

SPORTS TRAJECTORY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS OF BRAZILIAN NATIONAL TEAM SOCCER PLAYERS

TRAJETÓRIA ESPORTIVA E HABILIDADES PSICOLÓGICAS DE JOGADORES DE FUTEBOL DA SELEÇÃO BRASILEIRA 

TRAYECTORIA DEPORTIVA Y HABILIDADES PSICOLÓGICAS DE JUGADORES DE FÚTBOL DE LA SELECCIÓN BRASILEÑA 

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Abstract: This study looked into the construction of the professional trajectories of players from Brazil's national soccer team. Interviews were conducted with six male players who were part of the first team of clubs that play in the first division of the Brazilian Championship. Inclusion criteria: minimum of two years as a professional player and at least one call-up to the Brazilian national team. Athletes were interviewed individually. According to the analysis of the interviews, soccer is a central theme in their lives, and their families play important roles in the sports context. The importance of psychological skills for those who reach the elite of professional soccer and the Brazilian team is confirmed. Understanding the trajectories of elite athletes in sports is important for the advancement of sports science.

Keywords: Professional Competence. Soccer. Athletes. Psychology, Sports.

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1 INTRODUCTION¹

Soccer is the most popular sport in the world and plays an important role in societies in different parts of the world. Its expression can be observed by the financial activity, by the ability to bring people together, generate jobs, feed dreams and provide intense and diverse emotional reactions of people and groups. In addition, soccer is an important means of entertainment for many population groups (PIMENTA, 2008; ANJOS; SANETO; OLIVEIRA, 2012; ROTTA, 2014; SANTOS *et al.*, 2017; MATIAS, 2018).

Becoming a professional soccer player fills the imagination of a significant portion of young people and their families (WISNIK, 2008; ANJOS *et al.*, 2012; BALZANO *et al.*, 2019). However, when they observe an athlete in action, they do not imagine the years of dedication and discipline necessary to achieve sports performance, nor do they imagine that only a small number of athletes can reach elite sport (KANNEKENS; ELFERINK-GEMSER; VISSCHER, 2011; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017).

Achieving excellence and staying at a high level in sport requires the athlete to excel in the physiological, technical, cognitive (tactical, strategic, perceptual and decision-making) and emotional (emotional regulation) domains (SARMENTO *et al.*, 2018; DAVIDS; ARAÚJO, 2019; SCHARFEN; MEMMERT, 2019; KASUYA; NAKAZAWA, 2019). Therefore, deficits in these domains can compromise the acquisition and maintenance of high levels of performance.

The literature points to psychological resilience, discipline, dedication and clarity in the pursuit of their goals as important elements in improving and maintaining sports performance at high levels (GALLI; GONZALEZ, 2014; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017; VIDUAL; GOMES; FERNANDES, 2019). Added to this scenario is the support of family and friends, the role played by coaches and sports training centers (KASUYA; NAKAZAWA, 2019; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019). Access to elite soccer athletes who represented the country is not easy for researchers, which makes it difficult to scientifically study the sporting excellence of the most popular sport in Brazil.

Given the above, this study sought to understand the construction of the sporting trajectory and the use of psychological skills of professional soccer players who represented the national team.

2 METHOD

This is a qualitative study, with intentional sampling. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CAAE: 20795313.4.0000.5505). The period and year of data collection were omitted to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

¹ This article originates from the first author's thesis: Excellence in Sport: an analysis of psychological skills and professional trajectory of elite soccer players (Doctoral thesis), Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Health Sciences – Federal University of São Paulo, 2017, 219 f. Available in the institutional repository and in the Library of the Federal University of São Paulo.

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

Six male soccer players who were part of the main (professional) team of clubs that competed in the first division of the Brazilian Championship participated in the study. The inclusion criterion was to have worked as a professional player for at least two years and to have been called up by the Brazilian national soccer team (in the professional category – main or Olympic).

2.2 INSTRUMENT

Semi-structured Interview Guide for Investigating the Trajectory of Elite Soccer Players. Prepared by the authors based on the literature (FIGUEIREDO *et al.*, 2009; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017) and the experience and contact of the first author with the area of soccer. The guide addressed the following themes: education, marital status, religiosity, time in the club, history of the main championships and construction of a professional trajectory in soccer.

2.3 PROCEDURE

The first author, based on professional contact with professional soccer players, presented the objectives and ethical precautions involved in the study. After expressing interest in participating in the study, an interview was scheduled for data collection. The interview was carried out individually in a room intended for athletes' assistance, with an average duration of 60 minutes. Signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF) formalized participation in the study. The participants gave their consent for the interview to be recorded.

2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were audio-recorded, and their content was transcribed *ipsis litteris* by the first author. Data analysis considered the following procedures: floating reading; exhaustive reading; establishment of thematic units; context unit for the definition of thematic categories and interpretations in light of the literature, considering the objective to be answered (MINAYO, 2014). The following thematic categories emerged: 1) the realization of the dream of being a soccer player; 2) Trajectories: adversity and resilience; 3) Psychological skills for the development of sporting excellence; 4) Psychological preparation for competition; 5) Concentration: punishment/deprivation.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The minimum age was 23 years old and the maximum age was 38 years old. P1 was 27 years old; P2, 38 years old; P3, 25 years old; P4, 35 years old; P5, 23 years old and P6, 33 years old. Four participants declared that they were married, one was engaged, and one was dating. Only one participant had no child. Three had completed high school, two had incomplete high school, and one had completed elementary school. Five were Catholic and one Evangelical. The position in which

each participant played was omitted to avoid their identification. Table 1 presents the participants' sports data.

Table 1 - Participants' sports data.

Sports Data	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Start in competitions	9 y/o	15 y/o	15 y/o	10 y/o	14 y/o	8 y/o
Time as a professional	10 y/o	21 y/o	5 y/o	18 y/o	4 y/o	17 y/o
Calls as professional	7	32	8	31	2	68
International Squad	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: research data

It is possible to notice that the participants have experience in professional soccer. Half of the participants had been called up to the Brazilian national team in the youth categories and two athletes had not played for foreign teams.

3.1 THE DREAM OF BEING A SOCCER PLAYER

When they were invited to talk about their lives, the theme of soccer was central to their discourse, and their dream of becoming a soccer player was emphasized. Family revealed itself as a fundamental element in making the dream come true. They highlighted that this dream was supported and encouraged by their parents and that its realization provided a better future for the family. They emphasized soccer as a job and acknowledged the limitations that the profession has on family life.

The dream of becoming a soccer player starts before they step onto the field, it starts with the ball that the child gets, with the encouragement of parents, the media showing the "glamour" of the profession and so many other scenarios that refer to the imaginary of being a soccer player (PIMENTA, 2008; ROTTA, 2014). Soccer as a life project comes to be idealized as an instrument of personal achievement and social participation (PIMENTA, 2008) and its meaning is reinforced by research participants when asked about the representation of soccer. P5's account highlights the importance of soccer in the constitution of his life: "soccer is 24 hours a day, how can I say... we try to separate life from soccer, but it's not possible, you end up living it very intensely" (P5).

The representation of soccer can be observed in the study by Bossle and Lima (2013), who, when investigating the perception of youth athletes from two traditional clubs in Porto Alegre about soccer and school, found that this is an unequal relationship in which soccer training has priority over school. School education is revealed as an alternative plan to the non-realization of investment in soccer or as something accessory to building a career as a soccer player. The importance of school was acknowledged, but not as a priority at that time.

It was found that the interviewed athletes feel professionally fulfilled. Having reached the goal of being a professional player, playing in renowned clubs and representing the country in the Brazilian national team are important markers of their accomplishments in their professional careers. It is noticeable that the younger

athletes keep their goal of being called up again to the national team. Older players, in turn, demonstrate satisfaction with the professional career they have built and present goals related to soccer, even after the end of their career. The account below illustrates these observations:

I wanted to play in a World Cup. I participated in the Copa America, the Confederations Cup and in the [year omitted] Cup, I ended up being excluded [...] but I don't have that obsession: 'Oh I had to play a World Cup' was a dream, it didn't materialize, it passed, I didn't play. A professional dream I wanted was a Libertadores, which I played but didn't win, but this one is still possible [...] I had the dream of playing in the Champions League and I played, played in Europe, which I wanted too [...]. But the biggest dream I had, which I asked for on New Year's Eve, was to go to the professional Brazilian team, the rest was a consequence. I did everything to reach the national team and I succeeded [...] I believe I will always be connected to soccer, because once you have played soccer you can never distance yourself from it. (P4, 35 years old).

The account strengthens the assertion that soccer is a central theme in the interviewees' lives. Verbalizations such as "soccer is everything to me" and "soccer is my life" appeared frequently in the speeches of the participants. From this perspective, the findings of Brandão *et al.* (2008) on the meaning of soccer in the lives of players from different categories reinforce the positive perception of soccer. The study identified (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2008) categories related to satisfaction, livelihood, competence, socialization and entertainment.

The performance in the Brazilian national team and in renowned clubs in the national and international scenario are indicators of the realization of the dream and the reach of professional fulfillment. The prominent place in soccer allows some players to have their image widely explored by the media and occupy the status of celebrity, reproducing the image of success and prestige (PEREIRA, 2008; CAPRARO *et al.*, 2011). Such considerations show the process of construction of the imaginary "being a soccer player" in society.

3.2 TRAJECTORIES: ADVERSITY AND RESILIENCE

The participants' sporting trajectory was marked by overcoming a series of adversities and obstacles, such as moving from their hometown and living far from family and friends, leaving behind the typical experiences of their age and gaining recognition for their sporting performance, complex psychological skills required at an early age. The study participants reached the professional team before reaching the age limit to compete in championships in the youth categories (20 years old) and, due to their performance, they stood out early.

The demands and adversities present throughout the different stages of the sports career can have an important impact on the permanence of athletes in high-performance sport (GONZÁLEZ; BORGES; SFALCIN, 2015; CARVALHO *et al.*, 2017). This was evident in the speech of the participants of this study, as in the account of P3:

I started in a neighborhood team [...] and then I was invited to test at a club that, by the way, was in front of my house [...] I was bought and then everything changes, right? Because you're used to living with your

family and I had to go far away, I spent three years there and it fluctuated a lot because I missed my family and my friends a lot and I even thought about quitting because it's a very uncertain career. At that time, I was even removed by the direction, because I wasn't managing to perform as I could. (P3, 25 years old).

P3's account illustrates a difficulty common to all study participants at the beginning of their sporting trajectory, which was to live far from their family at a very young age. In this scenario, family support and encouragement to resist adversity and persist proved to be central to the permanence of the sports career. In this process, the family's expectation that their child will have a successful career in soccer and reach social mobility must be considered (RIAL, 2006; ANJOS *et al.*, 2012).

Rotta (2014) and Andrade (2016) highlight the role played by the family in the sporting trajectory of their athlete children. The account by P4 (35 years old) illustrates the importance of family: [...] since then, all the matches I play I always dedicate to her [mother], everything I'm going to do on the field, the goals, the victories, the achievements I had in life were always dedicated to her [mother] and my family (P4, 35 years old).

Insecurity in the professional career of a soccer player is something that appears frequently in the players' discourse. During the training process in the youth categories, athletes seek to make their dreams come true, but they live daily with the fear of dismissal, of injury and of having spent precious time marked by sacrifices and, even so, not having managed to reach professional soccer. Psychological resilience has been identified as an important characteristic of elite athletes (CRUST; AZADI, 2010; ROTTA, 2014; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019). P6's account highlights the importance of psychological resilience in the process of building his professional career:

A coach once told me to cut cane. I was sitting on the ground, and we had lost the match and he told me to cut cane: 'Go cut cane with your father instead of staying here and pissing me off'. I was only thirteen years old. But I saw it as a challenge: 'No, this guy is wrong'. (P6, 33 years old).

Almeida Neto and Santos (2015) note that, among the numerous aspects that differentiate the future professional player, for example, technical ability (knowing how to play), physical ability (supporting the pace of training and matches), their ability to resist pressure is one of the main characteristics. In the language of the players, in soccer, it is necessary to "kill a lion a day". The perspective of resisting in the face of adversity is a common element for all participants. The ability to resist and respond positively to adverse situations are important characteristics of resilience (FLETCHER; SARKAR, 2012; MORGAN; FLETCHER; SARKAR, 2013; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019).

When asked about the most difficult moments in their trajectories, the following were identified: extra-field problems (parent separation, mother's death, grandfather's death and mother's illness) (P1, P4); injury (P3, P5); transition from basic to professional categories (P6); retirement (P2). P2's account illustrates the challenges of the retirement process and the importance of Sport Psychology at this stage of his career:

My current phase is also very difficult, which is the retirement phase. Gee! I'm seeing a sports psychologist and I'm managing to get it out and I know

how beneficial it is, we take a huge weight off our backs. [...] at one point my cycle would end and it's ending... it's a transition and this transition is not a simple, easy thing [...]. (P2, 38 years old).

Regarding the sources of support in times of adversity, five participants mentioned their families. Once again, family appears as the main support in the players' trajectory. Initially in the figure of parents and, later, in the figure of wives and children.

Studies with elite athletes have shown that even among prominent athletes the need for family support remains. However, what changes is the type of support received, from financial, at the beginning of the career, to emotional (CÔTÉ, 1999; MARQUES; SAMULSKI, 2009; FERREIRA; MORAES, 2012; REIS; FERREIRA; MORAES, 2016).

P2 cites the role of the sports psychologist in times of adversity: "To be honest? I was counting on myself. That's why I'm saying that today I see that a sports psychologist is fundamental, primordial" (P2, 38 years old).

P2's account illustrates the importance of the psychologist in high-performance sport. Learning to manage emotions and deal with the (personal and professional) demands imposed at different moments in their career, in addition to the constant search for high levels of performance, are examples of important skills for elite athletes. From this perspective, the work carried out by a sports psychologist will have a fundamental role. Work that will be based not only on the pursuit of sporting goals, but also on the athlete's quality of life and mental health (RUEDA; LACERDA, 2017; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017; BELL *et al.*, 2020).

3.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTING EXCELLENCE

Mental toughness has been considered a central attribute to reach professional sport and to achieve sporting excellence (COULTER; MALLETT; GUCCIARDI, 2010; RAMADAS; SERPA; ROSADO, 2012; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019). Dedication, discipline and determination are examples of characteristics mentioned by the participants, corroborating the literature (RAMADAS *et al.*, 2012; ROTTA, 2014; COUTINHO; MESQUITA; FONSECA, 2016; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017). As an example of discipline and dedication, one can highlight the accounts of P2 and P3:

[...] I didn't let the pleasures of life take away my focus. Because you can have a lot of friends, co-workers... ah! Let's rest, let's go out, let's see a movie. [...] you need to give up something to get another, nothing comes effortlessly, nothing falls from the sky [...]. It was my dedication in training and off the field that is just as or more important. Because outside the field, if you don't take care of yourself, you don't perform, it's no use, the body is not a machine. If you don't rest, it's over. (P2, 38 years old).

[...] I think my willpower was enough for me to get there where I am today, several times I could have stopped, given up soccer, and I think that many who play well, who have a lot of quality end up getting lost in the middle of soccer for nonsense, because soccer has many wrong things, clubbing, women, that we have to know that our focus is to play soccer, my focus has

always been that and I think people got lost because of that, there are many players who can say they have the same quality, but sometimes they don't have the same will. (P3, 25 years old).

Self-determination, emotional control in the pursuit of desired goals, and belief in the efficacy of personal achievement are characteristics found among elite athletes (RAMADAS, SERPA; ROSADO, 2012; ROTTA, 2014; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019).

P6 stressed the importance of cognitive skills, motivation and dedication to the achievement of professional soccer.

I think it's about mentality. I think sport is very mental [...]. There are certain decisions you need to make regarding positioning, reading the game [...]. Soccer is the rule, situations happen and the same thing happens, several times, or you have to expose yourself and say something or a coach put you out of position and you have to be ready to even if you don't want to say yes and you have to figure out. I was always that guy. I went to the national team, there were three phenomenal guys there. I said: 'Ah! I'm not going to play here, I'm going to start playing more backwards, because then I know I'm going to play'. Create these habits, you understand? And train, dedicate myself, concentrate on understanding what the coach is saying, understanding what the coach wanted. You need to have wisdom, not just on the field. (P6, 33 years old).

Participant P6 mentions game reading, decision-making and tactical obedience as important differentials to reach professional soccer. Game intelligence is related to perceptual-cognitive aspects that play an important role in the anticipation and decision-making process in high-performance soccer athletes (CASANOVA *et al.*, 2009; ROCA, 2011; ROCA; FORD; WILLIAMS, 2013; PETIOT *et al.*, 2017).

According to Petiot *et al.* (2017), the literature suggests that elite athletes have the ability to consider key information and generate appropriate tactical actions. Knowledge and working memory are crucial for processing information and making a quality tactical decision. Players must make quick and accurate decisions in a complex and changing environment. Athletes' decisions are made based on information coming from different sources, such as the ball, teammates, opponents. The decision-making process takes place under pressure and with opponents trying to restrict the time and space available (CASANOVA *et al.*, 2009).

The constant search for improving skills and overcoming adversity are important characteristics for elite athletes (THELWELL; GREENLEES; WESTON; 2010; FLETCHER; SARKAR, 2012; SWANN; MORAN; PIGGOTT, 2015; LIEW *et al.*, 2019). The accounts of P1, P2 and P3 evidence this process of constant improvement of their capabilities.

When I play a very good match, I don't get carried away and when I play a bad match, I think that the next time I have to improve [...] I demand a lot from myself, I demand that I'm always playing at a high level, always to be training well, it bothers me a lot to be out of a match, I want to always be able to play, so I think it helps me a lot to always be at a good level, [...] I'm never comfortable with the situation. (P1, 27 years old).

You [can] never settle down. The athlete, to reach the summit, can never think that what he did yesterday was enough, he has to have regularity, he cannot be ten and he cannot be four, if he is five and every time five, don't let it go down, he'll do it. The athlete needs to have regularity and he gets it by being focused [...]. (P2, 38 years old).

[...] I always want to improve [...], I want to improve in training and I think that many players stay in the middle of the road because they are satisfied with what they have already achieved. (P3, 25 years old)

The following account by P6 makes evident the importance of mental toughness in maintaining high levels of sports performance:

[...] when you reach the top, you have to have mental stability, you need to have mental toughness because you are better marked, you are more pressured. It happens both in the professional career and in the national team. Many play three matches and then don't play anymore. So, excellence is also about staying a long time in the national team. Because within the national team there are changes from year to year and for you to stay you need to have great physical and mental power [...] you need to take care of yourself even more, you have to give up even more of things and the psychological side to be able to stay at a high level living all the situations. (P6, 33 years old).

Mental toughness has been related by several authors as an important characteristic for the acquisition and maintenance of sports excellence (JONES; HANTON; CONNAUGHTON, 2002; FLETCHER; SARKAR, 2012; MORGAN *et al.*, 2013; LIEW *et al.*, 2019; VIDUAL *et al.*, 2019). Mental toughness provides the athlete with a psychological advantage over opponents. In this perspective, Thelwell *et al.* (2010) identified as the main attributes of psychological resilience in soccer players the ability to believe that they will achieve success, react positively to adverse situations, control emotions and be able to ignore distractions and remain focused. Such characteristics were pointed out by the participants of this study.

Participant P2 also mentions as an important complement to the acquisition and maintenance of performance at high levels the specialized psychological monitoring (sports psychologist): [...] "now imagine an athlete who is focused, determined and who has the privilege, because it is a privilege that all clubs should have and don't have, to be monitored by a sports psychologist" (P2). This statement highlights the importance of Sport Psychology in the sports development process of high-performance athletes (GEE, 2010; RUEDA; LACERDA, 2017).

3.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR THE COMPETITION

The performance in a competition is the most outstanding moment for an athlete. It is at this point that their skills (physical, tactical, psychological) are most demanded to achieve the desired performance. Listening to music, mentalizing and studying the opponent are examples of the psychological preparation mentioned by the participants, corroborating the findings in the literature (THELWELL *et al.*, 2010; GRUSHKO *et al.*, 2016; WEINBERG; GOULD, 2017).

[...] I suffer from an anxiety that only I know. [...] so I do not watch sports programs before the matches, I try to listen to music, disconnect myself from the world. (P2, 38 years old).

I try to listen to music, visualize the match, remember my important matches. Mentally I visualize the games. I try to remember when I was a child and played in the countryside and I think that I'm here today and I think that I'm going to go in the same way when I played there, that I can't be different. But I always try to be looking at the matches I played in the past to be able to do the same in the match. (P4, 35 years old).

I try to be calm, clear my head [...]. The performance analyst sends the report to us and I'm always reading and thinking about what I'm going to do during the match. I watch as I head the ball, I can create match situations in my mind like this, you know? Every now and then some bad thoughts come, but I say at the time I can't think about it, if I do that I'll make a mistake and I say: 'No! This thought is not valid and I can mentalize it'. I don't know if everything I think happens during the match, but I've always tried to do that. (P5, 23 years old).

Participant P6 uses as his main strategy to prepare himself psychologically to study his opponents.

I study the opponent a lot, a reading. [...]. I went to play in the World Cup and studied the team for six months, the teams, so I knew how a guy, for example, Italy's team had one quality, Korea's had another, the Netherlands' had another, it changed from one team to another, one was faster, the other dribbles more, the other shoots a lot, the other has a good pass, especially in important matches. (P6, 33 years old).

Soccer requires the athlete quick decision-making. Throughout the game the athlete needs to quickly observe, process, evaluate and execute the tactical and technical solutions for a given game situation (COSTA *et al.*, 2010). This type of preparation grew among high-performance athletes with the rise of performance analysts. These provide information about the individual or collective of their players and teams from the use of various memory aids ranging from simple pencil and paper to the most sophisticated technology (SILVA; CASTELO; SANTOS, 2011).

3.5 CONCENTRATION: DEPRIVATION/PUNISHMENT

Being part of the squad of a first division club involves becoming a public person, which can have an important effect on the athlete's private and social life. In this process, the concentration regime deserves to be highlighted. The way it is established may vary from club to club.

Soccer is a sport that has an intense calendar of competitions and, throughout the season, competitions take place simultaneously. A squad may be playing, for example, the Brazilian Cup, the Brazilian Championship and the Libertadores at the same time (GOMES; SOUZA, 2008). In this way, players spend most of their days in hotels, traveling and at the Training Center.

Concentrations at the Training Center (when the match is at home) usually take place one day before the match. On these occasions, it is common for athletes to stay in a hotel in the same place where they train, and each athlete has their own room. When the game is away, the concentration is longer and players stay in hotels in the city where the match will be held. On these occasions, they can share a room with a teammate.

When athletes are in a concentration regime, they are usually isolated. They try to eat at pre-established times and are separated from other guests. The number of days they spend on a concentration regime may vary according to the coach. In the pre-season, some Brazilian coaches choose to keep athletes focused for 15 days or more without returning home. Therefore, from the moment he joins the main team of a first division club until the end of his soccer career, the athlete will have to live with

situations of concentration. As mentioned, the established rules may vary depending on the characteristics of the coach and the club.

The participants' perceptions of the concentration regime varied. Two players rated it as positive (P1 and P3); two as unpleasant, but as part of the process (P4 and P6) and two as a source of stress (P2 and P5). The following accounts illustrate the different perceptions:

[...] Today the awareness for concentration is better, but I think it's boring. Sometimes we concentrate at 10 am on Wednesday to play on Thursday at 10 pm. I watch TV, read the bible, talk with friends, listen to music, watch movies, a little bit of everything. The difficulty is to be alone, staying in the bedroom [...]. I always asked my family not to tell me any problems when I'm focused (P6, 33 years old).

It's a time to rest, a time to reflect, to focus only on the match, to be able to, I don't know, to think, to escape a little from off-field problems because it's a match and you can't keep thinking about the problems you have at home. [...]. I occupy myself watching movies, listening to music, downloading music, I try to, I don't know, to lie down, rest as much as possible and sometimes play video games. Sometimes I even enjoy concentrating, of course not for a long time, not many days, but I'm super calm (P1, 27 years old).

Honestly, I don't see such a need for concentration. [...]. You sleep, you wake up, lie down all day, you don't know what to think and you end up thinking good things and bad things, wow, you get bored. I lie a lot all day and watch movies, TV shows, I don't even talk to people much (P5, 23 years old).

The concentration regime, the renunciation of personal life and excessive training were identified in the study by Rodrigues (2004) as the main stressors in the career of elite soccer players.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this study allow us to conclude that soccer appears as a central theme in the participants' lives. The family of origin presents itself as an important reference throughout the entire sporting trajectory; initially in encouraging the realization of the dream of being a soccer player and, later, in emotional support in adversity.

There is great satisfaction with the professional career. The invitations to play for the Brazilian national team and social ascension deserve to be highlighted in this process. It is also possible to observe that the athletes reached the professional team before reaching the age limit to compete in championships for the youth categories and they stood out early in the different categories. Most players interviewed identified off-field problems as the most complex.

The participants' accounts show indicators of mental toughness and clarity in the definition of goals for the professional sports career. The effort, discipline and constant search for sporting improvement of the participants deserve to be highlighted. The performance in a first division soccer club and being called up to the Brazilian national soccer team materialized the realization of the dream.

The methodological choice of using an in-depth interview allowed for a broader understanding of the development and maintenance of sporting excellence in soccer. Research of this nature should be encouraged to advance sports science.

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Resumo: O objetivo deste estudo foi compreender a construção da trajetória de jogadores de futebol profissional da seleção brasileira. Foram entrevistados seis jogadores de futebol, do gênero masculino, que faziam parte da equipe principal de clubes que disputam a primeira divisão do Campeonato Brasileiro. Critério de inclusão: mínimo de dois anos como jogador profissional e pelo menos uma convocação pela seleção brasileira de futebol. Os atletas foram entrevistados individualmente. A partir da análise das entrevistas, constatou-se que o futebol se apresenta como tema central em suas vidas e que a família tem um papel importante no contexto do esporte. A importância das habilidades psicológicas é confirmada para aqueles que atingiram a elite do futebol profissional e a seleção brasileira. A compreensão da trajetória esportiva de atletas da elite constitui um tema de grande relevância para o avanço da ciência do esporte.

Palavras chave: Competência Profissional. Futebol. Atletas. Psicologia do Esporte.

Resumen: El objetivo de este estudio es comprender la construcción de la trayectoria de futbolistas profesionales de la selección brasileña. Entrevistamos a seis futbolistas, de género masculino, que formaban parte del equipo principal de clubes que compiten en la primera división del Campeonato Brasileño. Criterios de inclusión: mínimo de dos años como jugador profesional y al menos una convocatoria para la Selección Brasileña de Fútbol. Los atletas fueron entrevistados individualmente. A partir del análisis de las entrevistas, se constató que el fútbol es un tema central en sus vidas y que la familia juega un papel importante en el contexto del deporte. La importancia de las habilidades psicológicas se confirma para aquellos que alcanzaron la élite del fútbol profesional y la selección brasileña. Comprender la trayectoria deportiva de los deportistas de élite es un tema de gran relevancia para el avance de la ciencia del deporte.

Palabras clave: Competencia Profesional. Fútbol. Atletas. Psicología del Deporte.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that this work involves no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Juliane Jellmayer Fecho: Study planning, data collection, data analysis and article writing.

Maria Stella Peccin: Study planning, data collection orientation, data analysis and article writing.

Ricardo da Costa Padovani: Study planning, data collection orientation, data analysis and article writing.

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EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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