



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
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# **Comeback attempts by elite soccer players:**

## **A study of two cases**

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## **Abstract**

Studier har visat att elitidrottare kan ha svårt att anpassa sig till livet efter sin idrottskarriär. Vissa elitidrottare har det lätt att anpassa sig till sin nya vardag, medan andra har det svårare.

Det är dock brist på studier som undersöker kopplingen mellan elitfotbollspelare och comebacker, och syftet med den här studien är att titta närmare på detta fenomen.

För att undersöka detta har jag gjort en kvalitativ undersökning där jag har intervjuat två före detta elitfotbollsspelare. Intervjuerna behandlade tre stycken delar av deltagarnas liv: a) Varför de slutade spela fotboll, b) Vad de gjorde efter att de har slutat spela fotboll och c) Hur deras comeback gick till. Tre stycken forskningsmål användes för att få ut så mycket information som möjligt om deltagarnas comebacker, Hur ser fotbollspelare på sin comeback? Hur upplevde de den? Varför gjorde de comeback?

Som teoretiskt ramverk så har jag använt mig av Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA har sin hemvist i psykologi, och handlar om hur människor upplever stora/viktiga händelser i sina liv.

Resultatet av studien visade på likheter mellan deltagarna, men det var flest skillnader som uppdagades, både på hur deltagarna hade slutat med fotboll samt varför de gjorde comeback.

Båda deltagarna poängterade vikten av bra förberedelser innan man slutar, att man ska reflektera över om tiden är inne för att sluta med fotboll på elitnivå och vikten av att ha någonting att gå till efter att man har slutat.

# Preface

I would especially like to thank the two participants in this research study. Without them this thesis would not have been possible. It was a privilege to get to interview two former elite soccer players, and have them open up and speak so candidly about their careers. Thank you.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Natalie Barker for her helpful guidance during my work with this thesis.

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# Introduction

Sport can shape athletes in different ways, for example when children start with a sporting activity it is the leaders who decide what the children should learn; *"Leaders and instructors pinpoint, for instance, qualities like honesty, responsibility, independence and social and moral values as worth teaching"* (Oddner, 2010, p. 181). What you learn from your coach, your teammates, and the environment you are in can shape you as an athlete. However, not everything that athletes' coaches say or do will have a positive effect, or a desired effect. Research has shown that *"leaders maintain (consciously and unconsciously) that discipline, attentiveness and the observance of rules are central demands made on children. The leaders claimed to encourage creativity and independence, but turned out to reward law obedience, punctuality and discipline"* (Oddner, 2010, p. 181).

In Sweden, the two main areas of the socialization process in sport have been association fostering and competition fostering (Oddner, 2010). Association fostering encourages sport participants to feel committed to a club they represent. This process has been the dominant one in the country after WWII. Competition fostering has come into focus in recent years, mainly due to the professionalization of sport. This process is seen to teach that victory is important and that competition is necessary.

Sport is now also connected to various sectors – the law, the market and maybe the most important part – the media. Soccer is an association sport that has become more and more professionalized, from being a part time job to a full time professional career.

Today, a professional soccer player spends on average between fifteen to twenty years in the sport. Various factors affect a playing career, including injuries and fitness. However, when players retire, what do they do?

Newspaper articles have been used due to the lack of research on retired soccer players. Two examples of players having a hard time of coping with life after soccer are Dean Windass and Paul Gascoigne. Both players were active at the very top of professional soccer, the Barclays Premier League, the highest ranking division of professional soccer in England. Dean Windass admitted in an interview that he had struggled to cope with life after soccer: *"There is nothing to get up for in the morning"* (BBC, 2012), and that he had battled alcoholism and depression after ending his career. This led Windass to twice try to take his life. Paul Gascoigne has also struggled with alcoholism since he ended his active soccer career, and as recently as February 2013, was admitted to a rehabilitation clinic in the USA (BBC, 2013).

In some rare cases, players return to soccer after a phase of retirement. Reasons vary, of which one is missing the sport. One example is Paul Scholes, a player that has represented one of the best teams in the world, Manchester United for close to twenty years. He said after announcing his comeback: *"Ask any player who has finished, they will all miss it for a period of time. I missed it and decided to give it another go"* (Sky Sports, 2012).

There is quite a lot of research on career transition from elite sport (e.g. Stambulova, 2010; Park, Lavalle & Tod, 2013), however there is a lack of studies about professional soccer players'

comeback attempts. The need to explore what makes professional soccer players to attempt comebacks is further strengthened by studies showing that the support systems (psychologists, doctors, and education/welfare) during their active careers and beyond retirement are lacking (Drawer & Fuller, 2002). Why do some soccer players return to competitive sport?

## Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine comebacks of professional soccer players. The research questions are as follows:

- What factors contribute to retired elite soccer players attempting comebacks?
- Why do they decide to come back to a sport they have once retired from?

To be able to understand why professional soccer players have attempted comebacks, interviews have been conducted with two retired soccer players that both attempted comebacks on the highest level of professional soccer

## Significance

The three examples in the introduction paint a picture on how different life after an elite soccer career can be. This study hopes to shed some more light on how soccer shapes its players and why some players struggle while others cope. This is a chance to get players that have been professional soccer players for over twenty years to have their say on why they decided to return to soccer, even though they had once officially retired. This will help to get a better understanding for active players, retired players and coaches/managers on what happens after a player retires from the sport.

## Definitions

In this research study, several terms are key for best understanding of this thesis. These are: comeback and experience. In the context of this study it is important not to confuse this with making a comeback in an ongoing match, turning a deficit into a victory (Fry, 2011). For this research study I employ the following definition of a comeback: "a comeback is a return to previous elite sporting level the athlete played at". This means that if you played in the top tier of the Swedish soccer pyramid, your comeback must be in the top tier.

To explain how the interviewed former elite soccer players make sense of their decision to comeback to soccer, we talk about their experience. The definition in this research study is: *"Whatever presents itself as a unit in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning, is the smallest unit which can be called an experience. Any more comprehensive unit which is made up of parts of a life, linked by a common meaning, is also called an experience, even when the parts are separated by interrupting events."* *Selected Writings* (Dilthey, 1976). What this study will look at is what Dilthey (1976) describes as the "comprehensive unit", which is an experience that has had a larger impact on an individual's life. A significant moment in the person's life – and in this case, how former elite soccer players experience their comeback.

# Background

Transition in and out of sport is covered more and more in sport research. Reasons for this may be that the economic incentives being involved in professional sport, for example, are large. In the following, I cover literature that is relevant to the topic of my thesis.

## Earlier research

There has been extensive research on athletes' career transition out of sport. One recent study by Park et al. (2013) systematically reviews athletes' transition from 1968 to 2010, covering a total of 126 studies. Almost half of the studies, 44%, were qualitative, 44% quantitative, and 12% had used a mixed model when looking at career transition. As seen, there have been quite a few studies about career transition, many sports have been covered, and different methods have been used. In the 126 studies covered, there were 13,511 participants of which 11,332 (84%) had experienced termination (e.g. no renewal of contract) from their sport. 1768 (16%) participants reported that their experience of transition from sport had been accompanied by adjustment difficulties. Of the 126 studies, a total of 86 studies reported that at least one of their participants had experienced difficulties or negative emotions in their transition out of sport. They had experienced feelings of loss, identity crisis and distress.

Studies have also covered athlete identity in retirement and the transition back into elite sport by analysing 84 newsprint media articles representing athletes' career transition. They have looked at the athletes' social and sport identity, and the choice made by athletes to compete or not (Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb & Kettler, 2013). In most cases comebacks were shown by Cosh et al. (2008) to be driven by emotion, compulsion and motivation.

One study has looked at an elite female fencer with Olympic goals, collecting data from her different life transitions over a fourteen-year period using multiple interviews and handwritten notes (Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012). The study showed the importance of other domains of an athlete's life, such as; personal-, social life and education (Debois et al. 2012).

Studies on former elite soccer players have been conducted as well, with one study looking at how 500 former elite soccer players viewed the provision of support services before and after retirement, and if their career was ended due to injury, how/if it affected their views toward the provision of support services. They used questionnaires as research method, and had 187 out of 500 returned to them. The soccer players who answered the questionnaire had many similarities, one being the reason for their retirement. Many of them cited injury, new career or non-renewal of their contract (Drawer et al. 2002).

The difference between these studies and my study is that we have two former elite soccer players being interviewed about their decision to attempt a comeback. Why did they retire? How did they feel about coming back? Insight will be given about the players' comeback experience, how their comeback affected them and how we can learn from players making comebacks in soccer.

This study will look at how they look back at their career in three different stages, retirement, post-retirement and comeback and life afterwards.



## Contextualizing Soccer

To be able to understand how soccer has changed over the years, a contextualization of the developments is useful for my study.

Over the past twenty years, soccer has changed radically. One event that has made the most impact is the Bosman ruling from 1995. The Bosman ruling allows players within the European Union (EU) to leave their clubs at the end of a playing contract for another club without any fee needing to be paid (European Court of Justice, 1995). With this ruling, the players gained power over their employers. A player could now wait for his or her contract to run out, and then sign for another club with a large sign-on bonus (BBC, 1999). The sign-on bonus is used because the new employer did not have to pay a transfer fee for the player. The potential earnings (sign-on bonus) for a player in soccer increased as a result of this ruling, as it then became a smart move to let your contract expire.

It is not only players' rights that changed the economic climate in soccer. Sponsor deals and TV-rights have made soccer a multi-billion industry. Forbes' (2013) most recent list values the Spanish soccer club Real Madrid C.F at \$3.3 billion. This is in stark contrast to the highest Swedish league, Allsvenskan. In Sweden, clubs work with a fraction of what Real Madrid is valued. For instance IFK Göteborg, one of the largest clubs in Sweden, is a million-dollar club (IFK Göteborg, 2011). When the difference in money being involved is so great, there are going to be differences in context (environment, facilities, salary) for players representing these clubs. The two participants in this study have played abroad, but most of their career was spent in Sweden playing in the top tier of elite soccer, Allsvenskan. A few years abroad means a significant higher income during those years, even if you are not considered a key player for the team. There have been indications (even though salaries are mostly secret) that a player in one of the top leagues in Europe can with a month's salary earn up to what a player in Allsvenskan earns over a year (e.g. The Guardian, 2013; Nyheter 24, 2012). With this difference, financial reasons can also be seen as a contributing factor when looking at comebacks in professional soccer.

The economic climate in soccer is a generation issue. With these swift changes, soccer has changed greatly. The participants in this study have been active during the late 1980's, 1990's and early 2000s. Their context is not the same as for a player that has been active in the late 1990's and is still an active elite player. The participants' salaries and potential income from soccer were much lower than for a player that is active now. Elite players these days can solely focus on playing soccer and making a living from it. The participants in this study, and players active in the 1990's and earlier, in contrast, most likely had a civilian job outside of their soccer career.

Today's elite soccer players' everyday life looks a lot different in comparison to the elite players that were active twenty years ago. These changes in soccer are important, and will make it easier to understand the context in which the participants in this research study come from.

# Theory

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is the theoretical foundation for this study. IPA is a qualitative research approach which originates from psychology; phenomenology is at its core a philosophical approach with roots from philosopher Edmund Husserl, and looks at how individuals make sense of major life experiences. IPA's key feature is; "*Focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience*" *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith et al. 2009 p. 45). I chose IPA because I want to understand how two soccer players experience comeback. There are three cornerstones in the IPA approach; Psychological, Interpretative and Idiographic.

The *psychological* cornerstone is, as mentioned above from the phenomenological field of research, and provides the researcher with a source of ideas on how to examine peoples lived experiences. Phenomenologists are interested in what the experience of being human is like. The *interpretative* part comes from hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation. IPA bases its interpretative part on that; "*All humans are sense-making creatures; and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience*" *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith et al. 2009, p. 3). This means that the conducted interviews made for this study take a closer look at how the participants made sense of their experiences at attempting a comeback in elite soccer.

The last cornerstone of IPA is *idiographic*, which concerns itself with the particular (Smith et al. 2009). The particular in this study is how elite soccer players look at their own comeback.

The idiographic focus will help providing insight into how a given person (the players), in a given context (soccer), makes sense of a given phenomenon (retirement/comeback).

A part from the cornerstones IPA supplies, there are also three analysing tools to use when making sense of empirical materials. These three tools are; themes, patterns and interpretation (Smith et al. 2009, p. 101). In terms of *themes*, three different themes have been used in this thesis: a) Retirement process, b) Comeback process and c) Second retirement process. The second tool is *patterns*, when analysing the collected data it is important to look for patterns across the cases. I used the following questions to guide the process: What do the cases have in common? Is there something both of the participants mention about making a comeback? When looking at patterns, it will be easy to see the differences between the two cases.

*Interpretation* is the last analysing tool, and the tool that can be the hardest to use (Smith et al. p. 103). This is the interpretation the researcher makes of the participants' interview and the transcript from it. The researcher will make his or her interpretation in line with IPA, and see if the participants' experiences can be seen from a different angle. Perhaps the researcher will find new information or answers regarding the participants' motives and actions.

These three cornerstones of IPA together with the three analysing tools will together help with analysing how the participants' have experienced their retirement and comeback.

# Method

This is a qualitative case study about two former elite soccer players. For this study interviews have been the primary method. Interviews were used because as a case study, importance is put on the participants' comments. The participants have context-dependent knowledge about retirement; it is their experiences this study is built on. Their behaviour in relation to their retirement and comeback is the core of the study (Hemmestad, Jones & Standal, 2010).

## Criteria, Sample, Recruitment

The criteria for this study are as follows: The player must be an elite soccer player that has been retired for at least six months, and then have made his or her comeback. After the player had made his comeback, he retired again for good. There are not many players that have retired and then attempted a comeback in professional soccer, so from the beginning the sample pool was limited. Further, as the timeframe for this study was limited, only two Swedish players were selected (from a pool of eight players). Both players fitted the criteria set out for this study. Contact was made through E-mail to both players. The first player was then contacted through telephone and a time and place for the interview was decided. A personal visit to the second player's current club (where he is head coach) was made due to lack of contact information. At the personal visit, contact information was shared between the researcher and the participant. Telephone contact was then made, and time and place were agreed upon for the interview.

## Data production method

In line with the IPA approach, the interviews were semi-structured (Smith et al. 2009) with six questions used as framework; these questions were open so that the player could reflect on his or her experiences (interview schedule in Appendix). The interviews were split in three parts:

1. Retirement – Why did he retire from soccer?
2. Post-retirement – What has happened since he retired from soccer?
3. Comeback and life afterwards – What made him retire from elite soccer again? What is he doing now?

Both interviews were recorded so it would be easy to transcribe and analyse the answers and reflections from the athletes. The two conducted interviews were just over the hour mark, giving time for the athletes to answer the six main questions and reflect on their active career and comeback. The interviews were transcribed in Swedish, while I translated the parts that were relevant for this study to English.

## Data analysing

The transcriptions were analysed using the six-step framework IPA supplies (Smith et al. 2009).

1. **Reading and re-reading** – As a transcript was made after the interview this needed to be read. Since the transcripts are long and as a researcher you do not want to miss any relevant data, the transcripts were read multiple times.
2. **Initial noting** – This is the most important and most time consuming step. Everything that could be seen as relevant for the research topic needed to be included and noted. The participants' language, emotions and everything that seemed to be of importance for the participant was noted.
3. **Developing emergent themes** – Themes: Retirement process, Comeback process and Second retirement process.
4. **Searching for connections across emergent themes** – Looking at each case for connections between the three parts of the participants' career.
5. **Moving to the next case** – When this step was reached I looked at the next case study before I looked at both of them together on step six.
6. **Looking for patterns across cases** – When looking at patterns across the two cases differences are noted. What is similar between the two cases? Can I see anything that ties the participants together when looking at their attempts at comebacks?

Relevant parts for this study were colour highlighted. Relevant quotes matching the research topic and the six-step IPA framework formed the result section.

The results are presented in a narrative approach. A full narrative account must be given since the reader was not present during the process of making this study (Smith et al. 2009). This way, the reader will get a broader understanding of what has happened in the life of the participating athletes. It will help create an understanding through the participants sharing personal stories and making sense of the experiences they have been through (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

## Trustworthiness

As a case study, the participants' experiences are being analysed using the IPA-method. An experience is something an individual has (see definitions), and some experiences can differentiate from others. Two people can take part in the same thing, but experience it differently. The method section of the thesis is striving to be transparent, so that the reader can see how the research was conducted.

Yardley (2000) has four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research: Sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. IPA can address all four principles, as the theory lays its foundation on interviews with how individuals experience certain things (Smith et al. 2009). The researcher must show sensitivity, transparency and commitment when handling information that can be sensitive to the participant of the study. Impact is also a key factor for the researcher, as we want to discover something new and important.

## Ethical principles

Both participants were made aware of what the study was about, and what the purpose of the study was. They were also told that they would be recorded so that transcriptions could be made and analysed after the interviews were over. This study is based on the ethical principles a researcher should adhere to while conducting a research study (Denscombe, 2009). The participants of this research study are anonymous. No information that would make it easy to identify the participants is included. Instead of using the players' real names, codes (Player A and Player B) and have been used to differentiate and keep anonymity intact for the players. Everything presented in this study has been worked on with care and respect for the participants. The transcriptions are only available for the researcher, and all data has been handled in a confidential way.

# Results

The results will be presented in three parts. The first part is the period leading up to retirement, the second part is what happened after retirement and the third and last part is about the participants' comeback.

## Player A

### **Retirement - Why did he retire from soccer?**

Growing up in a small village, he found that soccer was an easy choice as there were not that many other sports to choose from. His dad was also involved in soccer:

“I think it was mostly the environment – that my dad played, and that I was with him and watched him play from an early age.“

When he was six or seven years old he started playing in organized form, joining the local club.

He made the move from a smaller club to Allsvenskan when he was a teenager, impressing and debuting at an early age.

“When I had been there one year exactly I debuted in Allsvenskan for the first team. From there on I was a part of the first team in the club.”

Good performances led to a move to one of the best teams in Allsvenskan. Further improvements on the pitch, and appearances for the Swedish national team led him to being targeted for a potential transfer from clubs abroad.

He agreed on a transfer and moved abroad and spent a few years in one of the top soccer leagues in the world.

After being troubled by injuries and loss of form, he was loaned out during his stay abroad to another team in the same country. During this period, he decided to end his stay abroad and return home to Sweden.

”In my head I was clear about my desire to move home to Sweden, but it was a good period ... preparation for moving home, and it was useful to play some competitive matches.”

Regarding his decision to retire he says:

It was something that had emerged ... it was a combination of that it (soccer) had taken its toll on my body, it started to get difficult more often...The last year I used anti-inflammatory pills quite often, and ... training was not as fun as it used to be. When my body started to hurt my motivation started to fade slowly. I have been very fortunate to have such a long career. It felt good to make the decision myself. Partly because it was not because I had lost my ability, or that I had been benched ... or that I had to retire because of injuries. I felt that when I made the decision public that I was going to retire, when there were six-seven games left of the season ... it became sort of a farewell tour, and it was fantastic during the last games. I got amazing support from the fans, and I played really good and scored quite a few goals ... it was a super

finish really.

Asked if he had regretted his decision to retire he said:

”No, and I was ... I have never really regretted it ... I felt that the time had come.”

## **Post retirement - What has happened since he retired from soccer?**

Almost a year passed before Player A made his comeback in Allsvenskan. During this time he had a few months of free time before starting a civilian job career. Some players are lucky to be able to work for the club they played for after retirement, and he had the fortune to sign his last contract in professional soccer with a clause in it that guaranteed him a job in the organization:

”When I signed my last contract, there was a clause that was added about working in the organization. It was not specified exactly what I was going to do. Then an opportunity came within the organization, and when I retired in November I knew I had a job to go to in August. I got around nine months’ vacation to just ... ”land” after my soccer career ... and to recharge my batteries”.

Being certain to have a job after retiring from soccer made the transition easier according to him:

”Yes, it was awesome. I know a lot of former elite athletes express emptiness after...I had thought about what I wanted to do and somewhere understood that it is soccer that I find the most fun and what I want to work with”.

## **Comeback and life afterwards - What made him retire from elite soccer again? What is he doing now?**

He worked at his new civilian job for a couple of months before his comeback. Something he never thought would happen:

”It was really completely out of the blue, it was nothing that I had thought about...what happened was that the club had a major injury crisis that year when the club was battling for first place ... they probably felt that I, with my experience could be an asset in a couple of different ways. But this comeback would never have happened if the club had not asked, or begged me ... because it was not something I had worked for”.

So when he got the question it came out of the blue. Since he had felt his body showing signs of wear and tear before his first retirement, a slight reluctance was felt:

”When the question came I felt...I have my job here, I have to check with them ... it did not feel very realistic since I had not trained or been that active ... but I talked with my employer, and it was for a limited time period ... so that is how it happened.”

Returning to soccer meant returning to familiar surroundings and familiar routines. He also had to deal with the rigourness of training again:

”It was a little bit frustrating that my head wanted one thing, but my body, even if it felt a lot better then I thought it would in the beginning...I was substituted in every game I think ... even though I wanted much more”.

In stark contrast to the finish he had when he retired the first time, the second time was not as successful. Losing out on the gold in the final match of the season:

”After the final match against [...] I felt an enormous emptiness, one of those really tough feelings that are hard to get over ... now when the finish ended up like it did ... it would have been a lot easier if we had won ... but ... well in some sort of aspect it was a little bit fun ...”

He continued reflecting on retiring after his comeback:

”After the final match I had that feeling in my stomach ... like punching a hole in a balloon ... a disappointment that lasted several weeks after...Even though I had not been back that long, everything came back ... the winner mentality started again ...”

After his final retirement from elite soccer he went back to work in the organization, a position he still holds.

”It is nice to get away from the pressure of results all the time...When you live as an elite athlete there is a focus on how you live, what you do and to able to deliver there and then. Then the whole concept of handling pressure...I am probably more relaxed as a person now”.

According to him, being retired for good feels good. He does not miss soccer or regrets that he retired when he did. Even though he retired twice he has not felt that it was wrong of him not to continue with his comeback for another season:

”I have never felt that itching feeling, that it was hard to retire, or that it was the wrong decision to retire. I always felt that it was right in time to call it quits, but of course there can be some matches, like when you are sitting in attendance at a season premiere or a national team match ... then I can feel ... I can miss the rush you got when you wandered out on the pitch in front of a full stadium ... I can miss that feeling, certain moments”.

What the future holds is not certain, he is very happy with the job he has in the organization now. When asked if he could see himself as a manager at the elite level of soccer he said that:

”I am not closing any doors; it is possible that the draw for elite soccer comes back, and then it is possible that I will try my hand at management. Right now I am very happy with my current job”.



## Player B

### Retirement - Why did he retire from soccer?

Player B's professional soccer career lasted over twenty years before he retired the first time. Most of his career was spent in Allsvenskan, but just as Player A he had a brief period playing abroad in one of the top leagues in the world. He made several appearances' for the Swedish national team.

He started to play for the local club when he was five years old. He started playing soccer because all his friends started to play, and his parents wanted him to do something in sport.

He moved to another smaller club when he was twelve or thirteen years old before securing a youth contract at one of the professional soccer clubs in Sweden. After first impressing, but later finding himself on the bench he decided to look for a new club. He found a new club that was playing in Allsvenskan:

"I wanted to move on, because [name] was as young as he was, and was the first choice for the team ... so I wanted to move on and try to find my own way. I looked around and found that [club name] was a good choice for me.

During his upbringing, Player B had combined his soccer career with playing handball. Something he could also continue with his new club:

"Yes I played in the two top tiers of Swedish handball. It went well; they had a good understanding for people who played two sports..."

After moving club again he soon found himself being targeted by clubs abroad. He eventually made the move to one of the biggest soccer leagues in the world:

"My agent has had their assistant manager as a coach, so...It was just [land name] also, it was because it was one of the biggest leagues ... and the team was really good ... they had a few good seasons before I moved there, and that continued when I played for them".

Even though he enjoyed life abroad, his playing time was limited, and he eventually moved back home to Sweden. Reflecting on the move back home:

"We were home on one of those camps for the national team, it was one for all the players playing abroad ... and when I was home one team asked if I was interested in returning home. I had always wanted to play for [club name], and this was a good opportunity to do so".

After spending many years playing in Sweden, he retired:

"Unfortunately I retired, it was not...Looking back at it I could have continued for a couple of more years, but ... during this time I had talked with some friends about starting a company ... well they worked together, but for different companies ... and I helped them quite a lot, so we were supposed to do something together all three ... and we did".

One factor that made him decide to retire was the fact that the club had just won the league:

”You were at the top, and had just won the league. The cliché that you should quit ... it is so stupid ... that is how I felt all the time”.

## **Post retirement - What has happened since he retired from soccer?**

After retiring he and his friends went in to business together:

”We started up [the company] and continued during [year]”.

Reflecting on his retirement and the period after he came to the following conclusion:

”I should have continued playing soccer; I should not have done anything else”.

He realized when he made his comeback that he still felt physically good, and that he could play at the top level.

Even though he continued to work with his and his friends’ company, a club made an enquiry about his availability to come out of retirement and play again. His retirement lasted six months before it was time to step out on the pitch again.

## **Comeback and life afterwards - What made him retire from elite soccer again? What is he doing now?**

He had a relative short period as a retired soccer player. When a club asked him to come and help them during an injury crisis he accepted their offer on one condition – he would only play matches:

”I played 19 matches for them ... it was only matches ... so I worked during the week and then travelled there on Saturday, played on Sunday and then went home. They called when they had an injury crisis, I said I could not train, just play matches”.

He continued [year] with the company and playing for his new club. For [year] he was without a club, and an injury to his arm almost ended it all again:

”My bicep muscle was injured ... so I went to the doctor, and he said I had to quit ... so I was absent from work from February [year] ... for three months”

During his rehabilitation period an old friend called him to ask if he was interested to come and play for them:

”In May ... if it was the first or second of May, he called ... I was on my way to hunt in Uppsala with two friends, and he called to ask me if I was interested. I told him I had to check my elbow first before I can give him an answer...The doctors said it was okay, so I was declared fit and trained that Monday, trained Tuesday and then played a match on Wednesday ... that is how fast it happened”.

After accepting the offer this was the first time in eighteen months that he would combine playing matches with training. Since it had been a while he was not used to it:

”The feeling of coming back...I was very tired, it took two weeks before I could complete a full training session ... and that was with all the fitness work”.

Even though it was hard work he was happy being back in professional soccer again, both playing matches and training:

”It was special to start training again ... I thought damn I should not have retired, because I felt really good fitness wise ... it just confirmed that retiring the first time was wrong”.

He spent [year] and [year] playing for the same club, the last year as back-up. In [year] he decided to retire from professional soccer for good. After leaving professional soccer he worked for a company involved in sport. Reflecting on his decision to retire a second time:

”It was finished, and I got a good job. I was lucky with the job. I had prepared myself before I retired the first time; I had notified people that I was going to start working, preparing myself. Not everyone does that. I think it is important to do that. Players that have done longer stints abroad than I have, probably do not have any panic to start working. Not everyone is so lucky”.

He continues to work for the company while still being involved as a coach in soccer. Being a coach is something he is very excited about:

”It is really fun...I have waited, well not waited, but I have thought about coaching for a long time. I will see what this leads too, if I should educate myself so to speak. There are really good educations at the University that you need to have these days if you want to be an elite soccer coach. If that is the next step, I do not know, but ... we will see how this works out first. It is a good opportunity to see how good you are”.

## Summary

Both participants have played elite soccer for over twenty years, and both represented the Swedish national team at least once. There is a difference on why they both retired and why they both attempted a comeback. Player A retired because his body started to react negatively to the training, he used anti-inflammatory pills during his last year as a professional soccer player. When his body started to show signs of wear and tear his motivation started to slowly fade. Player B felt more forced to retire due to his club winning the league, and that it was natural to quit while on top.

Player A made his comeback more than six months after his initial retirement due to a club having an injury crisis. The club was involved in the title race when he made his comeback. This made his decision easier as he had no intention of making a comeback due to having a civilian job career. Player B made his comeback six months after he had retired. He worked a civilian job during the first year of his comeback because he only played matches, he never trained. He later put his civilian job career on hold and started both playing matches and training full time. His decision to make a comeback was due to regret; he felt that he should have continued playing a couple of more years.

# Discussion

The discussion will include a part on the methodology I used, the results I found and at the end a conclusion.

## Methodology

IPA has been the theoretical foundation for this study. IPA gives the researcher the tools to conduct a case study using interviews, and by that letting the participants in the study become the focus point. One critique of IPA could be that researchers' interpretations are different to what the participants mean. It is however important to note that one of the cornerstones of IPA is the interpretation made by the researcher, but novice researchers might be too cautious, and make analyses to descriptive (Smith et al. 2009, p. 103). As a first time user of IPA, this was something that I tried to avoid by using the research objectives as guidelines when analysing the transcripts.

Choosing participants for this study was made with time constraints and geographical positioning. There are not that many elite soccer players that have attempted a comeback at the same or equal level. With more time and funds, a research like Debois et al. (2002) did on the female fencer could be made.

The participants in this study are very identifiable, so information that can help identify them has been removed. This is not something that I wanted to do, but something that I felt was necessary. This helps the thesis to adhere to the ethical principles a researcher should follow when conducting a research study (Denscombe, 2009).

## Results

The results of the participants' interviews will be discussed in three sections: a) Patterns, b) Differences and c) Interpretations. What do the participants' have in common and is there anything that differentiates them? These three sections will contain the information the participants' contributed from all three parts of their interviews; Retirement, Post-retirement and Comeback and life afterwards. Relevant patterns, differences and interpretations using IPA will be presented in connection with the research questions:

- What factors contribute to retired elite soccer players attempting comebacks?
- Why do they decide to come back to a sport they have once retired from?

The discussion in these two sections will be following IPA's analysing tools, which means the interpretations by the researcher after analysing the data will be included.

## Patterns

There are few similarities between the two participants of this study. The first one is that they both had long professional careers as soccer players, spanning up to and more than twenty years. Both participants had a mostly injury free career. Having avoided any major injuries most likely helped them have long careers as professionals in soccer. Drawer et al. (2002) showed with their study that injuries are one main reason that players retire from soccer with 46% of their 185 participants' citing injury as the main reason for retirement. Player A and B both decided at free will to try their luck abroad, playing in leagues that are considered among the top in the world.

Regarding their career after soccer, they both said that having something to go to after their career was over was important for them. Player A had a job already lined up, he even had a job guarantee included in his last professional contract. Player B started a company with his friends. Having job security after the career as a professional soccer player (or athlete) is over is something that they both mention as important. Both participants talked about how they had reflected on life after soccer while still being active players, they both seemed aware of what can happen, and what had happened to other athletes that are not prepared for life after sport.

The study made by Park et al. (2013) looking at career transition out of sport noted that in 86 of the 126 studies made; at least one of the players had felt negative emotions after retiring. Player A made no such revelation, but there is a strong chance Player B might have felt it since he regretted retiring, and talked about his retirement as being "stupid".

### *Retirement process*

Both participants retired relatively late in their career. They retired in their late thirties and early forties. Player B could have tried to find another club to play for; something that he never did. Even though he might have had second thoughts about retiring at the time, he still retired after winning the league. He also kept his promise to his friends and started a company after his retirement.

### *Comeback process*

Both Player A and B made their comebacks with seemingly good intentions. Player A wanted to help his former club in a time of need, since the club had a lot of injuries and was in the middle of a title race. Player B felt he had more to give as a soccer player, and a club that was having problems with injuries also helped his comeback process. Other people than the participants initiated the comeback process, but perhaps it was just a matter of time before Player B would try to attempt a comeback. During their comeback process both players had a hard time at the beginning coping with regular training again, something which is understandable when you have been out of professional soccer for over six months.

### *Second retirement process*

Both players' retirement was agreed upon with their respective clubs at the time. There seemed to be no hard feelings, and both players seemed pleased with their professional soccer career being

over. Player A had signed a short-term contract that expired after the end of the season, while Player B felt that he was “finished” playing professionally. Both players also had jobs to return to, which might have made the second retirement process easier.

## Differences

There are more differences than similarities between the participants.

Player B had already made plans for his retirement, but what happens to players that are encouraged to retire, or more or less forced by their club to retire? Or what happens to the players that do not want to retire, but no club wants to give them a professional contract? As mentioned in the introduction, research on former professional soccer players has shown that support systems have been seen as insufficient during their active careers (Drawer et al. 2002). This could be seen as a danger if players find themselves on the brink of retirement without taking the decision completely on their own.

Both players experienced their comeback and subsequent retirement differently. Player A usually remained on the bench and was brought on in the second half of matches. As his motivation had dwindled before his first retirement, perhaps being benched led to a lack of motivation during his comeback (Gould & Weinberg, 2011). Player B after being declared fit by doctors was a regular in the first team. Perhaps this difference was brought on by them attempting comeback on different grounds, Player A had no intention of coming back to professional soccer as a player, and maybe had a harder time during his comeback than Player B because of it.

### *Retirement process*

Player A had thought about retiring for quite some time and made the decision himself a few months before the end of the season. Player B retired after winning the league with his club, but from listening to him, it seemed like he might have been encouraged by the club to retire. He was old in soccer terms, so maybe the club felt that it would be good if he retired and they could find someone younger to take his place in the team. This is something that is not uncommon in sport, as Park et al. (2013) found out when their research study showed that 84% of the participants' (11,332 out of 13,511) had seen their contract been terminated or not renewed.

### *Comeback process*

Player A and Player B made their comebacks in different ways. Player A was happy with his new life and not being a professional soccer player anymore, so when he got the call about coming back he was very surprised. Player B on the other hand had already felt regret and wanted to come back to soccer. He had his company with his friends, but that did not stop him from pursuing a comeback.

### *Second retirement process*

While both players seemed pleased with their careers being finished, their second and final retirement also had a few differences as Player A retired after losing out in the title race. Player A

had his stability with work; it probably made it easier for him to cope with the loss of the gold medal and his second retirement. Player B's second retirement was better than his first; with him feeling it was time to retire for good.

## Interpretations using IPA

After making interpretations based on the participant's interviews in connection with patterns and differences, focus will now solely be given to the three research objectives together with the interpretations using IPA. The basis of IPA is that humans are sense-making creatures, and that the participants will try and make sense of their experiences (Smith et al. 2009).

### Player A

#### *Retirement*

Player A's interpretation is that he made the decision to retire by himself. Other people could interpret that injuries did have an impact – he did use anti-inflammatory pills during his last season, and his body had started to hurt. Even though he came to the conclusion to retire, he does not mention what did his coach, or people in his surroundings thought about his retirement. Perhaps he could have played for one more season and made an impact as a substitute, or just not start every match. People outside of his club could interpret his actions in other ways, one of which could be that he felt that it was time for a younger generation to step forward and make their mark on the club.

#### *Comeback experience*

Reading his interpretation of his comeback experience, it is natural to ask if Player A had a different expectation of his involvement in the team than his coach. It seems that Player A thought he would play every match from start, even though he alludes to his body not being in top form in terms of fitness. The coach's point of view could have been that he thought that Player A could make a larger impact if he was substituted in later on in the match. His feelings regarding his second retirement were good in the sense of his career being finished. The emptiness he felt after could be due to him and the team losing out in the title race. Player A could interpret people around him to find his second retirement a disappointment, as he when he retired the first time he did it on his own terms.

#### *Why he attempted a comeback*

Even though Player A states that his comeback attempt was pure coincidental, it could be seen as an indicator that he retired from professional soccer too early. Would the club really try and lure him out of retirement if they did not think that he could contribute? The club provided an avenue for him to make his comeback even though he had no intention to come back and play again. Player A had not worked for it, but maybe his comeback was bound to happen in some way.

## Player B

### *Retirement*

Player B repeatedly states a regret of retiring too early, he attributes his retirement to winning the league and that he went out on top. He could have asked the club for a new contract, or the club could have asked him to stay on. Retirement seemed to be the natural step for him after winning the league. He interpreted from his surroundings that it was expected of him, perhaps he should have taken some time off after the season to reflect on his retirement instead of doing what everyone seemed to expect from him.

### *Comeback experience*

His feelings regarding his comeback are natural to be positive after regretting his retirement, that is how he makes sense of the situation in retrospect. It is natural to emphasize the positive feelings when attempting a comeback, especially since he had regretted his retirement for over six months. If he had felt negative emotions during his comeback, maybe he would have tried to hide them from the outside world. He had wanted to come back to professional soccer since he had retired the first time. Player B expressed positive feelings during his comeback; there is a chance he could develop negative emotions towards his last club for not retaining him after they had won the league.

### *Why he attempted a comeback*

Player B's feelings when looking back on why he attempted his comeback is that he made a mistake retiring. His emotions seem mixed when speaking about his retirement, he had a job to go with his friends that he enjoyed, but he also expressed that he missed playing professional soccer.

How would he have felt if he had continued playing? How many more years would he have played? Now when he can look back on his career and see what could have been, which might make it easier to feel regret about retiring. He did however retire injury free and with a new job to go to.



# Conclusion

In this thesis, the aim was to get a better understanding of how former professional soccer players look at their comeback attempts. To be able to do that, the participants' retirement and post-retirement activities have also been analysed. Interviewing and analysing two former professional soccer players has given clarity and a better understanding regarding the processes and outside factors that contribute to their comeback attempts.

Both participants have had long and successful soccer careers. Leaving their careers behind it might have helped that both of them already were aware of the pitfalls that can happen to professional athletes when they retire from their sport (BBC, 2012). Educating active soccer players on life after sport is something that should be taken more serious by soccer federations and associations around the world. It is not only the soccer federations and associations that are to be held responsible though, it is important that clubs, coaches, managers and people involved in soccer are aware of what can happen to a player after retirement. Comebacks are not very common in professional soccer, and it would be useful for the coach to know how to relate to a player that wants to come back and play after having retired. The coach could be put in a difficult position if the he or she does not want the player to come back.

Not everyone knows what to do after they retire, and as the participants point out – it could be a good idea to reflect on your retirement, not only on what you are going to do after, but also if you should retire at all.

## Implications

Due to time constraints and funds this study covers two former professional soccer players that have attempted comebacks. A broader research with more participants and from different countries could lead to new findings on why players attempt comebacks and how they experience them. The two participants in this study come from the same country, making environment around the players an interesting focus point should future research be conducted on this topic. Having participants from vastly different age brackets could also lead to new discoveries regarding comebacks in professional soccer.

Career breaks could also be something that soccer professionals could find useful. A soccer season is long, you play your regular season with your club, but some players also have European competition games and every other year the European Championship or the World Cup takes place. Perhaps a break from soccer for a year or two could rejuvenate a player and/or prolong their career.

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# Appendix

## Interview questions

Why did you retire from soccer?

What has happened since you retired from soccer?

How did you feel when your routines around his soccer career stopped?

How did you feel the first time back playing soccer on an elite level?

What made you retire from elite soccer again?

What are you doing now?