

International Academy Player's Career Experiences and Mental Endurance

Interview-based study 2024

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Forewords

Discussion around athletes' mental well-being has increased recently, with several well-known professional footballers sharing their experiences of mental health struggles and challenges in mental endurance during their careers. Andrés Iniesta, Jesse Lingard, and Christian Pulisic, among others, have brought visibility to depression and anxiety in professional football. Behind these stories lies a multitude of players whose careers ended prematurely due to mental overload.

A study by FIFPRO (2015) paints a stark picture: up to 25–35% of European professional footballers participating in the study reported experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety during their careers. The mental burden was linked to performance pressures, injuries, and, most importantly, uncertainty about career progression. Faced with these experiences, we must ask: how are our young elite players coping? Can we train and support players to withstand and handle the pressures and challenges associated with their profession? Can we make our players mentally stronger and turn resilience into a competitive advantage for Finnish football and sports in international playground? What have our young elite footballers experienced, and how should they be supported?

The primary goal of this study is to map out how Finnish elite players are coping and identify factors affecting players' well-being and key challenges. The research focuses on the experiences of young Finnish academy footballers during their childhood, youth, and international academy stages. The study interviewed 25 Finnish international academy players to assess their mental readiness and endurance in international football academies. Of those interviewed, 80% reported experiencing anxiety, mental exhaustion, or depression while playing abroad. 72% said their experiences negatively affected their self-confidence and motivation. 68% stated that motivation is not solely dependent on the player, with 59% highlighting coach approval as the most significant external factor. Preparation for the transition was minimal, and expectations of everyday life were unrealistic. In freeform advice to their younger selves, the players emphasized self-compassion, patience, and taking care of their mental well-being.

The study interviewed players who had moved abroad at least three years prior and were aged 16–20 when they left. The interviews were conducted either in person or online. The average age of the players at the time of moving abroad was 17.1 years (median 16.8 years), and an average of 5.3 years had passed since moving abroad at the time of the interview. Of the players, 12 (48%) have returned to Finland and are currently playing in the Veikkausliiga (as of summer 2024). Twelve players (48%) have played continuously abroad since their move. One player has returned abroad after a period playing in Finland.

The interview questions aimed to detail the players' experiences of personal self-confidence and motivational factors, as well as the state of their sense of social security and mental endurance during their careers. The study mapped out the mental challenges players have faced in their careers, how these challenges impacted their well-being, motivation, and performance, and what kind of support the players would have needed.

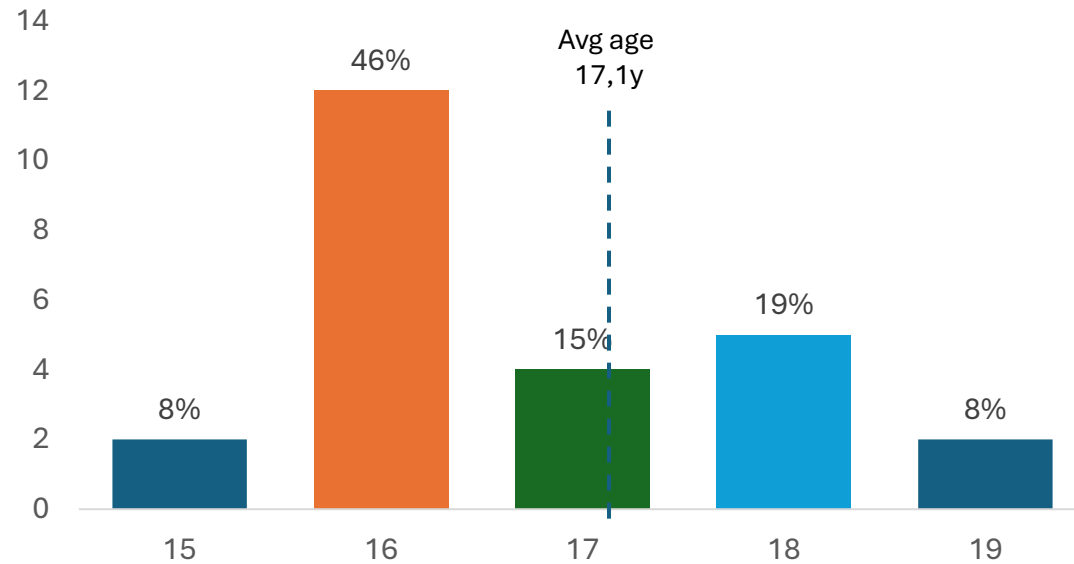
The responses provide a better understanding of the challenges and needs young players face on their journey to the top and the tools and practices that can support players' endurance and mental well-being. By strengthening a player's resilience, self-confidence, and self-awareness at the right time, players can better reach their full potential and experience improved mental well-being. This benefits not only the player but also the clubs and the entire Finnish football community.

The statistical conclusions of the study are limited by the small sample size (N=25) and the dispersion of the interviewees across various countries and clubs. However, strong patterns can be observed in individual responses. The results lay the groundwork for developing measures to help young players prepare for and transition to new environments, as well as to strengthen players' mental resources and endurance as demands and competition increase. The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and May 2024.

Interviewees – distribution

(1/2)

Age at transfer (N=25)



- Age at transfer by position:

- Goalies (6) 16,7 year
- Defenders (7) 16,7 year
- Midfielders (8) 16,3 year
- Forwards (4) 17,8 year

Interviewees by country of destination (N=25)



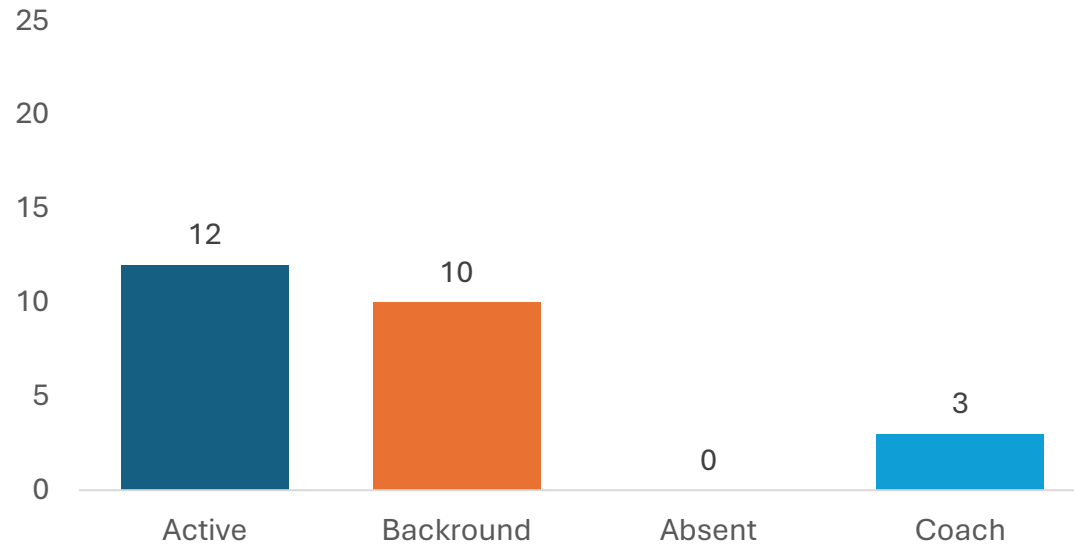
- Average age at transfer

- Germany 16,3 year
- Italy 18,0 year
- England 16,4 year
- Denmark 16,5 year

Interviewees – home and hobbies

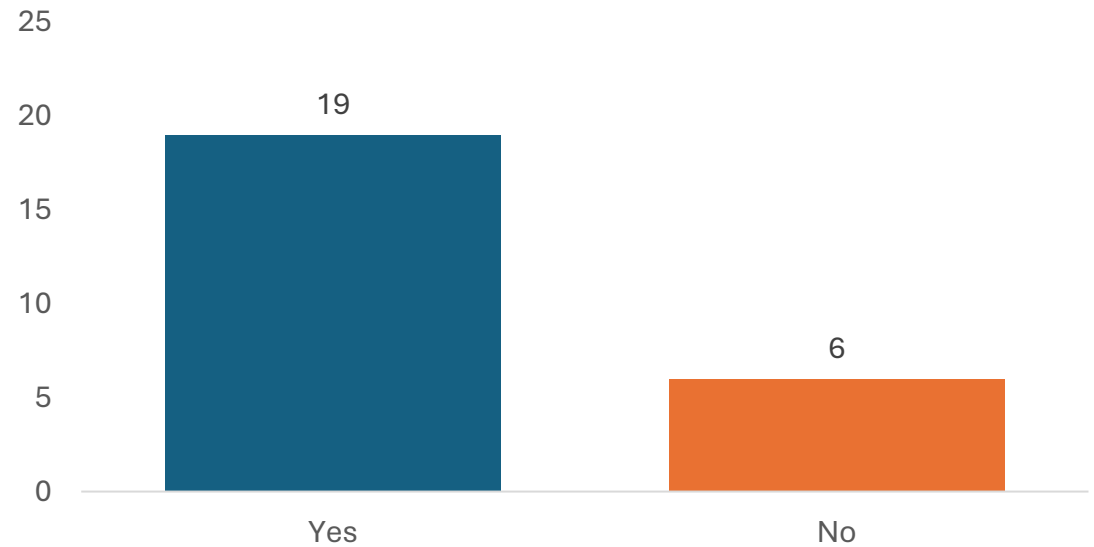
(2/2)

Parents role at ages under 12?



- “Active” = always at pitch and team events
- “Background” = supporting but staying on background
- All experienced that family helped “when help and support was needed”, no coercion or pressing by parents

Other hobbies at ages under 12?



- Most common: icehockey, rack and field, floorball and cross-country skiing
- Around half of “other sports” had done individual sports
- Other sports were secondary but continued up until the age of 13-15 years for most

Research Questions

1. Confidence and Resilience

- 1.1 Were there events during your junior phase that had a particularly positive impact on your confidence?
- 1.2 Were there events during your junior phase that had a particularly negative impact on your confidence?
- 1.3 Were there coaches during your junior phase who had a particularly positive impact on your confidence and motivation?
- 1.4 Did you already have experience with international academies before moving abroad (e.g., trials, camps)?

2. Motivational Factors

- 2.1 Are you driven by a desire to win, or do you hate losing more?
- 2.2 Is motivation entirely dependent on the player alone?

3. Transfer Phase

- 3.1 Who initiated the move to an international academy?
- 3.2 Did you have an agent before the transfer process started?
- 3.3 Were there other clubs as alternatives or interested in you?
- 3.4 Did your agent present or prepare you for other (international) options?
- 3.5 Were you prepared for the transfer (what to expect in the new environment)?
- 3.6 Did your home/starting club support you in making the transfer decision/process?
- 3.7 Were the Football Association or the Finnish Football Players' Association involved in helping with contracts or the transfer process?
- 3.8 Would support from the Football Association or the Players' Union have been helpful?
- 3.9 Was a long-term career plan created with you when moving abroad?
- 3.10 Did you have an option to return to your home club?

4. Mental Well-being in the International Academy

- 4.1 Was a personal player development plan created for you at the new club?
- 4.2 Was a career plan made for you at the academy, or was the typical career path of an academy player discussed?
- 4.3 Did the academy program include mental skills development?
- 4.4 Have you faced mental challenges during your international career?
- 4.5 Have you experienced confidence issues during your international career?
- 4.6 While abroad, have you experienced anxiety, mental fatigue, or depression?
- 4.7 Did the academy provide (professional) mental support?
- 4.8 Was it possible to talk about anxiety, mental fatigue, or depression in the academy?

5. Support Network

- 5.1 How actively was your agent present and supportive after the transfer?
- 5.2 Has your home club stayed in contact with you?
- 5.3 Have the Football Association or national team coaches kept in touch with you?
- 5.4 How important is it that the Football Association (national team coaches) stay in contact with the player?
- 5.5 Has the Players' Union been in contact with you?
- 5.6 Have you had or do you currently have a personal mental coach?

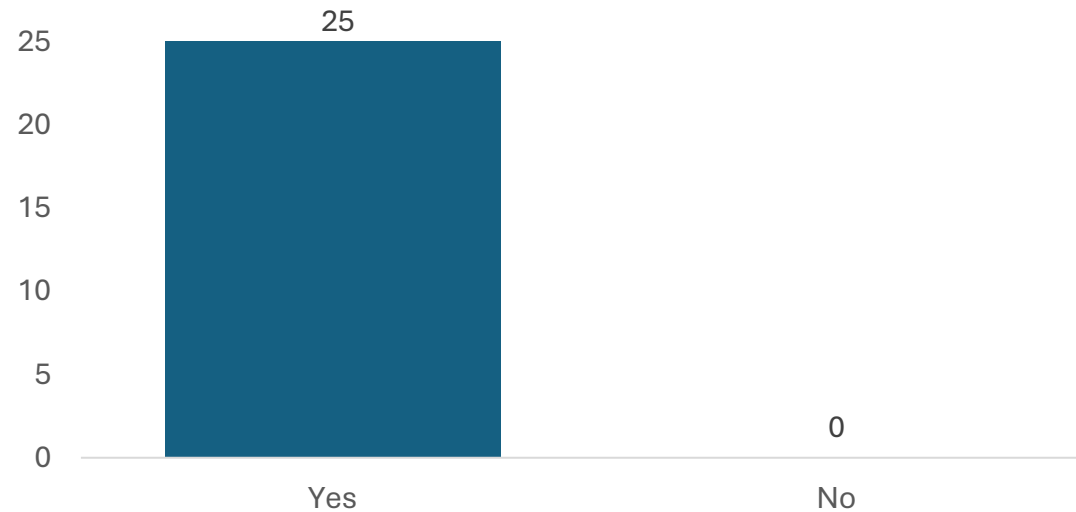
6. Advice for Your Younger Self Moving Abroad

7. Your Role in Supporting Young Players in the Future

- 6.1 Would you be interested in acting as a club tutor for young players moving abroad?
- 6.2 Would you be interested in acting as a mentor for young players abroad?

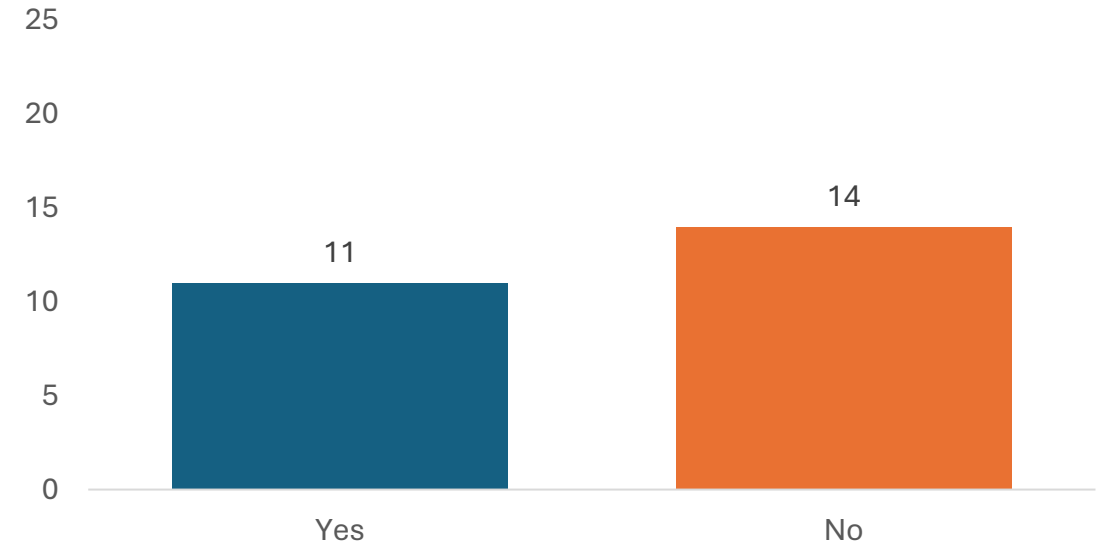
I) Confidence and Resilience – Basis

1.1 Were there events during your junior phase that had a particularly **positive impact** on your confidence?



- “Transfer to older age group”
- “Invitation to regional- and/or national team camp”
- “Named in starting XI”
- “Coache’s trust in me”

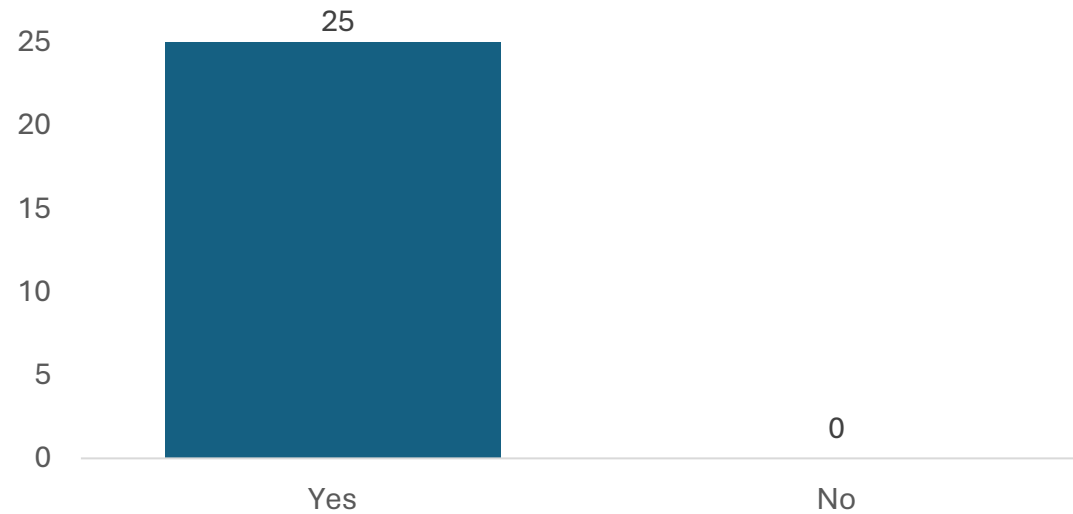
1.2 Were there events during your junior phase that had a particularly **negative impact** on your confidence?



- Seve (7) named negative coach experience
- Four (4) mentioned too high performance requirements, which improved after the change of coach or team

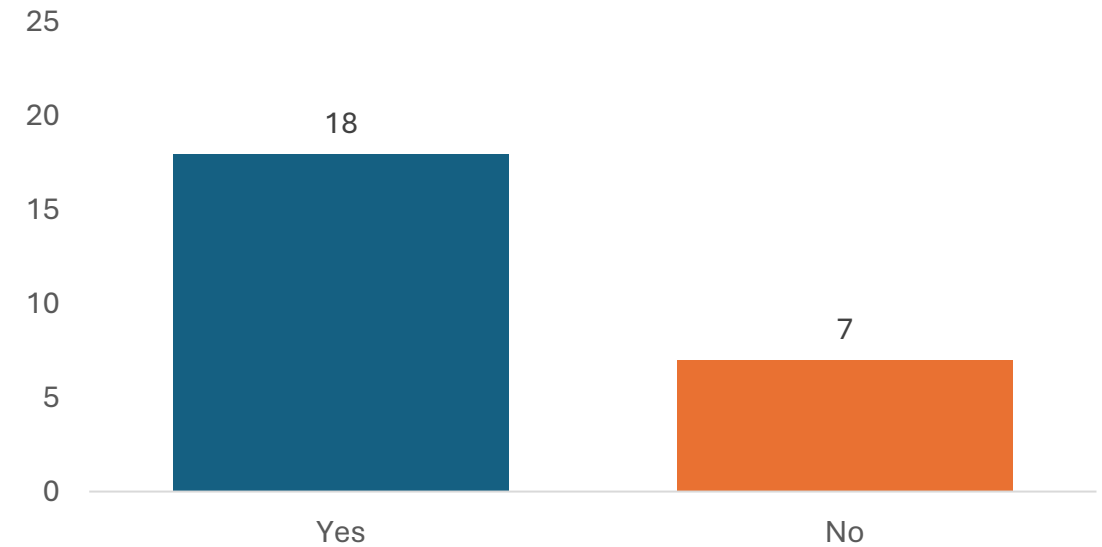
I) Confidence and Resilience – Basis

1.3 Have there been coaches at the junior level who have had a particularly positive impact on confidence and motivation?



- “A positive coach – demanding but approachable and empathetic“
- During the interviewees' junior phase, most had multiple coaches who had a positive impact.

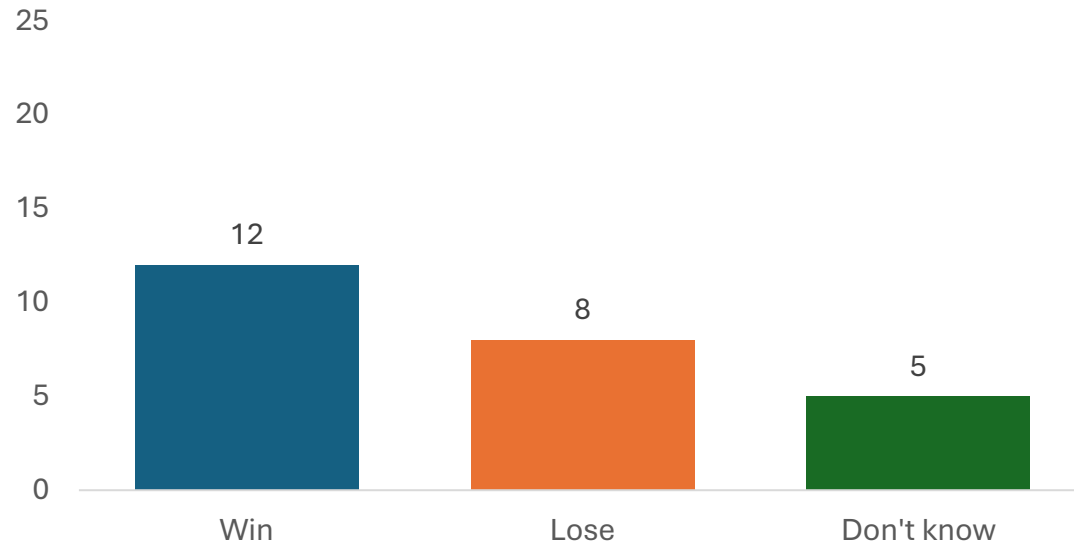
1.4 Did you already have experience with international academies before going abroad (trials, camps)?



- The most active countries in organizing the tests were Germany (11), England (9), the Netherlands (4), and Denmark (4). In Italy, 2 players attended the tests.
- 27% of those who went abroad had no experience with international academy tests or camps.

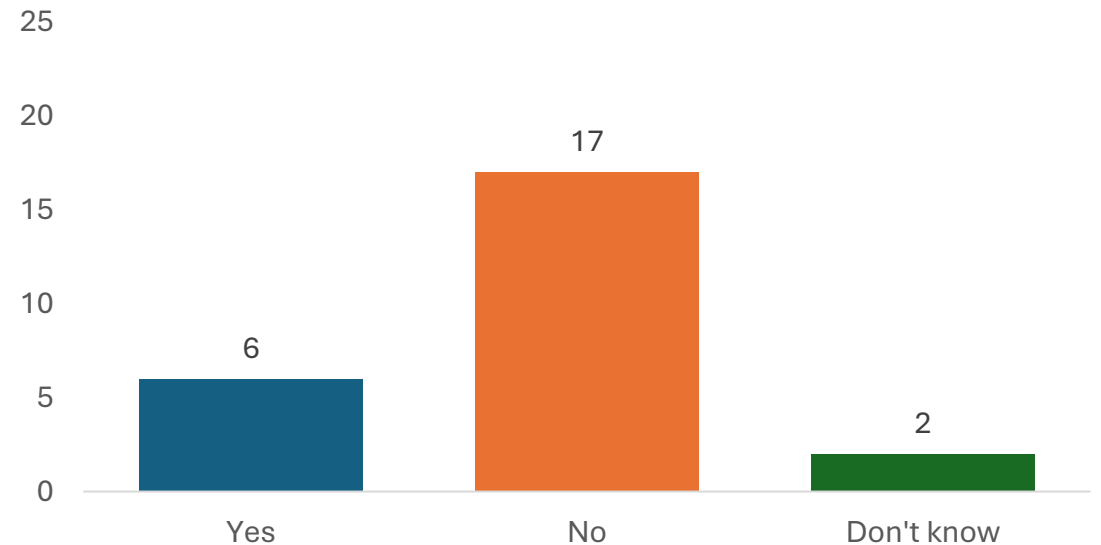
II) Motivation

2.1 Are you driven by the desire to win, or do you hate losing more?



- “Sense of superiority”
- “Pride”
- “Feeling of shame”
- “Fear of failure”

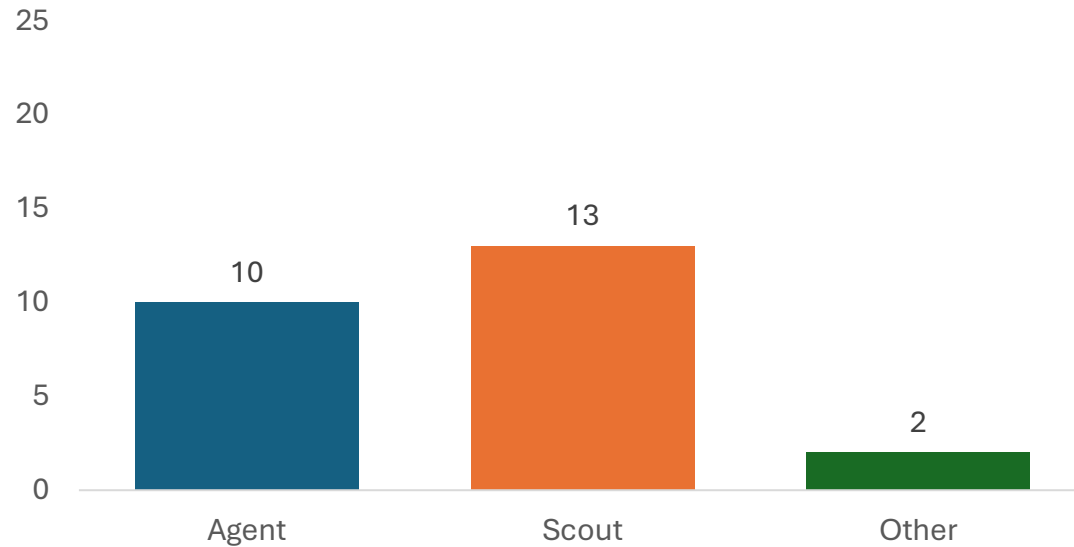
2.2 Is motivation solely the player's responsibility?



- Those who have had a longer career abroad emphasize their own professional responsibility for maintaining and developing their skills
- The coach’s approval (10) emerged as the most important factor, followed by the sense of social security created by stability and team spirit

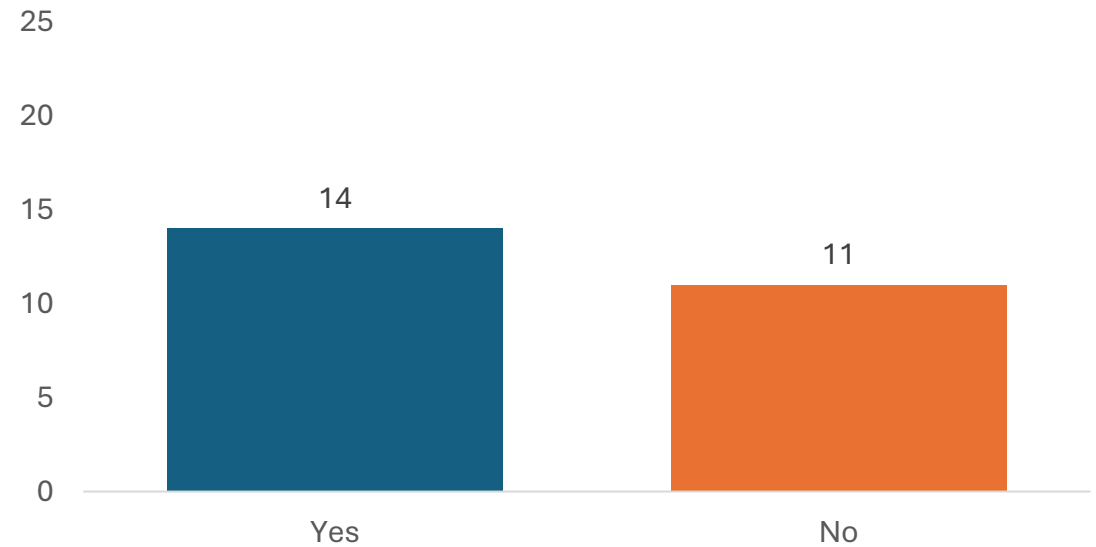
III) Transfer stage – Basis

3.1 Who took the initiative for your move to a foreign academy?



- 67% of agents (10) were the initiators of the move to the international academy
- Scout contact came from national team events or international tournaments
- "Other" included the player's own youth club and former teammates

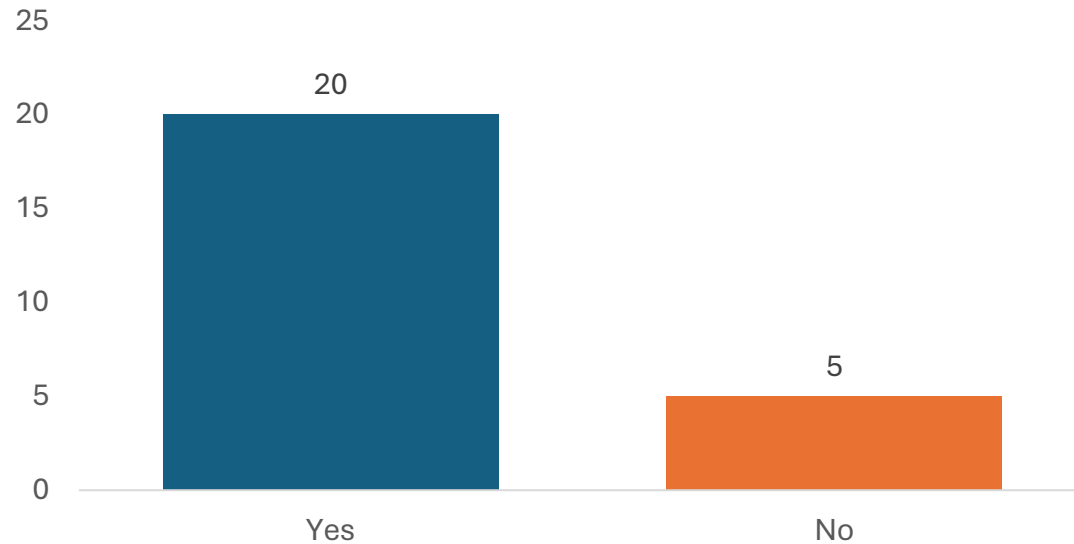
3.2 Did you have an agent before the transfer initiative?



- 57% of players already had a foreign agent, 43% had a domestic agent
- Two players had a "collaboration agreement" without an exclusive agency contract
- All players, except one, involved a player-agent in contract negotiations

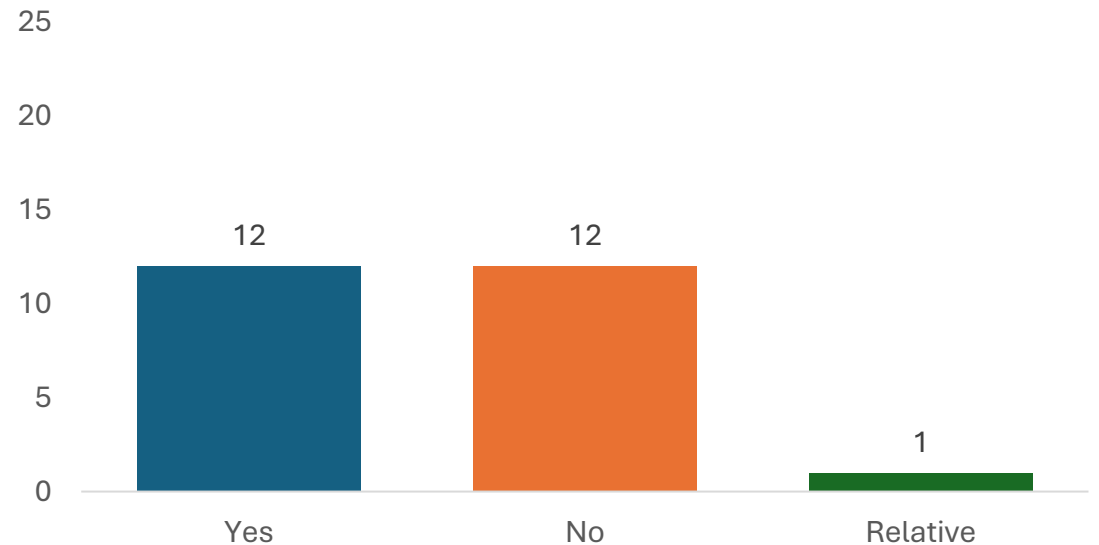
III) Transfer Stage – Alternatives in Decision Making

3.3 Were there other clubs as alternatives/interested in you?



- 13 players (65%) had discussions with teams from countries other than their final destination. In 10 of these cases, the contact came directly from the clubs, and in 3 cases, it was initiated by the agent
- 12 players were only presented with the interest of clubs from one country

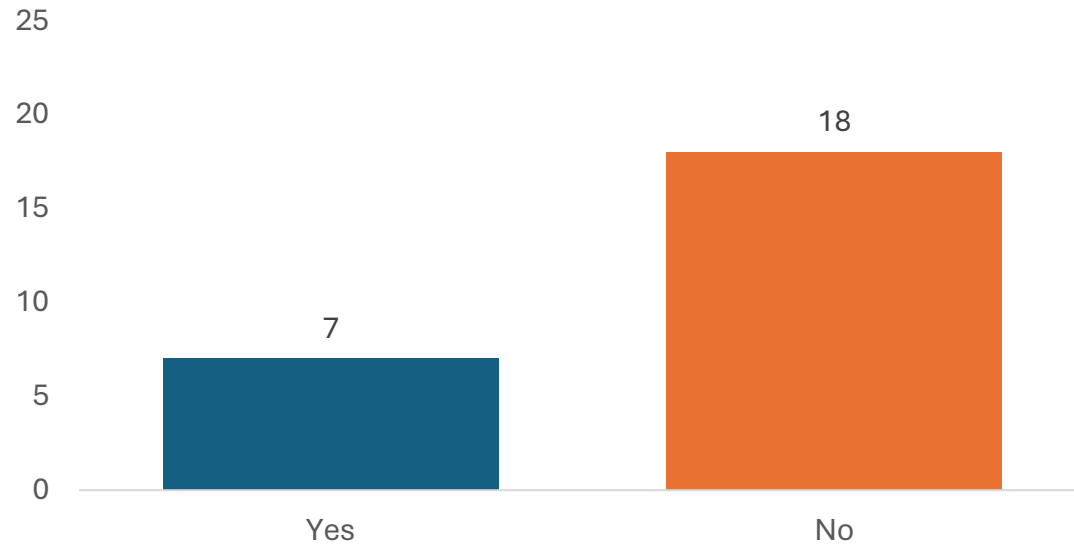
3.4 Did your agent introduce or present other (international) options?



- Agents primarily offered options from the agent's "own" target country
- In three cases, the agent had contacts in more than one country

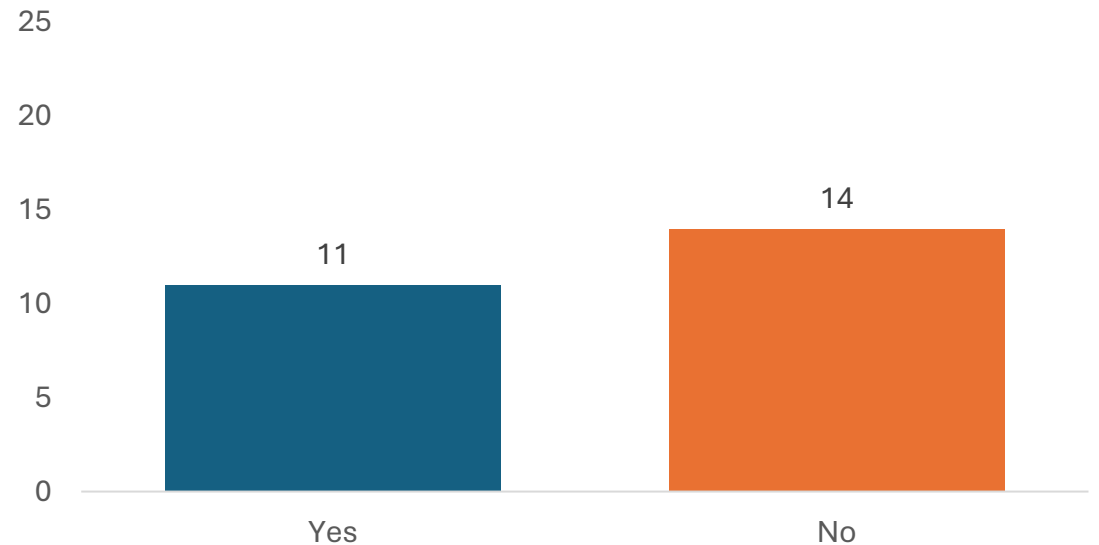
III) Transfer Stage – Readiness To Decision Making

3.5 Were you prepared for the transfer (what to expect in the new environment)?



- In six (6) cases, the receiving academy club was active, and in four (4) of those cases, the player visited the club multiple times to get acquainted with the club's operations and conditions
- In one case, the agent played an active role in the preparation

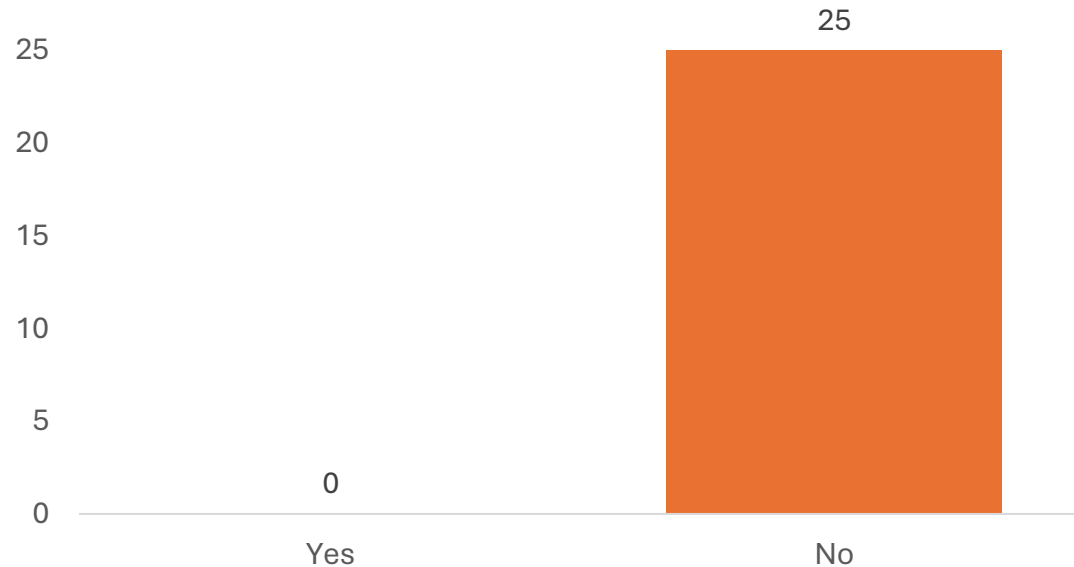
3.6 Did your home/development club support you in the transfer decision/process?



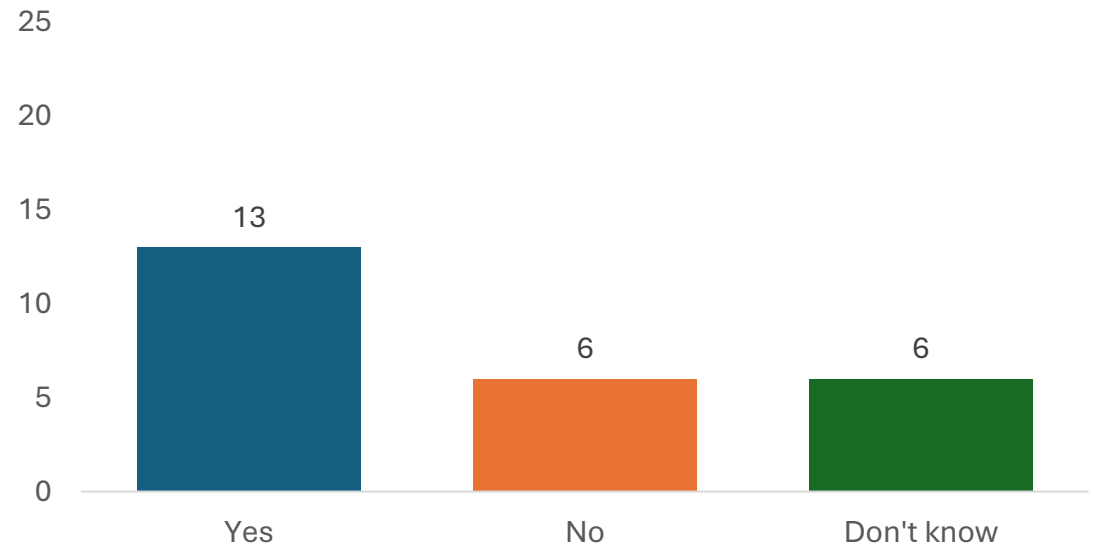
- Two clubs accounted for 2/3 of the "yes" responses
- The clubs were mostly perceived as focusing primarily on negotiating transfer fees

III) Transfer Stage – Unbiased Support in Decision Making

3.7 Was the Finnish FA (Palloliitto) or the Finnish Player Association (JPY) involved in assisting with contracts or the transfer?



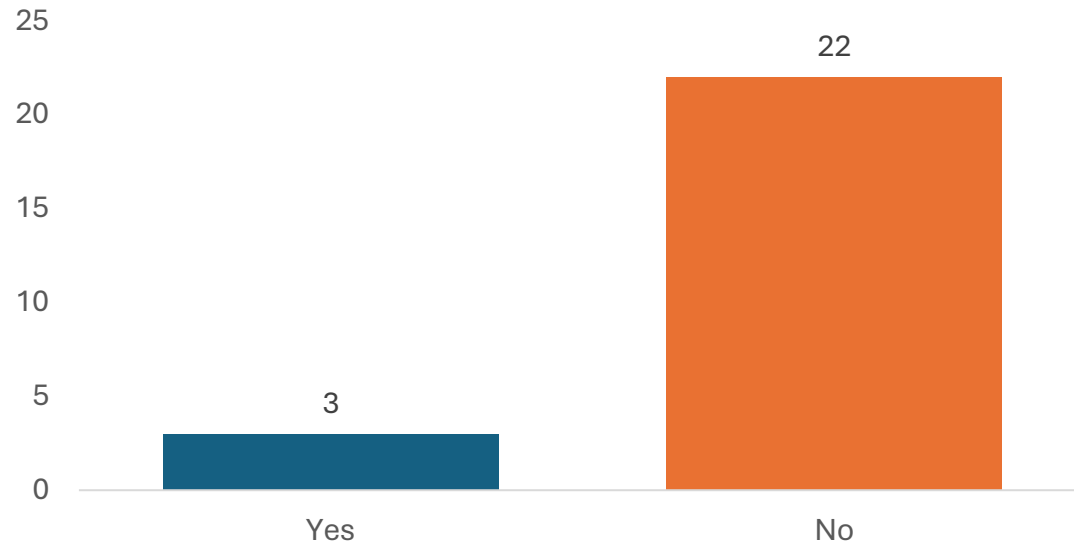
3.8 Would support from the Finnish FA or JPY have been helpful?



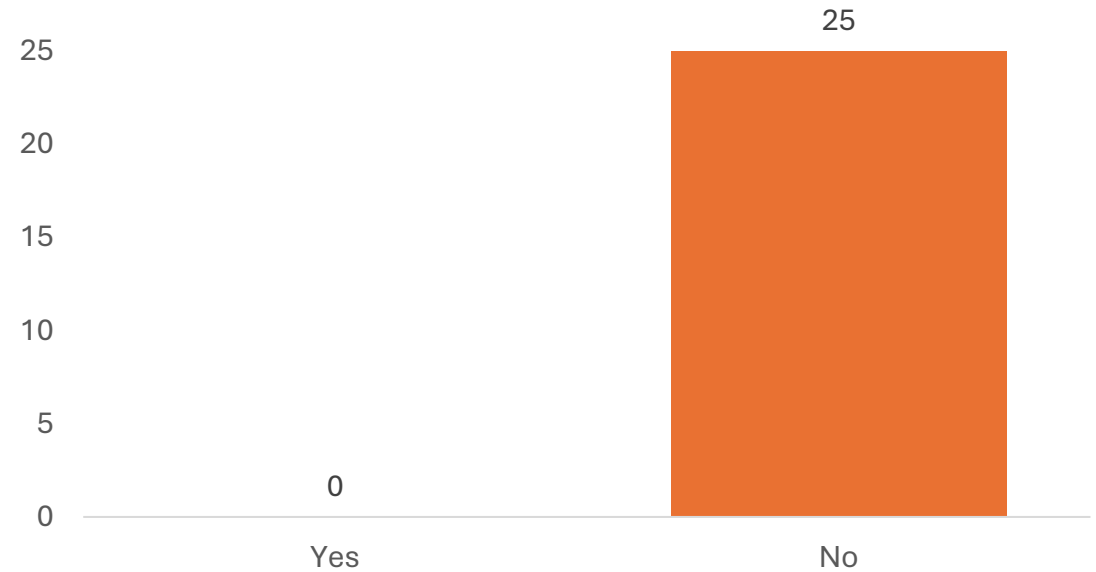
- There is a need for neutral support in pre-preparation, both in terms of club contracts and personal matters
- Players have had the opportunity to peacefully familiarize themselves with the academy and conditions, and have met the future coaching staff (some even multiple times)

III) Transfer Stage – Expectations for Career Ahead

3.9 Was a long-term career plan made for you when moving abroad?



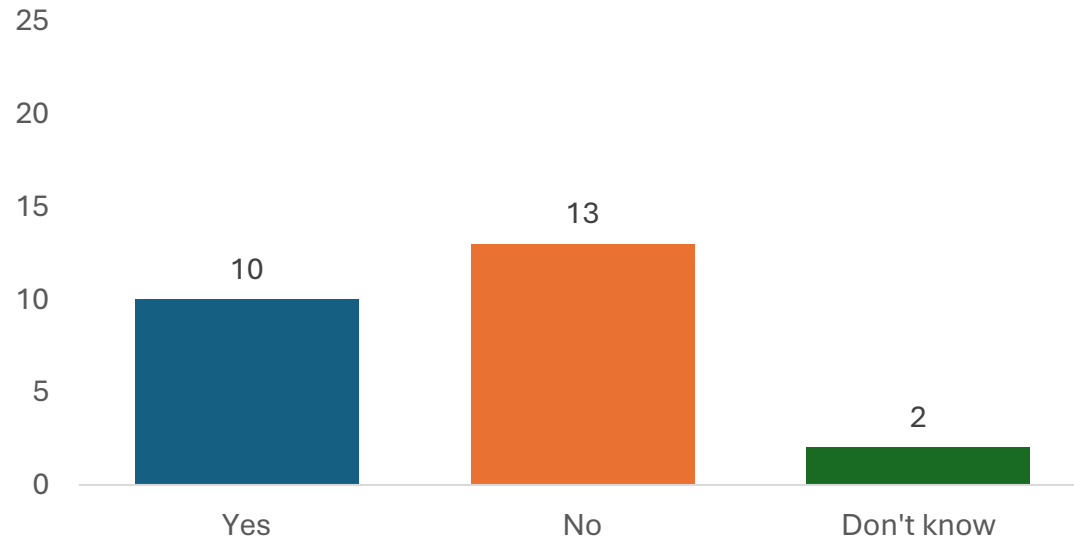
3.10 Did your contract include a return option to your development club?



- In one case, the future club was responsible, and in two cases, the player's own agent was involved
- There is a lack of understanding about the typical/average career path of an academy player, with high pressure to progress within the club and meet external expectations

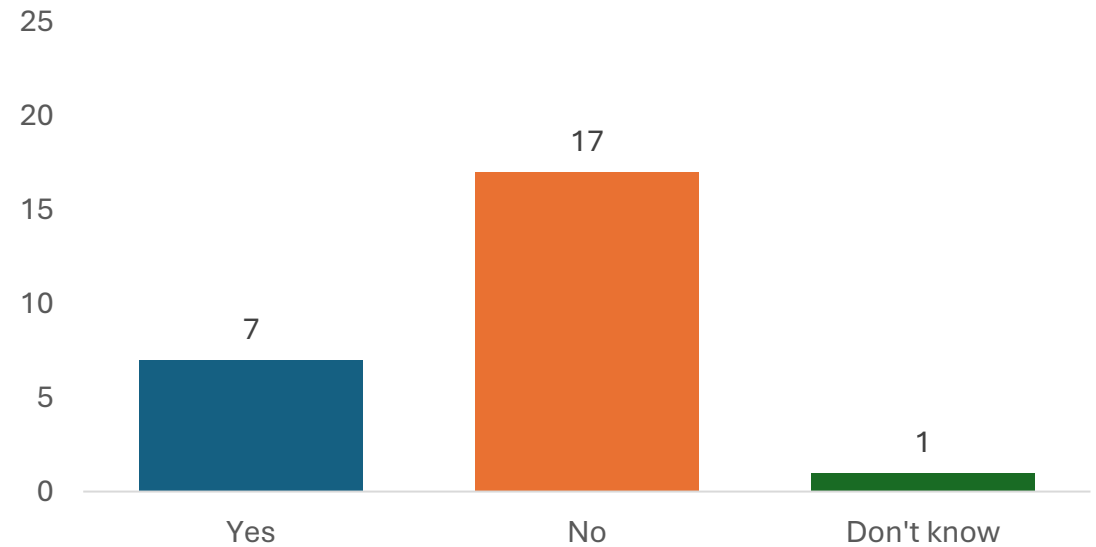
IV) Mental Well-Being in the Academy – Expectations

4.1 Did your new club/academy create a personal player development plan for you?



- The majority of players who moved to England (5) and Denmark (4) answered "yes" regardless of the club (country culture)
- All players who moved to Italy (5) answered "no" regardless of the club (country culture)
- In other countries, there were differences between clubs (club culture)

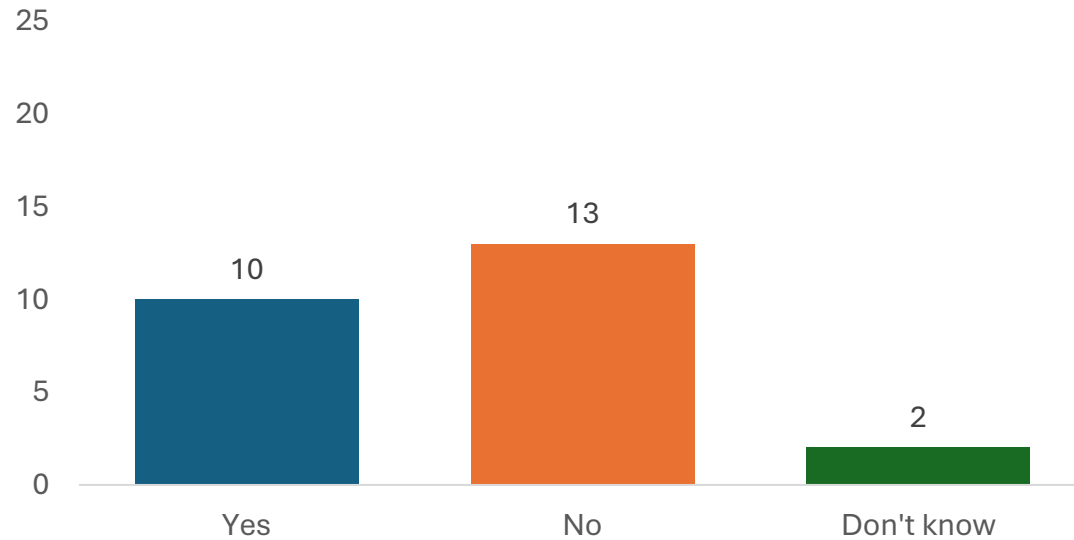
4.2 Did the academy make a career plan for you or discuss the typical career path of an academy player?



- The majority of players who moved to England (5) answered "yes" regardless of the club (country culture)
- All players who moved to Italy (5) answered "no" regardless of the club (country culture)
- In other countries, there were differences between clubs (club culture)

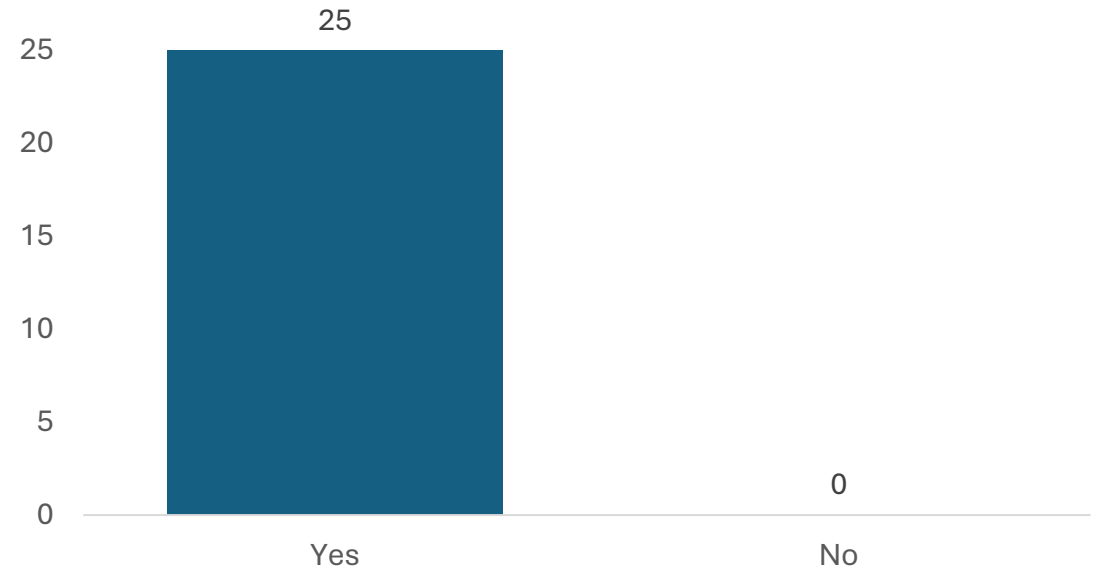
IV) Mental Well-Being in the Academy

4.3 Did coaching include mental development?



- As mentioned in section 4.1 "Player Development Plan"

4.4 Have you faced setbacks during your international career?

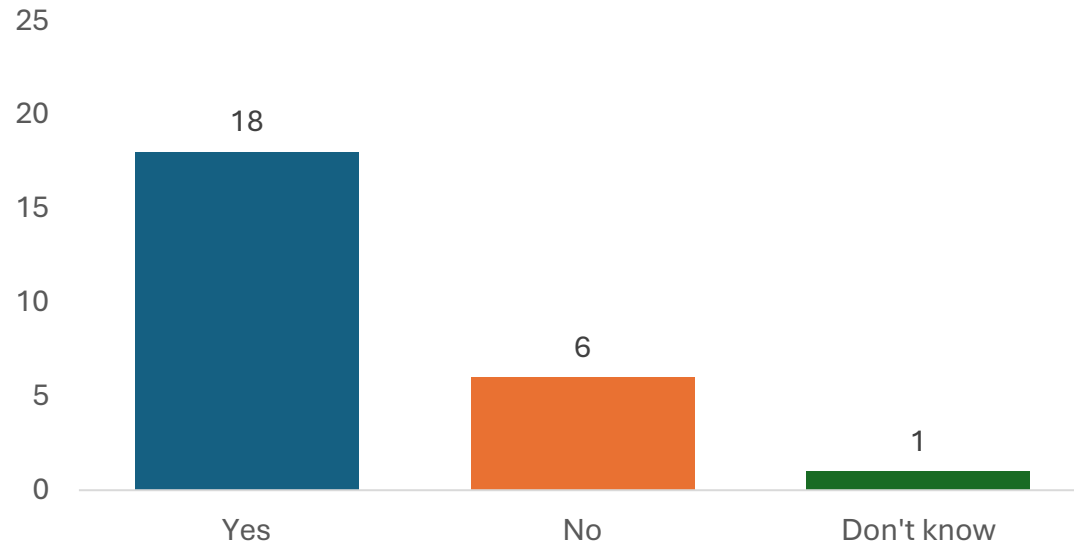


- Every second player (52%) experienced setbacks related to limited playing time and **uncertainty about their position** in the team
- Every seventh player (14%) experienced setbacks related to loneliness and **feelings of isolation**
- Every fourth player (26%) experienced setbacks related to long-term injuries
- **72% of respondents stated that these setbacks had weakened their self-confidence**

⇒ **The biggest causes of setbacks (74%) were related to mental factors**

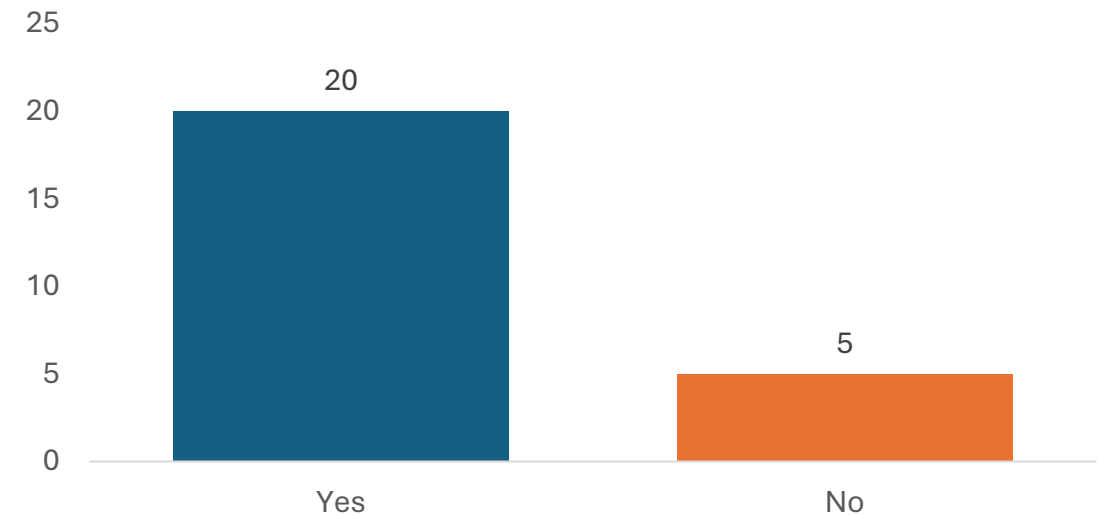
IV) Mental Well-Being in the Academy

4.5 Have you had confidence issues during your international career?



- Challenges with self-confidence were particularly related to changes in one's position, both in terms of playing role and social standing, compared to the role they were used to in their home country
- The coach's distance and uncertainty about one's position were emphasized in the responses

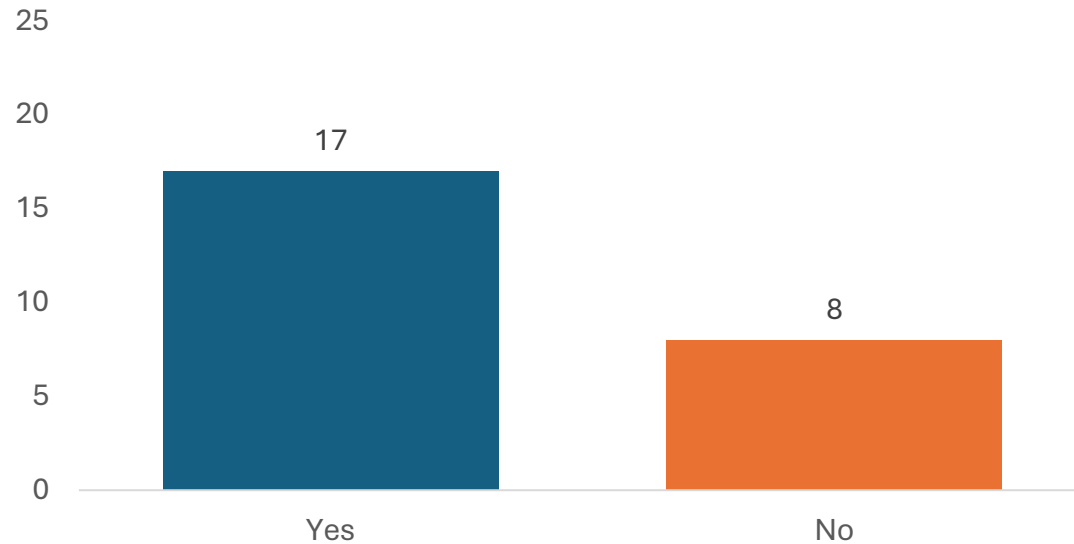
4.6 Have you experienced anxiety, mental fatigue, or depression while abroad?



- Change of role ("at home, I was in the starting lineup no matter how poorly I played")
- Coaches' distance and indifference towards the individual
- Social exclusion from the team, lack of appreciation from teammates
- Loneliness, "feeling forgotten"

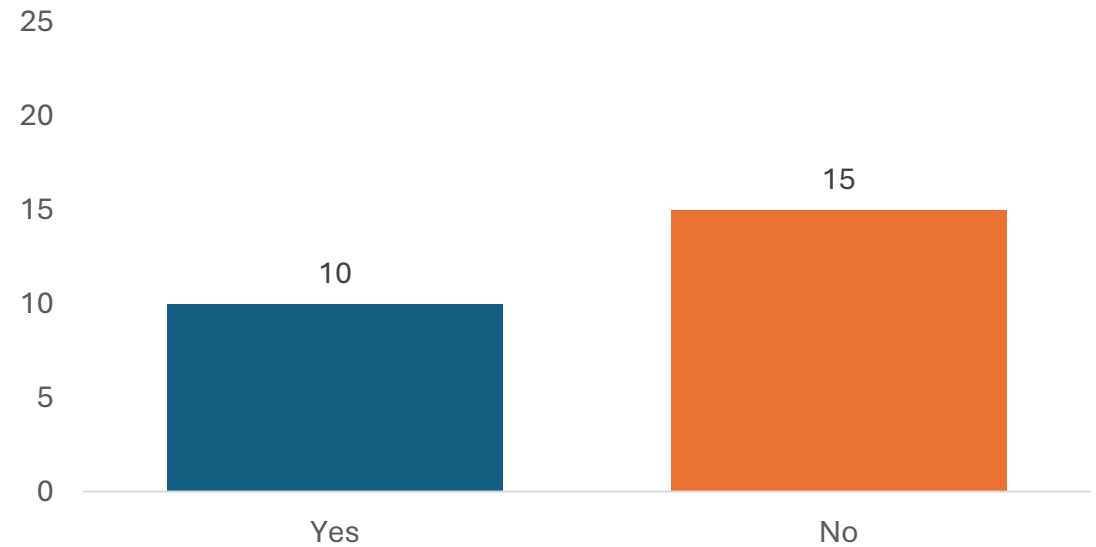
IV) Mental Well-Being in the Academy

4.7 Did the academy offer (professional) mental support?



- The majority of players who moved to Germany (8) and England (5) answered "yes" regardless of the club (country culture)
- All players who moved to Italy (5) answered "no" regardless of the club (country culture)
- For other countries, there were either differences between clubs or only isolated observations

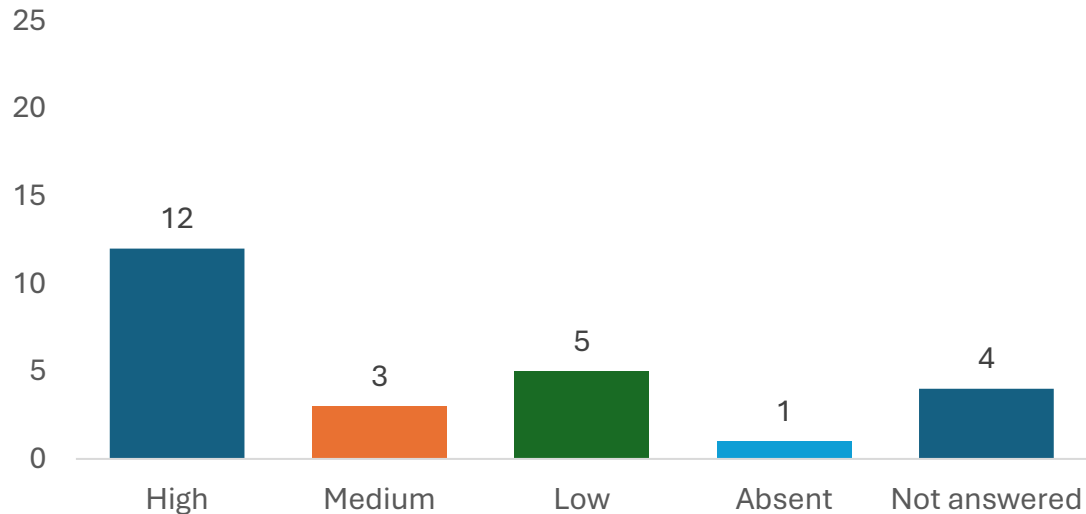
4.8 Was it possible to talk about anxiety, mental fatigue, or depression in the academy?



- The opportunity was offered (club's mental coach or psychologist), but players found it difficult or impossible to talk to someone from the coaching staff, seeing them as part of the "inner circle." Players relied on their close circle (family or non-professional acquaintances/teammates)
- Players primarily turned to their parents or former teammates for support

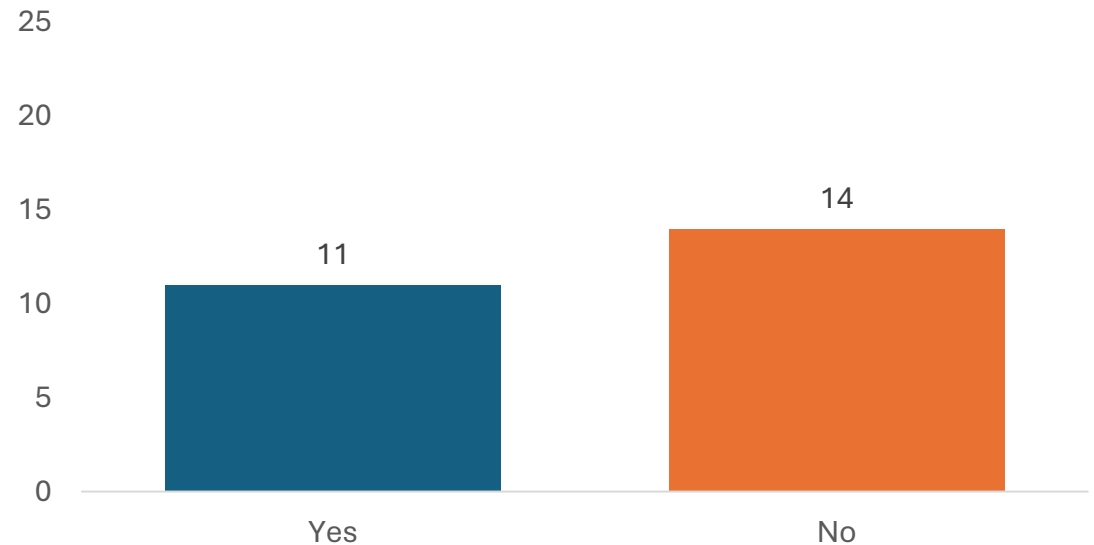
V) Support Network

5.1 How actively was your agent present and supporting you after the transfer?



- In 12 cases (57% of respondents), the agent was perceived as active and present in the player's everyday life
- Players do not expect the agent to be a mental support person. However, an agent who cares about the player's well-being earns loyal clients
- Agents with limited presence or those who were absent were not seen as fulfilling their role in supporting and strengthening the player's career. 13 players (52%) have changed agents at least once during their career
- One respondent felt the agent completely neglected the player after the transfer

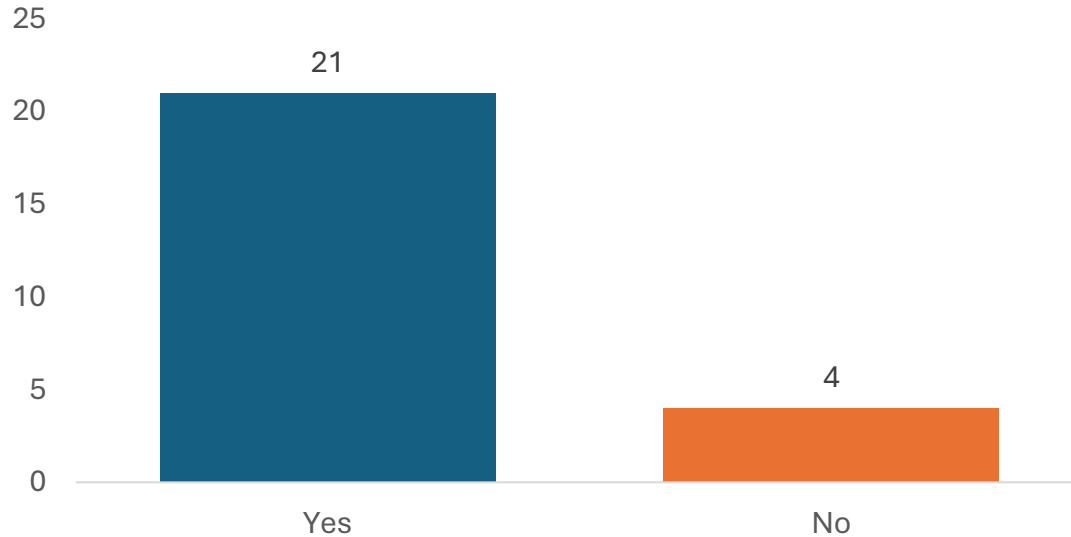
5.2 Has your home/development club stayed in contact with you?



- Players who participated in the survey represented a total of 11 home clubs. Of these, two clubs (2) systematically stay in touch with players after they move abroad (both have multiple players abroad)
- Clubs where this is emphasized enjoy great respect and loyalty from players ("If I return to Finland, I will definitely go back to my youth club to play")
- According to the responses, staying in touch with players who moved abroad is not part of the operational culture in most home clubs

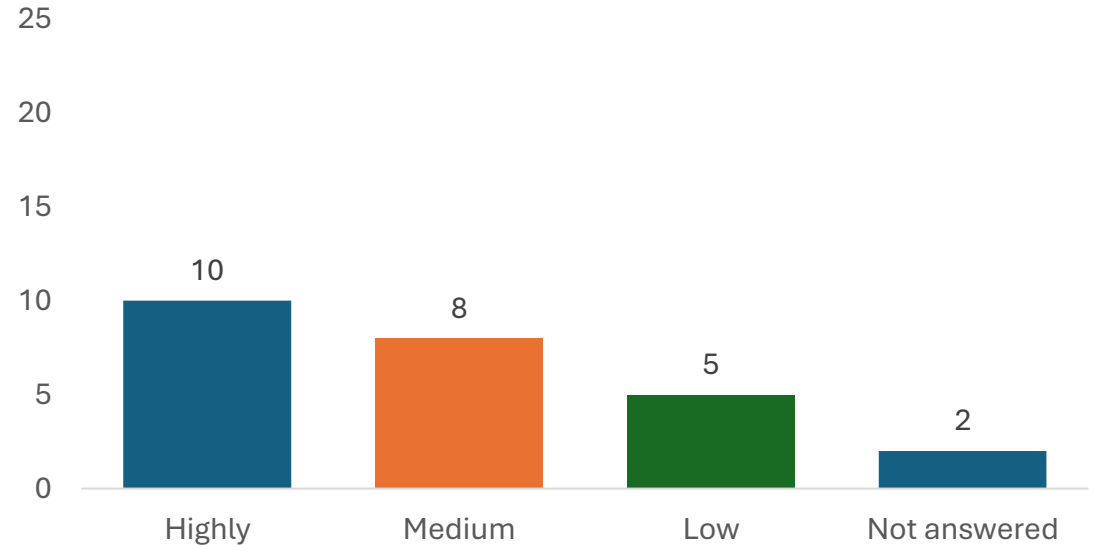
V) Support Network

5.3 Have the Finnish FA / national team coaches stayed in contact with you?



- Coaches' contact was emphasized in relation to upcoming national team events, and it was recognized if a player was part of the national team pool
- Conversely, players who were not part of their age group's national team pool generally did not receive contact from national team coaches or the football association

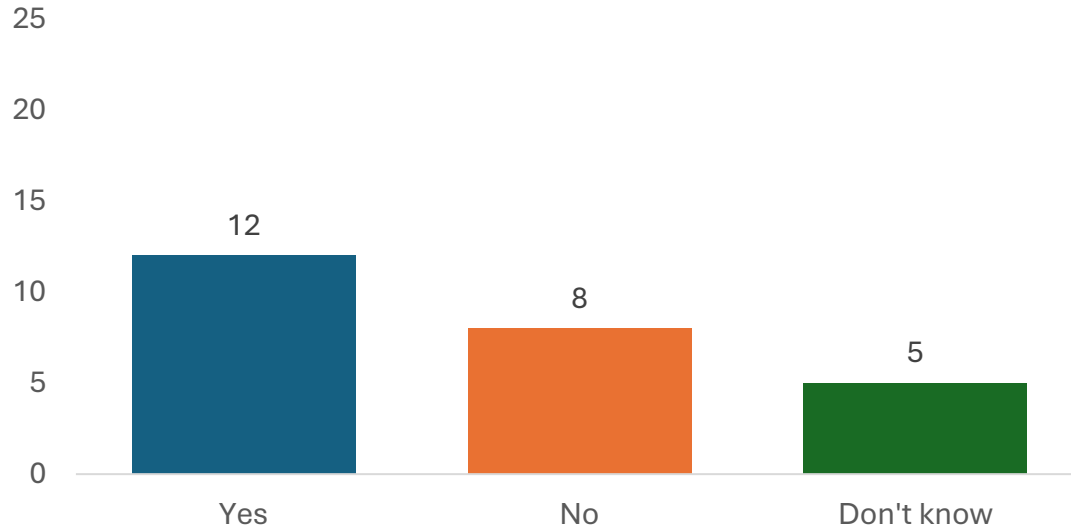
5.4 How important do you consider it that the Finnish FA (national team coaches) keep in touch with players?



- A clear majority of respondents (78%) consider contact from national team coaches and the football association important or very important
- Communication is seen as a strongly motivating factor ("not forgotten") and is particularly emphasized if the head coach of the player's international academy team maintains distance from the players
- For players who are more experienced in terms of age or have secured a national team spot, the importance of contact is not as prominent. However, contact is not considered insignificant in these cases either

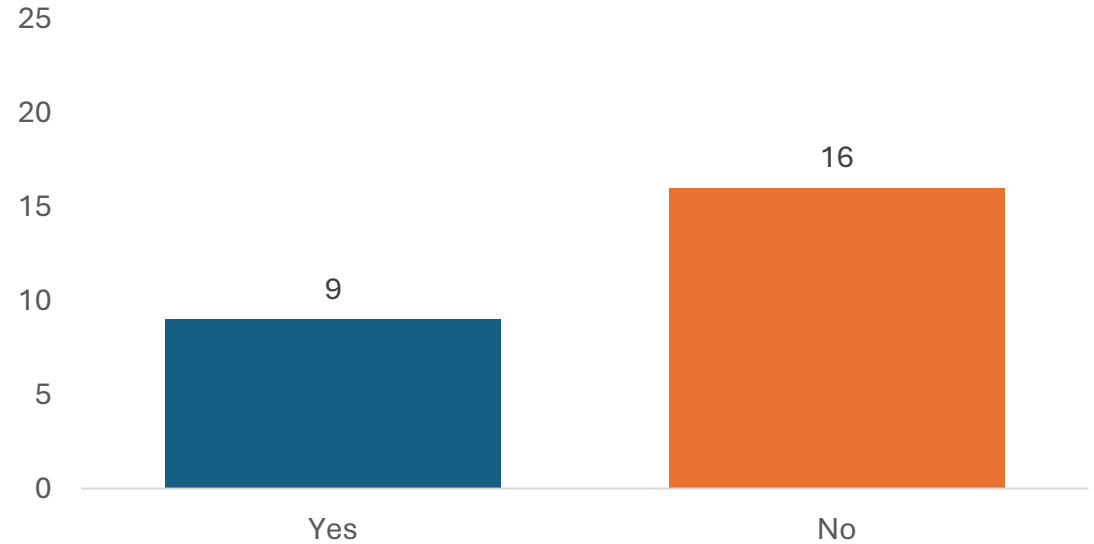
V) Support Network

5.5 Has the Players' Association been in contact with you?



- According to the survey, about half of the respondents recognized the role of the Players' Association's (personal mental coach), while the other half were either unfamiliar with it or had limited knowledge

5.6 Have you had, or do you currently have, a personal mental coach?



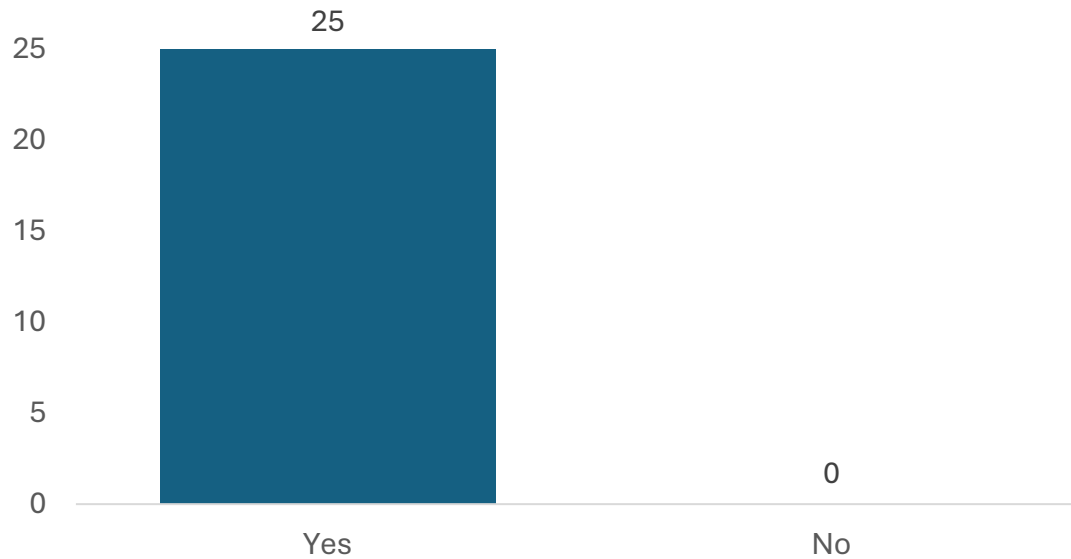
- 36% of respondents have experience with a personal mental coach or psychologist
- The need and benefit are recognized, but the network and contacts are currently "dependent" on the player's club. Some of the interviewees were actively searching for a mental coach

VI) Advice for Your Younger Self Moving Abroad

- “Don’t stress, trust in what you do, and focus on the present moment. You can only do your best at this moment.”
- “Don’t be too kind; take care of yourself and your well-being. Make sure you have something else besides football. Understand that it’s okay to fail. Don’t isolate yourself from Finland (friends, support network).”
- “Familiarize yourself with the culture and environment you’re going to. Language barriers (even in English, I missed things in the locker room), small talk culture, etc.”
- “Give yourself time to adjust to the playing culture and pace. Don’t waste energy worrying about playing time. Competition is a roller coaster; sometimes it’s you, sometimes it’s someone else playing. Don’t make decisions too early or too young.”
- “Understand and anticipate that difficult moments and challenges will come. Find out where you’re going and what the country’s and club’s culture is like.”
- “If I had known what was coming, I could have prepared better. There should be someone who knows what it’s about and with whom you can spar.”
- “Try to be twice as good as others. Don’t mix your work and personal self.”
- “Be as social as possible off the field, too. The first six months will be foggy, but after that, the social side becomes more important. It’s extremely important to have other things in life besides training and games (football), especially abroad.”
- “Talk.”
- “Be yourself. Don’t try to change who you are.”
- “Remember why you started playing football. Challenges will come, but approach them with joy. Don’t stress too much about the future. Live in the moment and enjoy.”
- “Language skills, sociability, don’t be intimidated by the speed abroad; you’ll catch up, give yourself time to adapt.”
- “Get to know the club and what life is like outside of football. Staff in the academy. Life outside of football is very important. It can’t just be football.”
- “Learn and adapt to the culture and customs (this helps with settling in).”
- “Don’t question the decision you’ve made; just focus on the moment. Enjoy and be active in relationships.”
- “Wait a couple more years; don’t leave at 16.”
- “Don’t overthink and analyze too much; focus on the present. Remember that, ultimately, it’s your decision, but listen to experienced people.”
- “Try to integrate into other areas of life outside football. When you’re a new player, be humble but don’t grovel (at first, it might feel like others are trying to put you down).”
- “Remember that there’s no rush; you have so much time ahead of you. Even if you face a long injury or a bad playing spell, it doesn’t matter. Accept that this is your life now and start building it accordingly. Network, make friends within and outside the team, and find other hobbies to take your mind off football.”
- “Don’t put too much pressure on yourself to take big steps in a big club; development paths are so different. Take things with joy and focus on the long term. You don’t owe anyone exceptional performance.”
- “You have nothing to lose. Make the most of it for yourself; everything is a bonus. Be yourself.”

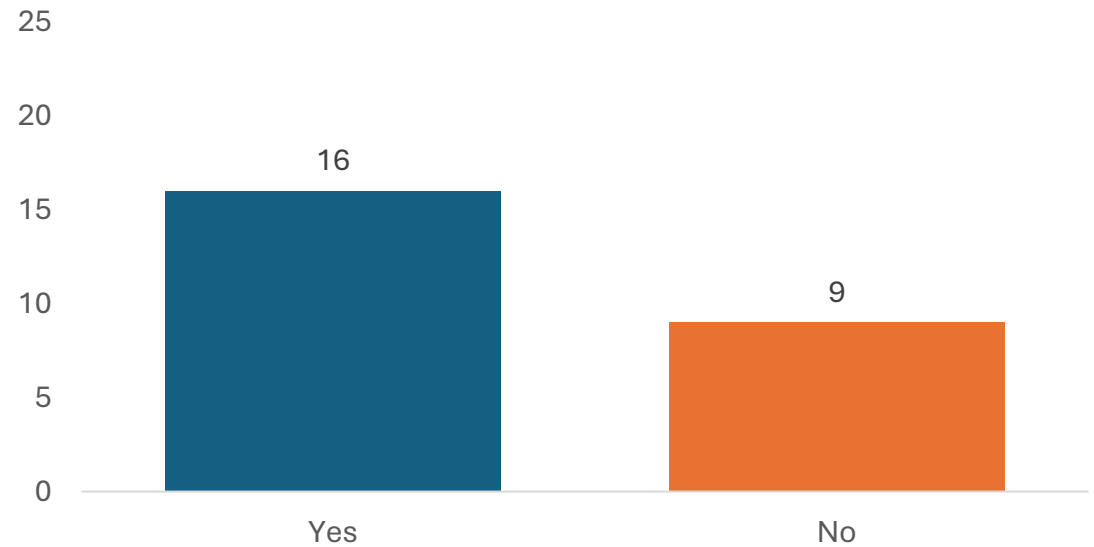
VII) Your Role in Supporting Young Players in the Future?

6.1 Are you interested in **tutoring** young players moving abroad?



- Before or during contract negotiations, the opportunity to get in touch with someone who has played at the academy and hear about their experiences and lessons as part of preparing for the academy move
- This reduces uncertainty about the future and helps the player prepare for a new environment and culture

6.2 Are you interested in **mentoring** young players playing abroad?



- After moving abroad, the young player has the opportunity to exchange experiences and receive peer support from older and more experienced professional football players with international careers
- "Not yet ready to be a mentor"

Summary and Conclusions

The interview-based study focused on the readiness and mental well-being of young football players who had transitioned abroad to new competitive environments. The responses highlighted factors affecting players' self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy, which had shaped their self-image and developmental journey as players during their youth. Additionally, experiences of resilience (mental flexibility) and feelings of lacking mental support emerged.

According to the responses, preparation for moving abroad was minimal or even non-existent for most players. The responses emphasized the lack of knowledge among young players and their close circles about aspects related to an academy career and daily life. Agent contracts, as well as transfer and club agreements, were unfamiliar and new to all parties involved. The Finnish Football Players Association, the Finnish Football Federation, and the player's home club were not part of the discussions, or if the original club was involved, it did not act as a supporter or advocate for the player. In many cases, transfer agreements were made without the player visiting the conditions at the destination club or understanding daily life there. Over time, issues and questions arose that the player should have addressed before signing contracts or moving abroad. As many as 72% of respondents felt that they were not adequately informed or prepared for the upcoming transfer (everyday life vs. expectations).

While abroad, players felt they were on their own. Communication with their home country was left to the player and their family. Connections to their former club and coaches were severed. Their self-image and sense of efficacy were called into question, leading to mental exhaustion and even anxiety. Although some players received mental support from their new clubs, they found the offered support problematic. Either the support person (mental coach) was part of the coaching staff, or they were an external psychologist who did not focus on the challenges and pressures players face in a football academy environment and club culture. During their academy career, 80% of the interviewees experienced mental fatigue, anxiety, or depression.

The mental strain is often rooted in uncertainty about the future and a lack of control over one's career (and life). A player's self-image is influenced by on-field performances and the interactions with coaches at the new club. The disconnection from social safety networks and ties to their home country becomes evident, and their importance increases. According to 72% of respondents, communication with national team coaches was important or very important. The significance of a sense of security (belonging and being accepted) is particularly emphasized at the early stages of a career. Here, the domestic football community could play a significant role in the player's development and support.

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the components and challenge points affecting the well-being of young Finnish elite players. These findings will serve as a foundation for developing models and processes to strengthen players' resilience and mental well-being. The results of the study should also be reviewed more broadly to explore how the information can be applied in domestic coaching and club activities, starting from the child and youth phases.

The conclusions and subsequent measures will be developed by a working group comprising the Finnish Football Players Association, the Finnish Football Federation, and the Eerikkilä Sports Institute. The goal is to create a mentorship and development program in Finland that strengthens the mental well-being and resilience of Finnish players, thereby supporting their well-being and competitiveness in international academy and club environments.

Research and Background Materials

- “A 2015 FIFPRO study revealed that 38 percent of active players have experienced symptoms of depression, with a distinct lack of support perceived in the industry.” - <https://fifpro.org/en/supporting-players/health-and-performance/mental-health>
- ” Coaches and athletes are putting more emphasis on mental toughness, also called grit, which the American Psychological Association (APA) defines as a personality trait marked by both perseverance and a passion for achieving long-term goals, characterized by the ability to overcome challenges and stay motivated in the face of failure, hardship, and plateaus” (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/wellness/resilience/can-getting-mentally-tough-up-your-game-sports-answer-yes/>)
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