



# Career Length Of Professional Male Soccer Players Is Dependant On Their Highest Team Level Reached

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## No Disclosures

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## Introduction

Several studies have reported RTP and career longevity after injuries in professional soccer and all show that “still playing” rates decrease over time<sup>1-7</sup>.

However, it is not known if this is the natural career progression for soccer players or if it is because of the injury concerned.

To be able to determine this a better understanding of “normal” career longevity is needed.

## Purpose

To determine ‘normal’ career longevity of male professional soccer players in England.

To demonstrate how these vary according to age, playing position, and team level played.

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## Method

4117 players who had 3 or more match appearances in the top four English football leagues (English Premier League, Championship, League One, and League Two) between the 2005/06 season and the 2009/10 season were included. Football match appearance data, from a publicly available website<sup>8</sup>, for these players' entire senior careers, which spanned all seasons between 1992/93 and 2022/23, was utilised in the study.

Players were grouped into 5 ability levels\* according to the team level reached and their “still playing” rates, and career trajectory tracked according to age.

Univariate and multivariate analyses were used to determine differences by playing position and ability and Kaplan-Meier survival curves were generated.

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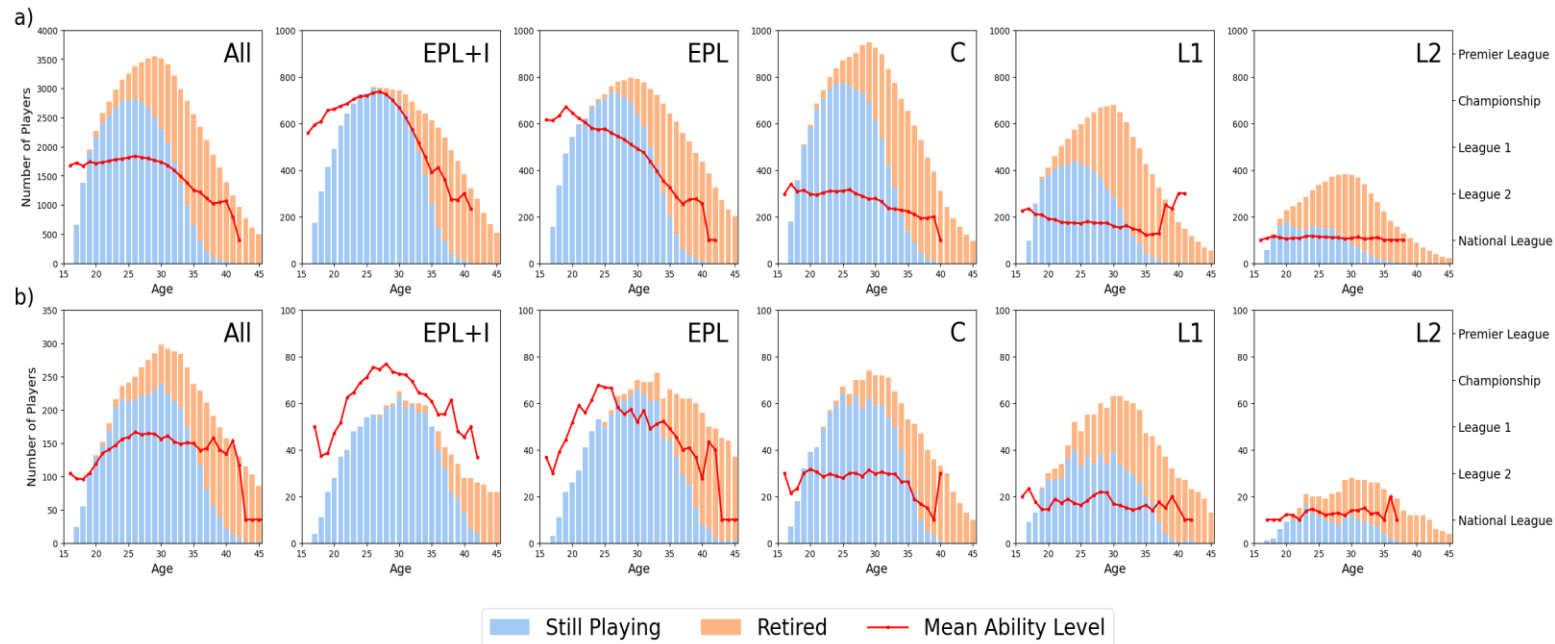
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## Results: Part 1

One thousand, seven hundred and ninety-five players (43.6%) competed in the English Premier League (EPL) and of these 856 (47.6%) also played for their national side. Goalkeepers had a longer overall career length than outfield players (12.4 +4.9 vs 11.6 + 4.7 years,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Participation decreases with age, with 95.7% of outfield players still playing at age 20, 85.7% at age 25 and 66.7% at age 30.

## Career Trajectory and “Still Playing” Rates by Player Age in a) Outfield players and b) Goalkeepers.



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## Results: Part 2

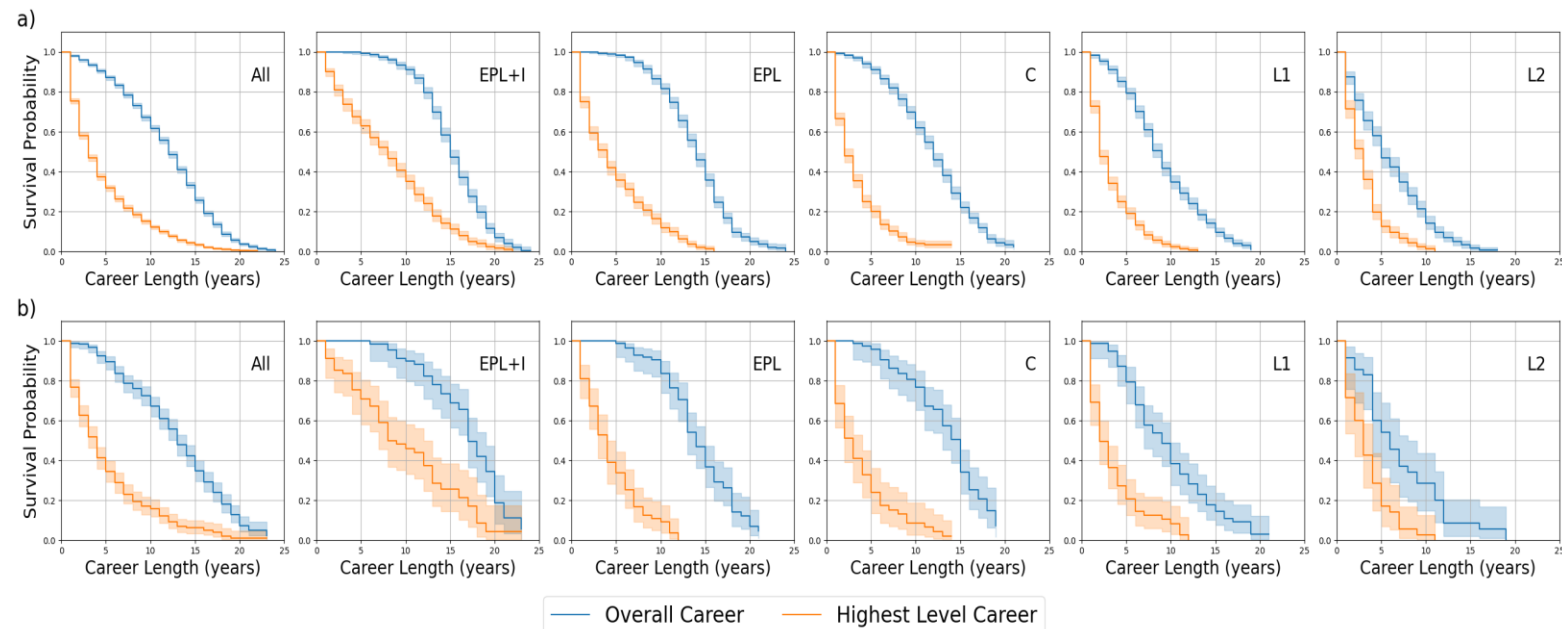
Outfield players in the EPL and those also playing internationally (EPL+I) play for longer overall than lower league players.

( $14.8 \pm 3.3$  vs  $6.2 \pm 4.1$  years in L2)

They also remain at their highest level than lower league players.

( $7.5 \pm 5.0$  vs  $2.9 \pm 2.2$  years in L2)

**Kaplan-Meier survival curves comparing overall and highest level career lengths by ability group for a) Outfield players and b) Goalkeepers.**



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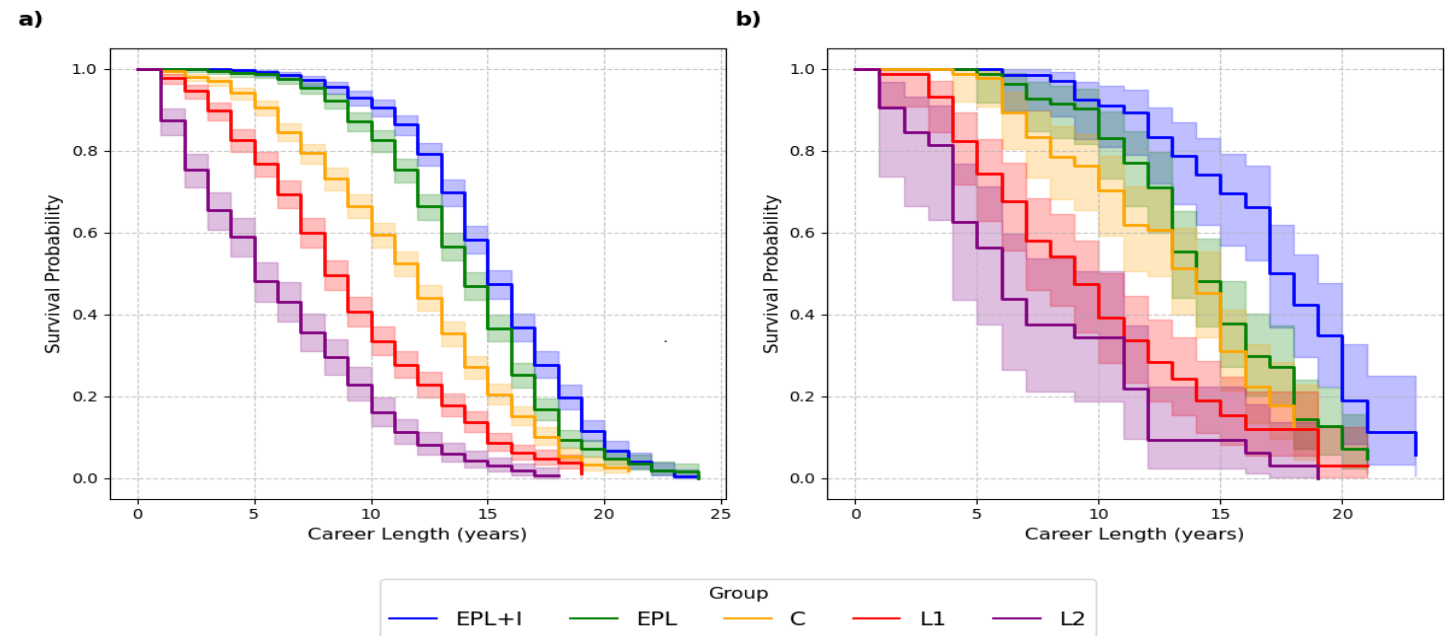
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## Results: Part 3

At 5 years, EPL+I and EPL outfield players have a 60% and 40% probability of continuing to play at their highest level respectively compared to less than 20% in The Championship and below.

At 10 years this drops to 40% and 18% in the EPL+I and EPL respectively compared to below 2% in the lower leagues.

## Kaplan-Meier career length survival curves comparing different ability groups for a) Outfield players and b) Goalkeepers.



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## Discussion

Only limited information is available regarding career longevity in professional soccer players yet, without this information, it is not possible to tell if career longevity is reduced by injury, nor the impact of medical intervention on it.

The career length and “still playing” rates found in this study can be compared with these outcomes after injury and intervention to determine their long-term effects.

However, given the effect of age and league level on “still playing” rates it is important that comparisons are made between cohorts of similar age and league levels to ensure the comparisons are valid.



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## Conclusion

Career duration in soccer players is affected by the position played and ability level with goalkeepers and Premier League players having longer careers and remaining at their highest level for longer than players in lower leagues.

The average career length for EPL players also playing internationally is 14.8 years compared to 6.2 years in League 2.

The lower league players have a less than 2% chance of playing at their highest level at 10 years compared to 40% of those playing at both EPL and at international level.

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