

“And all of a sudden you’re on your own”:

## The Experiences Of ‘Unsuccessful’ British And Irish Amateurs Upon Turning Professional

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### **Purpose:**

This study focused on a sample of male golfers (n=9) who represented Great Britain and Ireland at the highest amateur level before transitioning to professional golf. Despite seemingly to be at mastery level (Bloom, 1985) their transitions were unsuccessful with only one of the nine briefly achieving their goal of competing in the ‘Premier League’ of European professional golf, the PGA European Tour. The careers of all nine participants were played almost exclusively on the far less lucrative circuits of the Europro Tour (league three) and European Challenge Tour (league two).

The purpose of this research was to explore and identify, in the player’s own words, their experiences from turning professional to them giving up the professional game.

### **Methods:**

Publicly available data shows forty-six players represented Great Britain and Ireland at the highest amateur level between 1999 and 2009 and then turned professional. Nineteen of them went on to enjoy successful careers on the PGA European Tour and PGA European Seniors Tour while twenty-seven did not. Using the inclusion criteria of the study as players who were unsuccessful in realising a career on the PGA European Tour (one participant played on the PGA European Tour, but for one season only) a convenience sampling method identified nine study participants from the twenty-seven who did not enjoy a successful career. Their average career length on the professional circuit was six years and one month, which was played on league two and three circuits.

Using an inductive interpretivist qualitative framework, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The emergent data was then analysed and coded using thematic analysis and then key themes explored, reviewed and analysed to create key data themes.

### **Results:**

The data highlighted a number of transitional barriers (Stambulova, 2009) and critical episodes (Bailey et al., 2010) which occurred following the participants’ transition to the professional game. The emergent data suggests that despite being from very similar cultural and biographical backgrounds, there were differing transitional barriers present during the participants’ careers. These included: 1.a

lack of suitable mentoring; 2. a loss of institutional support-systems; 3. financial restrictions; and 4. playing strategy deficits. The findings also identified that there appeared to be five career stages (or critical episodes) which the participants experienced during their attempt to become PGA European Tour golfers.

### **Discussion:**

During their professional careers none of the participants were able to overcome their respective transition barrier(s) and only one briefly reached the goal of playing on the PGA European Tour. Successful transition is associated with effective coping i.e. when the athlete is able to recruit or rapidly develop *all* of the necessary resources to overcome transition barriers (Stambulova, 2003). We suggest the participants' lack of success as professional golfers was due to their inability to employ the necessary coping resources to overcome their transition barriers.

The findings of this study infer that some of the best young prospects in Great Britain and Ireland turned professional and due to a lack of guidance appeared to be overwhelmed by the experiences which quickly followed.

### **Practical Application:**

Based on these findings, an 'amateur to professional' Golf Union support-system could perhaps facilitate more elite GB & I amateurs successfully transitioning to professional golf. The study findings may indicate the effects of a dichotomy within Golf Union development programmes. In an effort to smooth the pathway for the development of their elite players, Golf Unions may have inadvertently practiced something akin to 'snow plough parenting' (Tallent and Barnes, 2015). By removing too many of the naturally occurring barriers during their amateur careers, it would appear that they are not equipping their players with the 'tools' to overcome the various barriers encountered during their career in professional sport (Stambulova, 2009).

This study hopes to provide a small contribution towards research in the area of athlete transition and talent development programmes.

Please consider for a podium presentation only

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