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Covid-19: Reflections on threat and uncertainty for the future of elite women's football in England

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Abstract

This commentary offers an analysis of the implications of Covid-19 on the future of elite women's football, with the intention of reflecting on and illuminating the threat and uncertainty facing the game. Topics covered include (1) organisational and economic repercussions; (2) consequences for player contracts, migration and investment; and (3) player wellbeing. These significant challenges require swift and decisive action in order to mitigate their potential effects. Recommendations are made for governing bodies, parent clubs and practitioners, in addition to possible future research directions for academics. We reflect upon what can be done during and post-pandemic to continue the momentum and growth of women's football in England, highlighting the need for football clubs to learn from previous crises by embracing innovation and entrepreneurship.

Keywords: coronavirus, Covid-19, sport, women's football, elite football, wellbeing

Introduction

In 2020, the world has witnessed the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) to nearly every country in the world. Having emerged in China at the end of 2019, its global impact led the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (WHO, 2020a). Global fear about the potential for rapid spread of Covid-19 has resulted in substantial restrictions to lives across the world (Hellewell et al., 2020), travel bans (WHO, 2020a), and the cancellation of mass gatherings and events (WHO, 2020b). Many major sports events around the world have either been cancelled or postponed. Postponements have also hit most domestic sports leagues, including Association football (hereafter football) in England.

The English Football Association's (FA) suspension of competitive fixtures of elite men's and women's football has been consistent, however the pressures placed on them by the pandemic are different. The financial consequences of postponed games and reductions in broadcasting revenue will be significant in men's football; however, questions are raised around the extent to which this will be passed on to elite women's clubs, many of which are already economically fragile. For the majority of these, the biggest losses will be felt through organisational and economic repercussions (e.g., maintaining personnel costs, loss of commercial sponsors), consequences for player contracts, migration and investment, and player wellbeing. Indeed, the infrastructures, personnel, and commitment of those involved in the game's development were under significant strain prior to Covid-19 (Wrack, 2020a). With this in mind, the present commentary offers a brief analysis of the implications of the pandemic on the future of elite women's football, with the intention of illuminating the threat and uncertainty facing the game.

The landscape of elite women's football in England

The relationship between women and football is complex, highlighted through a controversial FA ban of women's matches being played on the grounds of FA affiliated clubs between the years of 1921-1971 (Williams, 2013). Women's football had been a popular sport during the First World War, with thousands of spectators attending matches, but this ban in 1921 instigated the decline of the sport (Dunn & Welford, 2015; Petty & Pope, 2019). While the purpose of this commentary is to analyse the impact of Covid-19 on the shape of today's game, it is important to highlight some of the history of elite women's football in England to (a) contextualise the way that elite women's football looks today, and (b) understand the origins of the current pressures.

Since the reintroduction of organised women's football in 1971, the game has experienced a significant image problem in English football culture with players facing stereotypical attitudes and gender discrimination, as well as perceived associations with lesbianism (Harris, 2005; Pope, 2018; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999). At this time, tensions existed over the direction of women's football, with some advocates pushing for integration with well-established and dominant structures of men's football and others favouring a liberal approach aligned with radical feminist ideals of separation (Welford, 2018). Direction was provided in 1993 when The FA took back control of women's football, with the game's development centred on participation growth ahead of commercialisation, spectator support, and media interest (Williams, 2003). As a result, stereotypical attitudes and gender discrimination were not overtly challenged by the governing body. Over the following twenty years, and perhaps owing to this direction, women's football struggled to recruit fans to the game (Pope, 2018).

The 2015 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Women's World Cup saw England win the bronze medal and domestic viewing audiences peaked at over two million (Burnton, 2019). Petty and Pope (2019) showed that coverage of this tournament was generally very positive, focusing on the skill and achievements of the England national team, rather than undermining their achievements and reducing them to sex objects. They argue that elite women's football has entered a 'new age' of media coverage, with a shift towards greater equality. This suggests that attitudes towards women's football have been changing in recent years. At this time, the FA also launched a strategy to advance elite women's football by translating support for the national side into active interest in domestic leagues. The top-tier of elite women's football, The FA Women's Super League (WSL), was formed in 2011 and initially operated over the summer period in a bid to create its own identity, attract fans, sponsorship and media interest (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, & Sequerra, 2020). The FA announced in July 2016 that the league would move from summer to winter, in line with the traditional football calendar in England and other women's leagues around Europe, with an aim to improve the performances of the English national side at major tournaments. Record attendances have been observed at the Women's FA Cup Final for the last five years, currently standing at 43,264 in 2019 (Football Association, 2019a).

The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France was also highly successful, exemplified by average viewing numbers of 17.27 million, more than double the 8.39 million average set by Canada in 2015 (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2019). Following the success of this tournament, which saw England reach the semi-final before losing out to the eventual winners of the tournament, the USA, one survey suggested that one-third of adults now consider themselves interested in the women's game and 69 percent of those believe that women's football deserves the same profile as the men's game (Barclays & YouGov, 2019).

Professionalisation of the WSL also came into effect at the start of the 2018/2019 season – a major milestone in the development of the elite women’s game. Proposed changes to Super League licences were approved by the FA and clubs were encouraged to meet new criteria in order to secure professional status (Garry, 2017). New criteria included: a minimum of 16 hours contact per week for players; a minimum level of investment per club; an academy as part of club and financial fair play and salary cap. The second tier, the Women’s Championship, is now made up of 11 teams who meet part-time criteria. However, this overall growth in the women’s game has stretched the infrastructures, with some media commentators arguing that more could be done by seemingly wealthy parent clubs to ensure poor playing surfaces, low wages and inadequate conditions are brought up to the standard of a semi-professional and fully professional league system (Culvin, 2019; Wrack, 2020a). We now turn to consider the potential impact of Covid-19 on elite women’s football, specifically to predicted organisational and economic repercussions (e.g., maintaining personnel costs, loss of commercial sponsors), consequences for player contracts, migration and investment, and player wellbeing.

Organisational and economic repercussions

The financial viability of clubs is a topic that has been discussed by academics and practitioners alike (e.g., Hoffmann, Chew Ging, Matheson, & Ramasamy, 2006; Hudson, 2019; Klein, 2018; Wrack, 2019). Significantly increased revenues from TV coverage and sponsors have started to gain traction. For example, the FA recently signed a three-year, six-figure deal with Sky Mexico and Scandinavian broadcaster NENT to broadcast the WSL matches overseas for the first time in its history (Football Association, 2019b). However, revenues are still lagging behind the record attendances and growth in popularity of the game. One way that Covid-19 threatens elite women’s football is in a diminishment of expected

income from gate receipts, sponsorship, and merchandising, likely caused by drops in global economies. A long-standing disparity in sponsorship spending between men's and women's sport has meant that women's football clubs are restricted to a small pool of potential sponsors (Shaw & Amis, 2001). This pool may shrink further as companies who previously wanted to invest in women's football, may no longer be in a financial position to make such a contribution. Clubs will, therefore, need to focus their scarce resources into marketing departments to maximise their revenue potential from such sources. Yet, there is likely to be increased competition for funding as all clubs fight for access to a smaller pool of potential sponsors. Commercial deals or sponsorship represents a large percentage of WSL clubs' income, dwarfing their matchday and broadcasting revenue streams. For example, Manchester City Women FC recently detailed their turnover activity in their 2019 financial report as comprising: commercial activity (79.7%), WSL central development fund (10.2%), matchday (6.0%), and broadcasting (4%) (Millington, 2020). This breakdown exemplifies WSL clubs' reliance on commercial deals and sponsorship, and why the restricted pool of sponsors as a result of Covid-19 threatens the future of elite women's football. In the face of such adversity, marketing departments must look to innovative funding solutions away from traditional (men's) football sponsorship. For example, in the short-term, they may look to explore alternative sources of funding, such as crowd funding (Abdourazakou & Leroux-Sostenes, 2016). A key advantage that women's football possesses over men's football is the greater access for fans to players, therefore we recommend that marketers utilise this unique feature of the game as a differentiator to potential sponsors.

Given the significant investment by the FA since professionalisation occurred in 2018, it will be of great concern for elite women's football that the governing body have predicted the economic consequences of Covid-19 as likely to be in excess of £100 million (Independent,

2020). As the FA is a non-profit organisation, this will impact the ability of the governing body to reinvest in all levels of the game. Worryingly, when the FA has previously been faced with ‘financially turbulent times’, it has cut investment in the women’s game (Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd & Sequerra, 2019, p.2007). Yet, investment allocation in executive positions has been protected and steadily increasing over recent years (Maguire, 2020). It is currently unclear whether funding to elite women’s football will be significantly reduced, but many clubs who already struggling financially will be rightly concerned about the threat that Covid-19 poses to their future if the FA does not continue to fund elite women’s football.

The FA may need to look to other ways to recoup those economic consequences with innovative strategies. For example, they may wish to capitalise on the 12-month delay to the Women’s European Championship tournament, now due to be held in England in 2022 (Euro 2022). One possible solution for the FA to bolster ticket sales and generate economic income through tourism would be to shift the marketing style of this competition to capitalise on British tourism, which could be lucrative. For example, by changing some host stadiums to those that are close to transport links and located near areas of natural beauty (e.g., Southampton where the city has an airport and the New Forest National Park is 6 miles away), the FA could offer packages combining football and attraction tickets within the price. Such a strategy would recognise the tough economic circumstances that are resulting from the pandemic and also a likely desire for people to embrace the ability to travel once restrictions are lifted. In addition, the FA should look to leverage mainstream interest in the Men’s 2022 FIFA World Cup, due to be held in Qatar, to promote a ‘festival of football’ and attract fan interest in the women’s game. Failure to do so could result in the men’s tournament overshadowing the women’s tournament and any strategic advantages being lost.

167

168 In addition to Covid-19-related disruptions to the FA, top-level men's football has been
 169 interrupted and this has put a financial strain on leagues, clubs and national governing bodies.
 170 This has a knock-on effect for elite women's football where the majority of women's teams
 171 are incorporated as a secondary side under the umbrella of the professional men's club (i.e.,
 172 the parent club) – a strategic initiative when the FA established the WSL (Dunn & Welford,
 173 2015). There are numerous examples in recent history where relegation or financial hardship
 174 with the parent club has resulted in the separation of any relationship with the women's team.
 175 When this occurs, some women's teams are left with no choice but to fold. For example,
 176 when the men's club withdrew their financial support, Notts County women's club collapsed
 177 the day before the new season in 2017/18, leaving their players jobless and in some cases
 178 homeless (Guardian, 2017). Indeed, prior to the United Kingdom Covid-19 lockdown, former
 179 Yeovil Town chairman Steve Allinson gave an interview with *The Times* newspaper
 180 expressing apprehension about the sustainability of the new league system and the reliance on
 181 men's clubs to prop up the women's equivalent (Myers, 2020).

182

183 With the Premier League predicted to lose at least £1 billion if the season does not resume
 184 after the pandemic (MacInnes & Steinberg, 2020), history warns us that financial support to
 185 their associated women's clubs may stop (Wrack, 2019). This is the risk (and reward) of
 186 women's football teams being financially connected to men's clubs; organisations'
 187 commitment to gender equality is often trumped by the need for revenue generation (de Haan
 188 & Sotiriadou, 2019). Covid-19 is, therefore, likely to threaten the financial viability of the
 189 WSL if the level of funding previously received from their male counterpart is reduced. In
 190 this situation, women's sport has to "compete" for resources with well-established, male-
 191 dominated clubs (Lusted & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017).

192

193 Once the season resumes and is completed, Covid-19 also threatens the ability of
 194 Championship clubs to financially move up from part-time to full-time status, despite
 195 winning a promotion place to the WSL. Therefore, leadership teams at parent clubs must
 196 view women's teams as integral to their core business in light of Covid-19, rather than
 197 separate enterprises that can be cut adrift. By taking the latter approach, elite women's
 198 football could be set back decades. One way that clubs may be hindered is in the lack of
 199 female representation in football governance. In their examination of football politics and
 200 gender, Ahn and Cunningham (2020) argue that the presence of women in leadership roles is
 201 crucial, as these women are often advocates for fairness and equality. Navigating gender in
 202 the football workplace is wrought with organisational and sociocultural issues (Clarkson,
 203 Cox, & Thelwell, 2019); however, in the long-term governing bodies should continue pursuing
 204 gendered initiatives in football governance so that when the next crisis comes and boards are
 205 faced with hard financial decisions, women's football is better represented.

206

207 **Player contracts, migration and investment**

208 In addition to organisational and economic repercussions facing elite women's football in
 209 light of Covid-19, the labour market could face both short- and long-term consequences.
 210 These relate to player contracts, migration and investment. Women footballers do not receive
 211 the same luxuries afforded to their male counterparts in terms of length of contracts and
 212 financial compensation. In 2017 International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPro,
 213 2017), the world players union, found that 50 percent of the 3,295 women footballers
 214 surveyed globally received no salary from their club, whilst those who receive a salary earned
 215 on average less than \$600 (approximately £470) per month (Culvin, 2020). Indeed, there is
 216 much variation between players in and across leagues. Financial rewards for players between

clubs within each league will largely depend on the level of investment and financial capabilities of their parent club. Fully professional and semi-professional women footballers alike are often on short-term contracts that typically finish at the end of the playing season each year. To supplement this income, the FA offers central contracts to national players to cover additional responsibilities involved with playing international football. Semi-professional women footballers typically receive pay that will only cover their expenses and so bolster their small football earnings with ancillary occupations like coaching, administration or physiotherapy (Williams, 2011). These players may also hold jobs outside of sport. For example, Rosie McDonnell, who currently plays for Portsmouth Women, is a qualified nurse working on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lack of financial security will be felt by players at all levels of women's football. For full-time professional players, due to the short-term nature of contracts coinciding with the postponement of fixtures, some will find themselves without a club in the intervening time. For semi-professional players, their off-field employment is likely to have been impacted by the pandemic, especially for those who may have used casual or zero-hour contracts, which do not provide any minimum working hours, to flexibly fit with their variable footballing commitments. Therefore, in order to retain the integrity of the league, crisis management must be conducted higher than at a club-by-club basis and with the support of local player associations. Organisations must also work together to limit the inaudible effect on player health and well-being during quarantine and for a subsequent period of time after.

As the women's leagues in England are part of an open system where teams can be promoted and relegated, there are open recruitment rules and international player mobility is possible (Andreff, 2011). With some notable exceptions (e.g., Agergaard & Botelho, 2014; Botelho &

Aggergaard, 2011; Botelho & Skogvang, 2013), literature on sports labour migration has largely eluded elite women's football. Yet, the WSL, as the first fully professional elite women's football league in Europe, has spearheaded a trend of migrant female footballers pursuing employment opportunities in European countries, previously only enjoyed by a limited number of players migrating to Scandinavian countries or to North America. This shift reflects the rise of European national teams on the global stage, but also of greater investment at the domestic level. Player migration is influenced by economic crises and national financial weakness, the existence of only semi-professional opportunities, and attraction of unrivalled lucrative contracts (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001). High profile transfers into the WSL (e.g., Australian player Sam Kerr's reportedly \$1million transfer to Chelsea WFC in 2019) have helped to raise the investment potential of the league and, pre-Covid-19, it was hoped that this heralded a new age where such transfers became the new normal – as is the case in elite men's professional football.

Covid-19 has already restricted the movement of players between countries, in the short term, due to travel bans and government restrictions (Ebrahim, Ahmed, Gozzer, Schlagenhauf, & Memish, 2020). If, in the long-term, reductions in salaries, facilities and resources also occurs for women's clubs in England, the world's best players may be less attracted by the reduced off-field support at a club and league level. English women's football clubs must also remain attractive propositions for the most marketable current players so that their star players do not leave for other countries because of reduced resources. If this migration away from the WSL was to occur, there would likely be negative implications for gate receipts, sponsorship, and merchandising as a result of a less globalised, less fast-paced league that is lacking in star players that are a key motivator for attendance and attracting sponsors.

Andreff (2011) describes how promotion-relegation of open leagues forces teams into an ‘arms race’ in which “each team attempts to recruit the best players to improve its relative strength compared with opponent teams; the latter, in turn, are led to overbid” (p.8). While this arms race may lead to an improvement in relative quality of talent in women’s teams (Lazear & Rosen, 1981), the issue with such investment in elite women’s football is that few teams are able to recoup their investment costs and this means that many teams will be operating at a deficit, shored up by profits made by the clubs’ men’s teams as noted above (in the hope of a long-term benefit). The cluster of rich clubs able to heavily invest in sporting talent will likely be reduced by Covid-19 related disruptions as clubs prioritise their more lucrative men’s teams and may therefore hamper the growth of the WSL. This fear may not be unfounded – indeed, an illustration of the secondary role assigned to women’s sport can be seen by how in Australian rules football the women’s competition has been terminated while the men’s competition was merely suspended as a response to Covid-19 (Canil, 2020). It is vital that WSL clubs weather the financial difficulties in the short term in order to capitalise on the publicity of the Euro 2022 tournament to market themselves and their players.

Player wellbeing

There are currently unique demands and stressors for athletes at work. As this pandemic causes uncertainty and precarity globally, workers everywhere are experiencing redundancies, unpaid salaries, violations to their worker rights and income loss. Covid-19 is likely to impact the livelihoods of professional footballers, particularly women who operate within the margins of the sport. While FIFA reassure women’s football funding will not be cut (Wrack, 2020b), it is critical to understand the unique components of elite women’s football that mean its fragility puts players in unprecedented, precarious situations. FIFPro (2020) identify the Covid-19 pandemic as an existential threat to elite women’s football if no

specific protections are given to the industry. Described as the “little sister” of English football (Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd & Sequerra, 2019), the fragility of professional elite women’s football in England (and globally) will likely be exposed during the current pandemic and any inequities facing women’s football will undoubtedly be further exacerbated by this pandemic. Ambiguity exists between growing professionalisation of elite women’s football and the uncertain work conditions in which players operate (Culvin, 2020). Careers in sport are short-term, fragile and precarious (Culvin, 2020; Roderick, 2006). The emphasis on short-term results often constrains managers and coaches to overlook long-term objectives such as the wellbeing and welfare of their players (Culvin, 2020). Moreover, it also remains to be seen whether clubs and organisations have the capacity, or indeed the propensity, to safeguard the careers of professional women footballers in England following this global pandemic.

The increased uncertainty due to Covid-19 will likely threaten the wellbeing and welfare of professional women footballers. The reality for professional women footballers, in comparison to their male counterparts, is that their work conditions are more uncertain, unstable and peppered with precariousness in the form of insufficient employment and work-life policies based on social gendered expectations (Culvin, 2020) – much as has long been the case in the wider sport and leisure industry (Aitchison, 2000). Moreover, players now lack control over the pandemic and its outcomes. Thus, while the move to professionalisation and semi-professionalisation is progressive for elite women’s football, players are particularly vulnerable to occupational fragility and with that, wellbeing and/or mental health symptoms (Culvin, 2020; FIFPro, 2020). A cause for concern and consideration is how players will respond to this new threat to their careers. A perceived loss of autonomy and disempowerment has been established as a key factor in athletes developing depression and

anxiety (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). Indeed, FIFPro (2020) report that the number of footballers reporting symptoms of depression has doubled since the sport shut down. Anxiety symptoms have also risen amid concerns about the longevity and implications of Covid-19 (Ames, 2020). We acknowledge that these mental health issues are likely to affect the broader population and are not just isolated to elite women players (WHO, 2020c). However, the uncertain, unstable and precarious position that elite women players face means that these effects could be felt more acutely in comparison to their male counterparts and therefore governing bodies, practitioners and researchers alike must take care to understand the effects of Covid-19 on player wellbeing. Given women are likely to experience the mental health effects of employment differently to men (Dinh, Strazdins, & Welsh, 2017; Rosenfield, 1989), careful planning is required especially in light of funding depletion to women's football. Policy makers may look for guidance from domains outside of sport that share similar characteristics (e.g., occupational therapy, Bonder, 1987).

At this point it is unclear whether players will receive the support they need from their clubs, governing bodies and government. The report from FIFPro (2020) indicates that for elite women's football to survive Covid-19, and indeed to thrive post-pandemic, urgent action from governing bodies is essential. It is crucial to use the current situation to centralise the needs of professional women footballers, to develop a safety net and the gender-specific employment and workplace policies needed to mitigate wellbeing and welfare concerns.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to accurately predict what the future of elite women's football in England will look like in a post-Covid-19 world, the intention of this commentary was to reflect upon some of the immediate threats and uncertainties for the governing body, leagues, and clubs. It

adds to the discussion surrounding sport and Covid-19, led by Parnell, Widdop, Bond and Wilson's (2020) rapid analysis of football networks, by broadening the conversation to include elite women's football. We encourage academics to follow developments as they occur with primary and secondary research projects that better understand the historical, sociological, economic, management and psychological effects of this pandemic on elite women's football. We implore football clubs to consider how other organisations have navigated previous, unforeseen catastrophes. For example, Flammer and Ioannou (2015) surveyed 3500 US publicly traded companies following the Great Recession (2007-2009) and found that organisations sustained competitive advantage by adjusting their investments in strategic resources during the financial crisis. Intangible assets and resources (i.e., efficiency, innovation, adaption to shifting demands, and organisational resilience) became particularly valuable at these times (London Business School, 2020). When we consider women's football, those clubs which maintain their relationship with women's teams might be viewed as innovative and this could be used as a means to maintain a competitive advantage in the future. Such a strategy will require careful management to ensure that the maintenance of a women's team is not viewed as a positive public relations stunt by cynics. Moreover, women's clubs should be encouraged to embrace an entrepreneurial mindset (Ratten, 2010) and explore innovative revenue sources, such as crowd funding.

We also urge that the community of women's football supporters remain ardent in their support of the game, as having visible advocates will show the governing body and parent clubs that there is a sustained demand for women's football. What is certain, is that elite women's football in England has come a long way commercially and financially since the 2015 World Cup. Rapid growth of any sport is vulnerable to stretching the limits of its infrastructures and sudden derailment, without feeling the effects of a world pandemic. For

367 professional footballers, specifically, we must ask and understand, what are the mental
368 wellbeing costs to a halt in pursuing performance orientated goals? Prior to Covid-19, elite
369 women's football was facing poor pitches, low wages and conditions far behind men's clubs.
370 Professional women footballers were already engaged in a battle to prove themselves in an
371 occupation that has devalued them for so long, coupled with work issues, a lack of policy
372 support and little or no safety net. The threat and uncertainty facing the future of elite
373 women's football is significant. Therefore, all those within women's football must urgently
374 rethink their approach to growth in the face of organisational and economic repercussions,
375 reduced player contracts, migration and investment, and player wellbeing. These significant
376 challenges require swift and decisive action in order to mitigate their potential effects.

377

378 Finally, and whilst acknowledging these very real threats to the progress of elite women's
379 football – and perhaps its very existence –we should also reflect upon what can be done to
380 continue the momentum and growth of women's football in England. There are a number of
381 policy implications recommended in light of Covid-19 associated threats to elite women's
382 football. First, the governing body's pressure to integrate elite women's football teams with
383 professional men's clubs presents the governing bodies of elite women's and men's football
384 (i.e., the FA working in partnership with the Premier League and the English Football
385 League) with an opportunity to unite men's and women's football as part of their response to
386 Covid-19. One strategy that could be implemented is a division of financial support provided
387 to the men's clubs so that a percentage is ringfenced for the women's teams. This approach
388 would delay any women's teams from immediately folding, stop the precedence of men's
389 clubs from quickly withdrawing financial support to women's football, and also be symbolic
390 to wider football fans that the future of men's football is interconnected with women's
391 football. Financial integration is a strong indicator of being in partnership (Welford, 2018).

392 Second, the FA should consider the delay of the European Championships, now hosted by
393 England in 2022, as an opportunity to refocus towards spectatorship and tourism in order to
394 build on the back of the success of previous tournaments and continue in what has been
395 described as a ‘new age’ of women’s football (Petty & Pope, 2019). Third, and finally, the
396 governing bodies must take strategies that acknowledge issues surrounding player wellbeing
397 that might be felt acutely in women’s football. One approach could be to take a human rights
398 framework to help marginalised groups, such as women players, in football at a time of crisis.
399 Strategies to protect young athletes may also be pertinent for women players (Platts & Smith,
400 2009).

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