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Homegrown Heroes: Shared Group Membership Is a Basis for Recognizing Outstanding Sports Performance

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ABSTRACT

In the present research we examine how the recognition of outstanding sports performance is shaped by shared social group membership. To this end, we conducted a large-scale analysis over the last 28 years (since the Bosman ruling in 1995) of how the exogenous variable, players' social group membership (domestic vs. foreign players), predicts recognition of "player of the season" awards across all professional European soccer leagues. On the basis of social identity theorizing, we argued shared social identity provides a frame of reference from which to perceive and evaluate performance and so hypothesized that foreign players would need to exhibit superior performance than their domestic counterparts for their performance to be recognized with an award. Supporting this hypothesis, results show that foreign players whose performance was recognized in best player awards scored significantly more goals in a season than domestic award winners. The same pattern is evident for goal-per-game ratio, with foreign award winners outperforming their domestic counterparts. Finally, there is evidence that this pattern is moderated by the status of the league such that this differentiation was more pronounced in high-status leagues, indexed by associations' UEFA coefficient. We discuss the implications for social identity theorizing in relation to sport with a focus on the way in which group dynamics shape the psychology of how performance is perceived and recognized.

What makes athletes capable of outstanding performance? Who are the greatest athletes? What makes them great? These questions continue to fascinate researchers, practitioners, and members of the general public who seek to understand the nature and basis of performance excellence (Collins and Macnamara 2017; Larsen et al. 2013; Rees et al. 2016; Tucker and Collins 2012; for recent reviews, see Barth et al. 2022; Güllich et al. 2022). Indicative of its perceived importance and value, performance excellence is celebrated in a variety of awards that have been established across most levels of most sports. These identify and recognize those athletes who have displayed outstanding—often the *most* outstanding—performance in a given domain over a specified period of time

(e.g., as most valuable or best player of the season, as athlete of the year).

One seemingly obvious way to identify the best elite athlete in a given field is to collect data about the characteristics of candidate individuals and compare their performance (e.g., how many goals they score in a season). The factors that contribute to athletes' ability to generate outstanding performance are undeniably of critical importance (e.g., how hard they train, how experienced they are, what team they play for, how supportive their teammates are). Yet there is another side to the coin here. For beyond the factors that shape the *generation* of extraordinary performance, there are also those that shape the

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recognition of extraordinary performance. The importance of factors that shape recognition has been highlighted in previous research that has sought to understand the dynamics of creative performance (cf. Adarves-Yorno et al. 2008; Haslam et al. 2013; Yang et al. 2022; Zhou et al. 2019). However, they remain something of a blind spot in the study of high performance within the field of sport and performance psychology.

This is a blind spot that the present research seeks to explore and shed light on. We do so by means of a large-scale analysis of data covering almost three decades of professional soccer (football) leagues in Europe. More specifically, we examine whether and how an athlete's social group membership predicts recognition of their outstanding performance. Our theorizing in this regard draws on a social identity approach to sport and performance psychology (Eys et al. 2019; Haslam et al. 2020; Rees et al. 2015; Stevens et al. 2017). This approach asserts that people often see themselves not simply as individuals (in terms of personal identity, as “I” and “me”) but also as members of social groups (in terms of shared *social identity*, as “we” and “us”). Furthermore, the approach contends that people's social identities are an important platform for their cognitions, emotions, and behavior in sporting domains. In the present case, we explore this claim by testing the hypothesis that social identities which are grounded in shared social group membership are an important basis for making sense of the world including the recognition of exceptional sporting performance. Put simply, we contend that being recognized as a great sportsperson isn't just about being great, it's also about being “one of us”.

1 | Outstanding Sports Performance

In recent decades, the science of exceptional (elite) performance has homed in on the various factors that allow athletes to display exceptional performance (Ericsson and Lehmann 1996; Güllich et al. 2022). For example, research has shown that athletes are more likely to perform exceptionally when they possess and develop important attributes including, (a) high self-confidence (e.g., Hays et al. 2007), (b) key psychological, cognitive, perceptual, and motor skills (e.g., Hrysomallis 2011), and (c) beneficial training habits (e.g., Macnamara et al. 2014). Furthermore, athletes are more likely to show exceptional performance when they find themselves in (d) a supportive team environment (e.g., Morgan and Giacobbi 2006).

In addition to these general beneficial factors, previous research with soccer players has also identified several factors that are implicated in elite soccer performance (Haugaasen and Jordet 2012; Reilly and Williams 2003; Verbeek et al. 2023). These have been summarized in numerous systematic reviews and include factors relating to development and training (e.g., Thapa et al. 2021; van de Hoef et al. 2020), motor skills and physiological capacities (e.g., Slimani et al. 2018), as well as psychological capacities (e.g., Murr et al. 2018). A systematic review by Gledhill et al. (2017) also identified 21 different social factors in the development of talent in soccer (e.g., autonomy-supportive coaching, effective learning environment). As Gledhill et al. (2017) highlight, these factors are important because they shape how other people in a given sporting environment (e.g., coaches) make sense of, evaluate, and nurture athletes' performance. However, while these individual and

social factors contribute significantly to the development of athletic performance, on the basis of the review it remains unclear whether and how such factors also impact how athletes' performances are perceived and recognized by others.

In most (if not all) sports, athletes' performances are measured by comparing the performance of athletes within relevant categories (a given cohort, a given league, a given time period) on more or less objective indicators. In soccer, the performance of players in a given league is often recognized by comparing the number of goals that players score, the number of assists they make, the number of completed passes, the number of successful tackles, the covered distance and so on. Of these various indicators, the one that tends to receive the most attention, and is typically recorded most often, is the number of goals that players score. Indeed, this is a key indicator for the simple reason that the number of goals scored is what ultimately decides the result of a match—with results then going on to determine a team's standing in a given competition and ultimately the contents of its trophy cabinet. For soccer players the importance of this indicator is also reflected in the popularity of tables for leading goal scorers in domestic leagues, in international competitions, or across careers. In light of the objective nature of such performance indicators, one might assume that the process of recognizing outstanding performance follows straightforwardly from these objective indicators. The more goals you score, the more awards you will win. Yet, as we argue below, there are also important social identity processes at work here that impinge upon the recognition of outstanding performance.

2 | Social Group Membership as a Basis for Recognizing Exceptional Sports Performance

Social identity theorizing posits that when individuals define (or self-categorize) themselves in terms of a particular social group membership, this leads to a qualitative shift in their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors such that these are informed and shaped by the interests, norms, and goals of the particular group that is salient within a given context (Haslam 2004; Turner et al. 1987). The norms, interests, and goals associated with the groups to which we feel we belong in turn provide us with a lens through which we interpret others' behavior and make sense of the world. Furthermore, when we see ourselves as being part of a group, we are motivated to align our behavior with the norms and interests of that group. In line with these points, a growing body of work has shown that self-categorization in terms of shared social group membership has important implications for a range of key sporting behaviors (Beauchamp 2019; Haslam et al. 2020; Rees et al. 2015; Stephen et al. 2023; Stevens et al. 2017). For example, research shows that self-categorization (e.g., “us” members of a given team, organization, club, or nation) is a basis for the development and experience of positive supportive group life (e.g., Bruner et al. 2014; Campo et al. 2022), social influence and leadership (e.g., Mertens et al. 2020; Slater et al. 2014), and participation in group exercise (e.g., Branch et al. 2023; Stevens et al. 2019).

Beyond this, shared social group membership is also important for a range of other people who are involved in sports—including coaches and professional support staff, sports fans

and spectators, and commentators. Research on sports fans, for instance, shows that fans who identify more with a given team feel more connected to other fans (Wann et al. 2017), and are more willing to engage with the team (e.g., by attending matches; Lock et al. 2014; Theodorakis et al. 2012; Wann 2006). Expanding upon this prior research, we postulate that social group membership is also likely to shape perceptions of outstanding performance as it provides a shared frame of reference from which to appreciate that performance. This means that outstanding performance is more likely to be recognized when the social group membership of the performers is aligned with the social identity of those who evaluate performance in a given social context (e.g., when players perform in their home country's league and are evaluated by domestic juries).

3 | The Present Research

As noted above, hitherto most research on elite sporting performance has focused on the production side of exceptional (e.g., uniquely proficient or creative) performance, while far less theorizing and empirical research has been dedicated to understanding how that performance is recognized and appreciated. In the present research, we seek to address this lacuna by advancing our understanding of the way in which social group membership contributes to the recognition of performance excellence in soccer. More specifically, we focus on best-player awards for professional soccer players and do so for a number of reasons. First, because soccer is one of the most popular and influential (if not *the* most popular and influential) sports on the planet (Holt and Lloyd 2002; Parrish and Nauright 2014). Second, because there are extensive, well-documented records of objective performance in soccer (notably about the number of goals that players score) that allow us to precisely calibrate the relative impact of the objective performance and social group membership of players (domestic vs. foreign) on award allocation. For this purpose, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of player-of-the-season awards in European soccer leagues over the course of almost three decades since the Bosman ruling in 1995. The Bosman ruling established freedom of movement for international soccer players that significantly increased players' mobility in European leagues (Frick 2009; Magee and Sugden 2002). As argued above, we anticipated that outgroup members (foreign players) would need to display higher objective performance than ingroup members (domestic players) in order for their performance to be recognized with an award. More particularly, we hypothesized that award-winners' objective performance in terms of total number of goals scored per season (H1a) and goals-per-game ratio (H1b) would predict their social group membership (i.e., nationality) such that the higher the performance, the greater the likelihood that winners will be a foreign, rather than a domestic, player.

We further reasoned that support for H1a and H1b would be more pronounced in higher-status leagues. This argument is based on ideas within social identity theory which suggest that high-status groups (in this case, the groups that are allocating awards) have a stronger desire to maintain their distinctive image when this is under threat and the stakes are high (Haslam 2004; Manstead 2018). Some initial support for this

idea comes from research into the recognition of creativity among professional actors showing that Academy Awards ("Oscars") and BAFTAs are more likely to be given to ingroup members than to outgroup members and that this is more likely to be the case the more important a given judgment is (i.e., when deciding about awards rather than nominations; Steffens et al. 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence from European soccer that players' expression of passion during national anthems is associated with a greater likelihood of victory in the subsequent game, particularly during the knockout phase when there is more to win (or lose) than in the group phase (Slater et al. 2018). We therefore hypothesized that award-winners' objective performance in terms of total number of goals scored per season (H2a) and goals-per-game ratio (H2b) will be a stronger predictor of their social group membership (i.e., nationality) in high-status rather than low-status leagues.

4 | Methods

We examined our hypotheses in European soccer leagues since the *Bosman ruling* by the European Court of Justice in December 1995, which resulted in freedom of movement in a way that increased the proportion of international players in European leagues (Frick 2009; Magee and Sugden 2002). We examined player-of-the-season awards starting from the season 1996/1997 (the first season affected by the Bosman ruling) up to and including 2023/2024 across the leagues of all 54 UEFA member associations (UEFA 2022).

For this purpose, we coded the awards for leagues that had established player-of-the-season awards in which both domestic and foreign players were eligible (28 leagues met this criterion and had retrievable data; see Table 1). We used several sources to collect and validate the data including www.wikipedia.org, <https://www.national-football-teams.com/>, www.worldfootball.net, www.transfermarkt.com, and <http://soccerway.com>. Our analysis focused on two key objective indicators of performance: (a) the number of goals that award winners scored in the season and (b) the numbers of goals scored per game (which controls for differences in the total number of games played). Because goals scored are a performance indicator that is particularly relevant to midfielders and strikers, we only included award-winning midfielders and strikers in the analysis. We excluded goalkeepers and defenders because goals scored is not a key performance criterion for their performance (although their inclusion in the sample yielded a pattern of results substantively identical to that reported below). In addition to goals, there are several other important performance metrics (e.g., assists, successful tackles, completed passes). However, goals are widely regarded as the most important performance metric, as they determine the outcome of games and competition rankings. The importance of goals partly explains why goal data is more widely available compared to data for other metrics. Furthermore, across the various data sources, information on metrics other than goals was not consistently available for all leagues and all years. In light of the comprehensive and consistent availability of data on goals, we focused our analysis on goals scored.

We coded the country and name of the league, the name of the award and allocating organization, name of the award-winning

TABLE 1 | Overview of player of the season awards awarded to domestic and foreign players in European soccer leagues over 28 years since Bosman ruling (including seasons from 1996/1997 to 2023/2024).

League	Award (valid years)	Domestic players		Foreign players	
		Number of winners	Average number of goals (SD)	Number of winners	Average number of goals (SD)
English premier league	FWA footballer of the year (1997–2011)	7	14.70 (8.44)	21	18.80 (11.10)
Dutch eredivisie	Dutch eredivisie footballer of the year (1997–2022)	13	17.10 (8.85)	7	25.70 (11.00)
Spanish primera division	Alfredo Di Stéfano Trophy (2008–2021)	1	18.00 (0.00)	14	23.40 (7.48)
French ligue 1	Trophées UNFP du football ligue 1 player of the year (1997–2022)	10	21.80 (9.53)	17	18.20 (10.30)
German bundesliga	Bundesliga footballer of the year: fussballer des jahres (1997–2022)	13	12.50 (8.25)	8	23.50 (11.10)
Italian serie A	Serie A footballer of the year (1997–2021)	9	10.20 (6.46)	16	19.60 (7.69)
Portuguese primeira liga	Primeira liga player of the year (2006–2022)	6	10.30 (5.50)	10	18.20 (10.70)
Austrian bundesliga	Austrian footballer of the year: APA fussballerwahl/bruno VdF-fussballerwahl (1997–2021)	25	13.50 (10.80)	23	15.40 (8.75)
Scottish premier league	Scottish premier league player of the season (1997–2022)	12	13.30 (10.60)	9	20.40 (10.70)
Swiss raiffeisen super league	Swiss super league footballer of the year (1998–2020)	10	17.20 (8.42)	13	17.70 (8.81)
Norwegian tippeligaen	Norwegian kniksen award striker/midfielder of the year (1997–2020)	31	13.00 (9.40)	15	11.30 (7.22)
Israeli premier league	Footballer of the year of Israel (1997–2022)	18	13.90 (7.84)	3	9.67 (4.04)
Turkish süper lig	Turkish süper lig footballer of the year (1997–2010; 2012–2019)	17	11.10 (10.40)	6	17.70 (7.87)
Belgium pro league	Belgium pro league footballer of the year (1997–2019; 2021)	10	13.10 (7.53)	15	15.90 (7.78)
Croatian prva HNL	Croatian footballer of the year: SN yellow shirt award (1997–2021)	20	17.40 (6.14)	8	16.80 (4.33)
Russian premier league	Russian premier league footballer of the year (futbol) (1997–2022)	13	9.23 (4.94)	9	11.30 (6.16)
Ukrainian premier league	Ukrainian premier league footballer of the year (1997–2020)	14	9.14 (5.57)	0	8.00 (5.98)
Cypriot first division	Cypriot footballer of the year (2016–2017)	2	16 (17.07)	—	—

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

League	Award (valid years)	Domestic players		Foreign players	
		Number of winners	Average number of goals (SD)	Number of winners	Average number of goals (SD)
Finnish veikkausliga	Finnish player of the year: ilta-sanomat award (1997–2008)	4	13.80 (4.57)	7	10.30 (6.21)
Bulgarian A football group	Bulgarian footballer of the year (2002–2017)	11	15.70 (5.69)	3	12.00 (4.00)
Slovenian prva liga	Slovenian footballer of the year (2004–2006; 2008–2020)	14	14.60 (4.29)	7	12.40 (5.26)
Kazakhstani premier league	Kazakhstani footballer of the year (1997–2005; 2008; 2010–2018)	11	10.80 (8.01)	3	16.30 (11.60)
Republic of Ireland premier league	PFAIP player of the year (1997–2021)	19	13.20 (7.73)	5	16.20 (8.96)
Northern Irish premier league	Northern Ireland football writers' association player of the year (1997–2021)	12	15.80 (10.60)	2	4.50 (2.12)
Faroe islands premier league	Faroe Islands player of the year (2000–2021)	17	14.50 (6.03)	5	12.80 (7.53)
Icelandic premier league	Icelandic úrvalsdeild player of the year (1997–2021)	16	9.81 (5.80)	5	14.20 (3.83)
Luxembourg national division	Luxembourgian footballer of the year: Guy Greffrath challenge (1997–2019)	11	17.90 (8.56)	9	21.70 (4.50)
San Marino	San Marino player of the year: Pallone di Cristallo (1998–2019)	9	8.67 (3.39)	2	11.50 (2.12)

player, the player's position (e.g., striker, midfielder), and the player's group membership (domestic vs. foreign player in the respective league). We also coded the number of goals scored for their club in official games in the respective season in their league. In addition, we coded the number of games played in the respective season in the league. Goals per game scored was calculated by dividing the total number of goals scored by the number of games played.

We identified 28 leagues that met the inclusion criteria for valid awards for which players' performance data were retrievable. This resulted in a sample of 685 award winners. Of these, 296 were strikers and 310 were midfielders, and award winners who played in other positions were excluded ($n = 79$). After excluding cases that were missing data for goals scored and league appearances, the final sample consisted of 606 award winners (355 domestic, 251 foreign). For each year, we recorded the status of a league based on its country's Union of the European Football Associations (UEFA) coefficient for that season, which ranks the overall performance of a country's clubs over the past five seasons. An overview of the final sample is presented in Table 1.

5 | Transparency and Openness

This project was exempt from requiring IRB ethical approval as it uses archival data. The data and analysis code are available on the Open Science Framework's project page (the project was not pre-registered and so the page does not contain a pre-registration document): https://osf.io/dpr2n/?view_only=5d0fa6a4e3984c3f8e9411e0183f6779.

6 | Results

6.1 | Winners' Objective Performance Predicting Their Social Group Membership

To test H1, we conducted a series of logistic regressions to determine whether award-winners' performance, in terms of (H1a) the total number of goals scored and (H2b) goals per season, predicted their social group membership (nationality: domestic vs. foreign player; see Table 2). Logistic regression is appropriate as performance precedes and is a basis for subsequent recognition of performance in awards. If hypothesized relationships are analyzed using ANOVA in which players' performance is analyzed as a function of their social group membership (nationality), the results in terms of statistical significance of any hypothesis tests are substantively the same.

6.1.1 | Total Number of Goals

The analysis of H1a, using the total number of goals scored as a predictor, yielded an overall statistically significant model, $\chi^2(1) = 24.36, p < 0.001$. Results indicated that total goals were a significant predictor of social group membership, $B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.01, p < 0.001, \exp(b) = 1.05, 95\% \text{ CIs } [1.03, 1.07]$. As displayed in Figure 1, results show that foreign players whose

TABLE 2 | Means (standard deviations) and model statistics for logistic regression of performance as predictors of the nationality of winners of the best player of the season awards.

Predictor	Mean (SD)		B (SE)	exp (b)	95% CIs	χ^2	p	Hosmer and Lemeshow R^2	Cox and Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2
	Domestic	Foreign								
Total goals	13.25 (8.25)	17.24 (9.70)	0.05 (0.01)	1.05	[1.03, 1.07]	$\chi^2 (1) = 24.36$	<0.001	0.030	0.039	0.053
Goals per game	0.47 (0.28)	0.58 (0.29)	1.30 (0.30)	3.67	[2.06, 6.61]	$\chi^2 (1) = 19.04$	<0.001	0.024	0.032	0.044

Note: The reference condition for the dependent variable (nationality) is domestic player, such that $\exp(b) \geq 1$ indicate an increase in the odds of the winner of the best player award being a foreign player.

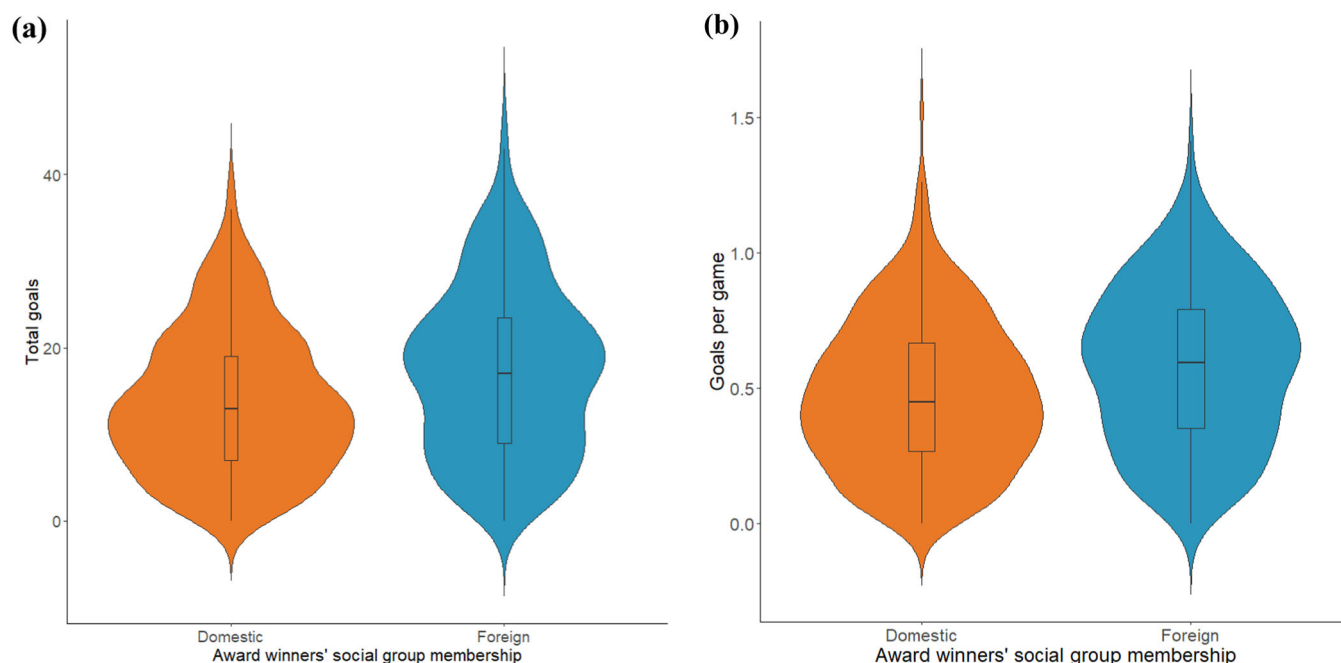


FIGURE 1 | Figure displaying average (a) number of goals per season and (b) goal-per-game ratio as a function of award winners' social group membership (domestic vs. foreign).

performance was recognized in awards had scored significantly more goals in a season ($M = 17.24$, $SD = 9.70$) than domestic award winners ($M = 13.25$, $SD = 8.25$; 30.11% higher performance). Furthermore, for every additional goal scored per season, the odds that the winner of the best player award is foreign rather than domestic increased by 5%.

6.1.2 | Goals Per Game

To examine H1b, we conducted a logistic regression to determine whether award winners' social group membership (domestic vs. foreign) was also predicted by the average goals scored per game. As can be seen in Table 2, results revealed an overall significant model, $\chi^2(1) = 19.94$, $p < 0.001$, with a significant effect of goals per game, $B = 1.30$, $SE = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, $\exp(b) = 3.67$, 95% CIs [2.06, 6.61] (foreign winners: $M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.29$; domestic winners: $M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.28$). These results indicate that there was a 267% increase in the odds of the winner of the best player award being foreign (rather than domestic) for every one-unit increase in goals scored per game. Put differently, they suggest a 26.70% increase in the odds of the best player being foreign rather than domestic for every 1 additional goal per 10 games.

6.2 | Moderation by League Status

To test our second hypothesis, namely whether league status moderated the relationship between winners' objective performance and their social group membership (i.e., nationality), we conducted two further logistic regressions—one where performance was indicated by the total goals scored (H2a), and one where it was indicated by the average number of goals scored per game (H2b).

6.2.1 | Total Number of Goals

Logistic regression examining H2a involved entering total goals scored in the season and standardized league status at Block 1, and then the interaction effect of total goals and league status at Block 2. Results for the moderation analyses are presented in Table 3 and displayed in Figures 2 and 3. The full model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 66.75$, $p < 0.001$. The main effect of total goals per season was significant, $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$, $\exp(b) = 1.03$, 95% CIs [1.01, 1.05], while the main effect of league status was not significant, $B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.356$, $\exp(b) = 1.19$, 95% CIs [0.82, 1.72]. The interaction effect was significant, $B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.028$, $\exp(b) = 1.02$, 95% CIs [1.00, 1.05], providing support for H2a. A χ^2 test showed that the full interaction model was a significant improvement on the original model in which the only predictor was total goals, $\chi^2(2) = 42.39$, $p < 0.001$. We ran simple slopes analysis to inspect the pattern of the slopes at different regions of league status: low status (-1 SD standardized UEFA coefficient) and high status ($+1$ SD). This revealed that the slope for total goals scored was significantly different from zero at high levels ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$), but not at low levels of league status ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.510$). Overall, the results provide support for H2a, indicating that number of goals scored predicted winners' nationality particularly strongly when league status was high while it did not predict winners' nationality when league status was low.

6.2.2 | Goals Per Game

A final logistic regression was conducted to examine whether league status moderated the relationship between winners' objective performance in terms of goals-per-game and their social group membership (i.e., nationality; H2b). Here too, goals

TABLE 3 | Model statistics for hierarchical logistic regression for the effect of (A) total goals and (B) goals per game moderated by league status on nationality of winners of the best player of the season awards.

Predictors	<i>B</i>	SE	exp (<i>b</i>)	95% CIs	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Hosmer and Lemeshow R^2	Cox and Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2
A. Total goals									
Overall model					$\chi^2(3) = 66.75$	< 0.001			
Step 1									
Total goals	0.03	0.01	1.03	[1.01, 1.05]					
League status	0.17	0.19	1.19	[0.82, 1.72]					
Step 2									
Total goals $\times$ league status	0.02	0.01	1.02	[1.00, 1.05]			0.081	0.104	0.140
B. Goals per game									
Overall model					$\chi^2(3) = 67.71$	< 0.001			
Step 1									
Goals per game	1.18	0.31	3.26	[1.76, 6.07]					
League status	0.23	0.19	1.26	[0.86, 1.85]			0.082	0.106	0.142
Step 2									
Goals per game $\times$ league status	0.64	0.32	1.89	[1.02, 3.61]					

Note: The reference condition for the dependent variable (nationality) is domestic player, such that $\exp(b) \geq 1$ indicates an increase in the odds of the winner of the best player award being a foreign player.

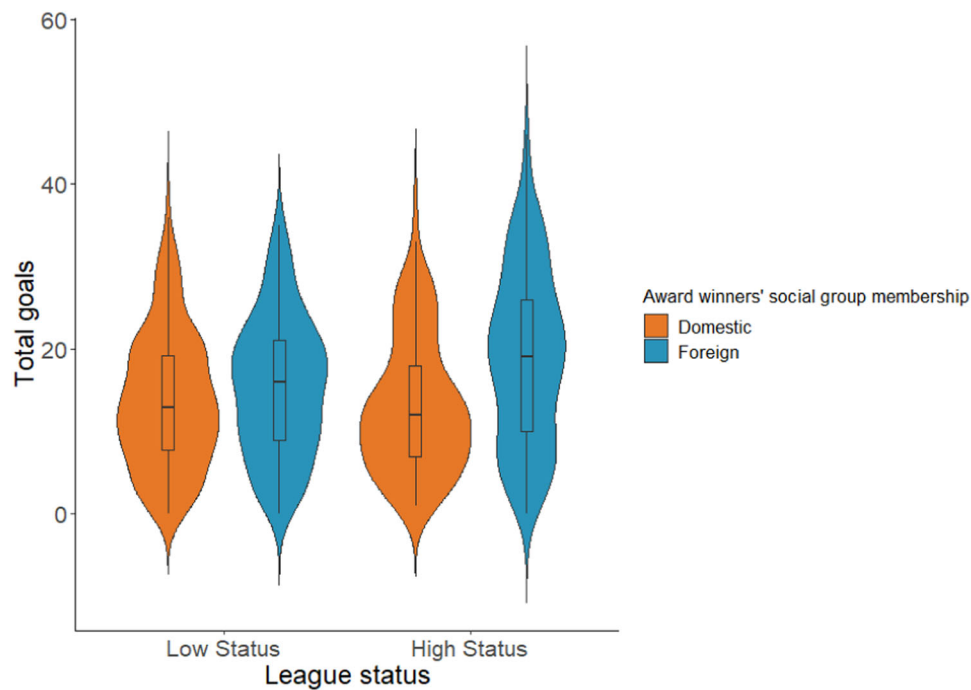


FIGURE 2 | Figure displaying average number of goals per season as a function of award winners' social group membership (domestic vs. foreign) and league status. Note: Low-status leagues include those with standardized UEFA coefficients below 0, while high-status leagues include those with standardized UEFA coefficients equal to or greater than 0.

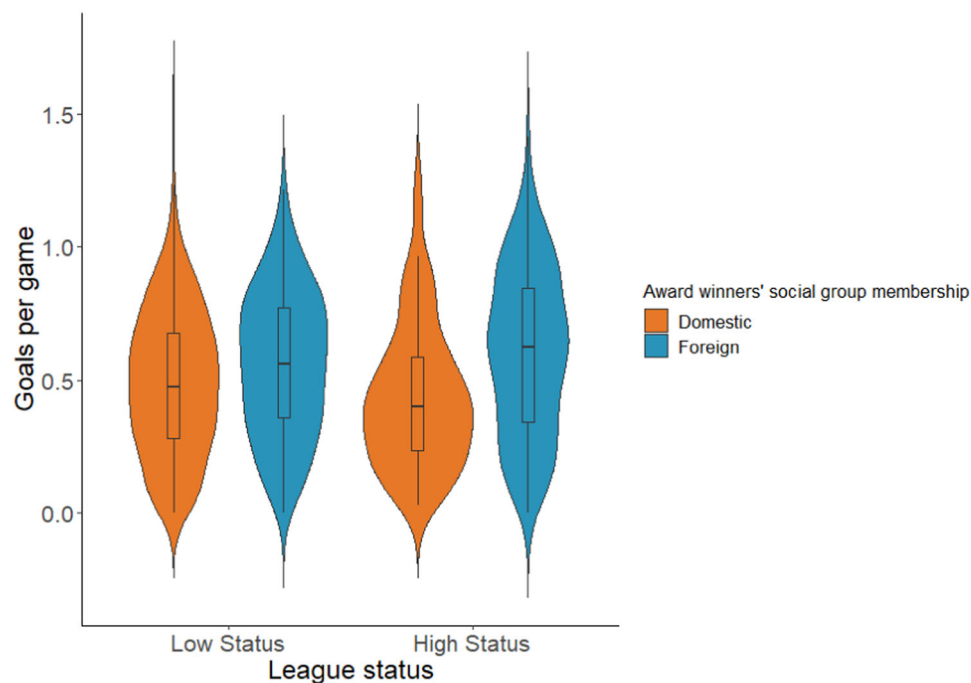


FIGURE 3 | Figure displaying average goal-per-game ratio as a function of award winners' social group membership (domestic vs. foreign) and league status. Note: Low-status leagues include those with standardized UEFA coefficients below 0, while high-status leagues include those with standardized UEFA coefficients equal to or greater than 0.

per game and standardized league status were entered at Block 1, and the interaction of goals per game and league status was entered at Block 2 (see Table 3).

The overall model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 67.71$, $p < 0.001$. The main effect of goals per game was significant, $B = 1.18$, $SE =$

0.32 , $p < 0.001$, $\exp(b) = 3.26$, 95% CIs [1.76, 6.07], while the main effect of league status was not significant, $B = 0.23$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.233$, $\exp(b) = 1.26$, 95% CIs [0.86, 1.85]. The interaction between goals per game and league status was statistically significant, $B = 0.64$, $SE = 0.32$, $p = 0.047$, $\exp(b) = 1.89$, 95% CIs [1.02, 3.61]. A χ^2 test revealed that the full interaction

model was a significant improvement on the original model in which only goals per game was a predictor of nationality, $\chi^2(2) = 47.77$, $p < 0.001$. We decomposed the interaction by means of simple slopes analysis again at different regions of league status: low status (-1 SD standardized UEFA coefficient) and high status ($+1$ SD). The analyses showed that the slope of goals per game was significantly different from zero at high levels ($B = 1.82$, $SE = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), but not at low levels of league status ($B = 0.54$, $SE = 0.45$, $p = 0.220$).

7 | Discussion

Hitherto, the literature on exceptional performance in sport has focused on the factors associated with its production, but we have little systematic understanding of processes relating to the ways it is perceived, appreciated, and rewarded. To address this gap, the present research centered on a comprehensive examination of the role that social identity and shared group membership (and more specifically, shared nationality) play in the recognition of outstanding sports performance. Our results, from 28 years of player-of-the-season awards in European soccer, show that foreign players whose performance was recognized in player-of-the-season awards had displayed objectively higher performance than domestic players whose performance was recognized in those same awards. Consistent with our hypotheses, this pattern was apparent across two key objective indicators: (H1a) the absolute number of goals scored in a given season and (H1b) goals per game. Speaking to the magnitude of these effects, in concrete terms, this meant that across the leagues and over a period of almost three decades, foreign award winners outperformed their domestic counterparts by scoring 3.60 more goals per season. This also meant that the odds that the recognized player was foreign, rather than domestic, increased by 5% for every additional goal that had been scored. Considering the number of games in a league, foreign players also scored at a significantly higher rate—on average every 155 min, compared to every 189 min for domestic award winners. This corresponds to a 26.70% increase in the odds that the best player was foreign rather than domestic for every 1 additional goal per 10 games. Furthermore, these effects were more pronounced as the status of the league increased. Specifically, our hypothesized interaction was significant for both total goals scored (H2a) and goals scored per game (consistent with H2b).

These results have at least three important implications. First, while the literature on performance excellence has uncovered a range of factors that contribute to athletes' ability to display exceptional performance (Collins and Macnamara 2017; Larsen et al. 2013; Rees et al. 2016; Tucker and Collins 2012; Verbeek et al. 2023), there has been limited theorizing and empirical analyses of the factors that shape the perception and recognition of outstanding achievement (cf. see Zhou et al. 2019). Our study addressed this lacuna by uncovering the powerful role of shared social group membership in shaping perceptions of greatness—indicating that perceivers have a very different orientation to athletes' performance as a function of whether they share (i.e., as a domestic player) or do not share (i.e., foreign player) social identity in relation to an overarching ingroup. This finding in turn has important implications for the field of talent identification and scouting. In particular, it suggests that those involved

in talent selection should be aware of potential biases stemming from social factors and the shared or non-shared identities with the athletes they are evaluating. In the present case the social identity that we focused on was nationality-based, but in this and other contexts it seems likely that other identities may also have bearing on these same processes (e.g., other geographical, socioeconomic, political, or any other identities based on social group memberships that are relevant to perceivers' sense of self).

This “performance gap” between award-winning domestic and foreign athletes likely derives from different frames of reference (or standards) that perceivers use when assessing the quality of performance displayed by members of their own group versus those of another group. In this respect, our findings align research by Coupe et al. (2018) on jury members' voting behavior showing that FIFA jury members are more likely to vote for candidates of FIFA's best-soccer-player awards who are similar to them in terms of their nationality). However, Coupe et al. (2018) found that these voting patterns influenced the outcome in only a few cases when the differences between the candidates was small. In contrast, the present research reveals sizable performance differences between outstanding performers as a function of shared social group membership (17.20 vs. 13.60 goals and 0.58 vs. 0.47 goal-per-game ratio for foreign and domestic players, respectively). In reconciling these findings, it is important to note the differences in the contexts of the awards. In the present case decision rules and voting for player of the season tend to be implicit (and often purposefully secret) and the leagues are in competition with one another, which is likely to feed into different standards in ways that increase the salience of shared (national) group membership and its subsequent use as a basis for perception.

Second, the present study has important implications for social identity theorizing of sporting behavior and performance. A growing body of research has shown that the way in which people come to understand the self and others in terms of social group memberships has important consequences for perception and behavior in the sporting domain—including their engagement with the group and its activities (Beauchamp 2019; Bruner et al. 2014; Stevens et al. 2017), their openness to influence from other group members (Slater et al. 2014), and importantly their performance (Rees et al. 2015; Stephen et al. 2023). Building on this growing body of work, the present research indicates that a sense of shared group membership is not only an animating factor for an individual's own sporting performance but also a basis for recognizing and rewarding the quality of others' performance. In this way, it is apparent that the process of perceiving performance is not passive or dispassionate but one in which perceivers apprehend and make sense of performance through the lens of group memberships and associated social identities (cf. Hastorf and Cantril 1954).

Third, our analysis uncovers an important amplifier of this performance gap relating to effects associated with the status of the leagues in which excellence is displayed. Here we posited that in high-pressure situations where rewards are both highly coveted and highly consequential, there will be an intensified concern with group dynamics resulting in enhanced attention to and recognition of ingroup members' achievements. This rationale is consistent with previous findings from European

soccer championships which observed that players' displays of passion during the playing of national anthems before a match is associated with subsequent team success, particularly during high-stakes knockout phases (Slater et al. 2018). Consistent with these ideas, the present results suggest that heightened recognition of ingroup members' performance is particularly pronounced in contexts where there is a lot to win (and lose) and where winning an award can be a life-changing event (e.g., Bünning et al. 2022; Parmentier and Fischer 2012).

8 | Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, this study is not without its limitations. First, we sought to shed light on the nature of the relationships in which we were interested through analysis of a large-scale data set. Although this has clear benefits (not least, in increasing reliability and external validity), like any archival study, this method does not allow us to establish causality. That said, a strength of the present design is that social group membership is a pre-existing exogenous variable (where reverse causality from winning an award to influencing social group membership is not possible). Nevertheless, there would be value in conducting experimental research (in which relevant variables are manipulated) to clarify the causal status of the theoretical variables in which we are interested and also extending examination of these relationships to other contexts (e.g., those in which athletes are evaluated in a stepwise fashion as they filter through to more elite levels of performance).

Second, the present analysis focused on the total number of scored goals and goals per game as the focal indicators of objective performance. As we noted in the introduction, these are key performance indicators in soccer and while an advantage of this index is that it is thoroughly documented, and hence particularly suitable for the present analysis, they are nevertheless only two of many indicators that one might want to focus on. Accordingly, there could be value in future research that investigates the relationship between other indices of player performance and performance recognition—not only those that relate to technical ability (e.g., passing ability, assists, completed tackles) but also those pertaining to more ethereal qualities (e.g., fairness, personality).

Third, the results reveal a performance gap between domestic and foreign best soccer players in a between-participant and between-year design. As a result, our data was not able to shed light on the contribution of process (potential mediators in this relationship). In this regard, it would be intriguing to examine potential mechanisms that can account this difference (e.g., the relative weight that people assign to different performance criteria as a function of group membership, the perceived prototypicality of athletes of their nation; Steffens et al. 2013). For instance, there would be value in fine-grained examination of the content of the decision-making around awards as of the ways in which juries justify their decisions and award-winners themselves understand and respond to them (McLaren and Mills 2008; Mulkay 1984).

9 | Conclusion

The present research advances the social identity approach to sport performance (e.g., Stephen et al. 2023) by showing that

social group membership significantly predicts the recognition of athletes' exceptional performance. Specifically, foreign (outgroup) players in European soccer leagues appear to need to exceed a higher standard of performance than their domestic (ingroup) counterparts in order for that performance to be recognized with a player-of-the-season award. Indeed, in any given season, a foreign player scored, on average, *more than three goals more* than home-grown players who picked up the same award. Furthermore, this performance gap between foreign and domestic players was more pronounced when the stakes themselves are higher—namely in high- rather than low-status leagues.

When it comes to understanding the psychology of elite performance, the present research underscores the importance of looking not only at how this is produced but also at how it is recognized and evaluated. It also tunes us to the importance of shared social identity in this process—making it clear that being appreciated as a great athlete is not just a question of being great but also of being seen to be “ours”.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://osf.io/dpr2n/>.

Transparency Statement

The data and analysis code are available on the Open Science Framework's project page (the study/analyses were not pre-registered and so the project does not contain pre-registration documents): https://osf.io/dpr2n/?view_only=5d0fa6a4e3984c3f8e941e0183f6779.

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