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**Work and Play: The Professional Footballer in
England, 1918-50**

Although the history of the professional sportsmen in general, and the footballer in particular, now has a firm place within academia, much of what we know is still based on limited evidence and much assumption. In England, little attempt has been made to extend the chronological focus beyond the detailed work of Mason and Vamplew on the pre-1914 period. This paper will utilize a range of primary material available in club, association and union archives, alongside the more conventional printed media, to examine the work and lifestyle of professional footballers in England between 1918 and 1950.

The paper is split in two parts. The first part considers football players as “workers” and the experience of work. While the employment conditions of players, particularly the retain-and-transfer system which constrained the freedom of footballers to sell their labor, have been well documented by historians, less is known about how footballers saw their work. The paper thus attempts, in an exploratory fashion, to investigate both the nature of this “work” and the attitudes of players towards their working conditions, relations with employers and career prospects. In doing so, it is suggested that the experience of football “work” was far from uniform, but varied according to the status of the player and his club.

The second part of the paper focuses on what footballers did away from the playing field and the training ground. It is generally assumed that before the 1960s the lifestyle and culture of footballers located them firmly within the working class, albeit as a well-paid, skilled elite. This may be the case, but it is argued that footballers were also keen to emphasize their position as members of a “respectable” occupation. While some footballers, then, were undoubtedly regarded as “obedient servants” of management, others increasingly saw themselves and were perceived as self-confident sporting professionals.
