only 51.22% identified their own mental strength as a tool for helping them adjust.

Age, gender, experience personality traits and personal resilience are some of the factors that impact how much homesickness can influence a person [23]. Players who move before their professional careers begin are likely to face fewer cultural transitions [20].

In this study both age and gender were included and it was found that people who were older found it easier to adjust to a new city and team environment. One player stated that he was old when he moved and had already achieved a basic level of independence prior to the move and this helped when he had moved and did not have a constant social support structure round him.

Experience of moving also meant that second and third moves were easier for of players. The reason for this was that the players knew from past experience that they have the resilience and personality to cope with the new demands; and also arranging the logistics was easier as they knew what worked last time and what did not. Experience

depends on memory. Working memory plays a significant role in higher cognitive functioning such as thinking, planning, reasoning and decision-making. Thus the neuronal mechanisms that are utilized in working memory provide relevant information on cognitive functioning. Players who have families that may have migrated before or come from mixed cosmopolitan backgrounds are more likely to face a migration transition with more ease [20].

Migration can sometimes involve traveling long geographical distances and this can include being exposed to new climates [8,20]. In this study 82.93% of players indicated that the weather and climate of the host city created some challenges for them. This is similar to the findings of a group of Brazilian players who had migrated to Faro Islands but returned home since the climate was not something they had adjusted to.

When players move they may also be exposed to different socioeconomic differences between their home and host cities [8]. Migration in many fields has often been linked with economic reasons for the change. People move to a new city hoping to increase their economic benefits. Players might need assistance or guidance to be able to cope with their own changing economic situation and learn about financial management. This might be prevalent when making international moves but can also be applicable in instances where players move from more rural areas to urban areas and big cities. This can open them up to shopping in different types of shops and trying to keep up with the lifestyle of teammates or other acquaintances. Age can also play a vital role in this, players who are older or more emotionally mature, might be able to better manage their finances than younger players with fewer responsibilities or a less than secure support structure.

Relocating can lead to emotional responses such as fear and anxiety. Emotions can turn the focus away from the goal at hand or the current competitive task and turn focus and attention towards a different goal. Thus negative emotions can have a detrimental effect on performance.

One advantage that football players have over other migrant workers is that often clubs provide services to make the transition easier. Houses and cars, as well as initial accommodation and travel arrangements are usually made by the club and or players agents. Players indicated that the role clubs play in advising players and assisting them with the logistics is important. Giving them access to maps, interpreters and having a welcome package with information related to the club and city can make a player feel better prepared for what is to come.

The social aspect of professional football the camaraderie which often extends to keeping things light and enjoying moments off the field is a big part of team cohesion. And often new teammates may help a player feel at home by sharing funny stories of things that may have happened when they joined the team or highlighting some of the light-hearted things associated with the club or coach [24].

Some players made more than one move in their careers. Ninety-two percent of these players found that the first move was the toughest one for them to make. Some felt that age was one of the factors in this, and that as they were older for the later moves, they were better equipped to deal with the challenges. The previous experience also acted as a guiding factor, with players learning from previous mistakes and knowing what to focus on and when to consult the club or embassies. Some players also indicated that when they made their later moves their family lives had changed and they were in steady relationships or had children, which made it easier to focus during the

move and also by creating a social network around the children's school or other needs, it increased their social interactions, making the adjustment easier.

One of the things that this study did not fully address was how number of years spent at a club might impact the move to a new club. The more time a player spends at one club, will impact the emotional connection the player has to the club and the city. The club will become part of the player's family and even if the player is not from the city, that city will also feel like home. Leaving these connections will create an additional challenge for the player, and it will mimic the way a player feels during the first move away from the family. At the previous club, the player might have played a pivotal role in helping other players adjust and might have been a leader, and now within a new environment that role will be changed. The reason behind the player's choice to move, or the team's choice to let the player go will also influence the way the player feels about the club and can impact the adjustment when the player migrates. When the player moves, his role within the new team will need to be redefined.

To make the adjustment easier players might prefer to move to a city where the language is the same albeit of a different dialect or the culture is very similar. This might make it easier for the player to adjust, but often the differences in culture transcend language, and food.

## Conclusion

One of the challenges of the modern football game is ensuring that homesickness is limited and that players have enough support and time when they move to new cities. Clubs play a key role in this process and by helping players find a place to stay, arrange for them to move their possessions, get a translator and language teacher the process is made easier. The football part is a vital component, and it is important for coaching staff and other players to welcome new players, and give them enough time and support to adjust. Making them feel included, advising them, and welcoming not just them but their family or friends who might have moved with them will help make the adjustment easier.

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