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Towards a feminist playology: social sport studies and the limits of critique

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Chapter 1

Methodology and data

1.1 Description of the research procedure

1.1.1 Sampling and access

In order to understand the social significance of elite women's football, this research adopts a multi-method ethnographic approach.¹ First of all, I analysed the content of various media material in order to reconstruct the public debate and to track down networks of informants and key stakeholders. Of key importance, here were the websites of the various elite clubs based in the Low Countries, the website of the Dutch football organisation and a booklet published by the football organisation, 'celebrating' 25 years of Dutch women's football, which includes a list of players active in the 1970s and 1980s. The semi-structured in-depth interview was however the most important method. To elicit insights into the experiences and perspectives of football players, I conducted interviews with former elite women's football players and technical staff and current elite players, technical staff and management. To complement the interviews, I made observations during several football matches at various clubs in the Low Countries and conducted a week of 'day in the life' participant observation. These observations allowed me to immerse myself in the settings, cultural practices, and daily activities of elite women's football players and facilitated further understanding of what the interviewees believe and why, and how they experience the place of sports in their lives.

In order to gain access to informants, stakeholders and important sites, and to initiate sampling, I deployed various strategies/tactics. First of all, based on the list of players and coaches active in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, included in the booklet *KNVB Jaarboek 25 Jaar Vrouwenvoetbal* (Stolk & Wagenaar, 1997), I conducted an internet search to find contact details of potential interviewees. This resulted in a few 'hits', which were followed up. Gaining access to these former elite players proved to require patience and much sensitivity since I approached them by cold calling, by telephone, Facebook or e-mail. Once rapport was established and the interview conducted, I deployed the method of snowball sampling, that is access to interviewees through contact information that is provided by other interviewees (Atkinson & Flint, 2004, p. 1043, 1044). I approached the Dutch football organisation to smoothen the process of data sampling. For privacy reasons, they were unwilling to provide contact details. To gain access to stakeholders (management and sponsors) and important sites (stadiums, skyboxes, training fields etc.), I approached the various elite clubs in the Low Countries. I visited the majority of the clubs at least once when hosting a match. These visits allowed for a general feel of the field and for an understanding of the concerns and motives of stakeholders and for the establishment of rapport with those stakeholders in a position to provide further access to the field (gatekeepers). At this early

1 I follow here the *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (Taskakkori and Teddie 2010a), which describes multi-method studies as studies involving multiple types of qualitative research or multiple types of quantitative research. This in contrast to mixed methods studies, which involve the mixing of both types of data (Taskakkori and Teddie 2010b, p. 11).

stage, it became clear that most clubs were evidently suspicious of the Dutch football organisation. First of all because of the fear of funding cuts and secondly because of the fear of a decrease in the quality of the competition. At the time I conducted the fieldwork, both Dutch and Belgian elite clubs were united in the transnational BeNe League. Particularly Dutch club affiliates lamented this structure, as they believed that Belgian clubs would bring down the level of play. In order for me to establish the necessary rapport, I had to repeatedly reaffirm my scientific independence from football organisations. Competitive sentiments were also expressed between the affiliates of the various Dutch clubs. To certify proper care in the dealings with the various clubs, these competitive sentiments required to be handled with diplomacy. Most club affiliates generously welcomed me and as these meetings generally took place during matches, they likewise expected me to root for their team. Overall, I did not have trouble in navigating through the competitive sentiments, but in some instances it was tricky. For instance, on one occasion I accompanied a club during an away game. Upon arrival, I enthusiastically greeted the affiliates of the host club. This was however clearly frowned upon by the director of the club whom I travelled with.

Following up on club visits, I approached management teams to arrange interviews with current elite players and coaches. In consultation with management teams, I drafted lists of potential interviewees. In some cases, managements arranged meetings for interviews, generally those who had provided the contact details of players. Once rapport with the players was established and the interview conducted, some players would also provide the contact details of their peers. The selection of the site for the week of participant observation was based on the quality of my relation with the clubs and their accessibility. The very opportunity of engaging in fieldwork illustrates some key aspects of the relatively 'open' character of Dutch elite women's football clubs. This is in contrast to male football clubs, which are in general closed to people who are perceived as 'outsiders', making it very difficult or even impossible to gain access (Roderick, 2006, p. 7). This being said, the access I was granted was nevertheless limited in scope. I very much hoped to be able to observe interaction within the changing room before and after matches and personal encounters between coaches and players, and amongst players, physiotherapist and coaches. However for privacy reasons the coaches decided to limit my access. Within the timeframe of a week, access was allowed to the training field in the stadium, the sky box, and the office spaces. At the start of the week of participant observation the coach informed the players about the context of my presence and stressed my availability for any questions, remarks or concerns. Notably, I was allowed to attend the discussion of tactics for the upcoming match, both amongst the coaches and amongst the coaches and players. Given the competitive nature of the games, this might be considered remarkable. It is, however, unclear to me whether the coaches allowed me this access either because they simply smelled my ignorance of football strategy, or trusted me with potentially sensitive information.

1.1.2 Fieldwork settings

The interviews primarily took place at the interviewees' homes and at club cantinas and offices, but in some cases also at my own office or via skype. The choice of these settings predominantly depended on practical factors, that is availability of the informants. As the majority of Dutch and Belgian based elite football players combine their football practice with part-time work or education, their available time was limited. Hence, I needed to be as flexible as possible in deciding upon interview locations. In all cases I made every effort to ascertain that the interviewees felt relaxed, with the aim of allowing them to speak at length and in their own terms

The week of 'day in the life' participant observation took place at a club located in the Netherlands. Along the overall majority of elite women's football clubs, this club makes use of the facilities of its host clubs, that is stadium, office space, training fields etc. The club is however a semi-private foundation and finances the usage of facilities and the payments of staff members and players with income generated by financial sponsors, public funding and allowances from the Dutch football organisation.

1.1.3 Fieldwork activities and methodological reflections

In total 10 of the 15 clubs taking part in the Dutch-Belgian transnational competition were visited. Eight clubs based in the Netherlands and two clubs based in Belgium. Some Dutch clubs were paid a few visits. These visits enabled not only the establishment of rapport with gatekeepers, but also enabled casual informative talks with sponsors and with relatives of some of the players. These talks were not recorded, but jotted down as field notes. The week of participant observation was devoted to an exploration of three themes: group behaviour, relation between players and technical staff and physicality. The theme of physicality was explored on the basis of the following questions: How do players address their bodies and physical issues in talks with medics? How do players address their bodies and physical issues in talks with peers? How do players negotiate injuries during training sessions and matches? Field notes were made in case of relevant remarks and remarkable social encounters or situations.

The semi-structured in-depth interview was however the most important research method. In total, I conducted 31 interviews. I interviewed 15 current elite football players and 12 elite players active between the 70s and the 90s, of whom four started a professional career as coaches of a national team, either in the Low Countries or abroad. The ages of the current players ranged from eighteen to thirty-four. The age of the former elite players ranged from thirty-seven to sixty-seven. At the time of the interviews, five of the current football players were taking part in the selection of the Dutch national team and two in the selection of the Belgian national team. Three of them played their club football outside the Low Countries. Nine footballers played their club football in the Netherlands and three in Belgium. One of the current elite players was from a mixed cultural and ethnic background and one of the former elite players was of Asian descent. That only two of the players

were from a non-Dutch ethnic background reflects something about what is often called the whiteness of professional women's football (Allison, 2018; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999). During the course of the interviews, both players reflected on their ethnic and cultural background in relation to their football careers. In general, however, ethnicity and race, including whiteness, could not be explored with all of the interviewees. Certain other demographic information was volunteered by the players during the course of their interview, in particular former elite players were keen to discuss social class. I also interviewed two (former) male coaches of the Dutch/Belgian national teams and two female managers, one working at national and the other at club level. As discussed in the previous section, the sample of players interviewed was not randomly selected. In the positivist sense of the word, and as is often the case in qualitative studies, the sample can thus not be considered statistically representative of the broader population of past and current footballers. Meeting such a methodological standard would have required unlimited access to the research population, which was, as mentioned above, impossible. In the rest of this chapter, I show how I take this into account in the way I draw conclusions from the data.

I interviewed all the players who responded positively to my request. The sampling continued after the 'saturation of knowledge' occurred (Bertaux, 1981, p. 37). The resulting data confirms the established view that 12 interviews of a homogenous group is all that is needed to reach saturation (Guest, et al, 2006). Saturation occurred after interviewing both 12 former and 12 current elite football players. Three additional interviews with current players were however conducted, as these were already arranged. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, but they generally tended towards two hours. At the time of arranging the interview, and again at the start of each interview, all interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research, its aims and objectives and what was expected of them, including the amount of time likely to be required for participation. I also made explicit that participation in the research was voluntary and that interviewees could withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions. Many of the current elite footballers, whether playing on local or national level, are more or less public figures enjoying celebrity status. To prepare them for public appearances, they received (online) media training, instructing them about the ins and outs of successful public appearances, with a strong focus on what not to say, or what not to share on social media. Since they are accustomed to media interviews and drilled to speak in public in a largely depersonalised tone, it was important to be very explicit about the purpose of the interview. I also encouraged them to talk in a personal way about their experiences. Given their status as public figures and the fragility of their football careers, it was also of key importance to reassure them that their comments would not be traceable to them. To protect confidentiality, agreements were made that the interview transcripts would not be made available to third parties, not even in anonymized form. Elite women's football is a 'small' world, meaning that even in anonymised form, full interview transcripts run the risk of revealing the identity of the interviewees. In the discussion of the research findings below, I make no reference to recognisable persons, dates, locations and contexts.

The interviews were structured around seven key themes: sports biography, social networks, everyday life, gender identity, physicality, media and future plans.² These themes provided a comparative framework for all the interviews and at the same time allowed the players to explore their own concerns. Important to note is that the questions I asked were not based on any expectations regarding the three main categories delineated: 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice' (see the section '*Overview of the data and key findings*' of this chapter). In effect, I had not expected to ask about sacrifice, but this came up spontaneously as a theme.

Prior to the interviews, I informed myself about the players, including aspects of their football trajectories. This contributed not only to the establishment of rapport, but it also allowed me to formulate more specific questions.

It might be important to note that, with the exception of a few school competitions, I have never been an active football player myself, neither in organised nor in informal form. I can recall that I enjoyed taking part in elementary school competitions, but in general I've never experienced much interest in football, not even passively. However, from my sixth birthday till early adult life, I did practise classical ballet on an intensive basis. What I can recall from my experiences is that many of the clichés about the disciplinary characteristics of ballet are justified. I still feel the eyes of my instructor burning on my shoulders, as these were my weakest spots, the stick behind my back, and the imaginary string puppet player. I thus have experienced what it means to be physically disciplined and to be challenged to push one's body to a next or further level, even when in pain. Both points about my position as an absolute outsider to the world of football and my experiences with harsh training regimes are important to stress, for there are multiple ways these experiences could have affected the research process. These experiences would for example influence the questions I formulated, my reactions to the players' responses and my interpretation of the meanings attributed by the players to their experiences. It also gave me and the players a basis for mutual trust. Several players thanked me for my interest in their experiences of being and becoming an elite football player.

Some players commented on the nature of my questions or were interested in my personal motivations for undertaking research on women's football. These comments and questions contributed to my awareness of the embodied and situated character of knowledge production and also sharpened the data analysis. Without doubt my gender identification has influenced the research procedure. Like any other encounter, an interview is a social situation and demands that the researcher adopts a 'responsible' attitude towards this relation. While I cannot know how my interviewees would have responded to me if I had been a man, what I did experience is that the interviewees felt encouraged and safe to speak

2 In delineating the themes, I followed the insights of Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, in: Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999

about their gendered experiences when I shared some of mine and expressed sympathy and showed understanding. As I wanted the interviewees to construct their own narratives, I did of course not speak at length about my own experiences. I can only speculate about the role of my ethnic background in the research process. Like the overall majority of the interviewees, I am white.

Unfortunately for the reasons discussed above, issues relating to race and ethnicity could not be sufficiently explored with the interviewees. There is thus a risk that this research positions white women's football players as the 'universal' or at least 'paradigmatic' subject. I am mindful about this risk, which in fact haunts gender and sports studies in general, as in these inquiries gender and ethnicity tend to be studied in isolation, each constituting a separate field of enquiry (Ratna, 2011; Scraton, 2005). What must however be emphasised is the fundamental role gender plays in the organisation of football. First of all, in the past women were denied access to the sport. Secondly, as in elite sports more generally, competitions are still distributed into men's and women's competitions.

I can also only speculate about the role of physical ability in the research process. In an obvious manner elite sports celebrate physical abilities. Would the interviewees have responded differently if I were visibly disabled? I cannot tell. I would, however, have faced a great many more obstacles and barriers in gaining access to the field had I been, for instance, reduced in my mobility. I jumped from train to train, bus to bus, got lost in the middle of nowhere, slipped on wet grassland, got stuck at night and hitchhiked.

As the detailed and lengthy discussion of the data in section 1.2 of this chapter suggests, the interviews yielded rich data. Even as regards issues of race and ethnicity, their limited occurrence in the interview materials might on its own be instructive. It might seem that this thesis could have done more with the data. However, it is precisely the data that dictate the route this thesis takes. As will be made fully clear, a key part of the data concerns the insistent references to sacrifice. In so far as it is any researcher's obligation to take the data of their research as seriously as possible, this anomaly required my utmost attention. There is no denying that many further studies can be envisaged on the basis of this data, but for the scope of this thesis, I had to prioritise the most conspicuous part of the data.

1.1.4 Structure of the analysis

With the interviewees' permission all the interviews were recorded. The records were manually transcribed by me, which took around 6 hours per hour of recording. The advantage of manually transcribing the data was that it enabled me to become familiar with the data from an early stage of the research process. Initially, I alternated between data collection and analysis, allowing for both a first reading of the data and a sharpened focus in subsequent interviews (for a concise discussion of the importance of 'contant comparison', that is alternation between data collection and analysis, see: Boeije, 2010, pp. 83-85). The interviews were conducted in Dutch. Because of time constraints, I only translated the

excerpts presented in this thesis into English. It goes without saying that every translation comes with deformations and alterations. I have translated these excerpts to the best of my abilities being attentive to tone and subtleties. As the excerpts only make sense in their larger context, that is prior comments and questions, or the interview as a whole, I am however confident, that possible mistranslations have not impacted the research in any significant way.

Initially I used a software programme for the analysis of the data. While data analysis programmes clearly have several advantages, I very much felt that the data analysis would benefit from manual data coding. At the first level of coding, that is 'open coding', distinct categories were found in the data, which subsequently formed the basic units of analysis (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). In practical terms this means that I broke the data down into different categories. I used different coloured highlights to distinguish the categories. For instance, as the interviewees consistently talked about gender difference, each time an interviewee mentioned gender difference or something related to gender, I used the same colour. Hence, gender difference would become a category.

Then during the second level of coding, that is 'axial coding', I first of all used the distinct codes to reread the transcripts to ascertain that the codes sufficiently covered the data (Boeije, 2010, p. 108). Secondly, I analysed the relation between the diverse categories and made distinctions between main and subcategories. To examine these relations, I asked myself some questions, such as the following: what conditions caused or influenced these categories? what was the social-political context? and what are the associated effects or consequences? Of particular importance here were contextual differences between the experiences of former and current elite players. As stated above, it was only in 1971 that the Dutch football association enshrined women's football in its regulations and in 1979 that it allowed membership to girls under the age of 16. Some former elite players didn't enjoy today's facilities, neither was there a scouting apparatus, such as current players are familiar with, in place. In the presentation of the data, references are made to these contextual differences. Bringing into focus contextual differences enabled me to familiarise myself with the differences in the experiences of different participants, but also with their continuities. Deliberately, I did not choose a comparative research design. First of all because the age between the so-called former and current players did not always differ substantially. Secondly, some of the former and current players even trained or played international matches together. As such it would have been impossible to identify 'hard' criteria for comparison.

Finally, during the 'selective coding phase', but already initiated by the process of axial coding, I re-confirmed the selection of both core and subcategories or themes (Boeije, 2010, pp. 114-117). This selection resulted in the delineation of three superordinate and 15 subordinate themes.

1.2 Overview of the data and key findings

1.2.1 Major results of the coding analysis of the interviews

Table 1 presents the major results of the coding analysis of the interviews conducted with former and present elite women's football players. The table shows three superordinate and 15 subordinate categories emerging from the analysis of the experiences of elite women's football players. The superordinate categories include 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice'. The table also indicates that six subcategories are associated with the major category 'high performance', seven with the 'gender policing' and two with the major category 'sacrifice'. All players discussed the superordinate categories 'high performance' and 'gender policing' and the overall majority 'sacrifice'. However no individual player discussed all the 15 categories in describing their experiences of being and becoming an elite women's football player.

Table 1. Major categories of the experiences of women's football players.

Major categories	Associated concepts
High performance	Culture of competition, Working attitude, Structures of control, Public expectations and surveillance concerning performances, Fragility and uncertain nature of football career, Post football plans
Gender Policing	Youth experience, Club culture, Gender identity, Negative view of Femininity, Sexualisation, Female Apologetic, Cynicism and self-protection.
Sacrifice	Football versus real-life values, Disempowerment

The dominant category referred to in the interview is 'high performance' and includes descriptions, interpretations and assumptions on what it takes and means to take part in and succeed in high performance sport. The focus on high performance most emphasizes: (a) culture competitiveness, (b) working attitude and (c) the fragility and uncertain nature of a football career. As Table 1 indicates, three other categories referring to high performance are also elaborated on by the players, however less frequently and not by all the players. One of these categories is future plans and refers to post football career plans. This category is not elaborated on by former elite football players and nor by a few current players still at the start of their football career.

The second irreducible category referred to in the interviews is 'gender policing'. Here the players' personal language reflects descriptions, interpretations and assumptions about the role of gender in the context of their experiences of being and becoming a football player. The focus on the role of gender most emphasize: (a) youth experiences, (b) gender identity and (c) negative view of femininity. However as Table 1 indicates, four other categories referring to the role of gender are also elaborated on by the players, albeit less frequently. Two of these categories are female apologetic and cynicism/self-protection. I use these categories to refer to strategies or tactics deployed to cope with the diverse forms of sexism at work in the context of football. As the subcategory 'female apologetic' refers

to a specific gendered form of behaviour, this category is distinguished from cynicism/self-protection, which in themselves are not gendered. Overall, these findings support the view that the policing of gender forms a substantial part of the experiences of being and becoming an elite football player.

The third irreducible category identified is 'sacrifice' and refers to the willingness of players to make sacrifices in terms of health, social life, financial security and future prospects for the sake of career advancement in sport. This category reveals that making sacrifices is part and parcel of the lives of the players. However, the testimonies of the players show something curious is going on. In the reflections and elaboration classified under the category 'Football versus real-life values' we see first of all that the players describe their experiences of being and becoming an elite football player as being characterised by contradictions between divergent commitments and values. More particularly we see that the players describe their commitment to their sport in opposing terms to their commitment to health, financial security and social life. Secondly we see in the expressions of the players that they do not attribute equal weight to the diverse commitments and values, but by contrast attribute more weight to their commitment to football, regardless of the value or commitment that it stands in opposition with. Third, we see that the players cannot explain why this is the case. To be more precise, what we see is that the players judge their participation in football as relatively insignificant, compared to the real-life values of health, financial security and social life, but nevertheless attribute more weight to their commitment to football. The curious thing going on is thus that the players judge their participation in football as unimportant, while this participation at the same time motivates them to make sacrifices in terms of health, financial security and social life. The second category referring to sacrifice is 'disempowerment' and refers to feelings of disempowerment, induced by the players inarticulate yet complete commitment to their sport. What we see in the expressions of the players classified under this category is that the very fact that they cannot make sense of their willingness to make sacrifices in terms of health, social life and financial security, makes the players feel powerless, incapable of making sense of their own lives and of taking their life paths into their own hands.

As will be made apparent, the irreducibility of the theme of sacrifice precisely consists in that it cannot be explained in terms of real-life values. By contrast, it points to an experience of the co-existence of two scales of value: one referring to real-life objective values and one referring to the value of being immersed in football. What we on the other hand see in the descriptions, interpretations and assumptions about the meaning of taking part in and succeeding in a high performance sport and about the role of gender therein, is the experience of only one scale of value, namely one referring only to real-life objective values.

In the following section I will give a detailed presentation of the findings that emerged from the analysis of the data. Both in terms of scope and focus this presentation may seem superfluous. That is, I am well aware that the presentation demands some patience from the

reader. However, the choice of a lengthy discussion of the data has been duly considered. First of all, since I am not allowed to disclose the interview transcripts, the presentation provides a feel of what the data looks like and what kinds of people and contexts we are dealing with. Second, the detailed and lengthy discussion of the data shows that the categorisation of the data into three irreducible themes and especially the introduction of the theme of sacrifice is not artificial, but emerges naturally from the data. Important to note is also that the excerpts that I discuss within each of the 15 subordinate categories stem from different interviews.

1.2.2 Key findings 'high performance'

Culture of competition

As suggested in the previous section, one of the subthemes most frequently discussed by the players concerns football's culture of competitiveness. The majority of the players, both former and present expressed worries with the competitive culture of football. Telling is the following excerpt from an interview with a former elite player:

I am an easygoing person, but in the team, you just had to fight for your place. Sometimes even during training sessions they tried to kick me out of the field, really this happened. Fortunately, the coach would speak with the culprits. I can handle these kinds of things, but it is not really how things should be. You know, when you are pushing yourself during training and then they tackle you, or kick you in the shin, in the hope of replacing you. Those who would sit on the bench during matches were the worst. I think there is nothing wrong with competitiveness, but no, and besides I could handle it.

For some former players the competitive characteristics of elite football even continued to play a role in their post-football lives. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a former player who pursued a career as an international coach.

Well look at my self-development. I had learned that to achieve something I had to fight, to push myself and battle for my position. And that is great, it allows you to achieve things. It brought me a lot for myself as a player and as a coach trying to fan the fire in the players so they'd achieve their full potential. That energy is something that I still bring with me. But there is also a downside to it. Fighting is not always the best thing to do. But it was only later in life that I learned that. Then I understood that it is sometimes important to take a step back from your emotions. But I only learned that later in life. When I was playing football or working as a coach I was a kind of fighting machine and that became my way of life. After my football period, I followed some courses that allowed me to understand these processes and then I decided to change things. That brought me peace.

A few current elite players negotiate competitiveness in a fairly similar way:

In women's football everyone is focused on their own success and position in the field. In the changing room, people would say this or that didn't go well or is badly organised. And then I'd go the coach and tell him what we discussed. And then the coach wanted to know who had said those things. But then no one would take responsibility and then the coach would blame me. So I learned that in women's football people are selfish and only concerned with themselves and their position. I learned it is not the best thing to start friendships with your teammates. You can't really be friends with them, as you can't count on them, because they are all focused on their own position.

It is only now that I realise how selfish the world of football actually is. This week I went to the library and there I found a book by this guy who had done research on the personal characteristics of elite athletes. Well, we have always been treated as if we were extraordinary: you are so good. What I read was really about me, and I thought I am actually making a fool of myself. I know that other people will fix things for me. I recognised myself in the book and there are quite a few characteristics I want to get rid of. In the team things are really bad, they are so self-centred. That's a big difference with friends who do not play. They are much more empathetic.

The majority of the players considered the 'world of elite football' a hostile environment, dominated by a focus on personal gain and success. To a certain extent competitiveness was taken as a given, but on the condition that teammates would respect fair play. Some current players however suggested that in preparation for an important match some solidarity could also be found:

The more matches I play the better I become and then my contract also gets better. Receiving a better contract reminds you of your motivations for engaging in elite sports. Everyone in the team works for herself and has her own ambitions. But now we have a common goal, which is winning the competition.

Working attitude

While the players in general lament the competitive nature of 'the world of elite football', a winning mind-set, self-control, working hard and putting the team above oneself are considered key characteristics of a good working attitude. Articulations of what constitutes a good working attitude were also found in the interviews with coaches. A good illustration of their points of view is to be found in the following excerpts, each from different interviews:

The national team flew charter to that country, for those princesses should not be disturbed. But really, we are not there yet. Who is going to disturb them, at best they receive some positive responses, like 'good luck girls.' Organising a charter is something you only do in men's football. They only started with that when the boys really needed it. During my

training camps I literally rented bikes. That is much better. They must go through tough spots and experience being in deep shit. Only then they realise what it is all about. I really believe that is the way to success.

All that matters during matches is that you achieve your goals. And, injuries are just part the game. Sometimes you have to make an exception, but only when there are good reasons to take measurements, for instance when someone just returned from a knee injury. That's something different than a player who is fit and just fine.

They are a bit spoiled you know. There are players that say, please organise this or that for me. But organise this for me, fuck off. Everything is organised perfectly fine for you. You should go for it and take responsibility. And you know, these sort of persons, you recognise them from the start. But I am really allergic to that. You have to work hard. Talent may be given to you, but what matters is what you do with it. And only the best ones make it.

Lots of things are organised for today's players, the conditions are much better. But there are still players who still mess things up. But they are talented and could develop into really great players. Mentally, there is a top, but also an absolute top.

For these coaches, a player who possesses a good attitude is someone who always works hard, has a will to win, is constantly looking to improve their level of performance and is willing to play with pain. Many of the current players who I interviewed made reference to 'hard work', a 'winning mind', 'self-control' and 'putting the team above oneself'. The importance of a 'winning mind' is clearly expressed in the following excerpts.

There are people who can't deal with competitiveness. Those are the ones that drop out of the national team. But they are also clear about that, saying that it is not for them. If the drive to win is not part of your nature or character, things become really difficult. But I really feel the need to win. And the advantage is that the more pressure I feel, the better I become. I perform much better, because I want to be the best. If you resign yourself to the situation you won't achieve anything. For instance when you are selected for the National team, but not granted minutes to play and are still happy. That is not the mentality needed to achieve things.

It is not always easy to deal with defeats, sometimes it is more difficult. When announcements are made about who will be given a spot in the team, 11 players are happy and all the others are disappointed. But they should be disappointed, because if you're not disappointed you accept the situation. That is not how it works, you just need to learn to deal with those things. There are two options, either you say, 'well then I quit', or you start focusing on improving yourself.

Next to a winner's mentality, various players mention self-control as a key characteristic of a successful elite football player:

Right now we don't have to play matches for 2 weeks as the national team is abroad. What you then see is that people start training in the gym, because they then say they are in pain. And as soon they have to play a match they again start training outside. I don't think that is good. I also train outside, even when it rains, and push myself.

It's not only about training 6 times a week. There is much more discipline to it. You have to be strict with your diet, but also train your strength. You shouldn't go to clubs, or drink, or smoke. There are many more things that you should or shouldn't do if you aim to perform like an athlete.

What emerges from these excerpts is not only the importance of self-control, but also one's willingness to play in pain:

I always keep on playing. Even when I broke my nose. We were playing against Germany and already after 10 minutes I broke my nose, but I just kept on playing.

Also indicative is the following remark from a former coach:

During a match, the only thing that matters is how you pass the time and how you achieve your goals. Sustaining an injury is then just part of the game, unless there are underlying reasons. If someone just recovered from a cruciate ligament injury, you deal with that player differently than a player that is fit.

Another characteristic of a good working attitude is working hard. Exemplary are the following articulations of current players:

If people think it's unfair that they have to sit on the bench, they lack the means of critically assessing their own performances. Because you don't sit on the bench for nothing. If that makes you angry, or you make negative remarks about someone else's performances, then that is just not right. If you want to play you have to push and improve yourself.

If you don't go to the gym, for strength training, I understand that. But then again there is this but, for if you're then not given time to play, you should not complain. Because you know that you're not working hard enough.

Expressed in these excerpts is not only that working hard is considered a key characteristic of a good working attitude, but they also suggest the importance of accepting one's defeat. Something also elaborated on in the following excerpt:

If someone on the national team turns out to be better than I am, then I have to accept that. Of course I would find it hard, as I have always been allowed to play. It would be very difficult to have to sit on the bench, because you also hope to perform well for the national team.

All the excerpts presented so far indicate that it is necessary for players to possess a 'right' working attitude. However an adjusted player not only possesses the right attitude, but also demonstrates and proves to others that she is fitted for the job. Consequently players that fail to live up these demands, risk serious punishments. Particularly telling are the following testimonies from current players.

I played two matches for the national team. But the coach and I didn't really get along. That is also the reason why my international career was put on hold. Perhaps I wasn't myself such a good girl. I must say I found it really hard to deal with all those rules and regulations. From the outset it looks of course amazing, playing for the national team. But there are so many rules and regulations, you have to go to sleep and have your dinner at such and such time. That blights your life and there are so many things you are not allowed to do. We also received a code of conduct on paper. The football organisation and the coach have these views on how things should be done and most people just obey, but I would start discussion and said that I didn't agree with the rules, because of this or that. But, no they cannot handle criticism.

The coach of the national team sent me off, because she thought that I wasn't serious enough. Well, that was fine with me. I was 18 and I found it really great to be part of the national selection and I also played matches for the national team under 19. But you know, when games were lost and someone makes a joke, I just have to laugh. But then the coach didn't think I was taking it seriously enough, so I was sent off.

What is expressed by these two players is that there is an expectation of obedience: 'I wasn't myself such a good girl', 'on inappropriate moments when you know that should actually keep your mouth shut'.

Structures of control

As already suggested in the excerpts presented above, elite women's football is characterised by an authoritarian management style. Coaches, but also managers corporeally control the players and promote an attitude of obedience in them. Players' lives are, however, not only constrained by strict codes of conduct, but also by availability, daily training timetables and diet. As suggested in the following excerpt:

There are all these obligations. It is not only playing football, but then you have to show up for dietary advice, or an activity with the team, or another obligatory meeting, or a meeting with the sponsors. Last year they also organised a new year's reception and I didn't show up for that and I got reprimanded.

The majority of the current players combine football with work or education. Exceptions are those players that can make a living out of their footballing career. For many players combining a 5-day training regime with a part-time job or studies provokes tensions inside and outside the football field:

Here at the club they demand from you to be flexible, but it doesn't work like that at my job.

At 6 VWO I wasn't feeling really well, but not that bad actually. So I played the match and the next day I had an exam, an official state exam, but I woke up and I felt extremely sick. Thus, well, my mother called the school to explain that I was sick. That was a thing, because it was an official exam. And I do not get sick that often, but then. At school they were of the opinion that I had become sick because I had played a match the day before. So they decided to fail me and give me a 1. Obviously I was far from amused and at home we decided not to let it go. We filed a suit against the school, and in the end I won. I was given the opportunity of a resit and received a very good mark.

At this moment I feel that I am failing both the club and the school. I can't give myself 100%, only 90% and that doesn't feel right. Because of that I feel that I am failing both the club and the school, actually I am failing everyone. So I should start making some decisions.

In addition to availability and daily training timetable, players' lives are also constrained in terms of diet and body measurements:

The national team very strictly monitors you. Our weight and fat percentage are constantly measured. And then they evaluate the results, this is ok, that is accepted or that is too much. They are very strict in that. It's not that consequences immediately follow. They give you 2 or 3 months, but after 6 months they would say there is a limit to it, in putting energy in you, because you're not doing anything with it.

My level of fat was too high and for me it was difficult to lower it. I've been quite concerned with that. Sometimes I had to show up for a meeting to discuss how things were going, and that my fat percentage should be lowered. That would improve my performances. Well my fat percentage really should be lowered. But actually all that didn't make me better. The monitoring didn't make me better. Because, you kind of know when to expect these measurements and then I would try hard to lose weight, but then I didn't manage to do so. At least that's how things were for me. Every time I thought now I am really going to lose weight, the opposite was the case.

It is noteworthy that for some current players body measurement and dietary norms are just part and parcel of being and becoming an elite player, while others would critically reflect on these forms of control.

Public expectations and surveillance concerning performance

The majority of the players expressed that at an early age their 'dream job' was to become a professional footballer. For some, the realisation of this dream was of symbolic value. In particular playing for one of the internationally renowned Dutch clubs, was considered to be of great value. Other players however, considered playing for a well-known club an honour, but not a matter of prestige:

It's an honour to play for this club. Sometimes when I see a small club flag in a car, then I think, ohh, that's my club. But it's never like, 'You know I play football and that I am allowed to play football at my own level that is something really great.' But that I play at this club, a well-known club has little meaning to me. But, yes, if I see a little flag, I think well it's actually nice. But it's not that I am outspoken about it, I hardly ever tell people that I play for this club.

For all players, playing in the national squad is invested with prestige and symbolic value. Playing matches for large audiences or 'before the eyes of the whole nation' influenced their attitude towards the game. With the aim of ensuring a balance between what the public wanted and what the player could offer, those players granted a place on the national team are challenged to manage the expectations of the public:

Playing for the national team is a bit different. I feel more pressure ahead of international competitions. I am not sure, but the stakes are higher when you play an international match. Naturally you want to deliver, and prior to matches you are a bit tense and have a certain focus. I also experience some tensions here during matches, but in a different way than during international matches. Many more people watch you and the stakes are higher.

I once had to play a match, in 2008, or perhaps in 2009, in any case during the 2008/2009 season. We lost 6-0 and the stadium was completely full, I think with around 30,000 people. And then already during the first 15 minutes I made the worst mistake of my life. It was so bad, really a nightmare. I can still visualise what happened. I was devastated for quite a while. We lost by 6-0 and of course I was not to blame for everything. But because of my early mistake we started with 1-0. We started that badly because of me. So many people had watched it, in the stadium or at home in front of the T.V. I was really devastated.

For injured players or players recovering from an injury that had taken them out of the game for a considerable amount of time, the key challenge to expectation management is related to public criticism. Particularly international players working on their 'comeback' on the national team, or who sat on the bench during matches, or were granted only a few minutes to play, expressed difficulties in negotiating public demands.

Well right now, things are getting better. But it's not always fun. You know, people don't know about your situation and then you hear, you are sitting on the bench, or you're not

in shape. But then I say, I have been out of the game for 8 months and that the coach already asks me back is a very positive sign. And then they say, 'oh, you have been out of the game for so long'.

Particularly telling is the response to this player's performance by a self-proclaimed women's football expert in the context of an informal meeting, who was however unaware of the player's condition.

She doesn't impress me. Have you seen her? Her performance is unsatisfactory. I must tell you that I can't believe that the coach selected her. She will not bring us where we have to be.

Fragility and the uncertain nature of a football career

The majority of the current players expressed concerns about undesired endings of their footballing practice. First of all, in particular players aiming to take part in the national team, or already granted a place, expressed that they felt subjected to the whims of coaches. Take for instance the following excerpt from a player who was in her own words sent away by the coach of a club:

She asked me to join her team. And as we had already experienced working together, I said well I'll do that, but I need to be sure that things will be different. And she said, yes, what happened in the past stays in the past. But then already after one month she told me to leave. I was really angry you know. Sometimes I can be a bit naïve, I just believe what they say. I am like that, also with meetings. I told you that I would be here at 11 o'clock, and then I just need to be here at 11 o'clock. 11 o'clock is 11 o'clock for me. So I needed to start protecting myself from this kind of thing. I misjudged her. She just sent me away.

Or from a player aiming to take part on the national team:

I was invited by a club abroad to play there for 3 months. I very strongly felt that I should accept the invitation, it had been on my list for so long by then. I told the coach that I would go abroad for 3 months to develop myself and then not only for football, but also for myself. The coach told me that he was happy for me and also told me that he would call me to make arrangements for the championship. And then I said to him, fine I'll hear from you. But you know I never received a call. And then I received this e-mail that I should return my equipment. Of course I never did that.

However, uncertainties in footballing careers are predominantly caused by injuries. All players noted that they had suffered from injuries. Some players were recovering from an injury at the time of the interview. The overall majority of the players stated that injuries represented a threat to their careers. Indicative are the following testimonies:

In women's football, maybe you know this, but lots of women suffer from cruciate ligament injuries, actually I can't name a girl that didn't suffer from a cruciate ligament injury. I would find that really awful. But it can happen to anyone. I train and do the best I can, I do everything to prevent it, but no matter how hard you train, or how fit you are it can happen to anyone. I try to comfort myself thinking like that. I really do everything that is in my power, but anyone can get seriously injured.

I had three operations. But that was at the start, lately things have been going pretty well. Naturally I was extremely frustrated. I had just had an operation and then they started with selections. I was worried, because I couldn't take part in selection matches. It's really frustrating for an athlete, because you want to practise the game every day, especially if you don't have hope of a quick recovery, things don't get better and you don't know when you will be capable of playing again.

Things are a bit different with selections for the national squad. There it's like: 'If you're injured, well too bad, we'll take someone else instead of you.' On the Dutch national team, you are basically a number.

You play because you want to and to achieve something. But at the same time you have to realise that it can be over just like that. For this reason education is also important, in case something goes wrong, or the circumstances are such that you can no longer achieve anything.

Quite often I thought about quitting, as I was afraid things would never get better. I was quite depressed. It still goes through my mind, but then I thought about what to do after finishing my studies, for what if I don't get better? Now, though, it seems that I will recover. Of course I've suffered from cruciate ligaments injuries and they are something that take between seven and eight months and, if all goes well, you can at least return. But with this injury, things are much more complex. It can take a few months or a few years. Little is known about it. That is the most difficult part, that I don't know what to expect. Sometimes it was alright, but a few days later the pain would return and then I'd be super unhappy. That was the most difficult part, the uncertainty.

Post football plans

As previously mentioned, the majority of current players, combine football with work or education. The exceptions are those players who can make a living out of their football career. The majority of players that combined football with studies or educational programmes 'organised' school around their football. Quite a few of them expressed feelings of regret related to the limited investments in their education. Exemplary is the following excerpt:

Looking back, I wish things had turned out differently with my studies. I studied physiotherapy and it took me a few years longer, because I played two European championships and well, that takes a lot of time. And for me it was easy, I could decide to skip some courses

and focus on football. But if I look back at all those classes that I missed and all the difficulties to get through exams, I regret that.

The difficulties experienced in negotiating both the demands of elite football and those of study programmes or future careers and the uncertain nature of football made a few players decide to quit the game by the end of the season.

You are the first person I am telling the news. But I decided to quit. It's just too much. I have to go on, make a career and earn a living. I have a new goal and that is finding a job. I'm doing an internship right now and I hope to convince them to hire me in the future. But right now I am not certain that I fully meet expectations. That makes me upset, because I really want to show them what I am worth. But that's the reason why I decided to quit.

As I am now a bit older, you realize there are more things in life. My girlfriend and I started with this aim to have a baby. I've always wanted children. We talked about the right moment to start, as I still play football. But we've been dating for five years now and this is the right moment to start with it. So I'm concerned with quite different things now. So I have decided that I'll quit when I'm pregnant.

At 2 o'clock I always have to tell my colleagues, sorry but I need to go. But then my colleagues continue working and that doesn't feel good. Lately I am also suffering a bit more from injuries. Perhaps my body is resisting. But, yes, I'm done with it.

Right now things are going pretty well. And with the national team, I could continue. But eventually I don't think it's worth it. I can explain to myself that I tried it, and that I am capable of it and that I am good enough, but it's not what I desire. That's what I realized this year. It's just not for me to set everything aside for football. In the end my social life and my studies are more important. Thus next year I'll start with a Master programme abroad and then I'll quit football.

Predominantly the level of education received, but also one's socio-economic background would influence their assessment of the 'value' of the game, as well as their decisions to continue or quit the game. The following testimonies are telling:

I am actually happy that my parents always reminded me of the importance of education. Looking back, I am really happy with that. Some girls playing in the national team completed their studies, but never had the chance to start a career outside football. And the longer you wait the more difficult that becomes. But at a certain moment football is done. Lots of younger girls on my team quit school or their studies because they find it too hard to combine the two. But I am really happy that I finished my studies.

There was a match of the under-19 National team during my exams. They arranged that I could take my exams at the embassy. But I wanted to do this special programme combining economics and law and in order to get accepted my grades needed to be really good. Thus, I said, one way or another, taking my exams there will influence my results. Football is great and all that, and it's also great that I can take part in a European championship, but no I won't join them. So I didn't go, I took my exams here and received good marks.

In contrast to these footballers, players who make a living out of their footballing are concerned with their post-football career. Yet they do not attribute the same level of urgency to this. The following excerpt is exemplary:

Lots of people confront me with my future: 'What if your football career is over, because you can't continue playing the game? What are your plans and shouldn't you already make arrangements, or take some courses?' Continuously people ask me 'But what are your plans for the future?.' But I don't know, I'll see. At this moment I still play and I do not feel that I should worry that much. Of course I do think about it. But I'll see. I am not in that much of a hurry. I earn enough and I don't have to work besides football. And later, well I can work the rest of my life. Thus I'm not really motivated to take courses at this moment.

1.2.3 Key findings: 'gender policing'

Youth experiences

All the players interviewed started playing football at a young age. All the current players started playing football in an organised form. During their childhood years a few of the former footballers played informally, as they were not allowed to take part in organised football. These early experiences were generally in informal spaces within local neighbourhoods. In talking about their first experiences with football, the former players recounted the significance of the street, but also grassland as the spaces where they began their footballing careers.

Of course, I started playing football on the streets. I come from a working-class neighbourhood. When I grew up, kids would only play outside, really outside and I loved playing outside. I loved all sports, but football the best.

I was born in the countryside and I started playing football with my brother and boys from the neighbourhood. I have some tiny black and white photos that portray me at the age of 5/6 and you see me wearing a pleated skirt and a ball, very proud. From that moment onwards we always played football. There was, of course, plenty of space, because of the rural area. I've just always played football. I also know that from my diary. I played football every single day, in the morning, at noon. Before school, after school, always. I played with boys from the neighbourhood. My neighbours, I think, were a family with eight children and six were boys. My brother played football, my sisters too. So it was a kind of football family.

In these quotes, former players reflect almost nostalgically on their earliest experiences with football. For the majority of them, leaving the relatively safe space of their neighbourhood came at a social price.

My parents really enjoyed it; they were fine with it. I never heard something along the lines, 'you are a girl and therefore you are not allowed to play football.' But then I went to primary school and there I encountered the first obstacle. At primary school you play football during each lunch break, you form groups and there is no real distinction between girls and boys. That's the great part at that age, there is no distinction. I encountered the distinction when older groups started with organised school football and I couldn't join them, there I found out that I was a girl.

My brothers were playing football and I stood behind the side lines and then I ran along the lines during the game, fantasising I took part in the game. At a certain moment the parents found out about my wish to play football, so they made space for me to run around the field.

No one came up with the idea to let me play football. My parents found it very sad for me, but well that was the just the way things went and with school football you were also not allowed to participate. I was allowed to take part in training sessions, but not in matches. Thus, always separated. And wearing a skirt was also a hindrance, because boys made me fall on the floor, on the ground to see your underpants, so everything that had to do with being a girl was an obstacle for me. When I went to high school I played football with a can during breaks and this guy who was a class above me, literally told me that my place was on the bench. I wanted to play football, but I had to sit on the bench. At PE classes girls and boys were separated and we had separate dressing rooms, so I thought it must be for that reason. But when I entered the gym I heard boys playing football above me, for six years. It took five years for someone to ask me to go upstairs to play football. That was in the 5th grade. Things were different back then.

When playing unofficial football within the relatively safe space of their neighbourhoods for these players gender differences were not really significant. Being denied access to organised school football made them aware of gender normalisations. One of the former players, desiring to take part in organised football, had her hair cut off as that would make her look like a boy and thus allow her to take part in the game:

And then I got to this age where you can play at F level and I really wanted that. But then girls were not allowed to play football. So I made sure I had a short haircut. I told the hairdresser to cut my hair so short that people wouldn't see I was a girl. My parents always acted as if it was the most normal thing in the world. I enjoyed it and my parents have always supported me.

While current elite players didn't encounter legal restrictions in participating in organised football, nevertheless the reflections on their youth experiences highlight the tenuous position of girls within the space of organised football. They were insiders, yet marginalised others, as highlighted by the reflections of players that took part in mixed competitions:

I was around six and occasionally you would see another girl. But no, it was not normal. Every week, or at least very often, opponents and their parent said things like, look that is a girl, that is weird. It's going to be an easy game today. And later, I heard people guessing my gender, is it a girl or a boy? And when I did something well, they would say, she looks like a boy. Those kinds of typical things. I will never forget. I was quite frustrated about the whole thing.

There was a coach who initially didn't want me on his team. We played at national level and then the guys were so strong and big. But then the following year the board decided to give me a place on that team, but they said they could not be held responsible for injuries. Later the coach apologised and said that he'd never seen someone that tough and that he was really happy with me. But damn, I always had to prove myself first. And then there were the opponents and their parents, shouting 'it's a girl.' I had a good time with those guys. But looking back, I don't know if I would recommend it to my daughter, if I have one.

Club culture

The majority of the former players reported feeling under threat at football clubs, as the extent they could make use of facilities was subject to change and much depended on the benevolence of boards.

It was a continuous comparison, between men and women's football. Between men and women and that was the fight. They received that and we only that and when we wanted to train more, it wasn't possible. Or at the club, I am thinking of club x. We were training somewhere in a corner, with only space for seven against seven and the men played on the main training field. They played on field one and we played on field two. We had those balls, clothing and facilities and they had that, you know. That was always a fight. I know that. So there were always differences in what counts as important and what not and that is still the situation. Not only between men and women, but also between the teams. The first men's team is the most important. Even where a former teammate of mine for instance coaches now. The men play fifth grade and the women play in the first division, and still they have to fight to be able to train on the first field.

Of interest is that one of the former players not only discussed unfair distribution of resources, but also said that she experienced difficulties with team mates who explicitly called themselves feminist, or openly displayed sexuality.

Some would call themselves feminists, but for me that was not a thing. I'm not sure how to explain this, but they were right, sometimes. I mean men and women are equal. I mean

the one is not better than the other or should receive more than the other. At the football organisation men had it all. I do understand it if you fight for that, but not when you fight for feminism. That a guy would bully me, because I am a woman, I never experienced that. So I don't need to fight for that. What did hurt me in women's football and that happened quite often in the past, when you went to a match, there were groups of girls kissing each other on the field. Then I thought I don't do that with my boyfriend, either, you can also do that later, why does that need to happen on the field? They were challenging others, they wanted to show and prove themselves. That bothered me at times.

It was, however, not only former players, but also current coaches and players who felt they were being mistreated by club managers and coaches. Recall that the majority of women's football clubs make use of the facilities of their host clubs, that is stadium, gym, training fields etc. and are dependent on the benevolence of managers and coaches of the host club. The following, rather long quotes, are exemplary:

Just look at the struggle here at the club. There were five directors and they all started with, 'let's have a chat' and then they said that they had some affinities with women's football. But eventually men's football is their core business, women are just dangling out there. And if times are good with the men and if the men's coach and the director support you, you can stay, but if they don't like women's football or things go wrong then they dump you and your team. Actually that happened, but then someone else jumped in. If it wasn't for him we wouldn't be sitting here right now, then this club wouldn't have existed, well that's obviously a shame. At times I talk about it with the head of the foundation. But, the men's team got a new trainer and I just made some arrangements with the old one. The new trainer immediately started to make demands about training dates and times. The head of the foundation assured me the new men's trainer had to adjust to the situation, but I really worry, we are just secondhand goods. Once we came to train with the team, and I am always extremely early and then I saw men on the field, and we could not train. At such moments I feel so slighted. Then I said, we will simply not train here, we'll go somewhere else. They said it was a matter of starting up communication, but it happened three times a week. I've had so many bad experiences and struggles to overcome the past years, it's really difficult'.

Well, we have a new coach for the men's team and he counts us for nothing, and he shows this. Yesterday we had a meeting with the team and he just runs into the changing room. When the men's team is having a meeting, we are, so to speak, not even allowed to breathe in the hallway, because that might possibly disturb them. Yet when we have a meeting, they just knock and bang on the door and when they need something from the changing room and yes we share the same changing room. For example, yesterday we had a meeting and this coach just walked through the room. Afterwards my coach asked us what we thought about that. So, I said, you mean about that man. Everybody started laughing and I know it's not always the wisest thing to do, but if you do not allow me, than I won't allow you.

He just has something against women's football, but I do not know what. He doesn't allow us anything and hates women's football. I really explode from this kind of thing. Every single time I come across him I need to show myself off, because you are not the boss and we also play football.

Noteworthy is how the coach describes herself and her team as secondhand goods and the current player is certain that the coach of the men's team hates women's football. These words reflect the tenuous position of women's football players, occupying privileged positions which have not been reserved for them, and for which they are not the norm. Violating the space players and coaches regard as their own, the coaches and managers of men's teams make clear that the presence of women at the club is not uncontested. In this regard, the following incident is worth mentioning. One afternoon during my week of participant observation, I observed the coach and the assistant coach developing the strategy for the upcoming match, making use of a board and pawns, which all took place in the women's team's skybox. At a certain moment one of the facility employees entered the room followed by a group of potential (male) sponsors, apologizing for the fact that the other skyboxes were closed. He showed them the room and informed them about all the conveniences, the great atmosphere and the opportunities for business networking. Perhaps unaware of the presence of the coaches, he made the telling remark: 'while the men watch the game their wives can make themselves comfortable with some wine at the bar, because after all women do not really like football.' The coaches did not seem to have heard the facility employee and because I didn't want to add fuel to the flames, I decided not to start a conversation about the incident. The incident however makes clear not only that stereotypical images still persist, but it also points to the marginal position the women's team occupies within the confines of the club. Also telling in this regard are the following quotes:

Sometimes the guys make an effort to watch a match.

Here at the club it is okay to greet the men and sometimes they are up for a little chat.

In general, current players report that their male counterparts hardly show interest in them or in the achievements of their team. Receiving recognition—in the ethical sense of the term—by male players would then be a source of excitement. This however, clearly indicated that women's football players reproduce stereotypical ideas about what counts as a good or successful football player and put into question their own belonging in the space they occupy.

Gender identity

Issues relating to self-perception of gender identity were a strong theme for the players. The majority of both former and current players talked about themselves as being other than female or feminine, particularly when describing their childhood experiences.

I have two brothers and at home we always played together and with one of my brothers I was also on the same team. I always wanted to be one of them, I didn't want to be a girl. I wanted to make the same jokes, talk about the same things and play football at the same level. I just wanted to be one of them, I didn't want there to be a difference.

When I was a child I was almost a boy. I was always outside, playing tricks and all that. Not only football, but also climbing trees. I just did what the boys did.

Once at school I raised my hand when they asked who would rather be a boy. I raised my hand, but then why? Well, as a girl you can't become a professional football player. I knew that that was impossible at that time.

In these excerpts, the players reflect on their gender identity, via what they didn't want to be, that is a girl. They distance themselves from anything that they define as feminine, something made very explicit in the following reflections of former players:

When I went to primary school, being a girl became an obstacle since I wasn't allowed to play with the boys.

At the end of primary school, things became clear to be. The girls reached puberty, but I didn't. I could delay that till I was 15 years old, then I got my first period. I didn't want it, and I managed to delay it as long as possible. But then things became unsafe. I could no longer be myself.

The majority of the players reported that they still 'struggle' with their gender identity. Exemplary are the following quotes:

Actually I think that I dress myself not as I'd like to. Sometimes I think that it is actually quite strange. I'm not sure if I dress myself the way I do because I've learnt that football and femininity don't go hand in hand, or because it is my dream to be a bit more feminine.

I'd like to be a role model, but not only for girls, also for boys. So, in that I prefer not to make a difference. I can imagine that I could be a good example of how boys and girls can work together and achieve something together. But, I wouldn't like to be a role model for girls only, I am bit against that. Then it's like, you know only girls and women, that's not what I want.

My friends sometimes tell me that I'm a feminist lesbian, because I am very sensitive to gender inequality and always had to fight in the past. But I fall much more easily in love with boys. It's why I found the role division between men and women very difficult to cope with.

For the players, their own gender identity was a point of continuous negotiation. One player referred to a 'struggle' with her ethnic background:

X: When things get difficult, I am someone that very easily bends her head down. I think I have become stronger in everyday life because of football, because it brought me a lot of structure. Because yes, you have to train in the morning and then the next morning. You have to be present all the time and before it was like: 'I'll go where the wind takes me'. I have had years like that and perhaps it is also because of my non-Dutch blood. I am still trying to cope with that, with my Dutch side and my non-Dutch side actually.

N: Because you're half Dutch, half...

X: Yeah, half Dutch, half non-Dutch. My structure is clearly from my mother. And my perseverance.

N: Your father is non Dutch?

X: Yes. They live day by day and people enjoy the moment. Dutch people are more organised. They work towards a goal. With foreigners this is not always the case. They are, what do you call it...? So that is actually what I am trying to cope with. But that is what I get here at the club, structure and perseverance if things turn out to be difficult. So yes, that has been of great importance to my life.

The demands of elite football are here contrasted with a particular ethnic background, which clearly says something about racist portrayals of elite athletes.

Negative view of femininity

A recurring theme in the life histories of both former and current players is the negative evaluation of femininity. Something already apparent in the description of their childhood experiences, 'everything that had to do with girls or girlish things was an obstacle for me', 'when I went to primary school, being a girl became an obstacle since I wasn't allowed to play with the boys'. In order to participate in football and to gain acceptance, the women defined themselves in opposition to femininity and regarded girlish things as a negative aspect of their identity. This is perhaps unsurprising as allegedly typical feminine qualities are not valued in sport. As a result of the negative confrontations with their own gendered selves, they bestowed preference upon masculinity, boys and men. Quite striking is the following excerpt from an interview with a former international female coach. In this quote the coach reflects on the relation between femininity and the performances of the national men's team:

In the Netherlands we live in a feminine culture. Germany and France are masculine cultures, the emancipation goes via women, who take up more masculine values. They are product-oriented, goal-oriented, and the more the pressure, the more they are willing to improve their performances. But, Dutch culture is feminine, the emancipation goes via men, they take up feminine values and as a result of this women in the Netherlands are peace builders, more concerned with harmony and less goal-oriented. Men start to act as carers, an example is daddy day. Or take for instance the last European Championship.

It was really awful that the wife of one of the players lost her baby. And then the whole team paid a visit to that woman in the hospital. But all that caring and all those feelings. Then they decided to wear mourning bands during the match. And then they were totally knocked out, because they were busy with each other and not focused on their performance. In Germany this would never happen. They'd say, 'dude, you know what, you need to be with your wife, not on the team.' He would have been kicked out of the team, to make sure the rest of the team is focused. But Germany is a masculine culture.

For this coach, characteristics often attributed to women negatively influence performances. In a similar way both former and current players articulated negative ideas about femininity.

X: There I learned to set everything aside and to completely focus on the match for 90 minutes, but before I was very easily influenced.

N: What do you mean by being influenced?

X: Well that I regressed into girlish behaviour.

N: And what does that mean, girlish behaviour?

X: Not being assertive, being passive and reactive, being nice and focus on social aspects and harmony.

N: And that is something you experienced in your team?

X: Yes, and that also impacted my performances. At a certain moment my brothers told me they would no longer watch me play, if I continued to play like that. I did everything to be part of the social circle.

I perfectly understand that people prefer men's football above women's football. Men are just much better. They are stronger, they are faster.

Sometimes, I think now it's done, shut up with all the complaints. They continue talking about minor issues for ages. Then I think, we've understood everything, everything is clear now, so shall we continue with what we were doing. With guys you don't have that. If something happens they talk about it and that's that. Sometimes I wish that I was on a men's team

Sexualisation

A recurring theme in the interviews is the (media) representation of women's football players. An often-heard opinion, even from managers is that women's football should be made more attractive to watch, as this would attract sponsors. While attractiveness can mean many things, here it is synonymous with sexiness. Women, according to managers and PR officers, would do well to wear sports clothes that were a bit sexier and preferably some make-up during photo-shoots. Some players followed this line of reasoning:

It depends on your priorities. If you want to attract more sponsors and supporters, well then the shorts should be a bit shorter and the shirts a bit tighter. From a marketing

perspective I do understand that. But on the other hand, if it's your ambition to increase the level of performance, then you have to increase the level of support systems. But, it doesn't really matter to me. I also want to look good on the field. But it's not that I think we should make a calendar. I think that's, what do you call it? Sexist.

Other players were clearly of the opinion that one's way of dress should not be considered important for the purposes of popularity.

There they play with these short shorts. But that is something we don't want here. We don't want to have to dress like that so that people will show up during matches. Perhaps there would be more supporters if they can watch sexy looking women, but it's really sad they stress that.

It is telling that these players not only challenge dominant marketing discourse, but also openly criticize the sexualisation of women in football. The following excerpts are exemplary:

It's almost dirty that people are that sexist that they can't perceive us as human beings. You don't accept someone for who she is. Because you force your opinion on them. I find that pathetic. But I must say that that is something I learned relatively late. Someone once told me she found it really upsetting that guys would catcall her in the street. And then she said to me she wasn't wearing those skirts for them, but for herself. Since then I am much more attentive to these things. Generally, people think that women wear skirts to get attention from guys, that's what people think. But it doesn't work like that, I am not an object.

If you post a photo of the national team on Facebook, then people often respond with, oh, all the guys in the first row and all the women in the second. But why is this the first thing you think of when you see the photo? They turn us into objects, but I never asked for that.

Female apologetic

In general, both former and current players reproduce stereotypical ideas about the ideal football player and equate the characteristics of high performance football with masculinity. In negotiating gender roles and expectations some apologised for their presence on the field, by highlighting their femininity:

I went to a club and then you'd talk with guys. And then they'd say 'you play football?' And then nobody wanted to kiss me, because I must have been a lesbian. And that's really awful. If you play football, people immediately think all these things. So then I decided to grow my hair, because I wasn't accepted. Otherwise they'd call me a tomboy.

People tend to think that all players are lesbians, because they look masculine on the field. I do understand that some of them aim to look feminine. Like, on the field I look like a football player, but off the field I am a real woman.

I really hated it when people thought that I was a boy. I mean, I had long hair and was wearing sports clothing, but that's not considered feminine. So if you're good then you're a boy, but girls, girls that play well? They just don't understand that. So that had quite an impact on me. When I reached puberty I decided that I would do extremely feminine things.

Back then it was still exceptional for girls to be good at football. I had short hair and then they thought that I would be a boy. I started to grow my hair. And I tell you, I'll never wear it short again. I like it a lot, but I won't wear it short again.

If I can, I skip going to the gym. Because I don't want to become that muscular. I find that really masculine.

Appearing explicitly feminine, or taking part in explicitly feminine activities count here as responses or strategies to deal with gender normativity.

Cynicism and self-protection

While some of the former and current players apologise for their presence on the football field, other stories display cynicism. Exemplary of both former and current players is the following excerpt:

Some girls at school would say, 'you play football.' But then I said 'well everyone has a sport.' It's just like that and I've always been like that. Sometimes girls think that if you play football, you must be a tomboy. I don't care that they say that. I don't care about that at all. I just do what I like.

1.2.4 Key findings 'sacrifice'

As already suggested in section 1 of this chapter, what we find in the following quotes, categorized under the theme of 'sacrifice', is first of all that the players describe their experiences of being and becoming an elite football player as being characterised by contradictions between divergent commitments and values. They do not attribute equal weight to the diverse commitments and values, but in contrast, they attribute superior weight to their commitment to football, regardless of the value or commitment that its stands in opposition to: health, social life, financial security, future prospects. Second we see in the testimonies that the players seem unable to make sense of their full commitment to football. Third, we see that this incapacity to make sense of their life-choices does not leave the players untouched. Rather we see that the players feel torn between the divergent values and commitments, and feel as if they are being disempowered. Let us start with some excerpts in which the players not only describe the value of playing football in opposition to health, but also as being more important than health.

Football versus real-life values

I never realized that I only have one body. And that I should have played a bit smarter. No, I always wanted the ball. But I must say that I do things a bit different now. Sometimes I think, well I'll let that ball go. If I really think about it, I would quit playing football. It's madness. But then I don't.

Back then, I often thought that I should quit playing football, as I was afraid that I'd never recover. But, what was I thinking! It's actually quite a depressing thought that I was thinking about quitting.

My neighbour saw me playing football with the kids from the neighbourhood. Without my knowledge he had registered me at the football club. And then he came by telling me that. And well, I just went to my first training. But after the first training I got injured in my groin. That was terrible. But, I really, really enjoyed playing. Since that moment I play football.

As a goal-keeper, you really cannot be afraid. Sometimes, when I go for the ball, later on I think 'well if I had', but I never think about that when I am playing. As a goal-keeper you just do things that are best not thought about. Actually, no-one in my team would say 'yes I'd like to become a goal keeper'. They are all afraid of standing in the goal.

I never realized that football is dangerous. But with my head, I got dumber. I could no longer make connections, and I also lost my empathetic abilities, much to the frustration of others. But really, I got dumber. And then I thought this is not what I want. It is like suffering from dementia and you realize that you have become a different person. That is really confronting, but then I still go on. But honestly, saying this here makes me want to call the coach and tell the coach that I quit.

X: Football gives me a lot of satisfaction. I have to give up a lot, but I think that it also brings me things, in terms of experiences. Also with injuries, I then just need to return to the field. It's a way of life. And I think that it brings me a lot. Otherwise it would also become really hard to continue playing the game.

N: What then does it mean that football brings you a lot, what is it that football brings you?

X: I find it difficult to explain what it means that football brings me a lot. That is a hard question. It is also a question that is not commonly asked during interviews. What it brings me? Satisfaction. That is a difficult word, an abstract word.

What we see in these quotes is that the players are well aware of the physical risks of playing elite football. A few players even explicitly state that just the thought of the physical dangers, would make them want to put an end to their career. But, they don't. Noteworthy is the reason given by one of the players: 'Football gives me a lot of satisfaction', and 'a lot

in terms of experience'. Importantly the player does not say that she is willing to play when hurt and take risks for the sake of money, or prestige, but because of what she experiences when playing football. In effect, as the following quotes indicate, the players do not only experience their health as being opposed to their participation in football, but likewise financial security, social life and their future prospects:

I fully devote myself to football. What you see is that I adjust my work to football and not the other way around. A lot of people call me mad. But then I think, 'well, call me mad'. As long as I can do it, I am happy.

It was never a conscious choice promoting women's football. My passion is the game. I just really like the game. It stirs me right up. But I also hate unfairness. But this doesn't mean that I think that things between men and women need to be equal 100 percent. If you look at the past it makes perfect sense that men earn more money and that we shouldn't have the illusion that things must be fully equal. For me it's really about playing the game and contributing to that.

We didn't really get along so I was sent off. I have very strong opinions and I am always clear about that, but also at inappropriate moments when you know that you should actually keep your mouth shut. But I didn't and sometimes I also made jokes, because it is just football. Football is number 1 and I set everything aside for it, school, everything, but it is still just football. And perhaps it's a bit strange, but often I think, we're not at war, football is not a war where people get killed for whom we then have to mourn.

When I was 16, I was playing for the national team. And well, it's almost impossible to achieve something higher. But my teammates at the club, they started going out, drinking beer, dating girls. That was a difficult period for me. They were relaxing with a beer and I could not join them. But I always had the feeling of being at the right place. When I am playing I always enjoy it extremely.

What emerges from the above testimonies is that the players' commitment to their sport, comes with difficult choices, not only related to health, but likewise financial security, and social life. However, as one of the players quips, even when called mad, she is willing to sacrifice financial security for football. Again, these players are not sacrificing one real-life value, in this case financial security or social life, for something else rewarding in an objective sense, such as prestige, but because of what they experience when playing football: joy and happiness. What we however read in the following, almost sad quote, is that, at the same time, it is also precisely because of the enjoyment that participating in football generates, that it becomes difficult for players to make sense of their life choices:

I really love it and I never really think about all the investments. The moment that you win something, that you win a game, that gives so much pleasure. When you win you realize

why you worked that hard. But if you think about it, about all the investments. It is really hard for people who do not play to understand that. It's only a game, 11 against 11 and a ball. Why then lose yourself in it?

Disempowerment

In general, what we see in the reflections of the players is that they not only experience contradictions between diverse values and commitments, but also feel torn between them. In effect, it seems that the players sense that the contradiction they live by, can't be resolved. Health, social life and financial security are important values in their lives, but when it counts, they simply and almost unconsciously sacrifice these for their sport. This in turn results in feelings of disempowerment, that is of being unable to take matters into their own hands. Particularly telling are the quotes in which some of the players discuss their social life:

My sister got married to an Eastern European man and they decided to get married in Eastern Europe. But unsurprisingly they picked a date that didn't work for me. So, I called him saying that I couldn't make it that particular date and whether he could not move the wedding by a few days. But asking your brother-in-law to change his wedding date is for me actually too bizarre to believe. Fortunately my family is understanding towards my situation, so my brother-in-law responded positively to my request. But, actually, it's just too bizarre to believe. With these kind of events, my family first consults me. On the one hand, I do really appreciate that, but on the other hand, I think, football, football is actually not that important, but then at the same time it is.

After all these years, my mother is getting a bit tired of the whole thing and tells me that it is also my own decision. Like, what in life is actually of importance? And I must say that I do really understand her. More and more I also get the feeling that other things in life are actually more important than football. I find it increasingly difficult to miss out on things. But then yes, it's a deliberate choice and I wouldn't have done things differently.

However, it was not only in the context of discussions about social life that players expressed feeling torn between different values and commitments. Particularly worth mentioning are the quotes in which players reflect on their future prospects. What we likewise see in these quotes is that players lament the consequences of prioritizing football above other commitments and values. For instance, one player expressed feelings of regret looking back at the difficulties she experienced during her studies. Nevertheless, she did 'call off everything for football'. And certainly, to sacrifice something considered important (studies), for something considered less important (football), must be confusing and induce feelings of disempowerment.

Looking back, I wish things had turned out differently with my studies. I studied physiotherapy and it took me a few years longer, because I played two European championships and, well, that takes a lot of time. And for me it was easy, I could decide to skip some courses

and focus on football. But if I look back at all those classes that I missed and all the difficulties to get through exams, I regret that. And yet football is always number 1. I call off everything for football. I am always present and I do everything for it. But on the other hand, it's number 2, as school is more important to me, but then I shift my exams for football.

1.3 Summary of the key findings

Methodologically undergirded by the process of triangulation (Boeije, 2010, p. 176, 177), the data of our research brought into focus three irreducible themes: 'high performance', 'policing of gender', and 'sacrifice'. The first overarching theme that emerges from the data is that of 'high performance' and refers to all those experiences related to women's football's move toward professionalization, based on the production of results, maximisation and hierarchisation. Central here are reflections on what 'it takes' to become an elite player, the social, physical, but also economic price paid for becoming an elite football player and their (mis)treatment by staff members and coaches, particularly in the context of international competitions.

Secondly the data shows that all players were and still are confronted with the problem of 'how to do gender right' in a male dominated context. From early childhood till today's professional experiences, all players articulated that they were subjected to gender policing, from being denied access to elite sport facilities in the case of the pioneers of Dutch women's football to more subtle forms of marginalization, stereotyping and exclusion. Key is that the players 'internalize' these norms and hold a negative attitude towards the quality of women's football, the 'feminine' characteristics of their peers, and their gendered selves. Hence all the players developed tactics or strategies to negotiate gender norms, from the so-called 'female apologetic' to dressing up like the lads.

The third overarching theme that emerged from the data was more unexpected. It deals with the willingness of players to make sacrifices for the sake of the sport. Central here is that the players describe their experiences of being and becoming an elite football player as being characterized by contradictions between the commitments and values related to playing the game and those related to the real world, such as health, social life, financial security and future prospects. To be more precise, the players judge their participation in football as relatively insignificant, compared to the real-life values of health, financial security and social life, but nevertheless attribute more weight to their commitment to football. Thus, the players judge their participation in football as relatively unimportant, yet it motivates them to make those sacrifices all the same.

Although I shall develop this in chapter four, already worth noting is that we also found in the data that this experience of contradiction results in confusion and a certain sense of disempowerment, visible in the ways the players seem to regard themselves as irrationally committed to their sport.

