

Mental Health in the League of Ireland: A Study



Ollscoil
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A Note from the Collaborators



Mark Scanlon, League of Ireland Director, Football Association of Ireland

This report is a welcome first step in looking into the crucially important, yet under researched, area of mental health amongst footballers in the League of Ireland. As the profile of the League of Ireland continues to grow, this brings extra pressure and attention to clubs and players and it is important that we ensure that the well-being of our players is always at the forefront of any decision-making process. This excellent report brings together crucial stakeholders in the game, and we hope that it will be the beginning of a journey of further research into this important topic. We look forward to working with the PFA Ireland and SETU Ireland as well as players, coaches and match officials to help break the stigma and encourage open conversations regarding mental health and well-being.



Dr Cíara Losty, Lecturer & Researcher in Applied Sport Psychology, SETU Ireland

Undertaking prevalence research for common mental health disorders in football is crucial for several reasons. By identifying the scope of the issue within footballers, prevalence research can help us to understand how widespread mental health disorders are among Irish football players. By recognising the proportion of players affected, stakeholders can better gauge the extent of the problem. Mental health often remains a stigmatised topic in sport. Research helps bring attention to the issue, destigmatising it and encouraging open conversations among players, coaches, and management about mental well-being. Mental health is crucial for the long-term career sustainability of players. Research can provide insights into factors that impact players' mental health, helping to prevent burnout and career-ending issues. Overall, prevalence research is a step toward creating an environment where players' mental health is prioritised, leading to healthier, more successful players in Irish football.



Stephen McGuinness, General Secretary, Professional Footballers Association Ireland

Players are an integral part of the League of Ireland and it is imperative that all stakeholders play a role in supporting them, whether that is around their employment, their physical health or their mental health. This research shows some of the additional mental health challenges faced by players in the professional football industry in Ireland. It highlights the necessity of the supports we already provide our members in PFA Ireland and gives some insight towards additional supports that will be needed to support players in the future. We look forward to undertaking further research in this area.

Executive Summary

219

Total
Participants

23.5yrs

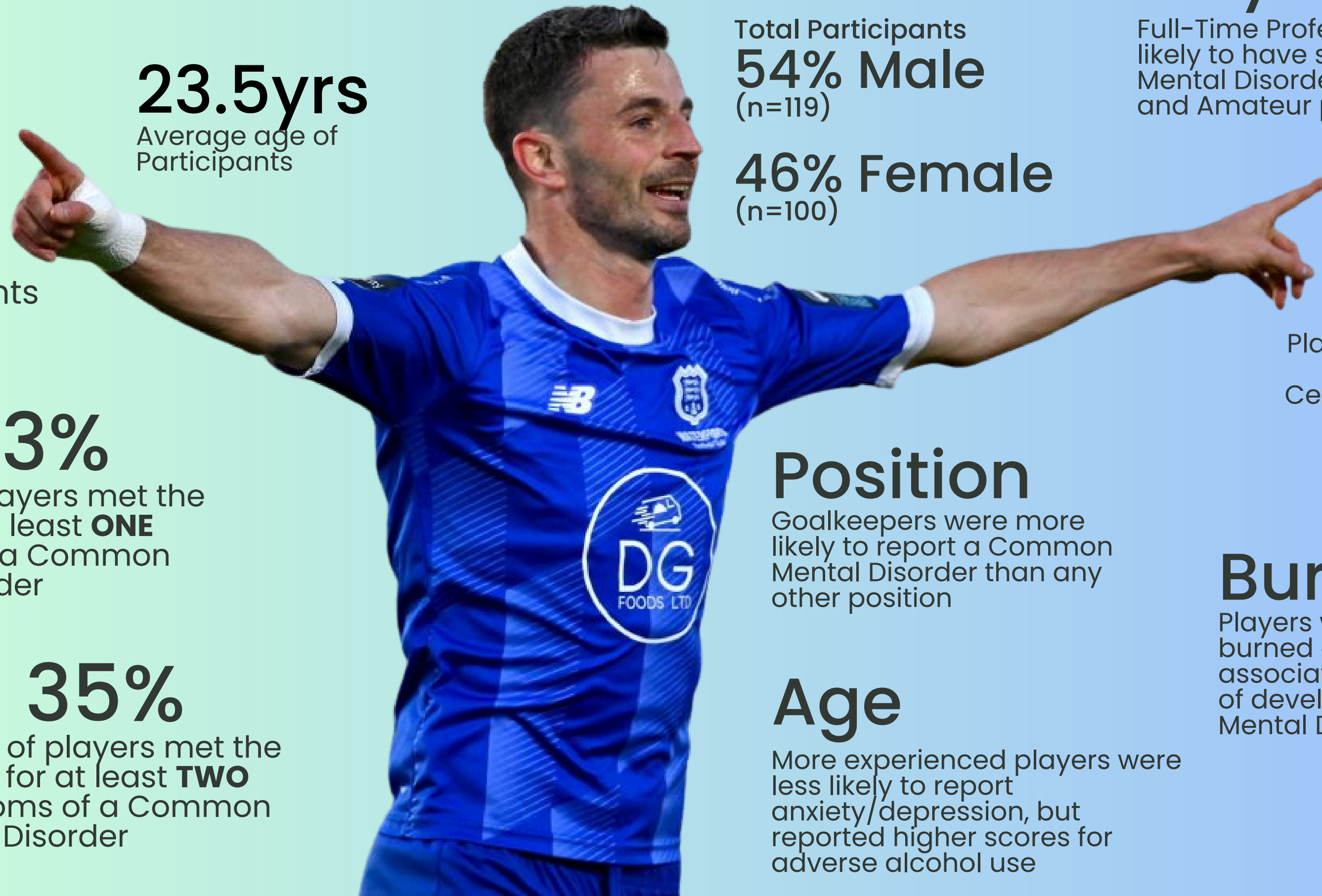
Average age of
Participants

63%

(n=138) of players met the
criteria for at least **ONE**
symptom of a Common
Mental Disorder

35%

(n=69) of players met the
criteria for at least **TWO**
symptoms of a Common
Mental Disorder



Total Participants

54% Male

(n=119)

46% Female

(n=100)

Position

Goalkeepers were more
likely to report a Common
Mental Disorder than any
other position

Age

More experienced players were
less likely to report
anxiety/depression, but
reported higher scores for
adverse alcohol use

Playing Status

Full-Time Professionals were the least
likely to have symptoms of a Common
Mental Disorder, less than Part-Time
and Amateur players

Education

Players with the lowest level
of education (Junior
Certificate/GSCEs) reported
the highest scores for
anxiety/depression

Burnout

Players who reported feeling
burned out were significantly
associated with being at risk
of developing a Common
Mental Disorder

Introduction & Background

WHO TOOK PART?

- Players over 18 years of age
- Players across the three divisions of the League of Ireland

Divisions as of the Season 2024



**Men's
Premier Division**

- Bohemian FC
- Derry City FC
- Drogheda United FC
- Dundalk FC
- Galway United FC
- Shamrock Rovers FC
- Shelbourne FC
- Sligo Rovers FC
- St. Patrick's Athletic FC
- Waterford FC



**Women's
Premier Division**

- Athlone Town AFC
- Bohemian FC
- Cork City FC
- DLR Waves FC
- Galway United FC
- Peamount United FC
- Shamrock Rovers FC
- Shelbourne FC
- Sligo Rovers FC
- Treaty United FC
- Wexford FC



**Men's
First Division**

- Athlone Town AFC
- Bray Wanderers FC
- Cobh Ramblers FC
- Cork City FC
- Finn Harps FC
- Kerry FC
- Longford Town FC
- Treaty United FC
- UCD AFC
- Wexford FC

What is a Common Mental Disorder (CMD)?



A person experiencing a CMD may report feelings of psychological disturbance and describe a state of emotions that noticeably affect their way of thinking, feeling and behaving.

This disturbance reaches the extent that areas of their life that they consider important to them are negatively impaired such as learning, living, working, exercising and socialising.

Education

Players with the lowest level of education were more likely to report symptoms of a Common Mental Disorder.

Among the existing mental health and wellbeing research in Irish athletes, the level of education plays a significant role in influencing an athlete's susceptibility of meeting the caseness for one or more CMDs.

Players with the lowest level of education (Junior Certificate/GSCEs) reported the highest scores for anxiety, depression and general distress when compared to their peers.

Age

More experienced players reported lower scores for anxiety/depression, but higher scores for adverse alcohol use.

Given the younger-than-average age of the athletes playing in the League of Ireland, it may have been predictable to find that the majority of athletes in the study (61.2%, n=134) have played at senior level for five years or less.

This group of players scored considerably higher than their older counterparts with regards to symptoms for General Distress and Anxiety/Depression.

However, more experienced players reported higher scores for Sleep Disturbance and Adverse Alcohol Use.

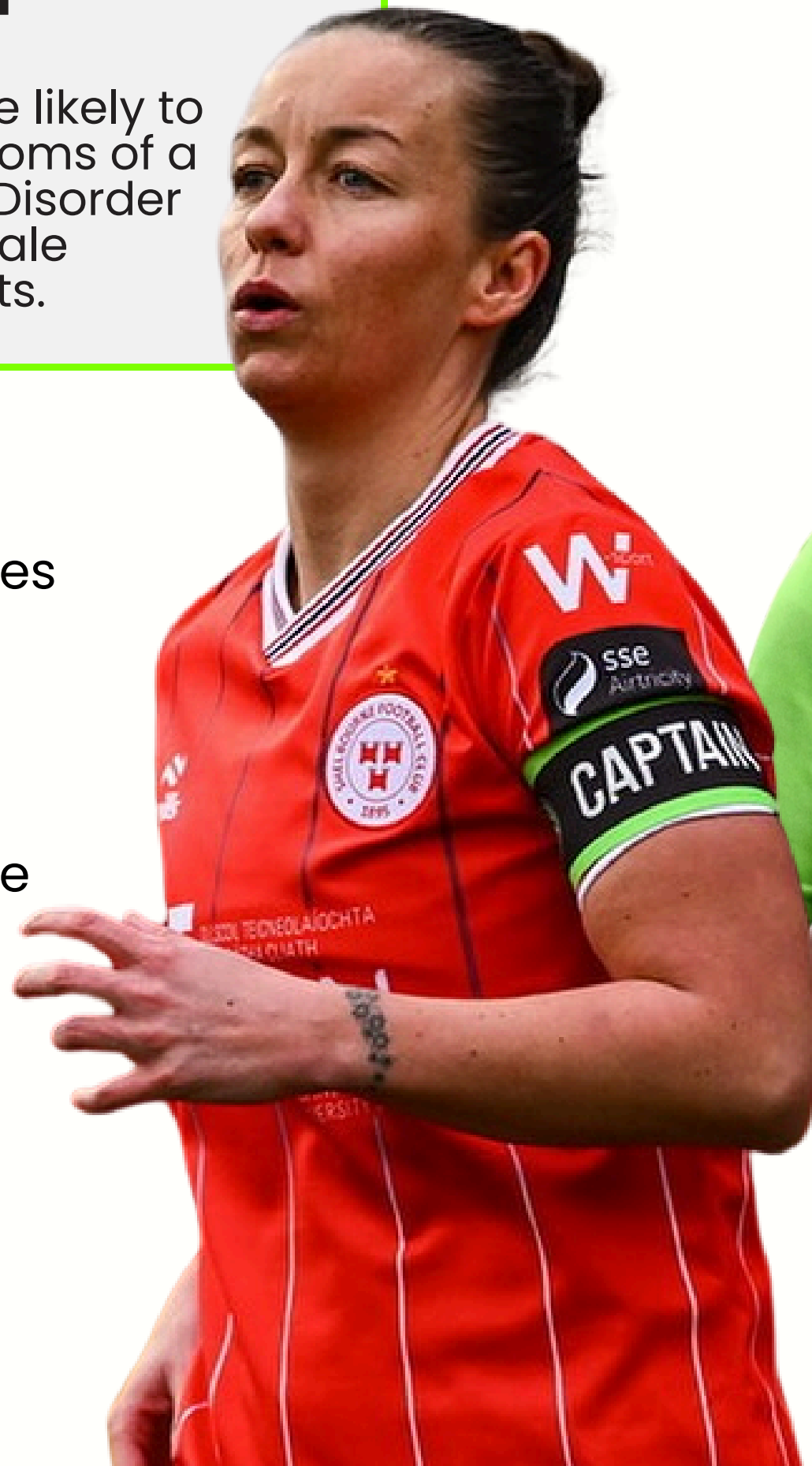
Adverse Alcohol Use, in particular, saw more than half (53.3%, n=16) of the 10+ Yrs population meeting the threshold for this symptom.

Gender

Women were more likely to experience symptoms of a Common Mental Disorder than their male counterparts.

In three of the four psychological inventories assessed (General Distress, Anxiety/Depression, and Sleep Disturbance), women surpassed the CMD threshold at a rate more than twice that of men.

Women reported lower scores than men when reporting symptoms for Adverse Alcohol Use.



Position

Goalkeepers were more likely to report symptoms of CMDs, more than outfield players.

A Goalkeeper is a standalone position, where the player wears a separate jersey, abides by a separate set of rules, and often experiences loneliness.

As a result, much of the existing research in this area found that goalkeepers tend to experience higher rates of anxiety/depression than individuals in other positions. Goalkeepers in the present study showed similar trends.

They reported the highest (33.3%, n=6) scores for anxiety/depression, in addition to also reporting the highest (27.8%, n=5) scores for sleep disturbance.



Athlete Burnout

Burnout is a risk factor to contracting a mental health condition, and research across the world of sport suggests that it is becoming more prevalent amongst athletes.

Players who reported feeling 'burnt-out' were significantly associated with being at risk of developing a CMD.

Playing Status

When compared to part-time and amateur players, full-time professionals were the least likely to report symptoms of a CMD.

The strong associations between athlete burnout and the risk of reporting a CMD are notable. Full-time professionals are the only athletes who are compensated for their recovery.



Methodology

1. Research Design

- A cross-sectional study design was used to determine the prevalence of CMDs across the player population.
- The study employed a quantitative epidemiological approach to data collection.
- Cross-sectional studies are observational studies that analyse data from a population at a single point in time.
- An anonymous survey was distributed online. Self-report screening tools for four CMDs (psychological distress, anxiety/depression, sleep disturbance and adverse alcohol use) alongside a predictor variable from questionnaires assessing for athlete burnout.

2. Research Aims

- The primary aim of the research was to examine the prevalence of CMDs (distress, anxiety/depression, sleep disturbance and adverse alcohol use) among League of Ireland players.
- Additionally, this study explored possible associations between CMD prevalence and demographical factors.



Conclusion

Although mental health research in football is expanding, it remains an underreported area.

This study is the first national research on CMDs amongst footballers in the League of Ireland.

We hope this study raises awareness and encourages greater commitment from all stakeholders to support Irish football in promoting high standards of player care, ensuring that those struggling with mental health issues can access supports.

The primary recommendation of this study is for it to be seen as a crucial first step in a process that will identify and propose the highest standards of preventative and supportive measures to protect and promote the long-term mental health of players in the League of Ireland.

We hope this study is viewed as the beginning of a journey to create a broader body of work on this important topic.



About the Author



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Cameron obtained a Master of Science Degree in Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology from SETU Ireland. This report was derived from his Professional Psychological Dissertation, titled 'Examining the Common Mental Health Disorders among players in the League of Ireland'.

**Want to work
together?**

For more information, get in touch.

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