



## BEYOND THE FIELD: MIGRATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND RETIREMENT EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN FOOTBALLERS IN THAILAND

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### Abstract

Retiring from professional sports marks a significant life transition for athletes, often accompanied by complex emotions. This phenomenological case study explores the experiences of ten professional African football migrants who retired in Thailand. It examines their reasons for retiring abroad, the legal and structural barriers they encounter, and mental health challenges faced during the integration process. Data for the study was gathered through semi-structured interviews with both retired African players and those in the retirement process, all holding permanent residency in Thailand.

The study underscores the time-consuming nature of cultural adjustment and integration for sports migrants, with language barriers, cultural disparities, and social adaptation posing significant challenges. Retired athletes, especially, face concerns regarding access to healthcare, insurance coverage, and specialized medical care. These issues are particularly pronounced for African sports migrants in Thailand, who also grapple with legal and immigration matters such as visa regulations and work permits. Despite these challenges, the African community in Thailand provides vital social support networks, fostering a sense of belonging and mitigating psychological stressors associated with retirement and life in a new country. However, retired athletes encounter obstacles in obtaining legal residency, with age restrictions for retirement visas which limits employment opportunities. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for local stakeholders supporting migrant players as they transition out of professional sport.

**Keywords:** Retirement, African Football Migrants, Integration



## Introduction

Existing research on African footballers has often been framed within colonial and neo-colonial perspectives, emphasizing economic and cultural dimensions of migration. However, there is growing interest in understanding the social dimensions and experiences of African migrants in Thailand by examining the convergence of migration studies within football, retirement, mental well-being, and the role of sport as a tool for social inclusion.

African migrants in Thailand are classified as expatriates, and many engage in circular migration patterns, traveling to Thailand on tourist visas to conduct small-scale businesses. Chantavanich, & Gozdziaik (2021) argues that African migrants in Thailand practice circular migration, which is common to the migratory patterns practised by other small-scale traders in Thailand. Previously, players of African descent would come to Thailand without contracts, aspiring to establish professional careers in the country. However, alterations in Thai governmental immigration regulations have made it increasingly challenging to use Thailand as a pathway to a career in Europe (Siriwat, 2024). The process now entails navigating through academies and agents, with the ultimate objective of displaying their skills in European markets, a journey that is now subject to institutional control through the government's visa entry program. As a consequence of the changes in the immigration laws, it has impacted the ability of football players to enter Thailand, requiring them to obtain work visas prior to arriving. These changes reflect broader economic and political processes affecting football mobility into Thailand.

The past two decades have seen Thailand as a destination country attracting international talents to play in the top-tier league (Thai League 1: T1). Among other nationalities registered in the T1, African players constitute up to 83 players in the 2022-2023 season. The paper presents the lived experiences of an early group of professional African footballers who migrated to Thailand over a decade ago with over 10 years of experience as sports migrants living in Thailand and hoping to retire and settle down in Thailand.

The study aimed to identify the multifaceted challenges of African football players after they have retired from professional football and seek legal residence in Thailand. By exploring the lived experiences of retired athletes and those in the retirement process, the study seeks to understand the challenges they encounter, including access to healthcare, insurance coverage, and legal residency. The findings aim to inform policymakers and local stakeholders about the specific needs and obstacles faced by migrant players during their transition out of professional sport, with the ultimate goal of developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to facilitate a smoother transition process.

## Literature Review

### **Studies on the global migration of African football players**

There have been several studies conducted on the migration of African football players, examining various aspects such as the reasons for migration, the experiences of players abroad, and the impacts on both the players and their home countries. Early studies led by Kuper and Szymanski (2009) explored the economic, social, and cultural factors driving the migration of



African football players to Europe and the USA, and the consequences of this migration on both African football and the global football industry. Acheampong, Raspaud, & Bouhaouala (2020) investigated the experiences and perspectives of African football players who migrated to Europe for professional opportunities. It examined the challenges they faced, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, and exploitation, as well as the motivations behind their migration.

Several studies on football migration have focused on the globalization aspects, with theoretical frameworks based on neo-colonial studies. Poli (2010) and Darby (2010) discussed the various perspectives on the migration of African footballers, including case studies, theoretical analyses, and policy recommendations on the role of football in African diaspora communities, the impact of migration on player development, and the relationship between football and identity.

In an attempt to better understand the legal and institutional restraints Kuper and Szymanski (2009) examined the barriers faced by African players in the European labor market, including the issues of work permit regulations, transfer rules, and discrimination. Recent studies have begun to look into issues of mental health and well-being. Research on mental health among retired football players has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly concerning issues such as depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and the long-term effects of concussions and repetitive head injuries (Gouttebarga et al., 2017). While these studies cover a broad spectrum of issues, experiences, and impacts, whilst offering valuable insights into the complex phenomenon of African football player migration and contribute to our understanding of its social, economic, and cultural dimensions, it is recognized that despite the popularity and legal recognition of football as a professional sport in Thailand (Yodmani, 2017), there have been limited studies addressing the issue of transition and retirement of foreign players abroad.

Starting from this foundation, the objective of this study is to enhance the existing body of literature concerning career transition, specifically focusing on the retirement journeys of football players. The aim is to gain a more profound understanding of how legal and institutional constraints in Thailand can be alleviated to reduce social and mental health challenges for those entering retirement.

### **Studies on the retirement of professional athletes abroad**

Research on the retirement experiences of sports migrants abroad is a relatively emerging field, with studies led by Chun, Wending, & Sagas (2023) highlighting the role of managing identity during times of transition. Studies have shown that retirement from professional sports can be a challenging transition for athletes, particularly when they are living in a foreign country away from their home culture and support networks. Research by Greif (2019) found that athletes who retire abroad often experience difficulties in re-negotiating their identity outside of the sports context, leading to feelings of loss and disorientation. Academic research on retirement among professional athletes who choose to live abroad covers various interdisciplinary topic with contemporary research seeking to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by retired athletes in their post-retirement lives.



In parallel, scholars such as Agergaard (2018) have explored the cultural adjustment and integration processes of retired sports migrants. They found that athletes who retire abroad may face challenges in adapting to a new cultural environment and establishing a sense of belonging in their post-sports lives. Factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation can contribute to the difficulties of retirement abroad.

Additionally, professional athletes who retire abroad may lack access to familiar support systems, such as family, friends, and former teammates, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Establishing new social connections and support networks in the host country is crucial for successful retirement adaptation. Moreover, retirement abroad may present unique financial considerations and challenges, such as navigating tax laws, managing investments, and accessing pension benefits across international borders.

The field of research on the retirement of professional athletes has been predominated by studies conducted on individual sports (Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016 and Küettel, Boyle, & Schmid, 2017) with limited research on the transitioning of athletes in team sports.

### **Studies on mental health issues and retired professional footballers**

There is growing recognition of an association between contact sports participation and increased risk of neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's' disease and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (Van Ramele, Aoki, Kerkhoffs, & Gouttebarga, 2017). Other main areas of research focused on addressing the prevalence of depressive symptoms and anxiety disorders among retired athletes, as well as the factors contributing to these mental health challenges. Researchers, including Gouttebarga et al. (2017) and Van Ramele et al. (2016), conducted longitudinal cohort studies to assess how factors like career transition, loss of identity, and adjustment to post-sports life affect athletes' mental well-being. Concurrently, they investigated mental health concerns among retired professional football players over a year - long period, analyzing incidence rates, the influence of adverse life events, and the efficacy of support networks.

Gouttebarga et al. (2017) studied the health-related quality of life of retired professional football players with that of the general population and explored various aspects of physical and mental well-being, including perceived health status, limitations due to physical or emotional problems, and overall life satisfaction. While not specific to football players, King et al. (2021), explored the mental health and well-being of retired professional jockeys, who also face significant physical and psychological demands during their careers. The findings may offer insights applicable to retired football players and other athletes.

By conceptualizing retirement from professional sports as a multifaceted process, it becomes crucial to tackle the challenges arising from different aspects, including social, psychological, and legal (institutional) dimensions.

### **Research Methodology**

The study utilized a general phenomenological research approach to delve into and analyze the lived-experiences of the informants. Aligned with methodologies outlined by



Moustakas (1994) this qualitative approach prioritizes understanding over confirmation. By adopting a person-centered perspective, the research sought to uncover the nuances of individual experiences, exploring both commonalities and differences through a meticulous examination of personal narratives. Dieumegard, Nogry, Ollagnier-Beldame, & Perrin, (2021) assert that this approach involves an ongoing internal process known to the individual and stems from the phenomenological tradition. Significantly, the research approach emphasizes an emic (insider) viewpoint, aiming to capture the participants' experiences from within.

Following approval from the Ethics Board of Kasetsart University in Thailand, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with ten professional football players of African heritage. The duration of the in-depth interviews lasted from an hour to one hour and thirty minutes. Informal conversations with the participants took place on multiple occasions, providing the researcher with a more profound understanding of their experiences as professional footballers. All interview locations were chosen by the interviewees; thus, all interviews were conducted in an environment that the interviewees knew and felt comfortable in. This three-months long fieldwork began in mid 2023 and employed a multi-sited data collection approach, with interviews collected in different cities.

As part of the research design, a purposive sample was recruited through the first author's contacts, and snowball sampling was subsequently applied to extend the sample (Hee Jung, & Fraser, 2023). To be included and qualified as an interviewee, players had to have professional careers spanning five seasons and must be residing in Thailand upon retirement. Based on the same inclusion criterion, the interviewees were able to comprehensively provide accounts of their experiences of relocating abroad and establishing themselves in their careers in Thailand. The prominent characteristic shared by all the interviewees was their decision to settle - down and retire in Thailand. The interviews consisted of three parts: a biographical part, a part on the challenges faced during the retirement experience, and lastly a part on the role of social support.

This research methodology followed the general grounded theory approach by Anselm, Strauss, & Barney (Strauss, 1994) and was chosen to ensure adequate continuation of the inductive approach. After gathering data from all participants, the interviews were transcribed and systematically analyzed through an analysis of recurring themes. As part of the data analysis, the initial coding identified a range of themes and issues, and the themes that were most salient and recurrent throughout the dataset were selected for more detailed study.

## Results

The findings from this study reaffirm that cultural adjustments and integration processes require time, with factors such as language and cultural differences and structural barriers posing as challenging factors impacting the transitioning process. Particularly in the context of retired professionals, their access to healthcare services, insurance coverage, and availability of specialized medical care is still an area of concern. As reiterated by the informants, how players experience their transitions are not only dependent on circumstances leading to the transition but also on the confidence in their individual financial planning and retirement security.



### Language and cultural differences

A player who has resided in Thailand for over a decade recalled that his initial attraction to the country was the promise of opportunity. Over time, he capitalized on these opportunities, successfully establishing himself and providing financial support to his family in Ghana through remittances. Additionally, he cultivated a network of friends and colleagues in Thailand, many of whom are involved in inspiring younger talents to explore opportunities in Asia.

The results from the study highlight the role of retired athletes' social support networks and community integration in Thailand. By fostering social connections with other members of the African community in Thailand, a sense of belonging is created which assists in minimizing the effects of common factors such as stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and the psychological challenges associated with retirement and living in a new country. As an informant recalled:

*"...living in Thailand, I relied on religion to maintain my connections with fellow Nigerians. The religious events and our gatherings shed light on our similarities, regardless of the occupations we are in..."*

*"...to be utterly honest, discrimination is everywhere. Even back at home, we may feel discriminated. Abroad and especially in a continent outside of ours, I tell my children it is the reality they will face. But that should not stop anyone from working hard and proving yourself. As a football player, I am defined by my professionalism on and off the pitch. There is a stigma that African players are lazy and too relaxed. I wake up each day trying to prove them wrong and to show with my performance..."*

### Structural barriers

Furthermore, common concerns regarding legal and immigration matters encountered by retired athletes residing in Thailand, such as visa regulations, residency criteria, work permits, eligibility for citizenship, and the legal rights and protections afforded to retired athletes within Thailand, were frequently discussed. In Thailand, the Immigration Office issues spouse visas or long-term residency visas, with the "Non-Immigrant O" category being the appropriate one for individuals seeking legal residence in Thailand upon retirement. However, a challenge faced by retired football players aiming to settle in Thailand relates to the age requirement. Applicants applying for the "Non-Immigrant O" Visa must be at least 50 years old, posing a hurdle for all younger retirees or players seeking to retire early. As part of this study, informants who met the age requirement and held the "Non-Immigrant O" visa are generally not permitted to work in Thailand unless they secure additional authorization or a work permit. This limitation restricts employment options for ex-players who might desire to pursue part-time or freelance work while establishing themselves in Thailand. As an informant highlighted:

*"There are certain constraints we face with the visa rules. I have children born in Thailand to a Ghanaian partner and we still encounter issues concerning re-entry. Friends from*



other African countries whom have Thai partners face other challenges, despite carrying work permits”

“...towards the end of this year, my contract will expire. If I am unable to secure a club to continue playing for in Thailand, I will need to explore alternatives for relocating my family, as our legal stay in the country will cease. Since I do not meet the retirement age criteria set by the Thai government, retiring is not an option for me.”

“I think it is almost impossible to retire legally considering my age. There are legal limitations because I am unable to apply for a retirement visa, despite other conditions that are met. Although I am able to show sufficient funding, if I am not at the age of 50 years, I can't attain that visa”

“There are issues because this means I must have a valid work permit to be able to live legally in Thailand. Despite whether or not I am employed by the company, I require it for my family to stay together here. I know of many Nigerian contacts that provide this service. You can pay to get a work permit but it does require you to validate it every certain amount of days. I don't know if it is the best option but people do it”

While the “Non-Immigrant O” visa provides a pathway for individuals to retire in Thailand, there are various issues and challenges that applicants may encounter during the application process and throughout their stay in the country.

“...Transitioning from being a player to an uncertain identity was a difficult journey for me. Leaving home as an athlete at the age of 19, and entering a phase where football was no longer part of my life was very hard. Harder than I thought. I had all these questions about my self-worth and ability to support my family.”

“...Fortunately, I found comfort in the transition as I was able to enroll in the coaching course [AFC C License program] that opened up new opportunities for me. As a player, I did not have time to participate in the courses. But as I ended my career, the support of my Thai football friends played a big role in my decision to remain in Thailand. Without their assistance, I might have opted to return home and pursue a more conventional career path, such as becoming an agent”

“When I left home, there was no choice of bringing my family. Now, I have family here in Thailand but since moving here over 8 years ago, my mother has never visited Thailand. I've been back home several times during the season break, but she has never travelled because to get a visa to enter Thailand, she has to go to another country to the closest Consular office. It's a lot of paperwork and not as convenient.”

“Family at home are not able to follow my games, but we communicate much easier than before. I am fortunate that I have children in Thailand and started my own family here.



*They come to my games and are a great source of support.... I would love to bring them back to see my roots one day”*

Another structural barrier, which was reflected as an area of shared distress among retired athletes involves the challenges faced in accessing healthcare and support post-retirement. Their access to healthcare services, insurance coverage, and specialized medical care remains a concern. One significant issue is the lack of continuity in insurance coverage, as transitions between clubs or countries often result in gaps in coverage, leaving athletes vulnerable to health risks and financial burdens. Additionally, accessing quality healthcare services can be challenging due to differences in healthcare systems across borders, coupled with language barriers and cultural disparities. Inadequate health insurance coverage further compounds these challenges, leading to high out-of-pocket expenses for medical care. A shared challenge amongst the informants is the concern over medical coverage and access to medical care for their children living in Thailand.

Additionally, the complexity of pension schemes also poses difficulties, with sports migrants contributing to multiple schemes in different countries, making it challenging to access retirement benefits and plan for long-term financial security at home. Moreover, career-ending injuries can exacerbate these issues, highlighting the need for comprehensive insurance coverage, rehabilitation support, and post-retirement planning. A former player recalled his experiences of being injured with a torn ligament, citing difficulties in receiving immediate access to medical attention:

*“The club told me to wait as they had used their group insurance for other players in the team. They told me that the priority to use the insurance was given to the main starting line-up. I ended up waiting half a season before beginning my surgery. It was frustrating as it was an injury that took place during practice, yet there was no urgency in the management’s response”*

*“A club I had played for was facing liquidity problems. I was injured on duty however the team doctor had insisted that I take a few weeks off to rest and recover. When I approached the manager with a request for a second medical opinion, he [the manager] was unhappy. He said, if you doubt the competency of our staff, my contract could be immediately terminated without compensation, attributing any perceived misbehavior on my part as the cause”*

Although research Rist, B., Quartuccio, C., Smith, B., & Pearce, A. J. (2024) indicated that both career duration and the manner of transition influenced a player's psychological well-being and athletic identity, several participants expressed a belief in the potential for entrepreneurship, coaching education, and career transitions following retirement from professional football in Thailand.

## **Discussion**

The study's findings underscore the time-intensive nature of cultural adjustment and integration processes, emphasizing factors like language barriers, cultural disparities, social



adaptation, and the hurdles of adapting to a new lifestyle, particularly during the transitional stages of an athlete's career.

In summary, career-ending injuries can exacerbate these difficulties, emphasizing the necessity of extensive insurance coverage, support for rehabilitation, and preparation for post-retirement life. Furthermore, tackling these obstacles demands cooperation among sports organizations, governing bodies, governments, and pertinent stakeholders to guarantee that sports migrants receive fair access to healthcare services and all-encompassing insurance coverage throughout their professional journeys and beyond.

As the research findings suggest, the experience of transitioning is influenced not only by the circumstances leading to the transition but also by their confidence in individual financial planning and retirement security whilst living abroad. The study emphasizes the significance of retired athletes' social support networks and community integration in Thailand.

Within the African community in Thailand, large cohorts are residing in Chantaburi province in the eastern seaboard (Chantavanich, & Jitpong, 2022). The African community in Thailand comprises individuals of African descent who reside in the country for various reasons, including work, study, or retirement. They form a diverse and vibrant community, with members originating from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and Sudan (Chantavanich, & Godziak, 2022). The community often fosters social connections and support networks among its members, providing a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Additionally, members of the African community in Thailand, especially those involved in specialized sectors like gemstone trading, play a prominent role in arranging and hosting cultural events, activities, and religious ceremonies (Chantavanich, & Jitpong, 2022). Albeit their involvement in niche industries (i.e. gemstone trade, wholesale clothes trade) cultural gatherings serve as a vehicle to celebrate the shared heritage and uphold connections with their cultural origins. During major sporting events such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, it was evident that community gatherings and activities were organized to encourage social gathering among expatriates, with Africans rooting for fellow African teams as they faced oppositions from other continents (Siriwat, 2024).

Moreover, the creation of social ties and interaction between individuals within the niche sports and gemstone sectors facilitates community support in diverse ways. This includes offering financial aid, guidance on remittance transfers, and opportunities to establish businesses, such as becoming involved as a trader in the wholesale clothing sector. The engagements reflected from the interactions among those within the African community exemplifies how a sense of belonging is fostered regardless of employment backgrounds. As reflected through conversations with informants, these interactions aid in mitigating the effects of common stressors such as stress, depression, anxiety, and the psychological challenges associated with retirement and adjusting to life in a new country.

In summary, community involvement has been identified as a vital element in establishing connections and fostering trust among members of the diaspora community. By building a trustworthy reputation, athletes aim to broaden their prospects for post-career



endeavors, instilling confidence in their ability to settle down with their families in Thailand. Moreover, concerns regarding legal and immigration matters are prevalent among retired athletes residing in Thailand, including visa regulations, residency criteria, work permits, eligibility for citizenship, and legal rights and protections. To be able to seek legal residence in Thailand, retirees must be 50 years of age, therefore posing a major challenge for professional athletes whom plan to retire but are not of the legal age. Furthermore, for those who satisfy the age criterion, holding the Non-Immigrant O visa generally prohibits retired athletes from working in Thailand without additional authorization or a work permit, limiting their employment options while settling in the country.

Despite these challenges, the Non-Immigrant O visa offers a retirement pathway in Thailand, albeit with various issues applicants may face during the application process and throughout their stay in the country. Nevertheless, some informants expressed optimism regarding entrepreneurship, coaching education, and career transitions post-retirement from professional football in Thailand, with the opportunities available through the Football Association of Thailand and Professional Footballers' Association (Thailand)'s career pathway coaching courses which have opened up quotas for foreign-nationals to participate in the various programs accredited by the Asian Football Confederation.

## **Conclusion**

The study emphasizes the challenges faced by sports migrants, particularly retired athletes, in adapting to new cultures and lifestyles, exacerbated by factors such as language barriers and legal hurdles. Issues surrounding access to healthcare, insurance, and pensions are particularly pronounced among African sports migrants in Thailand, leading to financial burdens and difficulties in obtaining medical care. Career-ending injuries further compound these challenges, underlining the need for comprehensive support systems and cooperation among various stakeholders to ensure migrants' well-being throughout their professional journeys and beyond. The study also highlights the importance of social support networks and community integration, particularly within the African community in Thailand, which offers solidarity and assistance to its members. However, concerns persist regarding legal and immigration matters, including age restrictions for retirement visas, which pose obstacles to retired athletes seeking settlement in Thailand. Despite these challenges, some opportunities exist for post-retirement career transitions, such as entrepreneurship and coaching education programs facilitated by football associations. Refocusing and developing new priorities in life and the importance of seeking support were highlighted in discussions on coping with life post-transition, particularly whilst living abroad. Insights collected from the study underscore the universal requirement for assistance and guidance among elite athletes, regardless of racial identity and locality. It becomes evident that the provision of support and care from both sports governing bodies and social support entities is imperative for facilitating the transition into post-athletic life.



## Policy Recommendations

The retirement process, especially when it occurs abroad, can be challenging and far from straightforward. Due to the diverse nature of football players' migration experiences, the study finds that despite support from the diaspora community, players vulnerable to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and heightened susceptibility to other common mental disorders (CMDs). Recognizing the complex nature of transitions like retirement, the study offers a set of recommendations for relevant stakeholders to help players navigate through these transitional periods more effectively:

**1. Establish Comprehensive Transition Programs:** Develop structured transition programs specifically tailored for athletes retiring from football, considering their unique migration experiences and the challenges they face abroad. Participants can be opened to locals and migrants.

**2. Provide Mental Health Support Services:** Offer accessible and culturally sensitive mental health support services to address feelings of loneliness, isolation, and susceptibility to common mental disorders (CMDs) among retired athletes.

**3. Enhance Social Support Networks:** Facilitate the establishment of robust social support networks within diaspora communities and among fellow retired athletes to foster a sense of belonging and companionship.

**4. Offer Career Transition Assistance:** Offer career transition assistance, including education and vocational training opportunities, to help retired athletes explore new career paths and successfully transition into post - football life. This partnership is encouraged through stakeholders such as the Football Association of Thailand, Thai League Company and clubs.

**5. Promote Financial Literacy:** Provide resources and training in financial literacy to empower retired athletes to manage their finances effectively and plan for their long-term financial security.

**6. Raise Awareness and Reduce Stigma:** Raise awareness about the challenges faced by retired athletes, particularly those abroad, and work to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues. Joint projects can be established with the media, attracting foreign players of various heritage to embark on careers in the media, such as football pundits or television show hosts.

**7. Encourage more collaboration between with Sporting Organizations:** Collaborate with football clubs and player associations to implement policies and programs that support athletes during the transition into retirement. The Professional Footballers' Association (Thailand) can play a role in creating personalized career guidance and counseling, educational opportunities, financial planning workshops, player welfare support, and transition workshops to assist professional footballers with career planning and retirement preparation.

By implementing these policy recommendations, relevant stakeholders can better support athletes in navigating the complex transition into retirement, particularly when it occurs in a foreign country.



## Areas of Future Research

1. Future research endeavors would benefit from employing a mixed - methods approach, which could accommodate larger cohorts, thereby facilitating more extensive and in - depth analyses. The outcomes of this study reinforce earlier qualitative investigations, such as the research conducted by Agnew and Abery (2021) on the transition experiences of professional Australian football players, reaffirming the notion that the transition phase presents challenges of varying degrees for all athletes.

2. Additionally, future research should strive to quantify the perspectives of players from diverse nationalities, such as Japanese and Brazilian cohorts, regarding their perceptions of transition. This approach will contribute to enhancing the transition process for all professional footballers, fostering the development of a comprehensive, collaborative, and inclusive guideline for individuals considering retirement or concluding their careers abroad.

3. Future research on the mental health of footballers competing internationally could explore various avenues to deepen comprehension and enhance support systems. Potential research paths include conducting longitudinal studies to track footballers' mental health from entry into professional football to retirement, comparative studies to understand cultural and environmental influences, qualitative research to delve into subjective experiences, and exploration of protective factors like social support networks and coping skills. By addressing these research areas, scholars aim to contribute to a holistic understanding of mental health challenges in international football and inform evidence - based interventions to enhance well - being.

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