

# Recovery for academy football players: A pilot intervention to enhance recovery of academy football players by improving well-being, coping mechanisms, and stress

Esben Elholm Madsen<sup>1,2</sup>, Noam Barak<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark

<sup>2</sup>Danish Football Association, Brøndby, Denmark

<sup>3</sup>Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## Background

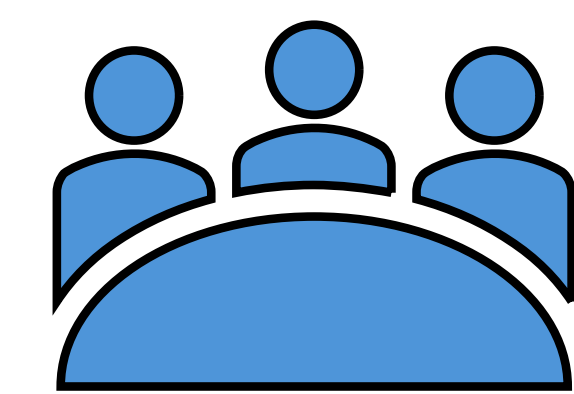
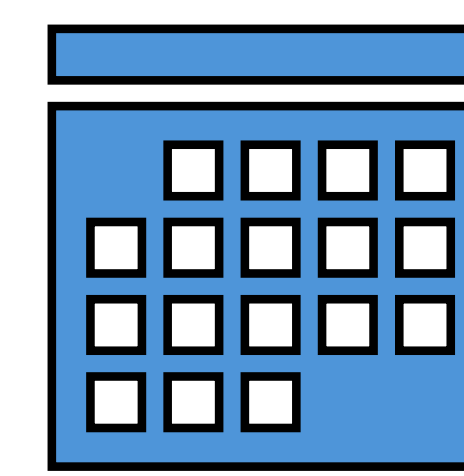
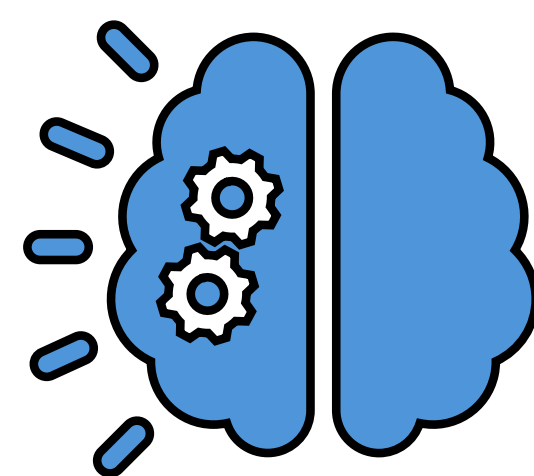
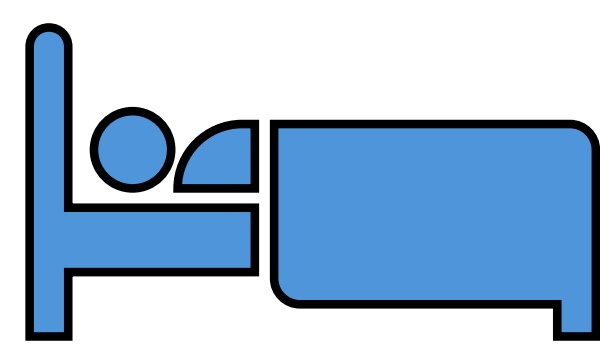
Elite academy football players are facing a unique set of challenges - physical and psychological. These young athletes are required to manage intense training and competitions schedules while simultaneously having non-sport obligations such as school, family, and social commitments. Therefore, adequate physical and mental recovery should be addressed and practiced.

## Purpose

This intervention aimed to help players handle the daily pressure they face at Brøndby Masterclass, teaching them principals and practical tools to manage stress levels, thought processes, improve sleep patterns, and develop healthier recovery habits. By helping players integrate recovery strategies, the program has the potential to support the players develop optimally while consistently performing at their peak.

## Method

U19 players from Brøndby Masterclass were recruited to voluntarily participate in the intervention (N=6). The players filled the Psychological Flexibility, Sleep Hygiene, well being, and Perceived stress questionnaires at the beginning and end of the program. Moreover, they reported daily on their sleep duration and quality over 9 weeks. The topics of the program were held each as a workshop, for six weeks. Moreover, 1-on-1 sessions were held on demand to help players target specific matters relating to the intervention topics.



Introduction

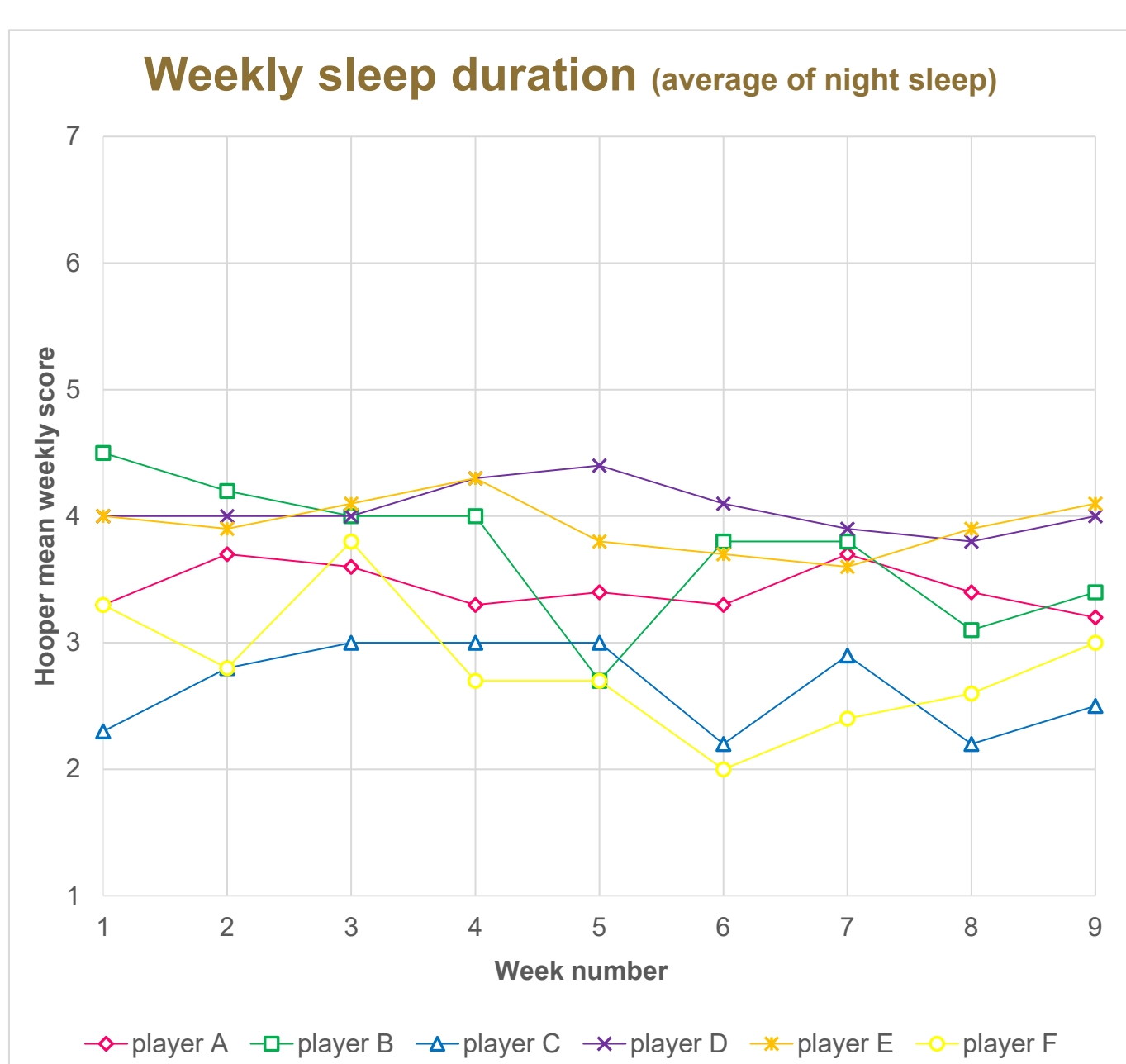
Sleep

Thought management

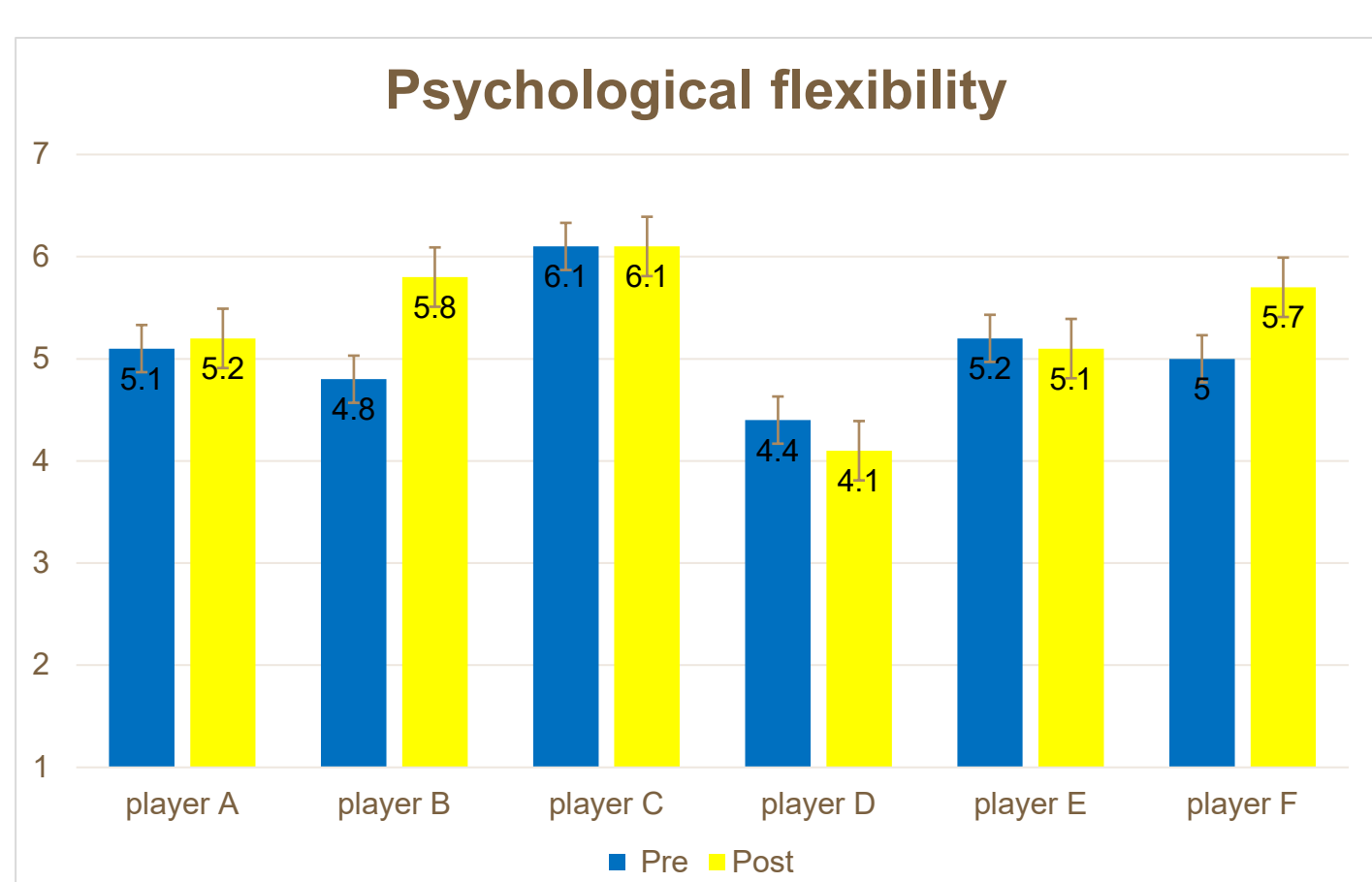
Stress management

Habits

Conclusion & Reflection



Higher score means **less** sleep hours. (1 = over 10; 4 = 8; 7 = under 5)  
 Week 1 & 2 = Pre intervention; Week 3 = Introduction  
 Week 4 = Sleep; Week 5 = Thought management  
 Week 6 = Stress management; Week 7 = Habits  
 Week 8 = Conclusion; Week 9 = Post intervention



Scores before and after the intervention. Higher score means more psychological flexibility, on a scale of 1 to 7 (AAQ-II, Bond et al., 2011)

## Conclusion

First, all conclusions should be taken cautiously as the number of participants is small, and it is the first tryout of the program.

Player B showed clear improvement in sleep duration, while the rest did not show any consistent change. However, the participants rarely dropped lower than average of “normal sleep quality (8 hours of night sleep)”.

No specific pattern can be drawn from the data regarding perceived stress (PSS-10), well-being (WHO-5), and sleep hygiene index. This might be a result of confounding variables and different level of involvement each of the participant had in the content of the program.

Two players showed noticeable improvement by 0.7-1 points in psychological flexibility (players F&B respectively), while the others remained about the same level between the start and finish (week 1-9). The results and the participant’s reflections indicate that the intervention was generally helpful, meaningful and relevant to the needs of the players. Further studies should test the intervention efficacy using a larger sample.

## Practical implications

**Small steps:** When addressing behavioral change, aim for small and consistent behaviors.

**Sleep:** Monitoring sleep routines, together with education, can help players improve sleep in terms of quality and duration.

**Psychological flexibility:** education and practice of ACT principles might help players improve in flexible attitude towards feelings, thoughts, and situations in football contexts.

## Participants reflections

- “I learned that stress is not always a negative experience, we just need to know how to handle it”
- “The length of the program was good. Each meeting was enough to cover each of the topics”
- “Private meetings in between helped me understand and use what we learned better”
- “Having discussions rather than lecture made the learning process more interesting”

