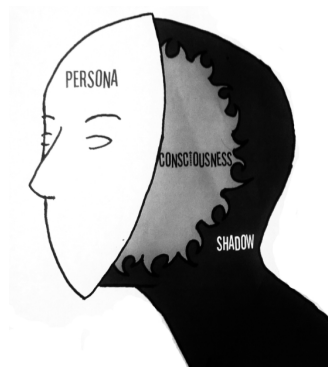


Behind the 'bold face': A clinical perspective on men's career transition, leadership and decision-making patterns among professional football players and military pilots

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Abstract

This thesis examines the nature and origins of football players' and pilots' skills, which are based on the cold-blooded rattling down of checklists and tactics. With reference to interviews with industry experts, it will explain the differences between this approach and modern concepts of management, which focus on people, adaptive leadership and complex, holistic result optimisation. The tensions between these two mindsets, it is argued, lie behind the difficulties footballers and pilots currently face when they undergo inevitable career transitions in their mid-thirties.

Jung's *persona-shadow* model is applied to interview data to establish hidden fears and anxieties, and consideration is given to the long-term effects of their suppression. In addition, it is acknowledged that in career transitions, a role is played by the loss of holding environments, with their strong rituals, both in football teams and in fighter squadrons. It is suggested that this loss can contribute to an identity crisis and the complexity of career transitions around midlife (Braverman & Paris, 1993).

Recommendations are set out regarding how better knowledge about one's own psyche can contribute to a smoother personal and professional transition. Both the benefits and limitations of a 'cold-blooded' approach are highlighted. It is therefore hoped that this research will help men to understand themselves better and open up to new insights, and help employers and co-workers who are accustomed to modern business environments, or have different mindsets, better cope with traditional men's leadership styles. The focus of interventions, it is argued, should not lie in making men softer and women tougher (which would be stereotyping), but in enhancing appreciation of everyone's strengths and qualities, regardless of their gender.

Keywords

Career transition, male leadership, stress management, Jung, persona-shadow, diversity.

1. Introduction

“Sometimes it’s not the people who change, it is the mask that falls off”

Haruki Murakami (as cited in azquotes, n.d. a, para 1)

The topic of men’s leadership is often approached from the perspective of women and with a focus on the struggles they face working in male-dominated areas (e.g., Sandberg, 2010). Men’s struggles have therefore tended to be overlooked (Runté & Mills, 2006; von Franz, 1992). This thesis focuses on the difficulties faced by two particular groups of men who face similar challenges: professional footballers and military pilots.

At around age 35, football players and Air Force pilots typically undergo career transitions. Their physical performance drops and can only partially be compensated by routine. The change is dramatic: even if they remain in their former environments – for instance as player’s agents (intermediaries), managers, instructor pilots, staff officers, etc. – they lose a great deal of their identities.

When you fly a jet at speeds around the sound barrier, people expect you to have everything under control: speed, altitude, navigation, radio communication. Fighter aircraft are traditionally operated as single seaters, i.e. there is only one pilot on board who bears all the workload. This requires an extraordinary multi-tasking capability as, unlike civil aviation, the flight itself is not the primary goal. The job of an Air Force pilot is to control the airspace with radar, to intercept other aircraft and, if they are declared as hostile, to engage and destroy them. Flying is a side job, a routine; the operation is the goal, the creative part. Therefore, all Air Forces implement a fierce selection process to detect the few out of many capable of doing the job.

In a cockpit, the climax of stress is reached when an emergency occurs. The first seconds are often decisive. Thus, all pilots know the first steps of the emergency checklist by heart; in case of an engine fire: Power Control Lever – OFF, Firewall shutoff – CLOSE, Extinguisher – ACTIVATE, LAND as soon as possible. The emergency checklist is also called ‘BOLD FACE’. This term is a homonym as it describes both how pilots’ emergency checklists are printed (in bold letters) and the kind of attitude expected from them when their engine is on fire¹. Comparatively, emergencies in

¹ “*Boldface* items are for immediate action, when the aircraft may be lost if the items are not completed quickly and in the correct order. Correct and rapid execution of these steps is so critical and essential that pilots must complete them from memory. Through training and repetition, the paired cognitive and motor activities required

civil aviation are so rare that some pilots, over a career of multiple decades, encounter them only in the simulator. The risk is considerably higher when operating fighter aircraft: The US Airforce proudly announced a record in safety for the year 2015 and named a figure of 1.12 mishaps per 100,000 flying hours. In 2014, the same figure of major airlines in the U.S. was a mere 0.16 (Business Jet Traveler, n.d.).

It takes a specific personality to contain these risks, to be alone in a cockpit and to experience a constantly high stress level throughout a flight. And yet, these pilots seem to love such stress levels. Their 'bold face' has become their brand: Always cold-blooded, ready to rattle down checklists, take good decisions, bring the jet back safely. And eagerly await the next mission.

The fierce selection process is also known in popular sports such as baseball (see Lewis, 2003) and, of course, in football. In Germany, the current World Cup holders, around 200,000 boys aged 14 presently play football (Mitglieder-Statistik, 2015). On average, only two of them will be called to play for Germany's A-team and only about 100 of them will have a chance to become a professional football player. The ones who get through must deal with high levels of stress, as winning the game is not only a matter of sportive success but more and more linked to economic survival. Examples of a 'heaven or hell' game include (non)relegation or (dis)qualification for the World's most lucrative sports competition, the UEFA Champions League. Often the decision is taken by a single goal; one shot, missed or scored. One can imagine the pressure on a player taking such a decisive penalty shoot. Or can we? If you look at these players just before the kick, you can hardly see any doubts. Before the match, they tell you how well-prepared they feel to win the game; how eager they are to play on the pitch and how much they want to be in the starting 11. They know they are good; their instinct helped them pass the screening, and their skills have achieved masterclass level through countless hours of training. They can rely on their talent and routine. And they know exactly what their job is: score, avoid conceding goals, win the match.

Both systems, football and military aviation, have set up performance-enhancing rituals, strong teambuilding procedures, and symbols of common identity to align individual aspirations with the overarching interests of the systems within which they operate. Both worlds are perfect settings for storytelling, which includes myths, exaggerations and sheer lies. Visit a local pub after a football

to perform the checklist are stored by the pilot as procedural memory (or 'motor skills')" (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994, as cited in Clay-Williams & Colligan, 2015, para 8).

match or an air show and you will witness plenty of these narratives. And it will be argued that both activities turn around a *phantastic object* – the star footballer or the fast jet.

Phantastic objects are:

subjectively very attractive ‘objects’ (people, ideas or things) which people find highly exciting and idealise. They engage core biological and psychological processes of human attachment and falling in love so that people seek to attach themselves to them because they imagine (feel rather than think) they can satisfy the deepest desires, the deeper meaning of which they are only partially aware (“Phantastic objects and divided states,” n.d.).

We can therefore identify some commonalities to describe the job environment of professional football players and fighter pilots:

Table 1. Common career characteristics of football players and fighter pilots

	Football Players	Fighter Pilots
Simple success definition	Score, avoid opponent goals, win	Take-off, bomb/control/fire, land
Career start-end	20-40	20-40
Holding environment	Team	Squadron
Rituals	Strong	Strong
Public opinion	Controversial but mainly inaccurate and glorifying + Heroes - Overpaid, Overindulged	Controversial but mainly inaccurate and glorifying + Heroes - Warriors
Phantastic object	Star footballer	Fast jet

The ‘simple success definition’ and ‘public opinion’ featured in Table 1 above are very relevant to men’s leadership and identities, as noted by Karelaia (2017):

When we see someone who gets results, we are likely to project onto that person the entire leadership package: self-confidence as well as ambition, status, charisma, etc. But the imagined leadership attributes we associate with high performers are highly contextual. In male dominated environments, the mantle of leadership will seem to settle more easily on

the shoulders of men, because that's what is already familiar—and hence expected—within that context (Karelaia, 2017, p. 1).

This thesis considers: how football players and fighter pilots develop the skills required to do their jobs; the resultant mindsets they develop; and the impact these mindsets have when they come to transition to new careers. Specifically, football players and pilots are encouraged to operate in a rational, 'cold-blooded' manner, as their objective is to work through checklists and engage in tactics. As will be explained, this differs tremendously from modern concepts of management, which focus on people and complex, holistic result optimisation. The conflict between these two ways of doing things means that footballers and pilots face unique challenges when they are forced, as a result of their declining physical capabilities, to undergo career transitions in their mid-thirties.

Relevant literature will now be reviewed in order to establish what work has been done on identity, career transition and midlife. Key theoretical concepts will be introduced. Appropriate research questions for the present study will then be set out, with the insights and shortfalls of this literature in mind. Next, the methods used to explore these questions will be described. Findings will then be presented and discussed, and recommendations proposed. Finally, limitations and future directions will be considered, before the main points of the thesis and their implications for practice are summarised in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Blurred Identities

Football players and pilots evolve in a community with a very strong identity: you fight for your team, your squadron, your country. This identity is galvanised through symbols: you wear uniforms and shirts; there are banners, flags, identifying colours, etc. Further, footballers and pilots interact within sacred spaces: The dressing room in both worlds is a holy grail for supporters and the media, who would love to enter but are unable to, as access is strictly restricted. Only active team members can enter; the media are banned from filming in this very intimate cocoon. These symbols, rituals and spaces have evolved because they paid off in terms of reaching overarching goals: winning battles and matches. It is perhaps unsurprising then that psychological investment in the Air Force is significantly higher than in other organisations (Meier, 2017).

On a macro level, identity bonds are not just very strong, but also various: a football player is not only part of a team but also of a club, a league, a nation. The mere fact that he is a professional football player opens many doors worldwide. Taxi drivers immediately know what to talk about, and players might even get tickets for sold out concerts when they introduce themselves. Similar observations can be made for pilots: although some myths were demolished following reports of boring long-haul flights, drastically reduced salaries and overstretched crew, the pilot remains something special, particularly when it comes to the military pilot (this includes pilots in the Navy, the Air Force, the Army, the Coast Guard, etc.). The Hollywood blockbuster *Top-Gun* has underpinned the image of the 'knights of the sky'. Pilots, similar to football players, have many different strong identities: they are members of the Air Force, the Armed Forces, their countries; pilots belong to a 'guild' which everyone knows (or thinks they know) something about.

But what is going on inside these people, in their 'inner theatres' (Kets de Vries, as cited in Lui, 2012)? Who are these people? What do they know about themselves? Few people take the time and effort to find out more about themselves and start their process of individuation, i.e. explore their whole personality, as Jung somewhat frustratedly noted in his last years (Geist und Psyche, 2013).

Jung coined the *shadow and persona model* (amongst others) to describe the composition of one's psyche (Geist und Psyche, 2013). He perceived people to be obsessed by the 'outer world', by impulses, hence neglecting the discovery of their psyche, their feelings and emotions (ibid.). The following figure depicts Jung's model:

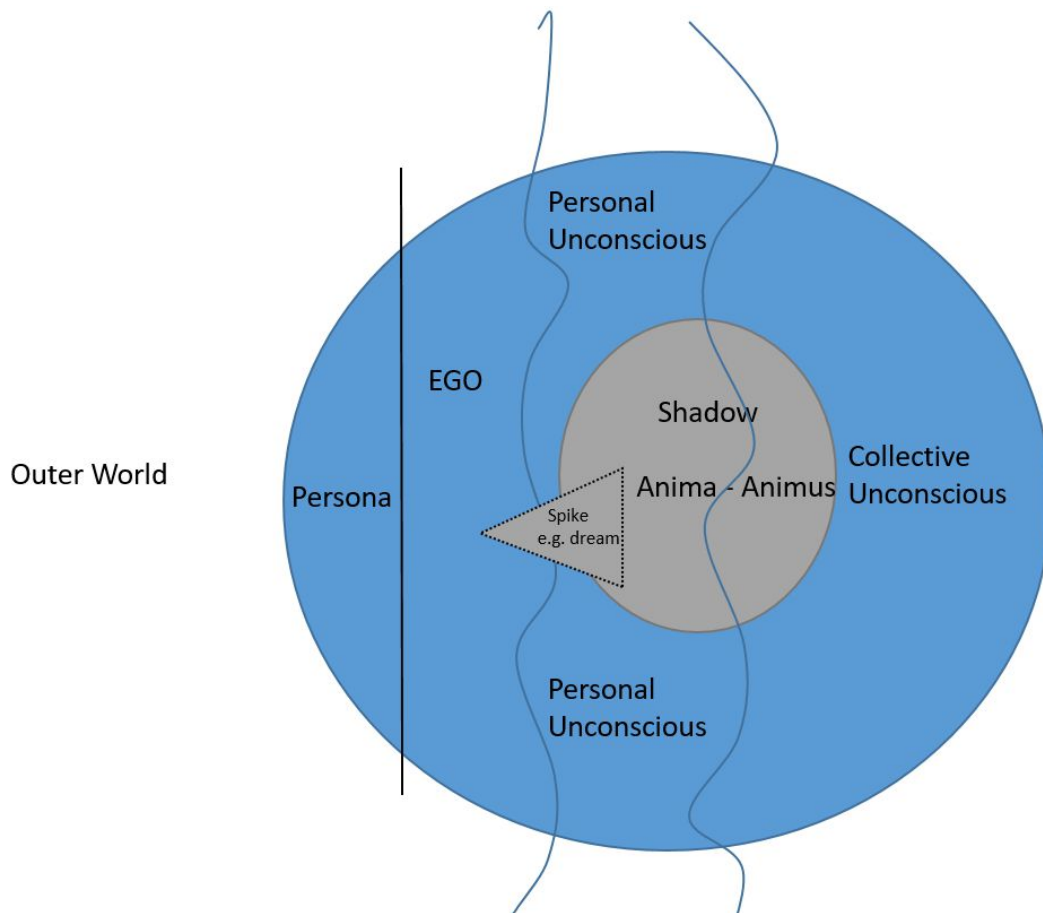


Figure 1. A person’s psyche. Adapted from The Depth Coach (2017), “Cognitive functions: Jung” (n.d.) and Jung (2011).

According to Jung, the *persona* is:

an element of the personality which arises ‘for reasons of adaptation or personal convenience’. If you have certain ‘masks’ you put on in various situations... that is a persona. The persona can be seen as the ‘public relations’ part of the ego, the part that allows us to interact socially in a variety of situations with relative ease. Those who identify too strongly with their personas, however, can run into problems—think of the celebrity who becomes too involved with his or herself as the ‘star’, the person who cannot leave work at work, or the academic who seems condescending to everyone (“The Jungian model of the psyche,” n.d., para 21).

Figure 1 shows the protective role of the persona (forming a shield from the outside world) and the important role of dreams as ‘spikes’ (messages where the unconscious tries to make contact

with the conscious). If such a spike is neglected, for instance because it contradicts the persona (the way people *should* see a person), the entire psyche (the blue surface) will not be explored. It is therefore argued here that, because reflecting openly on dreams, fantasies and associations is not part of the ‘masculine education’ experienced by footballers and pilots, learning to do so takes a lot of time and effort.

Psychoanalysts have spent entire careers attempting to understand the relationship between the conscious and unconscious states of psychic content (Meier, 2001). What is the likelihood, therefore, that a man in his thirties who has spent his career in a very specific segment knows much about it? One would guess low. Particularly when we look at the characteristics of this work.

Football players and pilots who have had seamless careers have had to pass continuous selection processes. Even after they have been selected for the A-team or the squadron, they must compete and be the best to keep their jobs. This I call a *Darwinian environment* in analogy to Darwin’s work about the ‘survival of the fittest’. Moreover, pilots’ and footballers’ primary task is not lifelong psychological balance, but simply success on the pitch and in the air. Hence, footballers and pilots have no obvious reason to ask questions about themselves, and as a result know very little about themselves. This presents challenges when it inevitably becomes time for them to leave.

Why should highly-specialised professionals in aviation and sport even try to start the journey of self-analysis? It is argued here that they should do so because their careers are short-lived, and doing so might facilitate their inevitable transitions into different working environments. As will be explained, Jung’s concept of the persona is fundamental to such understanding. In the case of pilots and footballers, the persona, or ‘mask’, takes on a specific guise: that of the ‘bold face’ described in the introduction.

2.2. The Midlife Challenge

Retiring professional football players and squadron pilots both join others entering midlife. When you type “midlife” into Google, the first 12 hits will be “midlife-crisis”. Even academic research tools, such as EBSCOhost (a database of literature) suggest adding “crisis” when you search for “midlife”. Altavini (2016) has a refreshingly positive approach, referring instead to the “midlife passage”, this being an opportunity to change from a caterpillar into a butterfly.

2.2.1. Defining midlife

Let us elaborate on ‘midlife’ to start with. Biologically (by simply taking average life expectancies of adults into account), midlife could be determined as the period between the ages of 40 and 45, also known as the “second adulthood” (Hollis, 1993, as cited in Altavini, 2016). Jung (Geist und Psyche, 2013) defined it at around 35 years (which makes sense considering life expectancy in the 1950s was around 68, “Life expectancy at birth by race and sex, 1930–2010,” n.d.). Medical definitions revolve around the production of sex hormones, and typically place the transition somewhere from the mid-40s onwards. Socially, midlife can be described as the period where children grow up and leave the family. Perrig-Chiello (2011) suggests that midlife can be defined around a new orientation point that takes over the navigation of life: in the first half of life, people count the years since they were born; at midlife, death becomes important and thus the remaining years ahead increasingly dominate one’s thoughts. There are clearly many different definitions, but whatever definition one might choose, the starting point will probably not be before 30 and not after 45. Therefore, the participants studied in this thesis were ending their careers somewhere at the beginning of their midlife.

2.2.2. What crisis?

As Stein (1983) states, persons in midlife sometimes feel sad, caused by a sense of loss and the emotions that go with it. This loss might relate to children leaving the family home, a decline in physical fitness, or letting go of career dreams and ambitions. Convinced by Jung’s definition of the self, which includes the unconscious, Stein compares the feeling in midlife with a thorn that might be extremely hard to find because it is embedded deep in the unconscious.

Kast (1991) compares the struggle at midlife to the stone of Sisyphus, who endlessly rolls it up the hill only to fail just below the top. The stone rolls down, and Sisyphus must start over again. Kast had this thought once standing in her kitchen, looking at all the plates and dishes which, once more, were dirty and needed to be cleaned – they became for her a symbol of the eternal repetition of routine tasks – and the older you get, the more tasks get routine; as Jung said: “...the turnings of the pathway that once brought surprise and discovery become dulled by custom” (as cited in Kets de Vries, 1978, p. 45). Stepping back from a beloved activity can, according to Kast, trigger an outburst in the form of a midlife crisis.

Jung compared midlife and the related crisis to the turning point of the sun where a re-evaluation of earlier values is needed to perceive the error in our former truth (Walker, 2012).

Others challenge not the existence of a midlife crisis itself, but the many definitions of it (Freund, 2009). Yet there seems to be some consensus that the multiple changes (social, professional, medical) that occur during midlife can, in connection with the growing insight that life is limited by death, lead to considerable destabilisation of, amongst other elements, mental health. Perrig-Chiello (2017) argues that men suffer more as a result of this phenomenon because they tend to underestimate the change and – in contrast to women – are not used to having a network outside of their core family where such worries can be addressed.

2.2.3. Midlife crisis in sports: Sad stories

“Nothing could satisfy me outside the ring... there is nothing in life that can compare to becoming a world champion, having your hand raised in that moment of glory, with thousands, millions of people cheering you on.”

Former boxing champion, “Sugar” Ray Leonard (as cited in Vickers, n.d., para 6)

The above quote represents just one example of a great sportsman who struggled to contain midlife and the end of a career. The list of sad stories, of fallen heroes in sport, is, tragically, extensive. Three out of five former professional football players will be declared bankrupt according one estimate (Gibson, 2013). One could mention Paul Gascoigne, George Best and Gerd Müller, to name only a few; all ex-international players who ended up either in bankruptcy, drug abuse or a combination of both. Ben Johnson, Tiger Woods, Mike Tyson and Michael Phelps are celebrities of sports other than football who did not manage the transition process well from sport star to a happy life, at least not at the first attempt. And these are famous sports people, known by the public. It is safe to assume that there are many more less-known or unknown athletes who share the same pain.

Vickers (2015) lists three main reasons for these struggles:

- Biological reasons: High intensity training releases the hormone serotonin. Once you reduce or stop your workouts, the hormone level sinks as well, creating a biological imbalance in the body.

- Tunnel vision: The focus of top athletes must be narrowly on their performance (at least, this is what they think). Once that target is taken away, they lose focus.
- An identity crisis: The stronger an athlete's identity has been shaped over his or her career, the more dramatic this is.

The last point brings us back to the main topic: a form of identity specific to footballers and military pilots that has been shaped over their careers, possibly by external forces such as admiration. Psychologically, the persona, the mask, has been moulded by spectators and supporters and there is room to assume that it does not represent the whole psyche (see Figure 1).

Caution should be taken when considering reports of sports stars' downfalls. Research might be biased by the 'celebrity factor'. Are there really significantly more failures in career transitions of sportsmen than for an average person? What type of failures does this include? Might it be that, when it comes for example to drug abuse, the shocking contrast of a previously fit, famous, handsome and rich person and emaciated wreck sleeping under the bridge has more impact than thousands of similar destinies of anonymous people? From personal experience and observation (for example, the annual gathering of all Swiss ex-international football players), I can tentatively state that it is both this contrast of their state of health, and also an increased likelihood of unstructured career planning, that points to the existence of a real problem. The best striker of all time in Swiss football reports that after just 14 months in his new job as Sports Director of a professional football club, he suffered from burn-out because, amongst other reasons, he could not stand having 27 meetings to discuss contracting a player worth (just) 70,000€ (Lavoyer, 2017). Also, although there are problems when pilots retire from their squadron, this shift seems to be less dramatic. I will therefore not overstretch the similarities at this point.

2.3. Career transition in general

Looking into the myriad of publications on career transition, we must acknowledge that it would be far beyond the scope of this paper even to *try* to summarise everything that has already been said or written about the topic: undoubtedly, over-generalisation would be the price paid to reduce complexity. What follows therefore is a sample targeted to the specific focus of this thesis.

For Ibarra (2004), a personal change process cannot take place overnight; the computer-like update does not work. In contrast to Jung's approach of *individuation*, which focuses on the inner theatre, her focus lies on the outside world and the multitude of possibilities for career transition that it

offers. Other, less academic and more practical handbooks, however, do stress the importance of an accurate inside view at midlife, including consideration of the benefits of age, such as typically decreasing zealousness, higher loyalty and increased reliability (Jakob, 2001). Some authors see career change as a bumpy but always upward road which manifests nicely in the title *Climbing the Corporate Matterhorn* (Newman & Roy, 1985). They illustrate one aspect covered in this paper: checklists are not an adequate management tool for handling complex (life) situations.

2.4. What is at stake?

In football, sportive success is paramount. At the beginning of a career, one can assume that winning the game is the basic driver. Many boys dream of becoming a great international football player in one of the big five leagues in Europe (England, France, Italy, Spain and Germany) and earning a lot of money in the process. But, as discussed in the introduction, most of these boys know that the likelihood they will achieve this is minimal. Their striving for glory is fuelled by excellent financial prospects for the few who succeed – but also by a huge public interest.

Jacques Lacan (cited in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013) uses chess as a metaphor, linking play to three different levels of identification: imaginary (war); symbolic (queen and king); real (the game). These levels of identification make chess popular because there is something in it for everyone: you can see it as a battle, you can adopt the role of king or queen, or you can simply play the game. It might be argued that the spectators of a football match can also individually choose different layers of identification: tribal war, roles (underdogs vs. superstars) and the (beauty of the) game itself.

George Orwell said: “International football is the continuation of war by other means” (as cited in azquotes, n.d. b, para 1), which illustrates that sports in general and football in particular can easily be taken too seriously.

Although economy is taken out of the equation in military aviation, the stakes remain high, if not higher: a failure can quickly lead to disaster, death or collateral damage. We can therefore conclude that what seems remotely linked – the roots of stress in football and military aviation – might have more in common at a second glance. Both footballers and military pilots must meet the expectations of the public, spectators, the media, politicians, opinion leaders, and the internet: football players and pilots are warriors in the name of many others; people want to see them

defending nations, tribes and beliefs. Typical psychological defence mechanisms are projected onto sports and the military – ‘splitting’, to name one;

One such relation is the management of anxiety through splitting and projection, one element of the split being imbued with the ‘good’ and the other the ‘bad’. Splitting and projection are widespread human ways of avoiding anxiety, of not problem solving at all system levels. Inevitably, organisational structure and culture is made up of many examples of this type of system defense mechanism (Long, 2013, p. 98).

In this case, splitting involves cheering for one’s own club and booing the opposition. In the military, it involves seeing the other side as the enemy.

Because many people are interested in the outcomes of footballers and pilots’ actions, the pressure on them as individuals can be beyond imagination. They shoulder the expectations of thousands and millions, and success and failure are not a result of a yearlong work but possibly of an intuitive or cognitive decision taken in a split second. What is going on in the minds and psyches of these people in this very moment? Are they aware of being responsible for the outcome of a possible tipping point for a large community? What are the long-term effects of regularly facing such high-pressure situations? How does this affect career transitions? As will be detailed in the findings and discussion, interviews with both football players and pilots, active and retired, can provide insights relating to these points.

3. Discussion: Turning the Kaleidoscope

The discussion which follows addresses the research questions set out earlier.

3.1. RQ1: How do Darwinian male-dominated business environments impact individuals' identities and career transitions?

3.1.1. The impact of the selection process

As mentioned, both professional football players and pilots go through fierce selection processes throughout their careers. For many of the participants, what started as a dream in early childhood turned out to be a bumpy road – even threatening at times. As rP4 commented: “When I was in a classroom with 300 other candidates, I was sure I would not succeed”; and, “I lost good colleagues during the screening”. Or, as aF1 said, “The older I got as a junior player, the less I believed I could do it [become a pro]”.

It is safe to say that all interviewees had at some stage doubts about whether they would achieve their goal or not. Is the downplaying of stress demonstrated in the results chapter a legacy of this? This is difficult to say with any certainty, but both football and military aviation as institutions do appear to struggle with creating ‘safe spaces’ within which to address overstress. Edmondson (2011) explains that a safe space is a site of psychological safety, where failure can be addressed without the fear of blame. Worries, fears and anxieties can be expressed without the risk of being seen as weak. Elsewhere, Edmondson states that safe spaces are characterised by: “the belief that one will not be rejected or humiliated in a particular setting or role, [the term] describes a climate in which people feel free to express work-relevant thoughts and feelings” (Edmondson & Roloff, 2009, p. 48). As an aviation psychologist I spoke with put it, “We [the aviation psychologists] would be happy to help them [the pilots] reflect, discuss, share anxieties. But only very few take advantage of this. Most of them would ask their colleague ‘Are you sick!?’ if he told them he is going to see us”.

Here we can observe a secondary effect of the selection process: The aviation psychologists are involved in the screening. Pilots would therefore always see them as people who try to find a problem, which would end the career aspirations of the candidates. They would have to enter the same building and see the same people, who, years ago, decided on their fate as pilots – this is certainly not the perfect set up to create a safe space in the sense described above. It is probably

difficult for the pilots to change their perceptions of psychologists after they graduate from pilot school to see them as a helping hand.

The continuous selection process triggers competitiveness. Three pilots mentioned explicitly that, once in the system, one of their main drivers was the challenge of remaining in it – they probably did not lose their enthusiasm for flying, but winning the game became at least an important secondary gain. From personal experience, I can confirm this: As a very young pilot, aged 17, I was glad to see my colleague flying the slot before me going around once more because I was under pressure and disliked being shouted at by the instructor. Seeing my colleague taking off again meant having to go through this 10 minutes later. What kept me going was competition; I neither wanted to be thrown out nor give up. I also remember that my aviation psychologist at the very first interview asked me whether it was *my* dream to become a pilot or my father's ambition. I was irritated by this question and said it was mine. I understand in hindsight that this was a crucial question. Never had I dared to tell my father how much I disliked flying what were then underpowered machines with an angry, authoritarian flight instructor. I am of course grateful for the inspiration received as I have the privilege of looking back on a great career as an aviator – but I think a bit of a safe space and more alignment between my inner theatre and the demands of the outside world would have been helpful. This could have happened had I been offered the possibility to discuss my struggles with the instructor pilot. But the picture I had in those days was that talking about one's fears or discomfort would lead to dismissal – remember, we knew that out of 2000 candidates, only 20 would be picked, so the feeling was that anything could be enough to send you home.

Constant assessment impacts football players as well. aF3 for instance, mentioned that the highest level of stress he experienced tended to manifest not on the pitch, but after the transfer of a lot of money: “There are huge sums paid and this is what builds up pressure”. There is a constant pressure to be lined up for the next match. aF1 waited many months to be given the chance to play – when he got it, he failed (he got a red card and was sent off). Every injury, every change of coach (which can lead to a new system played; to a new starting line-up) carries the risk of the individual dropping out.

Building up confidence within the football community seems to be difficult to say the least. But this confidence would be the basis for a ‘holding environment’ that allows people to address their fear and anxieties. Winnicott (2005) defines this as a caring, attentive, predictable environment in

which one feels safe. This is of course difficult to achieve when in your dressing room, 12 substitutes want to take your place. The richest examples were given by rP3, who suffered from burn-out at the age of 42. When he dared to speak about overstress, he did it in very formal terms such as “We do not have the resources to sort out the challenge”. It was enough for his superior to tell him “Well, we know it is difficult, but if out there we can find someone who can do it, it is *you!*” to trigger competitiveness and let him run into personal crisis. He continued, “I never said stop!”.

3.1.2. The impact on career transition

Specialisation

The two aviation psychologists and executive recruiter I interviewed in the preliminary phase of the investigation indicated that there are two main challenges for professional football players and pilots. The first is that their knowledge is very specific and because of this, they do not think ‘outside of the box’ when it comes to long-term career planning. As reported in the findings chapter, only two out of 13 applicable participants thought they might be doing something completely different 10 years from now (one thought about managing real estate, another one having no concrete idea). Thoughts about (completely) new possible selves were not observed. One aviation psychologist said:

At the age of 35, the hardware of our pilots is flawless, but they have a monopolistic software, only useful in (military) aviation. Young people (Generation Z, born 1995-2020), potential candidates, know this; they do not choose a lifetime job but a job that presumably offers them the possibility to adapt to the outside world. In the typical male-Darwinian (survival of the fittest) scheme this means: adapt to the demands of (potential) spouses who request more job-sharing at home and free yourself from lifelong commitments.

The executive recruiter shared this view, but saw pilots as being in a strong position: “Their strengths are resilience, goal-orientation; they are balanced and reliable. They have a strong, healthy personality; they are, in general, a safe pick for industry”.

Phantastic objects

Let us now take a closer look at the notion of the ‘phantastic object’, as described in the introduction. rP2 commented on his decision to quit fast jet flying:

I decided in December that I would stop flying the F/A-18 [the flagship of the Swiss Air Force]. I did not feel good taking this decision and wrote an e-mail to my commander. It is difficult to let go, you know. People look up at you and say ‘WOW, you are flying the Hornet’². I caught myself thinking ‘What will my children say in school when they are asked what’s their Dad’s job?’... how ridiculous is this? It is about your ego, you are flattered when people say ‘wow’.

Remember, this is a pilot who is still flying, has an excellent job in the Air Force and every – objective – reason to be proud and self-confident. But to let go of this specific jet hurt him, although immediately after taking the decision, he said he felt very much relieved.

From personal experience, I can sympathise with him. I left the Air Force eight years ago and ever since, I have a recurring dream. I am in the squadron room. Everyone is getting ready for the briefing. I realise that no one else is aware that I quit years ago, so I could just pretend I am still in and have another flight. In Freudian terms, I feel the fight between the *superego* and the *id*: one tells me not to be silly and that I should say I will not fly; the other says, “C’mon, have a go, you will be OK”. The dream always continues until I climb the ladder to board the jet. Then I wake up. On one occasion, before the crucial moment of taking off, I brought myself to the point that I could ask myself in my dream, “What pushes you to have a go, and not admit that you are neither fit nor allowed to fly the jet anymore?” My answer in the dream was: “It will make a good story tonight at the bar!” I woke up, a bit embarrassed. The dream has not come back again since. Both vignettes suggest that being a fast jet pilot is not just a job – there is an element of adventure, of pushing limits, of being one of a few and getting the feeling of admiration.

The work of Taffler (2014) on phantastic objects in the world of finance can be applied in making sense of this phenomenon;

The term *phantastic object* is derived from the Freudian concept of *object* which is used to describe the internalised ‘representations’ of people, ideas or things in our unconscious mind, and *phantasy*... It describes the unconscious mental representation of something (or an idea) that fulfils the individual’s deepest (and earliest) desires to have exactly what they want exactly

² The other name for the F/A-18.

when they want it. Possession of such phantastic objects allows investors unconsciously to feel omnipotent, like Aladdin whose lamp could summon the genie, or the fictional bond trader (Taffler, 2014, p. 5).

It does not take a huge amount of creativity to suggest that if a phantastic object relationship exists between investors and the finance market, there might also be such relations between men and jets. These are symbols of dreams: posters of aircraft decorate the bedrooms of scores of boys (and an increasing number of girls) all over the world. The same applies for posters of football. Indeed, just as fund managers can become phantastic objects for a whole industry, so might football players, who face similar levels of risk in their occupations, and also high levels of fame:

Fund managers themselves are in some sense being employed as phantastic objects. They are the agents that their clients, employers, financial advisers, investment consultants and the media unconsciously need to believe in to alleviate the anxiety associated with the fact that investment outcomes are uncertain (Taffler, 2014, p. 25).

The measurement of success

Besides a high degree of specialisation and a phantastic object relationship, a third element seems to complicate matters during career change: What is success? How do you measure it? This seems easy to define in football: depending on your position, score or prevent the other team from scoring. It is also relatively easy to describe in military aviation: attack the enemy; bring the jet back safely. But as Falcao (2010) points out, it is rather more difficult to define in business, such as in negotiation contexts. Does it relate to how best to compensate staff for redundancy, for example, or to increasing shareholder value? It is doubtful that the cosy feeling of winning a football match or landing a jet safely after an engine failure can be replaced by such things.

The relevance of this point is supported by many answers given in the interviews. For instance, two retired footballers defined the major difference between being a player and being a coach as the former being concerned with looking after themselves and the latter having to manage everyone and everything. And yet, consideration is rarely given to the challenges that others, such as the media, the family, the club or the association, raise for footballers' and pilots' rigid criteria for success. rP2 stated that balancing family and job is difficult because "there are no checklists to handle this". When 75% of active football players and pilots state that a good flight or a good match make them happy, there is room for doubt that the transition to becoming a CEO or a

project manager will be smooth – how will they know when they drive home from work or go to bed that this was a day to be proud of?

The executive recruiter interviewed mentioned that, for people like retired pilots and footballers, managing systems tends to be easier than managing people. He expected that pilots would struggle when it comes to cultural fit in organisations, as they come from a homogenous, screened world where many are carved out of the same piece of wood. According to him, the clear role assignment (blue against red, East against West – mentioned as splitting earlier in this paper) and clear task orientation (clear the airspace, shoot at the target) that military pilots are used to sharply contrasts with the daily life of a manager, who has to hold ambiguity and take decisions based on at times questionable facts – sometimes on no facts at all.

In the interview with the aviation psychologists, they revealed that the pilot screening process does not include the testing of career changing capability. The Air Force wants the best people to be productive between the ages of 20 and 35. It can be assumed that football clubs would have the same interest: to have the best players.

3.2.RQ2: How do acquired stress management strategies impact career transitions at midlife?

I will focus on stress management *as particular decision-making patterns* to answer the question of whether acquired patterns influence career transition. Both footballers and pilots seem to struggle somewhat when it comes to talking about stress. As mentioned in the results chapter, only half of them could recall a moment of high stress in their daily job. I therefore had to allow a lot of time and use a work-around (“talk me through a difficult, stressful phase in your life”) to get good examples of a critical incident. As a participant observer, this was a surprise because personally I could easily talk you through at least four situations of high stress (close to a fatal crash) in the cockpit.

Downplaying stress is very common in both fields. The most obvious example came from rP4, when he entered into very bad weather and eventually executed a U-turn close to the ground, close to the clouds, and in very bad visibility. When his passenger – not a pilot – said “Wow, that was tight”, he answered: “No, no, that was routine”, although he knew perfectly well that they had just avoided a crash. One might argue that he was hiding behind his persona.

One of the aviation psychologists I spoke with made similar observations. As a member of a care team after a fatal crash, she entered the squadron room and asked the pilots if they felt fit to fly in the afternoon. All of them said something along the lines of: “Sure, it is part of the job, our deceased colleague would love to see us taking off again”. Only when all left the room except one, would he open himself up and tell her that he could not get the pictures of the crash site out of his mind. She stated that maintaining the hero-image was an important aspect for the survival of the system (the Air Force; air combat) and that men are, according to research, educated to be strong and so self-fulfil existing stereotypes.

Relatedly, rF3 said “I like stress. I am very competitive”. Here we see again that stress is linked to competition. It is good to bear it, but when you do not, you lose.

‘Cold-blooded’ or ‘rational’ mindsets are also adopted in managing stress. aP2 explained that after his wingman (the pilot flying next to him) had an incident: “I was never really bothered. I knew this is part of my job and the fact that we quickly knew that nobody was harmed, helped”. This quick-fix mentality was seen elsewhere: aP1, who lost both engines in flight, said that after an unsuccessful re-ignition: “Only one engine must come back, only one”. aP4 said, “Stick to basics: Aviate-Navigate-Communicate”. And aP2 stated: “when I am under stress, I simply prioritise”.

The downplaying of stress involves not only ‘playing the hero’ and appeals to rationality, but also, relatedly, repression. Recall rF2’s statement reported in the findings chapter: “I try to repress stress, I use the image of Vaseline on my body in order to repel the stress.”

None of the interviewees, with the exception of one pilot who had suffered and recovered from burn-out, reflected on stress that *cannot* be handled; stress that is simply too much to bear and requires external help. The basic expectation within the observed systems is that stress is good: you handle it, even enjoy it, and perform better thanks to it. May the fittest survive.

In the contexts of military aviation and football, stress is managed by simplifying and prioritising tasks. And when the stress level lowers, no, or only little, reflection takes place. Novel approaches, like reflection, dream analysis and association are not considered. The ‘bold face’ persona reigns within situations of high stress, both in the cockpit and on the pitch.

Employers in both military aviation and football release men (and a small but increasing number of women) in their midlife into the job market. These are men who are used to experiencing sustained levels of stress; men who regularly perform under the scrutiny of thousands of spectators and/or high media interest; men who are competitive and, so far, successful; men who have acquired solid tools to handle stress. But they are also men who do not have much reflective space; men who do not know much about life outside of their professional environment; men who have fixed ideas about what constitutes strength and weakness. In short, they are not well prepared for a pivotal point in their career and in their life. It is therefore unsurprising that a lot of them fail during the transition process. The next chapter will consider what these men need to do before and at midlife to mitigate against the unique challenges they will face.

4. Recommendations: A Look Behind the ‘Bold Face’

As Jung noted, people in public life tend to have a particularly strong persona, i.e. the face they show to the public; their mask (Infinite Awareness, 2017). Such individuals’ personas are formed by – amongst other influences – the public’s expectations. Recall the example included earlier of rP3 telling a scared passenger that a life-saving flight procedure was purely routine. It is likely that rP3 thought that the expectation of the passenger was *not* to see an airman in trouble in bad weather. One might assume that this pilot saw trouble coming but showed his ‘bold face’, his mask, his persona, to the passenger, even when contrary evidence undermined this representation of his self. Are such men able to take off their masks in other situations, such as in the squadron room or at home, where they also face others’ expectations of them? Maybe they assume that their wives or partners are attracted to their cold-blooded side, or perhaps that their troops want a leader who always has everything under control.

Such beliefs may have severe consequences for pilots and those around them: How many widows have grieved after their husbands have died in an accident? How many pilots have perished due to over-confidence? The commander of Alitalia flight 404 on November 14th, 1990, is a possible example: He taught his co-pilot throughout the whole flight in a know-it-all manner how such a flight should be executed. Shortly before landing, the intimidated co-pilot did not, as he should have done, correct the commander when the latter executed a descent far below the suggested flight path (due to a dysfunctional instrument). The aircraft continued its approach below the minimum level and impacted three miles short of the runway, killing all 45 passengers and the flight crew. Possibly, the loss of Space Shuttle Challenger is also due to the strive to fulfil the (assumed) expectations of others (Wilkinson, 2016).

It is therefore important that footballers and pilots are given opportunities to ‘look behind the mask’, or at least acknowledge its existence. But this is likely to be difficult for them, as it is counterinitiative to all they have learned throughout their careers. Care should be taken to ensure that footballers and pilots are not only made aware of the benefits of self-discovery, but that that this self-discovery is managed in a way which will not overwhelm them and do more harm than good. Hence, appropriate recommendations are set out below.

4.1. Offer possibilities to acknowledge or look behind the mask

A footballer’s or pilot’s mask may not only be formed by the public, peers, families, etc., but also torn off by them, or by coaches or other practitioners, in an attempt to make the individual aware

of possible discrepancies in their character. Such a strategy is not recommended for two reasons: First of all, there is a reason why a mask can be helpful, why the characteristics of footballers and pilots exist. In the evolution of their jobs, being a risk-taker, being cold-blooded (or at least pretending to be cold-blooded) pays-off at times; it is a basis for survival, for mission accomplishment. Secondly, the mask should not be torn off by someone else, but individuals must know about its existence and have the opportunity to gently remove it *themselves* from time to time.

Focus might therefore be better placed on ensuring that pilots and footballers have the opportunities, courage and role models to be themselves and not constantly have to pretend that they are unbeatable. As aP4 said: “Some people want to always look good – but it is the open lads who have the best reputation”. For instance, if just one ‘strong’ leader set an example and talked about his weaknesses without fear, this might be helpful. Recently, the Chairman of Nestle did just this, enabling the CEO of Swiss Life, Switzerland’s biggest pension fund manager, to open up about his cancer diagnosis:

After consultation with the chairman and the media officer, we decided that a public announcement of my illness would be best. It took certainly a bit of willpower to do so as I feared stigmatisation. But what helped me was that the chairman of Nestle was also talking publicly about his illness (Enz & Gratwohl, 2017, para 7).

Decision makers, in particular career-makers, should add the following specific point to their promotion-item list: people who are prepared to talk about their limits. The flawless career record may trigger suspicion.

In the contexts of military aviation and football, a new approach to leadership could be that during management team meetings leaders do not just rattle down the agenda and flip through scores of PowerPoint slides and spreadsheets, but give room for reflections and hold the necessary room to think (as stipulated by Kets der Vries, 2016). A look into the overpacked Outlook calendars of many leaders implies that there is simply no time to ask peers, bosses and direct reports how they feel, which would include for instance the question of whether a young father has slept enough last night and if his spouse is happy with his work-life balance. But such ‘adaptive leadership’ is exactly what is needed when you have to perform in environments of uncertainty – in such contexts, “leadership is an improvisational and experimental art” (Heifetz, 2009, p. 65).

4.2. Develop networks outside the job

If there is no safe space at the workplace, it is even more important to have a network outside of work where one can take off the mask. Ideally, footballer's and pilot's families and friends would allow them to do so, and they would surround themselves with people who knew them before they became a successful manager, footballer or pilot.

4.3. Acquire a basic knowledge of psychology

One interesting question would be how much psychodynamic theory a manager has to be taught to identify the persona-shadow realm in Jungian terms and therefore to realise that there is a difference between the way people see him and the way he would like to be seen. If it requires 18 months of tuition, we cannot expect MBA programmes to change their syllabus accordingly. Would a day or two do? I suspect that people who are already inclined towards psychology could quickly understand how to look for masks and shape an organisation where they can be safely lifted *within* the organisation. But they would still face challenges in 'traditional' leaders, who have been shaped through countless years of competition where (a certain degree of) elbowing paid-off. From such a person's perspective, a man who talks through his employees' worries with them or, even more interestingly, through his *own* worries, might be seen as suspicious, a 'softie', and not ready to fight. Again, this calls for strong leaders (such as the above example of the Nestle Chairperson who served as a role model for the insurance company CEO) who somewhat unexpectedly come up with vignettes and examples of occasions when they reached their limits of stress handling and explain how they asked for help.

4.4. Raise awareness of men's struggles in midlife

It might also be helpful for co-workers who have always worked in modern business environments and are unfamiliar with Darwinian ones to understand that they produce people with particular mindsets. For example, a lack of clear boundaries and expectations may be threatening to men used to completing checklists and measuring success in terms of set criteria. Likewise, when competition has been a successful strategy for overcoming obstacles and achieving objectives, it can be difficult to adopt alternative approaches. Again, valuable support could come from role models, for example chairpersons. It would send a strong message if those in authority were willing to address their failures and worries and refrain from resorting to cockfighting games and other defence mechanisms.

4.5. Negative capability

Albert Einstein was frustrated because he could not find the link between his relativity theory and quantum mechanics. He could not stand the fact that there are phenomena that cannot be determined, put in a formula, sorted. Would he be comforted if he knew that we still have not bridged the two concepts? Is there not some kind of magic when we simply do not know exactly how something is done? Remember how we could marvel at a magician when we were children and did not strive to understand everything, somewhat numbing the entertainment of just being amazed when watching someone doing tricks? The concept of *negative capability*, first described by John Keats, may help to underpin this idea: “*Negative Capability*... is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899, p. 277). It can be assumed that this capability is not tested when pilots and footballers are selected.

4.6. Checks and balances

Very competitive managers who have come from military aviation and football may easily understand punishments for overconfident actions and situations where stress is downplayed. This is certainly the case for ex-pilots, who will be familiar with regulations such as those put in place after the Zurich air disaster, described earlier. ‘Red zone leaders’, as described by Prasad Kaipa (as cited in Lee, 2012), tend to overdrive and neglect (important) details. An organisation has to set up checks and balances to identify and confront these people when they take unnecessary or, even worse, uncontrollable risks. In aviation, cockpit voice- and flight data recorders help to identify such moments. The increasing number of codes of conduct, laws to protect whistle-blowers and scores of newly established ethical standards can be seen as a consequence of such efforts.

4.7. Acknowledge benefits of employing former footballers/military pilots

Companies may benefit from having courageous leaders, who are ready to take decisions under severe time constraints, and fight against ever-increasing bureaucracy and ‘protectionitis’ (having lawyers comment on and double check all decisions). Searching for limits, pushing those limits, and even going beyond them, remains an important driver for personal and collective success. This should be acknowledged by employers.

4.8. Prepare for career transition

Finally, it is the particular responsibility of leaders in highly competitive environments where a prominent career change is likely (such as professional sport and military aviation) to at least *offer* the possibility to learn about upcoming challenges. Football clubs and associations should offer

talks, classes and courses to players in their late 20s, and the Air Force should not simply focus on pilots aged 20-35 and wait for drop-outs to fill their organisational chart. Air Forces worldwide are already suffering from declining numbers of young people interested in the job as a result of poor career possibilities (Bogan, 2017) – it would be in their interests to add some lectures about career planning to their exhaustive educational programmes. A crucial message would be to make sure that there is a network outside the glamorous world of ‘Top Gun’ pilots and top scorers; a network that will be there after the jet has landed and the last match has been played. ‘Climbing the Matterhorn’ (see literature review) is not an appropriate metaphor for fighter pilots and footballers when it comes to career change: It not possible for them to climb any higher on the hierarchical ladder. But there might be a *different* mountain or, even better, a base camp to manage, where the rewarding task of preparing the next generation for *their* hike awaits.

5. Conclusion

It would be unwise to attempt broad generalisations based on the findings of this study. Nevertheless, we might cautiously assume that men who have worked in typically masculine environments of public interest in the first 15 to 20 years of their career tend to ignore the challenges of career change that may lie ahead.

Growing efforts are being made to increase diversity in all professional environments and there is an increasing number of educational programmes focusing on ‘soft’ factors (e.g., INSEAD’s EMCCC program). Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that the psyches of men suffer from classical management principles, for example as demonstrated in the high number of burn-out cases at the executive level (Freudenberg, 2014). Yet, acknowledging their limitations still seems to be taboo in male-dominated (professional) environments.

Football players and pilots do not openly talk about their worries – and this includes worries associated with a career transition. Their acquired decision-making patterns are often based on rattling down checklists or (over-)confidence in instinct and/or talent. This results in a quick-fix mentality, which can lead to frustration when the management task is not hitting the ball or landing the jet, but dealing with ambiguous, inter-personal challenges.

It is suggested that the cultivation of a job-independent network (outside the glamour of air shows and Premier League matches) and role models who talk openly about weaknesses and worries could lead to the creation of safe spaces and sustainable holding environments in private life *and* the work-place. It might be that co-workers who know about the possible struggles of men entering new careers in their midlife could themselves contribute to enhanced teamwork if they do not fall into the trap of admiring the mask, but look for the person behind it. They might not always like what they see, but positive feedback for openly addressed worries might be valuable.

The first step to break the deadlock remains, however, within the psyche of the individual man: he needs to understand the difference between who he is, who he would like to be and how he is seen by others. These might be three different men. Management education could consider this and provide relevant modules.

INSEAD Grading: *Excellent work. The project is outstanding across multiple areas.*

This is a superb thesis. In a world that is currently focusing on women in the workplace (not without reason), we must not overlook or drown out men's voices and challenges. You explore the "performance-enhancing rituals, strong teambuilding procedures, and symbols of common identity (that serve) to align individual aspirations with the overarching interests of the systems within which they operate." You have applied strong conceptual frameworks that support your research, and in addition will probably resonate with readers. You have managed your participant observer stance in a sophisticated way, taking your research in a direction that provided important findings not only for pilots and footballers, but also for men in general. You contribute to the literature on leadership in an accessible and practical paper.