

**‘Floodlights, Camera, Action’:
An ethnography of performance cultures and
team dynamics (*in football*)**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Thesis title: *'Floodlights, Camera, Action':*

An ethnography of performance cultures and team dynamics in football

This ethnographic study explores performance culture, identity, and team dynamics in non-league football in the United Kingdom, examining the performative nature of social interactions within a team environment. Grounded in dramaturgical analysis, narrative inquiry, and sports sociology, this research captures the lived experiences of players, managers, and staff over a six-year immersive fieldwork period.

Using Joseph Campbell's monomyth, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, and Carl Jung's framework of archetypes, this study conceptualises football as a theatrical performance, where individuals adopt, negotiate, and manage their masculinity, and identities both on and off the pitch. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation and field notes, the researcher uncovers how leadership, team cohesion, and social hierarchy are performed and reinforced in a sporting context.

Findings reveal that football dressing rooms function as microcosms of broader social structures, where players navigate shifting roles, impression management, and group allegiance. This study highlights the psychological and cultural dimensions of leadership, player identity formation, and the ritualistic nature of performance within team sports.

By integrating academic theory with creative storytelling, this thesis contributes to the sociology of football, sports psychology, and the discourse on performative identity in sport. These insights advance understanding of how performance culture shapes individual and collective experiences within teams, influencing leadership, cohesion, and the emotional landscape of sport.

Dedications

This work in its entirety is dedicated to my parents, my dear sister Lorraine, and, of course, my wife, Julie. Without you all, I would not be who I am today.

And finally, to Dr Clive Palmer. I told you that the hardest part of this research journey was leaving the field, but once again, you were there to remind me, *'Your PhD is there for the taking, now all you've got to do is get out of there and write the bloody thing!'*

Thank you, Clive. For everything.

Contents

Abstract	i
Dedications	ii
Declaration of Anonymity	viii
Main Cast	ix
Clubs, Locations, League and Interviewees	x
Acknowledgements	xi
List of Figures	xii
List of researcher’s publications and conference presentations	xiii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Open: Grey Box	2
1.1 Underpinning theory, context and preface	3
1.2 Immersive Fieldwork	6
1.3 Integration of Dramaturgy	9
1.4 Research Aims	12
1.5 Research Objectives	13
1.6 Thesis Outline	13
Close: Grey Box	15
Chapter Two: Meeting the Cast	17
Open: Grey Box	18
2.1 I didn’t start this empty handed	20
2.2 Conceptual research frameworks	23
2.3 Importance of storytelling in a football setting	25
2.4 Importance of performance in a football setting	27
2.5 Importance of archetypes within a football setting	29
2.6 It wasn’t always easy: <i>A Reflective Journey of Learning</i>	30
2.7 My research in the field	31
2.8 Overview of acts	33
Close: Grey Box	36

Chapter Three: Methodology	38
Open: Grey Box	39
3.1 Setting the Scene	39
3.2 Research Paradigm	41
3.2.1 <i>Ontology</i>	42
3.2.2 <i>Epistemology</i>	44
3.2.3 <i>Axiology</i>	46
3.2.4 <i>Reflexivity</i>	47
3.3 Influential Thinkers	50
3.4 Beyond the Mask: Unveiling Performance Through Ethnography	57
Close: Grey Box	58
Chapter Four: Methods	62
Open: Grey Box	63
4.1 Research methods for data collection, synthesis and reporting	64
4.2 Context and Opportunity	66
4.3 Covid-19 Interviews	68
4.4 The Last Soccer: <i>A visual Representation of Research Influences</i>	69
4.5 Observations and Note-Taking	73
4.6 Storied Analysis	75
4.7 Storytelling	76
4.8 Visual representation of the research journey	79
Close: Grey Box	82
Chapter Five: The Acts (Results, Analysis and Discussion)	84
Open: Grey Box	85
Prologue to the Acts	85
Programme notes	87
5.1 Act I. Entering the Field: <i>The Call to Adventure</i>	88
Prologue: <i>From Theory to Field</i>	89
5.2 Research context: <i>The bit before the 'Hero's Journey'</i>	90
5.2.1 Account 1. The Beginning: <i>What he wants, what I want and what the club needs</i>	91

5.2.2	Account 2. The Middle: <i>Pregame jitters, anxiety, fear or excitement?</i>	93
5.2.3	Account 3. The End: <i>Different masks, same relationship</i>	95
5.2.4	Reflexions and stylised approach to this Act	99
5.3	Act II. Lost in the field: <i>Season 1, into the abyss</i>	103
	Prologue: <i>Crossing the Threshold</i>	104
5.3.1	Account 1. The Beginning: <i>Into the unknown, emerged in the Special World</i>	105
5.3.2	Reflexion and stylised approach	116
5.3.3	Account 2. The Middle: <i>Tests, Allies and Enemies - The Vipers</i>	119
5.3.4	Vipers Reflexion	122
5.3.5	Account 3. The End: <i>Meeting the Mentor</i>	125
5.3.6	Script Introduction	125
5.3.7	Come Home, Wayward Son	126
5.3.8	Reflective monologues	151
5.4	Act III. A road of trials: <i>Pen, pad, social dynamics, and the dark arts</i>	154
	Prologue: <i>Season 2</i>	155
5.4.1	Account 1: The Dark Arts (<i>outward facing self</i>)	156
5.4.1.1	Journal Entry 1: The Rewritten Script	159
5.4.1.2	Journal Entry 2: The Prodigal Hero	162
5.4.1.3	Journal Entry 3: The Dark Art of War	165
5.4.1.4	Reflexion	169
5.4.2	Account 2: The Group (<i>behind the outward facing self</i>)	171
5.4.2.1	Reflexion	178
5.4.3	Account 3: The Individuals (<i>behind the group</i>)	180
5.4.3.1	Reflexion	185
5.4.4	Making Sense of Act 3: <i>Bridging Theory and Practice</i>	187
5.5	Act IV. Apotheosis and Atonement	189
	Prologue: <i>The archetypal story of JC</i>	190
5.5.2	Narrative Preface Account 1	191
5.5.3	Account 1. Am I Sancho Panza?	192

<i>The Fields of Brinchester: A Noble Quest</i>	193
<i>The Spartans Siege: Defending the Fortress</i>	195
<i>The Farewell at Feversbrook: A Final journey</i>	197
5.5.4 Narrative Preface Account 2	200
5.5.5 Account 2. <i>The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge</i>	201
Episode 1: The Call to Leadership	202
Episode 2: The Trials	204
Episode 3: The Final Battle	208
5.5.6 Narrative Preface Account 3	213
5.5.7 Account 3. <i>The Rise of JC: A Reflective Journey Foretold by Daniel</i>	214
5.6 Act V. Exiting the field	216
Prologue: <i>Refusal of the Return</i>	217
5.6.1 Account 1. <i>What the Others Say: Reviewing the Current Body of Literature</i>	218
5.6.2 Discussion	219
5.6.3 Account 2. <i>To You, from Me: My Future Self</i>	222
5.6.4 Account 3. <i>I Died on Stage: This is the End</i>	226
5.6.5 Reflexion: Into and out of the field	228
Close: Grey Box	228
Chapter Six: Conclusions and recommendations	229
6.1 Reflections and Learning	230
6.2 Recommendations for Future Researchers	232
Navigating Positionality and Dual Roles	233
Managing the Emotional Lifecycle of Fieldwork	233
Methodological Creativity and Representation	234
Context, Culture, and Masculinity in Football	235
Time, Change, and Transferability	235
6.3 The Final Curtain	236
Close: Grey Box	238
References	240

Appendices/Thesis B	259
1. Ethical Approval: UCLan BAHSS Ethics Committee	261
2. Participant Information Sheets	262
3. Participant Consent Form	267
4. Interview Schedule	270
5. Lockdown Interview Example (<i>PM</i>)	272
6. Raw Notes (<i>Blackhawk: 26th December 2022</i>)	275
7. Disguised Notes (<i>Feversbrook Town: 22nd April 2023</i>)	278
8. Refined Notes (<i>Cranford Town: 19th November 2022</i>)	280

Declaration of Anonymity

All the names of people, organisations and locations that have contributed to this research, or feature as characters or places within it, have been anonymised in this thesis. The process of anonymising this research has not been a restriction. Rather, it has brought opportunities to select new performance names which marry with the characters I portray, the roles they play, and their actions which I observed. In the process of writing, this freedom has allowed me to, essentially, '*create my own cast*'. In the methodological context and topic of this research (*observation of identity and social performance*), this anonymising and renaming is appropriate and ethically sound practice. However, all the characters and characterisations of people, actions and identity are drawn directly from data collected under UCLan ethics during the registration of this PhD.

MAIN CAST



Manager	Justin Conrad 'JC'
Ecuadorian	Fierro Guerrero
Old Guard/The Prodigal Hero & Viper	Jack Beagle 'J'Dog'
Viper	Clint Garner
Skipper & Viper	Brady O'Hara
Player/Opposition Player & Viper	Neil Linton
The Chairman	Alistair Montague 'Monty'
Supervisor/DoS	Dr Clive Palmer

SUPPORTING CAST

Old Guard	Callum Thorne 'Thorney'
Old Guard	James Langford 'Langs'
Old Guard	Tyler Temby
Old Guard	Brody Baxter
Player (goalkeeper)	Liam Alderson
Player	Joel Kane
Player	Matthew Wilton
Player	John Thomas 'JT'
Player	Tobias Bromley 'Tab'
Player	Dean Ferraro
Player	Alec Barclay
Player	Giovanni Ashdon 'G'
Player	Rhys Brockman
Player	Jake Steele
Player	Blake Alden
Player	Jamie Yates
Player	Connor Lawton
Player	Lennie Hale
Player	Dean Mosgrove
Player	Dave Parry
Player	Chris Gilliam 'Gilly'
Opposition Player	Jason Coyne
Former Player/Opposition Player	Christian Langford
Blackhawk Manager	Silas Slade
Physiotherapist	Tanya



CLUBS

Ironbridge FC
Blackhawk FC
Rocksgate FC
Haven Bay FC
Burton Hill Town FC
Harcott Town FC
Whittlesea Town FC
Loxley FC
Bridgetown FC
Cranford Town FC
Brinchester FC
Spartans FC
Feversbrook FC

LEAGUE

Ionian South-East League

LOCATIONS

Ironbridge FC's Ground
Victory Field

Haven Bay FC's Ground
The Post Stadium

Burton Hill Town FC's Ground
Canada Drive

Harcott Town FC's Ground
Ridgefield Stadium

Whittlesea Town FC's Ground
Bellmere Road


Blackhawk FC's Ground
The Ravens Cage

Feversbrook FC's Ground
Bluewave Stadium



INTERVIEWEES

Industry professionals
DT, WH, PM, GW, MJ, BN, NR, MD

Signature	
Date	9 th of September 2025

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This thesis represents more than an academic pursuit, it has been a journey of resilience, discovery, and personal growth. Along the way, I have been fortunate to receive the unwavering support of remarkable individuals, without whom this work would not have been possible.

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List of Figures

Figure	Title	Page
1.	Game face	19, 51
2.	10 Rules of Life	21
3.	The Hero's Journey	53
4.	Jungian Model of the Psyche	55
5.	Persona and Performance: <i>An integrated Model of Identity</i>	58
6.	Research Framework: <i>The story so far...</i>	61
7.	Theoretical social roles for fieldwork	65
8.	The Last Soccer	69
9.	Interviewees and Football Pioneers	72
10.	My Research Journey	79
11.	Research Framework: <i>Cont.</i>	81
12.	The Birth of the Vipers	119
13.	Come Home, Wayward Son Front Cover	126
14.	Use of Technology	127
15.	County Mall	133
16.	Café Nero	133
17.	Broadfield Football Stadium	143
18.	The Plan	151
19.	Ink on Paper, Don Quixote by Pablo Picasso	191
20.	A Leader in Training	200
21.	A Star Wars Story	200
22.	In a Hamlet not that far away	201
23.	A Biblical Reflection	213
24.	Lines in the Sand	215
25.	Look Behind the Mask	225

PhD Candidacy Publications

Danny Lee

Journal Articles:

Lee, D. and Palmer, C. (2018) Hatch, match and dispatch: a creative but nonfictional journey through research methods. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 12, 1, 101-166.

Books:

Lee, D. (2024) Canoeing and Gymnastics in China (Chapter 27: pp. 299-301). In Palmer, C. and Sellers, V. (Eds.) *Gymnastics, Education and Philosophy: An Anthology of Learning*. Dane Valley Press, Cheshire, UK. ISBN: 978-1-9161075-1-9

Lee, D. and Palmer, C. (2019) *The Nelson Boys*. Dane Valley Press, Cheshire, UK.

Conferences:

Lee, D., and Palmer, C. (2025) *Mapping the research journey – a visual and reflexive ethnographic framework*. Graduate Research School Annual Conference, University of Central Lancashire, UK. 21st May.

Lee, D., and Palmer, C. (2024) Hatch, Match and Dispatch: The Movie [YouTube 10mins 18 secs]. Nomination for the Routledge Dissertation Film Award 2024. IAEC: 11th International Conference of Autoethnography. The Engineer's House, Clifton Village, Bristol, UK. 21st-23rd July.

Palmer, C., Smith, G., Lee, D., and Lawlor, C. (2024) "Scoping out the but-it's-nots": [Panel Lead] *Common threads in learning, and the joy of sharing through community*. IAEC: 11th International Conference of Autoethnography. The Engineer's House, Clifton Village, Bristol, UK. 21-23 July.

Smith, G., Palmer, C., Lawlor, C. and Lee, D. (2024) "Getting under the skin of skin": *An autoethnographic analysis of institutional change concerning skin health in an island population*. [#1 Panel] *Common threads in learning, and the joy of sharing through community*. IAEC: 11th International Conference of Autoethnography. The Engineer's House, Clifton Village, Bristol, UK. 21st-23rd July.

Lee, D., Palmer, C., Smith, G. and Lawlor, C. (2024) "Floodlights, Camera, Action": *An ethnography of performance cultures and team dynamics in football*. [#2 Panel] *Common threads in learning, and the joy of sharing through community*. IAEC: 11th International Conference of Autoethnography. The Engineer's House, Clifton Village, Bristol, UK. 21st-23rd July.

Lawlor, C., Palmer, C., Lee, D. and Smith G. (2024) "40p a Mile and a Sausage Roll": *A song for the Nowhere Men in football scouting*. [#3 Panel] *Common threads in learning, and the joy of sharing through community*. IAEC: 11th International Conference of Autoethnography. The Engineer's House, Clifton Village, Bristol, UK. 21st-23rd July.

Lee, D. (2021) *The Last Soccer: significant influencers in my football research*. Qualitative Research Gallery: Infographic Collaboration: A Post-Graduate Research Symposium School of Sport and Health Sciences, UCLan, Preston. [Online: March 2021].

- Pryle, J., Keeling, J., Sprake, A., **Lee, D.** and Palmer, C. (2020) *LA lingo: a view from the cricket commentary box*. Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th- 21st March.
- Sprake, A., Keeling, J., **Lee, D.**, Pryle, J. and Palmer, C. (2020) *'Homework, in PE! Are you 'avin' a laugh?'* Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th -21st March.
- Keeling, J., Sprake, A., Pryle, J., **Lee, D.** and Palmer, C. (2020) *Tainted love: research in rugby league*. Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th- 21st March.
- Lee, D.**, Palmer, C., Keeling, J., Sprake, A. and Pryle, J., (2020) *Hatch, match and dispatch: corporeal ceremonies in the mud*. Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th-21st March.
- Palmer, C., Byrom, A., Grecic, D., Pryle, J., McGregor, K., Sprake, A., Wilkinson, S., Massaro, D., Keeling, J., Dransfield, F., Whall, R., Wragg, J. and **Lee, D.** (2020) *Promoting staff as active learners –co-producers of CPD for research in Sport and Health*. Presentation at the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing Research Away Day. University of Central Lancashire, Westleigh Conference Centre, Preston, UK. Tuesday 11th February.
- Lee, D.** (2019) *Danny Lee on TV: an ethnographic documentary of performance cultures and group dynamics in sport*. The Qualitative Bazaar - A Bizarre Marketplace of Research in Sport. Post-Graduate Research Symposium. Sport and Health Sciences, Faculty of Health, UCLan. 20th November.
- Lee, D.** (2017) *A statistical analysis of seasonal results against team dynamics*. Three Bridges Football Club, Sussex.
- Lee, D.** (2015) Clap hands, behold the Messiah in football. Presentation: *Symposium for Body Language and Sensory Communication*, Faculty of Sport and Exercise, University of Roehampton, 5th May.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Chapter One

Introduction

Before we begin, let me set the scene. I like to check in, with where I am, and in all honesty, who I am at the moment of re-reading, writing, and reporting what I’ve done. Although this is a serious academic piece, with rigour, theory and a deep commitment to knowledge, it is also a portrayal of who I am in the world. These are what I call my **‘grey box’** moments. This is where I stop, take stock, and reflect. Is this what I have actually seen? Is this what we did? Is this a true reflection of events? Sometimes these grey box moments are easy, but sometimes I need to revisit, check in with my personal emotions, and re-evaluate. Throughout this thesis, mainly at the start and end of each chapter, you’ll hear my voice, not the academic voice of structured argument or literature review, but the voice of the narrator. This is me, not just writing, but stepping into the spotlight: script in hand, heart in mouth, the vulnerable but curious researcher, narrating not the data, but the journey.

This voice is honest, performative, and present throughout. It speaks not just to what I’ve learned, but for what it means to me. Not just to what this work contributes to the academy, but how it has shaped me, as a researcher, a practitioner, and as a person. At times this may resemble that of Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), reflective, analytical, and a little windswept by the journey. Although equally, at times, it’s not dissimilar to *Ferris Bueller* (1986), who turns to the camera mid-scene and says, *‘Let me tell you what’s really going on’*.

These openings and closings are not summaries, but reflexive stage directions. They say *‘here’s where we are, what matters, and why I care’*. They are a spotlight and a breath before the next scene begins. They show where I change my voice, my positionality and the written structure. They are part of the performance, and they are authentically me.

1.1 Underpinning theory, context and preface

This research seeks to explore the performative nature of human beings in sporting culture, focusing on identity formation and team dynamics within non-league football in the UK. To set the scene for this research, this '*contextual preface*' foregrounds some of the key theoretical areas, and theorists that lay the foundations for this study to be undertaken and reported in this thesis. In this research, people's influence on team dynamics within the setting of non-league football in the UK are of central concern. This study develops from the creative methods explored initially within the researcher's MSc (Lee and Palmer, 2019). This doctoral research uses an ethnographic approach and creative qualitative methods to explore the characters and behaviours of the players, and manager, along with the social construction of the group being studied. The researcher has been embedded within the culture of club football for six years, undertaking the dual role of assistant manager and researcher, where acceptance is key to accessing raw data in real time. As the thesis suggests, the researcher will bring a range of his personal life experiences from both the British film industry and professional and semi-professional football to help make sense of the data that is collected. Considering this, monomyth, dramaturgy, and archetypal behaviours will underpin the reflexive narrative, offering data through creative storytelling (Goffman, 1959, 1966, 1969, 1990, 1990, 1991, 2005; Jung, 1968, 1983, 2003, 2014; Edinger, 1972; Campbell, 2003; 2008; Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1989, 1991).

Storytelling is considered one of the oldest forms of communication, even before the development of written language, human beings relied on oral traditions to share knowledge, history, values, and experiences (Krane and Baird, 2005; Saldana, 2005; Frank, 2010; Van Maanen, 2011). Forms of storytelling are evidenced as far back as prehistoric times, with cave paintings, artifacts, and ancient myths suggesting that early humans used stories to make sense of the world around them, to pass down information, and to a degree, entertain (Pellowski, 1990; Koch, Caldwell, and DeFanti, 2019; Kinch *et al.*, 2022). While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of storytelling, it is evident that it has been a fundamental part of human communication for tens of thousands of years, where oral narratives in some circumstances were crucial for the survival and cultural cohesion of early human societies (Vansina, 1985; Starkweather, 2012; Morrison and Lorusso, 2023). The evolution of this can be seen in other early forms of communication, that include non-verbal cues such as gestures and symbols, but storytelling stands out due to its structured nature and the depth of information it can convey (Vansina, 1985; Pellowski, 1990; Frank, 1995; Sparkes, 1995; Gabriel, 2000; Forche and Gerard, 2001; Gulino, 2004; Krane and Baird, 2005; Saldana, 2005; Frank, 2010; Van Maanen, 2011; Linghede, Larsson, and Redelius, 2016; Herman, 2017; Lee and Palmer, 2018; Lee, 2019; Storr, 2019; Pollock, 2021; Bauer, Leconte, and Visioli, 2023). As societies evolved, storytelling has adapted to include written forms of communication, but

its roots in oral tradition highlight its long-standing significance in human history (Kretchmar, 2017; Koch, Caldwell, and DeFanti, 2019; Kinch *et al.*, 2022; Dualde, 2023).

When engaging with stories, people often bring their own experiences, perspectives, and biases into the process of interpretation (Wacquant, 2004; Blodgett *et al.*, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011; Whitley, 2022), each uniquely perceiving and understanding a story differently based on their background, beliefs, and cultural context. This phenomenon is often referred to as ‘*seeing the world through their own personal lens*’ or ‘*subjectivity*’ (Benjamin, 1999; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In addition, individuals may also use narrative techniques to retell or reinterpret stories, shaping them according to their own understanding, agenda, or personal bias. This process highlights the dynamic nature of storytelling and its ability to be both reflective of and shaped by the storyteller and the audience. The evolution of narrative spans across cultures and epochs, reflecting a fundamental aspect of human communication and understanding. Researchers such as Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949) and Vladimir Propp (Propp, 1968) have explored the common themes that underpin narratives, revealing recurring patterns and character archetypes (Jung, 1968) that go beyond cultural boundaries. Campbell's monomyth (1949), outlined in ‘*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*’ (Campbell, 1949), elucidates the journey of a hero, from the call to adventure to the ultimate return with newfound wisdom. Propp's (1968) *Morphology of the Folktale* examined the narrative elements of Russian folktales, identifying the roles of the hero, villain, and helper in a systematic framework. Additionally, Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1974) and Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981) focused on the complexities of narrative communication, where Barthes' (Barthes, 1974) explored semiotics and structuralism, focusing on the layers of meaning embedded within texts (Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1989, 1991). Bakhtin's (Bakhtin, 1981) concept of dialogism emphasises the dynamic interplay of voices and perspectives within the narratives, highlighting the complex narrative of viewpoints that converge to construct the narrative, a reflection of the multi-layered nature of human experience (Baker, 1988; Wacquant, 2004; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011; Blodgett *et al.*, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011).

Within the modern age it is suggested that there has been a decline in oral storytelling (Ricoeur, 1984; Benjamin, 1999), although, within the field of healthcare, the use of storytelling is promoted as a tool for healing and understanding (Frank 1995; Charon, 2006; Larsson *et al.*, 2013). By integrating patient narratives into medical practice, narrative medicine endeavours to humanise healthcare and cultivate empathic doctor-patient relationships (Frank, 1995; Charon, 2006). This interdisciplinary methodology highlights the significant influence of narrative on the human experience, spanning from the development of personal identity to the cultivation of social connections (Capote, 1966; Charon, 2006; Blodgett *et al.*, 2011). As narrative evolves, it reflects the innate human quest for meaning, belonging and connection. Considering this, narrative still serves as vehicles for knowledge transmission, moral reflection, and emotional expression, whether conveyed through myth, folklore, literature, or personal

anecdotes, narratives shape our understanding of the world and in most cases, our understanding of ourselves (Baker, 1988; Wacquant, 2004; Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011; Blodgett *et al.*, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011; Kara, 2015).

There are various researchers who explore storytelling and narrative within sport, which suggests that storytelling and narrative play crucial roles in how sports are experienced, understood, and communicated (Blodgett *et al.*, 2011; Frank, 1995; Humberstone, 2009). While much of the existing literature emphasises the broader implications of storytelling in sports, such as identity formation, there is a growing interest in the nuanced exploration of narratives within specific sports like football. In football, narratives are not only constructed around the athletes and their performances but also emerge from the interactions within teams, the dynamics in the dressing room, and the relationships that shape the culture of the team (Giulianotti, 1999; Hughson *et al.*, 2016; Kitchin and Howe, 2013). These narratives can influence how players perceive themselves and their own roles, how teams develop cohesion, and how they engage with the sport on a deeper more emotive level. There are various aspects such as identity, culture, and the personal narratives of athletes and teams (Bairner, 2016; Guschwan, 2016; Lenk, 1982), narrative strategies, focusing on how stories can be used to present research voices of community members and psychological experiences within a sporting context, helping to shape identity, social interactions when sharing cultural stories and making sense of such experiences (Krane and Baird, 2005; Whitley, 2022; Strudwick, 2021). This research however, explicitly centres on football, examining the intricate narratives that unfold both on and off the field. This includes exploring the dynamics within the dressing room and key relationships that impact group dynamics and culture. By studying how these stories are told and understood, this doctoral research aims to provide a deeper insight into the cultural and psychological relationships within the dressing room, contributing to the broader discourse on narrative and storytelling within sports. In football these methods are also used to explore tribalistic identity, fandom, athletic experience and cultural representation (Hughson, 1997, 1997, 1999; Magee and Sugden, 2002; Inglis, and Hughson, 2003; Roderick, 2006; Hughson, Inglis, and Free, 2009; Kitchin *et al.*, 2022).

The interdisciplinary approaches of storytelling and narrative are embedded within fields such as anthropology, literature, sociology, and psychology, and within these, diverse aspects of human culture, cognition, communication, and social interaction can be explored (Boas, 1896; Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1928; Lévi-Strauss, 1962). Anthropology is the study of humans, their behaviour, and cultures, both past and present. It is a broad discipline with a long tradition that seeks to understand the full complexity of human experiences through a holistic and comparative approach (Mauss, 2002; Tylor, 1871). Anthropology is typically divided into four main subfields of culture, archaeology, biology, and linguistics, resonating with the foundations of this ethnography in sports culture. Anthropology is depicted by its use of comparative methods and its commitment to understanding human diversity and commonality

(Benedict, 1934; Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Anthropological studies in sport offer a comprehensive examination of various topics, sports, and cultural contexts, highlighting the intricate relationship between sports and society. Anderson (2005) explores the intersection of masculinity and sexuality within the context of gay athletes, highlighting the challenges and cultural dynamics they face in sports. Goldstein (1989) provides a historical account of early baseball, illustrating how the sport evolved and its impact on American culture, whilst Galeano (1997) explores the cultural significance of football, portraying its role in shaping national identities and social dynamics. Markovits and Hellerman (2001) discuss football and American distinctiveness, offering insights into why football occupies a unique position in the United States compared to other countries. Cahn (1994) addresses gender and sexuality in women's sports, emphasising the historical struggles and achievements of female athletes. Mandelbaum (2004) analyses the cultural and psychological aspects of American sports like baseball, football, and basketball, examining their broader societal implications. James (1963) in his seminal work *Beyond a Boundary*, connects cricket with colonialism and identity, providing a profound understanding of the sport's cultural significance in the Caribbean. Kuper (1994) investigates soccer's political and social impact, revealing how it can influence revolutions and support authoritarian regimes, and Dunning (1999) focuses on sport, violence, and civilisation, offering a sociological perspective on how sports can reflect and influence societal norms. Finally, Miller *et al.* (2001) compile various studies on the global cultural and political economy of sports, highlighting how globalisation shapes sports and their cultural expressions worldwide. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of sports, encompassing themes of identity, culture, politics, and social interaction across different sports. One key method within cultural anthropology is ethnography, and it serves as a primary research tool for researchers to gather in-depth and detailed information about the practices, beliefs, and social dynamics of different cultures (Ong, 1982; Goody, 1977; Vansina, 1985).

1.2 Immersive Fieldwork

Ethnography involves immersive fieldwork, where the researcher enters the community being studied for an extended period (Tylor, 1871; Boas, 1896; Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1928; Lévi-Strauss, 1962, 1963; Mauss, 1925; Benedict, 1934; Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Ong, 1982; Goody, 1977; Vansina, 1985; Palmer, 2010). This allows for the collection of rich, qualitative data through methods such as participant observation, interviews, and detailed notetaking. The objective is to produce a comprehensive, nuanced account of the culture being studied for a contextualised understanding systematically. Although typically associated with cultural anthropology, techniques to study social interactions and cultural phenomena are directly relevant to this research (Boas, 1896; Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1928; Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Mauss, 1925; Tylor, 1871; Benedict, 1934; Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Ong, 1982; Goody, 1977; Vansina, 1985). As ethnography captures lived experiences, researchers have the opportunity

to employ a variety of creative methods to report their data. Using creative methods enhances the engagement, accessibility, and significance of their findings for readers, as well as helping to protect identities, and amplify meaning or discoveries from the data. Ethnographers can craft vivid narratives that immerse readers in the lived experiences of the people they studied, and these narratives can be structured like stories, featuring characters, plotlines, and descriptive details that bring the ethnographic context to life. Other creative ways to present data are photo novella, ethnodrama, art (paintings, drawings, and sculptures) or digital storytelling methods such as audiovisual presentations and infographics, which I have used in my Master's degree in Sports Coaching and this doctoral research (Harper, 2002; Sands, 2002; Saldana, 2005; Banks, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Pink, 2007; Saldana, 2015; Pink, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011; Lee and Palmer, 2018).

Ethnographic inquiries into sporting cultures offer nuanced perspectives on the interaction between sports and social dynamics; for example, to illustrate how ethnography has been deployed. Rubinstein (2004) presents an examination of Hungarian society through the prism of ice hockey and criminality, unveiling the symbiotic relationship between sports, cultural identity, and socio-economic conditions. Bellos and Miller (2007) explain the transformative influence of street soccer on Brazilian community structures and grassroots sports development, highlighting the socio-cultural implications of participatory sports. Joravsky (1995) explores the aspirational pursuits of African American high school basketball players in Chicago, explaining the relationship of athletic ambition, systemic challenges, and social mobility within a sporting landscape. Buford (1991) provides a systematic analysis of football hooliganism in England, offering insights into the social dynamics, deviant subcultures, and symbolic expressions embedded within sports-related violence. Bissinger's seminal work (1990) offers a nuanced portrayal of high school football in Odessa, Texas, unveiling the intricate web of community identity, cultural symbolism, and athletic heroism embedded within local sporting narratives. Supplementing these ethnographic inquiries, John Hughson's seminal contributions (Hughson, 2009; Hughson, 1999; Hughson, 1997; Hughson, 1997) provide essential scholarly frameworks for dissecting the complexities within football, outlining its philosophical implications for identity formation, social cohesion, and cultural expression within diverse social milieus. Through rigorous ethnographic scrutiny and academic scholarship, these studies collectively furnish invaluable insights into the nuanced complexities inherent in the symbiotic relationship between sports, culture, and society.

In order to effectively report the data gathered from this ethnographic study, the framework of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or Hero's Journey, will be employed. As aforementioned, Campbell's monomyth, detailed in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949), outlines a universal narrative structure that describes the hero's journey through stages such as the call to adventure, the crossing of the threshold, the

ordeal, and the return with newfound wisdom. This narrative structure has been influential in various fields, including literature, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology, for its ability to convey complex transformations and human experiences through a compelling and relatable storyline (Campbell, 1949; 2003; 2008; Murdock, 1990; Vogler, 2007). The application of the monomyth in research has been notably explored by scholars such as Maureen Murdock (1990), who adapted Campbell's model to the feminine journey in *The Heroine's Journey*, and Christopher Vogler (2007), who applied the Hero's Journey to screenwriting and storytelling in film with his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. In sport, the monomyth has been applied to frame the careers and personal growth of athletes, providing a narrative arc that focuses on their challenges, triumphs, and ultimate transformations. For example, Denison and Avner (2011) employed a narrative analysis to explore the personal stories of athletes, illustrating how their journeys mirror the stages of the Hero's Journey (Denison and Avner, 2011). Additionally, works by Smith and Sparkes (2009) have demonstrated how storytelling in sport can reveal the psychological and social processes athletes undergo, making their experiences more accessible and engaging to both within academia, and in general (Smith and Sparkes, 2009).

In sport philosophy and psychology, the Hero's Journey framework has been applied in this research to understand the mental and emotional development of athletes. Researchers such as Carless and Douglas (2013) have used narrative methods to explore the stories of elite athletes, identifying common themes of adversity, transformation, and resilience that align with the monomyth structure (Carless and Douglas, 2013). Similarly, Schinke, McGannon, and Smith (2013) have highlighted the use of narrative inquiry to capture the lived experiences of athletes, underscoring the role of storytelling in making sense of their journeys (Schinke *et al.*, 2013). The monomyth has also been effectively applied in the context of sports coaching and leadership, where Potrac, Jones, and Cushion (2007) have explored how coaches' narratives can shape their coaching practices and identities, reflecting the stages of the Hero's Journey (Potrac *et al.*, 2007). This philosophical approach helps in understanding the complex, evolving nature of coaching and its impact on athletes.

While there is a growing body of literature that applies the Hero's Journey to various sports, its specific application to football remains limited. Existing studies, such as those by Roderick (2006) in *The Work of Professional Football: A Labour of Love* and Magee and Sugden (2002) in *The World at Their Feet: Professional Football and International Labor Migratio*, have explored the cultural and social dimensions of football, but have not extensively applied the monomyth framework (Magee and Sugden, 2002; Roderick, 2006). By incorporating Campbell's monomyth into this research, the aim is to offer a novel perspective on the developmental narratives of football players, capturing their own personal and professional journeys in a structured and creative way. The monomyth framework will enable the researcher to present the ethnographic data as a series of interconnected narratives, each

reflecting different stages of the Hero's Journey. This method will facilitate a deeper understanding of the players' and manager's experiences, offering perspective on their individual and collective challenges, growth, and contributions to the team dynamics.

1.3 Integration of Dramaturgy

Drawing upon the researcher's extensive background in the film industry, the integration of cinematic techniques and storytelling methodologies brings a unique and enriching perspective to this research. The performative nature of social interaction in sports, akin to the dynamics of film, can be explored more vividly by drawing on these film industry experiences. By incorporating dramaturgy, through the use of script, play or story forms, the research gains a more comprehensive view of the players' and manager's experiences, capturing the nuances of their interactions in a way that traditional methods may overlook. Dramaturgy allows for a focus on the emotional and psychological narratives that underpin sporting environments, making the reflexive narrative more engaging and insightful. The film industry's emphasis on narrative structure, character development, and visual storytelling enhances the research by offering innovative ways to present and analyse the complexities of culture within football. This approach not only enriches the storytelling aspect of the research but also provides a lens through which the performative elements of sport can be examined, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics at play. This sociological approach will not only capture the narrative arcs of their journeys, but also the performative strategies they employ to shape their social identities. Presenting the ethnographic data through the lens of dramaturgy can reveal the nuanced ways in which these individuals manage their roles and interactions within the team dynamics. This methodological combination can highlight the interplay between personal development (*as outlined by the monomyth*) and social performance (*as outlined by dramaturgy*), offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex realities faced by football players and managers. Goffman's seminal work '*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*' (1959) introduces the idea of social interaction as a theatrical performance, where individuals manage their actions to create desired impressions on their audience. This theoretical framework has been influential in sociology, psychology, and anthropology for understanding how individuals construct their social identities through performance (Goffman, 1959).

In the context of sport, Goffman's dramaturgical approach has been applied to examine how athletes and coaches manage impressions and perform their roles within the team and in public. For instance, Jones, Armour, and Potrac (2004) have explored the use of impression management by coaches to maintain authority and credibility, demonstrating how their public personas are carefully constructed and maintained (Jones *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, Gilmore and Gilson (2007) have studied the dramaturgical elements in sport management, highlighting how

leaders in sports organisations navigate their social role through strategic performances (Gilmore and Gilson, 2007). In football, the application of Goffman's dramaturgy is particularly relevant due to the highly public and performative nature of the sport. Roderick (2006) discusses how professional footballers manage their identities and public perceptions, often negotiating the pressures of media scrutiny and fan expectations (Roderick, 2006). This research will extend these insights by exploring how non-league football players and managers use impression management to navigate their own careers.

Considering the individuals' personal development and their social performance, the multifaceted nature of human behaviour and social dynamics can be explored in more depth. Integrating Carl Jung's (1968) archetypes and alpha behaviours into the analysis provides a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and patterns influencing individual actions within social contexts (Goffman, 1966; Bass, 1985; Lourenco, 2010; Yukl, 2010; Lourenco, 2011; Peters, 2012; Ferguson, 2013; Peterson, 2018). Jung's concept of archetypes suggests that certain universal symbols and themes exist in the collective unconscious, shaping human experiences and behaviours (Jung, 1968; Fordham, 1960; Cynarski, 2015). These archetypes are apparent in various forms, such as the hero, the shadow, and the wise old man, each representing fundamental aspects of human existence and psyche. Additionally, the concept of alpha behaviours, derived from evolutionary psychology and animal behaviour studies, offering a valuable insight into social hierarchies and dominance dynamics within human groups (de Waal, 2000; Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Woodside *et al.*, 2018). Alpha behaviours incorporate assertiveness, confidence, and leadership qualities that individuals exhibit to establish and maintain their status within social systems (McCrimmon, 2008). Within sport, the integration of Jungian archetypes and alpha behaviours offers a framework for understanding athletes' psychological profiles, performance motivations, and leadership styles. For example, Harris and Mullen (2009) have applied Jungian concepts to examine athletes' self-perceptions and behavioural patterns, revealing how archetypal motifs influence their athletic identity and competitive mindset (Harris and Mullen, 2009). Additionally, studies by Bell *et al.* (2023) have explored the role of alpha behaviours in team cohesion and performance, highlighting how assertive leadership and dominance dynamics impact group dynamics in sports settings (Vincent *et al.*, 2020). However, the specific application of Jungian archetypes and alpha behaviours in football research remains relatively underexplored, although existing studies in sports psychology and sociology have examined leadership dynamics and psychological factors in team sports (Wann *et al.*, 2001; Carron, Colman, and Wheeler, 2002; Jones and Wallace, 2005; Horn and Horn, 2007; Sage and Kavussanu, 2007; Burton and Raedeke, 2008; Horn, 2008; Cotterill, 2009; Carroll, 2010; Berbary and Richmond, 2011; Cotterill, 2013; Weinberg and Gould, 2019; Parry, 2021).

Having now established the methodological framework, highlighting the dimensions of personal development, social performance, and motivation, it is crucial to define the specific

facets of inquiry. This study explores the intricacies of social dynamics, team norms, and cohesion, with the aim of articulating the impact on the individual and collective behaviours within the study. Using dramaturgy provides a way to understand how athletes negotiate roles and identities, employing performance strategies to manage the complexities of team dynamics (Goffman, 1959). Simultaneously, attention to cultural foundations—the shared values, traditions, and rituals that underpin cohesion—highlights how collective practices shape interpersonal relationships (Egolf, 2001; LaFasto and Larson, 2001; Carron and Eys, 2012; Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Van Knippenberg, 2016). This inquiry therefore informs the sociocultural dimensions of team sport, where culture is central to shaping behaviour (Donnelly, 2002).

The study also addresses leadership dynamics, examining the traits, qualities, and behaviours that underpin effective performance, including the roles of emotional intelligence and related psychological factors (Lewin, 1935; Chelladurai and Saleh, 1980; Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley, 1985; Schein, 1992; Goleman, 1995; Carron, Colman and Wheeler, 2002; Eys, Loughead and Hardy, 2003; Hackman and Wageman, 2005; Jones and Wallace, 2005; Jowett and Lavallee, 2007; Vincent, Lee, Hull and Hill, 2020). Considering these factors, the integration of Campbell's monomyth, Goffman's dramaturgical framework, and Jung's archetypal theory provides a multilayered lens for exploring the psychological and social dynamics of football culture (Goffman, 1959, 1966, 1969, 1981, 1990, 1991, 2005; Jung, 1968, 1983, 2003, 2014; Hillman, 1975; Edinger, 1972; Campbell, 2003, 2008; Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1989, 1991). This approach builds on existing studies of sociocultural elements, such as role identity and community formation (Maguire and Falcois, 2011; Bill, 2009), historical and cultural significance (Goldblatt, 2006), and the emotional and psychological experiences of footballers (Nesti, 2014).

This qualitative research therefore seeks to address a gap in football literature by exploring team life in depth, using a methodological approach that blends ethnographic fieldwork with creative storytelling. Over six years of immersion, participant observation and extensive field notes have been used to capture the nuances of social interaction and individual performance through Goffman's dramaturgical lens (Goffman, 1959), alongside analysis of cohesion and leadership. The combined application of Campbell's monomyth, Jung's archetypes, and Goffman's dramaturgy offers a comprehensive way of interpreting these dynamics, highlighting the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of football. By integrating these frameworks, the study contributes to a richer portrayal of football culture and human interaction. This multidimensional approach enhances the reflexive narrative of non-league football, while maintaining academic consistency. Through the synthesis of ethnographic methods with storytelling and narrative analysis, it offers insight into the performative and social dimensions of the sport, advancing a holistic understanding of football's complexities.

While dramaturgy provides a rich framework for understanding how identities, roles, masculinity and performances are negotiated within the football environment, it is also important to recognise what this perspective does not reveal. This is not a weakness of the approach but a reminder of its partiality, and of my responsibility as a researcher to remain reflexively aware of the limits of my chosen lens. Having opted to use dramaturgy, it has allowed me to explore methods and apply them with confidence, but also to remain mindful of these limits. For example, dramaturgy does not capture the statistical and performance-based data that dominate more traditional analyses of sport. League tables, player metrics, and performance records are largely absent here, not because they are unimportant, but because they fall outside the performative focus of this study. Similarly, economic and status-based considerations, such as salaries, sponsorship, and the financial infrastructures that shape the wider game remain largely unexamined. These are crucial elements within football, but they are not the focus of a dramaturgical analysis of identity and culture.

Equally, this thesis does not attempt to account for the breadth of football cultures across the globe. Stories told here are rooted in the specific world of English non-league football, and they do not extend to contexts such as Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Germany, the USA, or China, where different histories and cultural logics shape the game in other distinct ways. Nor does this project claim to represent women’s football, and while dramaturgy could equally be applied to such settings, this particular study is embedded in a male-dominated environment. That specificity is both a strength and a limitation, it allows for depth, while reminding us that other spaces, genders, and cultures may perform identity in very different ways. Recognising these boundaries is not an attempt to excuse what is overlooked but to emphasise that each methodological decision highlights certain aspects while inevitably leaving others in shadow. By naming what dramaturgy cannot show, I aim to dial up my own reflexive awareness and invite the reader to see this study not as a totalising account of football, but as a situated exploration of one cultural stage among many.

1.4 Research Aims

This research aims to explore the social dynamics, identity performances, and power relations within the setting of a non-league football club, through a deeply immersive ethnographic approach. By drawing on reflexive storytelling, participant observation, and narrative analysis, this study investigates how individuals, including the researcher, navigate roles, relationships, and constructed personas in a competitive sporting environment.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To explore the dual role of the researcher as both participant and academic observer, and how this unique positionality affects access, interpretation, and reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork.

2. To examine the performative nature of identity within football culture, focusing on how individuals manage impressions, adopt personas, and negotiate group belonging.

3. To apply storied analysis and narrative ethnography as methodological tools for capturing and presenting lived experiences in a nuanced, creative, and academically rigorous manner.

4. To reflect on the emotional and ethical complexities of long-term field immersion, particularly the challenges of detachment, bias, and identity entanglement.

5. To consider the practical applications of this research in broader professional domains, including leadership, consultancy, and cross-cultural engagement.

1.6 Thesis Outline

Following the aims and objectives outlined above, this thesis is structured to reflect both the creative and analytical dimensions of the research journey. Each chapter builds upon the last, blending reflexivity, theory, and narrative to offer a holistic account of identity, performance, and meaning-making in a non-league football context. The work progresses through theoretical framing, personal and cultural contextualisation, methodological justification, and ultimately a performative narrative representation of the findings.

Chapter One: Background and Context

Establishes the theoretical foundations for the study, drawing on dramaturgical analysis (Goffman), archetypal psychology (Jung), and narrative structure (Campbell). This chapter introduces the researcher's position, personal motivations, and conceptual lens. It advocates for storytelling as method and self as research tool, laying the groundwork for a study situated in lived experience, cultural complexity, and emotional honesty.

Chapter Two: Meeting the Cast

Functions as both a literature review and a contextual map. It identifies the key players (the cast), the conceptual frameworks (story, performance, archetype), and explores the researcher's own biographical and professional influences. This chapter blends academic

source material with personal insight, offering an embodied entry into the field of study. It contributes a personalised, reflexive approach to literature review as lived narrative.

Chapter Three: Methodology

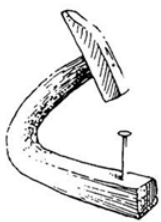
Outlines the philosophical assumptions and interpretive paradigm underpinning the research. It details the ontological, epistemological, and axiological stance, and presents ethnography as a creative and situated practice. This chapter introduces reflexivity as a critical lens, highlights methodological influences, and prepares the reader for the narrative ethnographic structure that follows. It contributes to debates on positionality, creative inquiry, and research ethics in immersive settings.

Chapter Four: Methods

Describes the concrete processes of data collection, synthesis, and storied analysis. It discusses the impact of Covid-19 on fieldwork, the evolving dual role of assistant manager/researcher, and the use of visual, verbal, and written methods (fieldnotes, WhatsApp messages, film scripts). It contributes methodologically by showcasing an adaptable, creative and varied approach to data collection and representation in a challenging real-world context.

Chapter Five: The Acts

This chapter, collectively called ‘*The Acts*’, are the combined results, analysis and discussion of this ethnographic research. It is presented in a stylised, storied format that blends analysis and narrative across five distinct phases of research activity. Each Act: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 is signalled by a stage ‘*entrance*’ graphic. Each Act contains three scene-analysis-stories which are called *Accounts* (each account being signalled by a box insert). The analytical lenses of the stories in the accounts are inspired by Campbell’s hero’s journey, Goffman’s performance theory, and Jungian archetypes. The five Acts chronicle the research journey as a whole, from initial entry into the field, to exiting from the field.



Each act finishes with reflexions of immersion, detachment, and critical reflection as a field researcher in this setting. This chapter offers an innovative model for presenting qualitative findings, contributing to performance-based, narrative ethnographic practice. These reflexions are marked by the hammer and nail paradox symbol, which at first glance seems ordinary, yet on closer inspection is impossible. This is a reminder that what appears straightforward may, in fact, be far more complex. I use this image to signpost passages where I step back from the flow of the narrative to reflect critically on my own positionality and voice, or to revisit experiences with

the benefit of time. These insets are deliberately disruptive, reminding the reader that research is never a seamless account but a dialogue shaped by perspective, positionality, and retrospection.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

Reflects on the research journey and its personal and professional impact. It articulates the study's contributions to theory (identity as performance, and archetypes in sport), methodology (creative reflexivity, and narrative representation), and practice (leadership, consultancy, cultural literacy). Recommendations for future researchers highlight the emotional labour of immersive research and advocate for methodological creativity and ethical reflexivity.

Overall, this thesis contributes a unique methodological approach that blends narrative, reflexivity, and theoretical depth. It explores football not just as a sport, but as a stage for identity performance, belonging, and human transformation.

It's only now, at the end of this chapter, that I realise how much of myself is already on the page. This wasn't just a review of literature or theory; it was a rehearsal. This was a quiet rehearsal of voice, of purpose, of memory. These words carry more than citations, they carry places I've stood, people I've learned from, and questions that have followed me longer than I had acknowledged. In writing this, I've been reminded that storytelling isn't just a method, it's a way of knowing, a way of surviving, connecting, and making sense of what matters. Somewhere between the dressing room and the film set, between Jung's shadows and Goffman's front stage, I've started to see the full cast of this research, and I'm in it, not behind the curtain, but under the lights.

I think that's what this chapter really opened up, not just a framework, but the stage. A space where we could perform something honest. This structure to analyse, synthesise and report is here now. Sets have been built, the acts are set, the script is drafted, the academic backdrop to this research is established. But I know this story will still surprise me, and maybe that's the point. Stories rarely stay where you put them. They move. They change. They talk back. Yet, in building this stage, something else has come into focus, not just what I'm researching, but how. This chapter doesn't only set the scene thematically; it establishes a methodological lens where I am the research tool. Where lived experience isn't background noise, it's data, its insight, it's the lens itself.

By fusing storytelling, performance with an immersive ethnography, I've started to uncover a way of doing research that feels truer to the complexities of sport and identity. This is more than method; it's me making sense of it all on the move. In stepping forward as narrator and participant, I've invited in a different form of knowledge. One that's embodied, entangled, and sometimes emotionally exposed, but that's exactly what gives it depth. This chapter has laid the groundwork, not just for what's to come, but for a type of research that takes the chaos seriously. That listens between the lines and lets the story speak.

Chapter Two

Meeting the Cast

Chapter Two

Meeting the Cast

If Chapter One was the theoretical plot, lit by intention, then this chapter is where the storyboarding begins. Where I set out the cast, the locations, the inner logic of this world, and reveal the lens through which I’ve come to see it all. What follows is part origin story, part framework, and part rehearsal, a way to show how ‘who I am’ and ‘how I’ve lived’ shape not just the research, but the very questions I’m asking of it.

This isn’t objectivity in the traditional sense, it’s something more vulnerable and more honest. It’s me acknowledging that my understanding of football, of social dynamics, of story and selfhood, have always been filtered through certain frames; a clapperboard hanging from my belt on a film set, the whistle dangling around my neck on the training pitch, or perhaps the quiet weight of a diagnosis long undiagnosed.

Before we begin, I invite you to pause with Figure 1, a visual representation of positionality, performance, and the inevitable mess of it all. These masks are not costumes; they are contexts. Each one has been worn at different moments, in dressing rooms, on a film set, at home. The “Research” mask is the one being lifted into view now, this has been chosen deliberately, not neutrally, acknowledging that stepping into the researcher role doesn’t erase the others, they are still present. They shape how I listen, what I notice, how I write. Look closely and you’ll see more than identity. You’ll see clues from my data collection, publications, my research journey. This is method as metaphor, a performance of self that sets the stage for everything that follows.

Then there is Figure 2, proudly mounted in the kitchen of my home. It is not academic by design, but its presence in this thesis matters. These are my values, gifted to me by my father, and, over time, tested through life. Honesty.

Pride. Opportunity. Humility. Each rule was learned before it was labelled. They became the lens through which I navigate relationships, leadership, even fieldwork. In their own way, they are axiological commitments, a form of moral reflexivity that doesn't shy from personal philosophy but roots it in care, responsibility, and the type of researcher I am trying to be.

Chapter Two looks to understand what's driving me forward. It maps out the mythic frameworks that have shaped my worldview, monomyth, mask wearing, and archetypes, not as borrowed theories, but as familiar scripts I've seen play out in dressing rooms and film studios alike. You might read this chapter and hear echoes of *John Keating in Dead Poets Society*, showing the fragility of identity, the tension between performance and self, and the quiet courage of stepping into your role, even when you don't feel ready. Reflexivity is stitched into every scene. Here, narrative becomes theory, bias becomes lens, and a childhood spent backstage becomes my adulthood method. This isn't just a framework, it's my frame of mind, and the camera is still rolling.

Who's that behind the mask?

Keeping with the Goffman sense of performance and theatre, each of these pre-introductions' introduces multiple characteristics of me in various roles within football, filmmaking, research and as a family man (*Figure 1*).

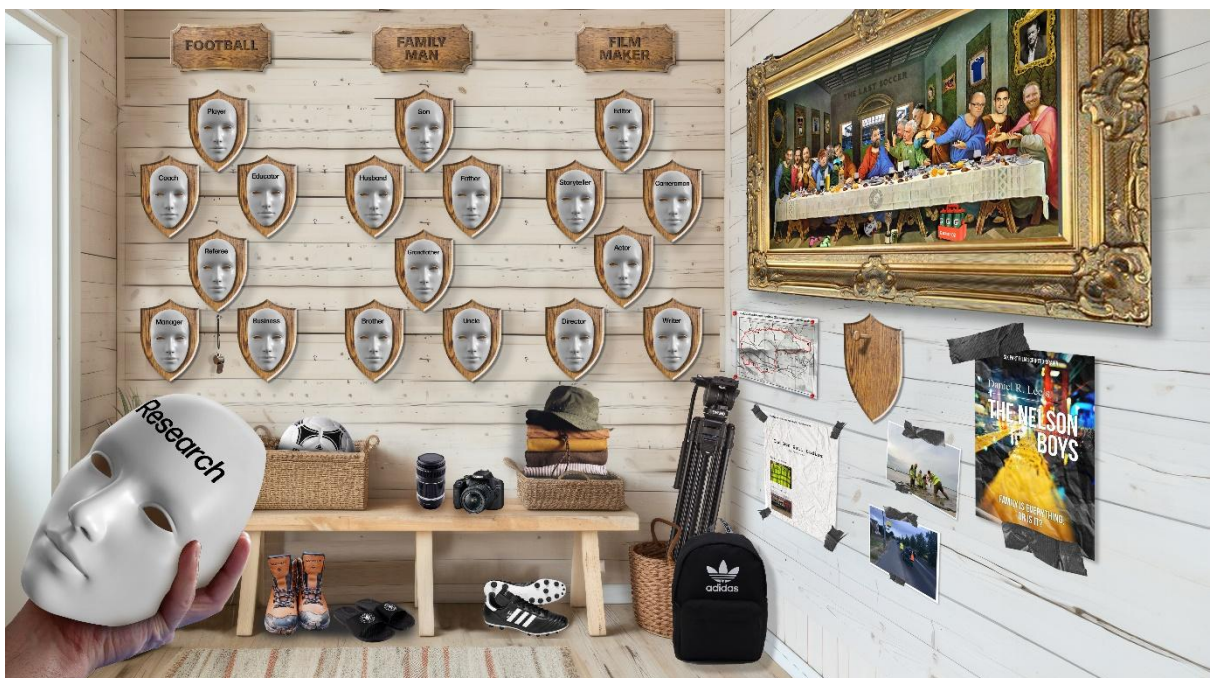


Figure 1: Game Face (D. Lee)

2.1 I didn't start this empty handed

The foundation of this qualitative research rises from my own lived experiences as an ardent football enthusiast and filmmaker, who has a passion for the art of storytelling (Herman, 2017; Pollock, 2021). Within football as a setting, I have recognised that there is an interplay between social dynamics and team performance, this is predominantly led by cliques, relationships, egos, and personas (Goffman, 1990; Jung, 2014; Giulianotti, 2004). Much like a theatre production or a film script, stories are intertwined and have a clear beginning, middle and end (Campbell, 2003; Herman, 2017; Pollock, 2021). There are heroes, villains, supporting actors, sets and costumes, it's all constructed to play up to the crowds, whether it be 45,000 watching Chelsea vs. Spurs at Stamford Bridge, or one man and his dog over at Hackney marshes, watching the Dog and Duck get hammered 10-0. Some moments within football are epic, and some like a Punch and Judy show in the little piazza at Covent Garden, for that moment, each meaning everything, and each meaning nothing (Pearson, 1991; Sorr, 2019). This aligns with the idea that personal identity is continuously shaped by one's engagement in sporting environments (Hughson, Palmer and Skillen, 2012; Jarvie, 2012). I have experienced each of these moments in some capacity as some of the most significant experiences in my life, yet upon reflection, they now seem as transient as yesterday's discarded fish and chip paper.

Throughout this research I have embraced the interpretivist paradigm, understanding the importance of social phenomena through subjectivity and interpretations within the culture and the social context I observe (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Considering this, I have selected performance football as the backdrop for my research, a place where I can navigate with both credibility and a measure of anonymity (Sands, 2002; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Here, I am simply one among the collective, distinguished only by my pen and pad, silently observing, and documenting the intricacies of this dynamic environment. The use of field notes and observations as a primary data collection method is integral to ethnographic research, capturing real-time nuances and rich contextual insights (Palmer and Grecic, 2014; Becker, 2007). My social constructivist perspective is rooted in my philosophical beliefs, which posit that individuals are shaped by three pivotal factors when encountering new situations or environments, their personal experiences, the influence of significant others such as father figures, guides, or mentors, and their own environmental experiences. My personal journey has been shaped by the pivotal relationship I shared with my father. His guidance, wisdom, and unwavering support has served as the cornerstone of my development, instilling within me values, perspectives, and a sense of identity that continues to resonate within my very being to this day. His stoic stance in life embodied his morality (Salzgeber, 2019; Van Natta, 2019; Hemlock, 2020), marked by unwavering resilience, and like many existentialists, he established that he alone took responsibility for the choices he made (Flynn, 2006; Sartre, 2007).

I was extremely fortunate growing up, my childhood was exceptionally diverse, I had the opportunity to experience a wide range of different environments across the globe, this in itself has helped to shape my worldview (*Figure 2*). Each encounter with a new culture, landscape, and community had expanded the limits of my understanding of the richness of human diversity. These experiences have not only broadened my perspectives but have also enriched my capacity for empathy, understanding, and appreciation of the variety of ways in which individuals navigate their own way on the pathway of their own existence. My father was a Key Grip in the British film industry, working a majority of my childhood abroad, sometimes taking me with him and sometimes leaving me at home. All I knew was that I wanted to be just like him, he managed the local football team, worked all over the world on films and was generally a man of strong morals and values (Van Natta, 2019). These morals and values have been embedded into my own personal philosophy; I have lived my life by them. During my post graduate degree, I visualised these principles and now proudly display them in my home for all to see as a mark of respect for my father.

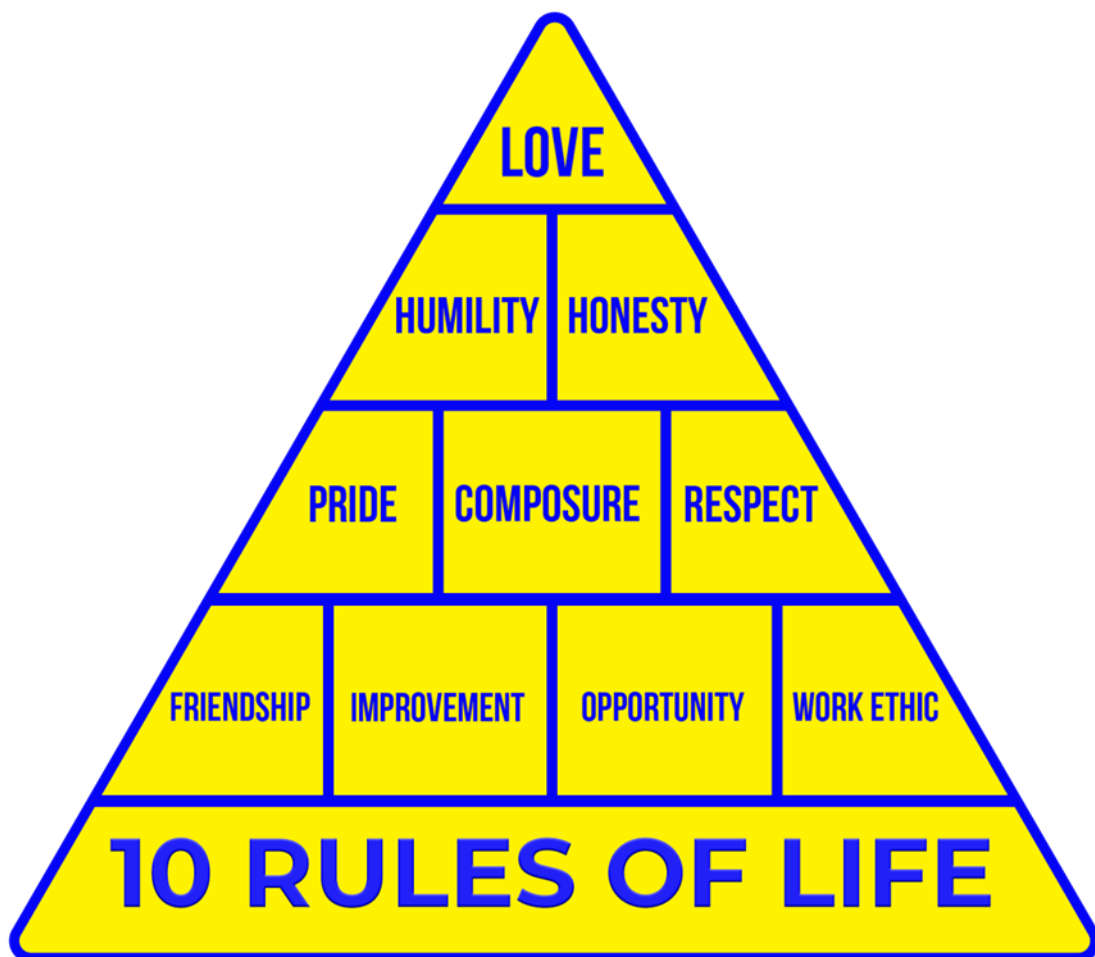


Figure 2: 10 Rules of Life (D. Lee)

My earliest memories are on film sets, in studios or on location, some exotic and some slightly less preferable. Literally, from the streets of Gotham to the battle fields of Agincourt, or

in reality, outside the Bond stage at Pinewood to the backlot at Shepperton. Reality and fantasy were somehow interconnected (Campbell, 2003; Jung, 2014), only ever separated by a loud bell and a red light, or the resounding bellow of the First Assistant Director roaring ‘Turn over’ or ‘cut’. This was the moment from a very young age I learned to hide in plain sight, something that would come in extremely handy as an ethnographic researcher many years later (Sands, 2002; Van Maanen, 2011). Conscious where to stand as to cast no shadow on the action, conscious not to move, as to not step on a creaky floorboard or get into the eyeline of the actors. I unconsciously started to understand the etiquette of a world that most people didn’t know existed, a world of narratology and monomyth (Campbell, 2008), actually acting out the inner most identity of someone’s deepest thoughts (Goffman, 1969; Jung, 1983; Campbell, 2003). From as far back as I could remember, reading film scripts was the norm, in fact it’s actually how I learned to read, firstly to gain an insight into what was going on in the world around me, and then as I progressed into the working world as a camera technician as part of my job. Reading books or articles was an odd concept for me, from a very young age I only really understood the world in script form. This will be evident throughout this research, as narrative helps to inform readers of my bias, part of my world view, my lens, it’s how I make sense of the things around me. These environments allowed me to portray a version of myself that would only work in this fantasy land, all of which shaping my philosophical self, something I would only become aware of on my journey through this PhD. In preparation, I published a six-part film scripted drama *The Nelson Boys*, supported by my supervisor (Lee, 2019).

As aforementioned, my own philosophical belief is that three key elements help shape people; namely experience, significant others, and environment, where each individual is on a journey of their own, each however at different stages. Each journey mirrors that of the concept of the hero with a thousand faces (Campbell, 2003, 2008), suggesting that there exists a singular, overarching narrative (*monomyth*) encompassing the grand story of our existence. While this narrative may manifest in countless adaptations, every tale ever recounted ultimately echoes elements of this fundamental narrative, serving as either a complete retelling or a just a reflection of its essential themes (Pearson, 1989; Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1991; Campbell, 2003). These beliefs drive my interest in understanding human behaviour, primarily within the setting of performative culture in football.

Undertaking research within the backdrop of a football club and further exploring the social dynamics within the team relates strongly to Campbell’s (2008) concept of the Hero with a thousand faces. At the heart of this theory lies the story circle, a narrative structure that outlines the typical trajectory of the Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 2003). This concept serves as a metaphor for personal growth, transformation, and overcoming adversity, where each individual faces their own challenges and quests, embarking on journeys of self-discovery, learning, and evolution. Delving deeper into the ‘main characters’, Erving Goffman’s (1990) *The presentation of self in everyday life*, offers a fascinating perspective on human behaviour

and social interaction, focusing on the ways individuals manage their self-presentation in different social settings (Goffman, 1966, 1969, 1990, 2005). While Goffman's work may initially seem distinct from Joseph Campbell's *The hero's journey*, there are intriguing connections and intersections between the two theories. At the core of Goffman's model is dramaturgy, which suggests that individuals engage in impression management, strategically presenting themselves to others to shape perceptions and create desired impressions (Goffman, 1990). Goffman uses the metaphorical theatre to describe social interactions, with individuals playing various roles and performing for an audience in different contexts, much like the aforementioned football teams.

This is comparable to the social dynamics within the dressing room, each preparing to go onto the metaphorical stage to play their part, prepared, rehearsed and in costume. There are several points of intersection with Goffman's theory alongside Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, such as, persona and performance, behind the scenes vs front of stage, impression management and transformation, along with archetypes and social roles (Pearson, 1989; Goffman, 1990; Campbell, 2003). By exploring the interplay between Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Campbell's *The hero's journey*, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of human identity, and social dynamics. Both frameworks consider the performative nature of existence, the negotiation of social roles, along with the pursuit of authenticity amid the complexities of everyday life (Goffman, 2005). For a deeper more meaningful exploration, Carl Jung's theory, particularly his concepts of personas and the shadow self, adds another layer of depth in the study of human interaction, delving into the complexities of human nature (Jung, 1983; Moore and Gillette, 1990; Jung, 2003). Jung's emphasis on the unconscious and archetypal forces enriches our understanding of *The Hero's Journey* as a metaphor for personal transformation and collective evolution (Jung, 2014). The interplay between personas, archetypes, and the shadow self illustrates the intricacies of human behaviour (Jung, 2003). Reflecting on this, similar to the path my father took, my interests became filmmaking and football, where I too spent my early working life on film sets, along with progressing through the ranks within football clubs from player to manager. Given the profound impact of film on my life, it felt only natural to share my experiences and research in football through the medium of narrative storytelling.

2.2 Conceptual research framework

Being essential to this plot, my academic journey through self-discovery has led me to understand why narrative is the fundamental essence of my being. Those early years learning about life, '*through a lens*' I might add; on set with script in hand reading the dialogue as the '*turns*' delivered the lines. This introduced me to narratology, although I didn't think all those years later it would become a twist in the proverbial plot. Within this academic enquiry a robust,

yet unique framework serves as the storyboard for this storyline, allowing an exploration through the lens of the research mask I wear whilst writing this introductory chapter. Throughout this research, self-discovery, and in some parts, acceptance has allowed me to create a framework, safe in the knowledge that my own personal bias is just something that is there. Its inherent in all of us, and as human beings, our thoughts and feelings are all we have. Knowing that this is the lens I see the world through is ok, so I can just get on with it. My own personal experiences are what I bring to the table, those early life experiences that have helped shape my own understanding of life, those relationships that have had a profound impact on how I think and the diversity of the environments that have given me the life skills of acceptance, seeing people for who they are, no matter what life throws at them.

These personal experiences resonate in some way with Joseph Campbell's monomyth, *The Hero's Journey*, positioning me as the hero of my own life story, binding tales into the fabric of my own human experiences. Building on this theoretical concept that looks at the common patterns inherent in narrative, dramaturgy and impression management recognise the performative nature of identity construction and the authentic nuances within social interactions. Integrating these two theories relates directly to my self-discovery and concepts of how I present myself in everyday life, especially in context to my innate background in filmmaking and storytelling. If it's all a monomythical story, full of real-life actors trying to portray different characters, then another layer needs to be applied. Enter stage left Carl Jung, who offers a little more depth in the framework with twelve archetypal personas enriching our understanding of symbolic language of the collective representation, and the intricate layers of human psychology embedded within this story.

Before moving on, there need to be some chronology, *'time for an analepsis'*, or in much simpler terms, a flashback. All the way back to my initial question, 'why do some teams perform, when others fail to reach their full potential?' or, what is the difference between a high-performance team and a high performing team? In a quest to find answers I began reading extensively, mostly around pioneering managers that have applied their art in football at the very top level. These books triggered something in me, opening memories of yesteryear of how my father behaved in front of football teams he managed all those years ago. Just as things were getting interesting, COVID hit, setting my field research back on my timeline. During a global lockdown it was going to be hard to collect data, so I had to be creative, I had to use the resources I had at hand. I continued to read, I continued my research, unpicking the layers of how teams are constructed, what elements could possibly contribute to success. Everything seemed to direct me toward the social constructs of teams, characters, roles, behaviours, buy-in and the intricacies of how things are communicated. One thing I had to my advantage was access to industry professionals, and like me, they had nowhere to go, allowing me to conduct a series of interviews where I could vicariously understand experiences had by others. Again, bias is inherent in all of their stories, and these experiences are only seen

through the lens of what experiences they had been subject to, the significant relationships and environments they themselves building up to that particular moment in time.

Piecing it all together was a challenge, and still at this stage unable to access the field, I had to find a creative way to display my findings. The Last Soccer was created to offer subtle but significant inferences for me to use as a visual aid/prompt to tell the story so far, this is something that has meaning, depth and incorporates everything I had researched so far. These very early foundational stages have been the bedrock of this thesis, everything in one snapshot in time during a surreal moment, where uncertainty became the new norm. Piecing together my own memories, readings and interviews, led me down a number of rabbit holes, and led me to long periods of reflection. I recollected on my time in football, who I was and why I behaved the way I did. I reminisced about my life on a film set, the actors, the scripts, the sets, the stories. Behaviour, why do people behave the way they do? Why do people behave differently depending on who they interact with, where they are or what they are doing? One thing that was obvious was that a common goal helped common understanding, although there are many ways to get to the same outcome, depending on the approach. These emerging themes led me to research in the areas that interested me the most, football, films and human beings.

Let's reorientate this story and pick this up where we started. My Hero's Journey, the masks I wear (*along with the others around me*) and the archetypes of this myth, the theatrics of identity and how it intersects in the story. This interplay between identity formation and storytelling in sports settings mirrors the importance of lived experiences in shaping personal and professional growth (Edwards and Palmer, 2016; Frank, 1995). I am finally allowed to go into the field to observe as a newly informed practicing ethnographer, researcher, coach, storyteller etc., as lockdown conditions are lifted. Having been through the costume department, dressed in uniform, ready to hide in plain sight, pad, and pen in hand ready to scribe notes on the next chapter.

2.3 Importance of storytelling in a football setting

Storytelling has been a huge part of football folklore from as far back as I can remember, stories passed down through generations, iconic players, games, highs, lows and to some extent exaggeration (Herman, 2017; Storr, 2019; Gabriel, 2000; Campbell, 2003; Pollock, 2021). With the latter it seems that anyone with a passion for the game can be guilty of over dramatizing moments, moments they have relived repeatedly, generally intensified over long periods of time (Storr, 2019; Campbell, 2003, 2008; Vogler, 1998). This is usually the case when people themselves have been involved in some way as part of the story, a simple tap in at the back post once communicated over time, can easily turn into a volley from twenty-five yards. Could this be the nature of the storyteller in all of us? Storytelling where the common

interest and background are the same, where there are similar lived experiences as our own is what we crave in art, connecting with likeminded people, it holds a lot more meaning and relevance (Storr, 2019). Dressing room exaggerations are part of the DNA of every team I have ever been involved with, and I have witnessed story's being adapted to suit whatever narrative the teller wants it to fit (Goffman, 1966; Goffman, 1969). Each player themselves has a backstory, a monomyth, experiences that they bring to the dynamic of the group (Goffman, 1966; Goffman, 1969; Jung, 1983; Campbell, 2003, 2008). Beyond the individual, this is also typical of every football club I have ever visited, who display their history in photographs displayed on the walls, a visual story proudly told throughout their entire period of existence, significant moments, teams, and players (Jung, 1983; Campbell, 2003, 2008).

Storytelling within the context of The Hero's Journey can offer structure to the narrative that shapes the collective identity and culture of the football club being observed (Campbell, 2008). Each member of the team on their own path, at their own point of their story arc, each their very own protagonist (Campbell, 2003). Coming to the group with their own backstory filled with experiences of challenges, victories, defeats, and personal growth (Goffman, 1966; Goffman, 1969). These narratives are not only about the game itself but also about the players' lives, struggles, and triumphs on and off the field (Gabriel, 2000; Pollock, 2021; Campbell, 2003). Members of the team have chosen a football environment, where there are mythical elements of symbolism embedded in the culture at the club, badges, trophies, bragging rights. Within the broader context, each team tribally represents an area, each having different colours to differentiate them from the proverbial enemy, especially local rivals. Each match presenting a different call to action, a different tactical approach, like generals preparing their armies for battle, each contributing to the complexity of football mythology (Jung, 1983; Campbell, 2003, 2008). Shared stories of yesteryear have more significance when the narrative is about the history of the team, it gives a sense of belonging, togetherness, and common purpose. Organisations (*the club*) contribute to the overall culture of the team, where members of the club reminisce and share old stories of historic moments specific to them, pass down traditions, or rationalise why things may or may not happen in their environment. Storytelling creates a bond, helps to strengthen the collective identity, and shapes the team through values, ethics, and moral standards (Herman, 2017; Storr, 2019; Campbell, 2003, 2008).

Within a socio-cultural context, storytelling allows for rich meaningful interactions, where narratives are constructed and shared, offering individuals opportunity to interpret storied accounts in their own way (Storr, 2019). How these stories are conveyed allows people to capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of their teammates, all within the safety of the dressing room. Speaking to older players or managers who have had the experience of being in different dressing rooms over a long period of time, they all listen more than they speak, all listening to the same storied accounts being retold (Goffman, 1969). It may be a different player, different team, and a different time, but each story follows the same arc,

sometimes comedy, sometimes tragedy, sometimes rebirth, rags to riches, voyage and return or overcoming the monster (Campbell, 2003, 2008). All told with the same enthusiasm as the first time you heard it, predictable, but somehow mesmerising at the same time. Considering the overarching framework is the same, the dynamic nature of the football narrative does evolve, where they are influenced by current events, societal changes, and shifts in cultural dynamics, where real life can be captured by real stories in real time (Herman, 2017).

These are the very reasons storytelling is an integral part of football, it offers an insight to the lived experiences, identities, and collective consciousness of those involved in the team, and beyond (Herman, 2017; Storr, 2019; Gabriel, 2000; Pollock, 2021). Clubs, managers, players, and fans alike, all use stories to offer lived experiences an insight to emotions, aspirations, and traditions. Some detailed and relevant to that environment, some holding players from yesteryear up as idols, some to intimidate and some for comedic entertainment, but all contributing to the rich narrative of football at every level (Goffman, 1966). Through stories, shared in dressing rooms, stadiums, or conversations in the bar, football people explore the depths of their collective history, establishing connections that can only be understood by likeminded people (Jung, 1983). Storytelling helps to define the characters in the storied accounts, myths, legends and antagonists, people tellers may know, or even only know vicariously. Regularly facing different opponents, some they aim to do battle with, some they may fear and some they know on a personal level. Whoever they may be, each narrative is told in a way that each is the hero of their own version of the story they tell (Campbell, 2003, 2008). These narrative reconstructions reflect the broader concept of storytelling as a means of identity formation and collective bonding in sports environments (Edwards and Palmer, 2016; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007).

2.4 Importance of performance in a football setting

Performance in football can take on extremely different meanings, especially when viewed through a dramaturgical lens (Goffman, 1990). This research uses football as a medium to view the human interactions of the manager, players and supporting staff, undertaking their respective duties as team members within a non-league football setting. Ervin Goffman (1966) compares these social interactions to that of a theatrical performance, where individuals within any given situation strategically present themselves to others. Using this allegorical example, players being observed become the actors on a stage, each adopting specific roles and personas that contribute to the collective dynamics of the team. Through the application of a dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1990) and the adoption of the notion of performance as persona (Butler, 1990), provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of these interactions in everyday life, accentuating the dynamic and strategic nature of each social exchange.

There are clear distinctions between the *'mask on'* sections and the *'mask off'* sections, where the portrayal of self is evident when the players and manager are getting their *'game faces'* on. Football the *'game'* is the theatrical metaphor, the matinee, whilst the focus of this study is the backstage and dressing room, where the metaphorical actors are preparing for their on-stage performance (Goffman, 1990). We are looking at these figurative method actors becoming their on-field characters, some showing dichotomous behaviours, while others slide from one end of the scale to the other, like a game of snakes and ladders (*without the ladders*). Some of the players can be very shrewd, actively managing their public image and interactions through what Goffman (1990) characterised as impression management. This process involves shaping how others perceive them, aligning on occasions with team norms, and encouraging cohesion within the group, and on other occasions, putting their own agenda at the forefront (Shoenfelt, 2010; Senecal, Loughhead and Bloom 2008). Impression management plays a crucial role in shaping interpersonal dynamics within the dressing room, and players strategically use body language, gestures, and verbal cues to project their impressions on others. Additionally, the concept of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) also interprets how individuals create and understand meanings through social interactions, influencing team dynamics and identity formation within the football context. Watching this on occasions, when influenced by selection, results or other salient factors, players almost go into peacock mode, displaying their feathers in an attempt to apathetically intimidate others within the dressing room.

Furthermore, sociological perspectives on teamwork and group dynamics (Egolf, 2001: Homans, 1950: Tuckman, 1965) provide insights into the stages of team development and the interpersonal processes involved in achieving team cohesion and performance goals. These theoretical frameworks can help identify the roles and interactions of the footballers and staff within the team environment. Practices not only incorporate a sense of identity and belonging but also contributes to the overall ambiance of the room, aligning with the concepts of role theory (Biddle, 1979) and identity formation, where it is emphasised how individuals enact specific roles and identities to fulfil social expectations and achieve collective objectives. These themes will run continuously through the acts, where we are privy to the dramas that unfold behind the scenes, away from the audience who have paid only to watch the on-field performance. Observations provide critical insights into these dynamics, offering an understanding of the ways in which team members navigate their roles, authority structures, and personal identities within a competitive environment (Palmer, 2010; Bloom, Stevens and Wickwire, 2003). The ability to capture these nuanced interactions in real-time provides a depth of understanding not always possible through interviews or post-event reflections (Angrosino, 2007). Considering this, the football pitch is the stage, the game is the performance, and the fans are the paying audience, whilst our focus is the dynamic of the cast and how they work with the director, or in this scenario, JC the manager.

2.5 Importance of archetypes within a football setting

Within the intricacies of teams and the interpersonal relationships within them, understanding the roles, behaviours, and natural leadership qualities exhibited by players and coaches are often overlooked. Carl Jung's concept of archetypes provides a foundation to understanding of universal patterns and symbols that shape individual and collective identities (Jung, 1968). These archetypes, such as the Hero, the Sage, and the Rebel, can be observed in the roles and interactions among these football team members, influencing, either positively or negatively the team culture. Each viewing the world through their own personal lens, or their own specific hero's journey, further illustrates the collective growth and transformation experienced by teams as they navigate challenges and strive towards common goals (Campbell, 2008). Although my experiences have seen that in each football team outsiders, spectators and other teams perceive them as proverbial '*chest beaters*', all the hero in everyone's story, all in fact the 'alpha' in the room, with egos and personas to match. This is one reason I wanted to breakdown this archetypal perception and further explore the real person behind the persona.

Although this qualitative approach allows me to interpret the world through my lens (*biases considered*), there are other methods to measure and interpret the psycho-social behaviours, such as, the 1962 Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which is a personality assessment tool based on Carl Jung's theory of psychological types. This framework catalogues individuals into different personality types based on preferences in four dichotomies of, Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I), Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N), Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F), and Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P). Offering this lens through which to understand players' personality types and communication styles within the team environment (Myers and Briggs, 1962) and then underpinning it with rationale. Different MBTI types contribute to the diverse approaches to collaboration, conflict resolution, and decision-making among team members. Without breaking down the sub of its parts in this way, each member would continue to consider themselves as the alpha in the pack.

Considering this; Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's 1990 *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* archetypes provide insights into team leadership and culture, highlighting the impact of '*alpha male*' behaviours and leadership styles on team dynamics and interpersonal interactions (Moore and Gillette, 1990). These archetypal energies shape the team's values, rituals, and collective identity. According to Jordan Peterson (2018), leadership and hierarchy can further enrich our understanding of these alpha male behaviours and their influence on the overall dynamic of the team (Peterson, 2018). Interpersonal relationships and group dynamics are directly influenced by symbolic interactionism, where players, staff and even the manager offer impressions and roles within the team environment (Goffman, 1990). These theoretical and psychological approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of the interpersonal dynamics

and psychological factors that contribute to not only how the individuals see themselves, but where they stand within the pecking order of the overall team itself.

2.6 It wasn't always easy: A Reflective Journey of Learning

Looking back, my education was anything but conventional. It was a mixture of experiences, constantly disrupted by the demands of a life on the move. One moment I was in a classroom, the next I was being whisked away to another location, filming with my father. At the time, the nature of my childhood seemed normal to me, it was simply the way things were. What I didn't realise then, but have come to understand now, is the severe impact this constant flux had on my social development, my sense of belonging, and my evolving identity (Pauc, 2008; Rindner, 2007). Absence, I learned, could be just as formative as presence, the long periods away from school and peers created a feeling of disconnection, a feeling that I was always slightly out of sync with those around me. I now know that the emotional turbulence of these years was not purely incidental, it was the framework of my experience. Anxiety and stress were constant companions, shaping my perceptions, responses, and self-concept in ways that only hindsight can fully explain (Kawohl *et al.*, 2009).

One of the earliest indications that I was somehow different surfaced around the age of six or seven. I became extremely aware of the involuntary tics, urges and movements beyond my control that left me exhausted and self-conscious. It was the sideways glances, the hushed whispers, even the laughter from those closest to me were carved into my memory. At the time, I had no language for what I was experiencing, no understanding that these involuntary movements had a name, it was Gilles de la Tourette's Syndrome (GTS). Diagnosis was decades away, and in the absence of understanding, I learned to cope the only way I knew how, through suppression, through disguise, through adapting my mask to fit the moment (Pauc, 2008; Connors, 2003). It is only now, in the information age, that GTS is recognised as a condition far from rare, with aspects of tics evident in virtually every child at some stage of their development (Pauc, 2006). However, in the 1970s, it was largely misunderstood, my struggles were seen more as quirks rather than symptoms of a neurological condition. It took until my early 40s to finally receive a diagnosis, a revelation that brought both relief and regret. Would my tutors have been equipped to understand my needs? Would it have altered the course of my education, or simply provided another label to carry? (Evans, Seri and Cavanna, 2016). It was the reality of living with GTS that was, and still is, a challenge that go beyond the physical. It's the constant need to suppress, to control, to mitigate public scrutiny is exhausting (Kawohl *et al.*, 2009). This mask, unlike the many others I have worn in my professional and personal life is the only one that brings both physical and emotional pain, and yet, it is also the mask that has taught me resilience, patience, and the reflective art of self-acceptance.

Education, for me, was fragmented, it was shaped by a revolving door of schools, teachers, and curricula that offered little continuity. Moving from one country to another meant adapting not just to new environments, but to new expectations, new social systems, and new pedagogies. With each transition, I found myself learning not only the subject matter but also how to navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes, the absence of consistency in my education was both a challenge and a gift, a constant disruption that forced adaptability, but at the cost of a deep-rooted stability (Beaton, McDougall and Singleton, 1997). Reflecting on this now, I often wonder whether a diagnosis in my early years would have made a significant difference at all. I suspect that, in many ways, the journey would have remained the same, shaped by the environments I was immersed in rather than the conditions I carried within me (Pauc, 2006). I also faced challenges beyond GTS, as I later discovered I had been coping with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Leckman, 1997; Conway, Brady and Misra, 2017). These overlapping conditions created a complex challenge, shaping my learning experiences in unique ways. Considering this, reflexive engagement with one's own identity and lived experiences is central to understanding the observed (Gilbourne, 2011; Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

If I could do it all again, would I? Without hesitation, yes, the challenges, the disruptions, the quiet struggles, they have all been instrumental in shaping the person I am today. Every hero's journey is fraught with trials, and mine has been no different, these experiences, though often difficult, have become the narrative that connects the past to the present, informing my understanding of myself and the world around me. In the end, the question is not whether the journey was easy, but rather, what it taught me about resilience, identity, and the delicate relationship between belonging and individuality. This reflective journey continues, each day offering new insights into the character I have become, shaped not in spite of my experiences, but because of them.

2.7 My research in the field

What does this research look like? Why did I choose to capture, analyse, and report my data in this way? Where does my ethnographic research sit in a world of ethnographers and ethnographies? These are all questions I am asked when presenting my project, and questions I often ask myself.

This project from the very beginning was organic, almost scripted you could say. Within this ethnography I have used a style and approach akin to Malinowski's western pacific adventure, engaging myself within a culture, recording social structures, advocating long-term fieldwork and immersive observation (1922). There are similarities and differences between what is being observed, and although the environment I am conducting my fieldwork may not have tribesman, there are inherent tribalistic behaviours to be observed (Malinowski, 1922).

similarly, I am looking at the interconnectedness between, information, behaviours and the culture that has been created, although unlike Malinowski (1922), the dangers I faced were extremely trivial in comparison. This research has taken a more theatrical approach, where the narrative is infused within the power of storytelling and the performative nature of human interaction (Goffman, 1990; Saldana, 2005).

Having spent my entire childhood and a large part of my adult life in film, this seemed the most logical way to disseminate the world I am seeing through my own lens, acting as the writer/editor, filtering out the seemingly mundane (*yet deep*) moments that underpin the instants that make the final edit. Having the opportunity to meticulously dissect the minutiae, allowed me to uncover the hidden layers of meaning and significance that come to play later in the stories (Baker, 1988), leaving the outtakes on the cutting room floor. Methodologically, ethnography allows a broad scope to be creative with collecting and reporting data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and allows for the researcher to immerse themselves within the data collection process. Using this type of research framework helps to promote critical reflexion, personal experiences and gives me an opportunity to allow the research landscape to shape the narrative (Wacquant, 2004). In the *‘ethnographic’* editing room, moments of observation, insights collected from interviews, and reflections on personal experiences are analysed to see what make the final cut. While each snippet of data holds its own significance, not all of it can find a place on the metaphorical stage or presented in the ethnographic narrative.

From a very young age storytelling and narrative have been a big part of my life, observing the performers, reading the scripts, and understanding the framework it all sits within. Storytelling helps me frame my own observations (Herman, 2017), helps me to understand the world around me. Humans are inherently wired to understand stories, and storytelling techniques are simplified and humanised as narrative to make them more relatable to their respective audiences (Storr, 2019). Character development within stories and a sequential approach to the character can help create a story-arc, making it easier to understand when seeing the character within the bigger picture, for this project, capturing the natural dialogue and interactions in the dressing room (Gulino, 2004). Considering the extensive background I have had in film, I later transitioned into football, where I currently practice. Whilst learning my trade as a football specialist, I had to take a holistic approach to best understand my practice from multiple perspectives. Throughout my time in football, I have been a player, coach, manager, and referee, allowing me to try to understand the social dynamic and behaviours from a range of diverse vantage points. Each situation unique, each situation offering a different experience, capturing moments and emotions, but understanding my place within it all (Franks, 1995; 2010).

Still using my narratological lens, but now within the domain of football, I can see and better understand the masks and how people presented themselves in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Bringing this all together, my film background (*performance*), my holistic football background, my education in both to observe, make sense of what I see and have the benefit of getting to document it, made it hard not to undertake this research in this particular way. Reflexivity allows me to understand my bias, and my role within all of this (Van Maanen, 2011), and what symbolic rituals convey meaning within all football cultures I have experienced or are explicit to the one I am observing (Geertz, 1973). Now informed by experience I can look at the habitual practices within the group, rejecting and selecting in real time, understanding what is unique to this group, and on occasions pausing to get a snapshot in time, recorded in scribed field notes adding another layer to this ethnographic research (Bourdieu, 1977; Pink, 2007). I am aware that I need to be structured in my approach to writing narratives, telling the real story and being true to my data (Becker, 2007), I can also appreciate that within the world of ethnography, although informed, I am still actively practicing, somewhat neophyte in comparison to others who have pioneered and proceeded me (Bruner, 1990). Nonetheless, it is my role as the researcher to shape the narrative and ensure accountability is a critical consideration in this research (Palmer and Hughes, 2011; Denzin, 2014).

2.8 Overview of the acts

Having undertaken a diverted route around a global lockdown to get to the fieldwork phase, I had the advantage of some extensive pre-fieldwork data. Studying pioneering leaders such as Clough, Mourinho, Michels and Ferguson, gave me a baseline understanding of the emergent themes, to then undertake lockdown interviews with industry professionals (Clough, 1994; Ferguson, 2013; Michels, 2001; Lourenco, 2010; Barclay, 2011). Once the interviews had been conducted, transcribed and synthesised, I was able to compliment and enrich the findings with my own personal experiences. To collate this information, I then sectioned off four aspects of how this research should be approached, organisational culture, the team leader, the team itself, and the individual within the team. All of these significantly and collectively influencing the effectiveness, cohesion and performance. The organisational culture shapes norms, values and behaviours, which then impacts interactions, decisions and approaches, whilst the team leader provides direction, motivation and support setting goals that should align with the organisation's expectations (Tuckman, 1965). Within this, the team are a collective of individuals who all share a common goal, they bring diversity in skills, perspectives and experience. Each individual is unique complex, bringing experience, relationships and layers of conscious and subconscious behaviours, shaped by social roles and norms (Goffman, 1959). Archetypal and repressed aspects of their self (Jung, 1983, 2003, 2014), or whatever version they want you to see (Goffman, 2005). Each viewing the world through the lens of their own personal life narrative (Campbell, 2003), making the impressions and adhering to societal

expectations (Goffman, 1966, 1990). Subconsciously they are influenced by universal archetypes whilst on their own personal hero’s journey, bringing with them baggage that affects how they interact, contribute and find their own personal meaning within the team (Campbell, 2003, 2008; Goffman, 1966, 1990; Jung, 1983, 2003, 2014).

Each act within this thesis is based on the stages of Joseph Campbell’s monomythical hero’s journey (Campbell, 2003), linking Campbell’s hero with a thousand faces (Campbell, 2008), with how individuals navigate social interactions and construct their own identities to present themselves (Goffman, 2005). As each individual explores their own human narrative and experiences, archetypal behaviours are underpinned by an innate psychological significance, offering an insight into their own quest for meaning and belonging (Jung, 1983, 2003, 2014). These collective perspectives help to explore the construction of identity, narrative, and symbolism in human experiences and interactions. Concurrently, this framework provides an insight into the psychological and cultural components of human behaviour and storytelling, emphasising the themes that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Campbell, 2003; Goffman, 1966; Jung, 1983, 2003).

Each act tells its own story and offers an insight to the research journey from pre-fieldwork anticipations throughout the fieldwork phase, to leaving the field. In the first act the scene is set with the foundations of the story, after the delayed pre-fieldwork activities. Within this story, it is highlighted how the backstory has allowed access to the team and how being invited into the club meant a dual role was the only plausible way in. Having an established reputation at the club as a coaching practitioner allowed the opportunity to access all areas and undertake the research at first team level (Smith and Sparkes, 2016). A conscious decision was made to be hidden in plain sight, being open and honest eased the process of building relationships with the players from scratch (Goffman, 1959). Having a relationship with the manager from before also made it easier to establish set goals and be honest to the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Armed with a note pad and pen from day one, it was accepted by the group that this was normal practice, allowing notes to be taken on the move, without drawing attention to the fact that the group was being observed (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011).

Act two looks at the first season with the team, getting to know and understand the players, and getting lost in the process. Wearing two masks in the field became a pivotal part of understanding the research process, understanding who or what mask was being used and when (Goffman, 1959). Researcher or assistant manager? That is the question. Could it have been the long delay getting back to normal after covid? Could it have of just been knowing where, when and how to change character (Smith and Sparkes, 2016)? Getting too involved in the dynamics that are being observed should have been a problem, but on reflection, it may have been the best way to start to make sense of the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Enter stage left, the vipers, performing their roles proficiently, adhering to the social scripts expected of them, but their masks at times slip, showing the world who they really are (Goffman, 1966, 1990). Although a convincing display of impression management, their masks cannot fully conceal their true intentions, especially when someone is watching (Goffman, 1959).

Act three, back on track, back to being a social observer, back to being a researcher. This phase looks at how the team see themselves, and how they collectively portray themselves to the world (Goffman, 1959). Despite JC's efforts to forge and display a different image, he ultimately concedes and embodies the very image that others perceive them to be (Hogg and Terry, 2000). They struggle against external expectations but eventually settle into the roles and characteristics that define them in the eyes of others, accepting and perhaps even embracing the identity they initially resisted (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). With limited resources to work with and competing with the majority of the other teams in the league, JC applies the '*dark arts*' or as JC so aptly puts it, *shithousery*. This is JC's way of levelling things up, adopting cunning and ruthless tactics that characterise their external reputation (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Meanwhile, the vipers continue to work their way through the dressing room, engaging in their usual way in an attempt to manipulate things to suit their own particular narrative (Goffman, 1966, 1990, 2005).

Act four explores the leader JC and the relationship that was formed with the researcher during the fieldwork period. In the dynamic world of football, JC, a young newly appointed manager, finds himself navigating his way through a series of challenges with leadership and identity, and the transition from previously being a player at the club. Self-perception, how others view him, as his attempts to command respect and authority in his new role is starkly different from his days on the pitch (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Van Knippenberg, 2016). With the dressing room, once familiar territory, now feeling like a minefield, inhabited now by individuals who view him in a different light. Having to put personal relationships aside, JC needs to navigate his way through the new dynamics of management (Goffee and Jones, 2006; Mintzberg, 1973). Amidst all this, our relationship seemed to flourish, with the assistant managers mask on I become his confidant and, in some places, his guide (Goffman, 1959; Jones and Gratton, 2015). JC asks good relevant questions, drawing from my knowledge of what I and others had done before him (Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Together, navigating through this mythical realm of football like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (Cervantes, 2003) each playing our part in a story of aspiration, struggle, and camaraderie, our bond growing stronger. This partnership, much like the one depicted by Cervantes, highlights the blend of idealism and pragmatism necessary to lead a team to whatever is the measurement of success (Torrance, 2007; Yukl, 2010). In this journey, JC not only battles external perceptions but also his internal doubts, striving to carve out his unique identity as a leader in the ever-demanding world of football management.

Act Five marks the conclusion of a four-year journey in the field of football, a period spanning two intense seasons. Throughout this time, a deep and meaningful bond with JC has been forged, the young manager whose leadership I have supported and witnessed evolve (Goffee and Jones, 2006; Yukl, 2010; Bass, 1985). Our relationship, built on trust and mutual respect, has seen us navigate numerous challenges and triumphs together. Leaving this role is an emotional and heart-wrenching decision for me, a club I have grown to be extremely fond of (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). JC has come to rely on me in some ways, not just as a researcher and assistant manager, but as a confidant and friend (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Liden, Wayne, and Stilwell, 1993). Every time I tried to gently prepare him for my departure, planting seeds of the inevitable transition, JC dismissed the notion with a steadfast, *‘You are not going anywhere’*. His confidence in our bond is evident, and the thought of leaving him to face the future alone weighs heavily on my heart. Yet, I must move on. This decision, though difficult, is essential for my own growth and well-being; likewise, it presents an opportunity for JC to step fully into his role as a manager, embracing autonomy and solidifying his managerial identity (Van Knippenberg, 2016; Mintzberg, 1973; Bennis and Thomas, 2002). My departure, while painful, is a necessary step for both of us. As I prepare to write up this final act, I reflect on the emotional complexity of this transition. The bond we built, the shared experiences, and the mutual growth make this parting particularly challenging. Nonetheless, I believe that this next phase will allow JC to flourish independently, applying the knowledge and confidence he has gained during our time together (Torrance, 2007; Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Northouse, 2018). This bittersweet ending marks not just the close of my fieldwork, but the beginning of JC’s journey towards becoming the resilient, self-reliant leader he is destined to be.

Let’s call this chapter what it really is, a literature review, though not in the traditional sense. I didn’t just pile up citations or line up theories like books on a shelf, I moved through them. Lived with them, picking some up and putting others down again. This chapter has been about learning what I need to carry forward, and what I can learn from, but leave behind. Some of it has stuck; for example, monomyth, dramaturgy, archetypes, but not just as theory, as something that explains the world I already know. Others, like Myers-Briggs, were useful in the moment, but didn’t belong in the final cut. Although, they have helped shape how I see things, and that part of the journey too. Those scenes that didn’t quite make it, still matter. They shape the narrative, even if they don’t appear in the later acts.

What has been laid out here is more than a framework, it’s a way of working, a commitment to a methodology that is lived, not distanced. One that treats storytelling as method, me as a valid research tool, and the messiness

of memory and emotion as something to work with, not against. If Chapter One set the stage, this chapter certainly helped form the script, in some ways it built the scaffolding. Quietly it rewrote the rules. It asked: what if a literature review didn't just explain the field, what if it explained me? What if reading, selecting, rejecting, and reflecting were all part of writing the final script? That's what this chapter did for me. Academically, I have begun to blend performance theory, identity, and narrative in a sporting context, this is often left to statistics or surface analysis. I've worked toward a methodology that's interdisciplinary, creative, and honest. I've also done it while acknowledging the risks of exposure, of bias, of putting my voice forward in a space that's not always built for it. But is that not the point? Research does not just need data, it needs people, and this chapter, in its own way, helped me step more confidently into that space. Fully present, better informed, and ready for what comes next.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter feels like stepping onto the set of someone else's film, where my instincts lean more towards story than citation, a voice over scaffolding. Although this is not my usual character, I do know the script, I've just had to adopt a more academic, third-person tone. This part of the work demands greater formality, but I'm still in there, somewhere at least. You may not hear me as clearly, but I'm there, in the pacing, in the frame, in the ideas that are stitched together. Writing this section has been less like directing and more like editing, cutting voice in favour of precision, keeping emotion in the wings, while the theory takes the spotlight. Nonetheless, it's still my work, it still carries the same questions, the same sense of curiosity, the same desire to understand the world from the inside out. This isn't me losing my voice, it's me adapting a new one, it's not a rewrite, but a reframe, a different genre, but the same author.

3.1 Setting the scene

This chapter establishes the philosophical and methodological foundations upon which this research is built. It opens by articulating the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions underpinning the study, and culminates in rationalising why ethnography is the chosen methodology. This framework provides a coherent lens through which identity, performance, and reflexivity are explored within the context of a non-league football club, a space that inherently embodies structured ritual, performativity, and constant social negotiation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Denzin, 1978). This research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm that recognises the socially constructed nature of reality and privileges subjective meaning over empirical generalisability (Vygotsky, 1978; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Schwandt, 2014). At its core lies a commitment to understanding how individuals make sense of their social environments through performance and interaction, themes that resonate deeply within the culturally rich context of football and

the narratological lens inherited from a background in film and storytelling (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Sparkes and Smith, 2014; Gabriel, 2004).

In bridging these domains, football serves not only as the research context but also as the cultural stage upon which identities are enacted, contested, and transformed. Within a club, social life is governed by complex hierarchies and shared understandings of roles, behaviours, and expectations (Roderick, 2006; Cushion and Jones, 2006; Hughson, Palmer and Skillen, 2012). These dynamics are shaped by factors including league status, institutional objectives, and interpersonal relationships between players, coaching staff, and management. The flux of such environments, influenced by new people, injuries, and managerial changes, contributes to the constant (re)construction of group identity and social performance (Maguire, 2011; Jones and Gratton, 2015).

This study’s methodological orientation is qualitative and interpretive. It employs ethnography not merely as a data collection method but as a holistic epistemological approach that enables immersion in the culture being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). Ethnography provides the means to explore lived experiences in situ and to identify the performative aspects of everyday life that underpin lived experience within the setting (Van Maanen, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). In the context of football, performances are not only played out on the pitch but also in the dressing room, on the training ground, and during informal interactions, all of which are infused with ritual, hierarchy, and symbolic representation (Roderick, 2012; Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Narrative and performance form the conceptual backbone of this research. Identity is treated not as a fixed category, but as something that is performed in response to social expectations, cultural scripts, and interpersonal relationships (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 2004; Riessman, 2008). This approach is informed by dramaturgical and narratological theories that understand individuals as actors navigating shifting roles and contexts (Goffman, 1967; Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Within the setting of a football club, players and staff are simultaneously inhabiting their roles and negotiating their place in the broader social fabric of the organisation. Their actions are shaped by norms and rules, but also by unspoken understandings, ambitions, and the social scripts that define who they are and how they should behave (Cushion and Jones, 2006; Roderick, 2006).

The methodological selection of ethnography is both strategic and philosophical. It permits prolonged engagement with the field and facilitates the gathering of deep, textured data through participant observation, note taking, and informal dialogue (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). This level of immersion allows for a nuanced interpretation of social life as it unfolds, recognising that the meanings ascribed to events are often subtle, contradictory, and context-dependent (Van Maanen, 2011; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, ethnography supports a reflexive stance, acknowledging the researcher’s influence in the construction of meaning and interpretation (Pillow, 2003; Coffey

and Atkinson, 1996). Embedded within this methodological stance is a sensitivity to reflexivity, which runs throughout this work. The researcher's dual identity, simultaneously an insider (*assistant manager*) and an academic observer, introduces both unique opportunities and challenges. This duality enables access to rich layers of data while demanding constant critical reflection on the role, biases, and influence of the researcher within the field (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Finlay, 2002). While some may suggest that reflexivity could become a form of self-indulgence or methodological narcissism, this study applies reflexivity as a rigorous analytical tool, enhancing the credibility and ethical integrity of the research (Patai, 1994; Pillow, 2003). It is used to acknowledge the co-construction of knowledge and to maintain transparency in the interpretive process (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The performative nature of social life, that is central to this inquiry, finds a natural home within the ethnographic method. Ethnography enables the examination of identity construction as a relational, situated, and often ritualised process (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Bourgois, 2003; Sparkes, 1999). Through sustained observation and storytelling, this study seeks to reveal the ways in which individuals within the football setting perform roles that align with, resist, or subvert the expectations placed upon them (Goffman, 1959; Campbell, 1949). This chapter positions ethnography not just as a technique but as a mode of thinking, a philosophical orientation that values contextual meaning, embraces complexity, and foregrounds human experience. It is through this lens that the next sections will explore the specific research paradigm adopted, discussing ontology, epistemology, axiology, and reflexivity. These discussions will further justify the theoretical commitments and methodological design of the study, and prepare the ground for the detailed methods described in Chapter Four.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The methodological orientation of this study situates the research within an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, foregrounding the belief that reality is co-constructed through social processes and the contextual construction of knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Schwandt, 2014). This paradigm provides the philosophical foundation from which the research questions, methods, and analysis are derived, ensuring coherence across each layer of the inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Schwandt, 2014). It affirms that reality is not a fixed or objective entity waiting to be discovered but is instead co-constructed through human interaction, perception, and social negotiation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

In this context, the study is not positioned to test a hypothesis, nor to quantify behaviour or outcomes. Rather, it seeks to interpret, understand, and represent the lived experiences of individuals operating within the distinct cultural environment of a football club. This commitment to interpretation over measurement reflects the belief that human behaviour is complex, context-dependent, and deeply influenced by symbolic interaction and cultural scripting

(Charmaz, 2006; Riessman, 2008). An interpretivist paradigm is particularly suited to exploring the performative and narrative aspects of identity, especially within settings where roles are in flux and social meaning is constantly being renegotiated. Within the non-league football context, participants simultaneously enact, contest, and adapt to shifting identities influenced by institutional structures, social expectations, and group dynamics. This paradigm allows for those subtleties to be captured, recognising that meaning is not universal but locally constructed and experientially grounded (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Smith and Sparkes, 2016).

This paradigm also supports the use of qualitative and ethnographic approaches that value immersion, reflexivity, and co-presence in the field. These methods do not aim to remove the researcher from the process, but rather acknowledge and incorporate their presence as a legitimate and productive component of knowledge generation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Pillow, 2003; Hume, 1748). As such, the chosen paradigm enables a deeper engagement with the phenomena under investigation, specifically how identity is performed and re-formed through practice, ritual, and discourse. Crucially, the interpretivist orientation adopted here is not neutral, it is driven by philosophical assumptions that will be unpacked further in the subsections that follow. These include a constructivist ontology that sees reality as multiple and co-constructed, a contextual epistemology that emphasises experience and interpretation, and an axiological stance that positions values, ethics, and researcher reflexivity as inseparable from the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Schwandt, 2014).

3.2.1 Ontology: Ontology, as a foundational pillar of research philosophy, addresses the nature of reality and what can be said to exist within the social world (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Schwandt, 2014; Annells, 1999). It underpins how researchers conceptualise phenomena, and consequently, how they engage with the research process. This study adopts a constructivist ontology, situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is not objective or fixed, but rather socially constructed, dynamic, and contingent upon human perception and interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In the context of this research, such an ontological stance is particularly pertinent. The study is situated within the environment of a non-league football club, an inherently social space governed by unwritten codes, interpersonal dynamics, and shifting organisational goals. Here, reality is constantly in flux. The *'truth'* of any given moment, on the pitch, in the dressing room, or during post-match reflections, is not something that exists independently of those who experience it. Rather, it is co-constructed by the individuals involved, shaped by context, emotion, and the collective norms embedded within the setting (Roderick, 2006; Hughson, Moore and Spaaij, 2016).

This ontological perspective aligns with the view that individuals actively participate in the creation of meaning. Rather than acting upon a singular, objective world, human beings engage in a continuous process of sense-making, constructing and negotiating multiple,

overlapping realities (Charmaz, 2006; Blumer, 1969). These realities are mediated through language, symbols, rituals, and behaviours, all of which are observable within the football context. Whether through the structured routine of pre-match warm-ups or the informal banter of training-ground interaction, performances within the club are layered with social meaning that shifts according to time, space, and audience (Goffman, 1959; Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Ontology, then, is not abstracted from the research environment, it is embedded within it. In recognising the interpretive nature of this reality, this study resists the notion that meaning can be isolated or measured independently of context. What is understood as '*performance*', '*leadership*', or even '*success*' within this setting is not a universal truth but a situated construct, one that is in constant negotiation between players, coaches, management, and the researcher. For example, a motivational team talk may be perceived as authoritative, inspiring, or controlling depending on the relational dynamics and individual perspectives of those present. Each participant's interpretation becomes part of a broader social landscape, constructed through shared experience and cultural understanding (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Cushion and Jones, 2006).

This ontological positioning also connects directly to the researcher's dual role within the field. As both an assistant manager and a researcher, the nature of engagement is shaped by reflexive practice. The researcher's own perceptions and interactions contribute to the construction of the observed reality, rather than sitting apart from it (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). This challenges traditional positivist assumptions of detachment and objectivity, replacing them with an understanding of knowledge as situated, partial, and negotiated (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Finlay, 2002). In turn, this shapes the types of insights that are possible, insights that are grounded in experience, relationship, and the unfolding rhythms of life within the club. This adopted ontology also finds relevance in its resonance with performance theory. Identity is not viewed as an innate or stable essence, but rather as something constructed through ongoing social interaction, a process of '*doing*' rather than '*being*' (Butler, 2004; Goffman, 1959). This is particularly evident in environments such as football, where individuals regularly shift roles, narratives, and masks according to expectation and audience. The same player may embody leadership, vulnerability, defiance, or camaraderie at different moments, depending on the script being enacted and the context in which they are situated. Such fluidity is not a weakness of the data, but rather a reflection of the very reality under examination, a reality that must be captured, not controlled (Riessman, 2008; Sparkes, 1999).

Adopting this ontological position allows the study to account for nuance, contradiction, and complexity. It recognises that multiple truths can exist simultaneously, and that these truths are shaped by power relations, social position, and personal history (Bourdieu, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). For example, the meaning ascribed to a captain's armband may differ significantly between a long-serving veteran and a new arrival, yet both interpretations are

valid within their own narrative frameworks. A constructivist ontology does not seek to reconcile these differences into a single objective account; instead, it seeks to understand how they coexist, clash, and inform behaviour. Furthermore, this approach makes space for marginal voices and alternative perspectives to emerge. It challenges dominant narratives, encouraging a critical reflection on whose reality is being represented, and how. In a football environment, often romanticised or stereotyped in mainstream discourse, this allows for a richer, more layered representation of the lived experiences of those within it (Giulianotti, 1999; Nesti, 2010). It also aligns with the interpretivist goal of understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those who live them, rather than imposing external frameworks or normative judgements.

Ontology, therefore, is not only a theoretical concern, but a practical orientation that informs every stage of the research process, from the framing of questions to the interpretation of data. It demands attentiveness to context, relational dynamics, and the meanings that emerge in the interplay between researcher and participant. This ontological position lays the philosophical groundwork for the subsequent exploration of epistemology, where questions of how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and legitimised are brought into sharper focus.

3.2.2 Epistemology: Following the constructivist ontology that underpins this research, the epistemological stance adopted here is grounded in interpretivism. Epistemology, concerned with the nature, acquisition, and validation of knowledge, provides the philosophical scaffolding that shapes how the researcher understands the world and makes sense of social phenomena (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Schwandt, 2014). It directs attention not only to what counts as knowledge, but also to how knowledge is constructed, whose knowledge is represented, and how the researcher engages with the field and its participants (Creswell, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Interpretivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is socially situated and subjectively constructed through language, interaction, and interpretation (Piaget, 1972). It rejects the notion of objective, value-free knowledge in favour of an understanding that is co-produced through the dynamic interplay between researcher and participant (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bourdieu, 1977). In the context of this research, the epistemological position aligns with the deeply embedded, performative, and symbolic nature of life within the setting (Locke, 1690). Knowledge within this environment is rarely explicit or structured, it is embodied, enacted, and negotiated through everyday practice, conversation, and ritual (Goffman, 1959; Smith and Sparkes, 2016).

Rather than seeking to produce generalisable laws or universal truths, this research is committed to producing contextually rich, situated understandings that reveal how individuals interpret and navigate the social world of football (Einstein, 1954). Meaning is not discovered but made, and the truths that emerge from the field are always partial, positioned, and

provisional (Charmaz, 2006; Gadamer, 1975). This is not a weakness in the research, but a core tenet of its validity, truth is seen not as an external benchmark but as something embedded in lived experience, shaped through shared narratives and relational interaction (Riessman, 2008; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). This epistemological orientation also places value on insider knowledge and experience. In the setting of this research, much of what is known about performance, leadership, hierarchy, or team dynamics is tacit, deeply felt, and hard to articulate. It is knowledge that is passed through gesture, silence, repetition, and shared memory. Understanding such phenomena requires methodological tools that can capture complexity and ambiguity, and an epistemological stance that supports these forms of knowing (Pillow, 2003; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Ethnography, as an immersive and interpretive approach, becomes the ideal conduit for accessing and constructing such knowledge.

The role of the researcher is also epistemologically significant. From an interpretivist perspective, the researcher does not stand outside the process of knowledge generation but is intimately entangled within it (Finlay, 2002; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In this study, the researcher's positionality as both assistant manager and academic brings particular responsibilities and opportunities. Knowledge is not simply extracted from the field but co-constructed through relationships, interactions, and reflexive interpretation. This duality allows access to nuanced layers of insight, while simultaneously demanding critical awareness of the influence that proximity, familiarity, and power may have on how knowledge is produced (Berger, 2015; Bourdieu, 1977). This study recognises that knowledge in football contexts is often layered and uneven. Within a club, different 'actors' have access to different versions of the truth. A player's understanding of the team's performance may differ significantly from that of the coaching staff, just as the interpretation of a team talk may shift depending on one's status, experience, or emotional investment. These layers of perception are not distractions from the truth, they are the truth, relational, negotiated, and deeply embedded in social life (Blumer, 1969; Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

Epistemologically, this also speaks to the significance of narrative in this research. Stories are not just a method of communicating experience, they are the very means through which individuals understand their lives and their identities. In the setting of football, narratives are shared in changing rooms, embedded in rituals, and transmitted through unofficial hierarchies. They function as epistemological anchors, ways of knowing, remembering, and negotiating meaning in a constantly shifting environment (Riessman, 2008; Gabriel, 2004). By attending to these stories, the research does not merely gather data but participates in a collaborative process of sense-making. Likewise, the reflexive stance taken throughout this study is an epistemological commitment. Reflexivity is not only a methodological tool but a way of ensuring that knowledge production remains transparent, accountable, and ethically grounded (Pillow, 2003; Finlay, 2002). The researcher's experiences, biases, and assumptions

are not hidden or neutralised but critically examined as part of the knowledge landscape. In this sense, reflexivity functions as both a safeguard and a strength, acknowledging the bias of perspective while enhancing the depth and authenticity of the insights produced. This adopted epistemological approach complements the interpretivist-constructivist ontology set out previously. It provides coherence between the philosophical assumptions of the research and the methodological choices that follow. It recognises that knowledge in this context is not only constructed but performed, lived, and felt. By embracing these principles, the research positions itself to explore the social world of football in a manner that is both theoretically robust and experientially grounded.

3.2.3 Axiology: As a philosophical orientation, axiology addresses the role of values within the research process. It acknowledges that inquiry is never value-neutral and that both the researcher and the research participants are shaped by ethical, cultural, and ideological frameworks (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Schwandt, 2014). This perspective is central to interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, where the subjective nature of knowledge requires recognition of the researcher’s values, intentions, and positionality as integral to narrative interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this study, axiology is not an abstract concern, it is an embedded, practical, and ongoing reflexive engagement with the ethical and moral dimensions of the research encounter. From the earliest stages of this inquiry, values have shaped the direction of the work. The choice to explore identity, performance, and storytelling is not coincidental, but reflects the researcher’s own experiences, commitments, and philosophical stance (Lambek, 2012). These decisions are informed by personal and professional investment in the chosen setting, and a belief in the relevance and richness of this cultural space. Research, from this view, is not simply the application of method to topic, but a value-laden engagement with questions that matter to the field, to the researcher, and to the people whose stories are being shared (Bourdieu, 1977; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The ethical foundations of the research go beyond procedural ethics such as consent and confidentiality. While these formal requirements are upheld, the study recognises the importance of situational and relational ethics, those that emerge in real-time during fieldwork, shaped by proximity, power, and emotion (Levinas, 1961; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). In a football club, access is built on trust, and maintaining that trust demands sensitivity, respect, and a commitment to ethical engagement. These values are enacted not only through ethical practice but also in the way participants are represented. There is a responsibility to honour their voices, avoid caricature, and ensure that portrayals are complex, dignified, and true to the relational dynamics in which they occur (Patai, 1994; Finlay, 2002). This study’s axiological position is further shaped by the researcher’s philosophical commitments. Stoicism, existentialism, and phenomenology underpin much of

the reflexive stance taken throughout the work. These traditions inform not only the conceptualisation of identity and meaning but also the way in which the research is carried out. Stoic ideas around discipline, self-awareness, and moral clarity influence how the researcher navigates the field and reflects on their role within it (Epictetus, 2008; Aurelius, 2006). Existentialist thought, particularly the emphasis on freedom, responsibility, and authenticity, resonates with the interpretivist aim to capture human experience in all its complexity and contradiction (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1975). Phenomenology, in turn, provides a philosophical grounding for valuing lived experience as a primary source of understanding (Heidegger, 1927; Merleau-Ponty, 1945), reinforcing the need for immersion, attentiveness, and narrative sensitivity in the research process.

These philosophical influences are not appended after the fact, they shape how meaning is approached, how data is interpreted, and how the researcher's own presence is understood within the field. They reinforce the commitment to ethical reflexivity, ensuring that decisions made throughout the project are not only methodologically sound but morally considered. The researcher's dual role, as both an insider and observer, demands this level of reflexive discipline, particularly when navigating blurred boundaries between participation and interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Berger, 2015; Luckmann, 1966). Axiology, then, functions as both compass and anchor, providing ethical direction and grounding amid the relational and interpretive demands of ethnographic research. In this setting, values are constantly in motion. Dressing room small talk, a handshake before a match, or the silence after a defeat are all moments that reveal something about what matters, to whom, and why. These moments are not just instances of action, but expressions of value. They shape the ethical texture of the setting and offer insights into the moral codes that define life inside the club. Recognising and respecting these situated expressions of value is essential to conducting research that is both authentic and ethically sound (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Considering this study's axiological stance, it supports a research process that is transparent, responsible, and attuned to the ethical dimensions of lived experience. It reaffirms that research is not separate from the people it engages with, nor from the values it enacts. By grounding the inquiry in ethical reflexivity and philosophical integrity, this approach ensures that the knowledge produced is not only contextually meaningful but ethically grounded. As the research progresses toward an exploration of reflexivity, the pivotal role of values, explicit and implicit remains fundamental to the credibility and depth of the study.

3.2.4 Reflexivity: Positioned as both a philosophical and methodological principle, reflexivity is consistent throughout this study rather than confined to a single chapter or stage. In interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, where knowledge is seen as co-constructed and meaning emerges from interaction, the presence of the researcher is not neutral, it is integral

(Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Schwandt, 2014). This means that how, why, and where the researcher engages with the field is not incidental, but directly informs the kinds of knowledge that are possible. Reflexivity, then, is not an optional add-on, it is a deliberate and necessary mode of inquiry that acknowledges the researcher's influence and interrogates the relationships between subjectivity, knowledge, and power (Palmer, 2016; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In this thesis, reflexivity operates on multiple levels, personal, methodological, and philosophical. It is the means by which the researcher accounts for their position within the study, and a critical part of shaping the research narrative (Mason, 2017; Sanjek, 1990). This positionality offers both access and complexity, it enables rich, layered insights into the dynamics of identity, performance, and culture, but also demands a heightened level of ethical and analytical vigilance (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Dewey, 1938). Reflexivity supports this process, creating space to examine how relationships, context, and personal investments influence interpretation and representation (Pillow, 2003; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

Ethnographic work, by its nature, resists detachment, requiring immersion, emotional presence, and sustained engagement in the patterns of social life (Simpson, 2011; Smith, 2010). In such contexts, the researcher becomes part of the field, not merely an observer but a participant whose presence can shift dynamics and whose insights are inevitably shaped by those entanglements (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Reflexivity provides the tools to explore these entanglements openly, legitimising the subjective as a site of knowledge production, not a threat to validity but a source of depth and richness (Plato, 2005; Smith and Sparkes, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This study does not claim to reject bias or achieve objectivity in the traditional sense, instead, it seeks transparency, acknowledging that every critical decision, every interpretive move, is informed by the researcher's worldview, emotional investments, and embodied experiences. These influences are not hidden, they are reflected upon, named, and used to inform the research process in meaningful ways (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Finlay, 2002). The reflexive passages that appear across this thesis, including those in the grey boxes, are intentional, they act not as distractions from the *'real'* research but as integral sites where the researcher's voice, memory, and perspective are made visible. These interjections are not anecdotal, they are epistemological. They reveal how the act of writing is itself an interpretive, situated, and emotionally resonant form of sense making (Van Maanen, 2011; Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Simultaneously, this work does not ignore the critiques of reflexivity, where scholars have questioned whether too much emphasis on the researcher's subjectivity risks methodological narcissism or dilutes the focus of inquiry (Patai, 1994; Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). There are concerns that reflexivity may become performative, more about rhetorical self-disclosure than analytical insight (Pillow, 2003). These critiques are valid and acknowledged here; however, this study responds not with defensive justification, but with commitment to reflexive discipline. Reflexivity is used here as a method of

accountability, not self-indulgence, a means to deepen the understanding of context, not abstract from it (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Practically, reflexivity is enacted through continual questioning; how is this knowledge being produced? Whose voice is being amplified? In what ways do the researcher's personal investments and relationships influence the framing, interpretation, and representation of data? These questions do not stall the research process, they deepen it. They help ensure that the insights generated are not only rich but also ethically grounded and critically aware (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In this sense, reflexivity is not just a tool for interpretation, it is an ethical commitment to transparency, respect, and humility in the face of complex, dynamic human experiences. This thesis also treats reflexivity as a site of resistance, against the tendency in sport studies to frame football environments through binary or instrumentalist lenses, winner vs. loser, coach vs. player, success vs. failure, reflexivity opens space for contradiction, ambiguity, and vulnerability. It centres the affective layers of the field, the doubts after defeat, the intimacy of shared rituals, the performative tightrope walked by players navigating masculinity, emotion, and team cohesion. These moments might be dismissed in more traditional research frameworks as noise, but here they are central, meaningful indicators of what is really going on. Reflexivity allows them to be heard and interpreted as vital expressions of identity, culture, and social negotiation (Butler, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Equally, this reflexive positioning aligns with the theoretical and philosophical commitments of the study. It reflects the influence of phenomenology, which emphasises lived experience and embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Heidegger, 1927; Satre, 2003), as well as existentialism, which recognises the fluidity and constructed nature of selfhood (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1975).

Stoic principles, such as discipline, presence, moral clarity, further ground the researcher's approach to navigating the ethical and emotional terrain of the field (Epictetus, 2008; Aurelius, 2006). These influences are not superficial, they shape how data is encountered, how relationships are built, and how the researcher moves through the field as both participant and observer. Ultimately, reflexivity within this thesis is both an orientation and an action. It structures the ethical and epistemological integrity of the research, ensuring that representation is not taken lightly and that voice, whether the researcher's or the participants', is handled with care. It informs the narrative tone of the writing, the selection of what is shared and what is left unspoken, and the interpretive frameworks applied to the construction of meaning. This is especially important in a setting like a football club, where trust, masculinity, performance, and loyalty shape not only what is said but what is allowed to be said. The reflexive mode also prepares the ground for the storytelling approach adopted later in this thesis. Rather than treat stories as neat containers of data, they are treated as collaborative constructions. Their meaning is not fixed but shaped by context, tone, silence, and timing. Reflexivity is what enables these stories to be approached not just as findings, but as

encounters, moments of relational, interpretive, and emotional significance (Gabriel, 2004; Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Reflexivity is not a conclusion but a commitment. It will remain active throughout the thesis, not only in designated sections, but in voice, structure, and interpretive stance. It is the strategy by which the research maintains accountability to its subjects, its methods, and its philosophical underpinnings. In doing so, it reaffirms the position that all knowledge is situated, all representation is partial, and all inquiry carries with it the weight of responsibility.

3.3 Influential thinkers

The conceptual framework underpinning this research is shaped by a collective of influential thinkers, whose work resonates with the philosophical and methodological commitments outlined throughout this chapter. Specifically, the theories of Erving Goffman, Joseph Campbell, and Carl Jung are not simply referenced but actively drawn upon to deepen the study’s interpretive lens and support the researcher’s reflexive stance. These figures offer intersecting perspectives on identity, narrative, and performance concepts central to this inquiry. Their ideas not only influence how participants are understood within the field but also shape how the researcher conceptualises their own role and movement within the ethnographic setting. Each contributes to a richer, multi-dimensional framework through which to examine identity as socially enacted, symbolically structured, and psychologically textured.

The work of Erving Goffman forms a foundational pillar for this study’s understanding of identity as performance. His dramaturgical approach, most notably outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), provides a powerful metaphor through which to interpret social interaction, not as static expression, but as a series of situated performances shaped by audience, context, and purpose. Goffman proposes that individuals engage in the management of impressions in everyday life, presenting versions of themselves that align with the social roles expected within particular settings (Goffman, 1959, 1967). This perspective is particularly suited to the football environment, where players, coaches, and staff operate within a performative culture governed by hierarchy, ritual, and unspoken codes. For Goffman, the social world is not dissimilar to a stage, individuals adopt masks or roles depending on their setting, performing in ways that maintain social cohesion or achieve personal objectives. These performances are not deceptive but necessary, shaped by the social scripts and expectations embedded within each environment (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). This understanding aligns with the philosophical orientation of this study, which treats identity not as a fixed essence but as something continuously negotiated in relation to others. In the context of the setting of the study, where dynamics shift with every match, injury, or managerial change, Goffman’s insights provide a means of capturing the nuance and multiplicity of self. A player may perform toughness in front of peers, vulnerability with coaching staff, and quiet leadership in moments

of crisis, all of which are valid, contextually bound performances that speak to different dimensions of identity.

Visually reinforcing this Goffmanian approach, the collection of masks on the wall, categorised under distinct social spheres such as Football, Family Man, and Filmmaker, illustrates the researcher's own reflexive awareness of role-switching (*Figure 1*). Each mask, mounted like a personal symbol, represents a performed identity. Holding the 'Research' mask in hand signals the conscious awareness of stepping into yet another role, one that carries its own responsibilities, limitations, and interpretive lenses. The image serves as a reflexive cue, not merely as aesthetic detail, but as an acknowledgement that the researcher is part of the dramaturgy under study. Notably, this perspective is not adopted uncritically. Goffman's focus on impression management has been critiqued for over-emphasising strategic presentation at the expense of internal motivation or emotional truth. However, in the context of this research, his dramaturgical lens does not deny authenticity, rather, it reframes it. Performances are not seen as artificial or inauthentic, but as part of the ethical and social negotiation that comes with occupying multiple roles (Bourdieu, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). To perform in a particular way in one context, and differently in another, is not to lack integrity, but to navigate a complex social landscape with emotional intelligence and moral clarity.



Figure 1: Game Face (D. Lee)

This study is particularly aware of those performances that unfold outside of formal settings, the dressing room, the warm-up, the sideline moments that can shape a training session. In these spaces, Goffman's theory becomes especially useful for noticing how unspoken rituals, informal hierarchies, and momentary interactions contribute to the construction of meaning. What might appear as mundane small talk or casual banter is, in fact, charged with performative significance, particularly in the negotiation of masculine norms. A

joke, a silence, a look exchanged across a room, these are all moments of impression management, subtle and situated expressions of role, power, and belonging. From a methodological perspective, Goffman also provides a useful framework for considering the researcher’s own role in the field. The ethnographer, like the participants, is engaged in performance. Whether taking notes, asking questions, or simply observing, the researcher cannot claim a position of neutrality, their very presence shifts the social dynamics. As such, the researcher must not only analyse the performances of others but must also account for their own. This aligns with the reflexive commitments laid out earlier in this chapter, particularly the need to acknowledge the ethical weight of interpretation and the constructed nature of fieldwork encounters (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Finlay, 2002).

Goffman’s dramaturgical theory therefore functions on multiple levels, as an interpretive tool for understanding participants, as a lens for viewing the researcher’s own positionality, and as a conceptual bridge to the narrative and archetypal frameworks that follow. It allows for a nuanced reading of identity, one that is performative without being reductive, and dynamic without losing sight of structure. In this sense, Goffman’s work prepares the ground for a deeper exploration of personal narrative and symbolic meaning. While Goffman offers a dramaturgical framework for the visible performances of identity, the following sections will explore the mythic and symbolic dimensions that underpin those performances, conceptualised by Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung.

Building upon Goffman’s performative lens, the work of Joseph Campbell offers a narrative structure through which to further interpret the complexities of identity within the field. Most notably recognised for articulating the concept of the monomyth or hero’s journey, Campbell (1949) proposes that beneath the diversity of human stories lies a universal narrative pattern, one of departure, initiation, and return. This journey, drawn from myth, literature, and ritual, provides more than a literary template, it serves as a psychological and existential model through which individuals come to understand themselves and their place in the world (Campbell, 1949; Pearson, 1991; Peterson, 1999). In the context of this research, Campbell’s framework is particularly valuable in exploring how participants construct personal narratives of growth, adversity, and transformation within the cultural and institutional landscape of non-league football.

Campbell’s hero is not a fixed character, but a role temporarily inhabited in response to the trials and transitions of lived experience. This concept resonates strongly within a setting where players must constantly navigate changing roles, from academy prospects to senior squad members, from sidelined injured player to returning leader. These are not just functional shifts, they are symbolic and emotional journeys, often underpinned by internal conflict and social negotiation (Campbell, 1949; Pearson, 1991). The dressing room, the pitch, and even the physio’s table become stages upon which individuals enact their personal quests for meaning, legitimacy, and belonging. These journeys may not follow a linear arc, nor culminate

in triumphant resolution, but they are no less mythical. In fact, Campbell's model encourages attention to the emotional and symbolic weight of transitions, setbacks, and returns, the quiet resilience after release, the reinvention following injury, the personal reckoning that follows failure (Campbell, 2003; Edinger, 1972).

In this way, Campbell's work offers a powerful complement to Goffman's dramaturgy. Where Goffman (1959) focuses on social roles and impression management, Campbell (1949) invites consideration of narrative depth and symbolic coherence. Together, they reveal how identity is not just performed but storied, shaped by story arcs of loss and learning, disruption and return. Importantly, this narrative sensibility applies not only to the participants but to the researcher as well. As someone embedded within the environment under study, the researcher's own trajectory is also marked by moments of call, challenge, and return. The decision to undertake this inquiry, the movement between field roles, the negotiation of academic and football identities, these too can be understood through the narrative rhythm of the hero's journey (Pearson, 1991; Peterson, 1999).

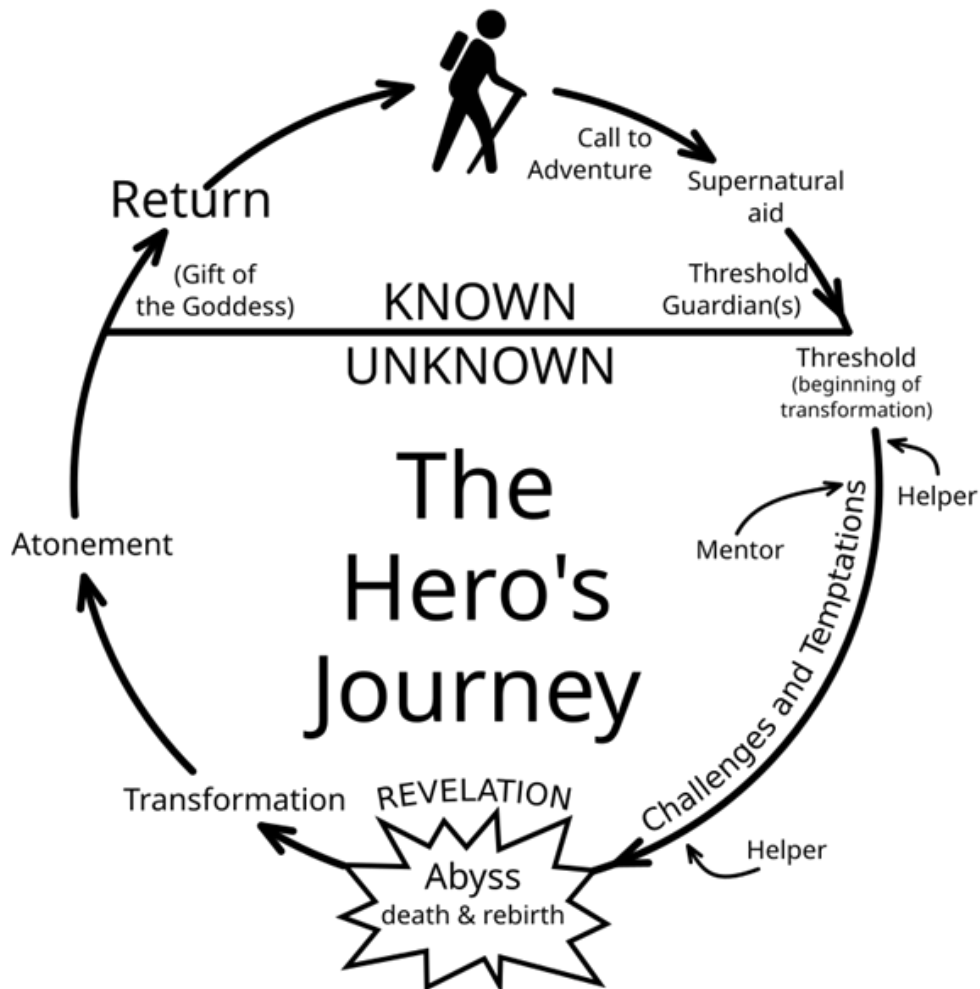


Figure 3: The Hero's Journey (J. Campbell, 1949)

The image of the Hero's Journey (*Figure 3.*) offers a visual metaphor for the deeper structure underpinning much of this research. It depicts not just a cyclical path of departure, challenge, and return, but a philosophical stance on how meaning is derived through transition and self-confrontation (Campbell, 1949; Jung, 1968; Eliade, 1963; Northrop, 1957). For this study, the journey is not universalised, but contextual and symbolic, participants and researcher alike experience disruption, transformation, and return in relation to their roles, identities, and cultural positions (Campbell, 2003; Pearson, 1991). Campbell's narrative construction legitimises the use of story not merely as data, but as a way of making sense of lived complexity, emphasising that even the mundane can hold mythic resonance when viewed through a symbolic lens (Gabriel, 2004; Bolelli, 2003). Campbell's contribution also supports a methodological commitment to ethnography as a form of storytelling. Ethnographic writing is not merely a report of findings, but a narrative practice, one that requires careful attention to character, voice, temporality, and transformation (Van Maanen, 2011; Geertz, 1973). Participants are not positioned as static data points, but as protagonists within evolving stories. Their accounts of progression, exclusion, camaraderie, or personal change are treated not as isolated anecdotes but as meaningful arcs through which identity is navigated (Smith and Sparkes, 2008; Pearson, 1991). In line with Campbell's notion of the hero, these individuals are not romanticised or flattened, they are understood as navigating real challenges, often in environments that require emotional endurance, moral choice, and role adaptation (Peterson, 1999; Moore and Gillette, 1990).

This narrative attention also allows for a more ethical engagement with participants' stories. Campbell's model emphasises the universal resonance of personal narrative, but this study also recognises the specificity and the context dependence of each journey. An experienced player returning from long-term injury may enact a narrative of redemption, while a young trialist's repeated rejection may embody the ordeal with no return. Both are valid, and both are socially embedded, shaped by institutional structures, personal history, and cultural scripts (Campbell, 1949, 1972; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bourdieu, 1977). In attending to these stories through Campbell's lens, the research centres on action, transformation, and the search for meaning without neglecting the material and social realities that shape them. At a philosophical level, the hero's journey reinforces this study's interest in identity as something constructed, enacted, and continuously revised. It aligns with the interpretivist commitment to understanding lived experience as shaped by narrative, and with the constructivist view that individuals actively author their sense of self in relation to the worlds they inhabit (Schwandt, 2014; Guba and Lincoln, 1985). In the context of non-league football, this is particularly prominent, where success and identity are not determined by medals or league positions alone, but by how individuals navigate struggle, reinvent, and the search for purpose within constrained settings. Campbell's narrative arc is not imposed onto the data, but emerges from within it, not as a prescriptive model but as a narrative guide, one that supports recognition of

structure, rhythm, and symbolic resonance. It provides a vocabulary for articulating the movement of identity through time, and a frame for acknowledging the emotional, existential, and storied dimensions of participation in sport and research alike.

To complement the performative framework of Goffman and the narrative structure offered by Campbell, the work of Carl Jung introduces a symbolic and psychological dimension to the study of identity. Jung's (1968) theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious offers a framework for understanding how recurring symbolic figures, such as the hero, the mentor, the shadow, or the trickster, all shape the way individuals interpret their experiences and present themselves in the world. These archetypes are not deterministic categories, but dynamic patterns embedded in the psyche, drawn from a shared pool of human experience. They structure our inner lives and appear in myth, art, dreams, and everyday narratives, surfacing as metaphors through which identity is constructed and enacted (Jung, 1968; Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1991).

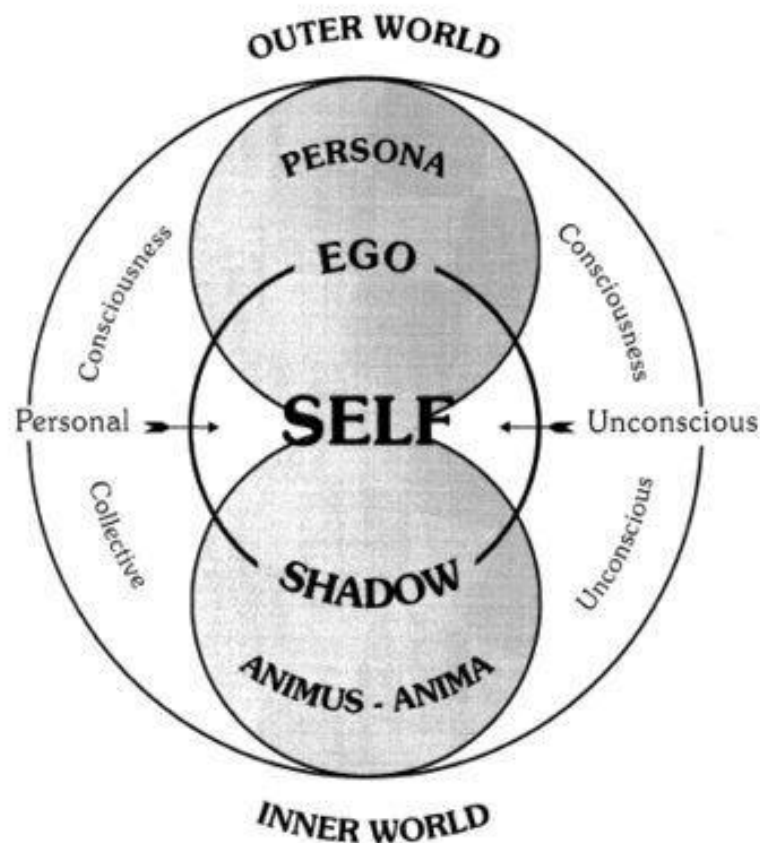


Figure 4: Jungian Model of the Psyche (C. Jung, 1959)

For this research, Jung's model offers an interpretive tool to understand the symbolic dimensions of participants' behaviour and self-presentation. Where Goffman draws attention to the external performance of roles, and Campbell invites an understanding of life as a narrative arc, Jung emphasises the internal make-up that informs those performances and

stories. His theory of the psyche, composed of the ego, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious, frames identity as a negotiation between conscious self-image and deeper, often unseen, psychic forces (Jung, 1968; Edinger, 1972). Within the football environment, this becomes particularly resonant, where emotions such as aggression, fear, ambition, or loyalty often appear in stark relief. These are not merely behavioural patterns; they can be understood as expressions of underlying archetypes activated by the intensity of the sporting context.

Jung’s Model of the Psyche (*Figure 4.*) gives visual form to the internal structure, or the underlying scripts or characters that inform these performances, providing a template for how individuals present themselves in various situations (Jung, 1968; Pearson, 1991). Unlike external roles that shift with audience and setting, the symbolic dynamics represented here are universal, shaping the ways in which people encounter challenge, authority, conflict, and transformation. In this sense, archetypes operate like psychic templates, structuring both the narratives people talk about themselves and the choices they make in navigating their lives (Jung, 1968; Moore and Gillette, 1990).

For example; a player navigating a return from injury may unconsciously embody the archetype of the wounded hero, equally, a coach confronting professional burnout may encounter their shadow self, the repressed or denied parts of the psyche that resist idealised self-image (Jung, 2003; Pearson, 1991). These symbolic roles emerge not as imposed categories but as interpretive possibilities that illuminate the emotional and existential layers of lived experience.

Jung’s concept of individuation, the process by which individuals integrate the unconscious aspects of themselves into conscious awareness, further enriches the reflexive alignment of this research (Jung, 1968; Edinger, 1972). For participants and researcher alike, identity is not static or singular, but a lifelong process of reconciliation between conflicting inner forces. In the context of ethnographic research, this means attending not only to what people do or say, but to what is symbolically at stake in their actions and narratives. This aligns with the study’s commitment to reflexivity, not merely as an acknowledgement of positionality but as an ethical and philosophical recognition of the layered self (Finlay, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As with Campbell’s model, these archetypal patterns are not imposed onto the data but arise through attentive, interpretive engagement. The athlete who constantly sacrifices for the team may evoke the caregiver archetype, the charismatic leader who inspires others through vision and defiance may mirror that of the warrior-king. These are not prescriptive labels, but suggestive tools that help surface the emotional and symbolic dynamics operating within social relationships (Moore and Gillette, 1990; Pearson, 1991). Importantly, these archetypes are not confined to participants, they also help the researcher make sense of personal investments, anxieties, and responses. The researcher’s journey through this project may well have passed through archetypal stages of quest, confrontation, and return.

Reflexive attention to these moments enhances not only self-awareness but also interpretive clarity (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Pillow, 2003).

What distinguishes Jung's contribution is his insistence that personal identity is always tied to something larger than the self. The collective unconscious is a reminder that we are shaped by cultural legacies, historical scripts, and shared symbolic worlds (Jung, 1968; Bolelli, 2003). In a setting such as football, that is rich in ritual, mythology, and metaphor, it is particularly relevant. Dressing room banter, initiation rituals, or pre-match routines may seem ordinary, yet they are rich with meaning. They act as cultural texts, echoing age-old archetypes of brotherhood, initiation, sacrifice, or redemption (Campbell, 1949; Gabriel, 2004). Jung's framework allows the research to take these rituals seriously, not as coincidences of sporting culture, but as meaningful enactments of shared human dramas. Jungian alignment also has implications for methodology, ethnography in particular, as practiced in this research, is not merely a process of observation, but of immersion in symbolic and affective space. The researcher becomes a witness to patterns that unfold over time, observing not just what is done, but what is carried, repeated, attacked, or transformed. Archetypal theory supports this long view, recognising that what appears as a small moment may echo a deeper psychic structure or narrative thread (Geertz, 1973; Van Maanen, 2011).

Jung's work reinforces the central premise that identity is not singular, but dynamically constructed across inner and outer spaces. This study treats identity as a layered performance (Goffman, 1959), a storied progression (Campbell, 1949), and a symbolic configuration (Jung, 1968). Each lens contributes something significant to the conceptual framework. Together, they enable a holistic reading of the lived, told, and felt aspects of participation in this setting. Through Goffman, the study attends to performance, through Campbell, it explores narrative, and through Jung it interprets the symbolic terrain in which those performances and narratives unfold. In this way, Jung's contribution completes the triadic structure of the research framework, anchoring it in a psychological depth that respects the complexity of human experience while offering a coherent interpretive method. Within a setting where players, coaches, and staff constantly negotiate identity through action, narrative, and ritual, these lenses ensure that no performance is read in isolation, but always as part of a broader human drama.

3.4 Beyond the Mask: *Unveiling Performance Through Ethnography*

The Persona and Performance model (*Figure 5.*) visualises the interplay between internal identity and external performance, integrating Jung's psychological framework with Goffman's dramaturgical lens. It captures the tension between the visible and the concealed, between what individuals present to the world and what remains unspoken or internally managed. Above the surface, the persona performs, below it, the ego, self, and shadow shift and respond to the pressures of experience, social expectation, and internal belief systems. In

the context of this research, these dynamics are never static. They are shaped by routine, ritual, hierarchy, and the performative demands of the environment. Identity here is not fixed, but fluid, navigated through action, narration, and interaction.

Ethnography, with its commitment to immersion and reflexivity, becomes the methodological counterpart to this layered view of identity. By entering the field as both researcher and assistant manager, the study gains privileged access to both front-stage and backstage spaces, making visible the micro-performances and quiet rituals that might otherwise go unnoticed. This dual role allows for a nuanced reading of performance, one that is not limited to what is said or done, but attuned to context, emotion, timing, and power.



Figure 5: Persona and Performance: *An integrated Model of Identity* (D. Lee)

The following chapter outlines how these methodological choices are operationalised, detailing the ethnographic tools, practices, and ethical commitments that underpin the research. It sets the stage for a reflexive, storied, and situated approach to understanding life inside the club.

There was a strange irony in writing this chapter, someone who has spent years working with story, character, and layers of lived experience, this section became the one that taught me most about myself. These theories, Goffman, Campbell, and Jung, weren't just conceptual tools I adopted for the sake of academic rigour. They're frameworks I've been living long before I could name them, only now, through the process of researching, writing, and putting them into a coherent structure, do I fully see how much they've shaped how I understand the world, and myself. It's tempting to say I chose these theorists, but in truth, they chose me. I see the masks Goffman describes every time I step into a new room. I feel Campbell's hero narrative when I reflect on the setbacks and victories that mark my life. Jung has given language to things I've sensed but never articulated, the quiet pull of archetypes, the shadow that shapes ambition, the symbols that recur when the lights are off and the noise fades. These are not just references, they're my companions. What's harder to admit is how much I've had to leave out. There's a good 6,000 words of theory that never made it past the cutting room floor, philosophers like Plato, Descartes, Kant, they're there in the background, setting the stage for the thinkers I have focused on. They taught me about dualism, reason, and the structure of inquiry, but this research wasn't about building a historical timeline of thought. It was about finding the concepts that could hold the emotional, symbolic, and performative realities of where I am, and the researcher within me. Goffman, Campbell, and Jung offered that rare blend, accessible, robust, and rich in metaphor, now that's the kind of theory I can use, the kind I can see.

I see in pictures, I teach in pictures, *Figures 1. and 5.*, the masks, the model of performance, they're visuals I use in my lectures, because they help people feel the theory, not just hear it. Metaphor isn't a stylistic flourish for me, it's how I make sense of things. In the classroom, I use those same illustrations to explain the fluidity of roles, the negotiation of identity, the way we all carry backstage selves. It's how I connect with students, and in truth, it's how I connected with myself through this process. From an academic standpoint, I realise this chapter aligns a unique trio of theorists whose work is not commonly placed in direct dialogue, but maybe that's the contribution. To bring dramaturgy, myth, and analytical psychology into one interpretive frame, and to show how they can be operationalised in ethnographic research, is something I haven't seen done quite like this. This isn't just theory for theory's sake, it's a '*toolbox*' for ethnographers working in messy, emotional, performative social worlds, and out of the *mess* comes the message. It's an

argument that performance, narrative, and archetype don't belong in separate silos, they often arrive together, on the same stage, played by the same people.

This is one of those moments I spoke about earlier the '*Ferris Bueller*' moment. I've tried to stay faithful to the tone of the thesis in this chapter, tightening language, writing in third person, taking the scaffolding seriously. But this grey box, this is me stepping out of frame for a second, reminding you that behind the citations is someone who has lived this theory, struggled with it, and come out changed. It's not just been a writing exercise; it's been a journey of re-seeing, of recognising that the frameworks we choose often tell us more about ourselves than we realise.

As Chapter Three fades, Chapter Four comes into focus, leading you deeper into the story. Here, the methods are not just a list of procedures, but the way I lived the research, the practical ways the story was captured, shaped, and edited. Think of it as a backstage tour, not just the polished stage directions, but the scaffolding, the mess, and the improvisations that allowed the performances to happen.

The story so far...

<p>Paradigm</p>	<p>Interpretivist-Constructivist Paradigm is the overarching framework guiding this study. It integrates assumptions about reality, processes of knowledge construction, ethical values, and the necessity for ongoing self-reflection throughout the research.</p>
<p>Ontology What Is Reality?</p>	<p>A relativist ontology with a non-realist approach, positing that while an external, physical world exists independently, its meaning is not fixed. Reality is interpreted in diverse, value-laden ways by its inhabitants, resulting in multiple co-existing realities shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts.</p>
<p>Epistemology What and How Can I Know Reality/ Knowledge?</p>	<p>Knowledge is viewed as a dynamic, co-constructed phenomenon. This study embraces epistemological pluralism, drawing on subjectivist, constructivist, transactional, and empirical perspectives, asserting that understanding emerges from the interplay between the knower and the known.</p>
<p>Axiology What Values Underpin the Inquiry?</p>	<p>A balanced axiology underpins the study, emphasizing transparency, ethical integrity, and empathy. The researcher's values, shaped by influences such as stoicism, existentialism, and phenomenology inform both the research process and the reporting of findings, ensuring that knowledge claims are fair and balanced.</p>
<p>Reflexivity How Do I Acknowledge Personal Biases?</p>	<p>Integrated reflexivity is woven throughout the inquiry. The researcher continually examines how personal biases, experiences, and positionality influence each stage of the research, from problem identification to data collection, analysis, and reporting, thereby enhancing transparency and credibility.</p>
<p>Theoretical Perspective What Approach Can We Use to Get Knowledge?</p>	<p>Multiple theoretical lenses inform the study, including narrative theory, symbolic interactionism, Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, Campbell's hero's journey, and Jung's archetypal framework. These perspectives offer robust tools for understanding how individuals construct identities and navigate their social realities.</p>

Figure 6: Research Framework: *The story so far...* (D. Lee)

Chapter Four

Methods

Chapter Four

Methods

There's a moment in every film when the director holds the shot, not to advance the plot, but to reveal something about the character that the scripted word just cannot say. This chapter, for me, is that moment. It might read like a straightforward shift into research design, but beneath the headings and citations is something else, something deeper, more human. This is where theory, methodology, and methods are no longer abstract terms but become the storyboard I lean on to tell the bits that matter. I'm aware that this isn't where I'm most fluent, I come from film, from metaphor, from scripted dialogue. I've spent years writing scenes and arcs, not paradigms and protocols, and yet, I knew from the outset that if I wanted to do justice to the people I was writing about, on the pitch, in the dressing room, behind the performance. I had to earn the right, and that meant mapping out this research properly, from the ground up.

This chapter tells of how I learned my craft as a researcher, it's where I lay bare how I moved through the field, how I recorded, interpreted, and stayed accountable to what I saw, felt, and heard. The shift into third person, which began in the last chapter, was no happy accident. It was part of me learning to speak the language of research, without losing the essence of my own voice, and the balance is delicate. Too much distance, and the people become data, too much presence, and the story risks becoming about me. This is not an autoethnography, this is about using the right methods to piece it all together. I've come to appreciate the method as more than just a procedural obligation, it is as I said before, a storyboard. A way of moving ethically, reflexively, through the space between roles, between assistant manager and researcher, between observer and participant. It also highlights the distinction between the instinct to write from memory and the responsibility to evidence

what’s been observed. My research journey that I have included (*Figure 9*) isn’t just a visual aid, it’s how I think, how I see things.

This is where the research takes shape in practice, where method becomes lived experience. Behind the script and the performance, there is also a second document call *Thesis B*. It holds the interview transcripts and handwritten notes, the raw material that underpinned this study. For me, this has been less a finished text and more a workshop, a rehearsal room where ideas were tested, voices preserved, and the fragments of lived reality could remain intact. It is a reminder that the polished scenes you read here were built from a messier, but valuable foundation.

This process taught me that the story doesn’t just arrive at the end scene, they are built through fieldnotes written at 11pm after training, through muted reflections in the car, through moments where I questioned whether I was too close to write with any clarity at all. Every method described in this chapter has been tested in the real world, not in the abstract, but in conversation, in tension, in silence. I didn’t just choose these methods, they chose me, and I lived them. This chapter wears the ‘*costume*’ of academic rigour, and rightly so. Just know that it carries weight for me, it is part of the commitment to learning I made at the beginning, one to write honestly, but with structure, to tell stories, with credibility. What follows is not just a list of techniques, it’s the foundations behind my voice, the groundwork that allows the narrative to emerge later with freedom and form. This really is me, not stepping out of the story, but stepping further into it, this time with intention, with accountability, and, finally, with the academic language to match.

4.1 Research methods for data collection, synthesis and reporting

Ethnography: This study employs a qualitative ethnographic design that is shaped by the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm underpinning the research. Rather than restating abstract philosophical positions, this ethnographic study is proposed as the practical outcome of a belief that reality is socially constructed, and knowledge emerges through lived interaction. It is not just a method, but a methodological commitment to studying meaning as it unfolds in context, in relationships, routines, and performances that cannot be isolated from their environment (Geertz, 1973; Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Van Maanen, 2011). This makes ethnography not only a methodological choice, but a conceptual and philosophical fit. Ethnography offers a way of seeing, one that acknowledges proximity, immersion, and reflexive focus to the patterns of everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011; Wacquant, 2004). The choice of ethnography stems from the aim to access lived experience from the inside. Football clubs are rich cultural settings where values, hierarchies, and identities are continually

negotiated through interaction, ritual, and performance. These are not environments that easily lend themselves to detachment or surface-level observation. Meaning is often communicated tacitly, where an ethnographic approach allows these elements to be noticed, recorded, and interpreted, with a sensitivity to context and a commitment to remaining accountable to the field (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

In addition to methodological alignment, this approach is shaped by the researcher's dual role in the field, where this duality raises critical questions around access, role fluidity, and positionality (Wacquant, 2004; Berger, 2015; Guba and Lincoln, 1983, 1985). Rather than treating these as methodological problems to be 'solved', this study approaches them as productive tensions that require reflexive attention. The overlapping of roles provided access that may otherwise have been impossible; although, with access comes responsibility to remain critically aware of how presence, authority, and insider status shape what is seen, said, and left unsaid (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Finlay, 2002). To visualise and situate this positioning, this research draws on Junker's (1960) model of *Theoretical Social Roles for Fieldwork* (Figure 7), as cited in Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:82). This model outlines a continuum from 'Complete Participant' to 'Complete Observer', helping conceptualise how researchers move between varying levels of involvement. In this study, the researcher operated primarily within the space between 'participant-as-observer' and 'observer-as-participant', roles that shifted in relation to time, context, and relational proximity. This was not a fixed position, but one negotiated daily depending on the relational and ethical dynamics at play. One that would later become integral to the story.

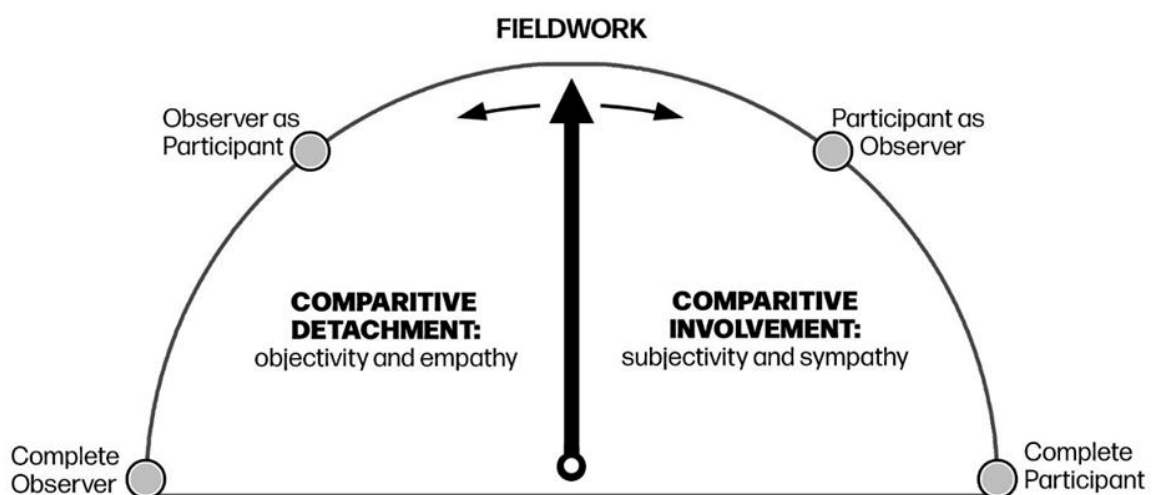


Figure 7: Theoretical social roles for fieldwork (Junker, 1960 cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:82).

Therefore, Junker's (1960) model (Figure 7.) is not used here as a static reference point but as a tool for understanding the methodological nuance of this research journey. It maps

directly onto lived experience, the blurred edges of being trusted as a coach while observing as a researcher, of joining in with drills one day and stepping back to write fieldnotes the next. These movements were not incidental; they were part of the method. The quality of ethnographic insight often depends on how well the researcher can navigate these overlapping roles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Reflexivity becomes essential, not as a confession, but as a form of critical calibration, a way of monitoring influence, presence, and ethical boundaries (Pillow, 2003; O’Reilly, 2012).

This design is also supported by the philosophical underpinning established in the previous chapter. Drawing on Goffman, Campbell, and Jung, the research is attentive to identity not as static, but as performed, storied, and symbolically constructed. These frameworks inform the way ethnography is practiced here, not as neutral data-gathering, but as interpretive, situated, and emotionally textured. It requires the researcher to see not only what is happening but how it is happening, and what it means within a broader cultural and psychological landscape. Ethnography becomes a way of being present, of listening to silences, of recognising when a handshake carries more weight than a quote (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003). This design is shaped by the commitment to reflexivity that runs throughout the thesis. This is not simply a matter of noting positionality in a footnote, it is about writing, observing, and interpreting in a way that keeps the relational, ethical, and emotional dimensions of research in view. This research design is part of a larger methodological map, one where theory, self, and setting are constantly interacting. In this sense, research design is not just a plan on paper, it is a lived structure that gives shape to how knowledge is formed, how stories are gathered, and how accountability is maintained throughout the study.

4.2 Context and Opportunity

This research project is situated within the unique setting of a non-league football club in the Southeast of England; contextually however, it extends beyond the geographical or institutional. It involves the social dynamics of the club, its hierarchical structures, and the researcher’s long-standing relationship with both the setting and its key figures (Lynch, 2010). Ethnographic inquiry necessitates an acknowledgement of positionality, the ways in which a researcher’s background, proximity, and relational ties shape the data and its interpretation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Pink, 2007; Spradley, 1980). The researcher’s involvement with the club began a decade prior through the establishment of a youth academy, building early trust and familiarity. Initially serving as an external consultant, the researcher was later invited to manage the first team temporarily, during a period of poor performance and limited strategic direction. The previous managerial approach, rigid, disciplinarian, and reminiscent of outdated traditions, was replaced with a more contemporary, player-centred model (Cushion and Jones, 2006; Lyle, 2002; Armour, 2011). This change generated a short-term uplift in performance, underpinned by the researcher’s relationship with senior players, most notably

team captain Justin Conrad (JC), who would later become the club's manager. Following a period abroad, the researcher resumed close ties with the club while beginning this doctoral study. A residential move within a mile of the club enabled ongoing access, and a renewed collaboration with JC, now first-team manager, led to the researcher joining as Assistant Manager. This dual positioning as both insider and academic, created a rare ethnographic vantage point, fully embedded, yet critically reflective (Goffman, 1974; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Gatekeeping in ethnography is often a negotiation of access and trust (Burgess, 1984; Creswell, 2013). In this case, both JC and the club chairman acted as key gatekeepers, endorsing the researcher's presence and role. Their support ensured visibility, legitimacy, and open engagement with staff and players, this overt positioning minimised ethical risks while enhancing the authenticity of data collection (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Crucially, the dual role did not require concealment, instead, it became a strength, allowing the researcher to observe, participate, and reflect, often simultaneously. This immersive relationship with the field aligns with a more embodied, reflexive ethnography in sporting contexts (Wacquant, 2004; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). Unlike conventional research that often begins with distant observation and slow trust-building, the researcher's history with the club allowed immediate integration. The players and staff engaged authentically, aware of the researcher's dual purpose but comfortable with it due to past interactions and shared experience (Holt and Sparkes, 2001). This duality enabled unique access to the backstage of football culture, the dressing room, general informative conversations, and the silences between moments. This rare positioning allowed the research to move beyond surface observations into the realm of tacit behaviours, rituals, and implicit norms that structure life inside this football club (Goffman, 1989; Van Maanen, 2011). The constant switching between footballing duty and academic perspective shaped not only the depth of the data but the way the club itself was perceived, as both a workplace and a social world.

The longevity of the engagement further strengthened the ethnographic lens. Continuous presence over multiple seasons enabled observation of long arcs of transformation, injuries, exits, and power shifts. This durational element is essential to ethnography, allowing a fuller picture to emerge through sustained, situated exposure (Sands, 2002; Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Through this approach, the club was not just a field site, but a living, changing environment, one where identity, culture, and performance unfolded in real time. This section frames the field as one shaped not only by organisational dynamics, but by a deep-rooted connection of personal and professional histories. It reflects how ethnographic research, when situated within pre-existing relationships, can offer a reflective lens for understanding the cultural logic of sport contextually. It also demonstrates how reflexivity and accountability must be continually

negotiated, especially when the researcher becomes part of the world they study (Spradley, 1980; Pink, 2007; Wacquant, 2004).

4.3 Covid-19 Interviews

As the research was set to begin, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 led to a nationwide lockdown in the United Kingdom, significantly altering the original research trajectory. On 23 March 2020, the UK government imposed strict restrictions on movement and social contact, effectively suspending all non-essential activities, including sport (Pillay *et al.*, 2020). With football clubs closing their doors and training suspended indefinitely, the initial plan to conduct early ethnographic fieldwork through in-person observation had to be postponed. However, rather than viewing this development as a methodological setback, the researcher adapted to the conditions by incorporating a preliminary data collection phase through interviews. This pivot was not only necessary but offered a distinct opportunity to engage industry professionals during a rare moment of collective pause. Drawing on existing networks within football, the researcher conducted eight semi-structured interviews over Microsoft Teams. Participants included scouts, agents, players, managers, and football business owners, each offering a range of perspectives across different levels of the sport. These conversations focused on pre-lockdown experiences, encouraging participants to reflect on their roles, relationships, and everyday routines within football prior to the pandemic, where the researcher could compare and contrast from their own experiences. At a time when the usual tempo of professional sport had been interrupted, the interviews created space for in-depth reflection, providing a valuable layer of insight that would later inform the observational phase of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Pink, 2007).

These interviews were not framed as isolated accounts of disruption, but as contextual foundations that helped build a clearer picture of the structures, norms, and tensions that existed prior to field immersion. Participants described a range of experiences, from the managerial challenges of player motivation and budget constraints, to the informal rituals and emotional undercurrents that defined team life. These accounts allowed the researcher to develop a more comprehensive understanding of football’s institutional and emotional dynamics, offering entry points for analysis that would later be examined through sustained ethnographic observation. The Covid-19 period also highlighted the adaptive nature of football culture. With lower-league sport suspended for longer than elite levels, many participants spoke of financial uncertainty, psychological strain, and a loss of identity tied to the absence of communal routines (Pillay *et al.*, 2020). These insights emphasised the symbolic and social weight of football in the interviewees’ lives, reinforcing the importance of attending not just to the action on the pitch, but referencing the broader context of belonging, community, and narrative significance within the sport.

Notably, the interviews also supported the methodological development of the project, by enabling early engagement with relevant themes and allowing the researcher to refine their ethnographic lens before entering the field. This early phase offered both practical and theoretical benefits, it maintained momentum during lockdown restrictions and facilitated reflexive thinking around the kinds of narratives, silences, and power dynamics that would later unfold in the field. Rather than seeing the pandemic as a delay, this adaptive phase expanded the study's methodological range. It allowed for a deeper understanding of the football world, from institutional practice to emotional belonging, prior to the observational work that followed. In doing so, the Covid-19 interviews formed a crucial component of the study's narrative arc, enabling the research to move forward not in spite of disruption, but because of it.



Figure 8: The Last Soccer (D. Lee, 2021)

4.4 The Last Soccer: A visual Representation of Research Influences

Created during the Covid-19 lockdown for an online academic conference (Lee, 2021), *The Last Soccer* is a visual adaptation inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Like its Renaissance counterpart, this image captures a moment dense with meaning, bringing together key figures, ideas, and cultural influences that have shaped the development of this research. Visual representation, increasingly acknowledged as a valid methodological tool in qualitative inquiry, enables ethnographic work to engage with symbolism, metaphor, and narrative in ways that text alone cannot achieve (Pink, 2007). In this adaptation, each seated figure represents a significant contributor to the research, ranging from football pioneers (e.g. *Mourinho, Clough, Michels, Ferguson*), to industry professionals and interviewees, whose voices shaped the study's early conceptual framework. Their inclusion is not purely decorative, it reflects their influence on the researcher's thinking, methodology, and reflexive positioning. This composition reference's themes central to ethnographic practice, authority, influence, the

giving and receiving of knowledge, along with the interplay between personal and professional identity formation (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). Subtle inferences embedded in the image, family photographs, symbolic gestures, and culturally meaningful objects echo the layered textures of football culture itself, where meaning often resides in what is unsaid or implied.

The image also reflects a methodological transition, initially intended as a field-based ethnography grounded in live observation, the onset of the pandemic disrupted access to the field and prompted a shift toward virtual interviews. Rather than stalling the project, this moment prompted a creative response. *The Last Soccer* became a bridge between pre-lockdown dialogues and post-lockdown field immersion, visually reinforcing the continuity of the research amid disruption (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; O’Reilly, 2012). This image functions as an ethnographic vignette, making space for personal investment while retaining interpretive value, and offers a layered expression of the research’s central concerns, power, pedagogy, performance, and relational meaning. Like *The Last Supper* is interpreted through gesture, proximity, and context, *The Last Soccer* invites layered understanding. Who sits where? Who leans in? Who gestures outward? These visual choices parallel the hierarchical and relational structures within football itself, and within the researcher’s own journey through it.

Notably, this is not a standalone creative exercise, it is part of the methodological narrative of the project. It reflects how the researcher sees and thinks. Since used in lectures to spark discussion about narrative method, symbolic analysis, and visual ethnography, the image offers a pedagogical dimension that extends beyond the written word. The use of visual metaphor, seeing theory through pictures, speaks to the researcher’s background in film and narrative construction, grounding the academic process in a language that feels both accessible and epistemologically rigorous. Framed in this way, *The Last Soccer* is both visual reflection and an interpretive tool. It affirms that football, as studied here, is not merely an object of inquiry but a lived, storied, and visually rich phenomenon, one shaped by history, identity, and the meaningful exchanges of people and place.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher had engaged in extensive pre-field reading on football’s historical pioneers, figures such as Brian Clough, Alex Ferguson, José Mourinho, and Rinus Michels, whose philosophies of leadership, discipline, creativity, and moral conviction framed much of the study’s conceptual orientation. These readings provided both language and lens: they shaped the researcher’s attentiveness to questions of authenticity, authority, and belonging, and informed the design of the early dialogues. As such, the interviews did not emerge in isolation but were conducted through a theoretical filter already influenced by the moral and performative dimensions of football culture identified in this foundational literature.

This adaptive phase not only expanded the study’s methodological range; it also opened a reflective space where dialogue replaced observation. From within that space

emerged a series of conversations with key figures within football, voices whose experiences, philosophies, and relationships would influence the next stage of this research.

As the early phase of fieldwork developed under lockdown, these conversations became more than data; they were moments of connection between professionals negotiating the same cultural terrain. The eight interviewees represented a diverse cross-section of the football landscape. Each interviewee brought distinctive positional and cultural insights. All were long-standing professional associates, bound by shared histories of coaching, scouting, playing or education. This familiarity created a reflexive space, a form of conversational ethnography, where trust allowed for honesty, humour, and self-examination.

The interviews were not designed as detached interrogations but as dialogues that unfolded within a shared understanding of football's own identity, hierarchies, and moral codes. I approached these exchanges as a practitioner among practitioners, interested in how people performed belonging, authority, and identity within the everyday theatre of football. Questions explored how individuals understood leadership and social performance, how they experienced camaraderie, banter, exclusion, and resilience, and how their personal philosophies aligned with or resisted organisational norms. In that sense, each dialogue became a rehearsal for the ethnographic eye I would later carry into the field, learning to read gestures, silences, and the micro-performances that shape football's social life.

Thematically, these conversations revealed recurring ideas: the importance of environment and culture (*Neveu*), adaptation and humility (*Mikhailov*), resilience after rejection (*Hedin*), pedagogical care and reflection (*Taggart*, *Drechsler*), and the maintenance of character and camaraderie across cultures (*D'Jesus*, *Wharton*, *Romano*). Together they mapped the moral terrain of football, its codes of behaviour, loyalty, humour, and self-presentation. Listening across continents during a period of global stillness gave these insights an added poignancy: they were collective acts of sense-making about a world temporarily paused, yet emotionally ever-present.

When fieldwork later resumed, these exchanges acted as a compass. They helped to attune to the small gestures that sustain team life, the moral performances played out in dressing rooms, and the quiet negotiations of status and belonging that run beneath football's surface. Their influence extends visually into *The Last Soccer*, where each of these figures takes a place at the table in dialogue with the pioneers who shaped the modern game. From left to right, the composition gathers a cast whose experiences speak to the morals of behaviour, belonging, identity, and the dressing-room culture that underpin football's lived realities. Duncan Taggart, the academy coach, represents pedagogical care and moral consistency; Wiktor Hedegaard, the player, embodies the emotional cost of rejection and the rebuilding of self; Pavlo Mikhailov, the manager abroad, reflects cultural adaptation and humility; Gregory Wharton, the national scout, offers perspective on inclusion, opportunity, and the moral politics of selection; and Mahesh D'Jesus, the seasoned goalkeeper, personifies

camaraderie, humour, and brotherhood within the dressing room. At the table’s midpoint sits Brian Clough, the moral anchor and provocateur of football’s past, beside the researcher, positioned between lived experience and observation. On the opposite side, Alex Ferguson, José Mourinho, and Rinus Michels symbolise the tactical and ideological frameworks that inform the sport’s performance culture, while Benoît Neveu, Nazzareno Romano, and Marius Drechsler extend the dialogue outward, bringing global and developmental dimensions to ideas of belonging and professionalism.

Collectively, these figures form an imagined ethnographic scene, a conversation across time and geography that fuses personal relationships with historical influence. *The Last Soccer* therefore becomes more than just an image; it is a moral tableau, capturing the shared codes, silences, and performances that shape identity and community within football’s cultural life.

Viewed retrospectively, these conversations were not preliminary exercises but formative methodological encounters. They established the interpretive ground on which the later ethnographic insights were built. As the research progressed and its analytical focus sharpened, the interviews became pivotal reference points, echoes through which subsequent field phenomena were understood and interpreted. In this sense, they offered both foundation and mirror, shaping the researcher’s sensibilities toward the social, moral, and performative dimensions of football culture that defined the discussion and analysis to follow.

The following table summarises the key figures, both the contemporary interviewees and the foundational pioneers whose perspectives and philosophies informed the direction of the study. Each individual is represented through a character or archetype drawn from Jungian and Goffmanian frameworks, allowing for an interpretive reading of their role, behaviours, and symbolic influence within football’s moral and performative culture. The emergent themes reflect the recurring ideas and values that shaped the researcher’s sensibilities during the transition from preparatory dialogue to immersive fieldwork. This synthesis acts as a bridge between theory, experience, and observation, illustrating how both lived encounters and influential readings contributed to the interpretive framework that underpinned the subsequent stages of the ethnography.

Name	Character/Archetype	Role in football	Emerging Themes
Duncan Taggart	<i>The Mentor–Educator</i>	Academy Coach (Scotland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Pedagogical and moral consistency</i> • <i>Player development</i> • <i>Modelling standards</i>
Wiktor Hedegaard	<i>The Wounded Competitor</i>	Professional Player (Denmark)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Resilience after rejection</i> • <i>Identity reconstruction</i> • <i>Vulnerability versus performance</i>
Pavlo Mikhailov	<i>The Wayfarer–Adaptor</i>	Manager (Belarus)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cultural adaptation</i> • <i>Translating values across contexts</i> • <i>Building belonging in unfamiliar environments</i>

Gregory Wharton	<i>The Gatekeeper</i>	National Scout (Trinidad)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity structures • Moral politics of selection • Talent narratives • Boundary-keeping in pathways
Mahesh D'Jezus	<i>The Jester–Guardian</i>	Goalkeeper (India)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidarity, humour and brotherhood • Emotional containment • Protecting group climate • Informal leadership within the dressing room
Benoît Neveu	<i>The Architect of Environment</i>	Academy Director (France)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture-building - belonging • Environmental cues • Habitus of effort • Aligning values and daily behaviours
Nazzareno Romano	<i>The Broker–Navigator</i>	Agent (Italy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career mediation • Identity presentation • Negotiation of status • Cross-cultural mobility
Marius Drechsler	<i>The Reflective Craftsman</i>	Lead Academy Coach (USA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective practice • Micro-corrections • Growing character • Sustaining moral standards
Foundational Influences: Football Pioneers			
Brian Clough	<i>The Rebel–Truth Teller</i>	Iconic Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity and moral courage • Challenging hierarchy • Plain-speech leadership • Values before image
Alex Ferguson	<i>The Culture Builder</i>	Legendary Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity through structure • Long-term culture work • Selection as moral message • Protecting 'the stage'
José Mourinho	<i>The Performer–Psychologist</i>	Elite Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persona crafting (narrative control) • Us-vs-them bonding • Situational tactics • Managing impressions to mobilise
Rinus Michels	<i>The Systems Architect</i>	Tactical Pioneer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective intelligence • Fluid roles • Space as organiser of behaviour • Design of play and culture

Figure 9: Interviewees and Football Pioneers (D. Lee)

4.5 Observations and Note-Taking

These methods formed the core data collecting techniques within this ethnographic study, capturing the dynamic and evolving interactions within the football environment. A notetaking approach was carefully structured to balance the dual roles of researcher and assistant manager while maintaining methodological rigour and reflexivity (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011; Palmer and Grecic, 2014). Fieldnotes were systematically documented using a structured framework that allowed for clear differentiation of data types. To achieve this, notes were distinguished through the use of a *red pen* to circle three key identifiers:

- **D (Descriptive):** Providing objective, detailed accounts of observable behaviours, settings, and interactions, focusing on what was happening in the moment (Spradley, 1980).
- **M (Methodological):** Reflecting the researcher's positionality in the field, documenting strategic choices regarding physical placement and the effect on observational opportunities (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Wolcott, 1995).
- **I (Inference):** Capturing subjective interpretations and reflections, considering potential underlying meanings, implications, and anticipated outcomes of observed interactions (Edwards and Palmer, 2016).

By implementing this structured approach, the researcher ensured that the observational data was comprehensive and methodically organised, facilitating robust analysis and reflexive engagement with the data (Bryman, 2016; Wolcott, 1995). To ensure access to authentic, real-life interactions, the researcher maintained a flexible approach to field positioning, often shifting locations to remain close to significant dialogues. This freedom of movement within the club, combined with the acceptance of the researcher's dual role, enabled unobstructed observation of critical social dynamics (Wacquant, 2004; O'Reilly, 2012). This overt positioning strategy, in which the researcher's role was transparent from the outset, normalised the presence of the notepad and pen, ensuring that the process did not disrupt the natural flow of activities. Sustained presence of the researcher allows for eventual habituation by participants, leading to more natural and authentic observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Balancing the roles of assistant manager and researcher posed unique challenges, requiring constant negotiation of identity and responsibilities within the field (Fine, 1993; Goffman, 1959). To address these challenges, the researcher adopted adaptive notetaking strategies, such as discreet voice memos and text messages to external devices, methods that reflect a responsive approach to ethnographic practice, one that prioritised presence in the field while still capturing the spontaneity and immediacy of experience (Adler and Adler, 1994; Palmer and Grecic, 2014; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Ethical considerations were paramount, with all sensitive or personally identifiable data omitted from written records. Transparency was maintained by openly communicating the research objectives, thereby ensuring informed consent and reducing potential ethical dilemmas (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007).

Field notes were reviewed and revised continuously to ensure accuracy and reflection, aiding in the development of storied accounts that authentically captured the lived experiences of participants (Riessman, 2008). Reflexivity played a critical role in this iterative process, with the researcher actively recognising personal biases and acknowledging their potential influence on interpretations (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Wolcott, 1995). Reflexive practice was

further reinforced through ongoing engagement with methodological frameworks, drawing on interpretivist perspectives that prioritise subjective meanings and contextual understanding (Bernard, 2018; Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Edwards and Palmer, 2016). Recognising that reality is socially constructed, the researcher remained conscious of their positionality and the evolving nature of their role within the club (Charmaz, 2006).

A key adaptation in the field was the strategic use of the research notebook for dual purposes, the front of the notebook was dedicated to research observations, while the back served as a tactical log used in collaboration with the management team. This approach allowed for seamless transitions between the research and managerial roles, ensuring that notetaking remained an unobtrusive and integral part of daily operations. Notably, the players and staff did not question the notetaking practice, further reinforcing its acceptance as a standard part of the football environment (Palmer and Grecic, 2014). This normalisation contributed to the richness and authenticity of the data collected.

Data analysis followed an inductive approach, aligning with the principles of storied analysis and narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Cote, Salmela, Baira and Russell, 1993; Edwards and Palmer, 2016; Berg, 2009). Observations were formed into storied accounts, reflecting the evolving team culture and individual identities within the club. This approach enabled the researcher to uncover recurring themes and deeper meanings, moving beyond surface-level descriptions to a richer interpretation of social dynamics (Frank, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988). Incorporating storytelling within the analysis process allowed for an engaging and accessible presentation of findings while preserving the integrity and complexity of participants' experiences (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Van Maanen, 2011).

4.6 Storied Analysis

This study adopts a storied analysis approach to interpret the ethnographic data collected over a two-year period. Rooted in narrative inquiry, storied analysis enables a nuanced exploration of identity, culture, and performance within a situated context, particularly when the researcher is embedded in the field (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Van Maanen, 2011). This method aligns with the interpretivist and constructivist foundations of the research, and with the study's broader commitment to reflexivity, rich description, and the construction of understanding within the social world of non-league football (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 2014). Narrative structures are central to how people understand their lives, through arcs, themes, victories, and losses (Polkinghorne, 1988; Frank, 1995). In this study, the use of storied analysis is underpinned by three intersecting frameworks. Goffman's dramaturgical model informs the view that identity is performed and situationally constructed (Goffman, 1959). Campbell's monomyth offers support for understanding personal and collective journeys, through adversity, transformation, and return (Campbell, 1949, 2003). Jung's

archetypal theory, while less dominant here, provides a representational layer to the emotional undertones and character resonances embedded within participant accounts (Jung, 1968; Pearson, 1991). Together, these frameworks shaped how the stories were read, constructed, and re-told.

Data for analysis included fieldnotes, participant observation, and reflexive memos, synthesised using inductive narrative interpretation. Observations previously categorised into Descriptive, Methodological, and Inferential methods served as a framework, allowing recurring themes to emerge (Wolcott, 1995; Emerson *et al.*, 2011). These themes, such as trust, conflict, change, and belonging were developed into storied accounts, structured as acts, reflecting the performative and evolving nature of team life (Frank, 1995; Denzin, 2014). Critically, this approach enabled the researcher to draw upon lived experience in the field without reducing the participants to characters or the data to anecdote. This narrative tone reflects the complexity of relational data, or how meaning circulates through moments, metaphors, silences, and shared understanding (Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Reflexivity remained vital throughout this process, where the researcher’s dual role was not sidelined but treated as part of the narrative system, critically considered in relation to power, proximity, and insight (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Finlay, 2002). Ethical considerations were paramount while stories were shaped into narrative arcs for clarity and accessibility, care was taken not to fictionalise or overly stylise participant accounts. Anonymity and narrative integrity were prioritised, with pseudonyms and merged identities used where needed (Ellis, 2004; Bochner and Ellis, 2016). This work acknowledges that all storytelling is selective, structured through voice, purpose, and frame, but insists on narrative as a legitimate and powerful mode of representation in social research.

By applying storied analysis, this study does more than report findings, it honours lived complexity, constructs meaning across time, and bridges the emotional with the interpretive. The use of narrative reflects a methodological stance as much as a writing choice, where these accounts were not coded into disappearance, nor flattened through abstraction, they were lived, documented, revisited, and restructured into meaningful forms. In this sense, the stories are not just products of the research, they are the research.

4.7 Storytelling

In the domain of qualitative research, storytelling emerges as a powerful method for reporting data, particularly within ethnographic studies where the nuances of lived experiences and cultural narratives are paramount (Riessman, 2008). This research adopts storytelling as a central methodological approach, aligning with the philosophical underpinnings of the aforementioned influential thinkers. Through storytelling, the researcher is able to present data not merely as a collection of observations but as a dynamic narrative that captures the essence of participants lived experiences within a snapshot in time, their social roles, and the broader

cultural context within which they operate (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Storytelling, as a method, reflects and reinforces the researcher's ontological and epistemological stances, viewing reality as a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and interpersonal interactions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Epistemologically, this research highlights the importance of understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, Storytelling, therefore, becoming a natural extension of this paradigm, allowing for the presentation of data in a way that honours the complexity and depth of human experience (Geertz, 1973).

Using this data reporting method is not simply a stylistic choice but a methodological strategy that aligns with the performative nature of social life as articulated by Goffman (1959). Just as individuals manage their impressions in various social contexts, the researcher identifies that the telling of stories in the research process is itself a form of impression management. The narrative crafted by the researcher is a reflection of the participants' identities, shaped by their social roles and the expectations of this cultural milieu. This approach allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the data, as it acknowledges the performative aspects of social interaction and the fluidity of identity (Smith and Sparkes, 2016). Furthermore, the incorporation of the monomythical framework provides the structure for presenting participants' narratives (Campbell, 2003). Each individual, whether consciously or unconsciously, navigate their lives as the protagonist of their own story, so by framing the research data within the context of the Hero's Journey, the researcher is able to highlight the universal themes of struggle, growth, and transformation that are present in the participants' lives (Frank, 1995). This narrative structure not only makes the data more relatable and engaging but also facilitates a deeper exploration of the psychological and existential dimensions of the participants' experiences, echoing the exploration of archetypes (Jung, 2003).

Concepts of archetypes further enhance the storytelling methodology by providing a lens through which the researcher can interpret and present the data (Pearson, 1991). Archetypes, as universal symbols and themes, resonate within the collective unconscious and manifest in the stories people tell about themselves and others. By identifying and highlighting these archetypal patterns within the research data, the researcher is able to connect individual experiences to broader, more universal human experiences. This approach not only enriches the analysis but also situates the participants' narratives within a larger cultural and psychological context, offering insights into the shared human condition (Jung, 2014). In the context of this research, storytelling serves as the bridge between the participants lived experiences and the academic analysis of those experiences (Denzin, 2014). It allows the researcher to present the data in a way that is both accessible and meaningful, while also honouring the complexity and depth of the participants' social worlds. This approach is particularly suited to ethnographic research, where the goal is to understand and convey the

richness of cultural practices, social interactions, and individual identities (Van Maanen, 2011). By adopting storytelling as a methodological tool, the researcher is able to present the data in a way that is both analytically accurate and deeply human, reflecting the connected nature of social roles, personal narratives, and cultural contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

As this section leads into the exploration of the theories of critical influential thinkers, it becomes clear that the storytelling methodology not only aligns with the researcher's philosophical stance but also serves as a conduit for integrating the insights of these thinkers. Jung's exploration of archetypes, when combined with Campbell's narrative structures and Goffman's insights into social performance, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the performative nature of human behaviour and the ways in which individuals construct and communicate their identities through storytelling (Goffman, 1990). This narrative approach, therefore, is not merely a reporting strategy but a core component of the research design itself, shaping both the collection and interpretation of data (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The relevance of storytelling within this research extends beyond the reporting of data; it is integral to the very essence of the research methodology, reflecting the interconnectedness of narrative, identity, and social interaction (Riessman, 2008). As the research progresses, these narrative techniques will underpin the methodological choices, guiding the way data is collected and interpreted. This approach, deeply informed by the works of thinkers like Campbell, Goffman, and Jung, stresses the role of storytelling in revealing the layers of meaning embedded in social identities and interactions. The methodological practices employed within this study are firmly rooted in the principles of ethnography, they enable the researcher to capture the nuanced, storied realities of the participants' lives, offering a rich and contextually grounded understanding of the social world being observed (Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

4.8 Visual representation of the research journey

This map (*Figure 9.*) provides a comprehensive overview of the structure and non-linear nature of the research activities undertaken within this ethnographic study (O'Reilly, 2012). It visually represents the evolving and adaptive landscape of the research process, highlighting the dynamic chemistry between planning, fieldwork, and analysis (Pink, 2007). This map captures key phases, beginning with **pre-field activities**, such as proposal development, ethical considerations, and securing access through gatekeepers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). These foundational steps were critical in shaping the research direction and ensuring that ethical guidelines and methodological frameworks aligned with the study's objectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

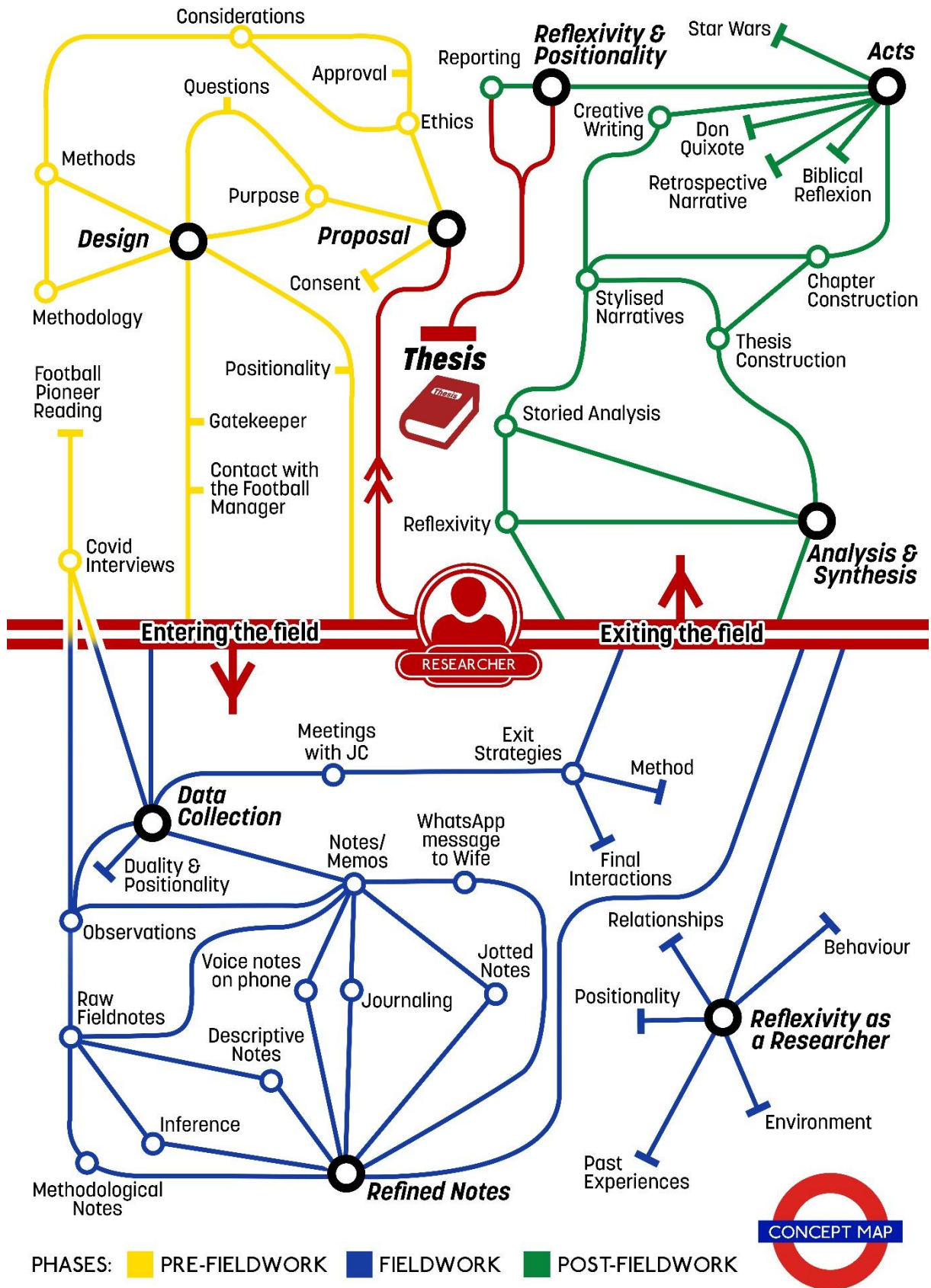


Figure 10: My Research Journey (D. Lee)

One notable aspect of the map is the inclusion of a contingency plan in response to the unforeseen challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid interviews, which emerged out of necessity, provided an initial window into the football culture and team dynamics, offering a preliminary understanding that informed later fieldwork (Pillay *et al.*, 2020). This flexibility underscores the reflexive nature of the research, demonstrating a capacity to adapt and recalibrate while remaining true to the core objectives (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011).

As the study transitioned into the **fieldwork phase**, the map illustrates the diverse data collection methods, ranging from observations and informal conversations to more structured methods such as reflexive journaling. Various tools, such as voice notes, WhatsApp messages, and jotted field notes, reflect the immersive, real-time engagement with the research environment. These methods, recorded in a variety of formats, allowed for a rich, multi-layered understanding of the social dynamics at play within the team, capturing both overt behaviours and subtle, unspoken interactions. Another critical component is positionality and reflexivity. As both an assistant manager and a researcher, the dual role necessitated ongoing reflection on the potential biases and influences that the researcher’s presence had on the team environment. Reflexivity, captured through methodological notes and personal reflections, enabled a conscious interrogation of how the researcher’s own experiences, assumptions, and relationships traversed with the data collection process. This iterative reflection ensured that the research remained ethically sound and analytically thorough, acknowledging the subjective lens through which the data was interpreted.

Exit strategies are employed to responsibly withdraw from the field, balancing the ethical obligations to participants with the need for methodological closure. Within the exit phase it was paramount that managing relationships, ensuring that the transition was handled sensitively, and mitigating any disruption were caused by the researcher’s departure. These considerations highlight the relational and ethical complexities inherent in ethnographic research.

Finally, the **post-fieldwork phase**, detailing the transformation of raw data into storied accounts that bring the research findings to life. Through the processes of analysis and synthesis, insights were constructed into reflexive narratives that capture the lived experiences of participants while maintaining academic rigour. Creating stylised narratives, inspired by Campbell’s *‘Hero’s Journey’* and Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, the use of creative storytelling as a methodological tool to present data in an engaging and meaningful manner. In essence, this research map is not merely a chronological representation of activities, noticeably, it embodies the fluid, iterative, and reflexive nature of ethnographic inquiry. It serves as a constant reminder of the importance of self-awareness, positionality, and ethical responsibility throughout the research journey, ensuring that the voices of participants are authentically represented while critically acknowledging the researcher’s role within the field.

Research Framework: *Cont.*

<p>Methodology What Procedure Can We Use to Acquire Knowledge?</p>	<p>An ethnographic methodology is employed to deeply explore cultural and social dynamics. By immersing in the research environment, the researcher captures naturally occurring data and recognises that meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, resulting in a rich, contextually grounded analysis.</p>
<p>Methods What Tools Can We Use to Acquire Knowledge?</p>	<p>Qualitative methods are used, including participant observation, interviews, various types of notetakings. These tools enable the capture of observable behaviours and the underlying meanings of social interactions, with data analysed using narrative and storied analysis techniques.</p>
<p>Sources What Data Can We Collect?</p>	<p>Data are gathered from multiple sources to build a comprehensive picture. Primary sources include firsthand field observations, interviews with industry professionals, and the researcher's reflexive notes. Secondary sources, such as academic literature, and previous studies provide essential contextual background.</p>

Figure 11: Research Framework: *Cont.* (D. Lee)

There’s something strange about hearing a familiar voice through unfamiliar channels, but in those early lockdown interviews, I found something unpredictably powerful, I found connection. The people I spoke with were not strangers, they were people I’d stood beside at training sessions and matches, people I’d argued with over tactics, laughed with on long away days. Although this time, the context was different, they weren’t speaking the usual football language, they were reflecting, remembering. The pandemic had created a pause, and in that space, what emerged wasn’t just reflection, it was stories. They spoke about collective identity, as well as their own, and about the void a sense of belonging had left during those times. They weren’t offering quotes, they were narrating themselves, and in doing so, reminded me how integral ‘*story*’ is to football, even in football’s absence. These interviews gave me a gift, a way to understand the emotional layers of the game before I even stepped back into the field with a notepad. They showed me what it means to long for a return, and how memory, in sport, is often the first form of reflection.

Out of that same stillness came *The Last Soccer*, an image born not through academic planning, but necessity. With fieldwork postponed, I turned to what I knew, metaphor, composition, and symbolism. I didn’t set out to create something academic, I set out to make sense of it all, and in doing so, I discovered that image can carry theory, and that academia doesn’t need to be detached from creativity to be credible. That image now opens discussions in lectures, as an authentic method to offer understanding, it has shown me that when conventional access is taken away, expression can still find a way through. I have adapted my methods to ensure I was true to my data, I observed, listened, took notes in car parks and corridors, whispered voice notes into my phone, texted insights to my wife just to get them down before they disappeared. This wasn’t just adaptive data collection, it was survival, a way of holding onto the story without interfering with it.

It was also in this chapter that I really began to get to grips with the mechanics of being in the field, negotiating the landscape of social characters, masks, and performances. From this practice, I learned how to make sense of the theory. In many ways, my apprenticeship as an ethnographer was taking place in real time, shaped by both the field and my supervisor’s coaching. I think here of the film-scripted moment in Chapter Five, *Come Home Wayward Son*, set in a café, where Clive pushed me to see what was right in front of me. That coaching, together with the social coaching he offered during my Master’s, teaching me how to ‘*hide in plain sight*’, became central to the way I learned to observe, participate, and then step back. These lessons were not

abstract theory, they were embodied practices, and they ran like threads from the early interviews through to the difficult process of exit. Learning to become an ethnographer happened here, through doing, failing, adapting, and trying again.

Adapting wasn't the final lesson, even as I adapted, I had to learn restraint. Belonging comes with emotion, and mine was threaded through every part of this club, observation, I realised, is different from immersion. It requires distance, a kind of ethical pause between what I felt and what I saw, and this chapter taught me how to do that. Not to remove myself, but to step back far enough to see how things were shaping up. That clarity will become clearer later in the Acts, when the voices get louder and the stakes get higher. Funny really, the section I assumed would be the most boring has become the one that's taught me the most. What I know now is that methodology and the methods are not just about what you do, they are about what you notice, what you carry, and how you honour both without losing either.

And so, the rehearsal ends. From backstage to onstage, the scaffolding now gives way to the performance. Moving into Chapter Five, the focus turns to *The Acts*, structured narratives that serve as results, analysis, and discussion, capturing the lived experiences, identities, and cultural dynamics of football. What was once method now becomes performance, and the story moves from preparation to play.

Chapter Five

The Acts

(RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION)

Chapter Five

The Acts

(RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION)

This is the chapter I couldn't wait to write, not because it's climactic, but because it's where everything I've carried entering the field of research finally finds its form, this whole chapter in some way, is all a 'grey box' moment. Having laid the theoretical groundwork, this is where the data is allowed to breathe. This is the world I've been inside, trying to translate without losing meaning. What you will read here isn't just data, it's the emotion of being there, of being within it, of feeling it. These Acts are how I remember the moments that made me stop, think, and feel. Each reflexive passage is drawn from raw emotion, sitting alongside these 'grey box' moments of reflective distance. Each one is shaped differently, but they are all authentically me.

Prologue to the Acts

This chapter represents the results, analysis, and discussion, brought together through a creative ethnographic lens. Rather than separating results from interpretation, this research adopts a storied approach in which the fieldwork is presented as a series of five 'Acts', each composed of three stylised accounts. These acts function as narrative case studies that reflect real-life moments, transformations, and emotional arcs from the field.

Each act is written as a 'three-story' play, presented as accounts 1, 2 and 3, each having a beginning, middle and end. These accounts offer a range of creative methods, including journal entries, film scripts, storied reflections, and visual imagery. These stories and accounts are shaped by the works of creative ethnographic storytellers, Johnny Saldaña, Arthur W. Frank, Clive Palmer and Carolyn Ellis, who use their authentic voices to redefine research through artistic and narrative forms, performance, and reflexive methodologies. This deliberate dramaturgical structure reflects the performative dimension of identity and social interaction observed within the football club, where individuals, including the researcher played a role, wore masks, and navigated complex group dynamics.

Inspired by Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, Campbell’s monomyth, and the storytelling techniques of narrative ethnography (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), this structure allows for a reflexive, immersive portrayal of lived experience. It offers a way to make sense of raw, real-time fieldnotes ‘*scribbled, chaotic, but authentic*’, to communicate the unfolding of events as they happened, with all their emotional complexity intact.

Crucially, the acts reveal not only what was being observed, but also how the researcher was being emotionally impacted. While the initial focus was on football culture, the deeper themes that emerged, such as, belonging, identity, and relationships, began to take centre stage. These accounts reflect the shifting emotional landscape of the research process, from entry into the field, through immersion and attachment, to withdrawal and reflection.

This chapter presents ‘*real life in real time*’. It offers stories that resonate not just with football, but within any group setting, boardrooms, workplaces, and the wider social worlds. The researcher’s own sense of self, his character, purpose, and performative mask became increasingly blurred. Emotional attachment to the field threatened to derail the research entirely, before eventually becoming the very source of insight. What follows, is not just a set of findings, but a lived narrative, raw, reflexive, and ultimately transformative.

Like a theatre awaiting its cast, each act and its storied accounts will be introduced. Stories are told with a different researcher voice, from different perspectives, about different issues. Some about the group, some about individuals, and how they interact, respond and portray themselves in everyday life within the context of this research. These stories offer an insight into the masks they wear and the emotional baggage they bring to the group. This is how the data has been interpreted; although, these are not just stories, they are performative texts, scripts drawn from lived experiences, where the researcher and participants play roles shaped by context, culture, and emotion.

Each Act begins with a short introduction that sets the scene, an opening of the curtains to offer context, theoretical positioning, and a dramaturgical cue to the themes ahead. Think of this as an invite, not only to observe but to engage, to move beyond findings and into experience. These ‘Acts’ do not represent closure, but movement, exploration, the unfolding of a reflexive journey in which insight is revealed through performance, and understanding emerges through story. Each Act finishes with a ‘*reflexive link*’ which accommodates my analytical reasoning and decision making at each stage of the research from the field experiences and then making sense of these in a social research context.

Programme notes

Act	Prologue	Account 1	Account 2	Account 3	Reflexive Link
I Entering the Field	From theory to field <i>P89</i>	What he wants, what I want and what the club needs <i>P91</i>	Pregame jitters, anxiety, fear or excitement? <i>P93</i>	Different masks, same relationship <i>P95</i>	Reflexions and stylised approach to this Act <i>P99</i>
II Lost in the Field	Crossing the Threshold <i>P104</i>	Into the unknown, emerged in the Special World <i>P106</i>	Tests, Allies and Enemies – The Vipers <i>P119</i>	Meeting the Mentor <i>P125</i>	Reflexion and stylised approach for Account 1 <i>P116</i> Vipers Reflexion <i>P122</i> Danny's and Clive's reflective monologues <i>P151</i>
III Back in the Field	Season 2 <i>P155</i>	The Dark Arts (<i>outward facing self</i>) <i>P156</i>	The Group (<i>behind the outward facing self</i>) <i>P171</i>	The Individuals (<i>behind the group</i>) <i>P180</i>	Account 1, 2 and 3 reflexions <i>P169, 178, 185</i> Making Sense of Act 3: Bridging Theory and Practice <i>P187</i>
IV Apotheosis and Atonement	The archetypal story of JC <i>P190</i>	Am I Sancho Panza? <i>P192</i>	The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge <i>P201</i>	The Rise of JC: A Reflective Journey Foretold by Daniel <i>P214</i>	Narrative Preface: Account's 1, 2 and 3 <i>P191, 200, 213</i>
V Exiting the Field	Refusal of the Return <i>P217</i>	What the Others Say: Reviewing the Current Body of Literature <i>P218</i>	To You, from Me: My Future Self <i>P222</i>	I Died on Stage: This is the End <i>P226</i>	Account 1: Discussion <i>P219</i> Reflexion <i>P228</i>

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

ACT I



ENTERING THE FIELD

Prologue: *From theory to field*

Stepping onto the stage with a dual role, setting the scene, as the performance begins, followed by the research context.

Account 1

What he wants, what I want and what the club needs
Re-entry negotiated, legitimacy, belonging, identity, dual lens/voice.

Account 2

Pregame jitters, anxiety, fear or excitement?
Fear and excitement. Identity tension (insider/outsider), reflexivity, doubts on credibility, unsettled dual voice.

Account 3

Different masks, same relationship
Returning to the dressing room exposes the collective power of this masculine space, where roles and belonging are tested.

These three Accounts are written in a reflective narrative style inspired by Arthur Frank, positioning experience as story and reflexivity as part of the telling.



Upon exit you will find my reflexions, where I step out of the scene to analyse how these moments reveal belonging, identity, masculinity, and my shifting voice as both insider and outsider.

5.1 Act I. Entering the Field: *The Call to Adventure*

Prologue: From Theory to Field

Before even stepping into the field, I undertook a journey that began long before the opening whistle of the football season. My preparation unfolded through distinct phases, beginning with theoretical explorations, or essential groundwork, setting the stage for what was to come. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, I navigated the virtual space, conducting interviews with eight individuals, mediated by just the distance of a screen through Microsoft Teams. The lockdown isolated us, but in that isolation, deeper more reflective accounts were on offer, it was an emergent insight to more meaningful truths. These conversations became a window into the lives of football pioneers, each story offering a glimpse into how identity is shaped not just on the pitch but in the spaces between games, through relationships, histories, and personal struggles. It was during these discussions, as they spoke of lost social practices and the yearning for connection, that I realised the importance of what was unfolding before me. The interviewees, like so many during that liminal moment in time, were reaching back into the past to make sense of a present that felt somewhat unfamiliar. Thus, the themes which began to emerge, were rich, evocative, tethered to their personal experiences. I saw in their stories not only a reflection of my own journey but a broader narrative of identity, culture, and resilience that underpins football itself. The theoretical frameworks I had begun to build on, group dynamics, high-performing teams, and the social fabric that binds players and coaches, somehow gained new depth as I listened. These stories were not just data, they were living accounts, storied lives awaiting a synthesis of theory and further observations of lived experience. They were the fuel for the fieldwork that lay ahead, offering me a framework to navigate what would come next.

Joseph Campbell's story circle resonated as I reflected on my role. Like a hero called to action, my own journey into the research field was ignited by a single phone call. Justin Conrad (JC), the new manager of Ironbridge FC, assumed his position in the chaos of transition a changing of the old guard that mirrored the turbulence of the pandemic itself. As one of the '*gatekeepers*' to this new world, JC would be my guide into the intricacies of a team in flux. But with this entry point came a host of apprehensions. How would I maintain my role as an observer without becoming too embedded, too influenced by the emotional currents that naturally arise in a setting as charged as football? How could I earn the trust of a group who would inevitably see me as an outsider, my role floating somewhere between researcher and participant? Ethnography, I knew, demanded immersion, but I was keenly aware of the delicate balance required between observing and influencing. Reflexivity would be my tool, my anchor in these turbulent waters. I knew I had to acknowledge my biases, but also learn to sit with them, aware that my presence in the field was never neutral.

These initial conversations with JC, and my subsequent reflections, became the groundwork for my entry into the heart of the research. This was the moment of '*forming*,' the

first phase where identities, both mine and theirs, began to take shape. These early days of engagement held within them the tensions of anticipation and uncertainty. The journey ahead was unfolding, but its shape was still undefined. The season was about to begin, and with it, the everyday interactions that would reveal the essence of coach-athlete relationships. What happens beyond the team? What lies beneath the surface of the performances we see on match days? These questions would guide me, but I knew that answers would not come quickly or easily.

5.2 Research context: *The bit before the ‘Hero’s Journey’*

The Pandemic and New Beginnings

The Covid-19 pandemic altered the landscape of football, just as it had altered nearly every facet of life. The 2019/2020 season came to an abrupt halt, and the familiar rhythms of the game, training, matches, even the casual conversations in the dressing room were lost to the isolation of lockdown. During this period, JC took over as manager from Alistair Montague (*Monty*), the team’s long-standing figurehead. In a sense, JC’s arrival mirrored my own re-entry into the research, both of us stepping into roles shaped by the disruptions of the pandemic. For me, the halt in fieldwork was both a pause and an opportunity. While I could not be physically present, the digital space offered a new vantage point, one that would unexpectedly enrich my research. Through Microsoft Teams, I connected with individuals who shared not only their memories but also their reflections on what had been lost. As they spoke, I found myself reflecting on the ways that small, everyday interactions from holding a door open to a casual word at the local shop had been disrupted, replaced by the disembodied formality of online meetings.

Surprisingly, these remote interviews offered a kind of intimacy. The distance of the screen seemed to invite a certain nostalgia, a yearning for the simplicity of what had been. My interviewees, confined by the same restrictions as myself, were eager to engage, to tell their stories, and in the process, we created a space where those stories could unfold freely. They spoke not just as athletes or coaches, but as individuals reflecting on lives now shaped by the uncertainty of the present. They were the lead characters in their own narratives, and as I listened, I realised that their stories, like mine, were about more than football. They were stories of identity, loss, and adaptation. What was shared in these interviews did not remain as isolated testimony, it was later interpreted and integrated into the storied accounts that run throughout this thesis. In this way, the interviews became more than conversations, they became part of the performance itself.

In these conversations, they moved fluidly between memory and reflection, past and present. What started as simple recollection deepened into a kind of philosophical reflection on what had been, what was, and what might come next. Their narratives were, in many ways,

my own, a search for meaning in a world that had been thrown off course. This unanticipated phase of data collection became a foundation upon which I would build the next stage of my research. Entering the field post-lockdown, I felt both more informed and more aware of the complexities that awaited me. The remote interviews had sharpened my focus, allowing me to see the subtleties of culture, interaction, and identity in ways I might not have seen before. Yet, I knew that my challenge moving forward would be to maintain a delicate balance, observing without shaping, reporting without distorting. This was indeed the call to action I had prepared for, but I knew the journey ahead would require constant reflection.

As the football season approached, I felt ready, but the question remained, how would I hold onto the structured process I had developed, observe, take notes, refine, report, all this without becoming too entangled in the very culture I was studying. This was the challenge, the tension that would guide my journey forward.

5.2.1 Account 1.

Account 1 Act I

*What he wants, what I
want and what the club
needs*

The Beginning: *What he wants, what I want and what the club needs*

The preparation was over. The theoretical groundwork had been laid, and the only thing left was finding a way in, somewhere to embed myself, somewhere to take my research from abstract to tangible. That's when fate, or perhaps something more deliberate, led me to a chance meeting in the County Mall with Monty, the chairman and, until recently, manager of Ironbridge Football Club. To anyone else, this might have seemed like an ordinary encounter, but for me, it felt like a crossroads. Ten years ago, I had been part of that world, working freelance for an education company, tutoring the club's scholars. Ironbridge had drawn me in, slowly at first, then with a force I hadn't expected. What struck me most back then was the contrast, the innocence of the green county landscape against the grit and chaos of inner-city London where I had been. The countryside felt like an escape, but it became more than that. It became a home. I had come to love the club, not just for the game, but for the sense of belonging it gave me.

Monty had always been at the centre of that world, a figure larger than life, someone who was equal parts guardian and gatekeeper. He suspended, shouted, and shaped the club in his image, for better or worse. I had been part of it too, advising, coaching, even stepping in as interim manager during one of his frequent suspensions. That chapter of my life had felt complete, or so I thought. Yet, here he was again, unexpectedly reappearing in my life, offering a doorway back into that world. We exchanged pleasantries at first, Monty, ever the storyteller,

filled me in on his plans and life beyond football. Then, as though it were an afterthought, he told me that he was stepping down as first-team manager. Just like that, a decade of control, of being the singular force at the club’s helm, was ending. I listened, feeling a shift, an opening, perhaps. He had appointed Justin Conrad, a no-nonsense centre half, as the new manager. Justin, or JC as we called him, was someone I knew well from my time at the club. He’d played for me, and I’d always admired his approach to the game, calm on the ball, erratic by nature, somehow grounded yet volatile, a leader in his own unique way. Monty asked for my thoughts, and I must have given him a wry smile. There was a flicker of something, admiration, yes, but also recognition. JC was stepping into a world that Monty had ruled with a firm hand, and I knew the weight that came with it. It didn’t take long for me to hint that I wanted back in, not as a coach or a manager this time, but as a researcher. I wanted to observe, to study the dynamics I had once been a part of. Monty nodded, intrigued. I had taken the bait, and he had, too.

A few days later, as I sat at my desk transcribing the interviews, the phone rang. It was JC. Our conversation flowed easily, steeped in nostalgia and shared experiences. He remembered the methodology I had applied during my interim stint at the club, and I could hear the respect in his voice. It was humbling to know that something I had done years ago had stayed with him. We talked about Monty, his old-school, sergeant-major approach to leadership, old fashioned in many ways but effective for that time. Monty was a character straight out of another era, leading like Windsor Davies in *‘It Ain’t Half Hot Mum’*, a man who thrived on command and control. JC, on the other hand, was eager for a new era, a new approach. As our conversation deepened, I sensed that JC wanted more than just football talk. He was sharing not only his plans for the club but something more personal, his vision, his hope for transformation. Just when I thought I had found my role in this story, as the quiet observer, collecting data from the shadows, JC asked me to be his assistant manager. The words landed like a bombshell. I hadn’t been prepared for that. Research was one thing, coaching was another. But there it was, a direct request to step out of the observer’s role and back into the thick of things. *‘I need you,’* he said, as though he had already anticipated my hesitation. *‘You can do the job. It ticks every box, it’s what I need, what you need, and what the club needs.’*

His words hung in the air. He had certainly got my attention, but what was he really asking of me? Could I maintain my distance, my objectivity, while being so embedded in the inner workings of the club? There was a part of me that felt the pull, this club, this place, it had been home. But there was also the researcher in me, cautious and aware of the complexities of crossing these lines. In the end, the decision wasn’t as hard as I made it out to be. Ironbridge had been part of my life for years, filled with memories, relationships, and a connection to something deeper, the pull was too strong to resist. Still, I made it clear to JC, my research was my priority, and he agreed, the deal was struck, it was game on.

Over the next month, we planned, meeting regularly, discussing coaching methods, formations, tactics. On the surface, it was all football, all X's and O's, but for me, there was another layer. Beneath every conversation about strategy and structure, I was watching the social dynamics unfold, characters taking shape, power being negotiated, alliances forming. This was the real research, the off the pitch world where identity, culture, and leadership played out in subtle ways. JC was growing into his role, not just as a coach, but as a leader, a manager, and perhaps most importantly, a human being. I could see the transformation happening, and I knew that I would need to be many things to him, a coach, a mentor, an observer, and sometimes just a sounding board. At twenty-nine, JC was about to see football in a way he had never seen before, the game, when viewed from the other side of the fence, reveals truths that are difficult to unsee. I couldn't help but think of *'The Matrix'*, where Neo is offered the choice between the red pill and the blue pill, between learning an unsettling truth or remaining in the comfort of ignorance. JC was about to take his red pill. His journey was beginning, and I would be there alongside him, a companion on his adventure, each of us navigating the roles we had chosen, or perhaps, the roles that had chosen us.

5.2.2 Account 2.

Account 2 Act I

*Pregame jitters, anxiety,
fear or excitement?*

The Middle: *Pregame jitters, anxiety, fear or excitement?*

The initial rush of excitement after securing my way into the club faded faster than I expected, replaced by a churn of anxious thoughts. Here I was, returning to a place I'd held dear, a club I had loved, now in a new role that both thrilled and unsettled me. The nervous energy churned in the pit of my stomach like a storm gathering force. Football, I knew this world well, I had lived in it, moved through its many dimensions, as a player, coach, manager, mentor. Each role, a layer of identity, that was built on years of experience, but this time, I wasn't simply returning as one of those roles, I was walking in as a researcher, a novice in some ways. I'd conducted ethnographic research before, many times in fact, but never within the world of football. That convergence, of being inside and outside, familiar and unfamiliar, practitioner and observer was entirely new to me. It was alien, and, if I'm honest, it terrified me. I sat with my thoughts, trying to untangle the emotions. I felt like a rabbit caught in headlights, frozen, uncertain which direction to move. So many questions swirled through my head. How would I balance the demands of credibility in both roles? Would I be accepted as a researcher, or would my presence in the club be met with suspicion? Or if I was open about my role as a researcher, would the players and staff

reveal their true selves to me, or would they start to perform for me to observe? I kept circling around these questions, caught between being overt or covert in my research.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I was like Robert Redford in *'Brubaker'*, the 1980 classic. There, he had to decide whether to disguise himself as an inmate or expose himself as the warden. Either way, I would be judged, but unlike Brubaker, I wasn't entering to enact reform or fight corruption, I was there merely to observe. But observing from the inside raises its own ethical dilemmas, there's nowhere to hide when you are part of the story. Returning to this club, my old home, would be a challenge, I would need to rekindle old relationships while forging new ones, and credibility would be everything. Who would I need to become in this role? What character would I play to navigate these relationships? Would JC, my partner in this endeavour see me as the advisor, the coach, the friend he needed? Or would my reputation falter under the weight of my dual role? I decided that honesty was the best course, to be open about my research. I needed to be hidden in plain sight, transparent enough to build trust from the beginning. My focus was clear, I needed buy-in, both as JC's assistant manager and as someone observing the dynamics within the team, these relationships would be crucial to my research. I needed to understand not just them, but the ways we influenced each other. That was the data I needed, but the anxiety wouldn't leave me.

I had been away from football for some time now. The world had moved on and so had the game. What if my knowledge, my methods, were outdated? What if the players saw me as irrelevant? The doubts piled up. What if I excelled as an assistant manager but failed as a researcher? What if my research flourished but I let JC down? I couldn't shake the feeling that I might jeopardise his journey, the journey of a young coach finding his way in the unforgiving world of non-league football. My credibility, not just as a researcher but as a football figure, was on the line. Football is a small world, after all, people talk, word spreads, would I be remembered as someone who couldn't hack it, or as someone who tried to wear too many hats at once? But most of all, I worried about how JC would feel. What would happen if I failed him? Then there were the practical concerns, some of the players knew me well, we had shared experiences, victories, and defeats. This should have been a good thing, familiarity bred trust, but what about their relationship with JC? What if JC didn't like the players I had grown to respect? As assistant manager, I would be the link between the players and the management team, this is where the politics start, the whispers, the backbiting conversations, the inevitable drama that comes with group dynamics. Then again, I knew that already.

I needed to figure out my place in this story. Who was I, really, in this production? What were the questions I needed to answer, not just for the research, but for myself? The players would ask questions, too, they would be curious about what I was doing. How would I respond? Would I offer them the full scope of my research, or would I keep it simple? Balance between transparency and simplicity, between who I was and what they needed to see felt razor thin. In

the midst of all this internal turmoil, I realised something I had overlooked in my planning, the impact this journey would have on my family. The commitment to this project would consume so much of my time, hours spent analysing data, travelling to matches, planning with JC. It was going to take me away from them, my weekends, once dedicated to family time, would now be spent on the pitch or buried in research. How would this affect my relationship with my wife, my sons? They were at an age where they needed my attention, growing, curious about the world, playing their own sports. Could I be the father they needed, while also being a researcher, a football coach, and a sidekick to JC?

I was stepping into the unknown. There was no way to predict the outcome, no clear roadmap to follow, all I knew for certain was that I wouldn't come out of this the same person who went in. Like a duck gliding calmly across the water, all anyone would see was composure on the surface, but beneath, I would be paddling furiously, trying to keep afloat. Fearless and fearful, all at once. This is where the journey truly begins, the questions will be answered in time, who I will become, how these relationships will unfold. But for now, I can only embrace the uncertainty and step forward into the chaos.

5.2.3 Account 3.

Account 3 Act I

*Different masks, same
relationship*

The End: *Different masks, same relationship*

Returning to the football arena felt akin to stepping back onto a familiar yet transformed stage, like an actor revisiting a beloved role only to find the script has changed. After several years of developing my academic identity, the prospect of returning to Ironbridge as an assistant manager sparked a blend of excitement and apprehension. I had traversed nearly a quarter-century in the football industry, embracing diverse roles, such as coach, manager, or consultant. Each position had equipped me with insights and experiences, yet this venture, stepping into the realm of ethnographic research within a football context was both stimulating and intimidating. Would the wisdom gleaned from my past resonate with the current dynamics of this team? The first day arrived with its usual pregame jitters, a swirl of nervous energy and anticipations reminiscent of the early moments of a crucial match. This familiar aroma of turf and the sounds of boots on grass rekindled memories of my earlier days on the pitch; However, this time I found myself armed with a notebook and pen, symbols of my dual identity as the assistant manager and the researcher. This blend was integral to establishing credibility from the outset, as I joined the team, it became evident that the players accepted my notetaking as standard practice, allowing

me to observe their interactions organically without drawing attention to my role as a social observer.

This dressing room has undergone a remarkable transformation, mirroring the evolving landscape of modern football. Each player is adorned in matching sets of vibrant shirts and shorts from *'Boohoo,'* preening in front of mirrors that reflect not just their physicality but the essence of contemporary masculinity. Gone are the days of rugged, hunter-gatherer archetypes, these modern-day alphas embody a new breed of man, complete with sun-kissed skin, gleaming *'Turkey teeth,'* and the occasional hint of Botox. Designer underwear peeks out from beneath well-tailored shorts, waxed chests, meticulously groomed facial hair, speaks to an obsession with appearance that contrasts sharply with football's storied past. As they exchange compliments about their eye-catching outfits, I can't help but wonder what the football pioneers of yesteryear would make of this type of performance. How would legendary figures like Cloughy react to such antics? I can almost hear one of his infamous pre-match motivational speeches cutting through the chatter, perhaps punctuated by a playful jab, *'Young man, put down that beard grooming kit while I outline our strategy against Liverpool at Anfield today!'* Or, knowing his flair for the dramatic, he might have opted for a more colourful X-rated tirade. Although amid this evolution, one aspect remains constant, the vibrant language and spirited banter that permeate dressing rooms across the globe. Throughout my years in football, I've noticed that people often leave me to my thoughts, perhaps intimidated by the quick wit I've honed from countless stories and experiences. I've heard every recycled joke in one dressing room or another, each punchline designed to deflect attention or elicit a laugh at someone else's expense. This form of camaraderie seems to unite people, having a common goal seems to drive people, and it's all fuelled by a dynamic that is as intriguing as it is timeless.

I watched as team members looked around, trying to establish who was who. They began to create their identities and roles within the group, the air was filled with tension of the unknown, everyone was navigating the delicate process of gauging each other's strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies. Amidst the excitement of new beginnings, I was acutely aware of the necessity to form strong bonds, particularly with JC. Our past relationship provided a solid foundation for open communication and goal setting, essential for nurturing both the team and my research. Yet, this journey would not be without uncertainties, would my existing relationship with JC be enough to navigate the challenges ahead? What if our personal connection clouded my ability to maintain professional boundaries, or his? As I stood on the cliff edge of this dual role, I am the character poised at the threshold of this monomyth, facing trials, uncertainties, and the daunting task of forging my own identity within this complex narrative.

In those initial weeks, I observed who was who, like a painter examining a blank canvas, ready to understand the colours and shapes that would define the picture before me, each

interaction was a singular brushstroke contributing to the larger masterpiece of team dynamics. I sought to unravel the layers of personas, the masks that each player wore, as the drama unfolded. Every individual displayed a unique façade, embodying various archetypal heroes. The bravado of the older players, the sincerity of newcomers, and the laughter shared among teammates painted a vivid web of identities. JC in particular, emerged as a central figure during this period of observation, his magnetic energy was evident, and his connections with both players and staff was definitive. He shifted seamlessly between roles, leader, peacemaker, and motivator, it was evident that JC morphed into whatever character the individuals needed. He deftly navigated the complexities of interpersonal relationships with wit and charm, I felt an instinctive urge to connect and join him, also a desire to learn from his unique ability to cultivate solidarity in a group where dynamics were still in flux.

One moment however that stands out vividly during this time was when I introduced Fierro Guerrero, a small yet resilient Ecuadorian who had once been my student. Despite my hopes for a warm reception, I sensed JC's hesitance to fully integrate him into the fold. It felt as if the team had adopted a collective stance, one that resisted change and newcomers, underlyingly I felt it myself. There was an unspoken language in the dressing room, echoing an almost Colosseum dynamic where acceptance seemed predicated on a thumbs-up from the core group. I couldn't help but wonder how this atmosphere would evolve. Would the masks that players wore reveal their true selves, or would they remain fixed in the safe confines of established identities? Either way, I found myself drawn deeper into the players' stories, I began to see their masks not as barriers but as vessels of expression. Each player's mask was a reflection of their personal journey, shaped by previous experiences, aspirations, and insecurities. Jack Beagle (*J'Dog*), Callum Thorne (*Thorney*), James Langford (*Langs*), and Matthew Wilton were formidable figures from my previous time at the club. Their dynamics remained unchanged, asserting dominance in the dressing room as they had in years past. But there was an undercurrent of tension, a hint that their influence was waning as younger players, and stronger characters entered the fold.

JC and I had several in-depth conversations about shaping the dressing room to his vision, and it was clear that some current players might not align with that visualisation. He acknowledged this challenge, it must be difficult for JC, having been a central figure in the '*banter*', to now step back, especially considering he is the same age as half the group, this offers a unique challenge in itself. JC wants to transform the team's dynamic, shedding the old half-hearted approach in favour of more professional standards, integrating technology, and establishing collective measurable goals. He recognises that this shift cannot happen with some of the old guard, who have become somewhat institutionalised. Their bad habits, excuses, and blame culture stifle progress, and given their dominance in the dressing room, JC knows he must implement his changes sooner rather than later. This atmosphere within the dressing room was electric, yet layered with complexity, the new players were gradually

starting to find their voices. I saw a few as lead characters, Clint Garner appeared to have a unique bond with JC, Joel Kane, a coach at JC's coaching company, and Brady O'Hara, who had been with the club for a few years now but was new to me. Though I hadn't encountered Clint or Joel before, I had heard of Brady, who had earned a good reputation locally. These individuals did seem to be key players in this unfolding drama, while others in the dressing room currently had little impact on the group's dynamics. Tobias Bromley (*Tab*), a no-nonsense centre-half, was tough as nails but quiet as a mouse, offering a stark contrast to the lively banter around him. Liam Alderson, a young goalkeeper, displayed a notably nonchalant approach that intrigued me. Fresh in the door players, such as, Dean Ferraro, Alec Barclay, and Giovanni Ashdon (*G*) were uniformly pleasant but still finding their footing. Rhys Brockman, another solid player who had stepped up from the County League, was joined by academy players Jake Steele, Blake Alden, Jamie Yates, and Connor Lawton. This diverse group brought a rich array of personalities to the table, yet during this formative period, few truly expressed themselves openly, trust was an issue.

As I digested and navigated the complexities of these relationships, I often felt like a spectator in my own story, observing, learning, and occasionally intervening. I started to see the players as not just athletes but as individuals carrying their own burdens and dreams. The old guard, along with Clint, continued to dominate the spotlight, overshadowing the others at centre stage. Yet I knew that the dynamic could shift, it was simply a matter of time and trust. Through these initial weeks, my focus sharpened on building relationships and understanding the myriad dynamics at play. Like me, they are all embarking on a journey filled with trials and transformations, they too must feel the weight of this adventure. My focus is split, balance between my roles as a mentor and a learner was delicate, I was aware of the need to shed my own preconceptions while embracing the newness of this environment. As I observed and engaged, I found myself thinking about the roles I played, the masks I wore as I stepped into different scenarios. There was the experienced assistant manager, the inquisitive researcher, and the faithful sidekick trying to reconnect with JC. Each role brought its own expectations and challenges.

As my observations deepened, I started to appreciate the beauty in the messiness of human interactions. The laughter, the teasing, the disagreements, they were all integral to the process of bonding. In the theatre of football, everyone had a role to play, and the relationships formed would ultimately determine the team's success, but who are the main cast? This journey had begun, nerves had settled, but the path ahead was riddled with challenges, although in the midst of this uncertainty, one truth remained clear, the masks we wear might differ, but the essence of our shared experiences would lay the foundations of this very research. As I continued to navigate the intricacies of this new role, I couldn't help but reflect on the journey ahead. Would I emerge from this experience a better more informed man, my

identity reshaped by the relationships I develop and the stories I tell? Only time would reveal the answers to these questions.

5.2.4 Reflexions and stylised approach to this Act



The three storied accounts draw heavily from Arthur Frank's reflective narrative style, characterised by deep introspection and an emphasis on how individuals make sense of their experiences through storytelling. Frank's work, especially in the context of narratives, focuses on how people structure their lives by telling their own stories. I have adopted this method, using personal and ethnographic storytelling to explore my role within the football team and the broader dynamics at play, while linking theoretical frameworks to provide a deeper, more meaningful exploration of human behaviour, relationships, and identity within this environment.

Frank's reflective approach allows for a narrative that moves beyond the surface-level events of football management and team building, into the realm of personal and collective introspection. The accounts are not just a recounting of experiences but are saturated with an internal dialogue, constantly questioning my evolving role within the team and my understanding of the social dynamics around me. Each story, therefore, is a consideration of my own identity as an assistant manager, researcher, and participant in the team's world, reflecting Frank's focus on how people turn life events into narrative arcs to find meaning in their roles.

Incorporated into this reflective style are the theoretical concepts of masks, personas, and roles, drawn from Jungian archetypes and Erving Goffman's dramaturgy. Jung's archetypes provide a lens through which to understand the different personas each character in the dressing room adopts. For example, JC takes on the role of the *hero* in Campbell's monomyth, but he also embodies the trickster archetype, blending humour and wit with the serious responsibility of leadership. His mask changes depending on the situation, at times he must be the authoritative manager, whilst concurrently relying on his past relationships with players to maintain connection. This reflects Goffman's idea that in any social interaction, individuals are performers, displaying different masks to suit the context. In this instance, the dressing room becomes a stage where these personas are constantly in flux, with players projecting their egos, insecurities, and roles within the group.

Throughout the stories, the *forming* stage of Tuckman's 1965 group development theory is evident, the players and coaching staff are all adopting these various masks, feeling out who will play which role within the evolving team structure. The dressing room is filled with archetypes, such as the *warrior* who wants to assert dominance, the *mentor* who guides quietly from behind the scenes, and the *shadow* figures whose doubts and insecurities disrupt

cohesion. My own mask, as both an assistant manager and a researcher, fluctuates between these roles as well, which is part of the deep internal tension I explore in the second account.

In the second story, I delve deeper into my apprehensions about these roles, for example, *who am I meant to be* in this dynamic? Should I perform as a confident, knowledgeable coach to ultimately gain the players' respect, or should I lean into my research identity, observing from a distance? These dual roles inadvertently reflect Goffman's notion of dramaturgy, where the front-stage performance (*as assistant manager*) must seamlessly blend with the backstage self (*the researcher*), leading to an internal conflict. The concept of masks is particularly relevant here, as I struggle with my own identity in front of the players, feeling the weight of expectation while simultaneously navigating my personal insecurities about having been away from football for so long. As I navigate this *crossing of the threshold*, the second stage in Campbell's monomyth, there is a growing awareness that the roles people adopt within the team are not static. Each player, like myself, putting on different masks depending on who they are interacting with. In the dressing room, players such as Thorney, J'Dog, and Langs, all veterans from JC's playing days, hold onto their alpha status, projecting the archetype of the *leader*, even though their influence is waning with the arrival of younger players. Meanwhile, newer players like Fierro struggle to integrate into the existing hierarchy, wearing the mask of the *outsider*, unsure of his place.

These accounts also explore the complexities of ego within the team dynamic. Football, with its unyielding competitive nature, brings out the *hero* and *shadow* in equal measure, as players balance their public personas with their private fears of failure or inadequacy. Frank's reflective style allows for this exploration of the inner world of characters, including myself, as we all navigate these social dynamics. My role places me in a unique position, similar to Goffman's *audience*, observing the performance while also participating within it.

In the third and final account, sees the masks and personas continue to shift, but now with more clarity about where individuals stand within the team hierarchy. JC begins to fully embody the role of the leader, shedding some of his previous personas as he steps up to implement his vision for the team. Conversely, the old guard continues to resist this change, revealing their own *shadow* side, clinging to outdated behaviours and resisting the new order. My reflections focus on how these shifting dynamics impact the overall cohesion of the group and my place within it. This reflective storytelling approach enables these storied accounts to transcend beyond mere observations of team behaviour, they become explorations of identity, power, and the fluid nature of human interaction within the highly charged environment of football. Each individual, including myself, wears different masks to navigate this complex social landscape, and the stories reveal the tensions, anxieties, and ultimate transformation that comes from navigating these roles. In the end, the narrative is not just about football, it's

about the human condition, the ongoing negotiation of self, ego, and identity in the face of constant change.

As I stand at this proverbial crossroads within my research journey, I am struck by an unsettling realisation, I need to delve deeper into the very essence of who I am within this narrative that I am crafting. It prompts a profound inquiry that resonates within me, do I truly know myself at all? In my pursuit of understanding the myriads of characters I've embodied throughout my life, such as a son, husband, father, brother, student, teacher, friend, and now researcher, I find myself questioning the authenticity of the identities I project. Each role I play seems to emerge from a different corner of my existence, yet I wonder who is the person lurking behind these masks? I recognise the figure who steps into the spotlight, performing for the audience in front of me, adept at donning the costume and demeanour that my roles demand. I see the me that occupies the metaphorical backstage, mingling with my fellow cast, whoever they may be at any given moment, whether family, friends, or colleagues. There's a certain comfort in these interactions, a sense of belonging that embraces me. Although somehow when I close the dressing room door, leaving the noise and the roles behind me, I am left alone with my innermost thoughts and feelings. In those moments, stripped of the layers I present to the world, I encounter my insecurities. Who am I really when the masks are removed? I mean, who is the me that understands the actions I have taken, both admirable and regrettable? More importantly, can I articulate the motives that lie beneath my behaviours, the driving forces behind my choices?

These questions loiter like shadows in my mind as I navigate the intricacies of my research, as I observe and interact with this group of players and coaches. Each encounter prompts a sequence of pondering, a deep-rooted debate with the very core of my being. It's a process that reaches far beyond mere observation, it calls for introspection, for peeling back the layers that define my identities. As I collect and report my findings, I recognise that it is not only my lens and interpretation of events that matter, the very essence of who I am, the experiences that shape my perspective, the emotional landscapes that inform my responses are predominant too. All of these elements are innate within my research, the importance of understanding myself is becoming glaringly apparent. This self-awareness is not just a comfort; it is the key to unlocking insights and unearthing truths that might otherwise remain hidden.

In my own journey of exploration, my anxieties are the wisdom embedded in vulnerability, engaging authentically with others requires me to confront my own uncertainties and limitations. If I seek to understand the nuances of human interaction within this context, I must first be willing to engage with the complexities of my own identity. Connecting myself and my research is not merely an academic pursuit; it is a deep personal endeavour that is constantly challenging me to embrace the complex nature of my existence. Therefore, as I navigate these developing narratives, I carry with me the weight of these reflections. Who am I in the field of

“Floodlights, Camera, Action”

this research? Why does it matter? Perhaps the answers are not readily available at this moment, but the quest itself, this introspective journey, may ultimately pave the way forward. This way forward could reveal the deeper connections that exist in the environments I know so well, my experiences within them, key relationships I have built and the roles I have played. Could understanding all of these establish my authentic self that seems to exist somewhere beneath them all?

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

ACT II



LOST IN THE FIELD

Prologue: *Crossing the Threshold*

Immersion begins, dual roles blur as I am swept into the dressing room's power, as performances are tested as I cross into the field.

Account 1

Into the unknown, emerged in the Special World

First match atmosphere, fragile belonging, identity under scrutiny, masks tested in a masculine space.

Account 2

Tests, Allies and Enemies – The Vipers

Loyalty and conflict expose allies and tricksters, masculinity and culture contested, and the loss of analytical distance.

Account 3

Meeting the Mentor

Intervention, as the mentor archetype restores reflexivity, challenging entanglement and recalibrating focus and voice.

This act is presented in three different styles. Account 1 as journal entries, Carolyn Ellis's autoethnographic approach, Account 2 as a dramatised story, and Account 3 as a film script. Each form captures experience and reflexivity in a creative way.



Upon exiting each Account, a reflexion follows, on immersion and identity, on bias and distance, and finally mine and Clive's monologues confronting entanglement and recalibrating my voice.

5.3 Act II: Lost in the field: *Season 1, into the abyss*

Prologue: Crossing the Threshold

Act two looks at the first season with the team, getting to know and understand the players, getting lost, in too deep in the football world, and losing sight of the process. Wearing two masks in the field became a pivotal part of understanding the research process, understanding who or what mask was being used and when (Goffman, 1959). Researcher or assistant manager? That is the question. Could it have been the long delay getting back to normal after Covid-19? Could it have just been knowing where, when and how to change character (Smith and Sparkes, 2016)? Getting too involved in the dynamic that is being observed shouldn't have been a problem, but on reflection, it may have been the best way to make sense of the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Enter stage left, the vipers, performing their roles proficiently, adhering to the social scripts expected of them, but their masks at times slip, showing the world who they really are (Goffman, 1966, 1990). Although a convincing display of impression management, their masks cannot fully conceal their true intentions, especially when someone is watching (Goffman, 1959).

Identifying my purpose within the field became an unexpected yet essential part of unravelling the intricacies of my research journey. Still, as with any fieldwork, guidance was not just beneficial, it was necessary. My Director of Studies (DoS), sensing the weight of my entanglement in the research process, identified a need for recalibration. It was during one of our discussions in relation to my learning that he suggested a hands-on intervention, he would meet me on the ground, witness my dual role firsthand, and, ultimately, deliver a few hard truths to pull the research back in line. The concluding section of this chapter narrates that pivotal encounter, crafted as a script inspired by the ethnodramatic work of Johnny Saldana (2005). This piece captures both my internal reflections and the candid perspective of my DoS, blending real conversations and post-event reflections into a narrative finale that reveals the raw reality of the field and the hard-earned insights it afforded.

Each of the three pieces in this chapter, though distinct in their narrative style, reveals the data authentically and stay true to the nature of each segment's unique storytelling demands. Together, they mark the arc of the first season at the club, the early explorations, the evolving narrative of mid-season events, and finally, the reflective reckoning. These formats initially inspired by the personal depth of Carolyn Ellis's 2004 autoethnography, followed by a dramatised narrative, and finally, a film-script-style recount reminiscent of Lee and Palmer's *Hatch, Match and Dispatch* (2018) and Saldana's approach to performance ethnography, offer both structure and creative space, capturing the fluidity of experience and reflection woven through my journey.

5.3.1 Account 1.

Account 1 Act II

*Into the unknown,
emersed in the Special
World*

**The Beginning: *Into the
unknown, emersed in the Special
World***

[Journal entry] Saturday 14th August 2021
Home game: Ironbridge FC, Victory Field
Vs: Rocksgate, Ionian South-East League

This marked the first game back in the dressing room, a space charged with a blend of excitement and tension. I felt a jolt of energy, yet beneath that was a thread of anxiety. Our training had led us to this moment, and the weight of that anticipation hung in the air. Upon arrival, I encountered Jason Coyne, an old friend from the circuit who had signed for Rocksgate. His first question, 'Why Ironbridge?' spoke volumes about our shared understanding of Ironbridge's reputation. This was more than just a query it was an acknowledgment of the challenges beyond my research that only time would reveal.

The dressing room itself was a microcosm of general football culture, a balanced mixture of youth and experience. Players glanced around, sizing each other up, assessing who might step into a leadership role once the whistle goes. At this stage, we were still forming connections, the pre-match atmosphere resembling a Mexican standoff, eyes darting, bodies tense, each player contemplating who was prepared to engage willingly in the impending battle.

With the referee's whistle, the 2021/22 season kicked off. We quickly took the lead, an unexpected but stimulating development against Rocksgate, one of the teams tipped to win the league. For a moment, the prospect of success felt tangible, the culmination of our efforts materialising into something real, or even surreal. Yet, as the first half progressed, one player drew my attention as he coasted around the pitch almost playing his own game. Somehow Clint Garner seemed ingenuine, an unsettling feeling pulled at my intuition. It was as if he were masking something beneath a carefully constructed facade.

As we headed into halftime, we somehow found ourselves down 2-1, despite an otherwise decent display. The conversation quickly shifted

to Fierro, who had become the subject of scrutiny, a narrative carried over from pre-season. There was a palpable sense of dissent among the players, a collective unwillingness to accept him as part of the group. When JC turned to me for input, I took the opportunity to speak to the team, stressing the critical importance of work ethic in the second half, especially without possession of the ball. I knew from experience that if teams like Rocksgate sense vulnerability, they will exploit it. We needed to maintain our intensity on but especially off the ball and remain vigilant.

Clint's reaction was telling, he bristled at my comments, quietly questioning if I meant him specifically as we walked out onto the pitch. It was an odd response, one that maybe hinted at his internal struggle. As the second half began, it became evident why he reacted that way, he appeared to have run out of gas. The pre-season antics, the frequent trips to the toilet, the phantom knocks all began to make sense as tactics to avoid the rigorous conditioning that lay at the heart of our preparation. I brought my observations to JC's attention, urging him to demand more from Clint, to challenge him to dig deeper, for him, for the group. Yet, as the game unfolded, it was clear Clint was simply unable to meet those demands. We managed to equalise, it was 2-2, reigniting the match, but Clint's frustration became overly obvious. In the 66th minute, he received a red card for a lazy tackle, an act that felt almost intentional. What was going through his mind? He strode past me and JC without a glance, a silent admission of defeat.

As the game concluded, the old guard pointed fingers at Fierro once again. It struck me as absurd; Clint had been sent off, yet Fierro bore the brunt of their criticism. The murmurs from the group as we left the pitch created a collective dissatisfaction, a wind of discontent that swept across the field.

Back in the dressing room, I attempted to engage Clint, but he was clearly disinterested in conversation. Had he spoken to JC? Was I being held accountable for his dismissal? Had I unwittingly played a role in his downfall?

Before we could retreat to the bar for a customary post-match beverage, we were confronted with a series of grievances hurled at us during the short walk. Unhappy forwards demanding to know why they hadn't played, concerned parents moaning at their sons' limited

minutes, and the cherry on the cake was the referee presenting us with a list of fines and bookings from the match. I exchanged a glance with JC, 'This is going to be a long season' I remarked, with the weight of uncertainty settling over us like a rain cloud.

[Journal entry] Saturday 28th August 2021

Away game: Haven Bay FC, The Post Stadium

Vs: Haven Bay, Ionian South-East League

This game had us visiting Haven Bay, a coastal side in the South of England. The journey was long and wasn't too pleasant, the welcome was just as chilly. Haven Bay tipped to win the league this year, came with big crowds, a big attitude, and even bigger budget. They'd drawn in seasoned players from across the circuit, putting forward a real test for us. After the hard-earned draw against Rocksgate and a narrow, bitter loss in the FA Cup replay, this match felt like it could swing either way, a potential breakthrough or a really hard fall.

The dressing room was a dim, cramped space, little to no natural light. It smelled of dampness mixed with a powerful blend of cheap air freshener and bleach, a makeshift attempt to cover up the mould that had clearly been scrubbed from the walls. We were packed in there, shoulder to shoulder, intimate but lacking that sense of unity. As the team settled, Clint made his entrance despite being suspended, his presence immediately drawing the room's attention. He moved through the players, shaking hands, high fiving, and then briefly exchanging words with JC. They moved aside to speak in a lowered tone before Clint turned to leave, passing me on the way out. I extended my hand in greeting, but he took it with reluctance, his gaze shifting away with something close to disdain. As he left, I glanced around the room, no one else had noticed the frosty exchange. Was I imagining it, or was there more behind his actions?

The game began, and Clint positioned himself by the dugout, close enough to JC to offer his commentary. Haven Bay came out strong, sending two shots screaming past our goal within minutes, this could be a long day. Clint, echoing my own focus from the last few games, and was quick to call out the importance of defensive positioning, dropping hints about our midfield's weak spots. His words carried a quiet edge, directed unmistakably at Fierro. Again, the familiar

pressure fell on Fierro, who was either naively unaware or simply trying to block out the negativity.

Haven Bay's attacks were relentless, waves of offensive players break forward, testing our grit with every play. We were down 3-0 by halftime, and it could easily have been double that. JC was visibly rattled, a side of him we hadn't seen in previous matches. Was it the weight of the game, something Clint had said, or perhaps pressures from outside of football? Whatever the reason, JC's response was direct and unfiltered, a torrent of expletives hurled at the players. The walls practically shook with the force of his frustration, echoing into the adjacent rooms. Faces fell, shoulders slumped, with only Fierro holding JC's gaze, the only player meeting his intensity head-on.

When the team left for the second half, JC stormed out behind them, leaving me alone in the quiet of the room. The halftime talk had been a string of criticisms, but there was no strategy, no direction for improvement, just pure frustration. The tactics and patterns of play we'd discussed over preseason fell silent, overshadowed by the raw anger he had known too well as a player under the former manager's regime. Was this anger what the team needed to turn things around? Or would it only deepen the fracture in morale?

The second half resumed with little change. Haven Bay widened the gap, scoring a fourth goal at the 64-minute mark. JC responded by substituting Fierro two minutes later, as if pulling him out would somehow shift the game's momentum. The score quickly rose to five, then six, and the final whistle was both a release and a condemnation. Today, we were thoroughly outplayed. Humbled.

Heading back to the dressing room, I overheard Thorney, one of the club's old guard, mutter, 'Six for them, not that I care much. I've had enough of all this.' His words reflected the air of resignation that seemed to be hovering over the squad. On my way to the bus, I noticed JC by his car, deep in conversation with Clint, likely dissecting the defeat. With Clint's suspension ending, he'd be back in the starting lineup next week, and after today's debacle, there'd be little argument against it.

This game had been a hard lesson, a chance to gauge where we stood in the bigger picture. For JC, it was a moment to reflect on his own

actions, his own instinctive responses in the heat of the moment. Would he adapt, or would these emotional outbursts continue to seep into our games? Only time would tell if the rawness of this experience would lead to growth or if we'd be seeing these same dynamics of this tense drama play out again as the season unfolded.

[Journal entry] Saturday 11th September 2021

Away game: Burton Hill Town, Canada Drive

Vs: Burton Hill Town, Ionian South-East League

This local derby against Burton Hill Town had that charged edge, the kind only close proximity and shared histories could bring. Both teams had shown up early, a side effect of familiarity perhaps, as players mingled by the tunnel, trading half-joking digs. I stood with JC, watching them all cross paths, handshakes and light insults, the banter possibly a ritual masking the anticipatory energy hanging between both teams. In our pre-match conversation, JC mentioned his plan to put Dave Parry on the bench, a recovering striker who was prolific leading up to his injury. Also today was a test for our young full backs against the pace of Burton Hill's wingers, leaving a few more experienced players on the bench. Our discussion soon circled back to Clint, whom JC felt merited a start despite his persistent habit of going missing without the ball. I'd expressed my concerns more than once, seeing his calculated lapses leaving us exposed, and I suspected JC had passed along my frustrations to Clint, sparking tension that rippled beneath the surface of the squad. Those in Clint's corner afraid to voice their concerns, whilst others voiced them in the shadows.

In the dressing room, Fierro, who seemed to be the perpetual target, struggled to find himself within the group. Visibly trying to find his place, whilst the old guard seemed to relish keeping him in the wings. Watching him, was heart wrenching, I almost felt responsible. He was the archetypal innocent, a misfit caught in a storm as we all tried to navigate our way through the storming stages of this group's formation. This group like every other before it grapples with clashing egos, each player attempting to negotiate their standing within the hierarchy. It's here where masks have started to slip, real identities creeping through as this young squad explore one

another, revealing glimpses of personas, some genuine, others strictly performative.

Once the game began, the shift in narrative was unmistakable, Clint and Brady O'Hara led the on-pitch discourse, their critiques of Fierro subtle at first, but sharpening with each passing minute. It felt as if Clint had recalibrated his campaign against Fierro after his quiet conversations with JC hadn't yielded the desired response. Now, every slight weakness Fierro presented was instantly magnified by the old guard's running commentary. The incessant nitpicking gnawed at me; I could feel my own sense of anger growing as I observed. Trying to deflect the hostility, I pointed out Clint's own lapses, particularly off the ball, prompting JC to call out, 'I need more from you, mate,' a half-hearted reprimand delivered almost as if to save face.

The response from Clint was as instant as it was predictable, a reckless tackle, a yellow card before the half was even up. Then, as he passed our touchline, he motioned to JC, barking out, 'Get him off,' gesturing sharply toward Fierro. My patience worn, I leaned over and, keeping my voice level with effort, said, 'Don't worry about him, just get on with your own game.' But instantaneously Clint shot back, 'What, because he's one of yours?' Sarcasm laced his words, and with my anger now fuelled, I heard myself crack, 'Shut your mouth and get on with it or f*ck off.' The immediate regret was deep as Clint wandered back into the game. What had I just done? Standing there, I realised that I'd become a participant in this drama, my position of observer momentarily lost. I'd been drawn in by Clint's goading, abandoning the impartial role I was supposed to have.

After a disappointing 0-0 draw, the dressing room was subdued, and half-time's frustrations seemed a clouded distant memory. Just JC and I were left clearing out the dressing room, reflecting on a well-earned point. We headed toward the bar, enduring the traditional onslaught of ill-informed opinions and advice born from hindsight, and as we tucked into the post-match meal, JC called Clint over, hoping to ease the tension. Clint shook my hand, the gesture polite yet rigid, his hostility just below the surface. He didn't need to say it aloud; our rapport was a casualty of this unresolved battle for influence within the squad. I felt a complex mix of frustration and responsibility, aware that my clash with Clint wasn't just personal,

it was in fact shaping JC's decisions, reshaping team dynamics, and could be unwittingly driving this campaign against Fierro. As Clint left, I spoke with JC, expressing my concerns about his relationship with Clint, and how it bled into each match, seeping into team morale. Yet something told me Clint wasn't the sole factor in this tension. There was a pattern here, and I couldn't ignore the possibility that our management choices and my feelings toward Clint were intensifying this cycle, potentially feeding the fire rather than diffusing it.

[Journal entry] Saturday 16th October 2021

Away game: Harcott Town FC, Ridgfield Stadium

Vs: Harcott Town, Ionian South-East League

The trip to Harcott felt less like a football match and more like a venture into a gritty theatre of war. This was Harcott, an ancient market town on the fringe of Romany Marsh, braced against the bite of sea winds that brought a coastal chill even this early in the season. Their pitch, thick with divots and unforgiving mud patches, promised anything but a technical game. Harcott's manager, a gravel-voiced Scotsman with the grit of a field commander, led his team like he was going into battle. It was his fortress, and he made no secret that he relished the discomfort it caused to teams attempting the finesse of modern play.

JC and I had talked about matching Harcott's brutal style, intending to meet force with force head on. Fierro was out, still recovering from injury, so we brought in two of the old guard, Lennie Hale and Dean Mosgrove, players who had shared a dressing room with JCs from their time as teammates. I knew he harboured some hesitation about bringing back these powerful personalities, both influential and combative in their own right, yet we needed men who wouldn't hold back in a battle. Clint, whose out-of-possession issues we'd discussed at length again, was in the starting lineup, despite my reservations about his impulsiveness in pressure games like these.

Clint entered the changing room that day displaying a cool calm, an odd air of pre-battle control. Was this another mask, another act or change of approach? It felt strategic, as if he had calculated every movement, looking to steady himself and establish control. He greeted us with a welcoming nod and faint smile, yet there was an unmistakable focus behind his eyes. Today, it seemed he was assuming

the archetype of the warrior, a different persona than the turbulent presence I was used to.

As the game commenced, there was an eerie hush from the stands. The fans, players, and staff all seemed frozen in anticipation. The field lived up to its chaotic reputation, deflecting and diverting even the simplest pass, reducing the play to long balls, aerial duels, and mud-clogged challenges. For all their usual reliability, our central defenders, Tab and Brockman, were visibly shaken. Neil Linton, Harcott's formidable number nine, seemed to tower over them, a physical juggernaut with a relentless drive that seemed to sap their very resolve. Even JC observed grimly, 'They've been bullied all half,' a verdict Tab and Brockman wore on their faces, mud-streaked and bewildered walking down the tunnel at the break. Linton jogged past me on his way to their dressing room, his presence casting a dark shadow, and I couldn't help but admire.

We were down 2-0, and although JC was disappointed, he responded with an air of calm deliberation that struck me as different from his usual fire. His tone was methodical, guiding the players toward tactical adjustments rather than impassioned outbursts. There was no blame, no anger, only clarity. The players absorbed his instructions, nodding, a sense of cohesion beginning to settle over them as if they, too, had found their roles. Here, I felt we had begun to move out of the storming phase, each player stepping up, abandoning pretences, and embracing the roles they'd need to see this game through.

JC's left the dressing room to take a moment before the restart, I stayed, watching to see who would take the lead as motivator. Surprisingly, no one launched into a rallying speech; instead, the focus remained on Tab and Brockman, now the target of some light-hearted banter. The team, in jest, questioned when they would 'join the fight,' a challenge that subtly reinforced their shared responsibility. It was a curious kind of camaraderie, these young men leaning on humour to encourage resilience. Their readiness was no longer brash or brittle, it was tempered, ready to prove itself.

When the final whistle blew, we'd clawed back to a 2-2 draw, a hard-fought, muddy victory of sorts. Clint had come off only in the 82nd minute after exhausting himself, pushing his endurance to new depths. He'd been a force, embodying a newfound resilience I'd never seen before, and I couldn't deny my admiration for what he did. In

many ways, Clint's performance had been a rite of passage, a deliberate shift in his identity within the group that seemed to signal his commitment to the cause.

Over the post-match meal JC encouraged me to approach Linton. We looked at where he was from, and with Harcott over an hour away, our location could make for an appealing offer. After a short chat, we arranged a meeting for later in the week. Bringing in a player like Linton would mark a powerful shift in our squad's identity, a statement of intent that could tip the balance. JC's vision was building, one battle-scarred player at a time. Little did we know then that an Ironbridge legend was about to be born.

[Journal entry] Saturday 30th October 2021

Away game: Whittlesea Town FC, Bellmere Rd

Vs: Whittlesea Town, Ionian South-East League

After a turbulent week of training, where tension finally boiled over and Fierro found himself the target of a rough, in-house clash that felt anything but '*friendly*', the air felt cleared, as if a storm had passed. The players who had grown accustomed to their factions now seemed to understand, once and for all, that our camp would hold its ground. Even JC seemed more relaxed, relieved to be witnessing a form of resolution without having to wade directly into the fray. Perhaps for the first time in weeks, the game we headed into felt routine, devoid of added pressure or expectation, just football.

I took part of the warmup, reconnecting with the love of coaching, appreciating the feeling of being on the field again. Watching the team, I felt a familiar affection for this club, I have a deep pride for Ironbridge and have done for some time now. When the whistle blew to start the game, I could feel we were playing differently, a sense of timing, knowing when to pass, when to press, when to defend collectively. It was as if the players finally clicked, each working for one another with an unspoken cohesion and a strength that ran from front to back. Tab and Gilly anchored the defence with a sort of arrogant confidence, young Liam in goal far beyond his years, while Fierro, running his heart out, seemed to rally the midfield around him, Clint playing the best I had seen him.

At halftime, the score was locked at 0-0, though the game had been far more exciting than the scoreline suggested. Back in the dressing room, I detected a change, the players communicated as though they'd been together for years. JC's plan, I felt, was finally unfolding, each player seemingly yielding to his role, comprehending the bigger picture, perhaps for the first time. As the team prepared to go back out, JC looked over with a wry smirk, like Hannibal from the A-Team, enjoying the feeling of a plan coming together. 'What are you thinking?' I asked. JC paused thoughtfully, before smiling, 'I'm thinking this could go horribly right or horribly wrong.' We shared a grin, then headed out to face the second half.

As the game resumed, the energy was intense, every player locked into what felt like battle mode, unwavering in their determination. The opposition was resilient, keeping our chances limited, yet our team continued to chip away, pressing forward at every opportunity. They finally took the lead at the 60-minute mark with a goal that might've crushed a different group, but not this one. Instead, it rallied us, pulling everyone tighter, determined to make the most of every remaining minute. Then, as if by fate, Dave Parry unleashed a stunning strike, a shot worthy of the Premier League, levelling the score. The field was charged as the two teams went toe-to-toe.

With only 10 minutes left, the exhaustion was etched on our players' faces. We were running on fumes, the adrenaline driving us through a relentless onslaught. The opposition hammered our goal, shots pelting in from every angle. They hit the crossbar, each post, as we threw bodies in front of the ball to keep it out. It felt like the Alamo, our final stand, not for a win but for the right to stand united. Every blocked shot, every goal-line clearance, brought a surge of pride. I had never seen such resilience from this group, and it sent chills down my spine.

At the final whistle, our players collapsed, some flat on their backs, some to their knees, others pounding their chests, celebrating as if we'd just won the World Cup. The opposition manager shook my hand with a smirk, offering a dig about the weight we seemed to place on the draw. But he didn't understand what this game meant to us; this was the moment we had become a team. JC's vision had taken root. We had crossed from storming to performing, each player finally

understanding JC's belief in them, understanding that they were building something together, something real.

[Journal entry] Monday 3rd January 2022

Away game: Blackhawk FC, The Ravens Cage

Vs: Blackhawk, Ionian South-East League

Neil Linton's arrival had quickly given Ironbridge a new focal point in attack, his presence and early goals marking him as a game changer. Yet, he'd shown his fiery side too, receiving a red card in his second appearance, a reminder of both his talents and his unpredictable nature. As game day approached, with a local derby against Blackhawk just outside of town for Ironbridge, we were aware of what lay ahead. Blackhawk's pitch offered a built-in home advantage, sloping dramatically downhill on one end, and the crowd would be wild, as always for this fixture.

But none of us could have anticipated that this derby would soon be watched worldwide, the footage going viral online within hours. It would become a cultural snapshot, even drawing commentary from *Match of the Day* and other platforms, its chaos lighting up social media. Preparation on our end was business as usual. The game began evenly, both sides trading blows, until Blackhawk gained a foothold, driving forward and testing our defence. Against the run of play, their keeper misjudged a pass on the uneven ground, delivering it directly to Linton. Calmly, Neil slotted it home from 20 yards, giving us an unexpected 1-0 lead, a margin we held until halftime.

In the dressing room, JC shifted tactics, deciding it was time to lean into our reputation, the infamous '*dark arts*' that Ironbridge had long been associated with. The plan was simple, play out the lead by wasting time, contest every call, frustrate our opponents into losing their focus. And, in an act of irony, JC encouraged us to embrace the *shithousery* we were already known for.

The strategy was working perfectly, Blackhawk players losing their focus as our antics began to chip away at their discipline. But then, in the 62nd minute, chaos erupted. Fierro, after tackling an opponent, found himself face to face, locking horns. In a flash, young Jake Steele ran over and gave the player a shove in the back, which unfortunately caused him and Fierro to clash heads. Fierro collapsed, clutching his face, as Blackhawk players encircled Jake, turning the

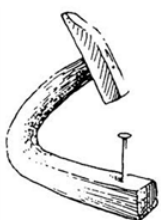
moment into a melee with Fierro left vulnerable on the ground as the Ironbridge players joined the spectacle. Then, as order began to return, one Blackhawk player nudged Linton in the back, who responded with a 'playful' clip around the ear. Yet, the opposing player fell dramatically, as if struck by Mike Tyson, right in front of the assistant referee.

What followed was inevitable, Jake Steele, the Blackhawk player, and Linton were all shown red cards, bringing Blackhawk down to ten men and us to nine. JC quickly reshuffled the formation defensively, while Blackhawk went on the offensive. We had to defend for our lives, and JC's instructions were clear, dial up the drama, hold onto every second, and try to pull Blackhawk further into our game.

The next stretch was a testament to our resilience and unity. Ironbridge had found a level of grit that defied the odds, battling back every Blackhawk attempt. Then, another Blackhawk player lost his cool, earning a second yellow and leaving us nine against nine with five minutes of normal time left, though fourteen minutes of stoppage loomed. It seemed like we'd hold on, but then Fierro, in a clumsy tackle, went studs-up in the mud. His challenge was high, drawing a third red card for us, making it nine against eight.

The final whistle blew on a 1-0 victory, but it felt like something much larger had been won. A bitter rivalry had ignited, one that wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon. Our intentional use of the 'dark arts' had done more than secure the points, it had strengthened the team's bond in a way that surpassed anything we had tried to do. This match, though watched by millions for its drama, was our defining moment. Ironbridge had found an identity, not the most polished, perhaps, but one unrivalled in persistence. Other clubs could outspend us, but no one could match Ironbridge for sheer determination and shithousery.

5.3.2 Reflexion and stylised approach



This section has been written as a series of diarised vignettes, a reflective, stylised approach that steps away from the traditional format of ethnographic reporting (Ellis and Bochner, 2016; Ellis, 2004). This decision was born from my own lived experience during the first season where rather than maintaining the objective distance of a researcher, I became deeply embedded within the world

of football at Ironbridge. This overall immersion led me to the point of no longer observing the culture from a detached vantage point but instead participating so passionately that I momentarily forgot my role as an ethnographer. Rather than viewing this immersion as a failure, I found it necessary to lean into the experience through a more personal and narrative-driven writing style, one that acknowledges my subjectivity and emotional engagement with the research (Denzin, 2014; Behar, 1996). This reflexive approach is not novel, it follows a tradition of ethnographers and researchers who have incorporated their personal voices and reflections into their work (Blodgett *et al.*, 2011; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Being able to recognise that such an approach offers valuable insights into the research process and the culture under study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Douglas and Carless, 2013).

This research is not pioneering new creative methods for collecting, analysing, or reporting data. However, by using a range of stylised techniques to document first-hand observations and the researcher's own struggles provides a unique depth of insight (Lee and Palmer, 2018). These methods reveal the complex relationship between immersion in the field and the ongoing reflexivity required to critically engage with the research. This entire section draws from the seminal works of auto ethnographers such as Carolyn Ellis and Stoller (Ellis, 2004; Stoller, 1989; Behar, 1996; Denzin, 2014; Chang, 2008), whose work in autoethnography has been foundational for those who wish to incorporate personal narrative and self-reflection into research. In *The Ethnographic I* (2004) advocates for an approach where the researcher's personal experiences and emotional responses become integral to the research itself (Ellis, 2004). For Ellis, personal narrative is not an obstacle to objectivity or validity; rather, it is a way of deepening our understanding of research in its context. Reflecting on my own experiences during my time embedded in the football community, I now realise that my emotional state and the extent to which I was embroiled in the culture were not distractions from the research, but significant parts of it (Lejeune, 2009; Sparkes and Smith, 2008). Ignoring these feelings or excluding my personal experiences would have meant overlooking an essential aspect of the very culture I was trying to understand.

To be truly immersed in the research leaves the researcher vulnerable, and it is that vulnerability that allows a deep connection with the people and cultures being observed (Behar, 1996). Taking the emotional risks of being 'lost' in the research is not failure, it's more of an opportunity for a more nuanced and humanistic understanding of the field (Ellis, 2004; Behar, 1996), although at the time I didn't know I was lost. Things felt deeply personal as I recounted the events, almost too personal, I still had to find my voice within it all, I needed to find the storyteller within to report the narrative, I needed clarity (Hurstun, 1935). Diarising these events allowed me to explore the spaces in between personal experience and cultural observation, where although deeply subjective, still rich in ethnographic insight (Douglas and Carless, 2013; Lejeune, 2009). I needed to find the boundaries personal as a researcher, and professional as

the assistant manager, adopting this approach I can acknowledge that my observations are often inseparable from personal experiences and emotional responses (Turner, 1969).

During this period I was a ‘complete participant,’ fully immersed in the activities with the group being observed, my identity as a researcher had truly faded into the background (Junker, 1960). I was no longer just observing JC and players; I was becoming one of them. While I appreciate the value of this for gaining deep insider knowledge, I knew the danger of losing the critical distance necessary for analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Covering such a big section of the research over a full year, and adopting a diarised, reflexive approach somehow represents my attempt to navigate through the tension, I am able to document the richness of that experience, while simultaneously using the act of writing as a means of regaining the analytical distance I lost (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Reflexion was the academic method adopted to offer this section the credibility it lacked in the approach to collecting the data (Ellis and Bochner, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Stoller, 1989). Through critical reflexion, I now know where I was and who I was during that time, and using my personal experience together with what was subjectively observed allows a richer, more meaningful account of the process in its entirety (Turner, 1969).

Although the personal and the academic are not mutually exclusive, by embracing the personal voice, we are able to offer richer, more nuanced account of the culture being explored. Writing from the perspective of someone who themselves was lost in the field, I hope to capture not only the data I collected but also the emotional aspects of this research. All this is to understand that to fully engage with the observed culture, you must be willing to lose yourself in it, if only for a while.

5.3.3 Account 2.

Account 2

Act II

Tests, Allies and Enemies
– *The Vipers*

The Middle: *Tests, Allies and Enemies* –
The Vipers



Figure 12: The Birth of the Vipers (D. Lee)

It is JC's first full season as gaffer, and one of the first items on his agenda was to change the culture of the team. Being considered relatively young to be taking the reins at a non-league club, JC was more than up for the job at hand of bringing in new blood and dispersing with the old guard, of which to a degree, he was a solid member. Initial meetings that I had with JC in the summer established that he needed to almost remove himself from the group of players he had been such a big part of, then re-introduce himself as the new 'Gaffer'. With such an array of larger-than-life characters, this was going to be a challenge, one that he said he'd relish, only time would tell. Under the old regime, the manager endorsed the sense of camaraderie, and a nonchalant approach to the process, one thing that JC enjoyed, but wanted to change. Much to the dissatisfaction of the old guard, JC wanted to establish a winning mentality, which meant for most of the group he inherited, that the ride was well and truly over. Me and JC spoke at length about what the others may perceive, and with such a contrast in relation to cultural shift what they may think about him as the new man in charge. He simply

didn't care what they thought, in fact, didn't care what anyone thought, he was there to do a job, and at all costs, he was going to do it. We discussed players; ones that would suit the level, and others who would integrate with the ones selected to stay and play under the neophyte manager in the shape of JC. One of the players I had suggested was a South American, an Ecuadorian called Fierro Guerrero, a tough tackling midfield enforcer, someone I had worked with many times over the years. I first met Fierro when he was sixteen years old, he had just arrived in the UK and joined a football education programme I was the teacher on. His backstory is unique, one that involves many selfless acts, a good human being, along with a side interest of Brazilian Jujitsu and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), Fierro is a true gentleman. Humble, kind and respectful is how most would describe him, unless of course he happened to be on the opposing team, where you would experience him as strong, tough and physical. In reference to his name, it literally translates to *'Iron Warrior'*, again, very apt considering his physicality.

Having introduced Fierro, I had a vested interest in how he was treated, almost a bias, looking out for one of my own. As a new face myself, I assessed the new environment, and although I had been at the club before, the dynamic felt different. There was one character who seemed to have the managers ear, they seemed to be close, from which information, and at times misinformation stemmed. Enter Clint Garner. Authentic to an extent, but cunning in his approach, smiling with you, then willing and able to orchestrate your downfall. I don't think his actions were calculated; I think that he knew what facade to display when needed. Fierro went about his business as usual, shaking hands, smiling and being generally gracious, this is just his character, one they try to test on a regular basis. I was keeping an eye on it all, observing, synthesising, and making sense of what they were trying to do. There were several members of the team who would take turns to make comments, saying things that were related to his technical ability, personal attacks, and brazenly too. Comments on his ability during training, voicing their dissatisfaction at him being selected for the team, vocalised to let JC know their feelings. As Fierro was taking a touch in training, passing the ball back and forth, one of the members said 'ugh, and he gets to start in the team', followed by several players sniggering. I'm watching, trying to see where and how this is going to unfold. Another significant moment was during a pre-season game, when Clint made a conscious effort to come over to the dug out to say, loud enough for both benches to hear, 'get him off'. This was done in a way that suggested he had already had a conversation with JC about Fierro, giving him the confidence to verbalise it so openly. I was livid, how embarrassing for Fierro, verbally slain whilst on the other side of the pitch, a gutless move. I had to leave the club that day to collect myself, then approach the next session more informed from my experience and judgment. I continued to observe as they chipped away at his character and credibility, each taking a swipe while his back was turned, it was character assassination 101. This happened consistently over a series of weeks, to the point where I suggested to Fierro that he should consider moving on. In

standard Fierro response, he smiled and said, 'Jesus will help them find their way'. This typically symbolised his great strength in character, that more than matched his physical prowess (Dweck, 2012).

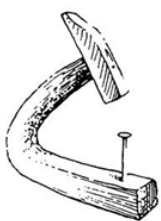
As the season drew nearer, JC was still unsure on what starting eleven would start the season, and in an attempt to shave off the superfluous excrescences, an '*in-house*' friendly was arranged. This meant that all the players got to play in a game behind closed doors against each other, giving them an opportunity to impress the manager. As an outcome, this would be some of the players last game for the club, JC's mind was still yet to be made on a few of the players, but one thing was for sure, he had to reduce the wage bill. As a typical non-league process, managers will often over recruit and select a squad based on ability and character, along with a willingness to work hard toward selected goals. At a pre-match meeting JC and I set up our respective teams. Fierro was to play in the team I was managing on the night. Also in my dressing room was several other players who were playing for their survival at the club, whilst the players who had targeted Fierro were with JC in the other dressing room. I knew building up to this game it was going to come to boiling point, I just didn't know how. After observing their behaviours over the past few weeks, it was almost instinctive, like a pack of animals circling their prey.

As I arrived at the ground, it was eerily silent, the lights had been turned on, almost like the calm before the storm. Fine rain fell steadily, light but soaking me to the bone, each breath visible in the air, hanging like a small cloud before dissipating in the misty drizzle. With the team now split into two distinct dressing rooms in preparation for the in-house practice match (*or even final cull*), the evening of football was underway. Each of the selected teams are now in preparation to face each other, in a game that will result in some players leaving the group when they are to be reunited as one team again. Edging closer to the start of the game, each group undertook a warmup at either end of the pitch for match day realism. JC wanted to create the most realistic environment possible. In our dressing rooms, we each took the duty of running our respective teams through set pieces, in and out of possession play and a plan to win the game. 7:45pm, the game promptly starts, both sets of players playing to win, and for some, playing for their futures at the club. Early in the game one of the opposition players calls out when Fierro gets the ball, 'press him, he's shit, he'll give you the ball', subsequently after around thirty minutes several dubious tackles are put in on Fierro from a few of his so-called teammates. It seemed to me like he was being targeted, as one by one they took turns to discredit him when he had the ball. Funny thing is, Fierro would be the first to admit, he's not actually the best on the ball, but adds his value when his team is not in possession. As we move into the second half, the attempt to call Fierro to action has failed so far, with each of them in succession bouncing off of him, like waves breaking against a steadfast rock. Off the ball, Fierro moves with the stealth and precision of a predator, eyes locked onto his target. Every movement calculated, deliberate, as he stalks his opponent. Then, with a sudden burst

of speed, he pounces, snatching the ball with the same power, swiftness and decisiveness as a predator seizing its prey. Fierro, though small in stature, moves around the pitch with a deceptive ease, combining power and grace in every step. His compact frame belies his strength, evident in the fluidity of his movements. His shirt clings to his toned physique, a testament to his athleticism. This could be the moment the touchpaper is lit, Fierro takes the ball from Clint with a crunching tackle, leaving Clint in a heap on the floor, the others look on as Fierro shows no mercy. As Clint lifts himself from the floor, he looks like his pride has taken a bigger hit than his body, he is seething and looking for revenge.

It was imminent, Fierro executes another well-timed decisive tackle, but this time the opposing players swarm around him like a nest of vipers attacking their prey. From all angles, they coil around him, striking with coordinated precision, he didn't know where to turn. Their aggression is venomous, their movements fluid yet calculated as they tear his shirt from his back, each strike akin to the lethal strike of a viper, leaving him vulnerable amidst their relentless assault. Fierro stood firm, despite their collective effort, he anchored himself into a defensive stance, a formidable force amidst the chaos. Sensing his readiness to defend himself, the vipers hesitate, as they realise that challenging Fierro meant facing a skilled and prepared opponent. Each now slithering back into the melee, behind the other players who were trying to mediate the issue. I thought about all the times they had targeted him verbally in training sessions; however, this was calculated, this was an attack, this was orchestrated. Almost in a series of flashbacks, I could see how they present themselves, how they see themselves and most of all, why they behave in that way. They are vipers. Thinking back, they dominate social space in a passive-aggressive way, for example, they move through the dressing room with an unsettling grace, smooth-talking, charming and sly, slithering around the room hunting, with their venomous words dripping with poisonous intent. They have a deceptive affability, lurking in the corners, watching, waiting, offering disinformation, their whispers spreading like wildfire through the team. Planting seeds of doubt, they are silent stalkers, sharp and calculated, building momentum, gaining followers then pulling the strings like master puppeteers. Why can't JC see this? Why can't he see the venomous influence the vipers are having on his team? How will this all pan out?

5.3.4 Vipers Reflexion



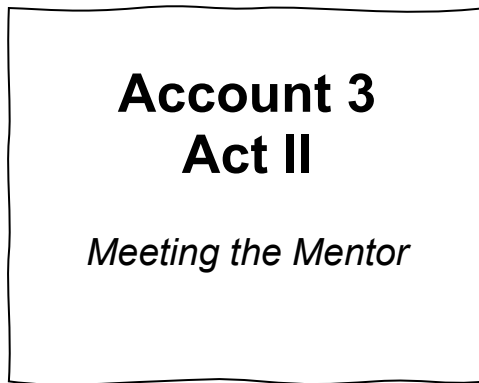
At the point of writing the first draft of *The Vipers* I was embroiled in the dynamic as it played out in the field. I was emotionally attached to the team, and to Fierro. I needed to remember that we are all in a dramatic story, and this particular story seeks an author, and that is my role as a researcher (Pirandello, 1998). I was both within and without, simultaneously captivated and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life within the team (Fitzgerald, 1925). It's now (*at this point of*

reflection) been a whole season since leaving the club, approximately one year. Fierro has now been at the club for three seasons, played well over 100 games, and is a clear fans' favourite. Since the incident, Fierro has been accepted by the players, including The Vipers (Maslow, 2011). On reading through my fieldnotes, I feel like I have demonised and portrayed essentially good people as bad, although some of their behaviours warranted the label 'viper' (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). This story, like all stories is about the characters, where creative storytelling allows for dramatization, where someone has to be the hero, so equally, someone needs to be the villain. With a research lens, I am starting to make theoretical sense of this data, and although dramatized, I still need to be true to it, even through the lens I viewed the action through first hand was laden with my own personal bias. Afterall, it's a play, it's nothing personal (Frayn, 2000), and we are all trapped in the same plot (Stoppard, 1968). This dramatological account of events shows the front stage behaviours of all within the story (Goffman, 1990), it shows the art of impression management during those moments of confrontation (Goffman, 1966, 1990, 2005). Each on their own journey, writing their own script for their own purpose, each bringing to the mix a backstory of emotions, experiences and the complexities of navigating their way through life (Campbell, 2003). It feels somewhat harsh to be writing about The Vipers in this way, portraying them as villains, when since that period in the field I have had so many positive encounters with them in different environments. For example, in the bar after every game, even when I go to watch the team now, Niel Linton (a key member of The Vipers) will offer me a drink, even when he is not sitting with me. He shows maturity, and respect when interacting with me.

They knew how I felt from the way I presented myself; they knew where I stood on matters (Goffman, 1990). J'Dog now with a young baby, he too has shown a compassionate side to his character, beaming with smiles and giggles, his young daughter on his lap. A far cry from the almost tribalistic warrior he portrays himself to be on the pitch, goading the away fans for fun, in fact he loves being the villain (Jung, 1983, 2003). I realise now that the rich descriptive language I used was just describing a snapshot in time, and one that was only viewed through my lens. Clint himself is far from being a bully, a long way from being a warrior on and off the pitch (Jung, 1968; Pearson, 1989, 1991). Although I feel deceitful writing about that moment, I need to be honest, because it really only comes down to me, them and my data. I really want you to see what I saw, I wanted them to be vipers, because fitted the narrative I wanted to create. Looking back, were they vipers? Were they ever vipers? Or are they just exaggerations, embellished characters for the sake of the story (Campbell, 2008). I believe what I saw to be a true account, I scribed what I witnessed, and can vividly recall each moment, is there a grey area between what I remember and what happened? Am I just another storyteller pushing the boundaries of creative non-fiction, telling the story from just one angle (Saldana, 2005; Dostoevsky, 1864)? I have the ethical duty of being an honest qualitative researcher, I am impartial, there to report the data.

Methodologically, I am sliding between contrasting points on a scale of morality for these characters, they did bad things, but are they really that bad? Truth and illusion. Who really knows the difference (Albee, 1963)? Again, this is how I observed it, this is my interpretation of the truth, and going back to the beginning, I too arrived with a preconceived bias. I rewrote this story several times on rereading my notes, draft after draft trying to not portray them in a negative way, but the data is the data, and the story is the story. As I re-wrote and developed the story more, I grew to really like all of these characters, they redeemed themselves in many ways, often showing loyalty and integrity that far outweighed their behaviours, in the manner I had characterised them as vipers. Each of them at some stage has been the hero and villain of their own monomythical story (Campbell, 2003, 2008), and my challenge was to just render the data as a truthful and honest account. Afterall, as Shakespeare (2006) said, all the world really is a stage, and we are only the players, we all have our own exits and entrances, I need to report the data with this in mind. Although I still have so many questions, for example, why did they make me so angry? What was I really worried about? Was I just lost in the data, letting my chimp take control, letting my chimp control my own personal bias (Peters, 2012)? Having the advantage of looking back on the data with fresh eyes has allowed me to see where I was within the story, and understand that although I am the narrator, I am also a character within it (Williams, 1999).

5.3.5 Account 3.



The End: *Meeting the Mentor*

In this unfolding narrative, I find myself at a crossroads, grappling with the apprehensions of being adrift in the chaotic world of my fieldwork. Clive, my DoS, steps into the role of Mentor/Wise Man, tasked with directing my wayward self, back to solid ground. Within this, our relationship is one of dual frustration, each of us burdened by our distinct challenges yet united in a shared goal, a clarity amidst the chaos.

At the heart of our dialogues, layered and complex, reveals itself only after we have begun to unpick the essence of confusion that has trapped me. I am a businessman at heart, unyielding in my pursuit of the honest truth. No fluff, give me the brutal facts, the harsh realities. I crave hard truth, a directness that cuts through the noise and lights the path ahead. Clive, with his unique approach to doctoral supervision, must navigate my high needs with a deft touch, learning to meet me where I am, without diluting the importance of our conversations.

Behind the spoken words lies an intricate inner dialogue, a reflective exchange that only emerges as we confront the core of my uncertainty. This scripted account seeks to capture that moment, a real, multi-perspective portrayal of our interaction that surpasses mere dialogue. Here, within the tension and the truths revealed, we unveil the narrative threads that weave our stories together.

5.3.6 Script Introduction

This is an energetic phone call about all things Ironbridge FC, Clive realising that Danny might be lost (in every sense of the word). Danny's focus on team dynamics and relationships overshadows the development of the research itself. Below is a sequential account of events, beginning with the phone call that prompted a support visit by Clive to Danny's home town and Ironbridge, to refocus Danny's efforts. This process not only got the research back on track but also highlighted the role of emotion and belonging in complicating the researcher's journey. These events culminated in a strategy for exiting the field, while intended as a straightforward formality, revealed the human challenges for me of maintaining a researcher-focus within my doctoral studies.

Sx chapters born of CONCEPTS

COME HOME, WAYWARD SON

Act 1
10K Entrance ^{me coming in.} _{Notes}
You as story teller
Centre of the
ethnographic
Storyed refined
Crit Narr Vignette/
Theorised

Act 2
10K
Thesis Con
Title
- Abstract
- Con
- Table of Contents
- Intro
- Lit Review
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Refs.
- Appendix

Act 3
10K
EXITING- Strategy
Situations
Nov 22
Fieldwork
April 2
Setup these Docs in one file 'thesis' @ 2/8 rd

Act 4
10K
then Fieldwork
Storyed Critical Narr
Sept
Latest!
Sept 30th 2025
Final Submission
6-8 weeks to Viva
Lo Mock Viva
Lo Viva
- Min viva
- May viva
Pass
Internal 1 External
Result with viva
Results submitted
MPhil or PhD

Act 5
10K
then Fieldwork
Storyed Critical Narr
Exiting the Field
then Fieldwork
Storyed Critical Narr
Conclusions, Recommendations
LIMITATIONS
10K

By Danny Lee

Figure 13: Come Home, Wayward Son Front Cover (D. Lee)

5.3.7 TITLE: Come Home, Wayward Son

INT. DANNY'S OFFICE/CLIVE'S OFFICE – DAY

Split screen: Danny and Clive at their desks in their respective homes. Danny is in the South, and Clive is in the North, some 220 miles North.



Figure 14: Use of Technology (D. Lee)

DANNY

(Teams call)

Clive, how are you?

CLIVE

(dialling into Teams, putting his glasses on)

Ah, I'm glad you rang, sorry I missed your call earlier, I was just about to call you back.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

A few home truths inbound, he needs to get a hold of this research before it's too late.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

How's it all going? What has the world of Danny Lee got to offer lately?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's settle him in gradually.

DANNY

(eager to speak about the team)

Not a lot really, we've had a decent first season so far, we've picked up a few points lately, we're safe put it that way. If we had a bit more in the budget, I think we'd be in a much better place.

CLIVE

(raising his eyebrows)

I meant your research.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This could be the difficult conversation I've been anticipating.

DANNY

(slightly embarrassed)

Yeah, that's what I mean. It's been good so far.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Ah, got that completely wrong!

CLIVE

(trying to get him to think about his research)

How do you think your fieldnotes are shaping up?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This will be the telling factor.

DANNY

(again, reoffering excuses)

It's not as easy as that. You see, whilst it's all going on I struggle to balance the two, it's hard to take down notes on the move.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I don't think he gets my relationship at that club.

CLIVE

(patiently guiding him back into the research)

Ok, I understand. Do you remember your postgrad?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I really need to get him back on track.

DANNY

(slightly lost in the conversation)

Yeah, why?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Where is he going with this?

CLIVE

(offering some gentle pointers)

We looked at you in the field, what sort of things you are looking at, and what you need to write about. Do you remember?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This literally could be make or break.

DANNY

(recollecting, but not understanding)

Yeah, I remember that. Why is it important now, I don't get it?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Nope, still clueless?

CLIVE

(reading the room)

Do you think it would be beneficial if we looked over the whole project, and set some clearer boundaries?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I need to get down to him and show him again step by step, lead him by the hand, map it out and navigate him back into his study.

DANNY

(bowing his head in acceptance)

Yeah, I think that would help.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

My god would that help!

CLIVE

(taking a more positive approach)

We can look at timelines, and methods too while we are at it.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I can't believe he needs more help at this stage, and yet another visual, all spelled out for him again, and more targets to aim for, after all the work we have done to get to this point.

DANNY

(still slightly awkward)

Yeah, I'm up for that.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I really am lost here. This could be the lifeline I need.

CLIVE

(leaning forward smiling)

Excellent. Well, it looks like I'm coming down then!

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I hope he has taken this seriously; he squandered two big passages of time already *(at application and transfer stages)*. This could be his proverbial crossroads.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

EXT/INT. DANNY'S DRIVEWAY/KITCHEN – DAY

Clive pulls up on the driveway, the garage door opens as Clive gets out of the car, Danny emerges from the garage to greet him.

DANNY

(walking out from the garage)

Hello mate, great to see you.

CLIVE

(getting out of the car)

Some drive that, did it in good time though.

Danny and Clive embrace, then Clive then opens the boot to get his bag from the car.

DANNY

(shepherding Clive through the garage toward the kitchen)

Come through, want a cuppa?

CLIVE

(walking through taking in his surroundings)

That would be great.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

We need to get this started.

They walk through to the kitchen; Clive puts his bag down and takes a seat at the table, Danny puts the kettle on.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(getting up and moving toward his bag)

Let me get my pad out.

DANNY

(surprised)

Oh, we starting already?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Blimey, the kettle hasn't even boiled!

CLIVE

(firm)

We've got no time to waste Danny, we need to get things moving.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

The next few days are literally his proverbial crossroads.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

Ok, lets map this out. We are going to go back through this again, step by step. Let's look at what you've got, what you need and how we are going to get it.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Knowing how he learns, this needs to be direct and to the point.

Clive starts to fill out the front page of the supervisory notes. Danny puts the teas on the table and takes a seat next to Clive.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(starting from the beginning)

Ok, number 1...

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's get him the basic tools to get this job done.

FADE OUT



Figure 15: County Mall (D. Lee)



Figure 16: Café Nero (D. Lee)

FADE IN

INT. SHOPPING MALL, TOWN CENTRE – DAY

Danny and Clive are walking toward the stationers.

CLIVE

(ready to get to work)

Ok, so once we have the right equipment, we can then have a little practice session.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

He needs to understand this, or it could be game over for him. I need to see where he is and what he is thinking.

DANNY

(Thankful for the guidance)

Sounds like a plan.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Is it that bad?

Entering the stationers, walking toward the pads and pens.

CLIVE

(pointing over to the books and pads section)

Ah, here we are. Look, pads, pencils and pens.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

He needs something that is going to hide in plain sight.

DANNY

(picking the pace up trying to stay alongside Clive)

I would guess we are looking for something specific.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

A pad is a pad, isn't it?

CLIVE

(picking up and inspecting a pad before putting it back down)

Yes, you need something robust, something big enough to scribe your notes, and something that is not going to draw too much attention to yourself.

DANNY

(reaching for a pad)

Like this?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

That'll do, it's blue, what can go wrong?

Danny holds up a blue A5 wire bound lined notebook

CLIVE

(taking it from Danny and flicking through the pages)

Yes, exactly like this.

Clive hands the pad back to Danny.

CLIVE

Now a pen.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Once we get this, we can get the ball rolling.

DANNY

(casually)

Here, I like these ones.

Danny holds up a basic black BIC biro.

CLIVE

(slightly agitated)

No, you need to differentiate your notes, colours may be a good way to do it on the move.

DANNY

(sincerely)

Here you are Clive, like these?

Danny holds up a two pack of BIC 4 Colours in one biro pens.

CLIVE

(taking it from Danny to examine)

Yes, perfect, these will do the trick.

Danny and Clive, make their way to pay.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

Ok, in true theatrical terms, let's get a bite to eat and rehearse.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's practice here before we go back, it's nice and busy.

DANNY

(with a slightly bemused look on his face)

Yeah, ok, sounds like a plan.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

What on earth has he got in mind?

Danny and Clive pay and exit the shop with the pad and pens in a bag, then take a short walk to Café Giardino, an open space eatery in the Mall's food court.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Ok, let's get a table at the back.

CLIVE

(interjecting)

No, let's sit here, right in the mix of things.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

He needs to be in the thick of things, he needs to come out of his comfort zone.

DANNY

No problem, what do you want?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Wide open place, I'm not that comfortable not being able to see behind me.

CLIVE

Nice and easy. I'll have a sausage sarnie and a cup of tea please.

DANNY

I'll go an' order.

Danny moves to the counter; Clive takes the bag from the table and starts to unwrap the purchased items whilst Danny orders at the counter.

DANNY

(arriving back at the table sitting opposite Clive)

Sorted.

CLIVE

Right, now these are your tools specific to your research.

Clive hands Danny the pad and one of the pens.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

These must be exclusively for your research, don't use them for anything else.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This needs to be a lesson on the move.

DANNY

Got it.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I know all this already, I'm confused.

CLIVE

Open your pad and make a note of specify where we are,
who is here, and start making notes.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This coaching needs to sink in, be patient.

DANNY

(slightly uneasy)

Ok, like what though?

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I am so confused right now.

CLIVE

(calm)

Start to describe the situation.

Danny starts to write in the pad.

DANNY

(looking but not seeing)

I'm not too sure what to write if I'm honest.

CLIVE

(calmly)

Where are we sitting?

Danny starts to describe where he is in the pad.

“Floodlights, Camera, Action”

Note: *Sitting in a booth facing the mall, Clive sits with his back to the wall of the booth with his leg casually across the seat. (D)*

Changing positions, moving to the other side of the booth (M)

Looking into the seated area, busier than I initially thought (I)

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(pleased)

Good, these are descriptive notes.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This is going to work.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(looking at what is being written)

Good, now switch places with me.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's flip him on his head again.

Danny and Clive switch places

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(assuming a calm front)

Now what do you see? We are in the same place, doing the same thing, but now you are seeing it from a different angle, this is contextual positioning.

DANNY

(looking around, seeing a different place)

Yeah, I can see a whole other world that was behind me.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

Now I see why we sat here.

CLIVE

Exactly, when you write about changing positions, these
will be your methodological notes.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

He's getting it.

Clive can see the penny dropping.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(teasing an answer out)

What do you think they are doing? Why are they here at
this time of the day during the week?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's get some inferences on paper.

Danny starts to create a story from what he is seeing. Clive looks at what is being written.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(smiling)

Perfect, these are inferences. Now, use a different colour
to separate description, methodology and inferences, this
will help you on the write up.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Good choice of pen Danny.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(prompting)

Go on, have a go while we are here, and we can go
through it together.

Danny starts to take in the surroundings before writing down what he has seen.

DANNY

(with a smile on his face)

I am going to call this section Fieldwork coaching with
Clive, what do you think?

CLIVE

(firmly sincere)

Call it what you like, just start doing it.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

At least he's back on the right road.

Danny and Clive smile, both understanding what needs to be done.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(looking at the fieldnotes)

Good, that's enough now. Let's now look at what things
need to be in there. Get your pen ready.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This needs to be worded in a way that he will remember.

Danny clicks the black pen ready to write.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

(looking at what has already been written)

Select a different colour, it will help you find it when you
need to go back on your notes.

Danny clicks off black and selects red for differentiation.

DANNY

(set, ready to take notes)

Ready when you are.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I hate writing in red pen.

CLIVE

(looking into nothingness, almost reciting)

One, just start writing, dive into it, experiment. Don't worry if you feel like you are rambling, there will be sense within it, almost cues for your memory. It may not feel like it, but you will make sense of your data. **Two**, time, date, location, describe where you are. Help the reader understand your surroundings. Also, be conscious to change position for a new or different perspective. **Three**, allow yourself to be free to ponder, question and develop curiosity. This is important to help your inquiry. **Four**, move a little closer to your subjects contextually, or in some cases, further away. Remember, you are there to do **your** research.

DANNY

(writing enthusiastically)

Ok, I think I know where we are going with all this.

CLIVE

(smiling patiently)

I think you might be right. Pass me the pad.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

This is gold, it's working.

Danny slides the pad over to Clive, who then turns the page to start writing.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

I have just two questions. I want you to answer these in relation to the café.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Now to offer two allegorical questions.

Clive writes down two questions, 1, How will you exit the field? 2, What are the consequences of doing so? Clive then slides the pad over to Danny. Hidden in the questions are a subliminal message. It's not about the café at all, it's about Danny and his relationship

"Floodlights, Camera, Action"

with his research. Is he too close? Can he anticipate leaving the field, and the impact on him as a researcher, and an individual?

DANNY

(writing, starting to answer the questions)

Ok how's this?

CLIVE

Read it to me.

DANNY

(reading from the pad)

Ok, question one, I've written: coat on, I have enjoyed the café and experience, but it's time for me to move on.

CLIVE

(prompting)

What about paying the bill and walking out?

DANNY

Oh yeah.

CLIVE

(looking over his glasses at Danny)

Details. And question two, what are the consequences?

DANNY

(slightly reserve)

I put, nothing, it allows me time to reflect and experience different things.

CLIVE

(again prompting)

Ok, so none then? Are there no consequences for leaving the field?

DANNY

(slightly curious)

None that I know of.

CLIVE

(changing the direction of the conversation)

I am excited to see the training session at the football ground later. I will observe, and I want you to observe me observing. I will watch the action, report on the action and

I want you to see what I do.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I may have to tease this out of him in another way.

Danny is curious as he and Clive make their way to the car.

FADE OUT



Figure 17: Broadfield Football Stadium (D. Lee)

FADE IN

EXT. BROADFILED 3G FOOTBALL PITCH – NIGHT

Danny and Clive arrive and start to walk onto the pitch. It's a cold, still night, each breath a vapor cloud lingering in the crisp air. Everyone is dressed for the occasion, leggings, hoods and gloves, Danny and Clive are no exception. And it's raining.

CLIVE

(rubbing his hands together for warmth)

Ok, so just keep your eye on me whilst I keep my eyes on the session.

"Floodlights, Camera, Action"

DANNY

(acknowledging)

Will do.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I'm being coached, I think I understand this now.

They walk into the pitch compound.

DANNY (CONT'D)

(pointing across the pitch)

Ah, there's JC, I told him you were coming.

Danny and Clive, walk toward JC, he glances over then meets them halfway.

DANNY (CONT'D)

JC, this is Clive. Clive, JC.

JC

(holding his hand out)

Alright mate, nice to see you.

CLIVE

(shaking JC's hand)

Likewise.

JC

(signalling toward the group of players)

You are welcome to jump in where you like, Dan said you are doing a bit of coaching.

CLIVE

(polite)

Oh, no, I'm just here to observe. Thank you anyway.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Not that sort of coaching.

JC

(shrugging his shoulders)

No probs.

Danny and JC walk over to the players.

DANNY

(to JC)

What are we doing tonight?

Clive loiters within earshot for the pre-session brief. JC takes control, almost like a sergeant major.

JC

(with raised voice, in coaching mode)

Give me a lap, then when you get back here, pair up.

Clive was transfixed on the action that was unfolding, taking notes. Danny was curiously watching Clive as he moves around the perimeter of the pitch, moving stealthily in and out of the compound.

JC (CONT'D)

(to Danny)

Where's your mate gone? I thought he was watching.

DANNY

(looking around)

He is. Somewhere.

(DANNY INNER MONOLOGUE)

I wonder what he has seen.

This aloof approach lasted throughout the entire session, as JC lifted the level of instruction to ensure Clive heard him.

At the end of the session Clive reappeared, just as JC wrapped things up.

“Floodlights, Camera, Action”

JC

(to the group, but elevated for effect)

Like I said, look after yourselves from now until then, hydrate and get some shut eye. Big three points at the weekend, don't let me down. See you all Saturday.

JC turns to Danny and Clive.

JC (CONT'D)

What do you think.

CLIVE

(casually, smiling)

Very good, looked good to me anyway.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

I got what I needed from it.

JC

(slightly confused)

Right. Nice to meet you then.

CLIVE

(shaking JC's hand)

Likewise.

They all make their way to the car park. Clive with his note pad, JC with a bag of footballs on his shoulder.

DANNY

(shaking JC's hand)

See you Saturday.

JC

(from across the car park)

I'll call you tomorrow.

DANNY

Speak then.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT. DANNY'S KITCHEN – DAY

Danny and Clive sit at the table with a cup of tea, looking over the notes from the last few days.

CLIVE

(reviewing the last few days, writing up the supervision notes)

Lessons learnt. Day one, understanding who you are in the field. Knowing your purpose. Selecting and rejecting the visual data, then documenting it. Use the paper 'You can't buy love at TESCO', this will give you an idea on how to formulate your observation field notes.

Danny is looking over the notes taken from the night before at training.

DANNY

(inquisitive)

What did you think of the session?

CLIVE

(looking up from the pad)

You mean JC's bootcamp? Read for yourself. It was never about the session, it was about positionality, observations and note taking.

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

Let's bring this episode to a close.

DANNY

You mean being overtly covert?

CLIVE

(nodding)

In some respect, yes.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

These supervision notes...

Clive spins the papers around on the table to face Danny.

CLIVE (CONT'D)

I want you to keep them safe. This is a step-by-step guide that leads us down the right path. I now need you to focus, you have wasted enough time.

DANNY

(looking up at Clive)

Wasted?

CLIVE

(simplifying things)

Well, put it this way, you have procrastinated enough. I want you to remember why you are there. Think of Goffman, you need to select the right mask for the right task. You are not a football coach, you are a researcher, you need to use this lens to take you forward.

Clive slides the papers back in front of him and continues to write notes.

DANNY

(in agreeance)

That's fair enough, I do understand that.

CLIVE

(pointing at what he has written)

I know you do, but your affiliation to the club is what's clouding your judgement. You have been more focused on the footballing outcomes than the research, this has simply got to change.

DANNY

(hanging his head)

I've lost the season; I've missed my opportunity.

CLIVE

(reasoning)

Yes and no. That season is behind you now, there is nothing you can do with it other than learn from it. Being lost and knowing you are lost are two different paradigms.

One can take us forward, and one will leave us behind.

Do you see my point?

DANNY

(penny dropping)

Yes, I really do. That bit in the café, that was never about the café at all was it?

CLIVE

(wry smile)

No.

DANNY

(smiling)

It was about how am I going to get out of Ironbridge, how am I going to leave a place I have become so attached to.

CLIVE

(nodding)

Yes, that's exactly what it is. You see, as an ethnographer, you need to delve in, take a look around, collect your data, and get out. Everything else is superficial, it doesn't really matter. JC, the team, the club, none of it.

DANNY

(swigging his tea)

It's all about what I see and how I report it. I am starting to see it.

CLIVE

So, you see, it's not a wasted season, it's an opportunity to understand how easily it can all go wrong. It's an

opportunity to share your experiences with others, and an opportunity to prepare for your exit.

DANNY

(sincere)

That is going to be the hardest part. Every time I tell JC that I need to go, he says no, you are staying here.

CLIVE

(reassuring)

You'll find a way, you have to.

Danny smiles to himself, almost planning his exit in that moment.

DANNY

I think I have a strategy, not sure I'll be too popular after, but for this research, I have no choice.

CLIVE

Remember the research you have done so far to get you to this point. Football pioneers, your interviews...

DANNY

(cutting in)

Emergent themes, the theorists that have informed my fieldwork...

CLIVE

(cutting in)

There you go, remember why you are there. Because, after all, it's not really about the football, is it?

(CLIVE INNER MONOLOGUE)

If this doesn't work, I think this is the end of the road.

Turning the papers around in front of Danny, but this time a ten-page plan with timelines, a research map and deadlines. Danny puts his glasses back on to read.

FADE OUT

Danny's reflective monologue



Of course, the drama is heightened in this scripted version of events. It must be, both to underscore the importance of the data and to draw attention to reflexivity as a central element. Conversations during this time were rich with information, each one bristling with direction, potential, and insight. Yet, it was the reflections that followed, the recursive return to these moments, that added depth and dimension. This is where the *'inner monologue'* took shape, a layered narrative offering multiple perspectives on how events unfolded and what each of us felt in those moments.

Over time, the internal monologues faded, replaced by something closer to frank dialogue. Clive and I began to speak with an openness born of necessity, fully inhabiting our thoughts and feelings, yet holding back just enough to maintain balance. We managed a delicate approach, revealing enough to sustain momentum while withholding just enough to preserve the tenuous threads of understanding. Complex. But brilliant.

Above my desk, on the ceiling of the annex, which is my office, I taped the ten-page plan. It's still there, a guidepost etched in the essence of this journey. It watches over me, reminding me of where I've been and nudging me toward where I need to go. This plan is not just a map; it's a companion, a silent collaborator in this research process. It keeps me moving. I've always learned differently, and I'm fortunate to have a supervisor who sees this, who knows how to propel me forward without breaking me.

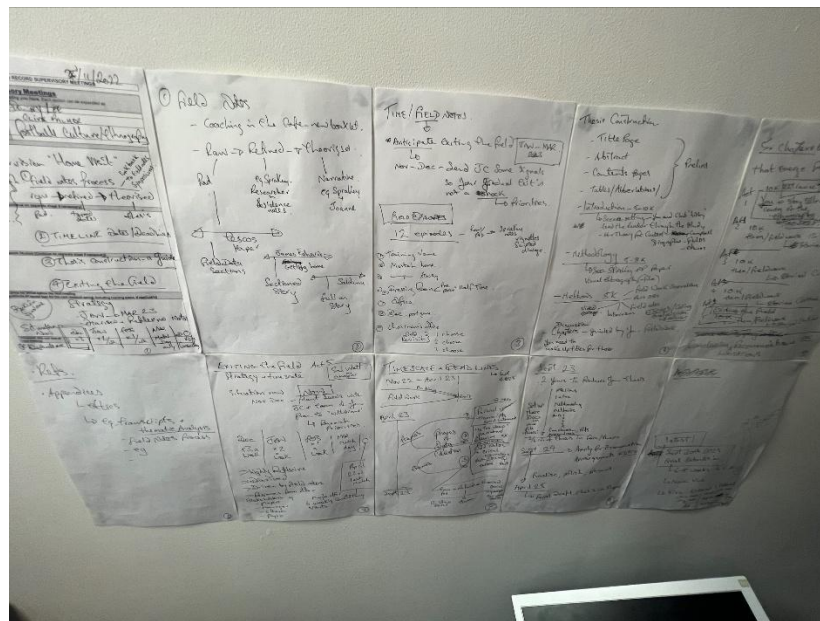


Figure 18. The Plan (D. Lee)

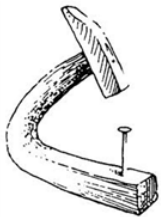
The thing is, I do love this club. Maybe too much. I've become entangled in its charm, worried about the minutiae, team selection, the next match, who said what and to who in passing. The lines between researcher and participant have blurred. I've lost my footing, and

Clive could see it long before I could. I was immersed in the research, but I was no longer part of it, I had become it. This realisation, stark as it was, became an opportunity, a moment to recalibrate. I get a second bite at the proverbial cherry, a chance to write the next chapter. This is my story, my lens, my narrative to shape.

But the path forward is not without obstacles. Leaving the club won't be easy. I live five minutes from the home ground, two minutes from the training ground and bump into the fans on a daily basis. I have History with this place, a friendship with the owner, unyielding respect for the manager, and the intricacies of relationships I've built with the players and staff along the way. My exit must be decisive, it must be hard, even if it casts me as the villain. The finale looms, and I know it will be epic. When the curtains fall, it won't just mark the end of this act but the beginning of what comes next, and that, too, is mine to write. It will either be applause or boos, I'm now ready for either, because I have a plan.

Clive's reflective monologue

“Danny, you have a PhD for the taking, all you have to do is write it”



My actions to support Danny's learning at this stage of his PhD, about 3 and a half years into a 6-year P/T programme, felt at the time akin to what the snooker players call 'a shot to nothing'. That is, as his supervisor, my visit would either 'yield fruit' or just return me (and Danny's PhD research) to a restful but ineffectual 'safe' position of looking productive on paper for the various Post Graduate progression committees at UCLan, but no real ground covered in research or doctoral learning. In a call to Danny, I tried to nudge the ball closer to him (or rather, kick it straight at him), "Danny, you have a PhD for the taking, all you have to do is write it". Danny had wasted a lot of time up to this point in his PhD journey through not recognising distractions around him or even twigging that time was being wasted at all, but my professional duty of care was to make an effort, as it was not me that was 'failing' his research, it was Danny, and time was running out. Danny is a complex learner, which is as challenging as it is rewarding, however, my pedagogical tactics at this point were basic, not at all sophisticated. I realised I had to go 'down south' and lead him by the hand (nose) to do basic things about practical research, pointing out obvious things – things that were blatantly obvious to me at any rate, that he should be seeing, rehearsing with him again field practices that I had already shown him, ran in PG research schools at UCLan, and in his own MA research of 4 days continuous field observations. With so much field research practice under his belt, why was he so lost? I did not understand it. Before visiting, I shared some thoughts with an experienced colleague from another university, "well, he's either gonna do it, or he aint" which I knew was the deal, "and it looks like at this stage of the game, that he aint" was my colleague's judgement. And to be fair, I agreed, so it was a sense of pedagogical duty that saw me down to London, mixed

with dollop of curiosity as to whether my 'shot to nothing' might actually yield fruit. Timing was everything and I knew I had to act now. One of Danny's huge foibles as a learner is his sense of timing. He does not have one, so on reflection it is no wonder he was lost. A big problem for me (and therefore Danny) is that something 'urgently required for the end of next week' in Danny's world, seems like miles off and there's actually loads of time to do other things before that. "No bother, don't sweat it, it'll be alright" and then deal with whatever it was 'at the end of next week'. With an 80,000-word doctoral thesis to write, and my having not seen a single written word from Danny since his Transfer Report almost a year previous, this attitude and Danny's learning dispositions were the ingredients for potential catastrophe and disappointment for him, and an utter waste of my supervisory energy to boot. Challenge: with Danny's submission date being in over 2 years' time (September 2025) my sense of urgency was not at all matched by Danny's. Fear and scare-mongering would not work with Danny, and I don't like doing that anyway, so I decided patience and care might be good. It's more pleasant and I had nought to lose. So, with patience and care I plodded through the basics of field research again... but the one thing I had overlooked, sort of, was structure and planning, and Danny's absolute need for it, it's like a drug to him. As PhD supervisors we rather expect that experienced doctoral candidates can plan their projects, or even what they are going to do next week. We'd done this planning at application stage, then again at proposal stage and again in even more detail in the Transfer Report. So why the bloody hell can't he follow his own plan? I think the plan that I wrote with Danny on his kitchen table as pictured above was a plan jointly made, tailored to him, rather than a formal plan served up for academic referees and their approval. Also, perhaps importantly, I took time out to spend time in Danny's world, to see and experience some of what he saw and experienced. So, I used this 'home visit' opportunity to plan a calendar of Danny's exit strategy from the lobster claws of this blessed football club, Ironbridge, and mapped out some chapter ideas. I gave Danny every permission and encouragement to indulge his genuine skills and particular genius for thinking creatively. When I left on the train I thought, "well, he's either gonna do it, or he aint!"

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

ACT III



BACK IN THE FIELD

Prologue: *Season 2*

I set the scene with a more focused approach collecting data on the group’s identity.

Account 1

The Dark Arts (outward facing self)

The team weaponise reputation, identity is performed through tactics, psychology, and external perception.

Account 2

The Group (behind the outward facing self)

Backstage bonds and fractures expose the fragility of belonging and loyalty within the group.

Account 3

The Individuals (behind the group)

Archetypes and dualities emerge; JC and others show strength, vulnerability, and the search for identity beneath performance.

This act is presented in three styles. Account 1 as a reflective narrative, highlighting three key games through journal entries, Account 2 as a descriptive group ethnography, and Account 3 as individual portraits.



Upon exiting each Account, a reflexion follows to establish my own positionality. This act closes by bridging theory and practice, where interviews deepen the analysis of belonging, identity, and performance.

5.4 Act III. A road of trials: *Pen, Pad, Social Dynamics, and the Dark Arts*

Prologue: Season 2

Back on track, back to being a social observer, back to being a researcher. This phase looks at how the team see themselves, and how they collectively portray themselves to the world (Goffman, 1959). Despite JC's efforts to forge and display a different image, he ultimately concedes and embodies the very image that others perceive them to be (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). They struggle against external expectations but eventually settle into the roles and characteristics that define them in the eyes of others, accepting and perhaps even embracing the identity they initially resisted (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). With interplays between internal and external selves, forms the core of the group identity, their collective acceptance of the pre-assigned role of proverbial villains, is a means of forging belonging within the team (Jung, 1968; Holt and Dunn, 2006). Group dynamics, particularly in high-pressure environments like football, thrive on shared narratives, the story the team tells themselves, and the one they perform for the world, both grounds their sense of belonging and sharpens their edge as competitors (Tuckman, 1965; Franz, 2012).

With limited financial resources to work and compete with the majority of the other teams in the league, JC applies the '*dark arts*' or, as JC so aptly puts it, *shithousery*. This is JC's way of levelling things up, adopting cunning and ruthless tactics that characterise external reputations (Jones and Gratton, 2015). But more than just a tactic, it is a symbol of their resistance, almost a refusal to be dominated by teams with greater financial and technical resources. They play to their strengths, but they also play into the expectations of their opponents and the crowd, weaponizing their reputation as a psychological tool (Bandura, 1991). Identities performed on the pitch are crafted with the precision of a playwright. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens provides a way to understand their duality; the team operates with a clear distinction between their '*front stage*' and '*backstage*' selves. In the dressing room, the backstage, their bonds are revealed through sincere, honest moments of vulnerability, humour, and occasionally conflict (Goffman, 1990). Nonetheless, as they step onto the pitch, the transformation is dramatic. Each player becomes larger than life, adopting an exaggerated persona that aligns with the collective identity of '*a shithouse team.*' This theatricality promotes a sense of belonging, as even the most reserved players find a role in the shared story (Frank, 1995; Campbell, 2008).

This dynamic is not merely accidental but a transactional process (Burns, 1978). The players and their leader, JC, engage in subtle negotiations, shaping and reshaping their collective identity. Transactional theory helps illuminate how JC, by both embracing and resisting external stereotypes, creates an unspoken pact with his team, if they must play the villain, they will play it together, amplifying their unity and purpose (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This unity is essential for their survival in a league where every advantage must be earned, whether through skill, tactics, or mind games. The '*dark arts*' are thus not just tactics but

narratives, rooted in the team’s identity. Storytelling becomes the mechanism through which I will make sense of their outsider status, as they craft a story arc around their underdog role, one where skill and mental strength can outmatch technical superiority (Frank, 2010; Campbell, 1990). This story arc is deeply personal yet shared, connecting each player to the bigger picture. For JC, this narrative provides a framework to articulate the team’s challenges and strengths, offering a lens through which they see themselves as capable, unified, and on occasions, unbeatable (Campbell, 1991).

Meanwhile, the vipers continue to work their way through the dressing room, engaging in their usual way in an attempt to manipulate things to suit their own particular narrative (Goffman, 1966, 1990, 2005). Here lies tension, as much as the team creates a collective identity, individual players inevitably bring their own stories, goals, and agendas into the fold. These micro-narratives can clash with or bolster the shared vision, influencing power dynamics within the group (Burns, 1978). The vipers’ backstage scheming is a reminder that while the ‘dark arts’ may define the outward-facing self, the internal self remains fluid, challenged, and complex (Jung, 1968; Gill and Williams, 2008). Through this interplay of performance, belonging, and identity negotiation, the team not only survives but thrives. They demonstrate that sometimes, it is not just skill or resources that dictate success, but the ability to craft and embody a story that resonates within themselves, the dressing room and against the world that watches (Campbell, 2008; Goffman, 1959).

5.4.1 Account 1:

Account 1
Act III
The Dark Arts (*outward facing self*)

The Dark Arts (*outward facing self*)

The team’s outward identity has been forged not only on the field but also in the minds of opponents and their fans. Seen almost as pantomime villains, our reputation precedes us, both a burden and an advantage. Where Monty, who is now the chairman, has left his indelible stamp on the name and character

of Ironbridge FC, well, from the outside looking in anyway. Monty has created a sub-culture, having been known as Mr Ironridge for the best part of two decades. Always the underdog, especially in a league defined by disparities in resources and talent, Ironbridge embrace cunning and guile, tactics that level the playing field. The ‘dark arts’ become our calling card, mind games, time-wasting, and relentless psychological warfare. These performances are not mere strategy, but a theatrical embodiment of our social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), a response to the roles cast for us in some way, by others. As Goffman (1959) suggests, life is a stage, and here, the team members play their parts to perfection. This world sees what it

wants to see, and for our team, this meant being cast as villains in a story where triumph and beauty belong to others. Before we can make our first pass, our identity has been decided, the scrappers, unsophisticated underdogs who will do anything to win. For this reason, we lean more into the performance. With no money and a few standout players, we turn our greatest perceived flaw, our reputation, into our greatest strength.

Tactical time-wasting, feigning injuries, circumventing the Laws of the Game become the language of our art, tactics that don't just challenge the physical but attack the psychological (Cox, 2007). As JC so aptly puts it, *'If they think we're pricks, let's be the biggest pricks they've ever met.'* It is a philosophy born of necessity but executed with flair and precision. It works not only because it disrupts opponents but because it unifies us. The field becomes a stage, the game a play where we embodied the very caricatures our rivals despised. Life is indeed a stage, with every player donning a mask to fit the role dictated by the script (Frank, 1995; Goffman, 1959). Our social identity further informs our approach, the stronger the opposition paint us as an outgroup, the tighter we close our ranks, reinforcing an ingroup identity that thrives on defiance (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), unity in adversity creates strength (Machiavelli, 2003; Tuckman, 1965). The *'dark arts'* are not just about winning games, they are about survival, about carving a space where we can belong, even if that space is marked by contempt.

As we moved through the season, it became clear that our *'dark arts'* are not just tactical, they are psychological, building on the principles of manipulation (Griffith and Griffith, 2018). Psychological manipulation for us is persuading others through our underhanded means, this is an essential part of our team's self-conception. In football, it isn't just about how well we play, but how we make our opponents feel, this can give us an advantage. We are constantly testing their mental fortitude, applying pressure when they least expected it. This game is not just about physical battles, it's also about mental dominance (Lai, 2020). Feigning injury or distracting the referee is not merely about time wasting, it is about altering the emotional dynamics of the game. By forcing our opponents into uncomfortable situations, we gain an advantage they are not readily prepared for. Every foul is calculated, every perceived *'mistake'* is a ploy designed to influence the flow of the game, making us more than just a team of fighters, we are masters of the psychological game, this is war.

All warfare is based on deception (Sun Tzu, 2006), our deceptive tactics are not about lying outright, but about bending the truth, manipulating perception, and crafting a narrative that throws our opponents off balance. Strategies of misdirection and controlling the narrative are embedded within our tactics, transforming the psychological aspect of the game into a strategic advantage (Griffith and Griffith, 2018; Sun Tzu, 2006). This reflects the Stoic principle of maintaining control over perception, bending circumstances to serve your purpose (Aurelius, 2006). These types of tactics in football are not always visible to the casual observer, *'dark arts'*

work by manipulating the flow of the game and the perceptions of those involved, including the officials (Lai, 2020). These principles are central to our identity, both on and off the pitch, no matter how good our opponents are, if we can manipulate their psychological state, we have already won half the battle before the first ball is even kicked.

These are more than just strategy, our adoption of these tactics are identity construction, deeply rooted in social performance. This is the *‘backstage’* and *‘frontstage’* of social life creating distinct identities for the individuals and the whole group (Goffman, 1959). For our team, the dressing room is our backstage, this is where we discussed tactics, joke about our role as the outlaws (Jung, 2003) and prepare to face the world collectively. When we emerged onto the pitch, we assume our frontstage persona, one that matches the negative stereotypes others have of us. Our self is shaped by the roles assigned to us by society (Goffman, 1959), and rather than resist the label of *‘pricks’*, we played it up to the fullest. We perform for the crowd, for the cameras, and for our opponents, embodying the caricature they expected from us yet finding power in that performance.

Our aim is to *‘rattle’* the opponent, where they spend more time focused on us than they do the game. This then becomes a battle of minds, or more specifically, mind games. If the opponent is quick-tempered, we will target him, or seek to irritate him (Sun Tzu, 2006). This idea encapsulates how we use our reputation, our infamous, aggressive persona as a tool to irritate and destabilise. We know that in a game where talent disparity existed, we can level the playing field by unsettling our opponents emotionally. By creating an atmosphere of chaos, doubt, and discomfort, we draw them into a game of our own making (Nietzsche, 2014). What Sun Tzu (2006) teaches us in the realms of warfare, we apply to the football pitch, we aim to dominate through psychological tactics, mislead through calculated deception, and win not just the game but the narrative around it (Andersen, 2005).

Through these influences, theory, philosophy, and practice, the so called *‘dark arts’* become an identity, an adopted role in which we thrive. No longer just a tactic, it becomes a way of being, a performance that is played on our greatest strength, our ability to disrupt, destabilise, and control the psychological terrain of the game. As we explore the power dynamics, we have the will to assert ourselves in adversity (Nietzsche, 1968), although, as we embraced this role, we also know the cost of such a performance (Burns, 1978). Goffman (1959) also warns us that the *‘backstage’* reveals the true self, and behind our villainous front, we are a team trying to carve out a space for survival, a space to belong. In this way, the dark arts, though initially a survival mechanism, become inextricably linked with our own identity, shaping not just how others see us, but how we see ourselves.

5.4.1.1 [Journal Entry 1] The Rewritten Script

Saturday the 17th of September 2022

Away to Loxley Football Club

FA Cup Second Qualifying Round

KO time: 3pm

The journey to Loxley was loaded with intention, our minds sharpened not by thoughts of glory, but by the necessity to survive and sabotage. This wasn't just another game; it was a theatre where reputations could be redefined or reinforced. For JC, the stage was especially poignant, this place was his first stop after being released from Premier League team Bridetown as a teenager, before signing for Ironbridge, he is known by the fans as both son and stranger. This setting offered an opportunity for a script only we could write. Preparation for this game was meticulous, unconventional, but detailed. Two scouting missions allowed us to dissect Loxley's structure, their strengths, their weaknesses, and the spaces in between where opportunities could be created or exploited. JC's directive was to know our enemy (Sun Tzu, 2006), the plan was as psychological as it was tactical, with the beauty of the 'dark arts' that lay in the duality, disrupt and unify, repelling the enemy while galvanising our own ranks. FA Cup fixtures are initially localised, promoting local rivalries and bragging rights, amplifying the stakes and giving meaning to the local fans. Loxley, a league above and regarded as one of the county's elite teams, saw this as a formality. In their script, Ironbridge were the spirited underdogs, present only to be swept aside for the amusement of their crowd. But we came to rewrite that narrative. JC's philosophy was clear, a blend of strategic disruption and psychological manipulation (Lai, 2020; Griffith and Griffith, 2018).

Arriving at the ground, Loxley's management greeted us with a mix of familiarity and dismissal, highlighting that he had seen us play several occasions. They warned us against any underhand tactics, declaring that such antics wouldn't work on a team of their calibre. At least they knew who we were. We shook hands, and they walked away, JC looked at me with a wry smile on his face, a non-verbal assertion that we had already prepared to challenge not just their players, but their presumptions. Our team has distinct attributes, pace on the flanks, tenacity in midfield, and trickery upfront. Although,

leadership on the pitch was our Achilles' heel, a gap JC sought to fill with J'Dog. Once a teammate, but later discarded in JC's cultural overhaul, J'Dog's return carries the weight of potential redemption. It's safe to say that JC and J'Dog have not always seen eye to eye, but mutual respect is evident. J'Dog's role in this play is that of pantomime villain, master disruptor, and has been carefully chosen to do so. He thrives on antagonism, feeding on the boos of opposition crowds, for this match, he will embody the shadow archetype, the figure who confronts the suppressed fears and desires of the collective (Jung, 1959). Tactically, knowing we would have long spells without the ball, we prepare to frustrate Loxley at every turn. Shutting down their danger man, a prolific number nine, by cutting off his supply lines and exploiting his frustrations. Defensive instructions of occupy the ground your enemy must hasten to defend (Sun Tzu, 2006). Loxley do not travel well, losing points on the road, especially in midweek. JC's mantra was that of restraint, play for the draw, bring them back to our ground, and then dismantle them from there.

The game kicks off, and our strategy immediately takes hold, fouls, jostling, and verbal's set the tone. By the fifteen-minute mark, two cautions, Clint for a cynical foul, and Brady for squaring up to their enforcer announces our intent. The opposition, technically superior, grow visibly agitated. On the half-time whistle, walking back to the dressing rooms, JC amplifies the tension by addressing the referee within earshot of their number nine, he plants seeds of doubt about officiating bias and delivers a scathing remark aimed at their striker. This results in a confrontation, or what is a calculated disruption, shifting the striker's focus from the game to JC himself. It was pure performance to manipulate the mindset of those involved (Goffman, 1959). In the dressing room, JC switched roles, the fiery provocateur gives way to the calm strategist. 'We're halfway there,' he said. 'Keep your heads, stick to the plan, and get them back to ours.' His duality, frontstage chaos, backstage composure exemplifies dramaturgical principles (Goffman, 1959) and reflects the Stoic art of mastering internal calm to respond to external adversity (Aurelius, 2006). Each player, exhausted but confident, absorb his words, whilst the second act awaits.

The second half begins with renewed purpose, the opposition, rattled by our first-half antics, faltering. Then, the breakthrough,

Connor Lawton scores on a transitional breakaway in the 54th minute, a roar erupts, not just from the players but from the collective persona we had created. The home crowd, silent at first, then the hostility intensifies, their groans signalling our success in unsettling their team. As Loxley push forward, desperate for an equaliser, our tactics darken. Liam, our goalkeeper, again feigns injury under JC's signal, halting momentum and inciting further frustration. The clock becomes our ally, the opposition our unwitting accomplices in this theatrical farce, a tactic that embodies pragmatism, the belief that the ends justify the means (Machiavelli, 2003). Their manager recognising that the goalkeeper is the only player on the pitch that cannot be asked to leave the field of play after receiving treatment, furiously points to his watch and yells 'they are running the clock down'. He then casts an angry look in our direction, as JC calmly smiles back at him.

With 90 minutes almost up, we had surpassed even our own plans, but then a wonder strike in the dying seconds draws Loxley level. Nonetheless, the damage has been done, the replay will be at our home ground on Tuesday night, where we can have more of an influence, home advantage. Days later, Loxley were on the end of a 4-0 rout, as the phase two performance underscored the psychological unravelling initiated in this first encounter. JC's prophecy about their travel woes was fulfilled, and the financial windfall for Ironbridge FC was secured. These matches were a masterclass in weaponizing perception and identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The 'dark arts' were not mere tactics but an ethos, transforming limitations into leverage. Like Campbell's proverbial hero, our journey required embracing the shadow, navigating adversities through cunning and guile (Campbell, 2008). Our archetypal heroes were all there, JC as the mentor shaping the group's collective identity, J'Dog as the shadow who thrived in antagonism, and the team itself as a band of misfits uniting against a common foe. In the grand theatre of the FA Cup, the rewritten script elevates Ironbridge from mere participants to protagonists in their own fable. Even the crowd's contempt, the opposition's frustration, JC's wry smile all became part of a narrative larger than the game itself. This is not just football, it is performance art, where shithousery and strategy converge to create a singular form of identity.

5.4.1.2 [Journal Entry 2] The Prodigal Hero

Saturday the 19th of November 2022

Home to Cranford Town Football Club

Ionian League - South-East Division

KO time: 3pm

Big spending Cranford Town arrive with the sort of entourage the likes of Beyonce would travel with. I am stood outside the dressing rooms watching the kitman wheel several large silver containers past me, knowing what question was coming once they unload them. This is a statement of power and wealth before a ball was even kicked, the visitors were tipped as league favourites, propped up by their millionaire chairman turned manager, a man inflating both the club's budget and his own ego. JC summons me to the office. 'Clint says he should sit this one out, still feeling that knock,' he begins. I'm not convinced. Clint's retreat seems less about injury and more about evading the looming battle. 'Also, J'Dog will step out, I'm starting Tab and JT at the back. I need to see how they work together.' I nod, suppressing the instinct to argue, knowing this would place me in the dugout beside two players whose company is as venomous as the adopted name I have given them, the Vipers. 'Yeah, great idea,' I said, with a forced smile that JC sees right through. A knock at the door interrupts us. It's Cranford's kitman, looking for somewhere to store the silver boxes. 'That dressing room is really small,' he ventures. Without hesitation, JC replies, 'No, mate, not really,' before closing the door in his face with a smile that hinted at the mischief yet to come. Outside, the grumbling kitman shuffles off, thwarted. JC turns to me, and smirks equal part amusement and rebelliousness. JC looking to win before the battle begins, introducing subtle frustrations that chip away at the opponent's composure (Sun Tzu, 2006).

From the office window, we spot the referee arriving. 'Oh no, it's this geezer,' JC groans. 'I can't stand him. You're dealing with him this afternoon.' I nod, knowing my role too well, charm the referee, plant seeds of doubt, and subtly tip the scales. It is a delicate art, flattering while undermining, befriending while manipulating. JC's Machiavellian approach of power lies in controlling how events are perceived, ensuring the referee's perspective tilts ever so slightly in our favour (Machiavelli, 2003). This involves briefing the referee before the game about the opposition players known for being volatile,

subtly ensuring that every tackle or comment they make lingers in the official's mind. At halftime, the tactic shifts to offering praise for the officials' performance, while gently pointing out potential errors to sow just enough doubt to make them question their morality. The same approach continues as the teams return for the second half, sharing observations from our players that plant the idea of targeting specific opponents psychologically, prompting the referee to scrutinise their reactions more closely. It is manipulation by accumulation (Griffith and Griffith, 2018) small but compounding acts that again can tilt the entire narrative. In this game of shadows, even the assistant referee becomes a tool. Positioned at our end of the pitch, his proximity offers us the opportunity to speak calmly while forcing Cranford's bench to shout their instructions and protests across the field, appearing hostile in contrast to our serene demeanour.

The whistle blows, and the game begins. Cranford look sharp, but at home, we are a fortress. Tab and JT prove formidable at the back, though their effectiveness only deepens the resentment of J'Dog, seated directly behind me. Flanked by Clint, wrapped in a blanket like a disinterested pensioner, the Vipers begin their usual whispers, envenomating, stirring discontent among the substitutes. The game settles into a rhythm, our tactics disrupting their flow. The ball goes out of play near the dugout, JC traps it under his foot. As the Cranford fullback approaches, JC rolls it away just enough to provoke irritation. The player shoves him, drawing the assistant referee's flag. JC raises his hands in mock innocence. 'Come on, ref,' he says, 'I was giving him the ball.' The referee issues a verbal warning to the Cranford player while JC turns to us, winking. By the 37th minute, we capitalise on their goalkeeper's errors twice, going into halftime 2-0 up. Crossing the pitch with the officials, I execute JC's plan, praising their performance while subtly highlighting moments they might reconsider. Inside, JC delivers his halftime speech, a study in duality. The troublemaker on the touchline was gone, replaced by a calm strategist. He speaks of control, urging the team to creatively manage time. This duality of balancing internal calm with external chaos, projects composure even as he attempts to manipulate the battlefield (Aurelius, 2006). 'This isn't just football,' he said. 'It's art. Tactical art.'

The second half begins with mounting tension. Cranford find momentum, pulling one back in the 69th minute. JC immediately scanned the bench for solutions. 'J'Dog,' he barks, 'warm up.' The shadow archetype once again steps into the light, his chaotic energy a double-edged sword. 'Dan, show him the set pieces,' JC instructs, handing me the book as J'Dog jogs back to the dugout, gearing up to enter the game. As I run him through the set plays, he casually slips on his pads, tapes his socks, and pulls his shirt over his head. 'Up front, yeah?' he quips, fully aware he's a defender with no chance of leading the line. I roll my eyes and continue. I emphasise the plan, run the clock down, stay solid, and hold his ground. The strategy here is simple, do not fight their strengths head-on, but frustrate and exhaust them into mistakes (Sun Tzu, 2006). J'Dog's reputation precedes him, infamous for racking up red cards yet beloved by fans for his unpredictable, erratic, and eccentric style. A flawed enigma on the pitch, he's both infuriatingly chaotic and undeniably heroic when it matters most. When he comes on, it is with a singular focus, to disrupt and to dominate. Every tackle, every clearance is charged with his unorthodox heroism. Then, in the 84th minute, the moment arrived. As the ball was whipped into the box, J'Dog, a defender by trade, surged forward like a man possessed. His diving header was pure poetry, a goal so audacious it felt mythical. 3 -1. Even JC, rarely one for overt admiration, looked stunned.

Play resumes, and we focus on disrupting their momentum. The ball rolls out for a Cranford throw near JC, their player, anticipating a delay, quickly grabs a spare ball to take the throw while our defence is momentarily disorganised. Just as he throws it toward their forward, who is preparing to break through on goal, JC casually rolls another ball onto the pitch, forcing the referee to halt play due to two balls being in play. This theatrical disruption embodies the essence of psychological warfare (Griffith and Griffith, 2018), create chaos that forces the enemy to lose focus. Their dugout erupts in fury, while JC offers a calm, measured apology to the referee. Each 'dark art' tactic unfolds with meticulous precision. Disruption is not about brute force but knowing where to destabilise (Machiavelli, 2003).

JC turns to the bench and instructs them to put the spare match balls in the ball holder, ensuring only the one in play remains accessible. With the Ironbridge players fully aware of the tactics at

hand, Gilly clears the ball from our penalty area with such force that it sails over the stands and out of the stadium, landing somewhere in the car park. Cranford, eager to restart, looks toward the dugouts for a spare ball, only to find none in sight. The referee whistles and gestures for a replacement, while we feign an innocent scramble to locate one, despite knowing exactly where they are. Frustrated, a Cranford player storms into the dugout to retrieve a ball, sparking a scuffle as he and JC wrestle over the ball holder, though it's clear only one of them is genuinely trying. The referee intervenes to address their player, further eating into the clock and playing perfectly into our hands, another masterstroke in the pantomime of disruption. Meanwhile, Liam, our goalkeeper, perfects the art of phantom injuries, needing the attention of the physio once again. Cranford snatch a late consolation goal, the final whistle blows, 3-2. Cranford's millionaire chairman/manager leaves the pitch deflated; his entourage silenced. For us, the victory was more than three points, it is a demonstration of the dark arts as a resource, triumphing over wealth.

We embraced our identity, not merely a team, but a narrative. Misfits, strategists, and shithouses alike, we weaponized perception and manipulate momentum. The 'dark arts' are not simply a tactic, they are the language of survival, a script written in the shadows and performed under the harsh lights of the stadium.

5.4.1.3 [Journal Entry 3] The Dark Art of War

Monday the 26th of December 2022

Home to Blackhawk Football Club

Ionian League - South-East Division

KO time: 1pm

Blackhawk, our bitter rivals and today's visitors, have been struggling near the bottom of the league. However, a recent managerial change has brought Silas Slade in, an experienced head at this level, raising concerns about the morale boost their new regime might bring. JC's gamesmanship begins long before the starting whistle on this freezing Boxing Day. When Ironbridge redecorated the dressing rooms in the summer, JC ensured all but one power socket was removed, leaving a single outlet inconveniently placed in the corridor leading to the pitch, just outside the main dressing room. This tactic is designed to disrupt the opponent's preparation, forcing them to compromise

their comfort and mental focus. This is to destabilise the opponent subtly but effectively, seeding frustration and disarray before the battle begins (Machiavelli, 2003). Teams often resorted to trailing an extension lead through the ajar dressing room door, leaving them exposed to the cold corridor. On days like today, this disruption becomes even more evident, especially with the absence of heating, another deliberate choice by JC, turns the away dressing room into an icebox.

As the Blackhawk assistant manager complains to the groundsman about the temperature, JC walks past, nonchalantly flicks the power switch off that controls their stereo. The sudden silence amplifies the tension inside the room. Without a word, JC continues walking, his face betraying no emotion except for the faintest wry smile I have come to admire, a smile that seems to say, 'Play the hand you're dealt, and play it well.' JC's focus then turns to the matchday lineup. 'Who's the ref today?' he asks, scanning the program. 'Yes, I like this bloke, he's been good to us.' He hands me the set pieces to put up in the dressing room. Inside, I notice one of the vipers missing. I return to the office to find Clint chatting with JC. As I enter, Clint excuses himself with an air of practiced innocence, slipping out in a manner that betrayed his motives. I watch him walk away, his body language crisp and deliberate, like someone who had just delivered an agenda and was confident it had landed. What is he up to? JC's expression is telling. He leans back in his chair, a faint tension outlined across his forehead, before speaking. 'I might drop Clint in just behind the striker today, play a bit narrower, play him down the middle.' His words hang in the air. I can feel that the backstage plotting is shaping frontstage performances, as Clint's stage management highlights the subtle negotiation of power within the team (Goffman, 1959). I know exactly the place this idea had come from. The viper had struck again, planting his suggestion with precision and retreating before questions can follow. 'Yeah, not a bad idea,' I reply, masking my doubts. Clint's reluctance to track back against their tricky winger was clear, and this shift in formation suited his intentions more than the team's. Still, I keep my reservations to myself, knowing my role is to support, not challenge.

Warmups finished, JC and I grab a tea from the burger bar near the tunnel. As we pass the away dressing room, we heard music blaring

through the ajar door, forced open by the power cord. On our way back, JC flicks the external switch again, plunging the room into silence. The resulting moans of frustration echo down the corridor, but JC's expression remains unchanged. These are mind games, I thought, not malicious, just enough to tip the balance. Blackhawk and Ironbridge share a history, an infamous game that went viral and shaped a bitter rivalry. Though the players exchange pleasantries before kick-off, their familiarity does little to temper the undercurrent of animosity. The referee's whistle blows, and the game begins, each team cautiously feeling out the other. Ten minutes in, we earned a free kick just outside Blackhawk's penalty area. Clint steps up, his reputation as a set-piece specialist evident in the groans from Blackhawk's bench. He strikes the ball with precision, a strike that nestles perfectly into the top right corner. The keeper had no chance. 1-0, Ironbridge. Moments later, a quick interchange between Clint and Linton sees the latter thunder the ball home. 2-0 with just 17 minutes played. Maybe Clint's new role was working after all.

But Blackhawk find their feet, pressing Ironbridge's defensive line. Tab gives away a clumsy foul on the edge of the box earning him a caution and giving Blackhawk their own free-kick opportunity. Former Ironbridge player Christian Langford lines the ball up and strikes it high and wide, this elicits laughter from the home crowd. Moments later, Langford redeems himself with a ferocious shot into the bottom corner of Liam's goal. 2-1. The momentum is shifting. In the 36th minute, Blackhawk's winger, untracked, overloads the left back, cutting inside to curl the ball past Liam. 2-2. JC turns to me, his expression grim. 'We need to get in at 2-2, or this could be a disaster.' Gesturing to Liam, he is instructing him to go down, buying a bit of time. As Tanya, the physio, jogs onto the field, JC calls the outfield players to the bench. 'Relax,' he says to them. 'Take the sting out of the game, run the clock down, and get us to halftime.' This interplay again reflecting the Stoic principle of internal mastery to confront external challenges (Aurelius, 2006). His voice is calm but firm, a stark contrast to the chaos on the pitch. The players nod, shellshocked but compliant.

In the dressing room, JC delivers his halftime talk, a mix of praise and admonishment. 'CG, go back to your usual role. Cover the flanks and stop their overloads. We'll switch to a 4-3-3. Be expansive

but cautious.' The players review the set pieces and exchange words of encouragement. Outside, the air crackles with the tension of a game teetering on the edge. The second half resumes with Blackhawk applying pressure. A quick counterattack sees Clint loft the ball over their defensive line, setting Lawton free. One-on-one with the keeper, Lawton slots it home. 3-2, Ironbridge, 52nd minute. JC scrambles for his pad, mapping out the plan to secure the points. The players execute every time-wasting tactic in their arsenal, slow walks for throw-ins, deliberate delays on goal kicks, and exaggerated reactions to tackles. Again, careful orchestration and understanding of compounding manipulations to erode the opposition's focus and morale (Griffith and Griffith, 2018). The spare match balls disappear behind the dugout, leaving Blackhawk visibly frustrated. By the 82nd minute, Blackhawk's frustrations boiled over. Their long-throw specialist approaches the ball near the Ironbridge bench, only for one of our subs to kick it away. The burly defender's reaction shows he is rattled. 'We're in his head,' one of the subs shouts, but could we take advantage of it?

As stoppage time drags on, another solid Fierro tackle leaves a Blackhawk player sprawled on the ground. The ensuing scuffle sees both players booked, but the delay has again disrupted Blackhawk's momentum. The referee restarts play, and the rattled Blackhawk defender lashes out, confronting the Ironbridge bench. The second yellow card is inevitable, leaving Blackhawk down to ten men. The final whistle blows. JC meets the Blackhawk assistant manager at the halfway line, in between the dugouts. 'I wouldn't want to win a game like that,' the assistant sneers. JC, grins, and replies, 'Don't worry, you didn't.' This response captures the spirit of asserting control by transforming adversity into a narrative of dominance (Nietzsche, 1886). The Ironbridge dressing room erupts in celebration. JC's tactics, the players' grit, and the well-executed 'dark arts' had delivered three points. It shows that the beautiful game isn't always beautiful, but today, from our perspective, it has never looked better.

5.4.1.4 Reflexion



At that time the events narrated here consumed me, drawing me into the theatrics and story. Writing this now with two years of distance, the heat of that moment has given way to a more composed, more reflective lens. Back then it all seemed so straightforward, the gamesmanship, the *'dark arts'*, were just the roles we all played. But now with the benefit of time I can see the layers beneath.

I can see how much of what unfolded was not just about football, not just about tactics, but about identity. We wore the masks handed to us, played the roles everyone on the outside ascribed to us, and in doing so created something larger than the sum of our actions. The field was our stage, but like any performance there is always a backstage, a place where those masks slip, if only briefly (Goffman, 1959). Impression management feels especially apt when I think about the team, we were both the players and the playwrights, crafting a story that suited our narrative, one where survival and defiance were the central themes (Goffman, 1959). J'Dog embodied the archetypal shadow, not just for the team but for the narrative as a whole (Jung, 1959). He was the chaos we outwardly condemned but quietly relied upon, the figure who carried the weight of antagonism so that others could stand united against it. JC, always the mentor, shaping this narrative as much as the team, balancing his role with a precision that only becomes clearer in hindsight. Looking back at these antics, it felt almost mythological, a modern retelling of Campbell's (2008) hero's journey. Trials were faced, shadows embraced, and transformations achieved, not always efficiently, but always meaningfully.

What about the morality of it all? The *'dark arts'* as we so proudly called them, were never just tactics. They were our identity, our response to the uneven playing field of the situation. They allowed us to assert ourselves, to survive, but at what cost? What about the idea of the will to power, the need to assert oneself in adversity, even if it means stepping into the role of the villain (Nietzsche, 2014). Is it seductive to view this as strength, as a necessary evil in a world that rewards cunning? I wonder now with the benefit of time if we lost something in the process. Does the end justify the means, or do the means inevitably shape the end? This is where Machiavelli makes me question my role, my own morality. Is this pragmatism? If so, this type of pragmatism seems to be inspiring and unsettling both at the same time. Are we heroes carving a path to survival, or villains wearing away the values that make survival worth it? Or can it depend entirely on where you stand within the narrative? Considering this, from the perspective of the underdog, these strategies are empowering, a way to challenge the powerful, a way to even the playing field. Although, from the perspective of the idealist, these methods can feel corrosive, an erosion of integrity disguised as cleverness. However, in this moment we favoured pragmatism, we assured ourselves it was necessary, and in some ways even righteous. It's on reflection I see the ambiguity, the grey areas that were easier to ignore whilst embroiled in the action and when the stakes felt so high.

Personally, this chapter in the story is as much about my own role as it is about the team's. I was the observer, yes, but also a role within the story. As an ethnographer, my job was to observe, to document, to make sense of it all. But am I ever just an observer? I was involved, embroiled even, again drawn into the very dynamics I was trying to study. How often did I shape my own actions, my own presence, to fit the story I thought I was telling? How often did my biases creep in, not just in how I interpreted events but in how I participated in them? Even at the point of writing this reflection, I struggle with the tension between truth and narrative. Have I again demonised those who were simply navigating their own complexities, their own roles within the group? The vipers, for instance, felt real in the moment, their actions warranted the label, or so it seemed at the time. They too are also human, multi-layered, capable of kindness and redemption, this exploration of the villainous archetypes reminds me that what we label as *'dark'* is often a projection of our own fears and suppressed desires. We all have unique masks, and we all have the choice of what one we want the world to see at any given moment. These concepts of dark or dark arts, in consideration to this group are not purely malicious, they are born of necessity, a response to the disparities of the situation. Principles of deception in warfare feel somehow relevant here, the use of tactics to level the playing field, to challenge teams with more resources, more talent, more everything (Sun Tzu, 2006). Although caution needs to be taken, as deception, no matter how well-intentioned, has a way of destroying the very values it seeks to protect (Nietzsche, 2014).

I feel that this chapter, this story, can only be told through the power of storytelling, using a narratology that feels almost mythological in nature. Through these accounts, I see not just a team but a reflection of larger dynamics, of power, identity, and belonging (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). I see how stories can shape reality, how they can unite a group, how they can make sense of chaos. Although I can also see the limits, the biases, the ethical dilemmas. Equally as an ethnographer, I have acquired enough knowledge to know that it is possible to balance involvement with research, to be both within and without, though the line is never as clear as one might think, or hope. This section is about the masks we wore, about the roles we performed, not for us, but for the world around us. Now considerations need to be made about every performance, and the fact that each has a backstage, and it is there, in the quiet spaces where no audience watches, that the real story begins (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, as this reflection closes one section, it opens another. If this was about the front stage masks, the next will be about the faces beneath them, about the truths we reveal when the crowd disperses and the curtain falls. The dressing room becomes the stage for the social actors, where a different persona needs to take centre stage, a persona not dictated by the expectations of the audience but shaped by the intimate, unvarnished negotiations of identity, power, and belonging. It is here, in the backstage chaos of camaraderie and conflict, that the group's true dynamics emerge, where the fragile balance between individuality and unity is both tested and forged.

5.4.2 Account 2:

Account 2 Act III

The Group (behind the outward facing self)

The Group (behind the outward facing self)

This group is like every other I have been involved with, as a player, a manager, a coach, and now an observer, but in some ways, it is like no other. The dressing room, that sacred yet chaotic safe place, is a world within a world. It is a place where individuality and unity coexist uncomfortably, each holding the other in tension. Some players come here to escape the grind of daily life, others to prove their worth, but to feel part of something larger than themselves. These reasons alone are performances in their own right, masks worn to conceal the rawness of what truly drives them. This is the backstage, the space where the team negotiates its identity, and the drama is as intricate as any play on a theatrical stage (Goffman, 1959). JC, the architect of this unconventional collective, has crafted the dressing room, it is a complex social sub-culture. To the untrained eye, it might seem a disordered mishmash of personalities, but JC has worked with precision, assembling this group like a playwright casting his characters. Each role is vital, from the star performers to the supporting cast. In this space, togetherness is as important as skill, and a player who cannot navigate the unspoken rules of the dressing room will soon find themselves on the outside looking in (Bourdieu, 1986). His management team consist of me and Tanya the physiotherapist. You might expect having a female physio to create challenges in this environment, but not in this dressing room. Tanya has been with the team for twenty years and is one of the closest confidants of Monty, the former manager, now chairman. She is as integral to the framework of the club as the players themselves; she is a fixture of stability and trust. When JC stepped into the role of manager, Tanya was part of the legacy, an appointment made long before his tenure, having known her for some time, JC welcomes her presence, though it's clear the chairman likely ensured her position was non-negotiable.

This dressing room, like the team itself is a space of contrast, where design meets utility, and every element has a purpose. It is an L-shaped room, a peculiar design that demands careful choreography from any manager or coach. Visibility is key, and the room's shape forces the speaker to navigate its angles, ensuring that every player, no matter where they sit, is drawn into the collective eye. The layout itself becomes a stage, the players stationed like actors awaiting direction (Goffman, 1959). On entering, the left wall immediately catches the eye, a line of players stationed there, their postures casual but their presence anything but. The right wall extends deeper into the room, curving into the seated area where the rest of the squad sits. Straight ahead, a short corridor, four or five paces deep leads to a small toilet, a private space in a room where privacy is scarce. To the right of this corridor is the shower block,

an intimate arrangement of six open planned showers, a stark reminder of the rawness of this environment. Here, players walk freely, sometimes to take a phone call, sometimes to urinate into the drain if the toilet is occupied. There is no pretence in this area, only functionality.

The room itself has orange and black decor, the club’s signature colours dominate the space, a visual assertion of identity. Overhead lockers are black, displaying JC’s uncompromising mantra of **TRUST – UNITY – RESPONSIBILITY – HARD WORK – RESPECT**. These words are not mere decoration, they are the pillars of belonging, the non-negotiables of this team. To step into this space is to accept these values, an understood agreement that binds the individual to the collective. The floor, fitted with artificial grass, is an unusual but deliberate touch, a subtle psychological preparation for the battle that lies ahead. Beneath the benches, a small storage space to accommodate personal belongings, adding to the sense of order and readiness. Set piece plans and tactical shapes adorn the walls, the visual cues of a manager who treats preparation as an art form. This is a dressing room designed for both comfort and combat, a space where the rawness of the game intersects with the precision of strategy.

If the home dressing room is a haven of calculated comfort, the away dressing room is its antithesis, a space of calculated discomfort. Smaller, darker, and definitely less inviting, it lacks natural light and displays an air of neglect. Its walls, painted in an intentionally faded pink, are dirtied for effect, a psychological ploy aimed at unsettling visitors. The showers, just two at the end of a narrow corridor, feel almost like an afterthought, a stark contrast to the spacious six-shower block in the home dressing room. Between the unvarnished benches that line the opposing walls, a single physio bed dominates the space, rendering movement awkward and cramped. Electricity is a luxury not afforded here, a lone power socket sits teasingly outside the door in the corridor, another small but intentional inconvenience, marginal gains, however slight, can tip the balance (Syed, 2015; Carron and Hausenblas, 1998; Carron, 1982; Carron et al., 2002; Carron and Spinks, 1993).

Within the home dressing room, each player is assigned a place, their positions reflecting the unspoken order of the team. The goalkeepers occupy the first seats on the left, with the number one jersey, historically and symbolically worn by goalkeepers and the backup keeper, wearing the equally traditional number thirteen, a nod to football’s enduring superstitions. From here, the seating order follows the traditional rhythm of teams, defenders, midfielders, forwards, and substitutes, each occupying their section like pieces on a chessboard. But some arrangements defy the order. Clint who wears seven claims the black spot, the obscured corner seated at the end in the corner, a subtle but significant act of autonomy. On the opposite side of the room, defenders like Tab, JT, and the younger players cluster together, joined by J’Dog, who has wedged his number fifteen shirt amongst them. His persistence in sitting with the defenders, despite no longer wearing the coveted number five, reflects a quiet assertion of

identity, a veteran player staking his claim in a team where his role is no longer assured. JC, ever the pragmatist, chooses his battles wisely and allows this small concession. The midfielders and forwards occupy the next section, a mix of youth and experience, of fire and composure. Neil Linton, the charismatic number nine, and Brady O'Hara, the reflective number eight, sit at the nexus of the group, their presence bridging the room's divisions. On the far side, Fierro and Dean Ferraro embody camaraderie and determination, while Lawton and Gilly add their own distinct energies to the mix. As mentioned, Clint sits next to the set-piece wall, his positioning both literal and figurative, hinting at his role within the group. He is close enough to influence but far enough to observe, a tactician even in his choice of placement (Tuckman, 1965; Bohorquez, Lorenzo and Garrido, 2012).

This dressing room is not just a physical space, it is a scaled version of the team's dynamics, a living breathing entity shaped by its occupants. Here, bonds are forged, hierarchies are negotiated, and identities are affirmed. It is both shelter and battleground, a place where the collective and the individual exist in a delicate, ever-shifting balance. In the moments before the game, this room buzzes with anticipation, the air thick with unspoken hopes and fears. Though as the players step beyond its walls onto the pitch, they carry with them not just the tactics and instructions from their manager, but the unyielding unseen essence of a group that is, at its core, a family (Bandura, 1977). The dressing room, much like the stage of a well-rehearsed drama, has its leading men, its supporting cast, and its extras waiting in the wings. While figures like Brady, Clint, and Linton dominate the spotlight, their presence is both balanced and complicated by others who contribute to the complex sub-culture that is the group. Among these are J'Dog, JT, Tab, Gilly, and Lawton, each bringing a distinct energy to the room, each playing a part in the production whether or not they are consciously aware of their role. J'Dog, once the face of the dressing room, is now a character caught between eras. He is a player whose shadow looms large, not just because of his talent but because of the narrative he's carried with him for years. In a different time, under a different manager, he was the alpha, the voice, a significant presence. But under JC's regime, he is reduced to something of a relic, his former dominance now tempered by the shifting dynamics of a group that no longer revolves around him. He is the archetypal trickster (Jung, 1959), stirring the pot when it suits him, yet quietly yearning for relevance in a team that has moved on without asking his permission. Watching him now, he is an undeniable tragedy, his antics, quick jibes, exaggerated swagger are not just performances for the others but for himself, as though trying to convince the room, and perhaps his own reflection, that he still belongs.

JT and Tab, on the other hand, are quieter figures, content to navigate the margins of the group, JT a player of precision and pragmatism, carries an understated confidence that sets him apart. He doesn't seek the spotlight; he doesn't need it. His role is that of the steady hand, the calming presence that smooths the rough edges of an otherwise volatile ensemble. He represents the glue that binds the storming and norming phases of group formation (Tuckman,

1965). He is neither the loudest nor the most visible, but his reliability is a quiet anchor in a room full of waves. Tab alike, retreats into his own world, an enigma even to those who know him best. His contributions to the team are undeniable, he has an uncanny ability to read the game, to anticipate the flow of play, but socially he is enigmatic. He exists at the fringes of the group, not out of exclusion but by choice. He embodies a duality, moving fluidly between engagement and withdrawal, between the performance required on the pitch and the introspection he seeks off it. Gilly, Lawton and Ferraro add energy of the group, Gilly is a raw, untamed potential that every dressing room needs to have. Lawton, a player who thrives on instinct and flair, an intellectual who displays a clean-living family man. Ferraro’s confidence borders on cockiness, but it’s a youthful arrogance that hasn’t yet been dulled by the harsh realities of football or life. Lawton’s style on the pitch mirrors his demeanour in the dressing room, calculated, deliberate, and quietly effective. He is the player who studies the set pieces long after everyone else has left, the one who asks questions not to show off but to learn.

Together, these players add texture to the group dynamic, shaping it in ways both overt and subtle. J’Dog’s struggle for relevance injects tension into the dressing room, forcing others to navigate the space he occupies, while JT’s steadiness and Tab’s enigmatic presence balance the emotional highs and lows. They each represent different stages of identity and belonging, from J’Dog’s shadowed legacy to Lawton’s emerging promise, weaving their narratives into the collective fabric of the team. These archetypes, while distinct, reflect the diversity of energy necessary in a high-functioning team (Jung, 1959; Edinger, 1972). The dressing room operates like any other group setting, a place where I have seen the stages of group formation unfold in real time. Forming, where players tentatively seek their place within the hierarchy, the storming, where egos clash and conflicts arise, norming, where rules are established, and roles solidify and, finally, the performing, where the group becomes a cohesive unit, functioning as more than the sum of its parts. However, this process is never linear (Carron, 1982), the group shifts and evolves with every game, every new player, every victory, and every defeat. The backstage negotiations are constant, an echo that cohesion is both task-oriented and social (Carron, 1982). The task, winning games, this binds them, but the social glue that holds them together is more fragile, more vulnerable to the pressures of performance and expectation. The backstage negotiations are constant, revealing the interplay of personal ambition and collective cohesion, as players navigate the push-and-pull forces that bind them to the group (Goffman, 1959).

As I scan the room, the scene is both familiar and unique, a ritualistic performance that unfolds much the same way each week yet brimming with subtleties that mark the individuality of the players. Each prepares in their own way, their pre-game rituals an intricate choreography that reflects the diverse personalities and shared purpose of the group, some actions are unique to the individual and some a concept of social learning (Bandura, 1977). Some sit quietly, staring into the middle distance, lost in their own thoughts, finding solace in the solitude

before the storm. Others huddle in small groups, discussing roles, patterns, and set plays with a precision that addresses their sense of responsibility. Then there are those who diffuse the tension with light-hearted humour, banter, their remarks and laughter grounding the room in a momentary levity before the weight of the game descends. Even the footwear alone speaks volumes, the wide players and forwards opt for colourful boots, flashes of individuality that reflect their flair and creativity on the pitch. In stark contrast, the defenders are steadfast in their choice of plain black boots, a no-nonsense emblem of their solidity and simplicity. It is in these small details that the roles and personas of each player are revealed, the quiet chemistry between individual expression and collective identity. Although they prepare together, each player carries their own narrative, they are a collective, yes, but within that collective, they are individuals navigating their own paths, wrestling with their own doubts, and chasing their own ambitions. The goalkeeper, Liam, meticulously tapes his gloves, his focus unwavering as he mentally rehearses his role in the unfolding drama. Tab, the defender, smears Vaseline across his brows with deliberate precision, a warrior preparing for battle, whilst Fierro, ever the steadfast presence, stretches methodically, his calm demeanour denying the storm he's ready to unleash on the pitch. Each action is a piece of the ritual, and each player's ritual is a glimpse into their world.

What fascinates me most is how these individual rituals merge into a collective rhythm, while they prepare together, each player carries their own narrative. They start as solitary figures, each consumed by their own routines, yet as the minutes tick by, they start to become a unit. Now donning their costumes, they become one collective unconscious, a shared identity that transcends individual differences (Jung, 1959). In these moments, their individuality is subsumed by the collective, the team becoming a singular, unified entity prepared to face the external world. As I watch them, their preparations seem almost theatrical, each player moving through their choreographed motions before assuming their place in the shared drama, wearing the kit feels transformative, with each piece put on, the individuals combine into a singular entity. They become one, their unity expressed through the uniformity of their appearance, their readiness for the fight ahead. Even the seating arrangements are ritualised, week after week, even at away games, the players instinctively choose the same spots, as if their positions in the room are as fixed as their positions on the pitch. It is fascinating to witness the comfort they find in these habits, these unspoken agreements that provide a sense of order in a world often defined by chaos. They are creatures of habit, their rituals grounding them, connecting them to the familiar during the uncertainty of the game ahead.

Then there is me, pen and pad in hand, observing it all. Initially my presence was noticed, acknowledged even, as the researcher among them, but now, I have become invisible in plain sight. My role as an ethnographer has disappeared into the essence of the room, I am no longer the outsider peering in, I am part of the furniture, as ordinary as the physio tending to an injury. My pen and pad are as much a part of me as their boots are to them, my presence

so constant that it is no longer questioned. Somehow, I have become covert through overt familiarity, my notetaking absorbed into the pulse of the dressing room, accepted as simply part of the game. In these moments I am struck by the layers of performance unfolding before me, the players are performing for themselves, for each other, and for the game yet to be played. I too am performing, balancing my roles as observer, participant, and narrator. Together, we share this space, a place where the masks of individuality and unity are both worn and removed, and where the real drama begins before a single whistle is even blown. Take Fierro, for example, his journey from outsider to being a key member of the group is a testament to the power of perseverance and performance. Initially he was met with scepticism, even hostility, but Fierro's relentless work ethic and quiet resilience forced the group to accept him. His energy on the pitch allows players like Clint to conserve theirs, making him invaluable not just in terms of skill but also in terms of group dynamics. Fierro's story is a hero's journey, he faced his trials, most notably the vipers' venomous attacks, and emerged stronger, transforming not only himself but the group as well (Campbell, 2008). Fierro's acceptance has reshaped the team's identity, proving that even the most established barriers can be broken down.

In contrast to Fierro, Clint and Linton represent a different kind of influence, they are both charming and brash, with an almost Machiavellian precision (Machiavelli, 2003). Their friendship is both a genuine bond and a strategic alliance, one that increases their power within the group. Their behaviours, both positive and negative are mirrored by others (Bandura, 1977). They set the tone, for better or worse, and their influence is both a glue that binds and a wedge that divides. JC appears to tolerate this dynamic, perhaps sometimes even leverage it, understanding that such characters are both assets and liabilities in equal measure. Then there is Brady, the captain, the designated leader. On the surface, he is the team's leading man, the intermediary between JC and the players. Yet beneath the surface lies a vulnerability that the team senses, even if they do not fully understand it. Brady's struggles, arriving late, leaving early, the subtle signs of personal turmoil are a reminder that leadership is not a fixed role but a fluid negotiation, shaped by context and need. The team often adapts, filling the gaps where Brady falls short, proving that leadership in this context is not about dominance but about collective resilience.

All of this is the construct of JC, a figure of duality, his public persona is brash, confident, and occasionally confrontational, a manager who thrives on projecting authority. Although behind closed doors, in the office, a space for just me and him, when his mask comes off, he is reflective, even vulnerable, I see a man grappling with the weight of his role. He confides in me in these times, seeking advice or simply a sounding board. It is in these moments that I see the Stoic principles at work, a quiet determination to endure, to learn, and to grow (Aurelius, 2006). Yet even Stoicism has its limits, and I wonder if JC's frontstage performance occasionally isolates him from the support he needs. However, when JC steps into the dressing

room, he commands the space with a presence that is almost cinematic, an aura that draws every gaze like a magnetic force. He is the focal point, a figure akin to Darth Vader, enigmatic and powerful, his voice filling the room with a quiet authority. All eyes are fixed on him, each word he utters landing with weight, as though it carries the promise of victory. The plan is his, and they are wholly devoted to it, their belief steadfast, even as unspoken doubts flicker in the periphery. No one dares to question the method, though whispers about personnel choices linger in the shadows. Even the vipers, masters of deception, remain silent for now, calculating their moments with the precision of predators waiting to strike. In this moment, JC owns the stage, and the team, spellbound, plays their roles in his unfolding drama.

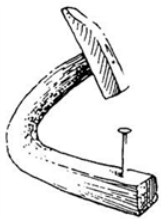
During these times I too struggle with my own role in this drama, knowing that it is equally complex. As the observer, I strive for objectivity, but as someone with deep ties to the club and its people, I am inevitably drawn into the story, knowing that every observer is also a participant, and I am no exception. My presence shifts the dynamics, whether I intend it to or not, some players confide in me, revealing their backstage selves, yet I know that even these confessions are performances of a sort, shaped by what they think I want to hear, or what they hope I will repeat or in some cases not repeat. The interplay between JC, the players, and myself forms a triangle of tension and alignment, where at times, I am a mediator, bridging gaps between authority and grievance. Equally, they know that I am firmly in JC's camp, a confidant and advisor who reinforces his decisions. This duality is not without its challenges as I navigate the overlapping spheres of power, loyalty, and identity that define this space. These players see me as an extension of JC, yet they also see me as separate, someone who can be trusted to hear their concerns without judgment. It is a delicate balance, one that requires constant negotiation. As I write this, I am struck by the layers of performance that define every interaction in this group, the outward-facing self is just one facet of a much larger story, a story that unfolds behind the curtain, in the quiet moments of vulnerability and conflict that rarely make it to the surface.

Over the season I have seen the patterns, for example, at halftime, the interval in the performance where the narrative swings, and the mood hovers on the edge of triumph or despair, dictated by the scoreline. When the tide is against them, the players instinctively cluster into their units, each group dissects the unfolding drama, analysing their roles and responsibilities, recalibrating their strategies to outwit their opponents. Here, the dressing room is filled with a shared urgency, a quiet yet evident determination to turn the tide. JC steps into this charged atmosphere, his presence amplifying the stakes, he often leans into the darker side of the game, urging the team to exploit every minor advantage, every splinter of opportunity. Here the atmosphere intensifies as he speaks, not with conflict intrinsic of ego, but with the friction of shared ambition, each argument is laced with the same singular desire, to win. Here, nothing is personal, it is all about the common goal. As the players listen, JC reaffirms the importance of set plays, those carefully rehearsed moments where the team holds

all the control, moments that can shift the game’s momentum in an instant. He knows the weight these plays carry, especially with a weapon like Clint in his arsenal. Clint’s ability with free kicks is unmatched, his strikes a thing of precision and artistry. Some of his efforts curling, dipping masterpieces from outside the area are the kind that would loop endlessly on highlight reels if they were captured on film. JC channels belief back into the group, grounding their collective hope in these moments of calculated brilliance. Halftime is not just a pause, it is the moment where plans are reforged, confidence is regained, and the stage is set for the second act.

As this section draws to a close, I am left with a sense of respect and humility. Respect for the complexity of human relationships, at the resilience and adaptability of this group, and humility at the comprehension that, despite all my observations and theories, I am still just one voice in this story, one perspective among many. The next chapter will delve deeper into these dynamics, peeling back another layer to reveal the faces behind the masks, the truths that lie beneath the performances. It is a journey I undertake with gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose, knowing that the story is far from over.

5.4.2.1 Reflexion



In stepping back, I have found clarity, yet with that clarity comes discomfort. Observing this group from a greater distance has illustrated not only their dynamics but also my own role within them. I see now how entangled I was, how my presence influenced the story, not just through direct action but through the simple act of being there. Last season, my shadow loomed large, and while it offered proximity, it obscured my perspective. Now, I am learning the art of invisibility, how to disappear into the group so that their performances, their rituals, unfold untainted by my watchful eye (Goffman, 1959). Even as I step back, I cannot escape my own humanity, my desire to see them succeed, to cast them as heroes, to romanticise their struggle and triumph, it is ever-present. However, the act of research demands something more grounded, more uncomfortable, it demands that I see them not as archetypes but as flawed, multifaceted individuals (Jung, 1959; Edinger, 1972). It demands that I report not just the victories but the failures, the cracks that form under pressure, the moments where morality and ambition collide. Is that not the essence of the human experience?

This group is just a portion of a much larger narrative, the universal struggle of identity, belonging, and self-expression (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Each individual I caught somewhere between their outward-facing self, shaped for the world to observe, and the inward-facing self, where fears, doubts, and aspirations dwell (Goffman, 1959). These dualities are not unique to them; they are the very essence of existence. Observing them has forced me to confront my own masks, my own shadows, it has reminded me that the stories we tell, to ourselves and to

others, are as much about survival as they are about connection (Frank, 2010; Campbell, 2008). In the relationship between individual and collective, I see the delicate choreography of human interaction. Moments of harmony, when the group moves as one, are no less significant than moments of tension, when egos clash, and cohesion falters. These moments are not failures, they are the heartbeat of the group, the friction that sparks growth (Tuckman, 1965; Carron, 1982). It is here, in the messy, beautiful chaos of their interactions, that I find the deepest philosophical truths. As a researcher, I am tasked with capturing these truths, knowing full well that my lens is imperfect. My interpretations, though grounded in observation, are inevitably shaped by my own biases, my own humanity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). I struggle with the weight of this representation, how to honour their stories without distorting them, how to tell the truth without imposing my own narrative. This act of writing becomes an ethical negotiation, a balancing act between objectivity and subjectivity (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), because behind every performance, there is a backstage, a space where the masks come off, and the rawness of identity is laid bare (Goffman, 1959). In those quiet moments, where the noise of the world fades, we see the shadow selves, the unvarnished truths (Jung, 1959), and it is in these moments that I feel closest to them, not as a researcher but as someone on a shared journey of existence. I see their fears, their hopes, their contradictions, and I am reminded of my own. This dressing room becomes a metaphor for life, a place where we prepare, where we perform, and where we confront the parts of ourselves, we often keep hidden (Bourdieu, 1986).

As I prepare to move from the collective to the individual, I find myself at a threshold, to delve into the psyches of these players, to explore their personas, egos, and feelings, is to step into a darker place. It is to confront not just who they are but who we all are when stripped of pretence. It is to ask uncomfortable questions about morality, about the roles we play, about the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world (Frank, 1995; Nietzsche, 2014). This work is not just an exploration of them, it is an exploration of us all, a journey into the heart of what it means to be human. To try, to fall, to seek belonging, to wear masks and then to remove them, to live in the tension between the hero we wish to be and the villain we sometimes become (Campbell, 2008; Machiavelli, 2003). Now, as I move forward, I carry with me not just their stories but the weight of my own, intertwined in ways that are both humbling and powerful.

5.4.3 Account 3:

Account 3
Act III
**The Individuals (*behind*
the group)**

The Individuals (*behind the group*)

Football in its own right is a sub-culture of its own, in relation to human existence, a space where outward-facing personas dominate, each ego striving to assert itself as the alpha. Yet beneath all this bravado lies an overwhelming vulnerability, a lost innocence of individuals searching for belonging and acceptance.

These motives, hidden under layers of persona and ego, act as both armour and battering rams, helping these characters navigate the complexities of the world around them. In this narrative of competition and camaraderie, we see persona as a mask crafted to meet societal expectations, concealing the shadow self that harbours unacknowledged fears, desires, and memories. Each of these characters is a blend of their lived experiences, relationships, and environments, their personas are not uninformed, they are shaped by the journeys of past, formed through victories, losses, and the relentless grind of forging identity in a world that often feels indifferent. These experiences are embodied within the self, consciously or unconsciously projected outward, managing impressions and influencing how they are perceived (Goffman, 1959). Nonetheless, this the backstage space of the dressing room offers a rare reprieve, a place where the masks can slip, if only for that moment, and the true self may occasionally emerge.

Some players lock their emotions and memories deep within, while others wear their stories more openly, testing the waters of judgment and acceptance. Both approaches are valid, there is no playbook on how to navigate the layers of identity. I see every individual as being on a hero's journey, their trials shaping who they are, how they see and face the world (Campbell, 2008). I see this backstage space as a theatre of discovery, my questions deliberate and probing, wanting to peel back the layers of their carefully constructed outward selves, to gain a glimpse at the essence of the person behind the mask. Last season, my own insecurities and prejudgments tainted my interpretations of these men, now, in reflection, I see that they revealed far more than I had given them credit for. My own biases shaped by my positionality, at this moment intersect with theirs, creating a dynamic chemistry of perception and reality alike. What follows is an honest account of the individuals who dared to confront their own demons, those who allow their masks to slip in plain sight for me to witness. These selected narratives are vividly real, a flux of human complexity that underscores the delicate balance between vulnerability and strength. Here lives authenticity, a reminder that behind every outward persona lies a deeper story, one of struggle, growth, and the eternal search for belong.

It feels apt to start with JC, the focal point of this story, the figurehead, the mastermind. There are several versions of this character I get to see in my dual role as a researcher and as assistant manager. These different masks offer varying qualities, strengths, and vulnerabilities, each revealing a facet of his complex identity. Outwardly, JC often displays a highly charged, charismatic persona, shifting effortlessly between roles. He transitions seamlessly from leader to jester when children associated to the club are present, embracing a playful yet approachable demeanour, the Lover archetype (Mead, 1990). This side to him is empathetic and nurturing, connecting with the emotional side of those around him. Then he shifts again, embodying the leader, articulating tactical plans with meticulous precision, guiding his players not just toward victory but toward a shared understanding of their collective purpose. JC often embodies the duality of the King-Warrior archetype (Mead, 1990), balancing external authority with internal doubt. As a King, he provides structure and order, setting boundaries and leading with authority, and as a Warrior, he protects and defends, ensuring the group's survival in a competitive and often unforgiving environment. Still beneath this commanding exterior lies a deeply introspective individual, struggling with the burdens of leadership. His moments of solitude are retreating to the office and closing the door, although this is not an escape, but an opportunity to recalibrate, to reflect on the external pressures and their alignment with his inner values. These existential moments challenge leadership, where the individual must navigate the tension between the self and the role they inhabit (Sartre, 1943).

JC operates on the edge, his tactical plans bring structure and predictable order, whilst his charismatic leadership and ability to adapt to the team's dynamic inject the chaos of unpredictability (Peterson, 1999). True leadership involves walking this line, using it as a source of power and resilience, a duality of structure and spontaneity. His ability to cultivate trust while maintaining authority, shows an understanding that leadership is as much about perception as it is about action, about carefully managing the impressions he wants to leave on both players and staff. This balancing act of external strength and internal reflection is a dichotomy of control, focusing on what can be influenced (Epictetus, 2008). Ultimately, JC's leadership situates him within the mythological framework of Campbell's hero, he has not only shaped the group's identity but has also created a culture, a narrative that unites its members. This narrative is one of defiance and unity, a story that binds the players to a shared purpose while allowing each to find their place within the larger saga.

These characters are complex, intricate, and deeply human, none more so than J'Dog, a figure whose broad spectrum of emotions often forces him into hasty, impulsive actions. He is one of the characters I aptly named '*The Vipers*', a charming yet ominous character. There exists an unmistakable tension between J'Dog and JC, not always articulated in words but manifested through actions and unspoken power battles. Once teammates, their relationship has since evolved or perhaps devolved into one of guarded mutual respect laced with

unresolved history. JC, now the manager, has banished J'Dog before, asserting his authority as both leader and architect of the group's identity. Although, despite this J'Dog remains, but walking an uncertain line between loyalty and rebellion, acceptance and defiance. J'Dog is a contradiction embodied, expressive and emotionally raw, yet capable of calculated and manipulative behaviour. His dominance in the dressing room, once unchallenged, has faded into a distant memory, eclipsed by JC's deliberate recasting of a new order. Circumstances have marginalised J'Dog, forcing him to adapt, to fit into a system that no longer revolves around him. Still, he endures, aware of his unstable position but unwilling to surrender the influence he wields in the shadows. J'Dog's existential dilemma centres on a deep-rooted need for belonging, a desire to hold an identity within a group that has evolved without him at its core. Existence precedes essence, J'Dog must define himself once more in a context that no longer values his past dominance (Sartre, 1943). His struggle reflects the universal tension between individuality and community, between the desire to observe from a distance and the yearning to be accepted. This tension is heightened by his acute awareness of his marginalisation, which he confronts with a mix of bravado and vulnerability. He swings between these extremes; a social chameleon who can adapt to different contexts yet cannot entirely mask his inner turmoil.

In our private moments, J'Dog has revealed layers of his vulnerability to me, he has spoken openly about his battles with mental health, including suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Unlike many who shield such struggles behind a stoic mask, J'Dog lays his emotions bare, sharing his experiences openly with those around him. This frankness in itself is atonement within himself (Campbell, 1949). J'Dog is a hero dealing with his shadow self, confronting the darker aspects of his psyche in a bid to find meaning and reconcile his inner and outer worlds. His willingness to voice these struggles makes him both relatable and polarising, a figure who resists easy categorisation and demands deeper consideration. This openness about mental health could also be viewed through the lens of a hero archetype within, an innocence that seeks connection and trust, like an orphan coming to terms with feelings of abandonment (Pearson, 1991). J'Dog embodies elements of both, navigating his own vulnerability while yearning for belonging and acceptance. This duality is what makes J'Dog such a compelling character, he symbolises his shadow self, hiding often darker aspect of his psyche that must be confronted to achieve wholeness (Jung, 1959). He is somehow the shadow and the light, the chaos and the order, the trickster and the hero all at once. His open acknowledgment of his struggles with mental health adds an existential layer to his narrative, a despair in the pursuit of authenticity (Kierkegaard, 1849). Ultimately, J'Dog is not defined by his flaws or his virtues but by his humanity. He is raw and real, his complexity a mirror reflecting the inner struggles we all face. His story underscores the delicate balance of strength, vulnerability of belonging and the individuality of performing for the world while surviving his own thoughts. In

this, J'Dog is as much a symbol as he is a man, a reminder that behind every persona lies a person, struggling, suffering, and merely surviving.

Next are Clint and Linton, two prominent members of *'The Vipers,'* their personas a seamless blend of charisma, sharp intelligence, and influence. Handsome, well-defined, and inherently commanding, they are again figures of duality, simultaneously heroic and villainous. At times, both have worn the hero's mask, displaying acts of chivalry and valour, but just as easily, they have adopted the role of antagonist, revelling in their capacity to manipulate and intimidate. This art of moving between protagonist and Machiavellian tactician seems second nature to them (Machiavelli, 2003). They project a confidence born not merely of skill but of their innate ability to navigate the social and psychological landscapes of the group with precision. Their tactics are rarely overtly physical, instead, they lean into subtle manipulations of power, frequently exploiting their close relationship with JC, positioning themselves as unspoken deputies within the group dynamic. Their calculated actions create an unspoken hierarchy, one that doesn't challenge JC's authority outright but subtly reinforces their own foothold within the team, an unspoken statement that it is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both (Machiavelli, 2003). Their duality is intense, they seem to relish the dichotomy of being both admired and resented, their confidence protecting them from the opinions of others. Their ability to harness this shadow side makes them both effective and enigmatic unprescribed leaders, unafraid to play the villain when the situation demands.

In the social hierarchy of the group, Clint and Linton occupy a strategic middle ground, their age grants them an edge. They are old enough to have earned experience and respect, yet young enough to maintain relevance among the younger players. This balance makes them natural intermediaries, able to connect with both ends of the age spectrum. They wield this influence deftly, leveraging their popularity with younger players while subtly distancing themselves from veterans like J'Dog and Brady, whose authority derives more from legacy than charisma. Their influence is further solidified through their role as orchestrators of the group's rituals and traditions, most notably the fines list, the *'wheel spins'* as forfeits, and the nights out. These activities, while seemingly light-hearted, serve as powerful tools for establishing control over the group. They are both revered and resented, insiders and outsiders, heroes and villains. For Clint and Linton, their journey is not one of self-discovery but one of social navigation, of maintaining power and influence within a constantly evolving dynamic. Their leadership, though unofficial, carries significant weight, it is not derived from formal titles but from the bonds they establish, the stories they craft and the rituals they enforce. They are the social architects of the group, weaving themselves through the dressing room, acts that are both self-serving and unifying. Their influence is a testament to the power of charisma, narrative, and the intricate paly of duality that defines human relationships.

Fierro was once the nemesis of *'The Vipers'*, an outsider, someone I personally introduced to the group at the start of last season. His narrative arc within this team is unparalleled, a testament to the transformative power of perseverance and authenticity. During his darkest moments he responded with calm, love, and hope. His composure in the face of adversity was so sincere, it even left me emotionally compromised. This ability to remain grounded under that much pressure is humbling. Telling me that external events beyond his control were not his issue, but how he responds to them is his responsibility. Fierro has since transformed from an exterior character into a central character within the group. His triumph is not merely one of survival but of transcendence, overcoming trials and tribulations to achieve genuine belonging and respect. His dedication to self-improvement is visible in his Adonis-like physique, a physical testament to his discipline and commitment to being the best version of himself. Fierro embodies the Warrior archetype (Mead, 1990), a figure who channels strength, focus, and purpose to protect and uplift those around him. My personal connection to Fierro runs deeper than the football pitch. I was his teacher when he arrived in the UK from Ecuador at sixteen, a decade ago now and remarkably, his ego remains unchanged, humble, generous, and caring. These qualities, which were evident even in his youth, now define his interactions within the team. However, when he steps into the arena, it is as if a transformation occurs, he is like a gladiator in the Colosseum, he is ferocious, channelling his inner strength and courage for the sake of his teammates and his leader.

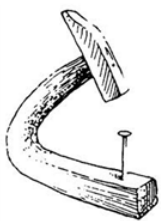
Fierro's journey reflects a deep existential truth, the ability to reshape one's narrative through action and authenticity. His fight against exclusion and his ultimate transformation in how the group perceives him highlight his unwavering belief in his own worth. Fierro's response to exclusion was not bitterness but determination, a choice that has redefined his role within the group, and the hearts of its members. This transformation of how the group views Fierro is as much about their recognition of his genuine character as it is about his ability to inspire them. He has shifted their perception not by conforming to their expectations but by consistently demonstrating his value through action and integrity. Fierro's story is a testament to the enduring power of the authentic self, and in this group, he stands as a beacon of hope and possibility, reminding everyone that belonging is not given, it is earned.

Lastly, one of the more complex leading men in this story, Brady, the vulnerable leader. As captain of the club and manager of the U18 team Brady is a key figure in the make-up of the club overall. He is a well-respected player, an influential man in the dressing room but somehow broken. I have had many intimate conversations with Brady, ones that have allowed him to reveal his innermost self. His life, his personal relationships outside of football, outside of this group, seem to have an unyielding impact on his persona, and on occasions, have dented his ego. Brady is calm, collected, and has all the attributes of a good leader, but there are cracks in his armour. This vulnerability reflects the existential weight of leadership, where it highlights the challenge of finding meaning amid life's inherent struggles (Frankl, 2006).

Brady seems to carry a double-sided mask, the public-facing figure of authority and the private struggles that erode his confidence. These cracks make him genuinely human, the wounded healer archetype, a leader whose vulnerabilities and imperfections allow him to connect with others on a deeper level (Jung, 1959). It feels like he enjoys being the captain, and in honesty, within this group, he is the only real emergent candidate, but he carries the burden of the group as well. His struggle to maintain this balance shows in moments where his personal struggles bleed into his leadership role (Edinger, 1972). This tension is the existential despair that can arise when one's authentic self is misaligned with the roles imposed by society (Kierkegaard, 1849).

If his social laundry were not proverbially aired in public, Brady might more seamlessly embody the archetype of the King, a figure who inspires loyalty and commands respect (Mead, 1990). He is another charismatic, handsome, well-defined character, but seems lost at times, he is there, but not there. People respect him, feel for him, and listen to him, but I can sense they don't believe in him like they did last season. Although Brady's struggles at times, and risks undermining his own perceived authority, even his inner circle including JC and myself, trust him implicitly. Yet he always seems to overcome these adversities. He is a hero archetype in his own right, continually returning from trials with lessons learned, though not unscathed. He exemplifies the resilient leader who navigates setbacks with persistence, echoing Stoic principles of endurance and authenticity (Aurelius, 2006). Displaying an ability to rise from personal and professional challenges, this may be his defining quality, showing that leadership is not about perfection but the willingness to confront and grow from one's flaws.

5.4.3.1 Reflexion



Last season, I was immersed, lost in the process, caught between my personal emotions and the objective lens I was supposed to wield. The very identity I needed as a researcher seemed buried under layers of involvement, masking the impartiality essential for studying the group. I became an actor, negotiating the blurred lines between detachment and immersion, my dual roles of confidant and assistant manager were not just complementary but conflicting, forcing me to reconcile how I saw myself with how I was seen by others. Stepping back into the shadows this season granted me clarity. It was as though I had put on my own mask, not to conceal, but to withdraw, to observe, explore, and interpret without casting a shadow on the characters I was studying. I stepped back and allowed myself to confront my biases and accept them, integrating this awareness into my role as a reflexive practitioner. That first season wasn't wasted, despite my involvement, it gave me the credibility and confidence to blend in, to hide in plain sight, and to conduct the type of reflexive research that brings truth into focus. At times, I found myself too close, unable to see the group objectively, and other times I was too distant to truly understand

them, or even myself within this context. This space between involvement and detachment revealed the complexity of human relationships and the frailty of perception itself. My own biases and experiences shaped my interactions with the group, just as theirs shaped how they engaged with me (Bourdieu, 1986).

Although none of their stories mirrored my own, I felt a primitive connection to certain characters, J'Dog, Brady, Fierro, and even moments of frustration with others, like Clint and Linton. My anger toward Fierro's initial treatment and my empathy for Brady's struggles stemmed from my own biases, my own vulnerabilities. I judged Clint's underhand tactics harshly, confronting him during the first season in ways that mirrored his own manipulations. It was only in stepping back that I could see him differently, not as a villain but as a man navigating chaos and order with the tool's life had given him (Peterson, 1999). My frustrations softened into understanding, his intent, I realised, was not malicious but simply his way of surviving, of carving out space in a world that offers no real guidance for behaviour. J'Dog's pain was heart breaking, beneath the bravado and the puffed chest was a man fighting an invisible war, the battle of the mind. His peacock-like display of confidence was, to me, a mask concealing a deep fragility. He wrestled with his own shadow self while striving to belong, I felt his struggle, understanding in him the unspoken battles that many men face, often in silence.

Fierro's transformation remains the most vivid arc in my memory, his refusal to alter his mask to appease others, shows integrity and self-belief. Watching him earn the respect of those who once excluded him reaffirmed my belief in humanity. Fierro never sought to prove anything, he simply stood steadfast for his values, and the group, eventually, accepted this. My own growth compares to these stories, just as JC wore many masks to lead, I wore mine to gain trust, to observe, to narrate. I am now more aware of the masks I wear and the stories I tell myself. Now as both an insider and outsider, observer and participant, this has taught me one thing, humility. I have learned to be curious, not judgmental, to see beyond the immediate persona and understand the essence of individuality. Looking back, I see that this group taught me as much about myself as I sought to learn about them. Their vulnerability mirrored my own, their struggles reflecting universal truths about identity, belonging, and growth. Time and reflection have softened the edges of even the darkest moments, leaving me with a sense of nostalgia and gratitude. My understanding of human behaviour has deepened, though I accept it will always be incomplete. This world is not something to be fully understood but interpreted, an ever-evolving phenomenon (Heidegger, 1927). Furthermore, this group, in all its complexity, reinforced this truth, I am not merely a researcher in this process, but just a human, and with that considered, my lens belongs to me, and me alone.

5.4.4 Making Sense of Act 3: *Bridging Theory and Practice*

JC's navigation of external pressures while shaping his team's internal identity captures the essence of duality between front stage and backstage performances, as defined by Goffman (1959). Externally, JC crafts a collective persona that shields the team from public inquiry, while internally, he promotes unity and resilience. This is common at every level, as highlighted by Alex Ferguson, who emphasises the delicate balance of managing external perceptions while nurturing an internal philosophy of unity and discipline (Ferguson, 2013). JC's team's adoption of a villain narrative exemplifies GW's insights within his interview, where he states that resilience in relation to external stereotypes become significant for forging collective defiance and camaraderie (GW interview).

Use of the dark arts in football, tactical mind games and psychological manipulation is a big part of Jose Mourinho's strategic approach. Lourenco (2010) describes Mourinho's skill in constructing narratives that unify his team and disrupt opponents; for example, his self-proclaimed title as *The Special One*. Mourinho's ability to build an exaggerated persona creates a ripple effect, lifting the confidence of his team while intimidating rivals. He masterfully assumes a dual role, an external antagonist who disrupts and unsettles, and an internal protagonist who promotes a siege mentality, motivating his team by creating an *us vs. the world* culture. This persona is a powerful reminder that what we show the world is not who we are, but who they perceive us to be. Similarly, JC fortifies his team's reputation, transforming their perceived *shithousery* into a narrative of defiance and resistance. MJ's reflections on camaraderie highlight how such strategies can strengthen team bonds, as shared adversities unite players under a common cause (MJ interview).

JC's transactional leadership style aligns with Rinus Michels' philosophy of deliberate role-crafting within teams, effective team building strikes a balance between individual ambitions and collective identity (Michels, 2001). This notion is shared by MD, where he asserts that nurturing environments where personal narratives contribute to the collective story (MD interview). JC illustrates this balance, blending individual player strengths into a cohesive whole that surpasses personal egos. Internal conflicts within JC's team bring to mind Brian Clough's candid acknowledgment of clashing agendas in football teams. Clough (1994) emphasises the manager's role in navigating these tensions through direct and adaptive management. Similarly, JC's handling of the Vipers, a subset of players whose backstage scheming threatens cohesion, demonstrates his capacity for managing complex dynamics. Within WH's interview, he speaks about navigating rejection and identity within a group, this again highlights how such micro-narratives within teams can either strengthen or undermine the collective vision (WH interview).

Alex Ferguson's emphasis on inspirational narratives complements Michels' team-building ethos, along with BN's reflections on cultural exchange illustrate how shared stories

bridge differences and encourage cohesion (BN interview). JC’s tactical intelligence, exemplified in his strategic disruption of Loxley’s expectations, draws on Sun Tzu’s (2006) principles of deception and preparation. This calculated approach mirrors Mourinho’s use of narrative control, transforming underdog status into a tool for defiance (Lourenco, 2010). Jung’s archetypal theories resonate here as well, with figures like J’Dog embodying the shadow archetype, a role of redemption and suppressed desires. This archetype’s influence on team dynamics parallels that of WH’s journey of resilience and adaptation, whilst playing abroad (WH interview). JC’s pre-match gamesmanship, from unsettling opponents to managing referees, reflects Machiavelli’s (2003) assertion that perception is an effective tool of power. By controlling subtle elements, such as dressing room conditions, JC channels Mourinho’s mastery of psychological adjustments to create an advantage. BN’s discussions on environmental psychology once more validate this approach, highlighting how such strategies exploit situational dynamics (BN interview). JC’s halftime talks, lay emphasis on composure amidst chaos, this shows Stoic philosophies of mastering internal calm (Aurelius, 2006). GW’s observations on adaptive leadership further lay emphasis on JC’s ability to recalibrate tactics mid-game (GW interview).

During the team’s manipulation of Blackhawk’s environment captures the essence of Griffith and Griffith’s (2018) principles of collective psychological manipulation, this is achieved through deliberate delays, tactical fouls, and ball substitutions. Additionally, JC’s strategies dismantle the opposition’s focus, showcasing Michels’ (2001) emphasis on adaptability in leadership, these calculated moves, paired with team cohesion, demonstrate how football surpasses the physical game, becoming a stage where identity and perception dictate outcomes. Across all of these accounts, JC’s leadership bridges theory and practice, reflecting the philosophies of Mourinho, Ferguson, and Michels. His ability to balance provocation with composure, and individual redemption with collective identity, positions him as a central figure in transforming his team from participants to protagonists. This is all achieved through narrative control, resilience, and adaptability, where JC’s leadership embodies the performative essence of football as a cultural and psychological phenomenon.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

ACT IV



APOTHEOSIS AND ATONEMENT

Prologue: *The Archetypal Story of JC*

The scene is set with JC's journey into leadership, explored through archetypes and the duality of my role.

Account 1

Am I Sancho Panza?

In the style of Cervantes, I cast myself as Sancho Panza to JC's Don Quixote, where loyalty, humour, and the human side of leadership is explored.

Account 2

The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge

Three Star Wars themed episodes, where JC emerges as a young leader mentored through knowledge, resilience, and the archetypal hero's journey.

Account 3

The Rise of JC: A Reflective Journey Foretold by Daniel

In biblical style, JC's rise is told as prophecy and redemption, framed through archetypes of leadership and destiny.

This act is written in three creative voices, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Star Wars, and Biblical allegory. Each is a deliberately stylised choice, framing JC's journey through archetypes while showing how creative representation can reveal leadership, identity, and my dual role.



Narrative prefaces introduce and lead you through the stories, giving a clearer sense of the roles each of us played during our time together. Upon exiting, the final Account serves as the reflexion that closes the act.

5.5 Act IV. Apotheosis and Atonement

Prologue: *The archetypal story of JC*

This chapter explores the relationship between the journeys of JC, the neophyte manager navigating the dynamic world of football leadership, and myself, the researcher, observing, participating, and reflecting on a process that demanded as much of me as it did of him. Through three distinct yet interconnected accounts, the chapter explores themes of leadership, identity, mentorship, and transformation, underpinned by theory and methods principal to qualitative research and storytelling. Fundamentally, this chapter reflects on the duality of my positionality in the field. Was I the researcher observing the drama unfold, or the assistant manager embroiled in its intricacies? Impression management and the roles we play in the social theatre provides a lens through which these questions are explored (Goffman, 1959, 1966). Masks donned in the field were not merely reflective of JC’s leadership journey but mirrored my own, and as the narrative unfolded, I found myself caught between roles, often blurring the lines between participant and observer. These fluid identities, while challenging to navigate, became a key to understanding the relational dynamics within the team and, ultimately my research process (Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

These storied accounts open with *Am I Sancho Panza?* a creative narrative inspired by Cervantes (2003), capturing the early days of JC’s managerial journey. Metaphorically using Don Quixote and his loyal squire as a powerful framework for examining the nascent stages of JC’s leadership, and my role as a steadying presence. Themes of loyalty, guidance, and ambition emerge as JC grapples with transforming a struggling football club into a cohesive unit. This account also highlights the shared humanity of our journeys, underlining the trials faced by any leader striving to redefine themselves in the shadow of their past (Jung, 1944; Campbell, 2003).

For the second account, *The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge*, the lens shifts toward mentorship and transformation. Styled after the archetypal mentor-hero dynamic explored by Jung (1953) and Campbell (2003), this piece explores JC’s confrontation with the ‘old guard’, a group resistant to his leadership, and the strength required to navigate their influence. This role/mask was not to dictate solutions but to create space for JC to confront his fears, take ownership of his decisions, and ultimately emerge as the leader he sought to be. This account underlines the nuanced relationship between guidance and autonomy, trust and challenge (Bloom, Stevens, and Wickwire, 2003; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002).

Finally, the chapter concludes with *The Rise of JC: A Reflective Journey Foretold by Daniel*, written in a biblical tone to highlight the timeless and comprehensive themes of mentorship, growth, and departure. Here, this reflective journey takes centre stage as I, in reflection reconcile my dual roles in the field. This socio-narratology and insight on performance, an exploration of vulnerability and self-discovery inherent in leaving the research

field is analysed (Frank 1995, 2010; Goffman, 1959). Just as JC finds his voice as a leader, the researcher finds clarity in his role as both narrator and participant, recognising that growth often requires letting go.

Together, these accounts form a triptych of narrative ethnography that captures not only the essence of JC's leadership journey but also the methodological and emotional challenges of fieldwork. By using creative nonfiction, underpinned by academic theory, the chapter remains true to the complexities of the research process, showing the connected arcs of personal and professional change. It demonstrates the power of storytelling in qualitative inquiry, reminding us that the paths we walk, although unique, are often universal in trial and triumph.

Account 1 Act IV

Am I Sancho Panza?

5.5.2 Narrative Preface Account 1: This storied reflection is in the style of Don Quixote. Written by Miguel de Cervantes in the early 17th century, Don Quixote is widely regarded as one of the greatest works of literature, blending elements of realism and fantasy in a satirical exploration of chivalry, identity, and social perception. Cervantes (2003) employs a unique narrative style that blends metafiction, irony, and

humour to critique the romanticised ideals of the past while grounding his characters in the gritty realities of contemporary Spain. The protagonist, Don Quixote, embodies the tension between illusion and reality, pursuing grandiose, self-imposed quests despite the mundane and often cynical world around him. This interchange of performance and perception resonates strongly with this storied account, where characters adopt multiple personas and navigate their identities within the social constructs of football culture. Much like Don Quixote's interactions with Sancho Panza and other characters, this narrative reveals the fluidity of selfhood, the masks worn in different settings, and the inherent contradictions within human behaviour. By drawing on Cervantes' (2003) style, this account similarly blurs the lines between subjective experience and objective reality, encouraging reflection on the performative nature of sport and identity.



Figure 19: Don Quixote (Picasso, 1955)

5.5.3 Account 1.

Am I Sancho Panza?

In some ways, I was looking forward to the adventure I would be starting with JC, a relationship different from the one we had before, where I was the manager, and he was my captain. I am now his assistant, his faithful sidekick, someone he can turn to for ideas, planning, or just a friendly ear. Non-league football can be brutally defining, glorious in the summer months, but dark, wet, and lonely in the winter. It's a mix of youth, experience, journeymen chasing a payday, and clubs that thrive or struggle based on the depth of their resources. Ironbridge is firmly in the latter category, a club that relies on self-generated funding. No mega-rich owner, no exclusive sponsorship deals, just a tidy pitch, a functional clubhouse, and changing rooms kept clean and orderly. Welcoming, yes, to a degree, but depending on who you are. For me, the club holds a place in my heart, it means something to me, a lot in fact. I also hold JC in high regard, a man who has overcome adversity before, whose playing career ended too soon, but someone who somehow hasn't had enough of this game. 'This season's about turning things around,' JC said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm as he laid out his plans.

'The fans, the players, the chairman, they all need to see we're serious. We're cleaning up the reputation of this club, one win at a time.' 'True', I replied, my tone even. 'But it'll take more than a few good results. These players need to buy into your vision, and the chairman needs to understand that resources are important. What happens when the weather turns, or when the players don't share the same passion? You know how this league can be.' JC nodded, undiscouraged. 'It doesn't matter. We'll show them who we are, and what this club can become. They'll see.' As he spoke, his excitement made me feel excited, too. There's a charm to JC, a wit and character that's hard to dislike once you get to know him. He's on a mission, not just to be a football manager, but to redefine himself in a space where his reputation precedes him. He knows he needs to win over the fans, the club, and the chairman before he can think about signing players. Then there's the question of the opposition managers, men who either played alongside him or against him. How will they see him now? How does he shed his reputation as an aggressive, no-nonsense player and step into the role of a tactician, their equal?

I watched as he pulled up to training in his white *'Top Flight Football'* van. This thing had seen better days, but to JC, it served its purpose. That van, battered and tired, was a symbol of his love for the game, his commitment to this club. He parked, got out, and grabbed the footballs from the back, slinging them over his shoulder as he walked toward the pitch. 'This is where it all starts,' he said, almost to himself, as he set up the session. 'The journey back to where this club belongs.' I paused, watching him. What did all of this look like in his mind? Did he see knights and castles? Because all I could see were budget cuts and muddy boots. Did he see the reality of it, or had he already cast himself in the role of a saviour? What if it didn't work? What if the players didn't believe, the fans didn't come back, the results didn't follow? Then I thought, what if it does? As I stood there, he continued. 'This season's about restoring pride, about honour. Ironbridge is better than what people think and it's time we

showed them.’ I could see it in his eyes, a glint, the fervour of a knight preparing for his first quest. He wasn’t just a manager in a tracksuit; to him, it was armour. This world of football, his La Mancha. This muddy pitch, his battlefield, and I, well, who exactly was I in this story?

‘Are you all right, squire?’ he asked, catching the confused look on my face. ‘Yes, fine,’ I replied, shaking off the thought. But as I looked at his van, the battered old workhorse, I could almost see it as Rocinante, his trusty steed, and Ironbridge, small, resource-poor, but humble, was it not his Dulcinea? This story, his unattainable dream he sought to raise to greatness. In his eyes, this wet patchy pitch was an arena where legends were born, where magicians cast spells and armies collided. I looked again, my feet sinking into the soggy ground, but to me, it was still a patchy pitch with dodgy lines and nets that had seen better days. If JC was to be Don Quixote, then I would play my part? I will in fact keep him grounded when the clouds of his vision grow too thick, and I would stand beside him, too no matter what. Then I am Sancho Panza.

The Fields of Brinchester: A Noble Quest

It was an early morning at the rendezvous point, there he was, tracksuit adorned, the Ironbridge badge gleaming like a crest of honour. He sat in his van, no, on his faithful steed, charged and ready, a knight awaiting his squire. He smiled as I approached. ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ he said. I checked my watch. ‘Call time isn’t for another five minutes. I’m early.’ ‘Never too early. We attack while the enemy sleeps,’ he declared, with the confidence of a man who’d just drank his third energy drink of the morning. I nodded and smiled, knowing full well we wouldn’t be kicking off until three o’clock. Gesturing toward the can in his hand, I said, ‘Looks like you’re ready to go.’ ‘I was born ready,’ he replied, chest puffed with caffeinated valour. ‘Jump on, Sancho. We ride into battle together today, a long and weary road to Brinchester awaits, and we’ve much to discuss before combat.’ I climbed into the van. ‘Not many returns victorious from this place, a mythical city, steeped in history, with tacticians as clever as they are crafty.’ I smile and nod, then get myself comfortable for the long journey ahead.

As we arrived, navigating the labyrinth of the one-way system, JC gazed out at the city like a conqueror surveying his prize. ‘Ah, Sancho, gaze upon this ancient city of Brinchester, a jewel set amidst the rolling hills of the countryside. Its walls whisper tales of Roman legions and noble crusaders. See there, the mighty spire of the cathedral pointing heavenward, defying the heavens to cast its judgment. Surely, this is no mere city but a sacred bastion of history and honour. Today, Sancho, we shall leave our own mark upon this storied soil, for our deeds here shall echo through time.’ I look at him for a moment, ‘Mighty noble, indeed,’ I said, my voice as dry as the roads we’d travelled. ‘But to my eyes, it’s a town like any other, with cobbled streets waiting to trip me up and parking inspectors as fearsome as any knightly adversary. As for the cathedral, I’d wager it’s more for sheltering from the rain than casting divine judgment.’ We pulled into the empty car park, the van rumbling to a halt. Together, we unloaded the equipment, walking it into the dressing room. There the kits were already laid out, each shirt a banner waiting for its soldier. JC paused, glancing around looking

out onto the pitch as though surveying a battlefield. ‘This is where it begins, Sancho,’ he said, his voice brimming with anticipation.

La Mancha, or the mythical world of football, is an odd place, especially at non-league level. No knights earn their fortunes here, yet we march onto the field with more conviction than many a noble army. Here, camaraderie binds us like steel, enemies are vanquished with tackles and passes, and at the end of it all, the spoils are counted over pints of ale, retelling tales of bravery that grow with every round. This battle begins under a frosty sky, the air thick with anticipation. Yet, Clint, one of our finest infantrymen, appears restless. His movements lack precision, his tackles stray, shadows of hesitation cloud his usual resolve. ‘Are you with us, soldier?’ JC calls, his voice cutting through the din. Clint offers only a glare in return before plunging once more into the fray, his temper as unsteady as the muddy ground beneath his feet. Then, the moment we had hoped for, a corner, the perfect opportunity to execute one of our meticulously planned battle strategies. The ball soars high, a shimmering jewel suspended in the air. Gilly and Brady, our stalwart sentinels, hold back Tab’s foes with the precision of seasoned warriors. Then Tab, with all the grace of a salmon leaping upstream, meets the ball with a thundering header, it fires into the net like an arrow finding its mark. Victory, however fleeting, is ours, 1-0 to Ironbridge.

The enemy, stung by our early triumph, launches their counterattack with renewed ferocity. Waves of precision strikes crash against our defences, each assault threatening to breach our lines. We hold firm, though our lead feels as fragile as a single torch in a storm. But then, as if by fate’s cruel hand, disaster strikes, the opposition equalises, a strike as venomous as the serpent in Eden, and in the aftermath, Clint, overcome by frustration, lashes out. His reckless kick connects not with the ball, but with an opponent, the whistle blows. The referee strides forward, his hand raised high, brandishing red. Clint is banished, his proverbial marching orders given, we are now outnumbered. ‘We must retreat, regroup, and fortify our defences,’ I urge, seeing the cracks beginning to form. JC, however, stands resolute, his eyes blazing with the fire of a commander unwilling to concede. ‘Retreat? Nonsense. We press on. Take the fight by the scruff of its neck and claim the day as our own.’ It is as if we are watching two different battles unfold. JC sees victory in every corner of the pitch, while I see soldiers weary and overrun. Our enemy’s onslaught intensifies, another goal comes, a venomous strike that once more pierces our defences. 2-1. We are beaten back, bruised, and battered. Yet JC, ever the optimist, makes his move. ‘We need new blood up there,’ he declares, replacing two of our forwards. ‘We need to keep them on the back foot.’ I watch as we charge once more into the mire. His optimism is admirable, but this is a game we cannot win. The final whistle blows, and the field is left to the victors.

Some might call it foolishness, a naive gamble against insurmountable odds, but I saw courage, a defiance that refused to bow to the inevitable. Each man followed JC into the fray without question, drawn by his conviction and spirit. On this day, victory was not ours to claim, but honour remained unbroken. As we trudged back to the van, boots caked in mud and hearts heavy with defeat, JC’s gaze remained steadfast. ‘We’ll fight again,’ he said, his voice firm as we started our journey back. JC broke the silence as we rumbled down the uneven road, his voice carrying the weight of both reflection and resolve. ‘Sancho,’ he began, his tone as grand as any knight recounting a noble quest, ‘what transpired today was no mere game. It was a clash of wills, a proving ground for honour and valance. Though the enemy triumphed in the

scoreline, we stood firm against their relentless tides. Did you see it? The courage in our ranks, the fire in their eyes? These men may not hold titles or fortunes, but today, they fought as heroes.’ I nodded, weary but unable to suppress a faint smile. ‘Heroes, indeed, JC. Though next time, I might suggest our heroes consider the merits of a well-timed retreat. Perhaps the glory lies not just in the fight, but in knowing when to pick your battles.’ JC turned to me, his face a blend of exhaustion and determination. ‘Sancho, retreat may save a man’s skin, but it cannot ignite the hearts of those who follow. Victory is forged in the fire of ambition, not in the shadow of caution.’

I leaned back, letting his words linger in the air, their resonance filling the quiet hum of the van’s engine. He was unwavering, undeterred, a knight wayward in a tracksuit, seeing the world through a lens I could scarcely understand yet couldn’t help but admire. Outside, the world blurred past, fields and hedgerows cast in the golden haze of the setting sun. The van, our Rocinante, carried us onward, its faithful frame creaking with every bump in the road. As the light faded, I let my thoughts drift, imagining us not as two men returning from a football match, but as travellers descending from a mythical battlefield. In this world, we were not defeated coaches, but warriors carrying the embers of hope for battles yet to come. As the van rattled down the road back home, I couldn’t help but think that perhaps he was right, for in this strange world of football, glory often lies not in the outcome, but in the spirit of the quest.

The Spartans Siege: Defending the Fortress

It had been some six months since our journey to Brinchester, and in that time, JC and I had traversed many adventures together. Battles had been fought, won and lost, but the shared journey was one of growth, for JC, for the team, and, in some way, I hadn’t expected, for me. Each encounter with the league, the game, and even with ourselves had strengthened the bond between us. As we crusaded onward, I felt a deepening sense of reliance, not just his on me, but mine on him. I was no longer just an observer or a companion, I had become a part of his story. As steadfast as Rocinante, I resolved never to let him down and the more time we spent together, the more his world became clear to me. JC saw nobility in everything, in the game, in the club, and in the men he led. He was a knight on a mission, his Dulcinea still the humble yet valiant Ironbridge Football Club, so how could I, Sancho Panza, destroy his dream when it burned so brightly within him?

That spring evening, I arrived at the grounds earlier than usual, the crisp air carried the promise of battle as gulls pecked idly at the pitch’s freshly scattered seed, this field lay quiet, barren, as if holding its breath for the clash to come. Tonight, under the glow of the floodlights, the Spartans would arrive, not as saints or scholars, but as men desperate to claw their way out of the abyss at the bottom of the league table. Lambs to the slaughter some might think, but I knew better, no team arrives without a fight, and no knight should ever underestimate the will of his opponent. JC arrived soon after, his tracksuit gleaming like armour beneath the setting sun. ‘Evening, squire,’ he greeted me with his usual eagerness. ‘What a night for battle. They will come from far and wide to witness the might of these South Coast Warriors against these marshland cave dwellers.’ I smiled and nodded. ‘Evening, JC. Do you want a brew?’ As I poured his coffee, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was taking this battle a

little too lightly. The Spartans might be rooted to the bottom of the league like a barnacle clinging to the hull of a sinking ship, but we were only a few missteps away from joining them. They would not come to be led meekly to slaughter; they would come to fight. While our ranks had been strong this season, our army of supporters, the twenty-odd people and a dog who made up our average home gate, gave the impression of a sophisticated book club rather than the rowdy masses at the Colosseum. Still, JC was undeterred. ‘Side by side or back-to-back, Sancho,’ he declared, raising his cup like a sword. ‘We shall meet them head-on and leave them with no doubts as to who controls this field.’

In the dressing room, JC stood before the men, shadows loomed large, stretching and twisting across the dimly lit walls like spectres of battles past. His voice was steady yet brimming with the fire of a leader preparing his soldiers for battle. ‘Men of Ironbridge,’ he began, pacing the room with purpose, ‘tonight we stand upon sacred ground. This field is not just a pitch, it is our home, our stronghold, and the very heart of all we hold dear. The Spartans come to challenge us, not as knights, but as desperate men. These desperate men, though their armour be battered and their weapons dull, can strike with a fury that belies their station.’ He paused, letting his words sink in. ‘Do not be deceived by their place at the foot of the table, for a man with nothing to lose fights with the strength of ten. But we fight not because we must, but because we believe, we fight because this badge, this club, and this cause are worth every ounce of sweat and blood we pour into it.’ JC’s gaze swept across the room, meeting the eyes of each player in turn. ‘Tonight, you will not just play a game. You will write a chapter in the history of this club, and when the whistle blows, you will leave this field knowing you have given everything, not for glory, not for riches, but for the honour of Ironbridge. Now go men and show them what it means to stand as one.’ As the room erupted in cheers, the tension dissolving into a charged energy, even I, Sancho Panza, felt the pull of his words, ready to march into the fray with pad and pen in hand.

Pitch side we prepared for the battle to commence, the setting sun surrendering to the glow of the floodlights, which cast long eerie shadows upon the battlefield. JC surveyed the scene, his eyes alight with both purpose and apprehension. ‘We must ensure victory here, Sancho,’ he said, his voice measured yet resolute. ‘But for now, it lies beyond our control.’ I nodded in agreement. Despite their lowly position, the Spartans were no mere lambs, they were young, strong, and eager, a formidable force that would not yield easily. This game, like so many we had faced together, was as much a contest of will as it was skill. This again was a display of modern masculinity, we watched as the game unfolded before us, both sides meeting head-on in every tackle, each echoing with the spirit of warriors refusing to yield ground. This referee, an enigmatic figure, clad in black, seemed to delight in the gritty spectacle, he presided over the match as if transported from another time, where football was a test of grit rather than elegance. Fierro, our rugged Ecuadorian, took full advantage of the leniency, smashing through opponents with a ferocity that left the Spartan ranks scrambling. The referee, rather than intervening, watched with a faint smile, as though savouring the show. JC, ever the noble commander, turned to the opposing manager, his face beaming with admiration for the spectacle before him. With a small nod, as if doffing an invisible hat, he acknowledged their shared appreciation of the contest.

The battle raged, end to end, with neither side yielding an inch. Then, against the run of play, though my humble and seasoned eye might say otherwise, the Spartans

struck. A swift counterattack found our defence wanting, and the ball nestled into the back of our net. The opposition erupted with a feeling unmatched, their cries of triumph reverberating as though they had just claimed the FA Cup itself. ‘This is not how the story goes.’ JC roared, his fury cutting through the din. ‘This is not the script we are writing. This is not cricket!’ I could only nod in agreement. This was not cricket, though, I thought, this script now lives not on the field but in the pages I write, what now feels like centuries removed from that moment.

Halftime came and went, the break doing little to calm the relentless energy of the match. Then, as if by magic, Lawton, our own nimble wizard, wove through their ranks. With a flick of his boot, he left the Spartans spellbound, their defence undone. 1-1. Now, the game was well and truly alive. The battle surged once more, each side grappling for control as time slipped through the hourglass, a draw seemed the fairest outcome. They had fought valiantly, as had we, but fate, ever the fickle mistress, had other plans. In the dying seconds, a mistake, a moment of hesitation in our ranks, and disaster struck as the ball found its way into the back of our net, and with that one final kick, they seized victory. 2-1. As the whistle blew, sealing the outcome the opposition erupted in celebration before the small yet energized crowd. I turned to look at JC, his posture sagging under the weight of defeat. In that moment he looked not like a knight, but a weary man who had given his all only to see the prize slip away. ‘Another battle lost, Sancho,’ he said quietly, his voice carrying the faintest tremble of sorrow. I placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘But not the war, JC. Never the war.’

The Farewell at Feversbrook: A Final journey

I knew this would be the last one, I had hinted to it on several occasions, each met with a deft deflection, humours quip or a simple ‘No chance, you’re not going anywhere.’ However, like any story, I knew this one had to end. I knew this wouldn’t be easy for him, and equally for me, although I knew that it wasn’t who was by his side, it was the thrill of the battle he relished. Rocinante took us forward into our last battle, on this occasion we were joined by Brady, although the journey seemed meaningless and somehow sombre. We had already had the awkward conversation, although his acceptance seemed only temporary in what will be a permanent decision. A few months ago, I asked for Brady to help us behind the scenes, in my mind, a diversion and to some degree natural replacement for me. Forces more meaningful decided my fate, it’s not for not enjoying the battles or loving the club, quite the contrary. This is for growth, not just for me, but for him too. Although, once the season concludes, I know he will come back to me with his ‘So what next? How do we face this upcoming season?’ A conversation I was ready for, I had a plan.

As the players arrived, there was an air of nothingness, we had secured our status in the league, so this was an opportunity for JC to look at his young warriors, give the periphery a chance to showcase their talent, whatever talent is of course. Linton and Clint not in the squad have travelled to support the youngsters, a show of solidarity in some ways. Everything seemed flat, from the warm-up, the pre-match speech and going to the dugout, it all seemed very lethargic. What surprised me was the amount of people who had come down to witness this event, not from us, we had our usual ten or so people in attendance, but the Bluewave Stadium seemed busy, a hive of activity. There was no battle plan for this game, just the feeling of us all going

through the motions, an inevitable end to a long hard season. It was more than that to me, it was almost an end of an era, once more into the breach, if only for this one last battle.

It felt like the game flew by, we went into the break 2-0 down, and it honestly felt like we were the lucky ones, it could have been six or seven. JC offered a half-hearted talk at half time, spirited, but I don't think even he believed what he was saying, it was just going through the motions. Back in the dugout I looked at JC as the third goal went in, he was expressionless, a mix between knowing he had done his job keeping the team in the league and pure unadulterated exhaustion. This season had certainly taken its toll on him, in fact on all of us. I observed, listened and tried to make sense of the whole thing, I was no longer lost, I could now see where this had all taken me. I was trying to lay way for my exit, introducing what could potentially be his new squire was indeed the long game, but would it work? A fourth goal brought me back from my daydream, 4-0, we are now just counting down the clock. On the final whistle we went and showed appreciation for the travelling fans, although with such scarce numbers, we could have offered them a lift home. We then packed all the kit and equipment away before JC turned to me and said, 'One for the road?', I smiled, 'That would be perfect'.

We made our way to the bar, it was packed, standing room only as the fans mingled with the gladiator heroes, some being questioned on their loyalties to their club, and some holding court like a medieval king dispensing wisdom, though most of it was about next season and questionable refereeing decisions. I find a quiet corner, JC approaches with a goblet of wine and an ale for himself, as he hands it to me, he raises his glass, I chinked it, 'Cheers, another season in the bag' he says. 'This could be my last, our last together' I reply as we both sip our drinks. 'Nonsense' he snaps back, then smiles and raises his glass again, 'Sancho, we have many battles that lie ahead of both of us,' I chink glasses again, knowing he is right, but just not together. I am proud of what we have achieved together, I'm also proud of him. We finish our drinks and head to the van.

It is just him and I on the long journey home through the garden of England, the rhythmic hum of the tires echoed through the quiet van, each bump in the road a reminder of the countless miles we had travelled together, both on and off the pitch, the silence broken only by the occasional rustle of the cross wind. JC stares out at the darkness beyond the windscreen, his eyes fixed not on the road ahead, but seemingly on the memories of two long seasons past. He breaks the silence with an almost reflective monologue. 'Sancho,' he begins, his voice softer than usual, carrying the weight of countless battles fought together. 'These past two years have been more than a campaign. They've been a quest; a noble endeavour filled with moments that would stir the hearts of poets and bring tears to even the most hardened warrior. Together, we've faced giants, some real, some imagined, and though the victories were hard-fought, the defeats bitter, it is not the battles I will remember most. It is our journey.' He pauses, his thumbs drumming lightly on the steering wheel, as if summoning the courage to continue. 'Do you remember all the victories? All the defeats, the goals, the tackles? All those games that have passed by like sand through an hourglass, slipping through our fingers, I swear, Sancho, I felt the world pause in those moments. These are not just games, my friend, they are chapters in a story, a story we wrote together.'

His voice falters slightly, but he steadies himself, his words now heavier, laden with meaning. ‘But every tale must change its course. I know, though I dare not say it aloud, that our roads may soon part. You, my loyal squire, may find a new quest to follow, a new path to tread, and I will need to seek another to stand beside me in these noble battles.’ I shift slightly, unsure how to respond, but he continues, his stare now resolute. ‘No one will ever be like you, Sancho, your wit, your humour, your loyalty, they are now woven into the very fabric of this football club, of its journey. Whoever comes next will carry the banner, but they will never be like you.’ He lapses into silence for a moment, and the van hums on through the darkened countryside. Finally, he sighs, a sound both weary and content. ‘Still, the quest must continue, Ironbridge is not yet the beacon I dream it to be. There is work yet to do, battles yet to fight, and a story that must go on, even if our chapters together come to a close.’ I glance at him, the fleeting glow of passing headlights casting light onto his resolute face. In that moment, I see it, he’s not a man worn down by defeats, but a knight ready to rise once more, to carry the weight of his dreams forward, even if he must do so without me by his side. I smile knowingly, ‘One thing’s for sure, JC,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘The next squire better know how to take notes; your tales alone are enough to fill a library.’

THE END

Account 2 Act IV

The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge

Narrative Preface Account 2: is written in the style of the Star Wars story (Lucas, 1977). Created by George Lucas in 1977, Star Wars is more than a cinematic masterpiece, it is a cultural phenomenon that has redefined storytelling through its masterful use of mythology, archetypes, and the hero’s journey. Rooted in Joseph Campbell’s concept of the *monomyth*, Star Wars weaves together timeless themes of good versus

evil, destiny, identity, and transformation within an expansive universe of richly developed characters. Lucas’ narrative style employs a dynamic interplay of heroism, moral ambiguity, and the struggle for belonging, where characters are constantly shaped by their environments, relationships, and inner conflicts.

This storied account draws heavily from the Star Wars narrative structure (Lucas, 1977), capturing the battle between light and dark within the intricate dynamics of football culture. Much like the iconic conflict between the Jedi and the Sith, the team’s journey unfolds with clear yet evolving distinctions between heroes and villains, mentors and challengers. Characters in this account are akin to those in Lucas’ universe, navigate a world where power, influence, and identity are constantly negotiated, and the struggle for cohesion mirrors the internal and external battles faced by Luke Skywalker and his allies (Lucas, 1977). By embracing the Star Wars ethos, this account reflects the complexities of leadership, loyalty, and the tension between order and chaos. This narrative structure employs archetypal figures such as the mentor, the trickster, and the reluctant hero, each playing their part in a larger quest for unity and success. Through this lens, the football dressing room becomes a battleground of competing forces, where alliances shift, and personal growth emerges through adversity. This stylised approach sets the stage for an epic journey that, like Star Wars, blurs the lines between reality and myth, offering an engaging exploration of human nature and the enduring struggle for identity and purpose.



Figure 20: A Leader in Training (D. Lee)

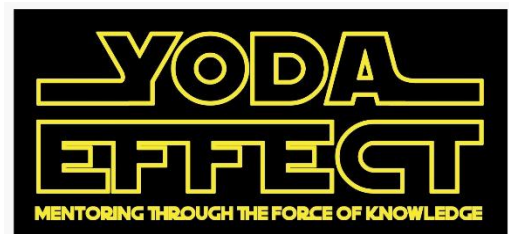


Figure 21: A Star Wars Story (D. Lee)

5.5.5 Account 2.

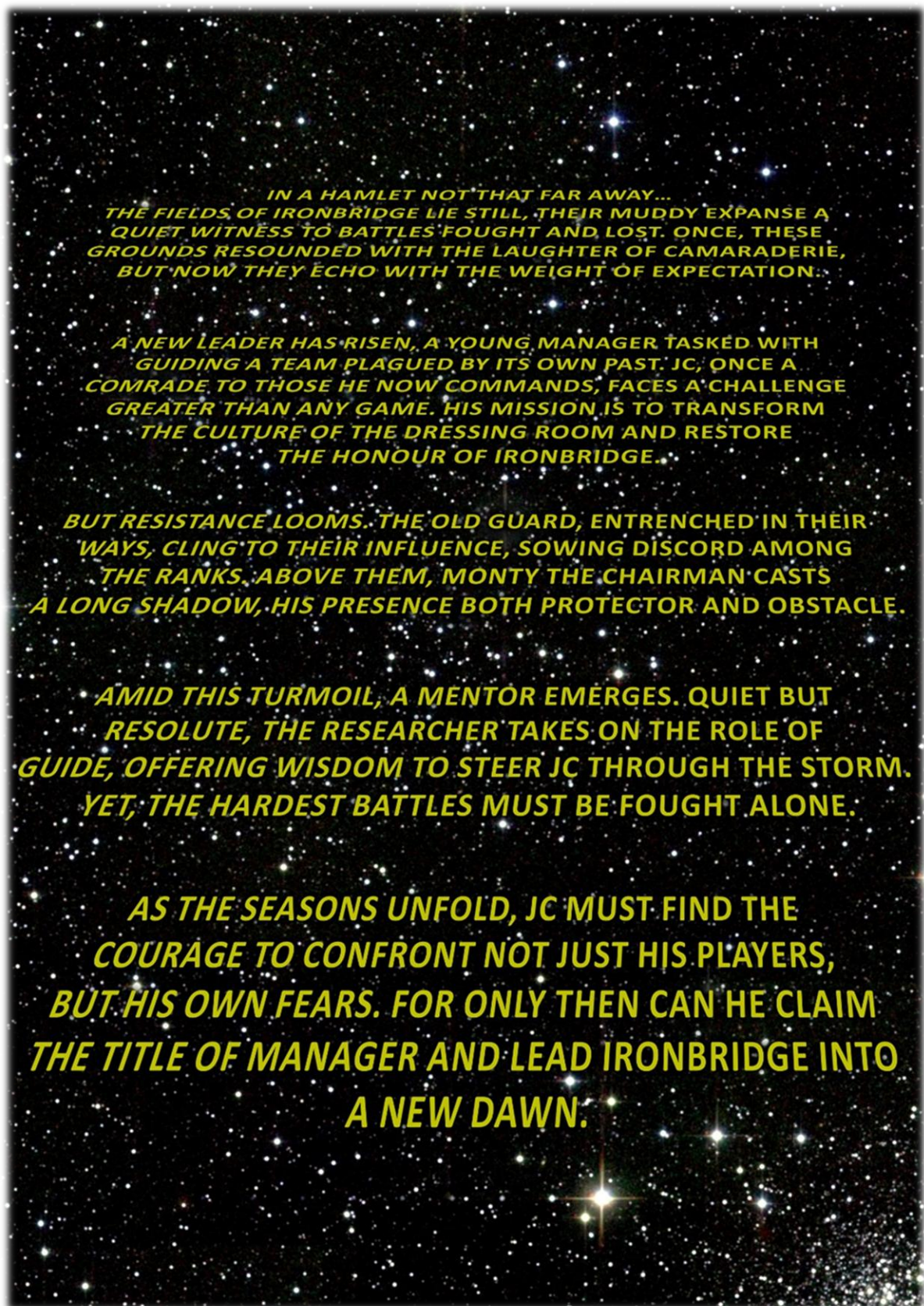
The Yoda Effect: Mentoring through the Force of Knowledge

Figure 22: In a Hamlet not that far away (D. Lee)

Episode 1: *The Call to Leadership*

JC, the newly appointed manager, at such a young age, the opportunity felt both exhilarating and terrifying, a chance to lead, to inspire, and to leave his mark, but also a stage upon which failure could cast its shadow. He was stepping into uncharted territory, unsure of how to act, react, or build the culture that would define his team. By his side stood Dan, a quiet observer and wise guide, a figure whose own journey, as a researcher and mentor, intertwined with JC's. Dan had traversed the world of non-league football; his wisdom forged in its muddy trenches and untold stories. To JC, he was more than an assistant, he was an oracle, one who could light the path forward without walking it for him. This is the start of a significant journey of leadership, identity and personal growth. JC and Dan knew that there were many challenges ahead, they had spoken at length about JC's apprehensions and expectations. Dan understood his role in this unfolding saga, he wore many masks, assistant, mentor, researcher, and narrator, each one reflecting the complexity of his position. JC turns to Dan as they prepared for the first session together 'I'm glad you are with me; I am going to really need the support' Dan's reply was measured, his tone steady. 'Support, JC, is not to carry the weight for you, but to steady you as you carry it yourself. A true guide does not shield the storm but helps you find the strength to stand within it', JC smiles nervously, knowing the challenges that lay ahead, as he stepped onto the training pitch, he knew this was the first step in a journey that would test not just his leadership but the very core of who he was.

As the players start to arrive Dan stepped back, his watchful gaze steady and silent. This was JC's moment, to step forward, to greet the group, to establish the authority he now carried. As the team assembled before him, he could see a variety of youth and experience, ambition and defiance. Among them stood the old guard, a group whose bonds with JC were forged in the fires of past battles, but whose presence now carried a weight of resistance. Dan knew these players well. He had seen them rise, overseen their development, and understood their temperament. J'Dog, Langs, Thorney, Tyler Tenby, and Brody Baxter, all names that echoed through the club's history like the lingering sound of a battle cry. They were men of strong will, unyielding loyalty to each other, and a stubborn aversion to authority that had served them well in the past. But now, their influence was a storm cloud hovering over JC's aspirations.

Monty, their former leader, now the shadowy chairman whose influence currently extends far beyond the pitch, had been the figurehead of this very team, shaping its culture with a calculated balance of autonomy and fear. Under his watch, JC and the old guard had once ruled the dressing room with confidence and camaraderie. He allowed them their freedom, so long as the results kept his wrath at bay. Monty's reputation was legendary. He ruled with an iron fist, his authority unchallenged. Rivals, referees, even the governing bodies had attempted to test his resolve, only to meet swift and decisive retaliation. He was a figure whose presence alone could silence a room, his aura drawing others in with an almost magnetic force. Few dared to stand against him, and fewer still emerged unscathed. Now, as JC stood before his players, the weight of Monty's legacy bore down on him. The old guard's laughter echoed across the pitch, a low rumble that unsettled

the air. Their casual glances and knowing smirks carried a challenge, unspoken but unmistakable: Would JC rise as their leader, or falter under the weight of their shared past? Dan watched from the shadows, knowing this was a pivotal moment. JC's next steps would determine not only his authority but the very foundation of his journey as a leader.

Once the session was over and they had dispersed, JC approached Dan, 'Well, what do you think?' he asked, his voice tinged with eagerness. 'About what?' Dan replied quietly, his gaze calm as they walked toward the office. 'The session, the players, the attitude the dynamic?' JC pressed, his words rushing out in a torrent of enthusiasm and unease. Dan allowed himself a faint smile as they reached the office and took their seats. 'JC, you ask too many questions, especially when the answers are already clear to you. Trust your instincts, they've been right more often than you think' he said, his voice measured and steady, like the weight of an ancient truth. JC sank into his chair, running a hand through his hair, his confidence faltered as he finally voiced the frustration he had been holding back. 'It's the old guard' he admitted, his tone quieter now. 'The group I played so many times with. I don't think they respect me as much as they should. They've already got bad habits, turning up late, saying negative things in front of everyone, being generally disruptive'. He exhaled sharply, his shoulders slumping. 'I just don't know how to tackle it, they're as much friends as they are players', he said, his voice tinged with exhaustion and the weight of unspoken doubts. Dan leaned forward, his gaze fixed on JC with quiet intensity 'The mask you wear, JC, must reflect the leader you wish to be, not the player you once were', he said, each word deliberately. 'Let them see the man, not the memories', Dan says with conviction, 'The hardest choices, JC, are not made with the head alone. The heart must also have its say, for leadership is both logic and love'. JC nodded slowly, the words sinking in like a stone into still water. 'So just get rid of them then?' he asked, his voice hesitant. Dan's smile widened ever so slightly, a glimmer of reassurance in his otherwise steady expression. 'Decisions made in haste are often regrets in waiting' he said. 'Breathe, reflect, and let the answer find you'. Dan leaned forward, his tone gaining weight 'Your choices, JC, are the brushstrokes of the painting you leave behind. Make them bold, make them clear, but never make them careless. JC sat in contemplative silence, the gravity of Dan's words settling over him. This wasn't just about the old guard; it was about his transformation as a leader. Though the path ahead was far from clear, JC knew this was his first lesson in management, and a lesson he could not avoid.

As the next training session began, a few of the old guard sauntered in, their footsteps deliberate and slow. They passed the ongoing session with casual indifference, no apologies, no acknowledgment, not even a glance in JC's direction. Their laughter, light yet sharp, floated across the pitch like a challenge cloaked in defiance. It was a performance meant for an audience, a statement that they would not be dictated to. JC's expression darkened. His frustration was obvious, his jaw tightening as his stare tracked their leisurely movements, the disruption began to bleed into his coaching, his focus shifting from the players on the pitch to the old guard. Whose antics now felt like an affront to his authority; the rhythm of the session broken. 'I'm going to tell them they

can't train,' JC muttered through clenched teeth to Dan, standing quietly by his side 'I'm going to tell them to go home.' Dan, calm and composed, turned his head slightly toward JC, his voice measured. 'Control is not taken with force, JC, but with trust. A leader must first earn respect before demanding it.' JC exhaled sharply, still visibly angry, his eyes locked on the old guard as they continued their walk toward the dressing room. 'I've got to say something,' he insisted, his tone urgent. Dan shifted his look back to the session, speaking with quiet resolve. 'JC, remember, your actions set the tone for those who follow you. React to a negative act with the same energy, and they'll learn to do the same. Show restraint, and you'll teach them strength.' His words lingered in the air, a stillness settling over the moment as JC reflected. He straightened slightly, though the tension in his shoulders remained. He knew Dan was right, yet the urge to assert himself clawed at his resolve.

After the session concluded, JC called the players together. His voice was firm, though the weight of the moment pressed heavily on him. 'Lads, this is not the same team as before,' he began, scanning their faces. 'I've got rules, not for some, but for everyone. You need to get here on time', the old guard exchanged glances, their expressions a mixture of amusement and disbelief. Subtle smirks played across their faces, their body language signalling that they did not take the warning seriously. Dan stepped forward quietly, standing beside JC, his presence a silent but powerful gesture of support. However, JC's mind churned, he knew the old guard's loyalties were not to him but to Monty, the shadowy chairman whose influence loomed over every decision. If JC pushed too hard, they could bypass him entirely, going straight to Monty to undermine his authority. At the same time, their familiarity with JC as a former teammate, someone who had shared in the old culture, made the situation all the more delicate. He was not just their manager, he was their peer, their friend, and now their enforcer. The roles clashed uneasily in his mind. JC glanced at Dan, searching for reassurance, Dan gave a subtle nod. This was JC's moment to decide, to define the leader he wanted to be, but the tension between the past and the present, the friend and the manager was a void JC wasn't sure he could bridge.

Episode 2: *The Trials*

Four long weeks had passed, each one chipping away at JC's resolve. The old guard's antics had escalated, wearing him down like a slow, grinding siege. This wasn't just defiance, it was a calculated chess match, and JC could feel checkmate drawing closer. Whispers reached him from all sides, collectively and individually, the old guard had been going to Monty, the shadowy chairman, voicing their dissatisfaction with the stricter regime JC was trying to instil. They didn't want change, and they certainly didn't want JC's version of it. Monty's silence also weighed heavily, he had not approached JC, nor had JC brought the issue to him. It was a battle fought in shadows, with no clear lines drawn, skulduggery hung thick in the air, incendiary whispers spreading like fire among the troops. JC knew a rebellion was brewing, but how to quell it, or even confront it remained unclear. The old guard, bolstered by their connection to Monty, put their stamp on the dressing

room with every passing day. They disrupted sessions with pointed challenges, questioning JC's decisions in front of the group. Their disregard for the new regime was deep, infecting the younger players and hampering the progress JC desperately sought to achieve. Their leadership among the players was unspoken yet undeniable, a reminder that their grip on the culture of the team had not yet been broken.

In the quiet confines of the office, JC's conversations with Dan revolved endlessly around the old guard. 'It feels like I'm losing the dressing room,' JC admitted one evening, his voice heavy with frustration. 'No matter what I do, they find a way to undermine me. I try to put my stamp on this team, and they just remove it.' Dan leaned back, his expression calm but thoughtful. 'The power you fear slipping away, JC, is the power you've yet to fully claim,' he said, his voice steady. 'Your identity as a leader is not something they will hand to you; it's something you must take. But first, you must decide who you are and what this team will become.' JC nodded slowly, though the weight of Dan's words pressed against him like a physical burden. This wasn't just about tactics or sessions, it was about defining himself as a manager, about taking ownership of a role that still felt unwarranted. He stared out the window at the pitch, where the echoes of the day's training session lingered like a ghost. 'The rebellion is real, isn't it?' JC finally asked, his voice quieter now. Dan's persona was calm, 'A leader does not fear the storm, JC. They step into it. The old guard's defiance is not just a challenge to your authority, it's an opportunity. To lead, you must face them. Not as the player they remember, but as the leader they must learn to follow.' JC turned back to the window, his reflection staring back at him. The rebellion was no longer an abstraction. It was here, and it demanded an answer, one only he could give.

'I'm getting sick of all this now,' JC blurted out, his voice heavy with frustration. 'We need to do something about this. Why hasn't Monty even spoken to me about it? I know they've all been to see him.' The words tumbled out in the safety of the manager's office, a rare refuge from the chaos outside. JC sat with his head in his hands, his thoughts churning like storm clouds. Dan sat across from him, calm as ever, his arms folded. He let the silence settle before speaking, his voice measured and steady. 'I cannot give you all the answers, JC,' he began. 'For the greatest lessons are those you uncover for yourself.' JC exhaled sharply, leaning back in his chair. 'I've tried everything, being their friend, being firm, even ignoring them, nothing works. I just don't know what to do.' His voice faltered, a rare crack in the armour he tried so hard to maintain. Dan stood and walked to the window, looking out onto the pitch, where the day's session had etched faint scars into the grass. 'A leader is many things to many people,' he said, his tone reflective. 'A friend to some, a disciplinarian to others. The key is knowing which mask to wear, and when to remove it.' He turned back to JC, who remained slumped in his chair, the weight of his role bearing down on him. 'Growth, JC, is not found in comfort,' Dan continued, his voice taking on a firmer edge. 'It is forged in the fire of failure, doubt, and perseverance. Look at what you oversee.' He gestured to the window, inviting JC to join him. JC stood reluctantly, moving to the window where he could see the pitch before him, its expanse quiet and still under the fading light. For a moment, the tension in the

room seemed to lift, replaced by a sense of quiet reflection. Dan’s voice softened, yet it carried a gravity that cut through the silence. ‘Within you, JC, lies the warrior, the mentor, and the king. To lead, you must learn to wield each of them in turn. Every hero begins with doubt, JC, but it is the journey that reveals their strength. The first step is not taken with confidence, but with courage.’ JC stared out at the pitch, and for the first time, clarity began to emerge from the chaos in his mind. He looked at Dan, his expression thoughtful. ‘I think I know what I need to do,’ he said, his voice steadier now. Dan gave a small nod, his face revealing the faintest hint of satisfaction. ‘Then take the first step, JC. The path will reveal itself as you walk it’.

With the first friendly game arranged for Saturday, JC had meticulously planned a fixture that would serve as a benchmark for his tenure. It wasn’t just about seeing the depth and skill of his current squad, it was about assessing the team’s spirit, cohesion, and readiness to embrace his vision. However, beneath the surface, the weight of an unspoken dilemma loomed. To bring in new blood, JC would have to make room in the budget, a task that would inevitably mean letting players go, and in this squad, the old guard, though experienced and influential, were also the highest earners and, lately, the least committed. As training drew to a close, JC called the players together, his voice carried across the pitch, calm but firm. ‘Right, we’ve got a game on Saturday. I need to know who’s available and who isn’t,’ he said, his eyes scanning the group. A ripple of murmurs passed through the players, most nodding their agreement, except for the old guard. Thorney, one of the most outspoken of the group, broke the silence with a casual shrug. ‘Depends what time. A few of us are going to the races. If it’s an early kick-off, we can make it. Otherwise, we won’t be there.’ JC’s jaw clenched; his frustration barely contained. He took a steadying breath before responding. ‘You’ve all known about this game for weeks. Why didn’t you say anything before?’ Thorney shrugged again; his tone dismissive. ‘Didn’t seem that important. It’s only a friendly.’ These words hung in the air, cutting through the atmosphere like a knife. Dan, standing just behind JC, observed quietly, his sharp eye taking in the scene. He could see the effort JC had poured into preparing for this match, the thought he had given to every detail, and now, in a single moment, the old guard had shown their utter disregard, not just for the game, but for JC’s authority. ‘How many of you are going to the races?’ JC asked, his voice steady despite the anger simmering beneath it. Slowly, a few hands went up, all belonging to the old guard, then, as if to twist the knife further, Langs interjected. ‘I’m away with my missus on Saturday. We’re going to Cornwall.’ JC’s frustration bubbled to the surface. He glanced at Dan, searching for an anchor in the chaos. Dan’s expression, calm but knowing, didn’t need to speak. JC could almost hear his earlier words echoing in his mind, ‘Not all storms need to be fought head-on. Sometimes the hardest battles are won by clearing the skies first.’ JC took a moment, letting the tension hang. Then, with a measured tone, he replied, ‘Okay, no problem. I’ll sort the squad and send it out by tomorrow evening.’ His response was calm, deliberate, and yet carried a weight that even the old guard couldn’t entirely dismiss. Dan watched as JC turned back toward the dressing room. The young manager’s restraint, though admirable, was born from necessity. This wasn’t just about selecting a squad for a friendly; it was

the beginning of a far more significant decision. The storm was coming, and JC was learning how to weather it, one moment at a time.

As the players dispersed, Dan walked toward JC, observing both the smiling players and the old guard, who strutted toward the dressing room with an air of quiet triumph. Their demeanour was unmistakable, a clear display of disrespect, a silent declaration of victory. JC and Dan, both saw it for what it was, the old guard believed they had won this round, their smirks speaking volumes, JC was weak, unfit to lead, and firmly under their control. JC let out a frustrated sigh, the weight of the moment getting to him. 'Well, that went well,' he quipped, his voice laced with irony. Dan remained calm, his tone measured and steady. 'Better than you might think, JC. Patience. A true leader waits for clarity before striking with conviction. You are the hero of this story, but even heroes need guides. Listen, learn, and when the moment comes, take the leap.' JC nodded gently, though his frustrations remained. 'I need to think. I need to act. I need to get my head straight,' he muttered. His voice tinged with frustration and resignation, the weight of the decision ahead bore down on him, its ramifications stretching far beyond a simple team talk.

In one way, the path forward felt like a trap. If he acted, he risked Monty's judgment, who could easily undermine JC's authority with a single word. His fear of becoming a puppet rather than the puppet master bothered at him, in another way, the old guard's defiance cut deeper than just professional frustration. These were men he had once called friends, allies in the trenches of the game, now, they were a threat, not just to his leadership, but to the cohesion of the entire dressing room. If he wasn't careful, their influence would fracture the team beyond repair. Dan placed a firm but reassuring hand on JC's shoulder. 'Remember, a leader embodies many archetypes but beware of becoming their prisoner. They serve you, JC, you do not serve them.' Again, his words carried a weight that JC couldn't ignore. Dan's wisdom, cryptic yet precise, planted a seed of thought that would need time to grow. With a small nod, Dan turned and began walking back toward the building. JC remained on the pitch, the evening air cool against his skin, his thoughts swirling like a thunderstorm. This was his crossroads, one path promised clarity, a way forward, a chance to lead on his terms. The other led to ruin, a loss of control not just over the old guard but the dressing room as a whole. He knew that whichever path he chose, the decision would define not only his leadership but his very identity. Alone on the pitch, under the quiet expanse of the darkening sky, JC began to weigh the choices before him.

JC had asked Dan to meet him at the club, and as Dan pulled into the car park, he saw JC stepping out of his van with a newfound sense of purpose. There was a sharpness to his movements, a conviction that hadn't been there before. 'Alright, Dan, follow me,' JC said, his voice steady but carrying an edge of anticipation. He led the way into the building, his steps steady and strong, he opened the door to the manager's office. Once inside, they both sat, the air thick with the unspoken significance of the moment. 'Check the group chat,' JC said eagerly, leaning forward. Dan picked up his phone and scrolled through the messages. His eyebrows raised slightly as he saw it, JC had removed every member of the old guard from the chat. It wasn't just a tactical move,

it was a statement, a symbol of how things were going to change. ‘How did they take that?’ Dan asked, his voice calm but curious. JC glanced at his watch, a small smile forming on his face. ‘I’ll let you know in about half an hour,’ he said, winking with an energy that felt almost rejuvenated. ‘I’ve asked them to come in one at a time. They deserve at least that.’ Dan nodded, his expression a mix of understanding and encouragement. ‘That’s a bold move, JC. Nervous?’ he asked, noticing the slight edge to JC’s smile. ‘A bit,’ JC admitted, leaning back in his chair. ‘But it’s time. I can’t let this go on any longer.’ Dan’s smile widened slightly, his tone taking on its usual measured cadence. ‘The old guard clings to the past, JC. To move forward, you must release the anchor. Remember, to lead, you must first follow. The dressing room mirrors the man at its helm. Show them who you are.’ JC nodded.

Soon, the old guard began arriving, one by one. Each came with their arguments, their pleas, their excuses. Some spoke of their need for the financial gains, others made veiled threats about going to Monty, it was clear they had coordinated their efforts, each conversation more prepared than the last, armed with what the others had already said. But JC stood firm. He listened patiently, his demeanour calm, yet resolute, his responses were measured but unwavering, each one reinforcing his commitment to the new direction. Slowly, the reality of the situation dawned on the old guard, their actions had brought them to this point, and there would be no turning back. When the final meeting ended, JC leaned back in his chair, exhaling deeply. ‘I’m glad that’s all over,’ he said, his voice carrying both relief and exhaustion. ‘Feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.’ Dan observed him quietly for a moment, pride evident in his expression. ‘You’ve made the hard decisions, JC,’ he said. ‘And that’s what leaders do.’ JC nodded, though the tension hadn’t fully dissipated. He glanced at Dan, a hint of nervousness creeping back into his features. ‘Just a meeting with Monty remains,’ he said, shooting Dan a look that was half-joking, half-serious. Dan returned the look with a knowing smile; his words calm but firm. ‘One step at a time, JC. You’re ready for this.’ They both shared a brief but meaningful smile, the moment charged with anticipation for what was still to come.

Episode 3: *The Final Battle*

The morning air carried a quiet tension as Dan arrived at the club. He walked briskly into the manager’s office, where JC was already waiting. The young manager sat at the desk; his hands clasped tightly, ‘Monty has asked to see me,’ JC said, his voice tentative but steady. ‘I know what this is going to be about.’ Dan nodded, sensing the significance of the moment. From the energy in the building, it was clear that something had shifted, in the changing room, the players moved with a newfound sense of purpose, their chatter filled with anticipation rather than doubt, the dark cloud that had lingered over the team for weeks seemed to have lifted, replaced by an atmosphere of quiet respect. As JC and Dan passed the dressing room on their way to the pitch, the players greeted JC with enthusiasm. ‘Morning, gaffer,’ said one, ‘What’s the plan Boss?’ asked another. These words, simple as they were, carried weight, they weren’t just questions, they were acknowledgments, a clear sign of the respect JC had earned. Dan glanced at JC, whose posture

straightened ever so slightly, lifted by the subtle affirmation. Once they reached the pitch, Dan led JC away from prying ears, the two of them standing in the vast quiet of the empty field. JC exhaled deeply, the weight of the upcoming confrontation with Monty bearing down. 'How do I deal with this?' he asked, his voice quieter now. 'What if he lets me go?' Dan turned to him, his expression calm and thoughtful, allowing the silence to stretch for a moment before replying. 'Fear whispers of what you might lose, JC, but growth speaks of what you might gain. Listen to the one that leads you forward.' JC looked at Dan, his mentor's words grounding him like an anchor in a storm. Dan continued with a soft yet unyielding tone. 'As a mentor, I am the mirror, JC. My wisdom reflects your potential, but it is you who must see it. It is not the mask that defines you, but the truth you carry behind it. Wear it with purpose, not pretence. Be yourself. Follow your heart.' These words settled over JC like a calm wind after a storm. He inhaled deeply, nodding, as a flicker of confidence returned to his expression. 'Are we going in together?' he asked, his voice tinged with hope. Dan gave a small, knowing smile. 'A mentor does not walk the path for you, JC. They hold the lantern while you take the steps. This is your path now.' JC nodded again, this time with even more conviction. 'Wish me luck,' he said, his voice steadier now. 'You don't need it,' Dan replied with quiet certainty, stepping aside as JC turned toward the corridor.

The walk to Monty's office felt longer than it was. Each step echoed against the walls, the door at the end growing larger with every stride. The weight of what lay ahead weighed heavy on JC's shoulders, but he did not falter. This was his moment, a confrontation not just with Monty, but with himself. As he reached the door, he paused, inhaling deeply before raising his hand to knock. 'Come in,' came a voice from beyond the door, deep, powerful, and unwavering. JC pushed the door open, a shaft of light spilling into the room to reveal Monty seated behind his desk, the chairman's figure, though motionless, seemed to command the entire space. His sharp eyes met JC's as he gestured to the chair across from him. 'Sit down. I want to talk to you,' Monty said, his tone leaving no room for hesitation. JC moved slowly, lowering himself into the chair, the air between them heavy with unspoken tension. Monty leaned forward slightly. 'I know there's a game this afternoon, so I won't keep you long,' he began, his voice firm, 'I have a few questions for you.' JC nodded slightly, though the gesture felt hollow against Monty's commanding presence. 'Why did you release all of the players I assembled for my team all those years ago?' Monty asked bluntly, his words cutting through the silence like a blade. JC shifted uncomfortably but held his ground. Monty didn't wait for an answer, continuing with the same sharpness. 'I trusted those players. They were the spine of my team', the weight of Monty's words hung in the air, the silence between them growing louder with every passing second. JC summoned the courage to respond, his voice steady but strained. 'Well, with all due respect, Monty, it's not your team anymore. It's mine', the room fell silent. Monty's eyes remained fixed on JC, his expression unreadable, the tension was almost unbearable, and JC felt the need to break it once more. He leaned forward slightly, his voice firmer now. 'I want to build my own team, my way. I want to become the leader. I don't want to always be in your shadow. I don't think I can do that with these players around me.' Monty didn't flinch, his expression remaining

steadfast, his silence almost as imposing as his words. JC felt the pressure mounting with the weight of the confrontation. Still, he pressed on, his voice resolute. ‘If I’m going to build a new culture for the dressing room. It needs to be how I want it, the way I want it.’ Monty continued to hold his silence; his piercing stare unwavering. JC felt the tension in the room reach its peak; the weight of the moment nearly unbearable. Finally, he put his cards on the table, his voice carrying the determination of a man who had nothing left to lose. ‘Look, if it’s not what you want, Monty, I can stand aside. You can get the man you want.’ His words echoed in the stillness, their weight lingering in the charged air. JC sat back, his heart pounding, waiting for the chairman’s response.

Monty studied JC for a moment, his piercing stare softening as he noted the tension in the young manager’s posture. Without a word, Monty reached for the water jug on the desk, he turned over two glasses and began pouring, the sound of water breaking the heavy silence in the room. Sliding one glass across the table, he gestured for JC to take it. JC, grateful for the gesture, picked it up and took a long, steadying gulp. Monty leaned back, his own glass in hand, and finally spoke. ‘I’ve got my man, JC. You are the man to lead this team now.’ His voice, though firm, carried an unusual warmth. JC’s eyes widened slightly, the words catching him off guard. Monty continued his tone thoughtful. ‘I had a few of the players come to me about how you were running things, and from what they were saying, I knew you were the right man for the job. I want someone strong, resilient, ready to speak their mind. I want someone to be their own man, not just a version of me.’ His words settled over JC like a calming wave, he leaned back in his chair, almost stunned by what he was hearing. Monty set his glass down, the faintest of smiles at the corners of his mouth. ‘My days in the dugout are long gone,’ Monty admitted, his voice tinged with reflection. ‘My methods, relevant in their time, like Cloughy, they don’t belong in the modern game. This game has moved on, and this club needs a manager from the modern era. A coach. A leader. Someone who knows what version of those to be and when.’ He leaned forward slightly, his eyes locking with JC’s. ‘If I was like Cloughy, then you are this club’s Jose, the modern football man.’ JC reached for his glass again, only to find it empty. Monty noticed and slid the jug across the table. JC poured himself more water, the simple act giving him a moment to absorb Monty’s words. As he did, Monty continued. ‘This team is your journey now,’ Monty said, his voice softening further. ‘I have my own road of trials and tribulations. I’ve never been a chairman before, so I’m navigating my own way through this role. I’ll need you as much as you need me.’

For the first time, JC saw a crack in Monty’s formidable armour, the man who had loomed so large now let his mask slip, revealing a hint of vulnerability. ‘We are all vulnerable in our own way, JC,’ Monty admitted. ‘We are all just making it up as we go along. Some decisions you make will be good, and some will be bad, but with each one, you will learn.’ Monty paused, his eyes drifting briefly toward the door. Then, breaking character for just a moment, he offered JC a rare smile. ‘I’m always here when you need me,’ he said, his voice lightening. ‘Now, good luck with the game.’

JC understood the signal, rising from his chair, he nodded respectfully. ‘Thank you, Monty,’ he said, his voice carrying a note of sincerity. He turned and walked toward the door, the weight on

his shoulders lighter than it had been in weeks. Just as he reached for the handle, JC paused and turned back. Monty was already back at his laptop, his focus returned to his work, JC hesitated for a moment before offering a final, heartfelt, 'Thank you.' Monty didn't look up, but a slight nod acknowledged the sentiment. JC stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him, a sense of clarity settling over him, the path ahead was still uncertain, but for the first time, it felt like his path, and that made all the difference.

From these humble beginnings, two seasons had passed. JC had forged the culture he had envisioned for the club, shaping a team that now recognised him, without question, as 'the gaffer.' His journey had been one of trials, atonement, adulation, and sorrow, a path marked by hard lessons and steady growth. While mistakes were inevitable, JC had learned never to make the same one twice. Now, firmly established and growing with every game, the time for Dan's mentorship was drawing to a close. In the manager's office, the atmosphere was thick with unspoken understanding. JC sat across from Dan, who leaned back, his expression calm, yet reflective. 'This road is going to be far longer for you than for me, JC,' Dan said, his voice steady but carrying the weight of finality. JC nodded, though the truth of Dan's words was not easy to accept. 'One more season?' he asked, though he already knew the answer. Dan shook his head gently, his conviction unwavering. 'Courage, JC, is not the absence of fear but the decision to act despite it. I must find my own path now.' JC leaned back, his expression contemplative, the bond they had built over the past two seasons was unshakable, and yet JC understood that this moment had always been inevitable. Dan continued, his voice taking on a measured tone as he delivered his final lessons. 'You have returned from your journey, JC. This is where the true hero emerges. What you have brought back to your team defines not just you, but all who follow you. The archetypes are not your roles, but your tools. Use the sage to see, the warrior to act, and the king to unify. These masks will keep you on the right path.' The room fell quiet for a moment, the weight of Dan's words settling over JC. Finally, JC spoke, his voice sincere. 'Thank you for your guidance. I know I can call on you whenever I need your mind, and Monty can help guide me in your absence too.' Dan nodded, with a faint smile, rising from his chair, he began packing his things into his bag. JC remained seated, watching his mentor with a mix of gratitude and resolve.

As Dan slung his bag over his shoulder, he turned to JC one final time. 'The greatest battles you have fought, JC, were within. You conquered the doubt in your heart, and that is why no opponent can ever truly defeat you.' JC nodded, his eyes steady, his expression carrying the weight of a man who understood the truth in those words. Dan took a step toward the door but paused, looking back at JC with a mixture of pride. 'This is when the apprentice becomes the master, JC. This team is yours now. Lead it well.' With that, Dan left, the sound of his footsteps fading down the corridor. JC sat alone in the manager's office, his mind racing with everything his mentor had imparted. The torch had been passed, and though the weight of leadership rested squarely on his shoulders, JC knew that he was ready.

Dan stepped back, knowing that his role as mentor had reached its conclusion. From a distance, he watched over JC, occasionally checking results or taking the odd call. He no longer needed to guide every step, the foundation was laid, and JC was walking his path with confidence. Dan observed JC’s growth with quiet pride. His decisions were no longer reactive but rooted in analytical reflection, shaped by the lessons learned through trial and triumph. JC was no longer just a manager, he was a leader, the architect of his team’s future, and while Dan was proud of what JC had already achieved, it was what lay ahead that truly filled him with hope. This season, JC had surpassed expectations, though not Dan’s. He had always seen the potential within JC, the strength waiting to be unlocked. That potential was now fully realised, driving the team to heights others could scarcely imagine. JC’s story was far from over, the challenges he would face, the victories and defeats, the legacy he would build, all still unwritten. Though Dan’s part in this chapter had come to an end, the journey continued.

But that’s another story.

The End

Account 3 Act IV

*The Rise of JC: A
Reflective Journey
Foretold by Daniel*

Narrative Preface Account 3: is heavily influenced by biblical rhetoric (The Bible, 2011) and allegorical storytelling, employing grandiose language and a tone reminiscent of scripture to frame JC's journey as a predestined path of trials, tribulations, and eventual redemption. The narrative is infused with moral undertones, drawing parallels to biblical figures who face adversity, self-doubt, and the burden of leadership. Through the use of symbolism, prophecy, and reflective introspection, this account elevates JC's experience beyond the realm of football, casting him as a figure on a divine quest for identity and purpose. Stylistically, the passage incorporates repetition, metaphor, and parable-like storytelling, creating a sense of inevitability and deeper meaning within the unfolding events. The language evokes a sense of gravity and reflection, presenting JC's journey not just as a personal struggle, but as a larger narrative of human perseverance and fallibility. The use of dramatic contrasts, light and darkness, triumph and failure, loyalty and betrayal, mirrors biblical narratives, reinforcing the epic and moral dimensions of the story.

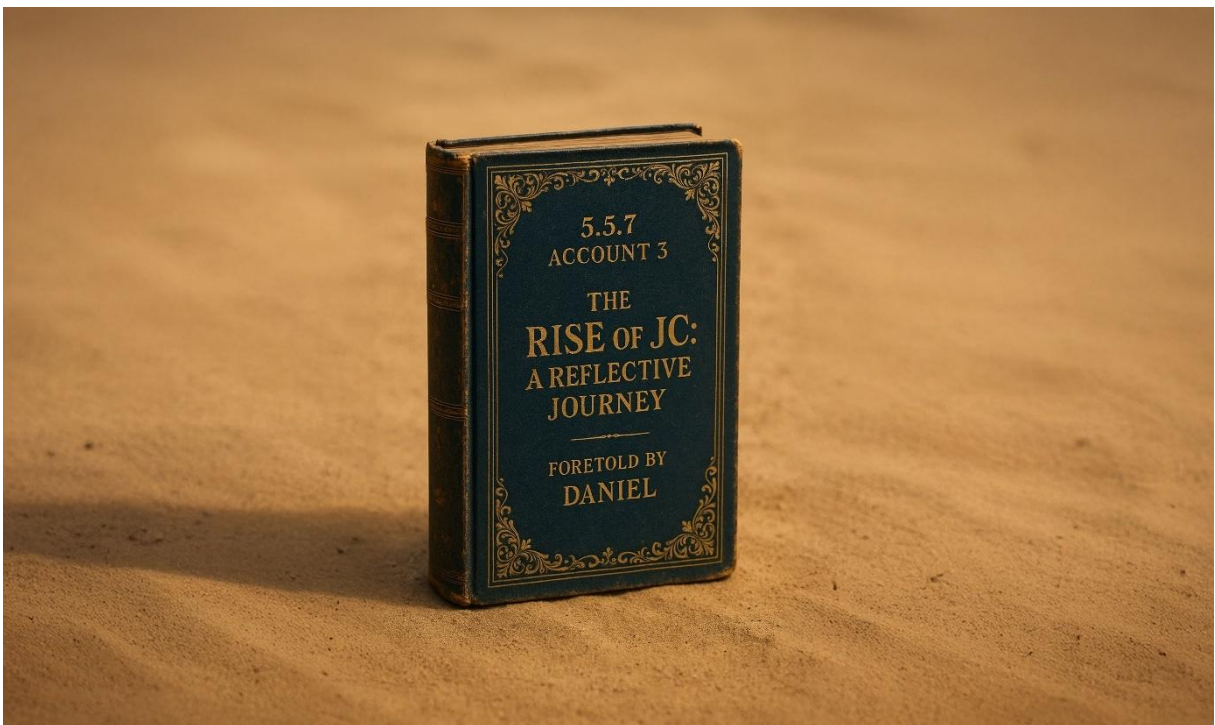


Figure 23: A Biblical Reflection (D. Lee)

5.5.7 Account 3.

The Rise of JC: *A Reflective Journey Foretold*
by Daniel



And it came to pass in the days of trials and triumphs that I, Daniel, did walk alongside JC, the young shepherd chosen to guide the flock of Ironbridge. Yet his path was not paved with ease, for his charge was to transform a kingdom burdened by its past. The fields were vast, their soil heavy with the weight of these past deeds, and the air thick with the murmurs of discontent. JC, though called to lead, bore upon his shoulders the doubts of his youth and the burdens of his lineage. And I, Daniel, stood by his side, not as one who commands, but as one who observes, counsels, and chronicles. Though I carried my own uncertainties, the path before us was veiled in mystery.

In those days, JC's spirit burned bright, his vision vast as the heavens, but his steps uncertain. He was both a leader and a novice, his courage matched only by the weight of his doubt. And I, his steadfast companion, grounding his dreams in the soil of reality. Whilst my own Lord of Studies, Clive, told unto me, 'Prepare thyself to depart, for the field is not thy home. Growth lies beyond this place, and thy journey calls thee onward.' Yet, I understood not his wisdom, for I was entwined with the land and its people. The stories I observed had become my own, and to leave seemed as to abandon a part of myself. But in time, the scales fell from mine eyes, and I saw that his counsel was true.

And the days came when JC stood at the crossroads, before the old guard, men of renown in their own time, yet resistant to the winds of change. They clung to the shadows of their glory, their defiance a storm cloud over the land, their hearts were hardened, their tongues sharp. These men, though once his brothers in arms, had

turned their faces from him, resisting his call to a new way. JC chose to confront his fears, not with the might of authority but with the quiet resolve of a shepherd guiding his flock. He wrestled not only with their defiance but with his own reflection. And I, watching from the shadows, saw in his struggle the echoes of my own. For had I not stood at similar crossroads, torn between my roles as contributor and chronicler, was I merely an observer and participant within the tale itself? Although together, we marched into battles both literal and metaphorical, each game a chapter, each decision a verse in the scripture of his leadership.

In those days, I came to understand the wisdom of the ancients, who taught that man is but a performer upon the stage of life, wearing masks to suit the moment. JC's mask was that of the leader, forged in the fires of solidarity, yet tested in the crucible of defiance. Mine was the mask of the researcher, a visage both near and far, present and unseen. And it was revealed unto me that these masks were not deceptions but tools, each a reflection of the roles we were called to play. JC learned to wear his mask with authenticity, letting the man behind it shine through. And I, in my duality, came to see that my presence in his story was both a gift and a challenge, for to guide him was to guide myself. And as I spoke to him, I beheld my own reflection, the researcher seeking clarity, the mentor offering guidance, the participant absorbed in the story I sought to tell. And it was in those masks that I found revelation.

And it came to pass that the day arrived when my time with JC neared its end, and my heart was heavy with both pride and sorrow. The paths we walked together had led him to a place of strength, his leadership no longer questioned, his team now a reflection of his character. Yet, as I prepared to depart, my reflections ran deep, for I had not merely observed his journey, I had shared in it. Before, I had not understood, for I was lost in the process, enmeshed in the very environment I sought to study. But now, as I stood on the

threshold of departure, I saw clearly. JC's path stretched ever onward; a road filled with trials yet to come. Mine too lay before me, leading into the wilderness of reflection and research, where the questions I once asked of him now turned inward, demanding answers of myself. And so, I departed, carrying with me the lessons of our shared journey. From afar, I beheld him leading his team to new heights, his leadership firm, his vision clear. Though my role had ended, my pride endured, for his triumphs were a testament to the trials we had faced together.

And thus, it is written, that life is as a corridor of doors, each one a choice, each one a path, and each leading to another, unending in its possibilities. JC's rise is not merely the tale of a football manager, but a parable of human growth, resilience, and the boundless power of choice. My role, though fleeting, is etched within the essence of his journey, just as his is with mine. And though our chapters together have drawn to a close, the book of life turns ever onward, its pages inscribed with lessons yet to be learned.

Behold, this is but one chapter; for the rest remains another story, yet to be told.

The End



Figure 24: Lines in the Sand (D. Lee)

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

ACT V



EXITING THE FIELD

Prologue: *Refusal of the Return*

Leaving the field, where belonging is pulling me back, while ethics drive me forward. Told through dialogue, reflection, and dramatic narrative, the exit becomes both performance and transformation.

Account 1

What the Others Say: Reviewing the Current Body of Literature

Discussions with my supervisor reveal a lack of guidance for leaving the field, and the ethical and emotional toll of the exit.

Account 2

To You, from Me: My Future Self

A reflective letter to myself, confronting identity, belonging, and the transition beyond the field.

Account 3

I Died on Stage: This is the End

A dramatic close: leaving through betrayal, cast as villain, detaching to complete the performance and exit.

This act is written in three styles. Account 1 as academic dialogue and review, Account 2 as a reflective letter to self, and Account 3 as a dramatic narrative. Each blends creativity with reflexivity to capture the ethical and emotional weight of exit.



Upon exit, reflexivity runs through the act, in dialogue questioning the ethics of leaving, in a letter reflecting on identity and belonging, and in a final narrative staging exit as performance and transformation.

5.6 Act 5: Exiting the field

Prologue: *Refusal of the Return*

Act Five marks the conclusion of a four-year journey in the field, a period spanning two intense seasons. Throughout this time, a deep and meaningful bond with JC has been forged, the young manager whose leadership I have supported and witnessed evolve (Goffee and Jones, 2006; Yukl, 2010; Bass, 1985). Our relationship, built on trust and mutual respect, has seen us navigate numerous challenges and triumphs together. Leaving this role is an emotional and heart-wrenching decision for me, a club I have grown to be extremely fond of (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). JC has come to rely on me in some ways, not just as a researcher and assistant manager, but as a confidant and friend (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Liden, Wayne, and Stilwell, 1993). Every time I tried to gently prepare him for my departure, planting seeds of the inevitable transition, JC dismissed the notion with a steadfast, 'You are not going anywhere'. His confidence in our bond is evident, and the thought of leaving him to face the future alone weighs heavily on my heart.

Yet, I must move on. This decision, though difficult, is essential for my own growth and well-being; equally, it presents an opportunity for JC to step fully into his role as a manager, embracing autonomy and solidifying his managerial identity (Van Knippenberg, 2016; Mintzberg, 1973; Bennis and Thomas, 2002). My departure, while painful, is a necessary step for both of us. As I prepare to write up this final act, I reflect on the emotional complexity of this transition. The bonds built, the shared experiences, and the mutual growth make this parting particularly challenging. Nonetheless, I believe that this next phase will allow JC to flourish independently, applying the knowledge and confidence he has gained during our time together (Torrance, 2007; Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Northouse, 2018). This bittersweet ending marks not just the close of my fieldwork, but the beginning of JC's journey towards becoming the resilient, self-reliant leader he is destined to be.

These three accounts explore the ethical, personal and strategy for exiting the field. Each account offers an insight to the thoughts and feelings of people beyond the research framework, the people who this research affects. We often look at qualitative and quantitative outcomes for research, and the impact the research has academically, but very often with little consideration to the social impact it leaves behind. Within the first account literature is reviewed in relation to ethical considerations, where impact and outcomes are discussed. Whilst in the second account an introspective personal message is shared by the researcher to the researcher. Finally, the hard exit strategy from the field that jeopardises personal relationships for the sake of the research. These accounts are explicit in some nature and offer a deep and meaningful conclusion to this four-year field-based ethnography.

5.6.1 Account 1.

Account 1 Act V

Reviewing the Current Body of Literature

What the Others Say: *Reviewing the Current Body of Literature*

This academic discussion is the outcome of several meetings between myself as the researcher and Clive Palmer, my Director of Studies. Understanding my learning style and the interpersonal struggle I faced with exiting the field, Clive could see how deeply I was entangled in a spider’s web of belonging, relationships, and personal emotion. In one tutorial, troubled with anxious feelings, I suggested pretending to leave the research field, fabricating an exit and just simply stopping data collection. It was a desperate suggestion; born out of the overwhelming emotional connection I had to the club. Although fleeting, it revealed something real, my life had become deeply interconnected to this field of research. For four years, this wasn’t just research, it was my life.

Clive and I agreed that a strategy was essential, though it was something I had to work on alone. I devised a plan that would ensure my withdrawal, but it was not an exit that would leave me in a favourable light. I would have to create a hard exit, one that cast me as the villain, absorbing the negative emotions myself so they would not burden the participants. This decision was severe but necessary, it forced me to confront not just the ethical complexities of the research but the deep emotional ties I had formed. Searching for guidance in the literature, I found little to support researchers’ well-being during such transitions. Literature seemed vague on the emotional toll exiting the field could take. My identity wavered as I struggled with questions of whether to pause the research, fabricate an exit, or abandon the study altogether. It is only now, with the clarity of hindsight, that I can make sense of this battle. This was a place of learning, a lonely one caught between two worlds. Such a place cannot be understood through literature alone, it must be lived, felt, and navigated. Sympathy for this process can come from reading, but true empathy requires experiencing the emotional weight of it firsthand.

During this stage, my bond with the research participants grew stronger, while my emotional connection to the research process and my supervisor became a balancing act, like scales constantly shifting. It was only when the weight of the research itself outbalanced the emotional factors of the field that I could step back and see the entire process clearly. This moment of clarity revealed not just the complexities of the exit but the transformative power of storytelling, enabling me to make sense of the journey.

5.6.2 Discussion

Leaving the field is a pivotal and complex phase of ethnographic research, yet it is one of the least explored stages in the research cycle (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2010; Calvey, 2017). Researchers invest considerable amounts of time preparing to enter the field and developing the skills needed to collect data during immersion, but exiting often lacks equivalent guidance, despite its significant ethical, emotional, and relational challenges (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Behar, 1996; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). The exit is not merely a procedural endpoint but a moment that can distinctly shape the researcher's legacy, their relationship with participants, and their own identity as an academic (Ellis, 2004; Madden, 2010; Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). Within this account, there are critical observations of the literature on exiting the field, addressing three key areas, ethical considerations, the emotional and relational complexities of departure, and the disparity between the guidance for entry and immersion, and the limited guidance for exiting. This ethnographic research at Ironbridge Football Club will be used for making a case that exiting the field warrants greater attention in methodological discussions, particularly for its emotional and social implications.

Exiting the field is inherently an ethical process, requiring careful navigation of relationships, obligations, and the potential damage that may result from the researcher's departure (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Waddington, 2004). Relational ethics highlight the connection between researchers and participants, and that they are particularly important during this phase (Ellis, 2004; Pink, 2007; Etherington, 2004). However, existing ethical frameworks often focus on issues such as informed consent and anonymity during data collection, leaving the exit phase relatively underexplored (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2010; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Relational Ethics and Trust Relational ethics require researchers to consider the impact of their departure on participants, particularly in immersive contexts where deep connections have been made (Ellis, 2004; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This researcher's time at Ironbridge exemplified the complexity of these dynamics. Over two seasons embedded within the culture of the team, forming close relationships with participants such as JC, the team's manager. Exiting the field meant not only concluding the research but also navigating the potential feelings of abandonment that this departure might evoke (Behar, 1996; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Finlay, 2002). For JC, the researcher's presence as an assistant manager extended beyond data collection to practical contributions, including tactical planning and team motivation. This departure would not only alter the team's dynamic but also raise ethical questions about the impact of removing a trusted collaborator from a high-pressure environment. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) point out, ethical research requires an awareness of the ongoing responsibilities researchers have to their participants, even as they prepare to leave the field (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Etherington, 2004).

Dual roles in ethnography further complicate the ethics of exiting. Calvey (2017) and Madden (2010) state that when researchers occupy hybrid positions, such as observer-participant or researcher-practitioner, the boundaries between roles can become blurred. At Ironbridge, the role as assistant manager often conflicted with the identity of a researcher. While JC saw the researcher as a trusted confidant and collaborator, the researcher was simultaneously examining the dynamics of the team for academic purposes. Leaving this dual role required the researcher to carefully navigate the ethical tensions between fulfilling duties as a researcher and respecting the trust JC had placed within him as a colleague (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Davies, 2008). This *vulnerable observer* (Behar, 1996) dual-role dilemma highlights the researcher’s emotional entanglement with the field. As he prepared to leave, he found himself questioning whether his departure would undermine the relational trust he had worked so hard to build. This tension underscores the ethical complexity of exiting, where professional and personal boundaries are often uncertain (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Ellis, 2004; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). There is guidance on managing relationships during fieldwork, although often the exit phase is treated as a logistical concern rather than an ethical or relational one (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). This gap became particularly evident when conducting this research, where existing frameworks provided little support for addressing the emotional fallout of departure or the ongoing ethical obligations this researcher felt toward participants. Exiting the field is a moment of vulnerability for both researchers and participants, requiring a level of reflexivity and care that is often absent from traditional methodological discussions (Burgess, 1984; Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Madden, 2010; Tedlock, 1991).

Literature on exiting the field is relatively light, particularly in comparison to the extensive guidance available for entering and immersing oneself in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2010; Davies, 2008). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) address the exit as a site of data collection, broader discussions of its ethical, emotional, and relational dimensions remain limited. Exiting the field is significant for its unpredictability, being as much an emotional process as it is a methodological one (Madden, 2010) and often involves untangling complex relational dynamics that participants may not fully understand (Calvey, 2017). These notions provide valuable insights but tend to focus on specific contexts or challenges, leaving broader questions about the social-emotional impact of exiting unanswered (Spradley, 2016; Pink, 2007). For example, Calvey (2017) highlights the unique ethical dilemmas faced in covert research, such as revealing one’s true role to participants and managing their reactions. While this research was not covert, the relational dynamics of the researcher’s dual role as assistant manager created similar challenges. Bonds that were formed with JC and the players raised questions about how to conclude the researcher’s own participation in a way that respected their trust and avoided feelings of betrayal (Holliday, 2007; Lofland and Lofland, 1984).

Documenting the exit phase through fieldnotes is highlighted as an integral part of the research process, though this approach often prioritises the researcher's perspective and offers little guidance on managing participants' responses to departure (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Practical strategies for preparing to leave the field are also discussed but fail to fully address the emotional or ethical complexities involved (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). This oversight reflects a broader trend in ethnographic literature, where the relational and emotional dimensions of fieldwork are often making way for technical or procedural concerns (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997; Schwandt, 2014). One of the most significant gaps in the literature is the lack of structure for managing the long-term relational impact of research. Relational ethics are often focused on the immersion phase rather than the exit (Ellis and Behar, 2004; 1996), this gap became evident within this research, where the researcher struggled to balance the immediate needs of participants with the broader ethical and emotional implications of leaving (Marcus, 1995; Wolcott, 2005).

Emotional and relational complexities of leaving the field are among the least understood aspects of ethnographic research. Ethnographers are not passive observers but active participants in the lives of those they study, making departure a moment of profound emotional and relational significance (Behar and Ellis, 1996; 2004). Exiting the field often involves a sense of loss, as researchers step away from communities and relationships that have shaped their work and identity (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2010). At Ironbridge, this dual role as researcher and assistant manager had become a central part of the researcher's identity. Leaving meant not only concluding research but also relinquishing a role that had given the researcher a sense of belonging and purpose. This type of emotional toll is often under acknowledged in the literature, leaving researchers unprepared for the challenges of departure (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). As for participants, the researcher's departure can feel like a breakup, particularly in contexts where trust and collaboration have been central to the research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). JC's response to the researcher's exit exemplified this relational complexity, despite efforts to prepare him for the departure, his reluctance to acknowledge it revealed the depth of the bond and the difficulty of navigating these transitions. This highlights that field relationships are often deeply personal, requiring researchers to approach their conclusion with care and reflexivity (Pink, 2007). Storytelling can provide a valuable framework for making sense of the emotional dimensions of exiting the field. Storytelling is a relational act, offering an angle to create closure and meaning for both researchers and participants (Frank, 2010). In the body of this research, framing the departure as part of a shared narrative helped to acknowledge the relational bonds the researcher had formed while maintaining a sense of closure.

Disparities between the extensive guidance available for entering and immersing oneself in the field and the limited attention given to exiting reflects a broader oversight in qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Madden, 2010). Entry is characterised by detailed

structures for preparation, rapport-building, and access negotiation (Creswell, 2013; Bernard, 2018), while immersion focuses heavily on data collection strategies and reflexivity (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). In contrast, exiting is often treated as a logistical afterthought, with little consideration given to its ethical, emotional, and relational dimensions. This oversight has significant implications for researchers, particularly those engaged in immersive ethnography. Without adequate guidance, researchers are left to navigate the complexities of exiting on their own, increasing the risk of ethical missteps and emotional burnout (Ellis, 2004; Madden, 2010). In relation to the literature, the lack of frameworks for addressing the relational and social legacy of this research left the researcher struggling with how to balance their obligations to participants with their own personal need to prioritise their own well-being if not for a strategic intervention by the Director of Studies that will be highlighted in Account 3. Exiting the field is a critical yet underexplored phase of ethnographic research, one that demands greater attention to the aforementioned ethical, emotional, and relational dimensions. This researcher’s experience at Ironbridge Football Club underscored the inadequacy of existing literature in addressing these complexities, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and reflexive approach. Future methodological frameworks must consider the emotional and relational dimensions of departure, ensuring that researchers are equipped to navigate this critical phase responsibly, integrally and reflexively (Wacquant, 2004; Schon, 1983; O’Reilly, 2012).

5.6.3 Account 2.

Account 2
Act V
My Future Self

To You, from Me: *My Future Self*

This letter is written from the perspective of completing this doctoral research, reflecting on the journey of entering, occupying, and ultimately leaving the field. Knowing now what I know about this process, the emotional tug of war it has on the different versions of self, and the impact that has on others, not just within the fields, but the supervisory team and personal relationships beyond this research. There is no amount of compliance, ethics forms or structure that can prepare you for this. Only the raw lived experiences that provide that understanding. There was a moment when I was ready to risk my entire research project because of the emotions tied to the club and my place within it. Irrational thoughts of belonging, it all felt so real. It wasn’t until I peeled back the layers of emotion that I could see and truly understand why I was there in the first place.

I knew who I was, but I didn’t yet understand that only I had the power to carry this forward or to set it down. I am a researcher, my mission is to collect, synthesise, and report

data. This process exists to inform, educate, and contribute findings. On paper, it's straightforward, a step-by-step journey that feels deceptively simple at first. Then add in human emotion, relationships, belonging, common purpose, and the fog begins to appear. This research has been about growth, dependence, learning and character, not just me as a researcher, but me as a person. How could I, someone with such high morals and standards, allow myself to get lost in this process? Back then I couldn't have answered that. Now, I understand that although we wear many masks, knowing which ones to wear, when to put them on, and when to take them off is the key to success.

I wanted to write a letter to myself, a guiding light for the version of me embroiled in the process (Madigan, 2011; Stone, 2002). If I had read this letter during those lost months, I wouldn't have believed it was my own voice guiding me. My decision to leave the field was made before the second season, where I came back stronger and more determined. I found my sense of purpose, put on my researcher mask, and faced the world. It was here that I sought the clarity I needed, it was here I planned my exit, and here I realised that although I would be the hero of this story, I would be the villain to some. This was what I had to come to terms with, and this marked the beginning of my academic journey of understanding. There comes a point in research, particularly in immersive ethnography, where the lines between self and study begin to blur. This emotional entanglement, the relationships built, the weight of departure, all of it demands a space for processing, for sense-making. In therapeutic practice, particularly within counselling and palliative care, letter writing has been used as a means of reflection, a way of making sense of complex emotions and ethical dilemmas (Pyle, 2006; Bjorøy, Madigan and Nylund, 2015). Narrative therapy adopts a similar approach, using letters to help individuals' re-author their experiences, externalising emotions and providing a tangible dialogue with the self (Epston and White, 1990). In many ways, this letter to myself follows that same principle, not just a tool for reflection but an anchor, a dialogue between the researcher I was and the one I have become. It is a moment of clarity in an otherwise tangled exit, a means to reconcile the pull of belonging with the necessity of moving forward.

Dear Danny,

Just to let you know, you are not letting anyone down, remember that. I do however know this is an existential test, because me of all people know exactly how you are feeling right now. At the point of writing this, I would like you to reflect on how far we have come. Your *call to adventure* was starting and committing to this doctoral journey, understanding that in some ways it would consume you. At that point, it seems like an adventure, knowing the process is one thing, but living it is something very different. Like an over-eager puppy exploring new surroundings, it can be new, exciting, and daunting all at the same time. *Crossing the first threshold*, going into the unknown, again is an important part of the

adventure. Although the world of football is somewhere you have been many times, it is now seen through a new lens, you are a researcher. This world may seem the same, but it’s somehow different, and it is here you face your *road of trials*.

During your time in this mythical world of research, you have had your *mentor* by your side, not to tell you what you should do, but to guide you. Like any guide, they allow the path to be yours to walk. In this story, like many others, you needed to go into *the abyss*, a somewhat death and resurrection. Being lost in the field has shown you so much, not just about research, but about you yourself. Sometimes it’s hard to see the path ahead, especially when you feel like this is where you actually belong. At this point, you and I both know what steps need to be made to complete the hero’s journey. At this point, I know what is keeping you here, but equally, I know how this story needs to end, and it’s not at Ironbridge Football Club. As you prepare for your *atonement and return*, decisions have to be made, conscious decisions that will help you return to the known world and finish this story.

At this moment, there are a few ethical considerations that need to be addressed, and in this case, it’s about the relationships you have forged. Consider your exit, and the implication of your exit. Consider what’s right for you, but also what’s right for the people you are leaving behind. Every decision has an impact, and you need to remember, in research we have an ethical obligation to the people within it, and this extends beyond the field. This needs a careful, considerate plan, one that you need to navigate confidently. Remember, your job is to tell the story, explore your own emotions, and reflect on your experiences during the process and when leaving the field. This should be a shared insight into your dual role as a researcher and a participant, and how this affects your own identity. Learn to use your masks as and when you need them, because only one of them can tell this story. There are no right or wrong answers, just interpretation. Tell the story of a world only you can see, this is your story after all.

You now have a choice, as do we all. Stay in the field, continue someone else’s journey with them, or exit, and write your own. As we well know, exiting the field will upset a few people, especially considering the relationships and trust you have built. However, you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain (Nolan, 2008), it is as simple as that.

This is your crossroads, this is your sliding doors moment, and you know where each path leads. Life is about choices, and you have one more door to explore, one more door to open. Through this door is the answer, the outcome, the conclusion you have long avoided, but the one that offers you the most growth, stepping back into the real world. It is only from here you can see the journey for what it is, and from this vantage point

the story must be told. It's easy for me, I can see it all from where I am now. But this story depends on if you make it here to see it with me.

At this moment I know you feel torn, caught between staying in a place where you finally feel you belong and stepping back into the real world. This field has become more than a site of research, it's become home, a sanctuary, a stage where your masks fit perfectly. You've worn them all, the confidant, the observer, the coach, the storyteller, and each has served its purpose along the way. But now, as you stand at this crossroads, you need to decide which mask to take off for good. There's no denying the cost of leaving, it feels like a betrayal of the relationships you have built, of the stories still unfolding within this football club. JC, the players, the team, all of them have become a part of you, and in leaving, you know you are leaving a piece of yourself behind. Although staying too long risks something far greater, you risk becoming a caricature in your own story, trapped in a narrative that's no longer yours to tell. Remember what this journey has taught you about transformation, yours, JCs, and the teams. Growth often demands endings, no matter how uncomfortable. You have seen it in the players shedding their masks in the dressing room, JC stepping into his role, and even in your own moments of failure and reflection. These endings are part of the process, not the conclusion. Now, the question isn't whether to stay or go, it's whether you're ready to trust yourself to tell the story when you do.

Yours,

Dan



Figure 25: Look Behind the Mask (D. Lee)

5.6.4 Account 3.

Account 3 Act V

This is the End

I Died on Stage: *This is the End*

So here it is, my exit stage left. My final curtain moment. From the chance meeting with the chairman to the last kick of the last game, this journey has been nothing short of a rollercoaster. Pre-field jitters, the lost season, the dark arts, the adventures, I have lived them all with

a sense of pride and, in the context of this research, an intense sense of purpose. Every moment has been a lesson, about them, about me, and about the process. Ethnography is not just about observation, it's about immersion, about seeing the world through your own lens while being constantly aware of the bias that inevitably clouds it. Because, whether fortunately or unfortunately, that bias is ever-present.

Yet, here I was, fully aware that the only way to complete this thesis was to leave the field behind. It was a decision made long ago, carved into my mind as a necessity for closure. In many ways, I had been setting the scene for my departure, gently introducing the idea to JC in passing conversations, subtly preparing him for the inevitable. But each time, he brushed it off with unwavering confidence. He knew me too well, perhaps better than I knew myself. He could sense my attachment to the club, to him, and to our shared journey. I lacked the courage to simply walk away, to just say goodbye and go. That would have been too hard, too painful. I knew they would pull on my heartstrings, and I wasn't sure if I could resist. So, I needed to make it a hard exit, there was no other way. I had to create a scenario where staying was no longer an option, where leaving wasn't just a choice but an inevitability. So, I had to become the villain of this story. We all play the villain in someone's story at some point, and now it was my turn. This was the only way to sever the ties, to say my final goodbyes to JC, the club, the fans, and the players. As the *'last episode'* played out, nostalgia crept in, each moment feeling like a scene carefully scripted. We took our final bow to the applauding crowd, but only I knew that I wouldn't be returning for a sequel.

This wasn't a decision taken lightly, it consumed me during restless nights, endlessly replayed in my mind. This was Tuckman's stage of adjournment, where every high and low, every challenge and triumph, must eventually come to an end. The conflict within me was relentless, on one hand, the guilt of leaving those who had come to depend on me, on the other, the clarity that I had a purpose beyond this club. I had to remind myself that I was a researcher, not a football coach. My role was to observe, to reflect, and to write. But in the blur of immersion, I had worn too many masks, lost myself in too many roles. Now, it was time to reclaim my purpose. Only I knew the ending, because I wrote the script, the hard exit was the only ending that would lead me to this point. I knew what I had to do.

An opportunity presented itself in the form of another club, who's manager had approached me several times before, but I had always declined. This time, however, the situation was different. I had a reason to say yes. It was a Saturday when we met, and as we sat discussing tactics, ambitions, and the future, I found myself reflecting on everything I was leaving behind. When he extended his hand, I hesitated for a brief moment. That handshake, an unspoken contract, a moral commitment I could not take lightly. Betrayal. Memories flooded my mind, the weight of two years pressing heavily on my heart. But then, clarity struck. I reminded myself why I was here, why I needed to leave. I shook his hand. This was an old school gentleman's agreement, and there was no turning back now. With that handshake the weight lifted, the closure was both liberating and devastating. It was over.

With the deal done, the hardest part still remained, telling JC. I delayed it for a day or two, asking the other manager to hold off on any announcements. JC called, asking if I wanted to grab a coffee to discuss the next season, I agreed, knowing this was my moment. Sitting across from him in that small Costa Coffee in Ironbridge town centre, I blurted it out: 'I'm done'. His response was unexpected yet unsurprising. 'I know', he said, piecing together the fragments I had unknowingly left behind. His expression was calm, understanding, yet laced with the weight of unspoken thoughts. 'It was a hell of a journey, and I can't thank you enough for sharing it with me'. Those words lingered, carrying more meaning than I had anticipated. Even then, I could sense his hope that I might stay. That, given enough time, I'd find my way back to the club, and that's precisely why I had to do what I did. If he believed I was just sitting at home on Saturdays, he would find a way to pull me back in. I knew it, and he knew it too.

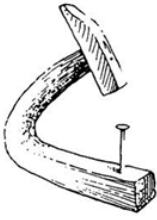
Then came the final act, the revelation. 'I've agreed to join another team', I said, watching his face carefully. 'Not in this league, I hope?' he asked, his expression shifting slightly. I hesitated and gently smiled before responding, 'No, it's the league above.' There was a brief pause, followed by the inevitable question. 'Who?'

'Blackhawk' I said expressionless.

The silence that followed spoke volumes; it seemed like an eternity.

Blackhawk, a club no Ironbridge supporter could ever forgive. If I wanted a way out, this was it, the one move that would sever ties completely, and it worked. I could see it in his eyes, the realisation, the quiet disappointment, but also the respect. It was over. We talked some more, reminiscing about the journey, replaying the highs and lows like old friends who knew they would soon part ways. As we stood to leave, he offered one last olive branch, 'You can still come down to the games, I'll put a ticket on the gate for you'. I shook my head. 'I don't think that will be possible for a while mate'.

5.6.5 Reflexion: Into and out of the field



A moment of reflexivity; two years have passed since then, the distance has provided clarity, allowing me to see the decision for what it was, an act of self-preservation. JC and his new assistant went on to achieve great things, securing a playoff spot and nearly clinching promotion. I spent half a season at Blackhawk, but my heart was never really in it. It was a necessary transition, but not a new beginning. I have never returned to Ironbridge, not even as a spectator. I still feel that the club remains a chapter closed, though I still exchange pleasantries with those I once worked alongside. My relationship with JC continues in some form, long calls dissecting football, strategies, and life. But he never asked me to return, and I never offered. He understood, and so did I. Looking back, the struggle to tear myself away was real, raw, and at times, heartbreaking. This was not a dramatised version; it was the truth. Exiting the field was an emotional battle, but one that ultimately shaped me. It forced me to confront myself, my addictive tendencies, my attachments, and my growth. I have come to realise that I actually like who I portray myself as in this world. I have somehow come to terms with ‘*me*’, no matter what mask I am wearing. But most of all, I have come to realise that after all that was said and done, in the end, it really was just me, them, and the data.

I had so much fun writing this whole chapter, this might sound strange in the context of research, but it’s the truth. This was storytelling in its truest form, not for output, but for understanding and purpose. These Acts in all their different forms gave me licence to write the way I think, or what I see. This I owe to my supervisor, not just for guiding me through this process, but for showing me that creative writing, storytelling, ethnography as method, even voice itself, belongs in academia. That ‘*licence*’ didn’t come in my undergraduate years, not even in the early parts of my PhD, it started with my Masters, and even then, it felt like it had snuck in through the back door of academic sports writing. I wish I’d found it sooner, or as it did, found me. Maybe that’s what makes this chapter matter to me so much, it’s not just what I wrote, it’s that I was finally allowed to write it like this. Building a space where story wasn’t an afterthought, but the method itself. This chapter reminded me that research can be enjoyable, creative and most of all, it can still hold weight. What follows in the final chapter is my attempt to step back from the stories and reflect on what they mean. The final chapter draws together the conclusions of this research, offering recommendations for others working in demanding social contexts, and considering what implications these insights might hold for the professional world of football, or beyond.

Chapter Six

Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter Six

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Reflections and Learning

This study has generated original insights into the connection between identity, reflexivity, and performance within a non-league football context. Initially, I entered this research with little sense of the depth and complexity I would encounter, and I leave having been required to move repeatedly across Junker’s (1960) spectrum of field roles, at times a participant-as-observer deeply immersed in the action, at other times adopting the stance of observer-as-participant, stepping back to analyse what unfolded, a fluctuation between involvement and analysis. This type of fluctuation of field roles proved methodologically productive, it created the conceptual space I needed to see the familiar and to treat the dressing room not only as a sporting workplace but as a socially meaningful backstage where roles are rehearsed, masks are worn, and selves are negotiated. My life in both football and film had prepared me to read people, situations, and narratives. My own issues with dyslexia have actually sharpened my observational skills, forcing me to rely on instinctive pattern recognition, body language, and tone. Years on film sets and on the touchline at football grounds has taught me to *‘read the room’* swiftly, skills that were invaluable in navigating positionality, from insider to outsider as the research demanded (Bruskin, 2019). Over time, the field became a mirror, not just a site of data collection but a place where I learned as much about my own positioning, bias, and affect as I did about others.

Theoretical scaffolding set out (Goffman’s dramaturgy, Campbell’s narrative arc, and Jung’s archetypes) was functional and important for organising the analysis and animated the storied chapters, helping me treat identity as dynamic, performed, and situated rather than fixed or purely personal. They enabled me to frame the dressing room as a culturally dense backstage where impression management, moral negotiation, and group cohesion are performed under pressure. My dual positioning brought both risk and reward, it opened doors to the backstage while demanding continual ethical vigilance, explicit boundaries, and disciplined reflexivity.

There are a few other things that need consideration; firstly, male-dominated spaces such as the non-league dressing room deserve more balanced scholarly reading. What I observed was neither an example of *'toxic masculinity'* or a utopian brotherhood. It was a controlled homosocial environment with its own codes, sanctions, humour, and care practices. Men here routinely gave up time and money to be present, they coached each other, absorbed disappointment, managed fear, and performed courage. Status was negotiated, but there were also quiet acts of support that rarely make the match reports. None of these excuses exclusionary talk or harmful behaviour, and it is not universally transferable beyond this context, but it complicates simple judgments about masculinity by showing how healthy masculinities can be sustained when the environment is confined and accountable. Findings within this study are supported by Anderson's (2009) work on *inclusive masculinity*, Messner's (1992) recognition of sport as a site for cooperative and caring masculinities, and Kimmel's (2008) call for rethinking male identities around responsibility and empathy. Sparkes (2002) similarly illustrates how embodied experiences of sport can challenge narrow definitions of masculinity, pointing towards more relational and supportive performances of being male.

Secondly, the emotional labour of long immersion is under-acknowledged in sports literature. Re-entering a purely observer stance after living inside the heartbeat of a club required an exit from belonging as much as an exit from the field. Most sports post-study guidance focuses on analysis and reporting, very little addresses the transition for researchers who have lived and worked inside their field for years. For me, writing became the primary mechanism of detachment, a way to shape memory into analysis. This should not be treated as an individual coping method, but as an expected phase of ethnographic work, with implications for supervision, aftercare, and project timelines (Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

Methodologically, this study shows how creative reflexivity, storied analysis, and symbolic interpretation can be integrated without sacrificing rigour. This approach has been exercised successfully across a range of social fields, demonstrating that creative reflexivity, storied analysis, and symbolic interpretation can maintain rigour while enriching insight. In health research, narrative inquiry has long been recognised as a means of making sense of lived experience, whether through Frank's (1995) exploration of illness stories, Charon's (2006) development of narrative medicine, or Larsson and Sjöblom's (2013) work on discursive approaches in care. In social work, similar practices have been adopted to engage with identity, voice, and transformation, for example through Stone's (2002) use of therapeutic storytelling, Bjorøy, Madigan and Nylund's (2015) application of narrative letters, and Etherington's (2004) reflexive exploration of self-as-researcher. Within sport, narrative ethnography has provided a powerful methodological lens, where Krane and Baird (2005) highlight its value in applied sport psychology, Holt and Sparkes (2001) demonstrate its use in understanding team cohesion, and Smith and Sparkes (2009, 2016) show how reflexive storytelling captures the complexity of athletic identity. Collectively these studies illustrate how storied and reflexive methods have

been applied with integrity in diverse fields, supporting their relevance and validating their use in the present research.

Storytelling was not just a method for representation but a working tool in the field, and in coaching, helping to frame shared purpose, connect individuals to group history, and defuse tension. The combination of narrative frameworks, visual metaphor, and reflexive practice expanded the possibilities for how lived experience can be brought into analytical focus. This research makes several academic contributions, it offers a model for applying narrative frameworks meaningfully within ethnographic sports research, using performative, symbolic, and storied methods to examine identity as a social performance. It contributes to reflexivity in sport and performance environments, emphasising the emotional weight of immersion and exit. It advances understanding of the dressing room as a site of complex moral negotiation and cohesive practice under competitive pressure. Practically, the skills strengthened through this work; for example, reading social cues, decoding roles, negotiating moral ambiguity.

Limitations are inherent. This was a single club, with particular relationships and histories, and cannot stand for football more broadly, the emphasis is on transferability through thick description rather than statistical generalisation (Geertz, 1973; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Depth came at the expense of breadth, voices across gender, ethnicity, and league hierarchies remain under-represented, indicating that qualitative accounts are always partial and positioned (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). My dual role created power dynamics that may have shaped responses despite efforts to surface and mitigate them, reflexivity functioned as an analytic discipline, accompanied by a critical awareness of its vulnerabilities (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Finlay, 2002; Patai, 1994; Pillow, 2003). Equally, Covid-19 constrained early embodied observation, and time is always a constraint, where this was just a slice of a moving world. Culture, identity, and performance are never static, they shift, evolve, and respond to pressures inside and outside the group. What I offer here is a situated interpretation, carefully made, transparently owned, and time-bound. Although narrative inquiry can yield powerful insights, it remains vulnerable to critiques of subjectivity (Sparkes 1995, 1999); however, its strength lies precisely in this vulnerability, where transparency and reflexivity transform subjectivity from a limitation into a methodological resource.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Researchers and Practitioners

Emerging directly from this study's findings, the following recommendations are offered for both academic researchers and football practitioners. They are not abstract principles, but grounded responses to the lived realities of long-term immersion in a non-league club, shaped by the opportunities and constraints of a dual-role ethnography. Each recommendation draws from specific events, observations, and patterns recorded in the field, and is framed to address

two distinct groups, the scholarly community, and the coaches and leaders responsible for sustaining healthy, high-performing team cultures. While distinct in focus, these recommendations are interconnected, where together, they reflect the core methodological, cultural, and practical findings of this work, and offer a roadmap for those entering similar team environments, for long-term emersion.

1. Navigating Positionality and Dual Roles

Recommendation: Acknowledge and actively manage the fluidity of dual roles, they are not conflicts to avoid but realities to navigate with reflexivity and transparency.

This study reinforces the need for researchers and practitioners to treat positionality as dynamic rather than fixed. In team sport environments, roles, allegiances, and access points shift from team to team and season to season. Considering this social dynamic, what is granted to you as a coach may be withheld from you as a researcher, and vice versa. The dual role I occupied offered unparalleled access to the backstage of the club, but also created moments of tension, blurred expectations, and power imbalances. Managing this required a continuous process of clarifying boundaries with players, staff, and at times, myself. At certain points, however, immersion tipped into over-involvement, and I lost sight of my role as a researcher, a challenge familiar to ethnographers negotiating what Finlay (2002) calls the ‘*swamp*’ of reflexivity. Energy that might have gone into systematic observation was absorbed by coaching responsibilities or invested in relationships that, in retrospect, yielded little analytically. This was a limitation of the dual role, where at times immersion diverted attention and effort away from research priorities, where what felt meaningful in the moment could also act as a diversion. These episodes were not wasted, but they highlight the costs of dual roles as much as their benefits. For practitioners within the football environment, the lesson is that credibility and trust depend on transparent communication and clearly negotiated expectations, often at key stages of the season. For researchers, the academic contribution lies in demonstrating how insider–outsider fluidity can be methodologically advantageous if handled with reflexivity and accountability. Although, ethnographers must constantly negotiate and rebalance their role in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Ultimately, dual roles are not obstacles to be avoided but realities to be managed, and when navigated well, they can unlock insights that neither role could access alone.

2. Managing the Emotional Lifecycle of Fieldwork

Recommendation: Embed emotional transition planning into research design, fieldwork must include structured preparation for exit, reflection, and recovery.

Extended immersion within a culture for academic purposes, in this instance, a football club, is not simply an intellectual exercise, it is an emotional investment that inevitably carries a cost at the point of exit. Leaving the dressing room required an exit from belonging as much

as an exit from the field (Behar, 1996; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). Bonds formed over seasons cannot be cleanly severed, and without preparation, this can lead to confusion or withdrawal. From an academic perspective, this underlines the need for institutions to embed more structured transition plans into research design. Staged exit plans, structured debriefs, and post-fieldwork support should be standard ethical considerations, not afterthoughts (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Simpson, 2011). In football, there are also lessons for club leaders around belonging and attachment. When staff or players leave, the departure impacts group cohesion and identity, and sensitive management of those transitions can strengthen long-term culture (Hughson, Palmer and Skillen, 2012). This could be an opportunity to expand the conversation in sports ethnography about researcher aftercare, and to encourage football practitioners to recognise and address the emotional wellbeing of staff and player turnover as part of their leadership practice. Whether in research or football, endings matter, and how they are handled can either protect or damage the relationships and legacies built over time. A further consideration was the sheer endurance required, six years of immersion felt like a marathon, exhausting to sustain alone and intensified by the ongoing burden of paying fees.

3. Methodological Creativity and Representation

Recommendation: Embrace methodological creativity, reflexive and visual methods can reveal what traditional approaches overlook.

This thesis shows the value of creative and reflexive methods in capturing the tacit, often unspoken codes of the dressing room. Fieldnotes, vignette writing, visual mapping, and narrative reconstructions were not stylistic additions, they were essential tools for highlighting banter boundaries, reading silences, and recording brief acts of solidarity or dissent that interviews alone could miss. These methods were effective not just because of their design, but because they were filtered through my own lived experiences, relationships, and embedded presence in the field. My history in football, my existing rapport with players, and my ability to understand the environment, helped shape what I observed, how I interpreted it, and ultimately how I represented it. In that sense, I was not a neutral observer, but an active research tool, one whose biases, perspectives, and positional history inevitably shaped this work. Bias is not a flaw to be erased, but a reality to be made transparent from the outset, as every researcher can only see the world through their own lens, and acknowledging that is a baseline requirement of responsible ethnography (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). At the same time, there are things this approach could not reveal. By privileging depth over breadth, I was not able to see larger statistical patterns across clubs, leagues, or demographics. A different design, for example, surveys, national datasets, or comparative studies might have mapped the prevalence of certain behaviours or traced correlations between cohesion, identity, and performance. These perspectives are absent here, but that absence is deliberate, because the value of this study lies in showing what creative ethnography can uncover in the close-up

backstage of a single club (Geertz, 1973; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In academic terms, this strengthens the case that ethnographic rigour is not at odds with creativity, indeed, creative methods of representation can enhance transparency when paired with a clearly documented line of reasoning. This methodological contribution is a demonstration of how symbolic interpretation, shaped by the researcher's own positionality, can deepen our understanding of sporting cultures.

4. Context, Culture, and Masculinity in Football

Recommendation: Recognise the dressing room as a legitimate site of cultural and moral formation, a space where masculinity, belonging, and care coexist.

The dressing room must be understood on its own cultural terms as a legitimate research object and as a site of identity performance. In this study, masculinity was not a singular, static construct, it appeared in plural forms, shifting with circumstance, relationship, and role. Moments of exclusion coexisted with acts of care, and the same bravado that could enforce hierarchy also bonded the group through humour and shared struggle. For academia, the contribution lies in resisting parodied readings of male spaces, instead offering a more layered account of how healthy masculinity can be cultivated in controlled environments. This study was positioned firmly in men's football because that was my access point, where I was accepted, and where I belonged. Immersion in this space helped me understand the enduring pull of the dressing room and why it holds such importance for so many men worldwide, especially in a moment when men's mental health is being more openly recognised (Connell, 1995; Sparkes, 2002). This is, however, a male-dominated context, and a limitation of the study is that it does not extend to women's or mixed-gender football, where identity, cohesion, and conflict may take different forms. Comparative ethnographies could test which cultural mechanisms are universal, and which are gender-specific (Hughson, Palmer and Skillen, 2012). This was beyond the scope of the present project, but a deliberate boundary, to prioritise depth and authenticity by working where I could gain belonging and credibility. For this football context, the lesson is to identify and sustain the conditions that enable supportive male bonding, clear codes of conduct, inclusive leadership, and consequences for harm, while also confronting challenging behaviours that undermine cohesion. This dual perspective strengthens both sociological theory and applied coaching practice, showing how cultural awareness can be operationalised to protect and enhance the team environment.

5. Time, Change, and Transferability

Recommendation: Treat ethnographic knowledge as time-bound, document and reflect on cultural change as part of the data itself.

Ethnography captures a world in motion, but always within a limited frame. This research reflects a specific period in one non-league club, during which players came and went,

alliances shifted, and the club culture evolved. For academics, the lesson is to mark the temporal frame as part of the findings, and, where possible, to build return visits or follow-up immersions to assess which dynamics persist, fade, or invert over time. For football practitioners, the point is that team culture is never static, even in a single season, the social chemistry can change dramatically, and leadership strategies must adapt accordingly. A limitation of this study is that the findings are time-bound and not easily transferable. It is not possible to generalise from one club to the whole of football, nor to other team sports or even to teams with more diverse socially constructed groups. The contribution to academia is a case for temporal reflexivity, recognising that what we record is not the whole story, but a moment in an ongoing narrative. Transferability is also necessarily limited, lessons from a male non-league environment may not directly apply to female-only or mixed-gender teams, or to professional settings. However, the dynamics examined here, such as belonging, identity negotiation, banter boundaries, and leadership under pressure, share similarities with situations widely researched in football, suggesting that while this account is situated, it resonates with patterns seen elsewhere (Geertz, 1973; Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

6.3 The Final Curtain

When I stepped out of the field for the final time, I left not as an assistant manager but as an ethnographer, no longer bound by the loyalties, politics, or the professional constraints of the dressing room. From this vantage point, the environment I had inhabited for years came into focus as an ecosystem with its own rules, rituals, and hierarchies. This research set out to examine those social dynamics, identity performances, and power relations through an immersive ethnography. The dual role I held brought the field's backstage into view while requiring me to navigate ethics, loyalty, and detachment. Anchored by dramaturgy, monomyth, and archetype, the analysis treated identity as something enacted with and before others, rehearsed, contested, and sometimes rewritten under pressure.

The dressing room emerged as a disciplined social world, where rituals steadied nerves, humour that bound or cut, sanctions that mark boundaries, and moments of unguarded care. Masculinities here were plural and situational, sometimes exclusionary, often supportive, always negotiated. Recognising both the value and the limits of this space allows for more useful conversations than simple criticism or defence.

Like a coliseum's waiting chamber before battle, the non-league dressing room is charged with anticipation, performance, and identity. It is a male-dominated space where belonging is forged through shared struggle, where the bonds of brotherhood can be both sustaining and suffocating. Over the course of my fieldwork, I saw patterns repeat themselves, social performances sustained by cultural norms, identity masks, and unspoken codes. Aggression was part of the leadership repertoire, commanding authority through tone and posture, targeting frustration strategically, mobilising siege mentality. Targeting frustration

toward selected individuals, often the same ones targeted by peer cliques such as the '*Vipers*'. In public, armour was fixed, although in private, vulnerability surfaced.

These performances, while normalised in football, would be unacceptable in most workplaces. The '*bank manager*' analogy makes the contrast clear, a manager who kicks over a table, throws a bottle against the wall, and unleashes a string of expletives would be out of a job by the end of the day. In football, such acts are often rationalised as passion or care for the group. When at its strongest, the dressing room cultivated a form of masculinity built on camaraderie, humour, and mutual challenge that forged resilience and belonging.

This space allows men to be playful and serious, competitive and caring, assertive and vulnerable, often in the same hour. The dressing room was also a sanctuary, where men can express competitiveness, banter, and even vulnerability without fear of external judgement. Contained by clear boundaries and mutual trust, it offers a rare environment where male expression could be explored openly. Such spaces allow men to inhabit roles that are both physically and psychologically demanding, to measure themselves against their peers, to test limits, to experience the deep satisfaction of striving together toward a shared goal. Far from being outdated relics, these environments channel primal instincts into disciplined performance, reinforcing values of loyalty, courage, and mutual protection. When governed well, they offer a safe, constructive outlet for energies that, left unguided, might find less productive expression.

While public discourse often scrutinises male-dominated environments, my time in the non-league dressing room revealed something less talked about, these spaces can encourage healthy masculinity. Here, '*boys being boys*' was not shorthand for toxicity, but for camaraderie, humour, and mutual challenge that forged resilience and belonging. The rituals, banter, and even the performative bravado were part of a shared language that strengthened group cohesion and individual confidence. This was also a space of politics and flux, where manipulation could shape decisions, and high player turnover disrupted continuity. Belonging here was powerful but never guaranteed. The sense of it was strong enough to keep the older players hanging on and to draw former players into management, where they can control and preserve the space. It is, in many ways, masculinity personified, amplified, celebrated, and performed.

Seen through the ethnographer's lens, the dressing room becomes more than a preparation space for sport, it is a microcosm where identity is negotiated, where men are free to experiment with the roles they play, and where the social bonds are strengthened by collective effort. In an age of increasing social fragmentation, such spaces offer respect and self-awareness, and can be not only acceptable but valuable for individual wellbeing and community cohesion. Parallels to military units and ancient hunter-gatherer groups were clear, shared rituals, symbolic armour, and the disciplined channelling of aggression toward a

collective goal. This is not an accidental parallel, the male psyche has been shaped over millennia by environments in which survival and success depended on forming alliances, preparing for conflict, and testing courage, strength, and honour against rival groups. In the dressing room, this ancient pattern is re-enacted in a controlled, rule-bound environment, the ‘*enemy*’ is not demonised but respected, and the ‘*battle*’ is limited by rules and laws.

Leaving the field for the last time, I saw the dressing room not as ‘*ours*’ but as ‘*theirs*’, an ecosystem with its own rules, hierarchies, and history. My years inside it had given me the privilege of fluency in its language, but stepping out meant surrendering the claim of belonging. Like a documentarian, my task was never to intervene or to rewrite its script, but to witness, to interpret, and to offer back an account shaped by both closeness and distance. Meaning that this work is not extracted, it is lived, witnessed, written, and offered back with the care it deserves. In football, as in ethnography, the score always matters, but how the game was played, and who we became together in the playing of it, matters more.

There’s a strange silence after the final whistle or when the director yells cut for the last time. Not relief, not sadness, just space, that’s exactly what this moment feels like. Writing this closing ‘*grey box*’, I realise this research hasn’t just been a project, it’s been a reflection, a journey, and at times, a reckoning. I didn’t set out to write something ‘*different*’ for the sake of it, I just knew that if I was going to tell the truth of what I actually saw, I had to do it in my own way. That meant resisting convention at times, trusting metaphor, and trusting my own voice. In doing so, I found that creative expression is not separate from structure, it’s one of its deepest forms.

This whole process has reminded me that people, real people, are complex, chaotic, and in flux. What I witnessed on the pitch, in the dressing room, and those moments with JC, taught me more than any textbook ever could. Although it was only through stepping back, through writing, that I began to see what it all meant. I owe that clarity to the players, the staff, my supervisor, and everyone who trusted me enough to let me watch, listen, and ask questions.

Reflecting on this journey, I now see that life is about personal choice and character development. These masks we wear are often there to suppress or disguise raw emotions, yet the choice of mask reveals more about us than we realise. Much like the Oracle scene in the *Matrix*, where Neo is offered the candy. Neo says ‘You already know if I am going to take it, and if you know, how can I make a choice?’ The Oracle simply replies, ‘You didn’t

come here to make a choice, you have already made it. You have come here to understand why you made it'. This is somehow where I am with me and this research, seeking to make sense of a world that does not want to be understood. This overall research process has given me clarity, purpose, and the tools to navigate both academic and real-world spaces with greater understanding and insight. As a researcher, this journey has not only provided academic knowledge but also personal growth and transformation. In the end, I have come to the conclusion that I did not undertake this research despite my personal needs, I did it because of them.

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Appendices

Contents

1. Ethical Approval: UCLan BAHSS Ethics Committee	261
2. Participant Information Sheets	262
3. Participant Consent Form	267
4. Interview Schedule	270
5. Lockdown Interview Example (<i>PM</i>)	272
6. Raw Notes (<i>Blackhawk: 26th December 2022</i>)	275
7. Disguised Notes (<i>Feversbrook Town: 22nd April 2023</i>)	278
8. Refined Notes (<i>Cranford Town: 19th November 2022</i>)	280



29 July 2020

Clive Palmer / Daniel R. Lee
School of Sport and Health Sciences
University of Central Lancashire

Dear Clive / Daniel

Re: BAHSS Ethics Review Panel Application
Unique Reference Number: BAHSS2 0107

The BAHSS Ethics Review Panel has granted **CONDITIONAL** approval of your proposal application 'An Ethnographic Documentary of Performance Cultures and Team Dynamics in Football'. Approval is granted up to the end of project date.*

The conditions relating to the approval are: Approval is conditional upon the restrictions upon face-to-face research due to COVID-19 being lifted.

It is your responsibility to ensure that

- the project is carried out in line with the information provided in the forms you have submitted
- you regularly re-consider the ethical issues that may be raised in generating and analysing your data
- any proposed amendments/changes to the project are raised with, and approved by, the Ethics Review Panel
- you notify EthicsInfo@uclan.ac.uk if the end date changes or the project does not start
- serious adverse events that occur from the project are reported to the Ethics Review Panel
- a closure report is submitted to complete the ethics governance procedures (existing paperwork can be used for this purpose e.g. funder's end of grant report; abstract for student award or NRES final report. If none of these are available, use the e-Ethics Closure Report pro forma).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "D. Bürkle", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Daniel Bürkle
Deputy Vice-Chair
BAHSS Ethics Review Panel

* for research degree students this will be the final lapse date



Participant information sheet

Title of study: An Ethnographic Documentary of Performance Cultures and Team Dynamics in Football

Version No: 1

Version date: 09/04/2020

Study invitation

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask if you would like more information, or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, relatives or any other relevant person if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this research is to attempt to enhance our current understanding of why certain teams achieve success, whilst others fail to fulfil potential or meet expectations. This research intends to develop a greater understanding of how a successful performance culture and a positive team dynamic can be established to influence a successful outcome in a competitive setting, by means of an ethnographic approach (looking at people and culture), and video documentary.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are currently a member of or football club where this study is taking place. As a participant, I feel that you will have a valid contribution to this study; furthermore, you will enhance the quality of the investigation.



Do I have to take part?

No. If you do not wish to take part in this study, then you have the right not to do so and should simply make this clear to the researcher. This is a voluntary process, and you are free to decline or withdraw your participation at any time, without explanation, and without incurring a disadvantage.

What will happen if I take part?

If you do agree to participate in this research, you will be observed by the researcher within the football club environment. This will only take place during matches, training and on occasions when socialising with members of the club. You may be invited to undertake an interview and/or a focus group. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and anonymised, if requested. If you wish to review the transcript at any time, you may do so by contacting Danny Lee (DRLee@uclan.ac.uk). Research will be carried out over two months, where Danny Lee (researcher) will be observing training, matches and social interactions.

As this is a video documentary, there will be video/visual recordings. All visual data will be examined and synthesised by the researcher, before being published.

How will my data be used?

After data has been collected, the data will be studied before being cut into the finalised documentary.

The University of Central Lancashire processes personal data as part of its research and teaching activities in accordance with the lawful basis of 'public task', and in accordance with the University's purpose of "advancing education, learning and research for the public benefit".

Under UK data protection legislation, the University acts as the Data Controller for personal data collected as part of the University's research. The University privacy notice for research participants can be found on the attached link https://www.uclan.ac.uk/data_protection/privacy-notice-research-participants.php

On request, there will be an opportunity for a respondent validation; this is where you will have access to all documents, auditory and visual data, before any data is publicised/broadcast. Thereafter, documentary footage may be broadcast ~~publically~~ on YouTube. If you wish for any footage of you to be pixelated, this must be requested before the footage is broadcast.



Further information on how your data will be used can be found in the table below.

How will my data be collected?	Data will be collected through direct observations, reflexive field notes, interviews and visual imagery.
How will my data be stored?	Your personal data be stored on the University of Central Lancashire’s network.
How long will my data be stored for?	Data will be stored for five years.
What measures are in place to protect the security and confidentiality of my data?	Data will be stored in a secure location within the network with restricted access, this is to prevent unauthorised parties, who have no right or need accessing your data.
Will my data be anonymised?	Interviews can be anonymised on the request of the participant. Any sensitive visual material will be shown to the participant prior to being broadcast.
How will my data be used?	Visual data will be collected and synthesised, resulting in a thirty-minute documentary and interviews will be transcribed verbatim.
Who will have access to my data?	Researcher: Danny Lee DOS: Dr Clive Palmer Supervisor: Anna Coonan-Byrom
Will my data be archived for use in other research projects in the future?	No data will be used for any other research projects.
How will my data be destroyed?	Data will be destroyed using a programme called Active KillDisk.

Are there any risks in taking part?

I do not consider there to be any significant risks to taking part in this study. Extreme care will be taken to ensure that confidentiality/anonymity when requested by you the participant.

Are there any benefits from taking part?

It is important to remember that participation in this research is typically altruistic; it is on the basis of informed consent and not on the promise of benefit. Of course, we may *hope for* benefits for participants, but in most cases, we cannot claim that there *will be* benefits. You will however be contributing to findings, that will benefit



the way in which performance teams can be studied and positively contribute to the current understanding of the aforementioned performance teams.

Expenses and / or payments

There will be no expenses or payments, this research will be within your everyday environment.

What will happen to the results of the study?

This research project is part of the researchers MPhil/PhD; documentary footage can be available on request. You will not be identifiable from the results, unless you have consented to being so.

What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

Informed consent is an ongoing process, not just something that occurs at the start of a study; consequently, you are free to withdraw from participation at any time.

To withdraw from this study

To withdraw from this study, contact the researcher, please note, you do not need to offer any reasons or explanation for why you wish to withdraw from the study.

Researcher: Danny Lee
 Email: drlee@uclan.ac.uk
 Tel: 07791 645 961

Please note

If data has been anonymised, you can only withdraw prior to anonymisation; afterwards it may not be possible to establish which results belong to you. Additionally, once data has been collated and/or reported, it may not be possible to isolate and extract your data.

Withdrawal timeframe: You can withdraw from this research at any stage of data collection, once data has been anonymised, analysed and synthesised, it will not be possible to extract your data. If you wish to withdraw, you can do so four calendar months from the date on your participant consent form.

What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting Dr Clive Palmer on CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with, then please contact the Research Governance Unit at OfficerForEthics@uclan.ac.uk.



The University of Central Lancashire strives to maintain the highest standards of rigour in the processing of your data. However, if you have any concerns about the way in which the University of Central Lancashire processes your personal data, it is important that you are aware of your right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office by calling 0303 123 1113.

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

Dr Clive Palmer

Email: CAPalmer@ucl.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1772 89 5710

School of Sport and Health Sciences: Room GR257, Greenbank Bld, UCLan,
Preston, PR1 2HE

Contact details of investigatory team

Danny Lee

Email: DRLee@uclan.ac.uk

Tel: 07791 645 961

**Participant consent form |****Name of Researcher:** Daniel R. Lee**Title of study:** An Ethnographic Documentary of Performance Cultures and Team Dynamics in Football**Version No:** 1**Version date:** 09/04/2020**Research ethics approval number:**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [09/04/2020] for the above study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that taking part in the study involves observations, interviews and focus groups. I also understand that visual and auditory data will be collected.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected. In addition, I understand that I am free to decline to answer any particular question or questions.

4. I understand that I can ask for access to the information I provide and I can request the destruction of that information if I wish at any time prior to anonymisation, up to four months after the date I had signed this document. I understand that following that period, I will no longer be able to request access to or withdrawal of the information I provide.

Page 1 of 3



5. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely and in line with data protection requirements at the University of Central Lancashire.

6. I understand that signed consent forms, and original audio/video recordings, along with verbatim interviews will be retained in a secure location on an encrypted drive, where only the named researcher will have access until the conclusion of the research process.

7. I understand that there will be an opportunity to view any documents, auditory and visual data, via a respondent validation, before any data is publicised/broadcast.

8. I understand that once I have approved all documents, auditory and visual data, via a respondent validation, footage could be uploaded and broadcast on YouTube.

9. I agree to take part in the above study.



Participant name

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Principal Investigator

Dr Clive Palmer

Address: Room GR257, Greenbank Bld, UCLan, Preston, PR1 2HE

Email: CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1772 89 5710

Student Investigator

Danny Lee

Address: Greenbank Bld, UCLan, Preston, PR1 2HE

Tel: +44 (0) 7791 64 5961

Email: drlee@uclan.ac.uk



Interview Schedule – Covid interviews			
	Questions	Probes	Prompts
1.	What's it like being locked down where you are?	Dynamics Motivation Social impact	How do you communicate with players/coaches/parents? Have you provided an alternative to keep people engaged? On-line group sessions for example.
2.	Tell me about your career so far, leading up to where you currently are.	Clubs Experiences/opportunities Cultures	What role did you have? What country was it? What were the goals/desired outcomes?
3.	Tell me a bit about your current role.	Country Culture Dynamics	Has your organisation got a clear vision? Is there a style of play/vision?
4.	What do you deem as success in your current role?	Winning/development Values Ethical practice	Who decides this? How does everyone know?
5.	Are there any communication issues?	Language barriers Lack of understanding/clarity	Could this impact cohesion? What other forms of communication are used, if any? (WhatsApp groups/meetings/socials)

6.	Where would you say you have gained your football knowledge?	Significant others Experiences Environments	Any particular methods? Different culture/different approach?
7.	Are there any particular low points you can think of that have helped build the character you are today?	Resilience Influence Missed opportunities	How has that helped/hindered your career path? What was the outcome/ What could have been the outcome?
8.	How would you describe the players habits/norms within your current environment?	Dressing room On-field Social cliques	Who drives the culture? What impact does 'banter' have on the group or individual? What are considered the group norms?
9.	How would you describe your character?	Self-image Social awareness Identity/belonging	How would you think others would describe you? Leading man or support cast?
10.	If you had the opportunity to meet your younger self, what advice would you offer and why?	Refelxion Regret Memories/moment Missed opportunity	What does success look like to you now vs then? What has had the biggest impact on you, a significant relationship, experiences or the environments? Or could it be a bit of everything?

An ethnographic documentary of performance cultures and team dynamics in football

Interviewer	Danny Lee: University of Central Lancashire drlee@uclan.ac.uk
Interviewee	[REDACTED]
Date	29 th January 2021
Location	Microsoft Teams (during Covid lockdown)
Enquiry	Experiences of team dynamics and general culture within football
Schedule	Lockdown interview. This interview was also used as an educational tool for a level 3 college course as extracurricular activities for students during lockdown.
<p>Outline of questions for context: Experiences so far within football, what experiences have been had within the dressing room culture and club/organisation values as a manager in a foreign culture.</p> <p>This interview is directly linked to research into football leadership at an elite level, and reflections within the socio-cultural element of football.</p>	

Time within audio file	Partial transcript notes from full interviews: utterances, questions and responses.	NVC actions, reactions disturbances and/or researcher notes	Initial coding of responses: themes emerging, trends and inferences
6.19 – 7.12	PM: A mixture really. I was kind of at a... I had enough on my CV, my background to allow me to get an opportunity like this, but, I probably didn't have the right credentials in terms of licencing at the time. I was very lazy. I thought the licences didn't matter, how wrong I was.	PM was asked if him ending up as a professional in Iceland was chance or hard work.	Reflection on his own pathway. Changing mind-set to create opportunities
10.50 – 11.45	PM: Everyone in Iceland speaks English. PM: I've held conversations where they are speaking to me in	PM was asked about the club he is currently working at an the language	Adapting to culture: PM knows that his survival as a 'foreigner', adaptation is key. Acceptance: Learning certain

	<p>Icelandic, and I am speaking back to them in English.</p> <p>PM: In terms of coaching, the first thing I did, in the first few days, I got a piece of paper and a pen then wrote down certain words like...basically to set their feet, or to stand up or two hands. SO if I'm coaching them in a New York moment, then they are not going to have to translate what I'm saying in English into their home language.</p>	<p>barrier</p>	<p>terminology PM is aiming for acceptance within the club culture that is already set at the club.</p> <p>Undertaking this role shows a strong character, also learning to adapt shows a strong mind-set.</p>
<p>13.39 – 16.58</p>	<p>PM: The barrier to get them to do what I want them to do more comes if it's completely out of left field.</p> <p>PM: When I first come here it blew my mind, I was like, that we can do, we can do that, it's that simple. It's almost less is more, like, completely, here it's like less is more. They don't want to be training for two hours because to them it's, not pointless but, you just end up training to train.</p>	<p>PM was asked about relationships, motivational climate and team habits, considering he is not from there.</p> <p>PM spoke about how short their coaching sessions are and the rationale.</p>	<p>For social acceptance, PM has found it easier to adapt his practice to suit the group rather than embed his knowledge and ideas. (impression management)</p> <p>Environment has started to shape his ideas and values.</p> <p>Social learning and adapting to the cultural needs of others.</p>
<p>17.44 – 18.40</p>	<p>PM: It's the most laid-back place I've ever been, it quite suits me. They have a saying, it basically translates to 'Ah, it'll be alright'. So the way they do it, it frustrates me so much, because like you said, in England, if you need something done, it's done, what, that day. In Iceland, oh it's so important, we need to get it done, it needs to be done...we'll do it in two weeks.</p>	<p>PM was prompted again on the cultural norms and how it has impacted him.</p>	<p>Environment and social norms within their society, and where PM is within that seems to suit his character.</p>
<p>21.05 – 22.19</p>	<p>PM: Yeah yeah, it's exactly the same, stuff like that don't change. You get different characters, the more outgoing characters that are...it's exactly the same, just all in Icelandic, they don't start joking around in English randomly, or if they do they are taking the piss out of an English saying, or</p>	<p>PM was prompted again on the cultural norms within the sport, explicitly banter.</p>	<p>Social norms, behaviours and culture is the same as the UK</p> <p>As a minority PM felt uneasy until he could understand (Social acceptance)</p>

	<p>something and, yeah, nine times out of ten, but as soon as it's go time, it's very serious, so they take their football very very seriously in this country.</p> <p>PM: I didn't really start to enjoy until about a year in, when I knew what they were saying.</p>		
25.44 – 28.41	<p>PM: It sounds cheesy, but nothing is impossible really. I come from Sutton, I've never played a professional football match in my life and now I'm a first team coach and first team goalkeeper coach at a professional football club in Iceland.</p> <p>PM: Don't be scared to think outside the box and go outside your comfort zone because there is more to life than being inside London outside England and you should take any opportunities that you do get to go abroad or even further afield than London and take it with both hands.</p>	PM was asked to offer advice for young students of the game.	<p>Pursuing dreams to make them realities (emotional resilience and self-belief)</p> <p>Experience different things to grow your identity</p> <p>Try different environments to see what suits your character</p>

DL reflection:

PM seemed relaxed in his new found environment, it seems to match his character. He reflected on himself being lazy, by not getting the relevant qualifications, then spoke about the laid-back culture he now finds himself in. I tried to prompt him several times on the cultural norms, he seemed to speak around the edges on this topic, but suggested that it was similar to the UK. Apart from the acquired specific football knowledge he has, he seems to be adapting and learning new cultural habits. This is one area that interests me, one area I would like to observe first-hand. His new landscape seems to be creating his identity, with an evolving methodology, beliefs and values, which he has embedded into his current practice.

Emergent themes summary:

- Self-reflection
- Mind-set
- Adapting and acceptance
- Social learning (being part of the group, learning how to blend in)

Monday, 26th Dec 22 (1)
 [REDACTED] (10:00)

11:30

Jc putting cones and balls out, ready for the match. Some warm up. (D)

Summary: Due to adverse weather there has been no games or training. Team selection will be problematic due to the fact that all the players are back. (D)

11:18 Team Selected, This is a must win, what will happen? (I)

A few surprises to the line up, but with no football for a month it's a lottery. (D)

de confidence that has selection is a winning one. (4) *lets see!*

is it on merit? ⁽⁺⁾ is it ⁽²⁾
on conversations had? ⁽⁺⁾
is it on gut instinct? ⁽⁺⁾
Can this be the best
line up we've got? ⁽⁺⁾

11:46 Physio Room C'D
on the bed talking about
baby's and how his Christmas
is. question: can, why's
he not playing?
onto the pitch to speak
to Jc. Viper Moment!!!
Very Calculated

12:05 Team talk dressing room
Justifying the team selection
was standing by the door ^(M)
C'D sits on the floor (distance
of separation maybe) ^{or desperate?}
Jc emphasises application
in moving to the showers
to see the whole room ^(M)
Team are briefed on
structure ⁽⁺⁾

(3)

Can (sub) not get boots on,
 is this a statement? (F)

CQ - we need energy.

will he
 practice
 it too?

JC addresses the attitude,
 and how we approach the
 game and match officials. (D)

Good technical info.

BE, DF, CL Both look disengaged,
 This is a reflection on the
 team selection. (F)

view
 moment

Lots of personal conversations

with JC & CQ, what are they
 discussing? (I) Could it be the
 opposition formation etc? (F)

12:50 - final prep, dressing room
 I am by the showers (M)

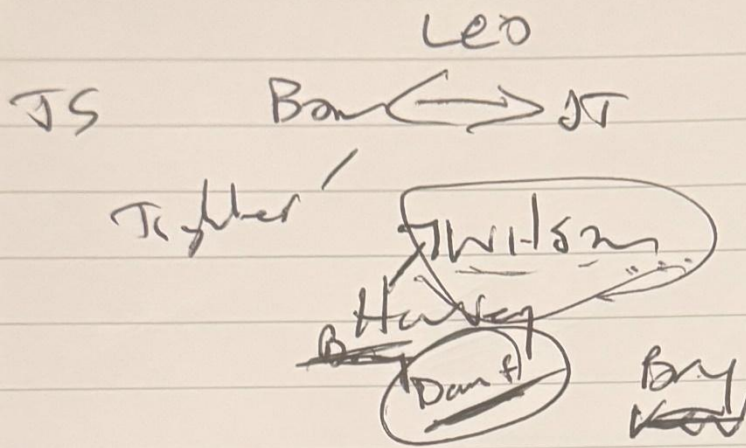
Some look focused, JC puts
 music on TT features last
 minute treatment from physio.
 Move to where GK sit, near
 the door. (M)

Motivation levels look
 Jaded... (F)

22/4/23



(Away)



9

Wilson for Harvey

4 off, 11 on.

Kevon

Nael

Cam

~~Bunch~~

Mitch

Harvey 9

Billy

Dan

Kieron

Drop to cover

(Rank 1)

Don't hit

Then get in

Behind.

FS/BP

Wilson

9

No Silly

Free kicks.

SXLVI'S

Bon

JT

Stoney

Nael

Bryan

Tommy

Harvey

Cam

Kev

HT Don for 9 $\frac{2}{3}$ off
Get at them.

Rank 1 — What did we say?

- Keep the shape
- 2 Sloppy goals
- Accountability!!!
- Don't come off the post until you are told (9)
- far too deep, close the lines and stop them playing in between us.
- Too aggressive in the press, let them have it there.
- up the intensity in the middle 3rd
- stop the 1v1's on the outside

Background notes, story so far and considerable factors (date, times, locations, and general description of setting)		
Date	19/11/2022	Venue
<p>Match day vs. [redacted] This team is flying high at the moment, sitting second in the league, unbeaten in their last twelve games, this is not going to be an easy game by any stretch of the imagination. A few face [redacted] in the dressing room, will they go straight into the team? How will the skipper respond to his form being questioned on and off of the pitch? On a footballing perspective, not much is known at [redacted] an interesting afternoon to look forward to. Big decisions for JC, especially around his own behaviours on the bench and around the group.</p>		

Time	Location	Descriptive notes (with observations)	Methodological notes	Inferences
11:20	Home	JC calls to inform me that he will be a little late due to working commitments, I have been tasked with setting up the warmup and putting the starting eleven on the board in the dressing room.		This is the players first glimpse of who is in and who is out. Some will anticipate their involvement.
13:00	Pitch		Set warm up, took my book into the bar to scribe these notes before we start. (quiet)	
	Bar area	I set a team task of 5 x £1 coins, this is for the World cup draw (Starts tomorrow)	I am sat in the corner of the bar area, but keep getting interrupted by ground staff, bar staff and youth team managers. I need to move back to the solitude of the managers	

			office down the football end.	
	Office	<p>The corridor to the dressing rooms is long, away dressing room on the right, then the referee’s room (on the right) is opposite the tunnel (where the pitch is), and then the home dressing room. At the end of the corridor there is a door leading to the physio room and the managers office.</p> <p>Walking past the home dressing room I could see four players, all on their phones. It all looks extremely sombre.</p>	Walking past the away dressing room to get to the office, the music is really loud.	<p>Could this be an over exaggerated confidence?</p> <p>What are they thinking?</p> <p>Against a good side [redacted] at do they think of the team selection?</p>
	Dressing room area	WhatsApp message read ‘all this stuff in long 😊😊😊😊😊😊’.	[redacted] it in the Players group chat (MW showed me the message).	Another example of dressing room viper behaviours. A smiling assassin!
	Dressing room area	I walked past [redacted] openly that he hadn’t got his coins, he then went to the players fine pot to exchange [redacted] [redacted] is masters, where they set		Do Curt and Noel think they are above the rest of the group? What makes them think that? Have they got too

Daniel R. Lee – PhD student researcher

				preferential treatment?
16:55	Pitch	<p>Full time – 3-2 win against the top of the league team, the players are ecstatic. Some players have gone in, and some still working the crowd, ██████ amongst the latter. JC gives all the credit to the group in his usual 'unsung hero' way. What a debrief, and it is highlighted that if we apply ourselves like that every week the outcomes would be vastly different.</p> <p>JC hands out the little brown envelopes to some gleeful looking men.</p>		
	Reflection	<p>Tuesday night we play Brighton and Hove Albion in the Sussex senior cup, JC will rotate, and that effort is going to be the minimum requirement ██████ is back undo some of the work that has been done to gel the group? From the conversations we have had, I can see that JC is starting to understand the concept of keeping his personal feelings aside when trying to make pragmatic decisions. Its also clear to see the Vipers and how they try to manipulate the dynamics. They are all in fact really nice people when you speak to them away from the dressing room, but the mask they use in there has a real sinister face on it, although I really don't think they see it like that.</p>		

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		<p>him that he is sticking with him for now, but ██████ goalkeeper is breathing down his neck. 'Be braver and louder' again JC assertively states.</p>		<p>knows enough to give the right information.</p> <p>If he did start to believe in himself, could he go to a much higher level?</p>
14:00	Dressing room	<p>Team Talk – there is an emphasis on behaviour, energy and group responsibility. Three or four players start to stretch in preparation as JC starts to talk. ██████ sits on the floor against his allotted seat.</p> <p>The only player I can ██████ the wall of the dressing room is in the way, the rest I can see are focused on JC as he is about to speak. 'Know yourself; and know the others around you. ██████ at the ██████ ██████ break eye contact. ██████ stares into space, ██████ idles with a few things, i.e., chain, socks, pads. All eyes are on ██████ ██████ focused, while ██████ looks uninterested.</p> <p>████████ is looking at me with my book out.</p>	<p>I move to the other side of the room to see the corner</p>	<p>Does ██████ purposely mean to be different?</p> <p>Can anyone what's he writing?</p>