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Psychosocial aspects of release in youth and developing athletes: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Release from sports teams, organisations and talent development programmes has been shown to have a number of effects on youth and developing athletes and their subsequent transition. The aim of this study was to systematically review, synthesise, and appraise research on release that has been conducted around youth and developing athletes. Specifically, this review aimed: (i) to examine psychosocial impacts of release; (ii) to examine factors related to adaptation to release; and (iii) to examine available resources for adaptation to release. Following a systematic search of six electronic databases and manual searches, a total of 15 studies that met the eligibility criteria were included in the final review. The studies included athletes from a variety of sports who were aged between 5 and 21 years, or athletes who were still part of a talent development programme. Although each of the included studies reported released athletes experiencing negative psychosocial impacts, positive psychosocial impacts were also identified in some studies. This review identified consistent links between factors and resources related to athletes' adaptation to release and how they influence the psychosocial impacts experienced by released athletes. Applied implications for athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders involved in the release process have been provided.

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KEYWORDS

Release; deselection; youth athletes; talent development; transition

Introduction

Due to the intensely competitive nature of organised sport, many athletes will experience release during their careers in sport. For example, less than 2% of elite youth footballers with an academy scholarship at English professional clubs at 16 are still playing in the top five tiers of English football at 18 (Calvin, 2017). However, a major issue in the literature is the interchangeability with which different terms are used to describe events whereby an athlete is no longer part of a team – e.g., deselection, release, cut. Deselection has previously been defined as 'an athlete being eliminated from a sport competition team or spot, based on the coach's judgment of their ability' (Neely et al., 2018). However, studies have used the term 'deselection' to describe a variety of athlete experiences, e.g., being let go by a professional football academy (Blakelock et al., 2016), not being selected for a dance role following an audition (Milne & Neely, 2022) and academy football players not being called up to represent their international age group team (Edwards & Brannagan, 2024). In the present review, we adopt the term 'release' and distinguish this

from the range of other terms used to describe different athlete transitional experiences. Based on the work of Munroe et al. (1999), we define release as an athlete being removed from a team, sporting organisation or talent development programme they were once part of. This encapsulates the concept of losing something or having something taken away, e.g., the termination of a player's contract and playing status with a professional football academy (McGlinchey et al., 2022). In contrast, we suggest 'non-selection' may be a more appropriate term to describe athlete transitional experiences whereby an athlete is not selected for, or does not make it onto a team, sporting organisation or talent development programme they are trying to become a part of, which has sometimes previously been described as deselection (e.g., Neely et al., 2016). Thus, non-selection encapsulates the concept of not getting something, e.g., not being selected following a tryout or as part of a draft (Herbison et al., 2019; Neely et al., 2016). Although release and non-selection share a common factor, whereby athletes do not have control over the decision, we believe there are distinct differences

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between the two transitions. Firstly, with non-selection, an athlete can likely tryout again for a team, or can be selected or re-selected for the next international camp (e.g., Edwards & Brannagan, 2024). Conversely, release is a more definitive decision that can end an athlete's career at the competitive level they have been released from (e.g., McGlinchey et al., 2022). Secondly, although non-selection will undoubtedly affect athletes, release may possibly have a greater impact on athletes due to factors such as the identity loss that may be experienced after leaving a team and the personal investment (time, emotional, financial) one puts into being part of a team (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025).

Release can occur at any point throughout an athlete's sporting career, including at the end of a lengthy playing career (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999). However, it is more prevalently experienced by youth athletes during their time on a talent development programme, largely due to there being increasingly limited available spaces the further you progress towards elite senior performance (Ingham et al., 2002). A plethora of research has examined transition out of sport (Brassard et al., 2022). Normative transitions, whereby the athlete expects, predicts or has control over the transition, such as retirement, have received much attention (see Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). More recently, there has been a proliferation in studies exploring non-normative transitions due to release, with an array of negative psychosocial impacts being cited, such as released elite youth footballers experiencing psychological distress, social dysfunction and phobia (Blakelock et al., 2016), and identity crises (McGlinchey et al., 2022).

Several models have been developed from which sport career transitions can be studied (see Stambulova et al., 2021), but none have specifically focused on release. Thus, we have adopted the Conceptual Model of Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) as a guiding framework for the present review to understand the release process, due to its focus on career termination transitions. At Step 1 of the model, key causes of career transition are outlined and may include age, injury, free choice and release (adapted from deselection for the purpose of this review). It is suggested different causes of career transitions elicit different response patterns from athletes due to the voluntary or involuntary nature of the change (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001). For instance, release is an involuntary and unwanted career termination with limited control or choice (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022), which increases the likelihood of the transition quality being poor (i.e., a distressful, crisis transition). However, Step 2 of the model also

suggests transition quality depends on a series of factors related to adaptation to the transition, including social identity, developmental contributors (e.g., opportunities for social growth), perceived control, and tertiary contributors (e.g., socioeconomic status, level of attainment). According to Taylor and Ogilvie, the most fundamental psychological issue that influences adaptation is an athlete's strong athletic identity, whereby their self-identity is composed almost exclusively of their sports involvement. Thus, they can gain little meaning and fulfilment outside of their sport, which may contribute to a more distressful transition (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Park et al., 2013). Aligned with the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2016), Step 3 highlights athletes' adaptation to career transition depends on the resources available to deal with the challenges that arise. Specifically, the Athletic Career Transition Model states successful transitions are the outcome of effective coping, where the athlete's coping resources and strategies match the transition demands, whereas a crisis transition is the outcome of ineffective coping strategies and/or a lack of resources (Stambulova, 2016). Taylor and Ogilvie suggest the availability of social support, possession of effective coping strategies and pre-planning for the transition influence the ability to respond effectively to transition-related challenges. According to Taylor and Ogilvie, Steps 1, 2, and 3 interact to influence the quality of the career transition (Step 4). Lastly, at Step 5, if the transition is distressful, the model suggests possible intervention at cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, and organisational levels.

Several systematic reviews have been conducted around transition out of sport (Knights et al., 2016; Park et al., 2013); however these have primarily focused on the quality of transition after retirement due to either choice or forced retirement due to age or injury. There is currently no systematic review specifically concerned with transition out of sport due to release, a non-normative, involuntary transition whereby athletes lack control over the decision, which are risk factors associated with more problematic transitions for athletes than normative transitions such as voluntary retirement (Park et al., 2013). A recent narrative review examined the mental health issues in academy football players following career termination due to release or injury (Wilkinson, 2021). While this review is significant in its contribution by highlighting the negative consequences of release, the nature of the review was not systematic, and was limited in its scope by predominantly examining athletes who had been released within one specific sport, i.e., football. Thus, the current systematic review is warranted and will seek to build upon this by examining literature concerning release in youth and developing

athletes across all sports. Due to the growing body of research in the area understanding the release process from sport, a systematic review is timely to enable an appraisal of the release literature and, based on the nature and quality of the research, identify avenues for future study.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to systematically review, synthesise, and appraise research on release that has been conducted around youth and developing athletes. Informed and guided by Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994; 2001) conceptual adaptation model, there were three main aims: (i) to examine psychosocial impacts of release; (ii) to examine factors related to adaptation to release; and (iii) to examine available resources for adaptation to release. This review sought to clarify understanding of the release literature with the potential to improve athletes' experiences of release by informing recommendations for athletes, coaches, sports teams, and organisations who may be involved in the release process.

Method

The present review was conducted following the guidelines for the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). A systematic review was selected over the use of similar methodologies such as a meta-analysis or narrative review, due to the aim of the current review being to answer clearly defined research questions, and the included studies containing a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Although narrative reviews can provide critical discussion of issues in a topic area, a protocol or transparent procedures are not typically adopted. In contrast, systematic reviews involve a rigorous approach including a thorough search for evidence, a criteria-based selection of relevant research, an evaluation of study quality, and evidence-based inferences (Collins & Fauser, 2005). Although this systematic review protocol was not registered in a database, we specified our search strategy, inclusion criteria, data extraction, and data analyses in advance of writing our manuscript. All details of our work are available from the lead author.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria were developed to clearly define what studies were eligible to be included in the review. Inclusion criteria were informed by the work of Munroe et al. (1999) and our previously stated definition of release, when an athlete is removed from a team, sporting organisation or talent development programme they were once part of. Studies that met the following criteria

were included: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles published in the English language; (ii) studies that comprise original empirical data; (iii) studies that include a research question, aim(s), or objective(s) that explicitly made reference to release or release related terminology; (iv) the study involved athletes' experiences of release; (v) athletes were either between the ages of 5 and 21 years, or still part of a talent development programme, at the time they experienced release, but (vi) athletes could recall their release experience at any age (allowing for studies where athletes recalled their release retrospectively). The fifth criterion was chosen to capture the release experiences of children and young people (between the ages of 5 and 21 years) but also athletes who were still part of a talent development programme at older ages. For example, the English Football League classifies players in academies up to under-23 (EFL, 2022) and within the baseball system in the USA, athletes can be older than 23 and on the talent development pathway to Major League Baseball (MLB) through Minor League Baseball (MiLB), which has various levels: Rookie, Short-A, Low-A, High-A, A, AA and AAA (from lowest to highest competitive levels). Studies were excluded if: (i) athletes were over the age of 21 and no longer part of a talent development programme at the time they experienced release; (ii) release was not a key focus of the study; (iii) studies were deemed to be non-selection as opposed to release.

Information sources and search strategy

Online searches were conducted on three occasions from October 2023 to the final search conducted in August 2025 on six electronic databases: PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO; PubMed; Scopus; SPORTDiscus and Web of Science. After scoping searches carried out by the first and second authors, and following discussions with the third and fifth authors, a final search string consisting of the following three blocks of Boolean terms was decided: (deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR de-selected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative) AND (sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer) AND (youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy). The first block referred to release, the second block consisted of sport specific search terms and finally, the third block related to the eligibility age criteria. The search terms and fields were modified for each database's configurations without restricting the publication date (see Appendix A for details). Retrieved articles were transferred

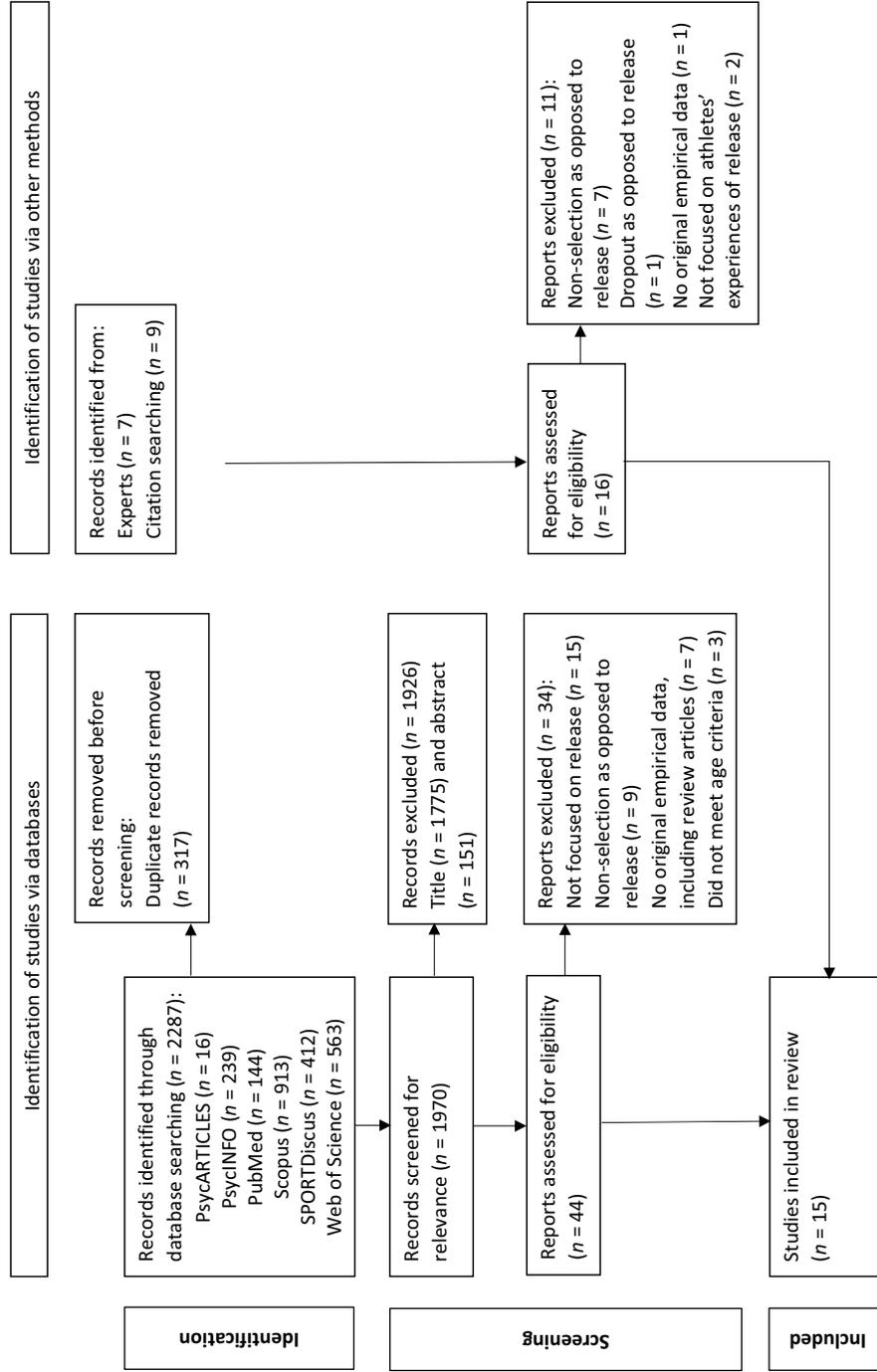


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the screening process.

to the reference managing software RefWorks. Duplicate articles were removed through the duplication remover function and manual screening. In line with guidance on conducting systematic reviews in sport and exercise psychology (Gunnell et al., 2020), we conducted forward and backward citation searches of included studies (e.g., Gledhill et al., 2017). The results of the screening process are presented in Figure 1.

Selection process

All articles were screened against the eligibility criteria by the first and second authors. In stage one, all titles and abstracts were screened by the first and second authors jointly. In the second stage, the full texts were assessed for eligibility by the first and second authors. These authors then met to review their decisions and agree reasons for excluding studies (see Appendix B). The third and fifth authors acted as independent eligibility assessors during this stage. If insufficient information was provided in an article to determine eligibility against the inclusion criteria, the corresponding author was contacted and met for discussion. Meetings were then held involving all the authors to resolve any discrepancies that still existed and to settle on the final included studies.

Data extraction

Data extraction was performed by the first author before being checked by the second author. The following information was extracted for each of the included studies: author(s); publication year; sample characteristics; study design and analysis; psychosocial impacts of release; factors related to adaptation to release and available resources for adaptation to release.

Synthesis methods

Key findings pertinent to at least one of the research questions were drawn from each of the included studies, i.e., the findings detailed in some capacity: the psychosocial impacts of release, factors related to athletes' adaptation to release and/or the resources available to athletes in their adaptation to release. These findings were compiled into a table upon which convergent qualitative synthesis was utilised to identify common themes across the findings from all the included studies, both qualitative and quantitative (Pluye & Hong, 2014). Due to the low number of quantitative studies included in the review and range of quantitative measures used, it

was deemed not appropriate to conduct a meta-analysis (Gunnell et al., 2020).

Quality appraisal

The quality of each included study was assessed using the mixed methods appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2019). The MMAT has been recognised as a valid and reliable tool for appraising mixed methods research (Souto et al., 2015) and has been used extensively in systematic reviews in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Gledhill et al., 2017). The MMAT was utilised as it consists of criteria to assess quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies, with five research study categories: qualitative, quantitative randomised controlled trials, quantitative non-randomised, quantitative descriptive, and mixed methods. Each study was assessed against the criteria for the category it falls in, with either a 'yes', 'no' or 'can't tell' (referring to a lack of evidence) being given for each criterion. Each study's quality was assessed independently by the first and second authors, with the kappa inter-rater reliability between the two authors indicating a substantial level of agreement ($\kappa = .69$) (Landis & Koch, 1977). Any discrepancies were resolved through conversations between the first, second and third authors.

Results

The electronic database search generated a total of 2287 records, with an additional 16 records identified through citation searching and speaking to experts. Following the removal of 317 duplicate records, 1970 unique records were screened for relevance (Figure 1). After screening the titles and abstracts, 1926 articles were excluded. Full texts for the remaining 60 reports, 44 identified through database searches and 16 identified through citation searching and speaking to experts, were reviewed for eligibility. Following this process, 15 articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected for inclusion in the review. The majority of studies excluded at the full text stage of the search process were due to being classed as non-selection as opposed to release, as per the definition provided, informed by Munroe et al. (1999), e.g., athletes attending tryouts for provincial teams but not being selected (Neely et al., 2016, 2017, 2018) and elite youth footballers who were not selected for their international age group team (Edwards & Brannagan, 2024). One study involving elite youth rugby league players was classed as dropout, which differs from release, as the athletes voluntarily terminated their athletic career (Rothwell et al., 2020); see Appendix B for further detail on excluded studies).

Table 1. Summary of included studies.

Author (year)	Aim	Sample	Study design & analysis	Results
Adams and Darby (2020)	To address three post-migration issues encountered by players: 1) how their release from professional football came about; 2) how the lack of adequate alternative career planning and the absence of educational qualifications impacted on their lives after football; 3) how they adjusted to and navigated life, and for some, football back in Northern Ireland.	8 male Northern Irish soccer migrants released from English or Scottish professional football clubs. (Age range: 19–41 years. No mean or SD provided.)	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Players were released in a 'cutthroat manner', an emotionally traumatic experience, eliciting feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players broke down in tears upon exiting their contract meeting. • Players demonstrated resilience when looking at alternate careers and trying to find a club in Northern Ireland. <p>Factors: Players felt the 'precarious' football environment caused feelings of doubt and a lack of control over their futures. Upon release, most players lacked a clear plan and experienced insecurity and a lack of control over their future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players vented frustration at the timing of their contract meeting and subsequent release, which precluded their potential involvement in 'exit trials' and from engaging in alternative career planning. • Players felt education was an afterthought whilst at clubs and their lack of educational qualifications hindered their transition into other vocations. <p>Resources: Players perceived they were viewed as failures by family, friends and peers following their release, causing feelings of shame and embarrassment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upon returning to Northern Ireland, players were hesitant to re-establish previous social relationships which could have supported their transition.
Blakelock et al. (2016)	To establish the prevalence of clinical levels of psychological distress in elite adolescent soccer players following deselection.	91 male adolescent soccer players contracted to an English or Scottish Premier League or Football League academy. Participants were aged 15–18 years ($M = 16.31$; $SD = 1.10$).	Two-group cohort design. The design compared psychological distress (General Health Questionnaire-12 scores) in retained and released players 7–14 days pre-selection procedures, 7 days after and 21 days after selection procedures. (Quantitative)	<p>Impacts: Released players experienced significantly higher levels of psychological distress than retained players at both post-selection timepoints (7 days and 21 days after).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 days post-selection procedures, 5 out of 14 released players (36%) experienced clinical levels of psychological distress. • 21 days post-selection procedures, 6 out of 11 released players (55%) experienced clinical levels of psychological distress. <p>Resources: Trait and specific avoidance coping were positively and significantly associated with psychological distress both 7 days after and 21 days after selection procedures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A significant negative correlation was found between problem-focused coping and psychological distress 7 days post-selection procedures.
Blakelock et al. (2019)	To explore the coping strategies used by elite adolescent soccer players in relation to release/deselection and determine which coping strategies were associated with psychological distress in the first month following deselection/release.	21 male adolescent soccer players who were released/deselected from English and Scottish Premier League and Football League academies. Participants were aged 15–18 years. (No mean or SD provided.)	Single group cohort design. The association between trait and specific coping strategies (Brief COPE scores) and psychological distress (General Health Questionnaire-12 scores) in released players was measured 7–14 days pre-selection procedures, 7 days after and 21 days after selection procedures. (Quantitative)	<p>Impacts: Some of the most severe psychological difficulties (depression and anxiety) experienced by the players were over 6 months post release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players reported experiencing identity crisis and confusion, loss of self-worth, low esteem and confidence following release. <p>Factors: Players' release, with limited control, choice or anticipation, and previous experiences of being released from an academy, was associated with players experiencing a more arduous transition, psychological distress at different time-points following release, an extended transition time and uncertainty and lack of direction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players perceived a high, exclusive footballer identity was associated with increased psychological distress and reduced psychological well-being following release. • Players perceived their engagement in educational and vocational development led to a smoother transition, reduced transition time, reduced duration of uncertainty and lack of direction following release and increased psychological well-being, by developing an alternative purpose, engagement and satisfaction. <p>Resources: Some players found it challenging to engage in social and interpersonal tasks following release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players reported a lack of support from clubs and organisations following their release, but highlighted the varied, beneficial support provided by the PFA. • Limited awareness and access to support was associated with poorer outcomes, whereas support and services provided by organisations and clubs were associated with enhancing outcomes. • Some players perceived clubs and organisations have a duty to implement initiatives associated with enhancing outcomes following release. Other players perceived key stakeholders, such as parents, have a role and shared responsibility to improve outcomes following release.
Blakelock and Slater (2020)	To examine how players measure outcomes following football career termination and what influences these outcomes by (i) exploring the retrospective perceptions of former players contracted to professional clubs at junior and senior levels, and (ii) using the data gathered to generate a theoretical model to explain how players measure outcomes and what influences these outcomes following career termination.	8 male former footballers (Age range: 24–39 at the time of the study) ($M = 31.88$ years, $SD = 5.08$ years). 3 players were released whilst still part of an academy/talent development pathway and thus met criteria. Age range: 24–34 at the time of the study ($M = 29.6$ years, $SD = 5.13$ years). Players age range at time of release: 18–19 ($M = 18.6$ years, $SD = 0.5$ years).	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory methodology. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Some of the most severe psychological difficulties (depression and anxiety) experienced by the players were over 6 months post release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players reported experiencing identity crisis and confusion, loss of self-worth, low esteem and confidence following release. <p>Factors: Players' release, with limited control, choice or anticipation, and previous experiences of being released from an academy, was associated with players experiencing a more arduous transition, psychological distress at different time-points following release, an extended transition time and uncertainty and lack of direction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players perceived a high, exclusive footballer identity was associated with increased psychological distress and reduced psychological well-being following release. • Players perceived their engagement in educational and vocational development led to a smoother transition, reduced transition time, reduced duration of uncertainty and lack of direction following release and increased psychological well-being, by developing an alternative purpose, engagement and satisfaction. <p>Resources: Some players found it challenging to engage in social and interpersonal tasks following release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players reported a lack of support from clubs and organisations following their release, but highlighted the varied, beneficial support provided by the PFA. • Limited awareness and access to support was associated with poorer outcomes, whereas support and services provided by organisations and clubs were associated with enhancing outcomes. • Some players perceived clubs and organisations have a duty to implement initiatives associated with enhancing outcomes following release. Other players perceived key stakeholders, such as parents, have a role and shared responsibility to improve outcomes following release.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author (year)	Aim	Sample	Study design & analysis	Results
Brand et al. (2013)	To gather representative data on the mental health status of young elite female and male student-athletes and compare with data from deselected athletes as well as with respective data from age and sex matched non-athletes.	786 elite student athletes (301 female, 480 male) competing in: artistic gymnastics, boxing, canoe/kayak, cycling, handball, judo, modern pentathlon, rowing, shooting, soccer, swimming, track and field athletics, triathlon, volleyball, weightlifting and wrestling. 80 deselected student athletes (36 female, 44 male) and 432 student non-athletes (181 female, 251 male) (age range: 12–15 years. No mean or SD provided).	Cross-sectional design. Indicators of mental health – the prevalence of symptoms of mental disorders (measured using The Composite International Diagnostic Screener) and chronic mood (measured using the Multidimensional Mood Questionnaire) were compared between the three groups: the elite student-athletes, deselected student-athletes and a group of students (non-athletes). (Quantitative)	Impacts: Released female athletes exhibit significantly higher risk of showing symptoms of somatisation, generalised anxiety, social phobia, depression (fatigue and loss of interest) and use of prescriptive drugs compared with elite student-athletes and non-athletes. ● Released female athletes also exhibit significantly higher risk of showing symptoms in depression (mood) and posttraumatic stress compared with elite student-athletes, and generalised anxiety (worry) compared with non-athletes. ● Released male athletes were significantly more at risk of alcohol and nicotine abuse than elite student-athletes and non-athletes, as well as significantly more somatisation and hypochondriasis compared with non-athletes. ● Both male and female released student-athletes exhibited significantly lower mood scores compared with elite student-athletes and non-athletes. Impacts: Release had a significant impact upon the players' sense of self, with participants highlighting how they experienced immediate, strong feelings of shock, humiliation, anger and despair. ● Players described feelings of depression, anxiety, loss of confidence, emotional disturbance, identity loss and failure after being released. ● While their release was a 'painful experience', the players believed that it had served to help them develop as people in the long-term. Factors: Players believed their clubs should have emphasised educational achievement to a much greater extent. ● Following release, players began to explore other career pathways and recreate new identities for themselves. ● Three participants registered for educational qualifications whilst continuing to play semi-professional football. They were positive about their new lifestyles, newfound freedom and 'pressure-free' participation in football. ● One participant continued to cling to his identity as a footballer. Resources: There was little meaningful support provided by players' clubs once they had been released, leaving them feeling angry and betrayed, adding to the difficulties they experienced during the transition out of professional football. ● Players highlighted the need for support in dealing with the emotional and psychological disturbances that occurred as a consequence of their release. Impacts: Athletes had feelings of self-resentment, disappointment and frustration at being released. ● Athletes reported a sense of relief after being released. ● Some athletes stopped playing their sport altogether. Factors: Athletes lacked control over their release. ● Following release, athletes developed a new identity unrelated to sport, with some focusing on their education. Resources: Athletes were resentful towards coaches following their release. Athletes experienced feelings of social rejection from peers who were not released and lost friends from their team following release.
Brown and Potrac (2009)	To utilise in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of young former elite footballers whose respective professional careers were prematurely ended as a consequence of deselection, and b) to highlight if, and how, a strong athletic identity acted as an Achilles heel in terms of shaping the players' responses to deselection, as well as the consequences of these reactions for personal long-term development.	4 males that were released after completing a 3-year scholarship from the ages of 16–19 at a professional football club's academy. (No mean or SD provided.)	Retrospective, reflexive interviews analysed using interpretive biography. (Qualitative)	
Butt and Molnar (2009)	To draw wider attention to the personal adjustments young athletes undergo during and after their career has been institutionally terminated.	8 ex-high school athletes, representing different sports (basketball, golf, swimming, field hockey, tennis and track and field), who experienced institutionally induced elimination from a varsity spot. (Age range: 18–21 years. M age = 19 years. No SD provided.)	Retrospective, in-depth long semi-structured interviews analysed using thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	
Carmody et al. (2024)	To evaluate the perception and satisfaction of deselected male academy professional footballers towards a medical after-care intervention.	12 male footballers that had been deselected from a Premier League Academy during the 2022/2023 season. (Age range: 18–23 years. M age = 19.5 years. No SD provided.)	Descriptive analyses (mean, SD, frequency and/or range) were performed for all variables. (Quantitative)	Resources: Ten (83.3%) players agreed academy players should receive medical aftercare information upon release. ● Nine (75%) players felt more prepared for the next steps in their careers due to the medical information shared with them. ● 11 (91.7%) participants reported knowing who they could contact within their former club should they have any medical or welfare queries once released. ● Nine (75%) participants expressed knowledge of external support resources should they experience mental health concerns. ● Where players wished to pursue a career unrelated to football, nine (75%) reported awareness of where to seek further information due to the medical information shared with them. ● 11 players (91.7%) felt the individualised medical recommendations they received were useful and relevant to their health and well-being.

(Continued)



Table 1. (Continued).

Author (year)	Aim	Sample	Study design & analysis	Results
Gorman and Blackwood (2025)	How ex-footballers, who have greater psychological distance from the experience and so time to process grief and develop perspective, make sense of their experience of deselection and of the consequences.	8 former male professional players aged 22–37 at the time of the study ($M = 26.63$ years, $SD = 4.66$ years). 6 players were released whilst still part of an academy/ talent development pathway and thus met criteria. Age range: 22–29 at the time of the study ($M = 24.5$ years, $SD = 2.59$ years). Players age range at time of release: 18–19 ($M = 18.3$ years, $SD = 0.51$ years).	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Players described being released as the 'the worst experience' and the ultimate setback. Players experienced identity loss, loss of self-worth, disappointment and despair following release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All players experienced feelings of loss and disorientation in the years that followed their release, with some having feelings of failure in the long-term. Some participants expressed relief upon being released. Players reported developing increased resilience through their footballing and release experiences. <p>Factors: All players discussed how joining an academy led to the creation of a strong, foreclosed footballer identity. Players believed the all-consuming professional football academy environment and their focus on 'making it' reinforced their footballer identity and stopped them pursuing alternative identities and interests, making transitioning following release more problematic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players reported clubs restricted their ability to pursue other interests outside of football and devalued players investing in their education. Following their release, in the longer-term, some players began to create new identities for themselves. <p>Resources: Participants reported a lack of support during their transition following release, with players believing aftercare provided by clubs was non-existent.</p> <p>Impacts: Being released was a traumatic experience, with players experiencing feelings of sadness, pain and anger.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players experienced the most severe psychological difficulties 6 months to a year post release, encompassing feelings of depression, anxiety, identity crisis and confusion, loss of self-worth, low esteem and confidence. Following release, players reported increased resilience and PTG growth. <p>Factors: Players highlighted a lack of control over their release – two specifically due to career-threatening injuries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Release led to a loss of identity and identity crisis, causing emotional harm. Following the healing process, players constructed new identities, developed a more positive outlook on life and an openness to new possibilities. One participant clung to his identity as a footballer. <p>Resources: Acceptance and ownership of release (problem focused coping) reduced players' psychosocial difficulties and transitioning was less problematic. Lack of ownership and acceptance (avoidance coping) resulted in more severe psychosocial difficulties.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No support was provided following the players' release by their clubs, resulting in feelings of sadness, anger and betrayal. Parents were available to provide emotional support to players but they did not use this due to feeling guilty about being released, compounding the psychological difficulties they experienced. Teammates were viewed as a valuable support network. Seeking professional support was very beneficial for two players in coping with the distress they experienced following release. <p>Impacts: Players reported feelings of shock when informed of their release – especially when they did not expect to be released.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players reported feelings of anger and bitterness towards their clubs and coaches/management, and sadness as they were left feeling unwanted and not good enough following their release. Players did not let their release impact their self-confidence. Some players reported a sense of relief after being released. <p>Factors: Athletes still perceived themselves as baseball players after release. Having a back-up plan, or devising one upon being released, helped facilitate the athletes' transition into life after baseball. This did not mean giving up on a career in professional baseball, but equipped athletes with an alternative pathway when the possibility of a release became reality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most athletes reported going to university and graduating with a degree gave them something to fall back on after their release and helped them transition successfully out of baseball. <p>Resources: Understanding the release process and reasoning behind decisions, whether they agreed with it or not, helped players cope with the transition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family, friends, significant others, former teammates and coaches provided emotional support to help players cope with the distress of being released and the transition out of baseball.
McGlinchey et al. (2022)	To retrospectively explore players' experiences of being released from a professional football academy.	4 male footballers that had experienced release from professional football academies in England after completing a 2-year scholarship. ($M = 21.6$ years; $SD = 1.5$ years).	Retrospective, in-depth semi-structured interviews analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Being released was a traumatic experience, with players experiencing feelings of sadness, pain and anger.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players experienced the most severe psychological difficulties 6 months to a year post release, encompassing feelings of depression, anxiety, identity crisis and confusion, loss of self-worth, low esteem and confidence. Following release, players reported increased resilience and PTG growth. <p>Factors: Players highlighted a lack of control over their release – two specifically due to career-threatening injuries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Release led to a loss of identity and identity crisis, causing emotional harm. Following the healing process, players constructed new identities, developed a more positive outlook on life and an openness to new possibilities. One participant clung to his identity as a footballer. <p>Resources: Acceptance and ownership of release (problem focused coping) reduced players' psychosocial difficulties and transitioning was less problematic. Lack of ownership and acceptance (avoidance coping) resulted in more severe psychosocial difficulties.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No support was provided following the players' release by their clubs, resulting in feelings of sadness, anger and betrayal. Parents were available to provide emotional support to players but they did not use this due to feeling guilty about being released, compounding the psychological difficulties they experienced. Teammates were viewed as a valuable support network. Seeking professional support was very beneficial for two players in coping with the distress they experienced following release. <p>Impacts: Players reported feelings of shock when informed of their release – especially when they did not expect to be released.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players reported feelings of anger and bitterness towards their clubs and coaches/management, and sadness as they were left feeling unwanted and not good enough following their release. Players did not let their release impact their self-confidence. Some players reported a sense of relief after being released. <p>Factors: Athletes still perceived themselves as baseball players after release. Having a back-up plan, or devising one upon being released, helped facilitate the athletes' transition into life after baseball. This did not mean giving up on a career in professional baseball, but equipped athletes with an alternative pathway when the possibility of a release became reality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most athletes reported going to university and graduating with a degree gave them something to fall back on after their release and helped them transition successfully out of baseball. <p>Resources: Understanding the release process and reasoning behind decisions, whether they agreed with it or not, helped players cope with the transition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family, friends, significant others, former teammates and coaches provided emotional support to help players cope with the distress of being released and the transition out of baseball.
Raabe et al. (2018)	To understand the experience of being released from professional baseball and identify coping strategies applied during the forced transition.	12 male former baseball players who had been released from an MLB team. (M age = 25.79 years; $SD = 1.97$)	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Players reported feelings of shock when informed of their release – especially when they did not expect to be released.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players reported feelings of anger and bitterness towards their clubs and coaches/management, and sadness as they were left feeling unwanted and not good enough following their release. Players did not let their release impact their self-confidence. Some players reported a sense of relief after being released. <p>Factors: Athletes still perceived themselves as baseball players after release. Having a back-up plan, or devising one upon being released, helped facilitate the athletes' transition into life after baseball. This did not mean giving up on a career in professional baseball, but equipped athletes with an alternative pathway when the possibility of a release became reality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most athletes reported going to university and graduating with a degree gave them something to fall back on after their release and helped them transition successfully out of baseball. <p>Resources: Understanding the release process and reasoning behind decisions, whether they agreed with it or not, helped players cope with the transition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family, friends, significant others, former teammates and coaches provided emotional support to help players cope with the distress of being released and the transition out of baseball.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author (year)	Aim	Sample	Study design & analysis	Results
Raabe et al. (2020)	To qualitatively explore the role of individuals' basic psychological needs during the release from professional baseball and throughout their subsequent transition to a new career.	12 male former MLB players. Age range: 25–34 years old ($M = 30.17$ years \pm $SD = 2.7$). Players were M age = 26.0 (± 2.3) years at the time of their release.	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Immediately following their release, players' self-confidence was negatively impacted. After this initial period, and time for reflection, the athletes regained their self-confidence.</p> <p>Factors: Athletes' lack of control over the organisation's decision to release them had a meaningful, negative impact on their emotional state, including feelings of helplessness and anxiety.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Players were informed of their release insensitively in a brief conversation. ● Following their release, athletes had a newfound sense of control over their lives and freedom. Some players gained increased control by quitting playing baseball following their release and transitioning into a new stage of their life. ● Athletes were able to create new identities following their release. ● Participants felt more prepared if they started planning for the transition before being released, such as exploring potential new career paths. Formulating a backup plan whilst in MLB did not mean players had given up on playing professional baseball, but helped prepare them for challenges they faced transitioning to life after baseball. ● Most participants had obtained postsecondary education prior to their release, assisting their preparation for the transition out of professional baseball. <p>Resources: Athletes felt rejected by their coaches and management staff and lost their sense of belonging with teammates following their release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Athletes discussed a sense of autonomy over how they reacted to their release, choosing to accept the decision. ● Athletes discussed the support their family provided in the transition out of baseball, which made them feel valued as people, not just as good players. <p>Impacts: Several players quit playing their sport following release.</p> <p>Resources: Significant others supported athletes' development post release.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Athletes developed transferable skills on the talent pathway, e.g., self-confidence, determination, time management, effective communication, social awareness and goal setting, contributing to successful transitions post release. ● Six participants described the need for coaches to 'show me you care' during difficult 'release or retain' transitions on the pathway. ● Some athletes discussed increased motivation post release, aiming to prove coaches wrong.
Williams and MacNamara (2020)	To explore the talent pathway experiences of youth athletes who were deselected and to consider how those experiences influenced their life post deselection.	10 male athletes who had experience of being deselected from a professional rugby or cricket club in the UK. Players were deselected at the U18 age group. (Age range: 20–25 years. M age = 20.6 years; $SD = 0.7$ years).	Retrospective, semi-structured interviews analysed using thematic analysis. (Qualitative)	<p>Impacts: Six athletes met criteria for PTSD post termination at either 3- or 8-months post release, with one athlete meeting these criteria at both timepoints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Athletes that endured a socially disintegrative release scored three times higher on measures assessing sleep disturbance, alcohol use, and negative event appraisal than athletes who experienced a supportive release process. ● Several athletes in the disintegrative release group reported persistent difficulties with falling asleep and staying asleep, as well as acute health problems and increased alcohol consumption. ● Athletes in the supportive release group, who were informed in detail about the reasons for their dismissal and had an opportunity to discuss the perspectives of coaches, displayed significantly lower stress reactions. <p>Resources: Within ten days of release, athletes recorded moderate scores on efforts to avoid trauma-related thoughts and emotions (avoidance coping). Athletes in the disintegrative release group experienced more intrusive thoughts and engaged in more efforts to avoid their emotional experience than those in the supportive release group (avoidance coping).</p>
Wippert and Wippert (2008)	To measure the level of subjectively perceived stress caused by a career-terminating event and to observe how this perception of stress contributed to the development of traumatic stress symptoms. To examine the levels of stress resulting from a supportive termination experience and a disintegrative termination experience.	40 athletes from the German National Ski Team, 19 of whom were involuntarily dismissed. Dismissed group = 5 men, 14 women (M age = 20 years; $SD = 3.63$). Retained group = 12 men, 9 women (M age = 18 years; $SD = 2.1$ years).	Two group cohort. Questionnaire data were collected using: the Impact of Event Scale (IES), German version of the Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale (PDS) and Psychosomatic Stress Reaction. The IES was administered only at 10 days and 8 months post-termination, the PDS was administered only at 3 months and 8 months post-termination and Psychosomatic stress reaction was administered only at 10 days post-termination. (Quantitative)	<p>Impacts: Six athletes met criteria for PTSD post termination at either 3- or 8-months post release, with one athlete meeting these criteria at both timepoints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Athletes that endured a socially disintegrative release scored three times higher on measures assessing sleep disturbance, alcohol use, and negative event appraisal than athletes who experienced a supportive release process. ● Several athletes in the disintegrative release group reported persistent difficulties with falling asleep and staying asleep, as well as acute health problems and increased alcohol consumption. ● Athletes in the supportive release group, who were informed in detail about the reasons for their dismissal and had an opportunity to discuss the perspectives of coaches, displayed significantly lower stress reactions. <p>Resources: Within ten days of release, athletes recorded moderate scores on efforts to avoid trauma-related thoughts and emotions (avoidance coping). Athletes in the disintegrative release group experienced more intrusive thoughts and engaged in more efforts to avoid their emotional experience than those in the supportive release group (avoidance coping).</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author (year)	Aim	Sample	Study design & analysis	Results
Wippert and Wippert (2010)	To understand the effects of career termination of professional athletes on the development of psychopathological symptoms, locus of control, self-concept, and mood, with special consideration of the mediator variable 'subjective control of event onset'.	42 athletes (23 female, 19 male) from a national ski team, 17 athletes (11 female, 6 male) were involuntarily dismissed (M age = 19 years ± 2.0 SD years) whilst 4 athletes (3 female, 1 male) voluntarily retired (M age = 23 years ± 6.4 SD years).	Two group cohort. Questionnaire data were collected using the symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R), Questionnaire of Competence and Control (FKK) and German Version of the Profile of Mood States (ASTS). The questionnaires were administered 10 days pre-selection procedures, 10 days post-selection procedures, 3 weeks post-selection procedures and 5.5 months post-selection procedures. (Quantitative)	<p>Impacts: Ten days after release, six released athletes experienced severe levels of psychological distress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five and a half months post release, three released athletes were experiencing severe levels of psychological distress. Five and a half months post release, sadness and anger were significantly reduced in the released group since measures three weeks post release. <p>Factors: Released athletes reported significantly higher levels of psychopathological symptom distress than athletes who voluntarily retired.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Released athletes had higher values for depression, hostility and psychotidism, interpersonal sensitivity and obsessive-compulsive symptoms than the voluntary termination group ten days post release. Three weeks post release, the released group revealed more negative mood states on 'anger' and 'current negative emotional state' scales than the voluntary termination group. Five and a half months post release, the released group showed significantly lower self-efficacy and more hostility, and higher overall distress values than the voluntarily terminated group.

Note: In the Results column, terms were abbreviated as follows: Impacts = Psychosocial impacts of release, Factors = Factors related to adaptation to release, Resources = Available resources for adaptation to release. Terms used in columns: 'Aim', 'Sample', 'Study design and analysis' all reported as per original publication. Terms used in column 'Results' were modified to the term release for consistency, as Adams and Darby (2020), Blakelock et al. (2016), Brown and Potrac (2009), Carmody et al. (2024) and Gorman and Blackwood (2025) used the terms 'release' and 'deselection' interchangeably, Blakelock and Slater (2020) used the term 'career termination', Brand et al. (2013) and Williams and MacNamara (2020) used the term 'deselection', Butt and Molnar (2009) used the terms 'structurally induced failure/elimination', and Wippert and Wippert (2008, 2010) used the terms 'involuntary dismissal/termination' and 'career termination'.

Sample and study characteristics

Contextual information for the included studies is presented in Table 1. In total, 1557 participants took part in the included studies. Of the participants in the included studies, 980 were male (62.9%) and 564 (36.2%) were female. Gender was not specified for eight participants in one study (0.5%; Butt & Molnar, 2009). The remaining discrepancy in participant numbers was due to an unclear participant sample in one study (Brand et al., 2013). Of the overall participants, 21 released participants were common across two studies (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019), thus were only accounted for once. Eleven studies included means for the ages of their participants, with the mean age for all included participants being 22.87 years. The age range for all participants for studies that provided this information was 12–41 years.

Of the participants who met eligibility criteria, 216 released athletes took part in the included studies. Of the eligible released athletes in the included studies, 147 were male (68.1%) and 61 (28.2%) were female. Gender was not specified for eight released participants in one study (3.7%; Butt & Molnar, 2009). Ten studies included means for the ages of their released participants, with the mean age for all included released participants being 22.36 years. The age range for all released participants for studies that provided this information was 12–41 years (age range reported at the time of the study as all qualitative studies employed a retrospective design where participants were recalling their release some years later). Regardless of the length of recall after athletes' release, findings did not meaningfully differ. Release was studied across a range of athletes who competed in a variety of different sports. The most examined sport was football, with nine of the included studies either solely examining released football players, or in conjunction with released athletes from other sports. Twelve studies examined athletes from one specific sport (80%), while three studies examined athletes from two or more sports (20%; see Table 1 for full details). Nine of the included studies utilised qualitative methods (60%), while six studies utilised quantitative methods (40%).

Quality appraisal

Results for the study quality appraisal are presented in Table 2. Most studies included in the review raised no quality concerns ($n = 10$). The studies that raised quality concerns were quantitative studies, due to incomplete outcome data associated with the respective studies.

Table 2. Summary table for results of MMAT quality appraisal.

Author(s)	Category of study design	Assessment criteria based on study design				
		1	2	3	4	5
Adams and Darby (2020)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Blakelock et al. (2016)	Quantitative non-randomised	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Blakelock et al. (2019)	Quantitative non-randomised	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Blakelock and Slater (2020)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brand et al. (2013)	Quantitative non-randomised	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes
Brown and Potrac (2009)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Butt and Molnar (2009)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carmody et al. (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gorman and Blackwood (2025)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Raabe et al. (2018)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Raabe et al. (2020)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Williams and MacNamara (2020)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Quantitative non-randomised	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Wippert and Wippert (2010)	Quantitative non-randomised	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes

Synthesis

The following sections present findings for each of the review questions. Firstly, the psychosocial impacts of release are presented, which are split into positive and negative impacts. This is followed by examining factors related to positive and negative adaptation to release, before concluding with the available resources for both positive and negative adaptation to release. A summary of general dimensions, higher-order themes, lower-order themes and their respective sources is presented in Table 3.

Psychosocial impacts of release

Negative psychosocial impacts of release. All studies produced at least one finding detailing a negative psychosocial impact of release. A salient negative psychosocial impact of release reported was psychological distress (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019; Wippert & Wippert, 2010), with one study highlighting a significant number of released youth footballers displayed clinical levels of psychological distress (Blakelock et al., 2016). Five quantitative studies highlighted released athletes experienced some form of psychosocial difficulties, which included: depression/depressive symptoms (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019; Brand et al., 2013; Wippert & Wippert, 2010), anxiety (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019; Brand et al., 2013), loss of confidence (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019), loss of self-esteem/self-worth (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019), social dysfunction/social phobia (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019; Brand et al., 2013), posttraumatic stress (Brand et al., 2013; Wippert & Wippert, 2008), anger (Wippert & Wippert, 2010); and alcohol/nicotine abuse (Brand et al., 2013; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

These findings were supported by ten further qualitative studies that highlighted athletes experienced at least one of the following psychosocial difficulties post-release: depression (Blakelock & Slater, 2020;

Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022), anxiety (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022), identity loss, crisis and confusion (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022), loss of self-esteem/self-worth/worthlessness (Adams & Darby, 2020; Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2018), anger (Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2018) and self-resentment (Butt & Molnar, 2009). Two studies reported athletes experienced feelings of shock when told they were being released (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Raabe et al., 2018). Following release, three studies reported athletes experienced feelings of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation (Adams & Darby, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022), whilst three studies reported athletes experienced feelings of failure (Adams & Darby, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025). Four studies specifically highlighted the athletes experienced a loss of self-confidence post-release (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020). However, two studies reported the athletes either experienced no loss of confidence in their own ability after release (Raabe et al., 2018), or after a temporary loss, regained their self-confidence (Raabe et al., 2020). A further study reported self-confidence athletes gained on the talent development pathway aided their transition into other domains post-release (Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

Three studies reported athletes quit playing their sport following release (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Williams & MacNamara, 2020), although in one of the studies this was enforced due to injury (McGlinchey et al., 2022).

Table 3. Respective source, lower-order themes, higher-order themes and general dimensions.

Source	Lower-order themes	Higher-order themes	General dimensions
Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Wippert and Wippert (2010)	Psychological distress	Negative psychosocial impacts of release	Psychosocial impacts of release
Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brand et al. (2013); Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Wippert and Wippert (2010)	Depression/depressive symptoms		
Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brand et al. (2013); Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Anxiety		
Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020)	Loss of confidence		
Adams and Darby (2020); Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2018)	Loss of self-esteem/self-worth/worthlessness		
Blakelock et al. (2016, 2019); Brand et al. (2013); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Social dysfunction/phobia		
Brand et al. (2013); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Identity loss, crisis and/or confusion		
Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2018); Wippert and Wippert (2010)	Posttraumatic stress		
Brand et al. (2013); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Anger		
Brown and Potrac (2009); Raabe et al. (2018)	Alcohol/nicotine abuse		
Adams and Darby (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Shock		
Adams and Darby (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025)	Shame/embarrassment/humiliation		
Butt and Molnar (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Williams and MacNamara (2020)	Feelings of failure		
Adams and Darby (2020); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Gorman and Blackwood (2025)	Athletes quit playing their sport following release		
Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Increased resilience	Positive psychosocial impacts of release	
Butt and Molnar (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); Raabe et al. (2018)	Posttraumatic growth		
Adams and Darby (2020); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Relief		
Adams and Darby (2020); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Butt and Molnar (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020); Wippert and Wippert (2010)	Release procedure (timing/nature of the way it was conducted)	Factors related to a negative adaptation to release	Factors related to adaptation to release
Adams and Darby (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025)	Lack of control over release		
Adams and Darby (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Lack of emphasis on education by clubs		
Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Unpreparedness for the transition		
Brown and Potrac (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	High, foreclosed athletic identity		
Brown and Potrac (2009); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Butt and Molnar (2009); Raabe et al. (2018, 2020)	Clinging to athletic identity following release		
Raabe et al. (2018, 2020)	Focus on education pre- or post-release	Factors related to a positive adaptation to release	
Brown and Potrac (2009); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Butt and Molnar (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025) McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020)	Planning for the transition		
Raabe et al. (2018)	Development or creation of new identities		
Raabe et al. (2020)	Holding onto athletic identity		
Blakelock et al. (2019); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Quitting playing their sport following release		
Adams and Darby (2020); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Increased athletes' control		
Blakelock et al. (2019); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Avoidance coping	Lack of available resources associated with a more negative adaptation to release	Available resources associated with adaptation to release
Adams and Darby (2020); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Disuse of social support (family/friends)		
Butt and Molnar (2009); Raabe et al. (2020)	Losing friends/belonging with teammates		
Butt and Molnar (2009); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020); Williams and MacNamara (2020)	Ill feeling towards coaches		
Adams and Darby (2020); Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Gorman and Blackwood (2025); McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2020)	Lack of support from club/organisation		

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Source	Lower-order themes	Higher-order themes	General dimensions
Blakelock et al. (2019); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Problem focused coping	Available resources associated with a more positive adaptation to release	
McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2018, 2020); Wippert and Wippert (2008)	Acceptance		
Raabe et al. (2018, 2020); Williams and MacNamara (2020)	Use of social support (family/friends)		
McGlinchey et al. (2022); Raabe et al. (2018)	Sharing the experience of release with/support of teammates		
Blakelock and Slater (2020); Brown and Potrac (2009); Carmody et al. (2024); McGlinchey et al. (2022)	Use/knowledge of/need for professional support		
Williams and MacNamara (2020)	Development of transferrable skills on the talent development pathway		

Positive psychosocial impacts of release. Six studies reported findings detailing a positive psychosocial impact release had on the athletes. Three studies produced findings suggesting some athletes experienced a sense of relief upon being released (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; Raabe et al., 2018). In the longer term, three studies reported athletes developed resilience following their release (Adams & Darby, 2020; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Two studies reported athletes experiencing characteristics of posttraumatic growth, such as openness to new possibilities and an increased personal strength (McGlinchey et al., 2022), as well as developing as people and having a new outlook on life (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

Factors related to adaptation to release

Factors related to a negative adaptation to release.

The most common factor related to a more problematic adaptation to release was athletes having a lack of control over their release, reported by six studies (Adams & Darby, 2020; Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Butt & Molnar, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020; Wippert & Wippert, 2010). Four studies outlined the release procedure, both the nature of the way it was conducted and the timing of the procedure, negatively affected the athletes' adaptation to release (Adams & Darby, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). Two studies made specific reference to the release process itself being a traumatic experience for elite youth footballers (Adams & Darby, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022). In these studies, the process involved the athletes being gathered in the changing rooms with their teammates before being called into their contract meeting one-by-one to find out they were being released, before having to return to the changing rooms and face their teammates. Further, two studies produced findings indicating the way in which athletes are informed of their release is

important (Raabe et al., 2020; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). In one study, athletes who were not informed of their release by their organisation or coach via a personal conversation, but either from third parties or by chance and without supportive communication, experienced a much more problematic adaptation than those athletes who had a personal conversation with their organisation or coaches, receiving a detailed explanation of the reasons for their release, and were provided with supportive communication (Wippert & Wippert, 2008). In another study, although athletes were informed of their release by their coach, it was often a brief, insensitive conversation, sometimes by phone call (Raabe et al., 2020).

Specifically within professional football talent development systems in the UK, there were several factors reported that contributed to elite youth footballers having a negative adaptation to release. A high, foreclosed athletic identity was a factor related to a more negative adaptation to release reported in four studies (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Three studies reported athletes perceived clubs placed a lack of emphasis on education whilst they were part of the club's academy (Adams & Darby, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025), which contributed to athletes from four studies discussing their unpreparedness for the transition following release (Adams & Darby, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Finally, two studies reported athletes clinging to their athletic identity put their adaptation to release on hold (Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022).

Factors related to a positive adaptation to release.

The two most common factors related to a less problematic adaptation to release reported were athletes focusing on education pre- or post-release (Blakelock &

Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Raabe et al., 2018, 2020), and athletes developing new identities following release (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020). Further, baseball players from North American talent development environments planning for the transition and having a backup plan aided their adaptation to release in two studies (Raabe et al., 2018, 2020). Following release, athletes holding onto their athletic identity aided their adaptation (Raabe et al., 2018). In one study, athletes gained an increased sense of control by quitting playing baseball following their release (Raabe et al., 2020).

Available resources for adaptation to release

Lack of available resources associated with a more negative adaptation to release. The most common resource lacking for the athletes leading to a more problematic adaptation to release was a perceived lack of support from clubs/organisations following release (Adams & Darby, 2020; Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020). In addition, athletes reported ill feeling towards coaches due to their handling of release procedures and perceived lack of support following the athletes' release (Butt & Molnar, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2020; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Disuse of social support, from family (McGlinchey et al., 2022) and friends (Adams & Darby, 2020) negatively impacted the athletes' adaptation to release. Similarly, two studies reported athletes lost friends or their belonging with teammates following release (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Raabe et al., 2020). Three studies found athletes who used avoidance coping strategies had a more negative adaptation to release (Blakelock et al., 2019; McGlinchey et al., 2022; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

Available resources associated with a more positive adaptation to release.

The most common reported resource available to athletes to support their adaptation to release was acceptance of the club's or organisation's decision to release them (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2018, 2020; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). Two studies reported athletes who used problem focused coping before and after release adapted more positively to the transition (Blakelock et al., 2019; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Three studies found athletes' use of social support, from both family and friends, aided their adaptation to release (Raabe et al., 2018, 2020; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Similarly, two studies reported sharing the experience of release with

teammates and the support of teammates following release supported the athletes' adaptation to the transition (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Raabe et al., 2018). Three studies outlined both the need for, and use of, professional support services as being very beneficial resources that would and did help athletes adapt following release (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022). In one study, athletes developed resources on the talent development pathway in the form of transferrable skills that supported their adaptation post-release (Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

Discussion

The current review aimed to systematically review, synthesise, and appraise research on release that has been conducted around youth and developing athletes. Unsurprisingly, most research examining this topic has focused on the inherent negative consequences of release. However, the present review also demonstrated positive impacts of release identified across studies. As well as identifying the various psychosocial impacts release has on youth athletes, the current review has identified the factors associated with contributing to a positive or negative adaptation to release, and the available resources for athletes' adaptation to release. In line with Taylor and Ogilvie's Conceptual Model of Career Transition (1994; 2001), we have structured the discussion into the following sections: psychosocial impacts of release, factors related to adaptation to release and available resources for adaptation to release, which are presented below.

Psychosocial impacts of release

The current review highlighted many negative psychosocial impacts of release. Perhaps most notably, three quantitative studies reported athletes experiencing psychological distress post-release (Blakelock et al., 2016, 2019; Wippert & Wippert, 2010). Several negative effects associated with psychological distress were reported across multiple studies, including symptoms and feelings of depression (e.g., Blakelock et al., 2016), anxiety (e.g., Blakelock & Slater, 2020), loss of confidence (e.g. Brown & Potrac, 2009), loss of self-esteem, self-worth and feelings of worthlessness (e.g., Raabe et al., 2018), social dysfunction (e.g., Brand et al., 2013), and symptoms of posttraumatic stress (e.g., Wippert & Wippert, 2008). The array of severe negative psychosocial impacts the athletes from the included studies experienced highlights how traumatic the release process can be.

Another salient negative psychosocial impact, which appeared unique to those released from professional football academies, was identity loss, crisis, and confusion (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025). The early professionalisation of elite youth footballers, combined with the sacrifices to the educational and social aspects of their lives, can result in the creation of a high, foreclosed athletic identity. Thus, when these athletes are released, the impact on their identity and sense of self is profound.

As well as these psychosocial effects, our review highlighted a range of negative emotions athletes experienced upon release. Immediately following release, athletes reported feelings of shock as they did not expect or anticipate their release (e.g., Raabe et al., 2018), and feelings of failure having not achieved their athletic career goals (e.g., Adams & Darby, 2020). Feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation were reported by athletes, particularly when facing teammates, family, and friends following release (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009). This was again only reported by elite youth football players in the UK, as they are potentially 'placed on a pedestal' due to the notoriety that comes with being signed to a professional football club's academy, before having this taken away by release.

While these emotional reactions were proximate to the release decision, some athletes did not experience the most severe psychosocial impacts until 6 months to 1 year post-release, which encompassed feelings of depression, anxiety, identity crisis and loss of self-confidence/worth (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Athletes in both studies sought psychological support to help deal with the psychosocial difficulties they were experiencing, further highlighting the necessity for ongoing professional support to be available to athletes long-term post-release.

Despite the inherent negative consequences of youth athletes being released, the literature revealed some positive psychosocial impacts can be experienced long-term following the healing process athletes go through post-release. In the short term, some athletes reported a sense of relief following their release (e.g., Raabe et al., 2018). In the longer term, salient positive psychosocial impacts were reported by athletes. Namely, an increased psychological resilience, stemming from the athletes' release (e.g., Adams & Darby, 2020), as well as athletes reportedly experiencing characteristics of posttraumatic growth (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009). Posttraumatic growth is defined as experiencing positive change as a result of the struggle with major life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), which athletes demonstrated through openness to new possibilities and an increased personal strength (McGlinchey et al., 2022), and developing as

people and having a new outlook on life (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Despite the many negative psychosocial consequences of release, the experience of release can serve to benefit the athletes' psychosocial development in the long-term, which warrants further investigation.

Factors related to adaptation to release

A key finding from the present review was the series of interconnected factors contributing to more and less problematic adaptations to release. Firstly, results showed a common factor related to athletes having a more negative adaptation to release is a lack of control. Lack of control was commonplace for athletes with regards to release, as it is a non-normative transition for athletes, whereby the athlete does not expect or anticipate the transition, and it is involuntary in nature (Wylleman et al., 2004). The talent development environment itself was often reported to contribute to the athletes' feelings of a lack of control due to its precarious, unpredictable nature (e.g., McGlinchey et al., 2022). Adding to the feelings of doubt the lack of control caused athletes was the handling and timing of release procedures. For instance, elite youth footballers in the UK reported the release process itself was a traumatic experience, which compounded their release, causing feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation (Adams & Darby, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Thus, the way in which athletes are informed of their release is important, with the reviewed literature suggesting a discrete, face-to-face meeting with athletes is recommended, with reasons for their release and supportive communication provided (Raabe et al., 2020; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). One study also highlighted the timing of release procedures reduced the athletes' likelihood of being able to sign for another club and precluded them from engaging in alternative career planning (Adams & Darby, 2020). This fed into the athletes feeling unprepared for the transition – another factor which negatively affected the athletes' adaptation to release. A common factor behind athletes not engaging in alternative career planning was them being elite male youth players at professional football academies in the UK, where a lack of emphasis on education was highlighted in this review (Adams & Darby, 2020; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025). This subsequently made adapting to release more problematic. Conversely, when athletes planned for the transition and had a back-up plan, including focusing on their education, this facilitated better adaptation to release, aiding their transition out of sport (Raabe et al., 2018,

2020). These results highlight how potential cross-cultural differences in talent development environments affect the release process. For instance, in many North American talent development environments, most athletes attend higher education before being drafted into professional teams, such as the NFL (Boulier et al., 2010). This is highlighted in the present review, where two qualitative studies reported 21 of 24 athletes released from the MLB talent development pathway had gained a degree prior to playing MiLB (Raabe et al., 2018, 2020). For these athletes, a focus on education and obtaining educational qualifications supported them to successfully transition following their release. Conversely, the male football talent development system in the UK involves professional clubs' academies signing and developing players from as young as 9 years-old, with a focus on producing players for the senior professional team (Premier League, 2022). Although a 10-year update report on the EPPP suggested there is now a greater focus on education and holistic development within the professional football academy system (Premier League, 2022), recent research has reported the still limited prioritisation of further and higher education within each club (Hague & Law, 2024). Thus, potentially leaving released players with fewer alternative career options, making successfully transitioning more problematic. This demonstrates how the nature of talent development environments can contribute to athletes' adaptation to release.

Another important factor affecting athletes' adaptation to release highlighted by the current review was athletic identity, whereby a high, foreclosed athletic identity led to more severe psychosocial difficulties for athletes and a more problematic adaptation to release, supporting previous findings in transition literature (Park et al., 2013; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001). However, there were contrasting findings surrounding holding onto athletic identity following release. In two instances, players clinging to their athletic identity hindered their adaptation to release (Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGlinchey et al., 2022) whereas some athletes felt protecting their athletic identity made the adaptation to release easier (Raabe et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the development of new identities was a factor that supported a healthier transition for athletes post-release as they transitioned to a new stage in their lives. For example, athletes who focused on their education post-release reported it gave them a renewed sense of purpose and supported their identity development, which may assist athletes in seeing themselves as more than their sport and guard against experiencing more severe psychosocial difficulties (Haslam et al., 2024; Young et al., 2024).

Available resources for adaptation to release

The present review is the first to clearly identify and summarise a range of available resources and strategies to facilitate a more positive adaptation and transition in released athletes. Firstly, in line with previous career transition models (Stambulova, 2016; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001), the effectiveness of coping strategies employed by athletes in relation to release appear to impact the success of their transition outcome and the psychosocial difficulties they experience. Avoidance coping, i.e., attempts to escape from the threat, harm, or loss of a stressful situation and its associated thoughts and emotions, was associated with elite youth footballers experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, whilst problem focused coping, i.e., strategies aiming to minimise distress by removing or eliminating the stressor, and diminishing the impact of the stressor if it cannot be avoided, was strongly correlated with players experiencing lower levels of psychological distress following release (Blakelock et al., 2019). These findings were supported by a further study (McGlinchey et al., 2022), whilst a quantitative study showed a correlation between avoidance coping and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Wippert & Wippert, 2008). Thus, in-line with a systematic review of retirement from sport (Park et al., 2013), and the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2016), avoidance coping appears to negatively influence athletes' adaptation to release, leading to a crisis transition, whereas problem-focused coping supports a more positive, successful transition. A unique coping strategy outlined in the current review was athletes accepting their release, which appeared to support more positive adaptations and transitions, by helping athletes come to terms with their release sooner. This aligns with the concept of active acceptance coping (e.g., acknowledging a negative situation and dealing with it in a constructive way), which has been associated with positive psychological outcomes in relation to unchangeable negative events (Nakamura & Orth, 2005). The reviewed literature suggests problem focused and acceptance coping are the most effective strategies to support athletes successfully transition following release, whereas avoidance coping strategies are associated with ineffective, crisis-transitions and released athletes experiencing more severe psychosocial difficulties (Stambulova, 2016).

Social support appears to play a key role in athletes' adaptation to release, as outlined by Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994; 2001) conceptual model. Unsurprisingly, our results revealed the use of social support from family, friends, teammates and coaches (e.g., Williams & MacNamara, 2020), facilitates a better and less

problematic adaptation to release. Conversely, the disuse of social support, even though the athletes perceived it was available to them, appeared to hinder the athletes' adaptation to release (e.g., Adams & Darby, 2020). Similarly, athletes losing friends and belonging with their teammates negatively impacted their adaptation to release (e.g., Butt & Molnar, 2009). These findings highlighting the beneficial role social support plays in assisting released athletes' transition supports previous research (Park et al., 2013).

From the current review, possibly the main resource athletes perceived to be lacking was support from their club or organisation. This left athletes with feelings of betrayal and anger, as they felt they had dedicated large portions of their lives to the clubs/organisations but were not supported following release. Further, ill feeling and resentment towards coaches was commonly reported, both during release procedures and post-release. The lack of support provided to released athletes is concerning as elite youth footballers highlighted the need for support in dealing with the emotional and psychosocial disturbances that occurred because of their release (Brown & Potrac, 2009). A recent pilot study also highlighted the potential benefit of medical aftercare for elite youth footballers from club medical staff, with 75% of players reporting awareness of external support resources should they experience mental health concerns (Carmody et al., 2024). Saliently, two studies highlighted the positive role of the Professional Footballers' Association in providing a wide range of services, such as counselling, financial support and career advice, to support players post-release (Blakelock & Slater, 2020; McGlinchey et al., 2022). Thus, as previously suggested, this highlights the need for the provision of support services to all released youth athletes (Wilkinson, 2021).

Limitations and future research

Regarding limitations of our review, we are conscious that our findings are susceptible to publication and language bias as our review only considered studies published in the English language. Secondly, we did not conduct a meta-analysis due to the low number of quantitative studies included in the review and range of quantitative measures used. Regarding limitations of the included studies, of the nine qualitative studies included in the current review, all studies used singular interviews, highlighting a lack of methodological variety, and a clear avenue for future research. As the qualitative studies all used retrospective designs, there are potential issues of recall bias and/or faulty recall (Talari & Goyal, 2020). Further, this review has highlighted the negative

psychosocial impacts experienced by athletes can vary depending on time since release, which is difficult to capture with one-off interviews (see Kendellen & Camiré, 2020). Prospective, longitudinal designs are needed to explore the 'process of release', in both qualitative and quantitative designs. As previously mentioned, future research should attempt to examine the associations between the severity of the psychosocial impacts and the quality of transition, with the aforementioned factors such as athletic identity, preparedness and the release process. Considering only one study within this review focused on the potential positive effects of release (Williams & MacNamara, 2020), future research could take a more balanced approach when exploring experiences of the release process. Similarly, there is a lack of research examining the use, application and effectiveness of different coping strategies in dealing with the negative consequences of release. Future intervention studies could be conducted with released athletes to understand how best to implement the most effective coping strategies, which based on the findings from this review, could involve an emphasis on problem focused coping (Blakelock et al., 2019). Further, there is a lack of research around coaches' or parents' experiences of the release process, which would be a fruitful avenue for future research. For example, research could explore the reasoning coaches provide to athletes as to why they have been released and athletes' perceptions of those reasons. There is also a publication bias towards football contexts within release literature, with nine of the included studies examining football. Finally, the difference between the UK and North American talent development environments and their impact on released athletes has been highlighted within this review, so expanding research to a wide range of countries and cultures is warranted. Specifically, African and Asian talent development systems are underrepresented in the literature and require further attention.

Applied implications

The necessity for a 'back-up plan', or at least some level of preparedness for the release transition, has been highlighted as being crucial for athletes in having a healthier adaptation to release. Our review revealed a focus on education pre-release may assist athletes' transition post-release when transitioning into other careers (e.g., Raabe et al., 2018). Thus, more emphasis should be placed on youth athletes' education and preparing for the associated transition with release. This appears to be particularly relevant to professional football academies in the UK, although the nature of these talent development environments, whereby early

professionalisation occurs, is problematic. Elite youth footballers often develop strong, foreclosed athletic identities whilst part of professional football academies, which can lead to more severe psychosocial difficulties post-release when this identity is lost (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025). Furthermore, athletes with a strong athletic identity are unlikely to consider alternative career trajectories (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). However, a stronger emphasis on elite youth footballers' education can help to broaden these athletes' identities, aiding their adaptation to release and reducing the psychosocial impacts they experience (Scandle et al., 2025). Therefore, as suggested by a recent expert statement on creating effective holistic talent development environments (Gledhill et al., 2025), a stronger onus should be placed on the organisations, sports clubs and coaches associated with athletes to prepare them for a possible life outside of their sport.

The current review highlighted how the release process itself and the way athletes are informed of their release can be a traumatic experience which compounds their release (e.g., McGlinchey et al., 2022). Thus, the reviewed literature suggests athletes should be informed of their release in a discrete, face-to-face meeting with decision-makers providing reasons for their release and using supportive communication (e.g., Raabe et al., 2020). Further research exploring coaches' and organisations' practice when releasing athletes is warranted to create evidence-informed guidelines for key stakeholders involved in the release process.

Following release, avoidance coping was associated with athletes experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, whilst athletes who used problem-focused and/or active acceptance coping, experienced lower levels of psychological distress. Thus, whilst part of talent development programmes, there should be a strong emphasis on developing athletes' problem-focused coping strategies as this may help to reduce psychosocial difficulties should they be released. Following release, if athletes are struggling to cope and experiencing psychosocial difficulties, various studies have highlighted aftercare for athletes is key (e.g., Blakelock & Slater, 2020), with support from clubs, organisations and professional support services being beneficial to help athletes deal with release.

Conclusion

The current review makes a novel contribution to the field as the first of its kind to systematically review, synthesise and appraise release literature. This review appraised findings across different sports and nations, highlighting differences cross-culturally in talent

development environments and their impact on athletes' experiences of release. In sum, the current review outlined factors and resources associated with a more problematic adaptation to release and crisis transition, whereby athletes experience more psychosocial difficulties, can include: a traumatic release procedure whereby athletes lack control over their release, having a high, foreclosed athletic identity and being unprepared for their release, with a lack of a back-up plan or educational qualifications, the use of avoidance coping strategies, the disuse of social support and a lack of support from their club or organisation following release, which can result in the athlete experiencing more severe psychosocial difficulties, such as psychological distress, depression, anxiety, social dysfunction, identity loss and crisis. Factors and resources associated with a less problematic adaptation to release and successful transition, whereby athletes experience less psychosocial difficulties, can include: athletes being prepared for the transition, such as having a back-up plan and a focus on education pre- or post-release, the development and creation of new identities post release, the use of problem focused and/or active acceptance coping strategies, the use of social support and professional support post release, which can lead to positive psychosocial impacts such as increased resilience and posttraumatic growth in the long-term. We advise key stakeholders involved in the release process, such as organisations, coaches, parents and athletes to consider the findings of this review to improve the release process, thus supporting athletes to more adaptively transition from release.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. PRISMA checklist is also provided.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Search strategy applied to each electronic database

#	APA PsycARTICLES	APA PsycINFO	PubMed	Scopus	SPORTDiscus	Web of Science
1	Title (Deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)	Title (Deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)	TITLE (Deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)	TITLE (Deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)	Title (deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)	Title (Deselection OR deselected OR deselect OR de-select OR de-selection OR deselected OR cut OR release OR released OR selection OR selected OR non-selection OR termination OR terminated OR 'involuntary career termination' OR 'forced dropout' OR non-normative)
2	noft(Sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)	noft(Sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)	Title/Abstract (Sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)	Title, Abstract, Keywords (sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)	Topic (Sport OR athlete OR athletic OR player OR performer)
3	noft(Youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)	noft(Youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)	Title/Abstract (Youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)	TITLE-ABS-KEY(Youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)	Title, Abstract, Keyword (youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)	Topic (Youth OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR junior OR academy)
4	Limiters: Peer reviewed journals; full text; language: English Titles = 15	Limiters: scholarly (peer reviewed) journals; source type: academic journals; language: English. Titles = 232	Limiters: Peer reviewed journals; full text; language: English Titles = 127	Limiters : document type: article; source type: journal; language: English. Titles = 823	Limiters: source type: academic journals; language: English. Titles = 379	Limiters: document type: article; language: English. Total = 508

This appendix details the studies that were excluded from the review, and the reasons for their exclusion, after being assessed against the eligibility criteria at the full text stage of the search process.

Appendix B. Summary of excluded studies

Study	Reason for exclusion
Alfermann, D., Stambulova, N., & Zemaityte, A. (2004). Reactions to sport career termination: a cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian, and Russian athletes. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i> , 5(1), 61–75.	Not focused on release
Barnett, L. A. (2006). Flying high or crashing down: Girls' accounts of trying out for cheerleading and dance. <i>Journal of Adolescent Research</i> , 21(5), 514–541.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Barnett, L. A. (2007). 'Winners' and 'losers': The effects of being allowed or denied entry into competitive extracurricular activities. <i>Journal of Leisure Research</i> , 39(2), 316–344.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Baxter-Jones, A. D., Barbour-Tuck, E. N., Dale, D., Sherar, L. B., Knight, C. J., Cumming, S. P., . . . & Humbert, M. L. (2020). The role of growth and maturation during adolescence on team-selection and short-term sports participation. <i>Annals of Human Biology</i> , 47(4), 316–323.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Bernaciková, M., Gimunová, M., Kumstát, M., Paludo, A. C., & Škovranová, R. (2022). Negative Training Responses During the Runners' Career Could Cooperate in an Early Career Termination: A Case Study in Top-Level Female Runners from the Slovakian National Team. <i>Studia sportiva</i> , 16(2), 53–63.	Not focused on release
Blinde, E. M., & Stratta, T. M. (1992). The sport career death of college athletes: Involuntary and unanticipated sport exits. <i>Journal of Sport Behavior</i> , 15(1).	Non-selection as opposed to release
Capstick, A. L., & Trudel, P. (2010). Coach communication of non-selection in youth competitive sport. <i>International Journal of Coaching Science</i> , 4(1).	Non-selection as opposed to release
Capstick, A. L., & Trudel, P. (2010). Reflection about the communication of non-selection: A shared responsibility. <i>Journal of Sport Psychology in Action</i> , 1(1), 15–24.	No original empirical data
Carapinha, A., Mendes, P., Guedes Carvalho, P., Torregrossa, M., & Travassos, B. (2018). Career termination of Portuguese elite football players: comparison between the last three decades. <i>Sports</i> , 6(4), 155.	Did not meet age criteria
Dugdale, J. H., McRobert, A. P., & Unnithan, V. B. (2021). Selected, deselected, and reselected: A case study analysis of attributes associated with player reselection following closure of a youth soccer academy. <i>Frontiers in Sports and Active Living</i> , 3, 633,124.	Not focused on release
Edwards, D., & Brannagan, P. M. (2023). Dealing with de-selection from youth international football: A case study of English Premier League academies. <i>International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching</i> , 17,479,541,231,216,873.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Erpič, S. C., Wylleman, P., & Zupančič, M. (2004). The effect of athletic and non-athletic factors on the sports career termination process. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i> , 5(1), 45–59.	Not focused on release
Gibbs, N., & Briggs, D. (2025). The school of hard knocks: Systemic violence and the motivation to harm in boys' youth academy football. <i>Frontiers in Sociology</i> , 10, 1,631,118.	Not focused on athletes' experiences of release
Giles, L. E. L., Harwood, C. G., & Rongen, F. (2025). The retain-release process in elite youth football academies: Parent perceptions and recommendations for minimising harm. <i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i> , 1–21.	Not focused on athletes' experiences of release
Gleddie, D. L., Sulz, L. D., Humbert, M. L., & Zajdel, A. P. (2019). If you must cut athletes from school sports teams, consider best practices. <i>Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance</i> , 90(2), 24–30.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Grove, J. R., Fish, M., & Eklund, R. C. (2004). Changes in athletic identity following team selection: Self-protection versus self-enhancement. <i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i> , 16(1), 75–81.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Güllich, A. (2014). Selection, de-selection and progression in German football talent promotion. <i>European Journal of Sport Science</i> , 14(6), 530–537.	Not focused on release
Herbison, J. D., Martin, L. J., & Sarkar, M. (2019). Achievement despite adversity: a qualitative investigation of undrafted national hockey league players. <i>The Sport Psychologist</i> , 33(4), 285–294.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Huijgen, B. C., Elferink-Gemser, M. T., Lemmink, K. A., & Visscher, C. (2014). Multidimensional performance characteristics in selected and deselected talented soccer players. <i>European Journal of Sport Science</i> , 14(1), 2–10.	Not focused on release
Kadlick, J., & Flemr, L. (2008). Athletic career termination model in the Czech Republic: A qualitative exploration. <i>International Review for the Sociology of Sport</i> , 43(3), 251–269.	Not focused on release
Kite, R. J., Noon, M. R., Morris, R., Mundy, P., & Clarke, N. D. (2024). Observations of player (de) selection within a professional UK soccer academy. <i>Journal of Science in Sport and Exercise</i> , 6(1), 71–80.	Not focused on release
Koopmann, T., Faber, I. R., Lath, F., Loffing, F., & Schorer, J. (2023). Exploring the subjective beliefs of expert coaches on 'talent' and player selection in German table tennis. <i>International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching</i> , 18(6), 1952–1963.	Not focused on release
Lindgren, E. C., Hildingh, C., & Linnér, S. (2017). Children's stories about team selection: A discourse analysis. <i>Leisure Studies</i> , 36(5), 633–644.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Lipsyte, R. (1979). Varsity syndrome: The unkindest cut. <i>The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> , 445(1), 15–23.	No original empirical data
McCarthy, N., & Collins, D. (2014). Initial identification & selection bias versus the eventual confirmation of talent: evidence for the benefits of a rocky road?. <i>Journal of Sports Sciences</i> , 32(17), 1604–1610.	Not focused on release
McEwen, C. E., Clarke, L. H., Bennett, E. V., Dawson, K. A., & Crocker, P. R. (2018). 'It's this thing of being an Olympian that you don't get from anything else': Changing experiences of Canadian individual-sport athletes with Olympic team selection. <i>The Sport Psychologist</i> , 32(2), 81–92.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Milne, M. J., & Neely, K. C. (2022). Exploring female dancer's emotions and coping experiences following deselection: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i> , 63, 102,289.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Neely, K. C., Dunn, J. G., McHugh, T. L. F., & Holt, N. L. (2016). The deselection process in competitive female youth sport. <i>The Sport Psychologist</i> , 30(2), 141–153.	Non-selection as opposed to release

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(Continued).

Study	Reason for exclusion
Neely, K. C., Dunn, J. G., McHugh, T. L. F., & Holt, N. L. (2018). Female athletes' experiences of positive growth following deselection in sport. <i>Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 40</i> (4), 173–185.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Neely, K. C., McHugh, T. L. F., Dunn, J. G., & Holt, N. L. (2017). Athletes and parents coping with deselection in competitive youth sport: A communal coping perspective. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 30</i> , 1–9.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Pica, G., Mallia, L., Pierro, A., Alivernini, F., Borellini, V., & Lucidi, F. (2019). How stressful is retirement! Antecedents of stress linked to athletes' career termination. <i>Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 49</i> (8), 488–497.	Not focused on release
Ristolainen, L., Kettunen, J. A., Kujala, U. M., & Heinonen, A. (2012). Sport injuries as the main cause of sport career termination among Finnish top-level athletes. <i>European Journal of Sport Science, 12</i> (3), 274–282.	Not focused on release
Rothwell, M., Rumbold, J. L., & Stone, J. A. (2020). Exploring British adolescent rugby league players' experiences of professional academies and dropout. <i>International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 18</i> (4), 485–501.	Dropout as opposed to release
Scandle, M., Brown, D. J., & Wagstaff, C. R. (2025). Supporting client transitions out of UK football academies. <i>Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 16</i> (1), 18–30.	No original empirical data
Slade, K., Jowett, S., & Rhind, D. (2024). Developing guidelines for selection-deselection in high performance sport for athletes, coaches, and organisations: A delphi study. <i>Journal of Sports Sciences, 42</i> (13), 1209–1223.	Did not meet age criteria
Sweeney, L., MacNamara, Á., & Taylor, J. (2023). International selection and competition in youth sport: pin the tail on the donkey or targeted intervention?. <i>Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 5</i> , 1,298,909.	No original empirical data
Terry, P. C., & Youngs, E. L. (1996). Discriminant effectiveness of psychological state measures in predicting selection during field hockey trials. <i>Perceptual and Motor Skills, 82</i> (2), 371–377.	Non-selection as opposed to release
Thelwell, R. C., Wood, J., Harwood, C., Woolway, T., & Van Raalte, J. L. (2018). The role, benefits and selection of sport psychology consultants: Perceptions of youth-sport coaches and parents. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 35</i> , 131–142.	Not focused on release
Vozniuk, T., Shchepotina, N., Koliadych, Y., Lazarenko, N., Ihnatova, O., Baiurko, N., . . . & Chyzhevska, N. (2021). Methods of Primary Selection of Young Football Players. <i>Sport Mont, 19</i> .	Not focused on release
Wilhelmsen, L. (2023). Young and burned out – the dilemma of women's elite football. Early termination of the football career for elite women footballers in Norway caused by a high degree of emotional and interpersonal stressors. <i>Soccer & Society, 1–15</i> .	Did not meet age criteria
Wilkinson, R. J. (2021). A literature review exploring the mental health issues in academy football players following career termination due to deselection or injury and how counselling could support future players. <i>Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 21</i> (4), 859–868.	No original empirical data
Wilkinson, R. (2021). Counselling in football: Who is caring for the players that don't make the cut?. <i>Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 21</i> (4), 846–851.	No original empirical data
Wrang, C. M., Rossing, N. N., Agergaard, S., & Martin, L. J. (2022). The missing children: a systematic scoping review on talent identification and selection in football (soccer). <i>European Journal for Sport and Society, 19</i> (2), 135–150.	No original empirical data
Wrang, C. M., Martin, L. J., Rossing, N. N., & Agergaard, S. (2023). How do young athletes experience selection and nonselection? An ethnographic study of talent categorization and identification processes. <i>Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology, 12</i> (3), 155.	Not focused on release
Wysoczański-Minkowicz, R. (2024). Sport Careers and Process of Career Termination. <i>Sport and Tourism Central European Journal, 7</i> (2), 83–102.	No original empirical data