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‘Bad for *my* game, good for *the* game’: A phenomenological psychology of playing on artificial surfaces in Irish Premiership and Championship soccer

McKenzie, S.^{1✉}, & Miller, P.K.¹

Department of Medical and Sport Sciences, University of Cumbria, UK
s1605697@uni.cumbria.ac.uk

Although they have a chequered history with players, fans and officials alike, artificial surfaces have recently become a recurrent feature in world association football, with 3437 FIFA-certified surfaces laid in 149 countries since 2006. The use of artificial surfaces has, however, remained divisive. In the last year, players across Scotland’s top leagues have signed a petition demanding that these surface be removed from top flight football. Moreover, and excluding clubs who currently have artificial pitches, as of February 2019, every Scottish Premiership player has put their name to a petition stating concerns over injury, recovery and movement. It is the case, however, that the scientific literature investigating injury risk seems to contrast with these concerns; extant evidence indicates that these types of pitches do not inherently engender extra injury risk at all. The question then remains - why do players, managers and fans still react negatively towards this type of pitch, even with stacking evidence, and many major governing bodies throughout the world backing their use? It is clear, therefore, that some model of understanding is needed to square an apparent conception-gap, regarding artificial surfaces, between received wisdom and actual fact. Given this concern, the majority of social-scientific studies currently addressing the matter have been deductive, and/or survey-based, and confined to the elite domain in Holland, Belgium and France. While these studies have clear value, they have hitherto failed to represent the nuanced ways in which artificial surfaces are affecting the game, and the experiences of players themselves, in smaller domains and settings such as the Irish leagues. Therefore, with institutional ethical approval, and using semi structured interviews as part of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of seven individuals playing in the Irish Premiership and Championship regarding the use of artificial surfaces. After provisional analysis, the superordinate themes that emerged were identified as: (1) differences regarding the league and teams, (2) injury concerns and (3) differences in play style/mind-set. A particularly novel finding from the analysis was

the identification of an 'ideological dilemma', between how the players viewed the pitch regarding their own game, verses how they seen them on a larger, league wide scale. Further data analysis and results are pending.