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How to scout... or rather, how not to scout in professional football: Advice from an outsider looking in.

¹ Craig Lawlor (University of Central Lancashire)

² Clive Palmer (University of Central Lancashire)

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How to scout... or rather, how not to scout in professional football: advice from an outsider looking in

Craig Lawlor and Clive Palmer

(University of Central Lancashire)

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Abstract

This research delves into the murky underworld of football scouting, highlighting the challenges that scouts face, including the need to be decisive and work alone, whilst craving collaboration in an ambiguous, unprofessional industry. The study emphasises the idiosyncratic nature of scouting, where scouts can interpret the same game differently based on their personal experiences set against differing club priorities. The methodology adopts a phenomenological approach, using ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews to gather insights to the world of football scouting. The research also employs a first-person narrative, with the lead author reflecting on their experiences in the scouting world as they move from being an insider to an outsider to this otherwise private world. This dual perspective enriches the analysis, combining personal reflection with empirical data. The story called *The Outsider* demonstrates the acquired habitus of scouts and football personnel more generally, concerning the decisions scouts make about players as well as the loneliness of the faceless, nameless scout. The research concludes with the 10 Commandments of Scouting, derived from primary data, offering guidance on 'how not to scout'. By blending theoretical insights with real-world experiences, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of football scouting and suggests strategies for improvement.

Introduction

Despite the centrality of effective scouting to the success of modern-day professional football, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to the role of the scout and the scouting process. Various theories attempt to explain this gap. Some attribute it to the inherently recondite nature of professional football, suggesting that the clandestine and competitive atmosphere of the industry hinders academic scrutiny (Parker, 2000). Others point to the complexity of the scouting, recruitment, and performance processes, which are often seen as labyrinthine and impenetrable to those outside the profession (Reeves, McRobert, Lewis and Roberts, 2019). Additionally, there has been a general lack of interest in exploring this dynamic topic; scouting, as much of the existing research has predominantly focused on talent

identification in youth football rather than performance identification for adult football (Baker, Schorer and Wattie, 2018).

Prominent authors in the field, such as Miller, Cronin, and Baker (2015) have argued that instead of asking ‘How should scouting be done?’ and ‘What should scouts do?’, researchers would be wise to investigate ‘How is scouting done?’ and ‘How is the experience of scouting understood?’ This shift in perspective advocates for a more experiential and descriptive approach to understanding the intricacies of the scouting profession. This paper, alongside two previously published articles (Lawlor and Palmer, 2023; Lawlor, Rookwood, and Wright, 2021), which form part of a broader examination the topic of football scouting, seeks to address gaps in the literature and enhance our knowledge about the scouting experience. These studies have aimed to identify opportunities for research and investigate the notion of *being* in the scouting world, how scouts experience their roles, and what it is like to be a scout. However, there has been limited reflection on how scouts *should* or *could* undertake their role. Following the lead of Miller, Cronin, and Baker (2015), this paper aims to guide scouts away from certain practices and pitfalls encountered in the industry rather than prescribing specific methodologies. It is crucial to recognise that the professional football scouting process is fraught with challenges and errors, often resulting from flawed decision-making and a lack of systematic guidance. Scholars such as Johnston and Baker (2020) term this ‘talent wastage’ and highlight that scouting decisions are frequently made too hastily, based on instinct or gut feeling rather than thoughtful analysis. This approach can lead to overconfidence in judgments, resulting in costly mistakes for football clubs.

This inefficiency is compounded by the lack of clear guidance, which results in scouts attending unnecessary games, often just to prove their worth (Lawlor and Palmer, 2023). This approach fails to respect the realities of scouting and detracts from a more focused and purposeful scouting strategy. Therefore, the creation of scouting guidelines, or in this case, guidance on *how not to scout* has the potential to enhance practice and help create an environment where scouts are not compelled to justify their existence by attending games for the sake of it. Furthermore, the divide between traditional scouting methods, such as visual assessments and intuition, and the use of data analytics can create tension within clubs. This dichotomy often hinders effective collaboration between stakeholders, including scouts, coaches, and analysts. Enhanced training on integrating human intuition with data-driven insights, along with fostering collaboration between all parties involved, would significantly improve the player identification process (Gerrard, 2017).

Scholars such as Griffiths and Bloyce (2022) contend that professionalisation of the scouting industry is urgently needed. The profession often suffers from nepotism and poor working conditions, with scouts relying heavily on personal networks to

secure industry positions (Cotterill, 2021). The fear of being outed or losing a job drives many to conform to the industry's unspoken rules, limiting innovation and diversity of thought (Austin, 2017). The work of Cushion and Jones (2006) explores the concept of habitus in football, drawing on Bourdieu's theory to explain how practices are shaped by often unconscious, internalised cultural norms. Their findings reveal an authoritarian discourse within football, legitimised by both various stakeholders. In a subsequent study, Cushion and Jones (2012) identify football's 'hidden curriculum', where implicit norms and values such as respect for authority, hierarchical awareness, control, obedience, collectivity, work ethic, and a focus on winning are ingrained in the culture. Furthermore, low pay and lack of recognition exacerbate these issues, leading to disengagement, burnout, and high turnover rates within the profession (Lawlor and Palmer, 2023). Without substantial improvements in working conditions and adequate recognition, clubs risk the departure of valuable scouting talent.

Finally, the role ambiguity faced by scouts is a pressing issue. Without a clearly defined recruitment strategy and alignment with the club's philosophy and financial model, scouts are left to operate in a vacuum of uncertainty. This lack of clarity can result in disjointed recruitment efforts, where scouts' work does not align with the club's needs (Reeves, Roberts, McRoberts and Littlewood, 2018). Clearer roles, responsibilities, and strategic alignment between scouts and club management are necessary to ensure more effective player identification and recruitment.

In summary, the research literature around this topic reveals that professional football scouting is plagued by several interconnected challenges, including hasty decision-making, lack of collaboration, unrealistic expectations, and insufficient professional standards. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards more structured, collaborative, and well-defined scouting processes that integrate both intuition and data while fostering a supportive and professional environment for scouts. This paper aims to contribute to this shift by exploring how scouts navigate these challenges, providing insights and recommendations to enhance the scouting process in professional football.

Methodology

The study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of scouts, examining how they perceive and interpret their roles within the professional football industry. The ontological stance acknowledges that while a football game is a tangible event, scouts' interpretations of performance are inherently subjective. Two scouts might view the same game yet derive entirely different conclusions based on their unique perspectives, influenced by their club's culture, priorities, player profiles, and financial considerations. Thus, understanding scouting requires an understanding of these subtleties. Epistemologically, the study recognises that

scouts' intuition and gut feelings are products of their experience (Lund and Söderström, 2017; Franssen and Kuipers, 2013; Christensen, 2009). The absence of standardised, respected training programmes or 'gold standards' for player evaluation means that scouts operate based on personal agendas, with their methods often unverifiable and seldom shared. This secretive nature and the role luck plays in successful scouting, as highlighted by Reeves, Roberts, McRoberts and Littlewood (2018), complicates our understanding of what constitutes 'good scouting'.

To address these considerations, this research adopts a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology, as defined by van Manen (2017), involves studying the lived experience to understand what it is like. It posits that a scout's 'eye for talent' is shaped by the culture they inhabit and embody, and their past experiences, making a phenomenological investigation into their lived experiences appropriate. Given the unique and dynamic nature of these experiences, the methodology requires an analysis and presentation that reflect this dynamism, as advocated by Smythe (2011). Thus, the study emphasises reflexivity, where the researcher continually examines their preconceptions and how these influence their understanding. The lead author's extensive experience in professional football and scouting is acknowledged as an asset, shaping the research process rather than being bracketed away. This reflexive practice ensures that the researcher's values, beliefs, and motivations are transparent and contribute to the depth of the analysis.

Data collection involved a period of ethnographic observation, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with eight scouts. Immersion in the scouts' experiences allowed the researcher to identify emerging phenomena through the interplay between the data and their interpretation. In line with the recommendations of Blommaert and Jie (2010), all ethnographic fieldwork consisted of 'rubbish bags' full of collected data, of which interviews are but a small contribution but not necessarily as important as other aspects of the data.

Narrative is integral to phenomenological research. As Küpers, Matere, and Statler (2012) argue, humans are 'storytelling beings', making sense of their world through narratives. Hermeneutic phenomenology (HP) involves understanding these narratives within their context, emphasizing the temporal and unfolding nature of experiences (Cunliffe, Luhmann and Boje, 2004). In line with Ricoeur's (1984) assertion that time becomes human through narrative, this study uses a storied reflection to explore scouts' experiences, aligning with the narrative structure inherent in team sports like football (Ryan, 2002).

Considering the author's rapport with key stakeholders, the study integrates elements of autoethnography and phenomenology, termed 'autophenomenography' by Gruppetta (2004). This approach combines the detailed, reflective analysis of

autoethnography with the experiential focus of phenomenology. It allowed the researcher to draw on personal experience while critically engaging with participants' narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of the scouting profession.

The story below discusses the lead author's transition from being an accepted insider in the scouting world, to becoming an outsider to it. The account stems from his experiences of re-immersion in the scouting world after a period away from the game, revealing his reflections and realisations about the role he previously had. The second part presents the '10 Commandments of Scouting,' derived from primary data collected during ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with scouts. The idea of the 10 commandments is a way of conceptualising and communicating some key findings from the research in a way that may resonate with colleagues in professional scouting. Rolfe *et al.*'s (2001) critical lens of *what, so what* and *what now* provide an accessible means towards fresh reasoning about scouting activity. Names of clubs and individuals have been anonymised.

The Outsider

It's 7.03pm, Wednesday night and it's relatively mild, autumnal. I've got my ticket and teamsheet and I've exchanged pleasantries with the staff on the front desk. I head up the stairs to my right. Hung on the walls are pictures of some of the greats that used to play for the club, captains holding the cup, a last-gasp winner against a local rival. I grab the door handle and enter the lounge. It's pretty empty, cold. There is half a dozen round tables, each with one or two scouts sat huddled scribbling on their teamsheets, scrolling on their phones, exchanging tales and opinions on players. I think back to Cotterill's (2021) assessment:

The image of the scout persists, as the mysterious loner in a flat cap skulking around crumbling stadia, scribbling on bits of paper.

The inference is that this *isn't* the case anymore but as I enter the field, the scouting world once more, I encounter the same people who fit Cotterill's description. Most of the scouts arrive alone, sit on their own and scribble on their teamsheet. A handful are in fact wearing the customary flat cap. As we approach kick off there is a steady flow of scouts who enter the room, all looking like they're in a rush – the scout I've come with has just come straight from another game over 45 minutes' drive away. One chap, who looks in more of a hurry than most, is eating a plate of hot food, stood up, studying the incoming team news from other fixtures from *Sky Sports News* on the huge plasma screen hung on the wall.

The clock on the wall now reads 7.37pm and we make our way to the Director's Box. I know a lot of the people there – the Director of one of the clubs who are playing tonight, a Manager I used to work with, a scout I recognise, whose name I

don't remember – we exchange a nod. We sit down as the players begin their march onto the field and I look at the scouts around me. The guy to my right furiously writing the heights of the players next to their name on his teamsheet, he's already written their age down whilst he was sat in the lounge. The scout I've come with, who works for a team in the league below, points to his teamsheet, to the number 6 for the away team, 'We were so close to getting him in the summer, so so close, but their new gaffer came in and started playing him. Gutted'. He's already told me there's not much point in going to this game tonight, he just wants to get out to 'remind himself what the league looks like'. In fact, looking around there's several people who don't need to be there – a couple who are 'out of work' or 'out of the game', others who work for clubs who couldn't afford any of the players on display tonight but it's the usual story: it's midweek, it's a good chance to 'take in a game'.

The first half is a relatively quiet and even affair. Most the scouts are silently compiling their notes. There's the odd comment here and there, 'I've got it as a 4-1-4-1 out of possession, have you?', 'He's surely offside', 'How's he missed that?'. I look down at a scout in front of me, he's sat on his own, scribbling away, and he's wearing a flat cap. The half-time whistle blows: 0-0. The Director's Box empties and everyone files into their respective discussion rooms. There are three boxes and your allocation depends on how important you are and how much respect you're afforded. I'm not afforded much nowadays as an outsider, last time I was here I was in the Director's Lounge which was very plush indeed. Here, there are the customary tea and coffee stations and some appealing cakes and pastries. Whispers hum around the room as some of the scouts, those who were once sat alone, have now latched onto one another as they discuss the game and share the gossip of the last few weeks.

A manager I used to work with enters the room, 'Alright big man, how's it going?' he asks as he shakes my hand; I get the habitual 'Where are you now then?' and 'Ah right, full-time at the Uni? What are you doing here tonight then? Are you looking to get *back in* anytime soon?', inferring do I want to get *back into* the world of football scouting. My answer should probably be a straight 'No' to the latter, but I don't want to close any doors – your network is your currency, so I tend to say something along the lines of 'If the right thing comes up with the right people? Yeah, of course'. It's good to hear someone say, 'Someone like you shouldn't be out of the scouting game', I appreciate that, but so far there's not been anything tonight that's really enticed me to get *back in*. He concludes with 'This is me getting out to try and get my name out there again. It's a lonely place let me tell you. The phone stops ringing because no one needs you anymore. That's the nature of it'.

We head back out to our seats, polythene cups in hand and the second half has already started. It's easy to lose track of time when you're chatting away in a warm

conference room at half-time. The gossip continues and the scouts, who were once clandestine adversaries, now began to talk like best pals:

‘I really liked him at Green Park Rovers, what did they pay for him?’

‘Only compensation, about 200 grand. Liked him did ya? Lemme tell ya, he’s an absolute space cadet’.

Suddenly, I get sucked in. I start saying how I think the number 8 is the best player on the pitch, the full back is going to be a Premier League player one day. I’ve been out of it for over two years but now it’s like I’ve never been away. One of the players on display I helped sign; I scouted and recruited him in the past and can’t help but mention it to the guy sat next to me, who asks in response: ‘What did he cost? Was it a million and add ons or was it a million and a half with add ons?’

I can’t remember exactly but you can’t be indecisive or vague in this game, people seem to lose respect for you if you are, so I punt for ‘A million and a half with add ons it was’. I get a nod. A few moments later comes the response:

‘You have to be a certain type, don’t you? You know, have a standout attribute? He didn’t have that when I was at South Gale City and he still doesn’t have that. You need to have something special to go for a million and a half and I couldn’t see enough to justify that sort of money at the time’.

I don’t necessarily agree with him but I don’t think it’s worth the hassle of a debate with someone I’ve just met about something so hypothetical. It reminds me how much you need to use your imagination or deal in guesswork, living in a parallel universe in this game e.g. ‘If he didn’t cost a million we’d have signed him’ or ‘I get the feeling he’s going to play in the Premier League one day’. Interestingly a similar conversation then gets struck up around me, the scout who said they were ‘so close’ to signing, Harrod, the number 6, asks a fellow scout:

‘How’s Harrod done this season? We were so close to getting him in the summer’

He’s talking to the old bloke with the flat cap in front of me who turns round and says:

‘Been their best player. He moves so well now, not stiff and slow like you’ll remember him at Lingsby Town’.

‘You’re so right, he couldn’t run could he? He was big and slow, doesn’t look like that now!’

I wanted to ask ‘What’s changed? How did he get quicker?’ But I decide not to, those questions don’t seem to go down too well. But reflecting on this, it’s a great example – most scouts couldn’t *imagine* Harrod getting quicker or ‘less stiff’, so

they didn't sign him. The team in question 'took a punt' and have been rewarded with a good player. Perhaps this is some of the alchemy which Michael Calvin (2013) proclaims scouts possess.

In amongst the gossip there's been 3 quickfire goals for the home side. Interestingly, the scouts don't seem too bothered about the goals themselves, they make a note of the players who scored them and say, 'Tell you what, that's not an easy finish' but so very little of their notetaking or assessment of players seems to be around the most important action of the game – goals. The scouts around me start to share their reflections as the game reaches its conclusion, the away side have given up and the home team are knocking the ball around in their own half, running the clock down: 'Never a 3-0 game, Harnet (the away team) had the three best chances!', 'What a weird game', 'Jairo's never a centre forward, can't believe he missed that chance!', 'What a poor game. I tell you what, I can see both these sides struggling this year'. The game reaches 87 minutes and most the scouts have left the stadium, I feel the insatiable urge to do the same, it's just what you do as a scout so I leave my seat, head down the steps, into the hall and past the pictures of the greats on the walls, say my thank yous and goodbyes at reception and make my way into the October night.

Reflecting on it all as I get home:

You have your ticket, you literally have your ticket in your hand to this underworld and you *feel* a part of it. But you question if you really are or ever were part of it. Even more so now, I know I'm no longer a part of it. I'm not like the club legends on the wall in the stadium, I don't have anything to show for ever *being* a scout. The ties are loose between you and the club you work for and the same with other scouts who you sporadically see at games. You acquire a habitus of being guarded and decisive and not wanting to debate or to get things wrong, to lose your network, or damage your social capital. I felt and I still feel like something of an imposter, not so much in the scouting world but in the football world. There will always be a scout who's been doing it longer or someone who played 500 league games or there's the Director and you need to do your best to act like them, talk like them and if you aren't already, *become* one of them to really be accepted. I felt myself slipping into 'bad faith' and *becoming* the scout again, even though I wasn't. I arrived as Craig Lawlor but when I was in the ground and the game started, I went straight back to *being* a scout. I too felt that loneliness after the game had ended, the feeling of being back at home, alone, away from the excitement of the game and removed from shaking hands with a former Manager and a Director of a football club. And I, at least for the night, had to mourn the death of my identity as *Football Scout*, part of the inner ring. At the time I felt part of it but as I came away, but now I feel more detached than ever. Was I ever really part of it?

The 10 Commandments of Scouting

1. *Thou shalt trust thy eyes and ears and give thy opinion*
2. *Thou shalt collaborate*
3. *Thou shalt not make snap judgments*
4. *Thou shalt not undervalue thy scouts*
5. *Thou shalt not under or overvalue 'the stats'*
6. *Thou shalt honour thy club and thy line manager*
7. *Thou shalt not be complacent about networking and nepotism*
8. *Thou shalt not try to watch every player at every club*
9. *Thou shalt not let football become thy life*
10. *Thou shalt not stay too long*

1. Thou shalt trust thy eyes and ears and give thy opinion

What: Whilst there are issues with scouts relying solely on their eyes and ears, their gut feel and intuition, clubs still value having ‘boots on the ground and a trained eye in the stands’ (James, 2023) and scouts seem to have confidence trusting their gut and giving their judgement or opinion on players:

Scout Responses:

I could make a high confidence judgement on a player within 10 minutes of a game.

You can't rely on other people's opinions all the time. You've got to give your own opinion, and that's why you're employed at the end of the day.

It's always fascinating I think in terms of like how different people see the game. I don't suppose there's anybody that's right and there's anybody that's wrong, you know, we've all got our own opinions and I think as long as you're kinda respectful of people and give them, certainly give them the chance to have their opinion it's good to disagree.

So What: There are notable flaws in scouts' live, one-off judgements in isolation (Reeves, Littlewood, McRobert and Roberts, 2018; Johansson and Fahlén, 2017) but previously, literature has been too quick to disparage player identification when grounded in naturalistic decision-making, and over-reliance on prior experience (Miller, Cronin and Baker, 2015). However, the value of scouts' experience and expertise should not be overlooked. In the absence of a gold standard or silver bullet for player identification, clubs are ultimately reliant on the expertise of their scouts.

What Now: Improved training and guidance for scouts both centrally from education providers and from clubs themselves has the potential to enhance player identification. This may include bias training, guidance on report writing, or football specific training to improve the ‘Scouts’ Eye’. Also, the establishment of more collaborative environments where scouts are valued and engaged with key decision-makers can enhance scouts’ use of their eyes, ears, gut feel and intuition when identifying players.

2. Thou shalt collaborate

What: Scouts crave collaboration and if more effective judgements are made when there is a high degree of engagement between key decision-makers, then ‘multiple eyes, multiple times’ is an effective strategy when making recruitment decisions. Collaborative practices have the capacity to enhance the scouting process.

Scout Responses:

(A player should be watched) as much as possible, live and video, multiple eyes multiple times across and in numerous contexts, recent and historical.

If you ever have moments of success as a team and as a collective, you’ve got to enjoy them because that’s the reason you do it.

We will both disagree on players, but I’ve got a huge amount of respect for The Manager and it’s actually just the pair of us striving for the best.

I’m not a big fan of that whole ‘I found him’ thing, I always encourage teamwork amongst scouts, it’s not just one individual. You get people saying ‘I did this, I did that’ but I always say ‘Suchabody went and gave a good report and put some stuff which you didn’t put in your report’. It’s a collective thing, it’s never just one person.

So What: Without collaboration, scouts will become isolated, which can lead to incorrect judgements and may even result in scouts working competitively against one another, even with scouts who work for the same club, which has the potential to lead to unnecessary conflict. As one respondent proclaimed, ‘*Collaboration is a nice idea but it’s alien in the industry*’. Crucially, MacMahon, Bailey, Crosser and Weissensteiner (2019) found that intuition was more effectively used by scouts in collaborative environments where there was a high level of coach-scout engagement which emphasises its importance.

Now What: Football’s culture of having to remain ‘guarded’ against others (Gibson and Groom, 2019) needs to change and if scouting departments are better recognised and rewarded, it has the capacity to enhance collaborative practices rather than a scout’s only currency being their network and the idea of ‘I found him’ (Lawlor and Palmer, 2023).

3. Thou shalt not make snap judgments

What: Scouts should guard against deciding on a player too hastily and independently from their colleagues. They should try to avoid solely trusting their own eyes and ears and avoid being overly confident in their gut instinct.

Scout Responses:

*We all make mistakes, there's a lad playing and scoring every week in the Premier League now I said no to him, I said he was s**t.*

It can be one instance with some people that writes players off, we all do it. We all see someone do something on football pitch and you just go 'I can't have him after that' which is wrong.

I think when it comes to recruitment, I think if you've got the right team around you, you're hoping to create an environment where people can put their hand up and feel safe of getting it wrong. I might come in and go, 'Well, look, I don't like him, I don't like him.' And then all of a sudden, I've got to come in and go, 'You know what? I got it wrong. I think he's really good'.

So What: The unsystematic scouting process, riddled with bias and potential errors can lead to 'Talent Wastage' (Johnston and Baker, 2020), where players are wrongfully selected or de-selected, which leads to negative consequences for scouts, clubs and the players themselves. One respondent stated that scouts should '*Treat the club's money as their own*' which might help scouts to be more reasoned and less emotional about their judgements.

Now What: Scouts should be afforded time to be more rational and change their mind rather than saying 'Yes' or 'No' immediately, contrary to the advice offered by experienced scout Mel Johnson in James' (2023) article. Scouts should seek to apply actuarial rather than clinical judgement as scouts who base their judgement on specific performance traits (actuarial) rather than their overall perception on the player (clinical), are likely to make more reliable, accurate decisions (Den Hartigh Niessen, Frencken and Meijer, 2018; Kahneman, 2011).

4. Thou shalt not undervalue thy scouts

What: Scouts are still perceived as a mysterious, flat cap wearing loner who haunts the terraces (Cotterill, 2021). Low standards, modest remuneration and poor working conditions are rife because scouts are perceived to be happy just to be involved in football and get a free ticket to a game (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2022). Evidently, if scouts were better trained and valued, there would be the potential for them to undertake their role more effectively, having the capacity to enhance practice and performance at their club. However, once scouts have received the requisite support from their club, they should be allowed a degree of autonomy.

Scout Responses:

I just want to work somewhere where they appreciate the work you've done. It's hard to sell to managers and other decision-makers what you can do.

*The Director of Football and The Manager didn't give a s**t about us clearly, we don't get a chance to receive any feedback and when it's like that it's easy for me to be detached emotionally, physically, geographically.*

*From day one at Blue United there was role ambiguity, there was no role clarity. I had to ask the Dave Holden, Head of Recruitment, 'Why on earth am I being micromanaged?' It took him more effort to micromanage me, and he couldn't even do that appropriately. I just asked, 'Why can't I just get on with the job?' They don't want you to have autonomy and they can't explain why. I never had any autonomy, and I don't know why because they can't tell you why. They want the authoritarian, archaic, hierarchical bulls**t of football because that's the factory they're from, isn't it? We've just got different schools of thought completely that's the thing.*

So What: Scouts being detached from their club as a result of being undervalued is not a good sign and maybe this is where they begin to go to games for the sake of it, for the potential to receive a match fee and expenses, and take the easy option; they leave the game early and put minimal effort into writing and submitting their report. Either that or they consistently strive for recognition, have fantasy-laden thoughts and engage in hope labour, waiting to be rewarded with a (better) paid, more well recognised role in the club (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2022). Clearly if there is a lack of collaborative practices and an emotional, physical, geographical detachment with poorly defined expectations from potentially anonymous stakeholders, there is likely to be a lack of trust between scouts and their line managers (Bentzen, Kenttä and Lemyre, 2020).

Now What: Respondents also spoke of 'lip service' being paid to their role. If there is clear benefit to recognising, training and rewarding scouts, clubs should strive to do this, or they need to question why they continue to employ untrained scouts who work in isolation and are detached from their line managers. The final respondent left their club soon after the interview and is no longer employed in football. Better management of and collaboration with key stakeholders may have enhanced the relationship with his Head of Recruitment and subsequently, the club's scouting practices.

5. Thou shalt not under or overvalue 'the stats'

What: According to James (2023), the football scouting industry is constantly evolving as data analysis and 'the stats' are driving the way players are identified. Clearly, since the growth of performance analysis and technology in sport, the use of data in scouting is here to stay but its mere presence seems to be somewhat divisive (Lawlor, Rookwood and Wright, 2021).

Scout Responses:

I think people like to use the thing of like, 'Oh, we're data because we see it as progressive'. Ultimately like people probably see it as sexy.

It's not science, we're not flying to the moon. No one's cracked data in football yet but it's never going to be 'all data alone' or 'all opinions alone' neither of them are any good (in isolation). You can't put your finger on it but generally 'it's people'.

I think, you know, certainly older, more traditional, sorry, more traditional scouts rather than older, more traditional scouts are fearful of it (data).

There are too many Academic Analysts in the game who just produce a sheet for the manager to look at, but I look at them with all my experience and I just think 'How many games have you watched?' they can't have watched many because they've not been doing it for long enough.

See there's the Chief Scout and then there's me and then there's two Stats Men. 80% of these players who the Stats Men think require 'Immediate Attention', we watch and give them a 'Forget' signal, so there's clearly a discrepancy between the Stats Men and us, maybe they're biased towards the players based on stats. Some of them don't even fit the mould of what we want.

So What: Clearly there are unhelpful divisions between different groups regarding the use of data: 'Stats Men' or 'Academic Analysts' who are 'flying to the moon' using data which is perceived as 'sexy' and the 'older, more traditional' scouts who are sceptical or even fearful of data. This is consistent with the findings of Radichi and Mozzachiodi (2016) who assert that in professional football, disparities exist between the 'Senior Generation', colloquially termed 'Digital Dinosaurs' who are not very open to, and even reluctant to embrace new technologies and methods for scouting, and those who are well-versed in more contemporary methods.

Now What: Better guidance and training on how scouts and key decision-makers may implement and utilise data have the potential to enhance practice. As Gerrard (2017) posits the most successful teams are those who can effectively combine analytics and expert judgement where scouts and data scientists working in tandem can provide holistic input into the decision-making process.

6. Thou shalt honour thy club and thy line manager

What: Scouts need to know who the powerholder is in the 'authoritarian, archaic, hierarchical bulls**t of football' and ultimately be given guidance on their role and know when to accept or challenge their position within the club. In this context, scouts are working on behalf of a club and therefore should be provided with, and work in line with a club culture, philosophy, strategy and financial model (Stephenson, 2012).

Scout Responses:

We still don't know our roles, on the day that Johnny came in, The Boss should have sat us down and said 'Your role is this, you do that' and that never happened, we still need that to happen so everyone knows what they're doing.

Johnny asks me to do a report on Nicky Fyre and I'm sat there thinking 'Well yeah he's a good player, he plays in our league so I'm not going to say otherwise but I don't know how he would fit in our system because we don't have a..., and I don't necessarily like using this term, but, a 'football philosophy' which makes it so difficult to say whether a player's suitable or not.

So What: Without clear guidance, scouts do not know what to do or how to do it. The responses above are evidence of that. This leads to role ambiguity where the scout may find themselves uncertain of how to best navigate the scouting world.

Now What: Scouts' working processes and identification strategies need to align with their club's culture and philosophy. Scouts need to be aware of this, receive guidance and respect the club's wishes to avoid the ambiguity that surrounds the scout's role in the absence of professional guidelines, recognised training programmes and fair employment practices (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2022).

7. Thou shalt not be complacent about networking and nepotism

What: Football is an industry built on networks (Parnell, Widdop, Groom and Bond, 2018) and has an explicit culture of nepotism which permeates the scouting world (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2022). Without a network of industry insiders, scouts don't stand a chance.

Scout Responses:

It's not a meritocracy, someone just says, 'I like you as a person and I think you know football, go and do some reports for us' and they let you run with it and no one really gives you any education. We just go, 'Well, I like him and he's a good egg and I do rate him and he is competent'. If I had to run a scouting and recruitment department, it would be: I know good people, but they're all in fulltime positions and they're not going to come and want to do part time or full time scouting unless you remunerate them properly.

So What: As seen in *The Outsider*, one day the phone stops ringing, people are scared of becoming outdated, being forgotten and losing their job. According to Austin (2017), nepotism in football leads to the development of a homologous group who end up seeing the same thing, thinking the same way and sharing the same information. This results in a blinkered view of the world, which stifles creativity and innovation and results in an inability to see dangers looming or innovations happening elsewhere.

Now What: Scouts must recognise the need to build up their network, potentially having to volunteer in the early stages of their career to become recognised in a fiercely competitive industry. Clubs also must improve their employment and working practices to guard against nepotism in the industry.

8. Thou shalt not try to watch every player at every club

What: Whether it is the club, their line manager or the scout themselves, there appears to be an unrealistic desire to know everything about every player. As a result, the scout's job is never done.

Scout Responses:

The job is never done, there are always more players to watch. I can never shut the laptop at the end of the day and feel like I've completed football.

It's gonna be a little bit more targeted this season in terms of maybe not having the thing of like 'Oh we need to watch every club, and watch every player' but actually be like 'Which players and which clubs do we need to see?' I think there's always been a bit of a thing like you need to know every player in your league.

You can end up with too many targets... We have a list of 40 left centre-backs. The Manager wants 4. You end up with too many and one's in Holland, one's at Shoppington Town and you don't know how they compare.

So What: Scouts seem to be forever doing needless work, feeling the need to watch every player before making a decision. Whether this comes from the scout's love of football to watch more and more games, or it comes from them feeling the need to prove themselves, it undoubtedly complicates the scouting process making it challenging for scouts to make decisions on players. Drawing on the wisdom of philosopher John Barth (1967):

'There's a great difficulty in making choices if you have any imagination at all. Faced with such a multitude of desirable choices, no one choice seems satisfactory for very long by comparison with the aggregate desirability of all the rest, though compared to any one of the others it would not be found inferior. All equally attractive but none finally inviting'.

Now What: Scouting every player at every club is at best, challenging, at worst, impossible especially given that there are over 700 players who will play in the one season in the league that this respondent is referring to. Clearer guidelines regarding the positions required, the playing philosophy and the financial model of the club will allow scouts to be more targeted in their player identification. Similarly, the establishment of an environment where scouts do not feel the need to prove their worth should negate the need for scouts to watch 'every player at every club'.

9. Thou shalt not let football become thy life

What: Football, for many, has become of obsessional, unhealthy importance. Moore (2021) contends that football is given a significance it does not deserve, its power is regularly romanticised and sentimentalised and as a result, its importance in society is overdramatised. Scouts seemingly continue to go to games for the sake of it, for the experience and it becomes an unhealthy obsession. But after all, it is a job, often poorly paid, if paid at all, and it is just a game, it is not a matter of life and death, it is far less important than that. Bill Shankly's famous aphorism is commonly quoted out of context and an essential portion of the quote is removed to fit the narrative of football's ultimate importance. The former Liverpool Manager's full quote is as follows (Friends of Liverpool 2024):

'Well, everything I've got I owe to football, and the dedication I put into the game. You only get out of the game what you put into it... I put everything into it I could, and still do. So, I put all my heart and soul into it, to the extent that my family suffered. I regret it very much. Somebody said that football's a matter of life and death to you, I said "listen, it's more important than that".'

Scout Responses:

When my time in football came to a halt after 27 years I moped around for a while. However, in hindsight, it is one of the best things that has happened to me. I love life at present and now resent all the time that I devoted to football, missing out on so much in the process. All those lonely hours spent on the road come at a heavy price. There is no bigger thief of time than football. The importance of a proper work-life balance cannot be overemphasised

I'm out at 5 games next week and I watch 3 video games a day. You have to love it, it's not a job to me, it's almost an unhealthy obsession

I don't go to games just to do the job, I do it for the experience. It's to get out the house and get a feel for the game. It's like with Jay now, he doesn't get paid but he does it because he loves it. Who knows, he might go up to Northside Wanderers just to listen to music in the car for an hour, I don't know, but I could get the same information from that game by staying at home and watching it on video.

So What: Scouts give football scouting a meaning beyond the facticity of the job where their task is identifying players. It has the potential to consume their lives, where they go beyond their physical limits as human beings (facticity), striving for limitless progress (transcendence) (Culbertson, 2005).

Now What: Scouts should be encouraged to spend time away from the terraces and with the help of their clubs, should find a suitable work-life balance. Again, more targeted identification of players would go some way to addressing this along with an appropriate professional body to care for and develop scouts.

10. Thou shalt not stay too long

What: For scouts who are not recognised or rewarded, do not experience collaboration, do not meet their line manager(s), do not get the requisite guidance from their club and/or let football scouting consume their lives, they must know when to walk away from their club or from the industry.

Scout Responses:

If you're not sure about working in football you should probably get out

*I think if you're a scout and you're going to a game and haven't got that excitement, buzz, and I know this sounds a bit... but if you haven't got that passion when you're going... 'I'm here, Daybridge FC versus Brownleaf Town *Drops Head and Shoulders, Visibly Disappointed* Here we go.' Then you shouldn't really be doing it.*

So What: If scouts continue to accept the current unprofessional working practices, they will endure. Much of scouting appears to be tied to the person, their love of football and the meaning they create from scouting and being involved in the game, but they need to know when their time is up.

Now What: Working practices must change and scouts must be rewarded and recognised or the industry will continue to lose talented, committed people.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of scouts in the football industry, highlighting the importance of intuition, collaboration, and the need for suitable training and guidance. Scouts' reliance on their eyes, ears, and gut feel, while valuable, must be balanced with structured training and collaborative practices to enhance decision-making accuracy. The findings reveal that effective scouting is not a solitary endeavour but thrives in environments where scouts are engaged with coaches and decision-makers, fostering a culture of mutual respect and shared insights. Moreover, the study identifies significant challenges within the scouting profession, including undervaluation, role ambiguity, and the detrimental effects of nepotism and overwork. These issues contribute to a high turnover rate and a lack of professional development opportunities for scouts. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including better recognition and reward systems, clear role definitions, and the promotion of a healthy work-life balance.

The integration of data analytics into scouting practices remains a contentious issue. While data can provide valuable insights, it should complement rather than replace the nuanced judgments of experienced scouts. The study advocates for a balanced approach that leverages both statistical analysis and traditional scouting methods.

In conclusion, the future of football scouting lies in creating a more professional, collaborative and supportive environment. By valuing scouts' contributions, providing comprehensive training, and fostering collaboration, clubs can enhance their scouting processes and ultimately improve player identification and development. This holistic approach will not only benefit scouts but also contribute to the overall success and sustainability of football clubs.

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Ethics statement: This research was conducted with ethical approval from the University of Central Lancashire.

JQRSS Author Profiles

Craig Lawlor¹ is a Senior Lecturer and PhD researcher in Sports Coaching and Performance Analysis at the University of Central Lancashire. He has over a decade of experience in professional football settings, specialising in devising systems for player identification and processes for match analysis. Through managing scouting teams for various clubs, he has significantly impacted player recruitment. At UCLan, an important aspect of his role is teaching students to use performance analysis software, as well as forging links with professional clubs and supporting placements. His current research into the phenomenology of scouting is shared nationally and internationally which has been well received by academics and football industry professionals alike. Email: CLawlor2@uclan.ac.uk

Clive Palmer² is a research supervisor in the School of Sport and Health and a doctoral education lead in the Graduate Research School for the University of Central Lancashire. ORCID-ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-2811>  Email: capalmer@uclan.ac.uk

Reviewer's Comments

The authors of this paper demonstrate a highly nuanced and accomplished form of essence capturing. The rich storytelling clearly problematises the *solitary endeavour* of current football scouting practices, and rightly calls for the increased professionalisation of the role. By utilising *autophenomenography*, a novel methodological approach, within a field of research that is seldom investigated, the authors successfully capture the complexities associated with the *mysterious loner in a flat cap skulking around crumbling stadia*. Notably, the paper brings into sharp relief the vulnerability of the *insider* status – that is, the difficulties of maintaining one's social and cultural capital within the field of football scouting – and how self-perceptions of being (or becoming) an *outsider* can, and most likely do, affect many scouts in the industry. The 10 Commandments offer a critical point of departure for those concerned to improve and professionalise football scouting. Football clubs and their hierarchies would benefit significantly from considering the findings of this research. More deliberate recognition of scouts' contributions to the industry would be a first step in establishing the more professional, collaborative and supportive environments which are so clearly needed, particularly if Football clubs endeavour to establish more sustainable practices.



CRAIG LAWLOR



performs

"4op a Mile and a Sausage Roll": A song for the Nowhere Men in football scouting.

**Common threads in learning,
and the joy of sharing through
community**

Panel Lead:
Clive Palmer

Panel members:
1. Simon Smith, PhD by Honorable candidate
2. Tonya Ann, PhD candidate
3. Craig Lawlor, PhD candidate

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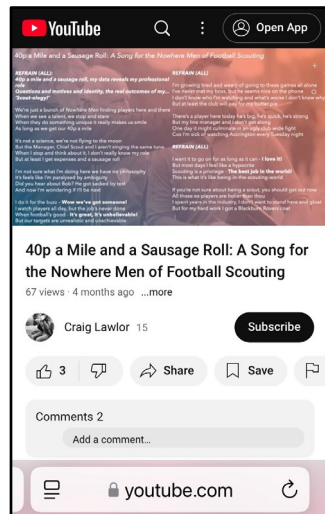
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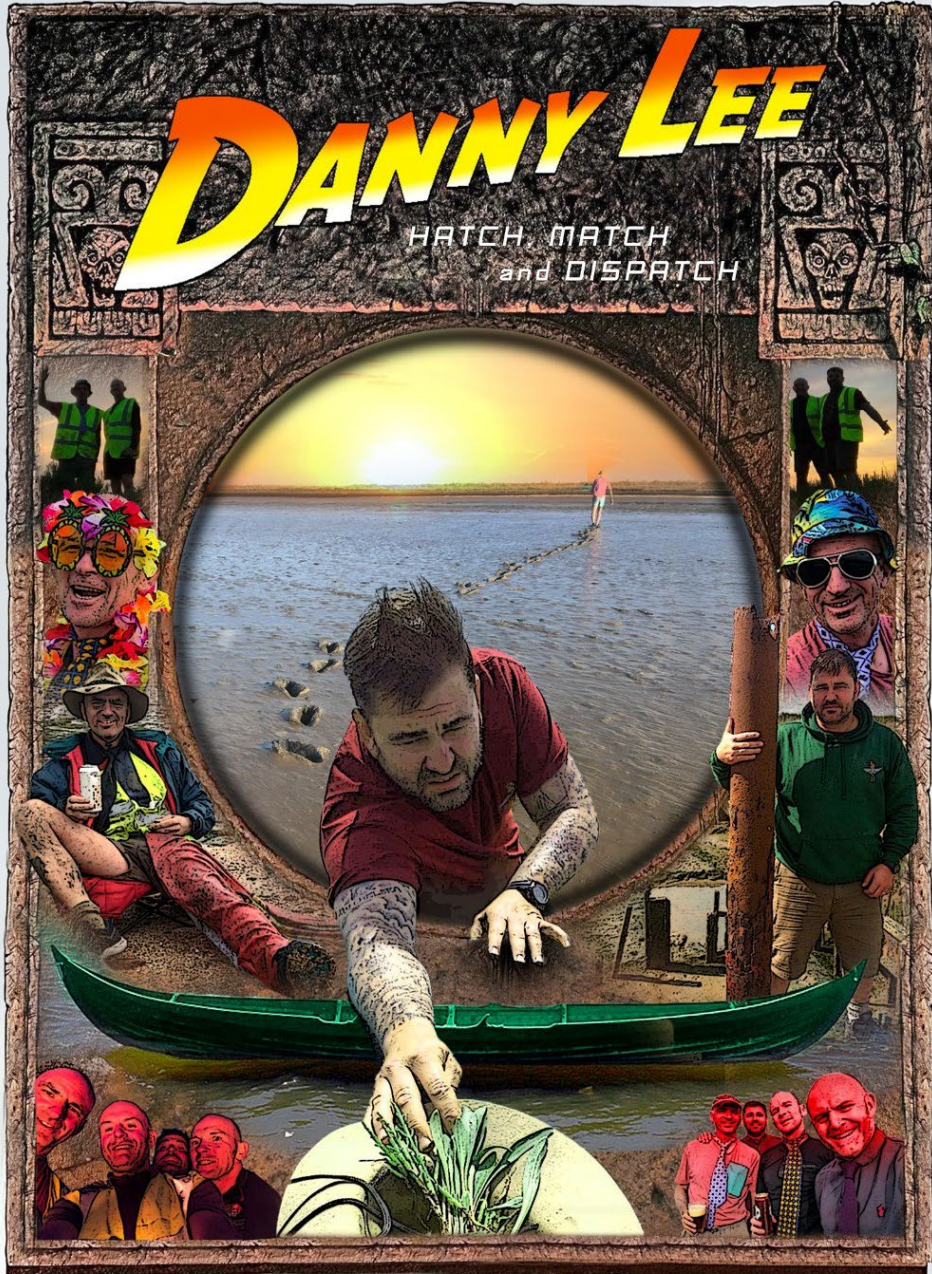


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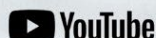
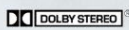
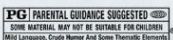
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