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"I literally played seven minutes and then got scouted for England": Player experiences of talent identification and development in women's blind football

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ABSTRACT

The international development of women's blind football is in its infancy, yet blind football has featured at the Paralympic Games as an event only for men since 2004. The last few years have seen nations establish women's representative sides, the inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships and the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) lobby for the addition of women's blind football to the Paralympic Games programme. This paper adopts an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality to analyse the performance trajectories of female players in England. Through six semi-structured online interviews and one in-person focus group, data were generated with seven players, all of whom have been involved in England development squads over the last 3 years. Collaborative abductive thematic analysis generated the following key themes: (1) Entry points – a game of chance; (2) Rapid development trajectories – too much, too soon?; and (3) A whole new ball game? Whilst players revelled in the opportunity to represent their nation, they encountered numerous challenges along the way. These findings have significant implications for key stakeholders striving to grow the game in an equitable manner while supporting the needs of diverse players.

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Introduction

Since its inclusion in Athens 2004, blind football has so far been a preserve exclusively for male players in the Paralympic Games (IBSA, n.d.) with no opportunity for females to act as role models and inspire future generations. The game has been regarded as mixed-sex in many domestic leagues and international competitions governed by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA). However, females have been significantly under-represented (Leivers et al., 2025), as they are throughout elite visually impaired (VI) sport internationally, despite visual impairment being more prevalent in females than males (Stratton et al., 2022). Over the last decade, there have been global efforts to attract more females to the game, arguably prompted by the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) drive for a more equitable Paralympic Games and the potentially precarious position of men's blind football (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025). Developments include the launch of the IBSA Women's Blind Football Network in 2015 (IBSA, 2015), subsequent training camps in Austria in 2017 and Tokyo in 2019 and the announcement in February 2020 of plans for the inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships (IBSA, 2020a). These events triggered the formation of women's blind football squads in several nations, adding to more established national squads such as Argentina and Japan. However, many of these new squads were being launched prior to the establishment of talent pathways for females, and with only a limited talent pool. To add complexity to the development of the women's game, IBSA acknowledged in January 2020 that there were insufficient B1 players – those who are severely sight impaired and the only classification traditionally eligible for blind football – and opened women's blind football to partially sighted players (classified B2 and B3), with all players required to wear a blindfold (IBSA, 2020b). This has resulted in a range of challenges for players and coaches to navigate (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025) which have implications for talent identification and development (TID).

In 2021, the English Football Association (FA) acknowledged an under-representation of females playing football across all impairment groups and a commitment to the 'general development of all women's para teams across the disability spectrum' (FA, 2021, p. 12). With the inaugural Women's World Blind Football Championships due to be hosted in England as part of the 2023 IBSA World Games, the FA made a timely commitment to

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establish the first England Women's Blind Team (FA, 2021). A development squad launched in May 2022 to compete in the inaugural 'European Championships' the following month, a tournament involving only Germany and England (IBSA, 2022a) and suggestive of inconsistent development across Europe. Similar issues are evident in other regions, with Japan winning the 2022 Blind Football Asia/Oceania Championship after only two matches against India (IBSA, 2022b). At the inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships in Birmingham (UK), Argentina were crowned champions of eight nations, and England finished eighth. With the second IBSA Women's Blind Football World Championship due to be held in Kochi, India, in October 2025, it is essential to gain a critical understanding of players' experiences of TID within the game at this crucial point in its growth.

Academic interest in parasport TID has gained momentum in recent years, as reflected in Dehghansai's et al. (2017) systematic review. A subsequent flurry of studies provided the impetus for the first edited book on the topic in the specific context of Paralympic sport (Dehghansai, Pinder & Baker, 2023). Work has explored a range of aspects of TID in the parasport context, with particular focus on para-athlete experiences of development pathways (e.g., Dehghansai & Baker, 2020; Dehghansai et al., 2022; Lemez et al., 2020; Patatas et al., 2021; Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014), and policy factors and stakeholder perspectives (e.g., Dehghansai et al., 2021; Green et al., 2024; Patatas et al., 2020, 2022; Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014). Specific stages of athlete development pathways (e.g., recruitment [Baker & Mazhar, 2023]; talent ID and athlete selection [Wattie & Dehghansai, 2023]; talent transfer [Dehghansai & Green, 2023]) have garnered investigation and researchers have also turned their attention to other integral aspects of parasport TID, including coaching and coach education (Townsend & Clare, 2023; Townsend et al., 2018), TID in youth sport (Houlihan & Chapman, 2017) and the role of parents in the para sport pathway (Coates & Howe, 2023).

There are a number of key findings in this body of work that are most relevant to this paper. Firstly, TID in parasport contexts is highly complex, largely due to considerable diversity across athletes and the role of the classification process, and there is an overwhelming consensus that this renders traditional TID models from mainstream sport unsuitable for parasport athletes (Baker et al., 2017; Dehghansai et al., 2017, 2022; Patatas et al., 2020). Secondly, para-athletes tend to enter sports and associated development pathways at unpredictable times and at an older age i*n comparison to non-disabled peers (Dehghansai et al., 2022; Lemez et al., 2020) Thirdly, due to limited talent pools, para-athletes subsequently experience shorter development trajectories to elite level, yet this can present challenges, sometimes to the detriment of athletes (Legg et al., 2023; Mahmodi et al., 2018). Fourthly, training programmes for para-athletes need to be athlete-centred and account for variances in impairments, previous sporting experiences, readiness for training and competition, and different support and resources requirements during key development periods (*Dehghansai et al., 2017, 2022; Francis et al., 2023). Finally, the work of stakeholders responsible for TID in para sport (e.g., coaches, high-performance directors and policy makers) is hindered by a lack of resources, limited impairment-related knowledge and success pressures (Patatas et al., 2022; *Baker & Mazhar, 2023; Howe & Silva, 2023; Patatas & De Bosscher, 2023).*

Limitations in the current body of literature on parasport TID provide a rationale for our research. Most importantly, researchers acknowledge that a lack of females in parasport development pathways has automatically led to limited research on the TID experiences of female para-athletes (Dehghansai et al., 2021, 2022; Patatas et al., 2021). Since Radtke and Doll-Tepper's (2014) cross-cultural analysis, most research has focused on parasport in the contexts of Brazil, Canada, Australia and the UK. Whilst there has been a combination of methodological approaches to the topic, namely quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, even the qualitative research in the area has yet to yield rich descriptions of athletes' lived experiences of TID. Most studies focus on multiple sports, and almost exclusively those which feature at the Paralympic Games, neglecting the experiences of athletes competing in other parasport contexts.

Recent work specifically on blind football includes Pennell et al'.s (2022) exploration of the value of a blind football skills test for talent identification and Tafah et al'.s (2024) Delphi study to identify and rank indicators for talent identification in blind football. In addition, Francis et al. (2023) utilise a case study of blind football to advance understanding of TID components in 'para-soccer'. Yet, despite providing useful observations relevant for TID practitioners, there is a failure to acknowledge the nuanced developments, particularly the impact of combining B1-B3 classes, in the women's game.

We contend that there are distinct aspects of, and challenges within, women's blind football that existing TID research does not yet capture. Given TID research in parasport largely neglects female athletes and prioritises established Paralympic sports, attention to this under-

represented population of female visually impaired (VI) footballers is timely, original and of international significance. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to explore the TID experiences of female VI footballers who play blind football, focusing on the following research questions: How did players enter the TID pathway? How are development trajectories impacted by recent global advances in the female game? How do current classification rules impact players? What are the current and future challenges facing players and key stakeholders?

Theoretical framework

To answer these research questions, this paper builds on the theoretical approach of our previous work (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025) and advocates for research on TID in parasport to engage more with intersectionality. Intersectional approaches enable the examination of 'crosscurrents' (Crenshaw, 1989) of different forms of privilege and oppression and how they manifest to shape 'individual, collective and structural conditions' (Naples et al., 2019, p. 10). Given the complexity and diversity across and within athlete groups in parasport, intersectional work has considerable potential for researchers responding to recent calls for a better understanding of individual parasport athletes' experiences, so that stakeholders can provide tailored support and resources relevant to diverse impairments, prior sporting experiences and the extent to which athletes are ready for training conditions and competition (Dehghansai et al., 2022). In the sociology of sport, intersectional research has paid relatively little attention to disability (Lim et al., 2021). While research on TID in parasport centralises disability, the field is yet to utilise intersectional approaches to examine how para-athletes' experiences of disability intersect with other forms of oppression (or privilege) to shape athletic opportunities and career pathways. This omission was highlighted in Gail Hamamoto's *Practitioner Commentary* emphasising the importance of listening to the voices of parasport athletes so that athletic career pathways 'provide equitable opportunities that acknowledge diversity and intersectionality' (Legg et al., 2023, p. 20).

For intersectional analyses, Söder (2009, p. 76) suggests that decisions about 'what power axes or categories should be included' are determined by the specific research aims, participants and the different dimensions of identity being explored. We find the work of McCall (2005) particularly useful as she differentiates between three main approaches to intersectionality, which differ by how analytical categories are understood and used to examine complex intersections in social life. Firstly, an *intercategorical complexity* approach involves the pragmatic use of existing analytical categories (such as gender, sex, sexuality and ethnicity) to examine the complexity of relationships of inequality between multiple social groups (McCall, 2005). In the context of TID in parasport, such an approach might inform analyses of inequalities between groups of para-athletes differentiated by sex, gender, impairment, sport, geographical context and so on; hence, 'the subject is multigroup, and the method is systematically comparative' (McCall, 2005, 1786). In contrast, an *anticategorical complexity* approach regards social life as 'irreducibly complex' and analytical categories as 'simplifying social fictions' which need to be deconstructed (McCall, 2005, 1773). The adoption of such an approach would be curious within research on parasport since, despite the associated controversies and challenges, the processes of classification and categorisation are fundamental.

We adopt an *intracategorical complexity* approach to intersectionality which is positioned between these two approaches and focuses on 'particular social groups at neglected points of intersection … to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups' (McCall, 2005, 1774). This approach tends to be used to explore new, invisible or unstudied groups, 'people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups' (Dill, 2002, cited in, p.5; McCall, 2005, 1774) with the aim of uncovering the diversity, difference and complexity within. While a specific social group – VI women who play blind football – is our focus, we regard such categories to hold 'ambivalent status' (McCall, 2005, 1783). Intracategorical complexity research scrutinises the categories to which people belong or, in the case of parasport, are allocated. As a defining feature of parasport, classification can perpetuate 'homogenising generalizations' (McCall, 2005, 1783), masking diversity between those allocated to the same sport classes for competition (Howe & Jones, 2006; Powis & Macbeth, 2020). An intra-categorical complexity approach enables us to interrogate such categories as 'misleading constructs that do not readily allow for the diversity and heterogeneity of experience to be represented' (McCall, 2005, 1783). Given that women's 'blind' football currently includes a combination of blind and partially sighted players, an intracategorical complexity approach is fitting.

It is important to outline some parameters to our analysis in this paper. McCall (2005, 1785) explains how, in an intracategorical complexity approach, relationships of inequality across social groups serve as background and contextual factors rather than the focus of analysis itself. Our previous work (Macbeth &

Sprake, 2025) and the introduction have provided context about the broader hierarchical structures that have marginalised women within VI football and led to the current organisation of women's blind football. The explicit focus in this paper, therefore, is to utilise an intracategorical complexity approach to explore the intricacies and nuances players with diverse visual impairment encounter as they navigate TID pathways in women's blind football, a sport already subordinated on the basis of sex and gender. Since disabled women have arguably been consigned to 'intersectional invisibility' (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 377) within football and within research on TID in parasport contexts, our intracategorical complexity approach to exploring the experiences of women entering VI football – a space historically dominated by men – makes an original and internationally significant contribution to knowledge in this area.

Materials and methods

Philosophical and methodological orientation

We adopted an interpretivist qualitative approach, underpinned by a relativist ontological and a constructivist epistemological position. In doing so, primacy was given to the lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In recognising the scope for participants' multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), we sought to construct meaning as we gained knowledge of their lived experiences. In this case, participants articulated their diverse experiences of being introduced to, 'scouted' and coached in blind football in relation to their intersecting identities, beyond the reductionist categories of 'female', 'disabled' and 'visually impaired'.

Participants and sampling

The participants in this study (N = 7) were recruited through purposive (Kenneavy & Harnois, 2023) and snowball (Cheek & Øby, 2023) sampling. The inclusion criteria required that they: (i) were female; (ii) were aged 16 years or older; (iii) have a visual impairment (blind or partially sighted) and (iv) currently participate, or have participated, in VI football in any context in England (e.g., FA-organised VI activity days and/or development camps, the Partially Sighted Football League [PSFL], the National Blind Football League [NBFL] or other VI-specific football provision). Utilising social media channels (including PSFL, NBFL, British Blind Sport [BBS], Metro Blind Sports), we circulated a call for participants via relevant stakeholders and through gatekeepers at the FA. Given that Leivers et al'.s (2025) analysis of the IBSA database revealed only 66 female blind (B1) and partially sighted (B2-B3) players registered to compete in IBSA-approved competitions globally, we are confident that our call for participants reached most of what is a very small population of potential participants in England.

At the time of data generation, the participants were aged late teens to thirties and had highly diverse experiences of visual impairment, with varied sight conditions that were either acquired or congenital and degenerative or stable. Despite these variations, all had experience of playing blind football, some played in the mixed-sex NBFL and, significantly for this article, all had been involved in the England development pathway at some point in the previous 3 years.

Data generation

Data were generated through one focus group (in-person) and six individual semi-structured interviews (via Microsoft Teams), to gain an in-depth understanding of players' experiences. The focus group was facilitated by Jessica and took place at an England blind football development event with four players. Despite time constraints limiting the focus group to 42 minutes, it nevertheless generated insightful data, providing us with an initial appreciation of players' diverse experiences which were to be explored further through individual interviews. Of the four focus group participants, three participated in the subsequent interviews. The average time of the interviews was 74 minutes in length, ranging from 51 to 107 minutes. Three interviews were facilitated collaboratively (Monforte & Úbeda-Colomer, 2021), with Jessica as the lead interviewer and Andrew adopting a probing role. The co-interviewing method enabled us to actively listen to participants and probe spontaneously, which reduced the cognitive load of preparing for the next questions (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). The three subsequent interviews were conducted by Jessica individually due to challenges aligning the diaries of participants and researchers. The focus group and interview guide followed the same structure, with questions relating to participants' backgrounds and sporting biographies, entry into football, experiences of development trajectories, opinions of recent developments in women's VI football and aspirations for the future. Through this line of questioning, rich in-depth data on talent identification and development was generated.

Collaborative qualitative data analysis

We analysed through abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and utilising Thompson's (2022) guide to

influence the development of themes. The process of abduction is 'the form of reasoning through which we perceive the phenomenon as related to other observations' (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 171). Through knowledge gained in previous research projects, we entered the process highly aware of the heterogeneity within groups of VI athletes, the way that sport classes in parasport conceal difference and the relevance of an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality. We acknowledge and embrace that, across the research team, our *brought selves* (Reinharz, 1997) are imbued with pre-existing appreciations of intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity, ableism, ocularcentrism, talent identification and development. Consequently, interpretations of the data were theoretically framed throughout. To date, abductive analysis has seldom been utilised for intersectional research (see Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Kochanek et al., 2021) and not explicitly for any research on TID in parasport. We deemed abductive analysis as contextually appropriate because it gives license to the continuous oscillation between theory and empirical data. Given that women's VI football is in a state of flux, with players navigating new and unfamiliar TID processes, abductive analysis enabled us to harness pre-existing theoretical insight whilst recognising the potential for the generation of 'anomalous, novel, or surprising' (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024, p. 975).

Methodological rigor

The research gained ethical approval from a central institutional ethics committee (BAHSS2 0319) in May 2022. Our decision to adopt collaborative abductive thematic analysis – resulting in over 20 hours of recorded online discussions between Jessica and Andrew – enabled us to develop an extensive audit trail of data generation and analysis. We achieved this through the following phases: initial independent data familiarisation; bookmarking significant responses; two rounds of collaborative coding; the creation of a codebook; data clustering; theme generation; non-linear theorising; a comparison of datasets; culminating in data display and writing up. Experiences of talent identification and development were salient and warranted specific attention. Given his expertise in this area, David was invited to independently analyse this data. Subsequent peer debriefing (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) between all three authors confirmed consistency in our interpretations and led to the refinement of themes.

As this sample of participants are from a very small population group, they could be identifiable if individual identity markers – such as age, sport classification and football career information – were provided. We deemed it ethically imperative to balance trustworthiness, through accurate and faithful presentation of findings, and the protection of participants' identities (Baez, 2002). As a result, all participants have been pseudonymised, we have provided no additional information about the individual participants, and we refer to the nature of their visual impairment only where necessary.

Findings

This section is organised around the themes generated through our analysis relating to talent identification and development: *Entry points – a game of chance; Rapid development trajectories – too much, too soon?; A whole new ball game*. We also offer context about the players' experiences of sport and football more generally prior to being introduced to blind football, as these contextual factors shape aspects of their talent pathway experiences.

Entry points – A game of chance

All players described their initial introduction to blind football as occurring largely by chance, yet their previous experiences of football varied and were influenced by differences in the nature and onset of visual impairment. Steph and Olivia participated in mainstream football at primary and secondary schools and in local teams prior to becoming visually impaired (VI). For Steph, her deteriorating vision during high school resulting in her being excluded from both school and local football teams. Having been born with a visual impairment, Laura described growing up in a football-oriented family where football has always been 'in the blood', yet she suffered a similar fate to Steph, being refused a trial at a local football club due to being VI.

In contrast, Sarah, who began to lose her sight in early adulthood, claims that despite being quite sporty, 'football was never on my radar', similarly other players who were born with a visual impairment acknowledge having had no interest or experience of playing football prior to being introduced to the game. Claire revealed a lack of interest and avoidance of any sport during her childhood, 'I was never a sporty child . . . I quite happily hid away in corners away from actual sporty people'. This lack of engagement with football throughout childhood and adolescence is arguably not typical for international players but can be explained by intersecting factors shaping the experiences of this specific group. The limited VI football opportunities for females and lack of notable role models are symptoms of the historic marginalisation of VI women in football until very recently and reflect what Fine and Asch (1981, p. 235) describe as the 'systemic rolelessness' imposed on disabled

women. Furthermore, this may be compounded by the internalisation of ableist assumptions which has been revealed to impact engagement in sport by VI women (Ball & Haegele, 2024).

After varied initial engagements with football, players were introduced to blind football in different ways in their mid-late teens or 30s. Four players' first introduction occurred at a college specifically for blind and partially sighted students which acts as an important route into VI sport in the UK. Whilst not a student at the college, Laura describes her first introduction to blind football at a multi-sport taster session:

> They were playing with a ball with the neon green and obviously my sight had got worse since the last time I had played so I could no longer see the ball and one of the coaches took me aside and was like how would you feel about … playing blind football? … and I fell in love, absolutely fell in love.

Similarly, Steph was still at high school when the Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCO) made her aware of a multi-sports camp being hosted at the college. Electing to try partially sighted football at first, Steph was encouraged to try blind football:

> … they were like 'come outside quickly … this is a blind football pitch, put this blindfold on' and I was like 'erm … ok'. And obviously by then I was still registered VI, like I still had decent vision … I put the shades on and they were like 'you have got potential'.

Two players who were students at the college, Jenny and Claire, reiterated their relative apathy for football despite encouragement from friends at the college, as Jenny revealed:

> I wasn't even interested in football I mean my experience of football before that was kicking a ball around the garden with my brother and someone I knew was like 'I want to try it', dragged me along to a session, they ended up hating it, I loved it. (Jenny)

Despite different degrees of interest and engagement with football before trying B1, having access to the VI college proved significant in introducing them to the sport. Yet this highlights a potential issue for VI girls and women with an interest in football but without awareness of the opportunities in such contexts – with age potentially playing a role here – or the means of accessing them.

The other players' entry points to blind football occurred in diverse ways and contexts. Olivia was the only one of the younger players not to be initially introduced to blind football at the VI college. Having already been playing in the PSFL, she explains how a dip in her vision during her late teens led to her transition into blind football:

> I got a migraine one night and … the next day I woke up and I had completely lost my sight so I couldn't obviously play partially sight futsal … and then my coach, he also coaches B1 football, so he said, 'oh why don't you try this?' … I started doing the training sessions and then surprisingly I actually enjoyed it so after that I started training more regularly.

Two players who were introduced to blind football in their thirties experienced different routes into the sport. Sarah was introduced firstly to partially sighted football before trying blind football, yet her 'recruitment' was entirely by chance when she was 'just randomly approached by a disability [football] officer in the street [who] saw me using a white stick and said, "how do you fancy coming along and giving one of our VI football sessions a go?"' She also explains how meeting other VI people was an important factor in her persevering with the sport despite some initial challenges:

> … [I] absolutely struggled but enjoyed being out with other visually impaired people and just sort of meeting a group of friends and having something in common … then it all sort of snowballed from there really … got into the blind game and I have never looked back.

Finally, Lyndsey also entered blind football in her thirties, after an elite career in another VI sport. Having monitored developments in the women's game via social media, she became interested with the announcement of the England squad and determined to be part of it, the only player inspired by the pioneer players who had become involved briefly before her:

> … that is when I thought 'yes, this is the time … let's see if I can do this'. I have been in sport a long time, there is no way that it is going to be like impossible for me to get on that team. I announce that I am going to go and play football for England … and I had never touched a ball in my life.

Lyndsey actively pursued finding a club, a process she described as 'actually harder than I thought … I didn't realise how niche it is in this country', and was self-driven in pursuing her goal, despite admitting to having 'no idea what I was doing'.

These diverse and chance entry points into blind football have been uncovered through the intracategorical approach and reflect the embryonic nature of pathways into the sport for women and girls. The development trajectories players experienced from this point were rapid and accelerated by broader global developments in the women's game.

Rapid development trajectories – Too much, too soon?

This theme focuses on players' initial introduction to the England talent pathway and experiences of representing England at an international tournament. It is important to reiterate the environmental factors impacting players' experiences of these stages. The FA's plans for a women's blind England squad came to fruition in May 2022, with the hosting of the inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championship on the horizon. A first international match against Sweden in April 2022 was followed by the first women's blind football European Championships (Italy, June 2022) between England and Germany which acted as an important stepping stone providing players with their first experience of 'tournament' football before the World Championship in August 2023.

After attending sessions at the VI college when early plans for an England squad were in motion, five players (Laura, Jenny, Claire, Steph and Olivia) were subsequently invited to initial England development camps during late 2021 and early 2022. Some players who attended the earlier taster sessions waited several months until development camps were established, as Jenny describes:

> I got an email . . . it was like 'oh, would you mind coming to St George's Park to do this exhibition game because we want to get women's blind football as a thing?', and about six months down the line it's like, 'hi, you've been invited to England women's training camp'.

Steph experienced almost immediate recruitment to the development pathway, being told 'you have got potential, we're signing you up to these . . . development camps for England' at her first taster session. Lyndsey had a similar experience having been spotted playing in her first match in the NBFL, 'I literally played seven minutes and then got scouted for England . . . just like that'.

While Jenny and Laura perceived there to be competition for places, most players reflected on the ease of being selected amidst the rush to establish a national team. Sarah asserted that players had 'quite a good chance of getting quite high up, quite quickly because the sport is so niche'. Similarly, Claire reflected wryly on how the 'panic' to establish an England team in time to host the World Championships meant that very basic selection criteria applied, 'be female, be VI and preferably have seen a ball before but that is not necessarily required . . . I had not really touched a ball for more than a few weeks'. These views reflect the under-developed nature of women's blind football in England and the limited pool of talent that currently exists as a consequence of its previous neglect.

All players spoke very fondly and proudly about their first experiences of representing their nation in tournament football. However, limited opportunities to play competitive B1 football during their rapid performance trajectories presented challenges. A perceived lack of experience in comparison to other nations fuelled apprehension ahead of the World Championships for Jenny, who felt:

> . . . terrified, it's a weird thing, it is like an excited terror . . . because I know there are some countries . . . they have been around for years and years. So, their team is going to be a lot more developed, in not just their tactics and their skills but then also the way the team is actually formed together with their own personal bonds.

The varied experiences of players across different nations add weight to the value of an intracategorical complexity approach to research in this area. While this paper represents the experiences of England players, a detailed understanding of the diverse experiences of female VI footballers in other nations is warranted.

Players also identified additional challenges associated with their rapid development journeys, including access to information, travel logistics and related financial costs. For example, Sarah explains:

> Some of the girls are saying 'who knows what camp is going on next week, are we getting a car?' Because we can't just jump on a train, it takes planning. . . I would be sitting here panicking thinking 'oh my god I have got to get my ticket because I can't use the machine' . . . you can't understand that unless you have been through it, and I think . . . for the England team, that is going to be a detriment.

Whilst these players overcame such issues, they also recognised them as potential deterrents for prospective players, especially considering the challenges reported by different VI women when accessing physical activity (Ball, 2024).

Finally, players described how they felt unrealistic expectations were initially placed upon them by staff tasked with developing an international team:

> [They were] trying to build a team out of novices to play in a world games . . . They didn't know how to treat us . . . they were split between treating us like novices who did not know what we were doing, which is what we were, and also treating us as if we should know what we're doing because we are part of the England team. (Claire)

With staff involved in developing the England Women's Blind Team having experience within the men's game, the players' sentiments infer that unrealistic performance standards were imposed on and used to judge

inexperienced female players. This is revealing of the inequalities across these two different social groups (male v female 'blind' footballers) yet, as the next section demonstrates, there is further intracategorical complexity amongst female players with varying levels of sight as they navigate the process of learning blind football.

A whole new ball game?

A consistent finding for all players is that the specific game of blind football was a completely new sport and a steep learning curve. Claire explained how players all needed to 'get the basics' before they could 'start doing complex things', with Laura asserting that everyone was essentially 'learning from scratch'. Jenny elaborated on the nature of the basics, particularly ball control and orientation:

> As soon as you get those little things right, like you can learn all of the big important things, this is how to shoot, this is how to pass, but unless you can control the ball in a dribble and you can orientate yourself, there is no point knowing those other things.

In addition, Laura richly described how the dynamic nature and multi-sensory demands of blind football can sometimes be overwhelming for new players:

> It is obviously really difficult trying to focus on all of these different elements of saying Voy, where is everybody on the pitch? Keeping the ball at our feet, doing a good speed, listening to our guide behind the goal to go towards them, there is so many things that you need to focus on at one time, it can be a lot and mentally draining. So, we have lots of workshops … I think it is just lack of game time … going forward we're going to be doing a lot more internationals … to get that kind of game experience.

Such support was provided at workshops during development camps but, as Laura explains, the message to players was '"Ok, yes, we have these camps, but we need you to train out with for you to develop"'. Yet the feasibility of accessing appropriate local facilities to undertake independent training depended on where players were based, 'when I am at home I am training in the garden because there is just nothing around … officially the only two blind pitches in the country are at St George's Park and Hereford' (Jenny). Although the main regular learning opportunity was to play in the mixed-sex NBFL, this presented some challenges for the female players, particularly in terms of the physicality of playing against men, something players identified as a potential deterrent for females (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025). So, being able to train regularly to develop skills and replicate competitive game situations was encouraged but not necessarily feasible.

Learning the sport from scratch presented different challenges to players with different levels of sight. While there is some degree of variance in sight across B1 players within the men's game – hence the need for players to wear blindfolds – the inclusion of B2 and B3 players in women's blind football leads to greater diversity in terms of pre-existing football and 'blind' skills and, accordingly, what different players are capable of, comfortable with and what they need to learn. As Lyndsey explains:

> My orientation is probably my forte … for me that is my every day, so I don't struggle with that side of it but … I never played football when I was sighted which I kick myself for now. Learning the actual skills required is so much more difficult when you're totally blind, to be explained to you, whereas some of those other girls can just watch it.

However, Steph describes a contrasting experience having played football previously with useful vision; the key challenge for her was adjusting to playing football wearing a blindfold:

> I don't have my orientation, but I can shoot very well. Like when I first joined, I could dribble with the ball, and I could pass, and I could shoot … because I had a mainstream football background. But my skill level couldn't increase … there was no point knowing how to dribble and shoot and pass if you don't have orientation, if you don't know where you are on the pitch.

While learning the game itself was a fundamental need for player development, learning other aspects of becoming a blind footballer also presented challenges for these novice players, whose lack of exposure to the sport meant they were yet to acquire associated cultural capital. For example, Sarah described a conversation with a new player who, rather than approach coaching staff, contacted her for advice about purchasing equipment to ask:

> 'Can you send me a link to get some of those knee pads that you all wear?' And I am thinking, 'you're in the England team, why the hell are you messaging me asking me to send you a link so you can buy knee pads?'

Reflecting on her first international game, Laura explains how inexperienced and unprepared she was for what might seem like taken for granted rituals and game etiquette:

> We had obviously never played … that was our first ever major game, our actual full game like I am still learning things like … how to shake the persons hand and do the toss … what side you're going to play on, do you want to stay at that side? Who starts with the ball? Kick off and I am like 'I have never experienced that, what do I do?' I had not been prepared for that kind of stuff.

Overall, becoming a blind footballer presented all players with a range of unknowns to negotiate. Their testimonies suggest that, during their experiences thus far, they had not been fully supported in preparations for competition both on and off the field, with staff at times assuming they had some degree of prior knowledge beyond their novice status.

Discussion

Concerted efforts have been made to develop women's blind football globally in recent years and, although England has established an international representative squad, players' voices illustrate several challenges. We acknowledge that existing TID frameworks for sport (e.g., Balyi et al., 2013; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017, 2023; Martindale et al., 2005) have already been scrutinised and deemed too restrictive to account for the nuances of TID in parasport. Like Patatas et al. (2022), it is not our intention to propose a model for TID in parasport or, more specifically, for women's blind football, particularly given that the game is in flux. Instead, this section offers a critical discussion of inter-related areas that could inform future practice.

The players in our study described experiences consistent with parasport athletes in other TID research, yet there are some distinct nuances which derive from the complex intersection of disability, visual impairment, sex and gender. Our participants exhibit diverse entry points, with all players acknowledging the challenges of accessing appropriate recreational pathways (Coates & Howe, 2023). They exhibited age variations when being introduced to blind football, with no clear indication that those with acquired impairments start later than those with congenital impairments, as commonly reported in existing research (e.g., Patatas et al., 2021). Yet this is complicated by a distinct lack of opportunities for females in blind football, other than the mixed-sex NBFL, until very recently. Players experienced even more rapid development trajectories in comparison to those reported in other studies (Patatas et al., 2021, 2022), arguably due to the current environment of women's blind football and the push for Paralympic inclusion. Most notable, within England, was the added impetus to have a representative team as hosts of 2023 Women's Blind Football World Championships. The pace of players' development trajectories came with consequences not unfamiliar within the parasport context. Limited recreational and competitive opportunities to learn the game meant that players often trained alone (Francis et al., 2023; Dehghansai et al., 2022) and were thrust into international competition 'while still acquiring and improving motor their skills' (Patatas & De Bosscher, 2023, p. 31) and overall 'readiness for training and competition' (Dehghansai et al., 2022, p. 79). Players exhibited apprehensions in this regard, highlighting feelings of incompetence on the international stage. Given that Baker and Mazhar (2023) stress the importance of quality early engagements, governing bodies and coaches need to carefully manage these issues so as to not overwhelm or deter prospective players in the future.

While existing literature suggests that para-athletes with acquired impairments can capitalise on previous transferable skills (Francis et al., 2023), a particular nuance with the current combination of B1-B3 classes in women's blind football is how partially sighted players may similarly benefit from what Patatas et al. (2022, p. 314) describe as a 'smart track opportunity' where athletes are identified based on 'who may perform better in a particular sport class, which may bring faster results or medals'. This raises the concern that, without a quota system such as those used in other parasports, there is a risk of women's blind football becoming exclusionary for some B1 players (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025).

Women's blind football is in a state of flux and how it evolves in the coming years remains to be seen. Amongst players, there is an appetite for a split between blind and partially sighted formats, replicating the structure for males (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025), yet considerable work in recruiting more players is required before any such aspirations are likely to materialise. This paper has represented the experiences of pioneer players operating in a complex and 'dynamic and interconnected system' (Baker & Mazhar, 2023, p. 43). What is clear is a fundamental need to develop awareness of recent developments and current opportunities and raise the profile of the women's game amongst relevant VI communities.

As advocated by high-performance staff in Dehghansai et al. (2021, p. 10) study, providing opportunities at younger ages enables athletes 'to feel comfortable with their abilities and the sporting environment while developing fundamental skills'. While this opportunity has effectively been denied to our participants, there are positive signs with the launch in March 2025 of *Female Futures*, an 'explicit initiative' (Baker & Mazhar, 2023) between Goalball UK and the FA to identify, recruit and develop VI females in these sports (Goalball, 2025). This multi-sport approach to TID aligns with that advocated by Dehghansai et al. (2022) as an attempt to mitigate challenges to athlete recruitment. We recommend that channelling efforts and resources to grow the number of VI females playing football is

a fundamental step in the equitable development of women's blind football and, potentially, women's partially sighted football in the future.

This paper has responded to Dehghansai et al. (2021, p. 10) call for research that has the potential to help 'introduce a more welcoming space for female athletes' in parasport. While key stakeholders may be tempted or pressured to sacrifice long-term athlete development for the ambition of a 'golden shower of medals', Howe and Silva (2023, pp. 204–205) warn of the 'disillusionment, disengagement, and damage' that this can bring for athletes. In terms of developing recreational and competitive football opportunities for VI females, serious consideration needs to be given to the appropriateness of mixed-sex leagues (Macbeth & Sprake, 2025). While insufficient numbers may not yet make female-only VI football leagues viable, this should be considered by stakeholders as an important ambition.

We also recommend that efforts are made to upskill coaches, from grassroots to elite level, on the nuances of visual impairment, especially the different needs of players across the B1-B3 spectrum in the women's game. Whilst the publication of the *IBSA Blind Football Training Manual – Girls, Women, Non-binary* in 2023 (IBSA, 2023) provides a useful resource, there is no mention of the integration of partially sighted players within women's blind football and no advice about the realities of supporting players with different experiences of visual impairment. We recommend that IBSA take responsibility and provide such guidance, ideally co-created with a representative group of players. This aligns with a crucial point about player agency and voice. By centralising the voices of VI female players to better understand their lived experiences of parasport TID, we hope this paper has provided important evidence to influence TID in women's blind football and raised significant considerations for any parasport attempting to attract currently under-represented groups. It is opportune and necessary for key stakeholders to include the athletes they serve in decision-making processes going forward so that future developments meet their needs, from recreational to elite level, and empower them to reach their potential.

In terms of research on TID in parasport, we reiterate our endorsement of intersectional approaches in this field. An intracategorical complexity approach has enabled us to begin with 'a unified intersectional core – a single group' (McCall, 2005, 1787) and to develop an understanding of the complex texture of their TID experiences. We have provided comparative reminders of how their experiences are contextually different to more established groups which have already received academic attention. So, while women's blind football has been our focal point, aspects of men's blind football have served as a source of background comparison and contrast (McCall, 2005, 1783). McCall (2005, 1787) identifies that intracategorical approaches can progressively work outward to consider multiple categorical influences. We regard our approach to have advanced the existing understanding of challenges in parasport TID by illuminating the intricate experiences within a specific group of para-athletes. Further studies of this nature across the spectrum of parasport are warranted, as are more comparative intercategorical complexity analyses. We acknowledge that our analysis has not extended beyond the intersects of visual impairment and gender, with some brief attention to age, yet it was differences emanating from diverse visual impairment that we prioritised as an important project in itself, given the current organisation of women's blind football.

Finally, our research sample is made up of players who have all been 'selected' to attend England development camps in recent years. Therefore, we cannot claim to have captured the experiences of VI females – potentially prospective players – who have not yet been 'recruited' to blind football for a myriad of reasons stemming from complex intersections of disability, visual impairment, sex, gender and other social forces. Similarly, our research does not represent the experiences of players who may have been involved at some stage of the 'pathway' but no longer engage. Further research with such individuals is warranted to better understand how to make opportunities more accessible and empowering, grow the talent pool and advance the game in an equitable manner.

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