

THE CONVERSATION

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Liverpool star Mohamed Salah was one of the more overworked professional football players in recent years.
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It's easy to scoff at claims elite footballers are 'at breaking point' from workload – but their burnout speaks for the rest of us too

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Maheta Molango, chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), has claimed that elite football players are now at "breaking point" because of excessive workload and insufficient rest. Speaking at the PFA and world footballers' union FIFPro's end of season review of player workload and recovery, Molango warned that players could strike because of workload demands, including the increasingly congested match timetable.

I can tell you a situation not even 10 days ago where I went to a dressing room directly affected and I said: 'I'm happy to be here and bark a bit but ultimately it's down to you. How far would you like to go?' Some of them said: 'I'm not having it, we may as well strike.' Some said: 'what's the point? Yes I'm a millionaire but I don't even have time to spend the money'.

Many readers must be rolling their eyes at the suggestion that some of the world's highest earners are at “breaking point”. At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, the idea that multi-millionaire sportsmen are too busy playing to spend their wealth must seem hard to swallow. Can these overpaid pampered millionaires really be complaining about their jobs?

FIFPro also claims that “players have gone beyond the limit” due to exhaustion from the schedule and demands of domestic and international football. FIFPro president, David Terrier, said there was “an emergency” around the growing mental and physical fatigue of players. And they're not the only ones. Commentators agree that professional football players face the prospect of burnout.

I think we should take them seriously.

Ironically, the rarefied world of professional sports represents a unique experiment to assess the limits of rewards to protect our mental health.

Booting the myth of personal resilience

Professional footballers represent a highly selective group – people at the peak of their physical fitness, playing a sport that they love that gives them meaning and purpose – and a huge salary. The perks of their job are the envy of the world.

If people with such extreme wealth suffer from burnout and fatigue, surely we can finally bury the myth of personal resilience. Their plight is more evidence that burnout is organisationally driven, and not due to personal weaknesses.

Individual measures to deal with employee burnout, like free subscriptions to meditation apps and lunchtime yoga classes once a week, can bolster our ability to deal with work stress, but such measures offer only limited respite and are no match against the continual wave of work demands and interpersonal challenges. For instance, we can't yoga our way out of difficult interpersonal relations with colleagues or toxic leaders.

The organisations who should be protecting players' wellbeing, like FIFA and UEFA, increase workload instead, blaming consumer demand for more football matches and competitions. Football is big business and players are expected to perform or be replaced.

'We're going to kill players!' - Pep Guardiola warns about burnout...



Professional footballers, like all high performers, can suffer from burnout, anxiety and depression. The genuine fragility of well-paid sports stars, then, is a slap in the face to organisations who think that simply giving people more rewards or making their jobs more meaningful will “protect” them from mental and physical stress. If the mental health of highly paid and celebrated professional footballers can suffer due to their working conditions, what hope nurses, care workers, police officers, teachers – and the rest of us.

As part of their review into the workload of elite footballers, FIFPro reported that a player survey showed over half of respondents said they had been forced to play while already carrying an injury, and 82% of football managers said they had fielded a player they knew required a rest. This must sound very familiar to frontline professionals in healthcare, social care and security – police and prison officers, for example. The rewards may be different – certainly the salaries – but the organisational drivers pushing burnout are the same.

Huge salaries compensate for constant abuse?

Like celebrities, football players lose ownership of their life – their lives are under constant public scrutiny. Take David Beckham, for example. His treatment following his red card against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup was extraordinary. The mixture of schadenfreude and hate that followed him long after the event was unacceptable, but normalised. And players continue to face regular abuse both on and off the field.

The burnout from being watched, monitored, constantly micromanaged and criticised fuels the twin engines of chronic stress: cynicism and feeling less capable. Elite footballers' exorbitant earnings gives the illusion of freedom and enormous privilege so any public mistreatment can seem deserved, expected, maybe even warranted – and part of the job.

But, let's be honest, none of us are always performing well at our job so why do we expect it from football players.

I wonder how I would feel if I delivered two substandard classes, and woke up to headlines splashed across social media barking out – “Has Anthony lost it?” “Is he fit to be a Lecturer anymore?”

Guilt and shame, then, is part of the burnout. But professional footballers suffering from exhaustion, anxiety or depression find it difficult to be open about it.

It's not surprising, then, that most of the awareness about these issues tend to come from ex-footballers. Unfortunately, these confessions are often viewed as anomalies rather than symptoms of a dysfunctional system.

For example, Liverpool player Trent-Alexander Arnold's The After Academy is an excellent initiative to support players who don't progress to the next level and are released from clubs. However, it also unintentionally reinforces the idea that elite professionals are the lucky ones without questioning whether the organisational structures in football are dysfunctional – even for the “success” stories.

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is characterised by three elements, which can reinforce each other and create a vicious cycle:

- I feel continuously exhausted;
- I feel more cynical about my work;
- I feel less capable about my performance at work.

If you are experiencing these feelings, remember that burnout is not an individual failing but is driven and maintained by working conditions.

So the next time you feel like flinging your coffee mug at some whinging sports millionaire on TV, remember; wealth doesn't protect wellbeing.