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Foucault Goes to the Footy: Professionalism, Performance
Prudentialism and Playstations in the Life of AFL Footballers

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Abstract: This paper will report on a research project funded by the Australian Football League (AFL) that is exploring the emergence and evolution of a ‘professional identity’ for AFL footballers – an identity that has many facets including the emerging ideas that a professional leads a balanced life, and has a prudent orientation to the future. The research is informed by Foucault’s later work on the care of the Self to focus on the ways in which player identities are governed by coaches, club officials, player agents and the AFL Commission/Executive; and the manner in which players conduct themselves in ways that can be characterised as professional - or not. The paper explores elements of these processes by analysing the forms of risk management that Clubs use in the processes of List and Player management that they engage in as a consequence of AFL rules. Psychological testing and profiling of players is becoming more important in identifying, recruiting and managing players. The paper discusses how this testing is used to identify character or personality traits prior to initial recruitment in the draft or trading processes – and suggests that a number of issues related to workplace surveillance and identity emerge as a result.

Introduction: The Evolution of a Professional Identity for AFL Footballers

This paper will report on a research project funded by the Australian Football League (AFL) titled: Getting the Balance Right: Professionalism, Performance Prudentialism and Playstations in the Life of AFL Footballers. It explores the following issues:

- the emergence and evolution of a ‘professional identity’ for AFL footballers
- an identity that has many facets including the emerging ideas that a professional leads a balanced life, and has a prudent orientation.
The idea that this 'professional identity' isn't natural, and must be developed through a range of 'professional development' (PD) activities (a common ill other professions)

Our analysis of these processes is informed by Foucault's (2000a; 2000b) later work on the care of the self. Foucault's analytical framework allows us to focus on the ways in which these behaviours and dispositions are governed in diverse ways by coaches, club officials, player agents and the AFL Commission/Executive; and the manner in which players conduct themselves in ways that can be characterised as professional

The paper will illustrate aspects of these processes via an analysis of the forms of risk management that clubs recognise as being important in the processes of list and player management that they have to engage in as a consequence of current AFL regulations. A significant issue to emerge from discussions about identifying, recruiting and managing players was the increasing emphasis on psychological testing and profiling of players. Psychological testing as a recruitment and management tool has a chequered history in many employment contexts (Robbins et al. 2001). In this paper, we will discuss how this testing is used to identify character or personality traits prior to initial recruitment in the draft or trading processes – and suggest that a number of issues related to workplace surveillance and identity emerge as a result.

The AFL: A Provincial Brand in a Globalised Sports Entertainment Industry

In an increasingly globalised media-sport-marketing nexus Sports are much more than a game. Highly profitable TV, WWW and print based media corporations seek to establish relationships with elite sports competitions to provide content – conte
attractive to various demographics and which can establish and maintain lucrative marketing and sponsorship associations with various products. These relationships have, over the past 30 years, dramatically increased elite player income from playing contracts and sponsorships. These mass mediated associations between individuals and teams, and highly visible products and brands create a range of rewards and responsibilities. These brand management issues rest largely on public perceptions of individual and team behaviours (Goldman & Papson 1998; Western & Smith 2003).

At the start of the 21st century the AFL is a significant sports entertainment industry in Australia. The sixteen team national competition has a short recent history. Australian Rules football has, however, a much longer history as a series of State based competitions. The AFL, while successful in managing the business of sport (Buckle 2002), is very much a regional brand in this globalised marketplace of brand associations - limited by the attractiveness of an indigenous game not readily understood by outsiders. The AFL industry has an annual turnover in excess of $400 million dollars. Corporate partnerships (with companies such as Toyota, CUB, NAB, Telstra), broadcast and Internet rights, merchandising, membership and gate receipts make significant contributions to this turnover. Individual clubs have turnovers that range from $12 to $30 million (Buckley 2002; Grant 2004; McGuire 2004).

AFL players, while being well paid by wage and salary earner standards, are in minor leagues of global earning and celebrity stakes – although celebrity status in regional markets does create a range of issues for the development of a professional identity (Voss 2004). A major influence on the level of player payments is the cap
otal player payments (salary cap) that the AFL enforces as part of its; 'commitment
a policy of equalization that promotes an even and exciting competition' (AFL 2004a)
In 2004, for example, most clubs have a total player payment ceiling of $6.2 million
(with some variations due to regulatory requirements, AFL 2004b). Under this
equalization policy clubs are also limited in the number of players (44) that they c
have on their lists. Player recruitment by clubs is also regulated by a draft process
based on an allocation of selection priorities determined by the finishing position in
the competition each year. The draft of beginning players is complimented by
process of trading established players - for other players, or for selection order in the
draft. The draft and trading processes are highly regulated and take place at particular
times of the year. The details of these mechanisms are complex and have created new
forms of expertise in the pursuit of competitive advantage.

Professionalisation and the Care of the Self

The emergence of the idea of the 'professional AFL footballer' – as a relatively rec
phenomenon – is not without its tensions. A professional identity as a footballer do
not come naturally. It is something that needs to be developed, and different
authorities have different responsibilities for facilitating this development. It is, a
not stable. New demands and responsibilities emerge all the time. It also means
different things to different individuals and groups within a team, to different
individuals and groups within a club, to different authorities within the indust

'Professionalisation in this context is understood in terms of Foucault’s ideas a'
ways in which we develop a sense of Self, and the ways in which Others seek to
govern us in relation to ideas about the particular characteristics that this Self shov
hibit (2000a; 2000b). In his later work Foucault’s concern was to situate the
From this perspective, the formation of a professional identity can be understood as the development of a specific relationship to oneself and others. To be a professional is to be a person who must do certain, quite specific work on oneself so that one can be considered to be professional. To be professional as a police officer, or teacher, for example, means different things, requires a different relationship to oneself and others, requires the individual to do different work on the self, than to be a professional footballer.

It be a professional invokes, also, a sense of asceticism, a certain disciplining of Self so that one might be, or become, more professional. This is a key element in considering the sorts of ‘sacrifices’ individuals are prepared to make to become ‘professional’ (Foucault 2000a: 282), in a discussion of the ways in which people make choices about the sorts of person they wish to become, suggests that process of self formation can be understood as ascetic processes – ‘not in the sense of morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of br

What it means to be a ‘professional footballer’ is a product of the negotiations between different individuals and groups about why players should adopt this identity and the forms of work necessary to produce this identity (Foucault 2000a; Foucault
Identity is also many faceted and produces different outcomes, rights and responsibilities at different times and settings. In this research two, closely related aspects of a professional identity are important.

Being professional: Preparing for life after football

Contemporary ideas about PD for AFL footballers include an encouragement to develop a prudent orientation or disposition to the future - in an occupation that can 'cut you off at the knees' (or the groin, or ankle, back ...) at any time without warning. An ability to adopt a prudent, risk aware relationship to present and future circumstances is a particular issue for AFL footballers who - at an age when others young professionals might imagine a career that stretches 40 years into the future - have to develop a future oriented disposition to a career that might span 10 years. In this context the AFL and AFL-Players Association invest over $1.5 million p.a. in various education and training activities undertaken by players (AFL-PA 2001; Burgan 2002; Brereton 2003).

Being professional: Doing something to fill your day

AFL footballers are increasingly encouraged to develop balance in their life - balance that would enhance their effectiveness and performance, and thus contribute to their club/team performance. Footballers are being encouraged to develop an orientation to themselves, and their team/club, that requires them to undertake some form of training or education, get a job, do community based activities - almost anything to counter the 'Playstation Syndrome' that witnesses players struggling to fill their days with activities other than training and video games (Oakes 2003). It is claimed that developing this 'duty of care', as an aspect of what it means to be...
professional footballer
and club performance

e will illustrate aspects of these more general concerns via a suggestion that cure recruitment practices, and subsequent PD practices in AFL clubs, increasingly focus on identifying character attributes in individuals. The identification of these character traits, and their apparent relationship to an individual’s disposition towards PD, form a significant part of emerging risk management practices in the AFL.

List Management, Player Management and Risk Management: F

Themes in the Professionalisation of Player Identities

The research is gathering data using a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques. For example, we are conducting one-on-one and focus group intr

with, and gathering documents from, the following club sources

Managers of Football Operations or Football Departmen
Player Development Managers (PDMs)
The Coaches Group

recruitment Manage'

is from interviews with these groups that the following discussion emerges. The research has shown that clubs are increasingly concerned with managing a variety of risks associated with recruitment (via the draft and trading) in an environment that is structured by restrictions on the size of the playing list, the salary cap, and the ways in which playing lists can be changed over time. If it is more difficult within these regulations to recruit, retain and manage a successful mix of the right people, h
A result of the mass mediated, brand driven, celebrity elements of the AFL these risks are increasingly focussed on player character traits. Athletic or football ability is still of vital importance in recruiting. However, the research indicates a belief that character (or commitment or attitude) is a very important influence on player performance – on and off the field.

Character has always been seen as vital to elite level performance. However, attributes of character considered to be important may have changed. Evidence suggests that a good attitude to hard work, perseverance, courage, commitment to team above the individual, continue to be highly valued traits in a competitive, team based, physical contact sport environment. However, the recruitment processes emerging within the AFL suggest that these often easily named, but hard to predict or measure, traits are being subjected to the rationalised, psychologised processes that have been evident in various other organisational settings for many years.

I asked club coaches and administrators to identify five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for individual and team performance on the field. Their responses reflected the increased significance of commercially produced and sold statistical services that enable clubs to break down the game of football into more readily identifiable, calculable and discrete components – marks (contested/uncontested), kicks (contested/uncontested/effective/ineffective/short/long), tackles, inside 5...
The list of responses included several scientific, measurable KPIs.

I then asked the same coaches and officials to provide five KPIs for individual and team performance off the field. The responses here were, in general, far more vague and unscientific. While these officials spoke powerfully about how character influenced players’ performance, and were particularly forthcoming about the brand, media and commercial realities of the industry, they struggled to articulate how they could name or quantify indicators of performance off the field. Some spoke about how players who were married or in a long term relationship were ‘quieter’ or ‘more stable’. Others indicated that players who had mortgage commitments were more focused or committed than players who didn’t. ‘Bricks and mortar settle them down’ Some reverted to counting activities such as football clinics for junior and communityubs, and promotional activities for sponsors or the league.

Some clubs, PDMs prepare periodic profiles of players in an effort to track their behaviours/performance. These profiles are then circulated among Football Department officials. These profiles contain various types of information about players – including involvement in education, training, employment and business activities, and plans for these in the future. They also include information about relationships, family life, social activities (e.g. gambling). In short, many of these individual profiles contained information of a highly personal nature which in other work organisations would not have been available to employers, and would be seen as constituting an invasion of privacy. These profiles constitute forms of workplace surveillance that were justified by a form of paternalism that had the players’ inte
This information, about off-field behaviours and attitudes, was considered important for a number of reasons: it was argued that such information could help explain or shed light on on-field playing performance; and clubs needed to be aware of what was happening in players' off-field lives so that they could identify and manage any risks these off-field activities might pose to the individual player or club. PDMs were aware of some of the concerns and possible consequences that might emerge from this sort of personal profiling. They were also aware of issues of trust for their ongoing relationship with players. Some spoke of their self-censorship in compiling and circulating these profiles – but they also argued for the usefulness and benefits, they saw them, of these profiles.

Psychological testing is increasingly seen as a useful tool in managing recruiting risks associated with playing list management. Football Department officials at one club had recently travelled to North America on a study tour to review the pre-draft psychological testing practices in elite level sports entertainment industries such as the NFL and the NBA. This visit was considered a worthwhile investment within a risk management regime. However, these psychological tools are not risk proof. A similar story is told of a talented, athletic, tall player whose football skills made him a very attractive potential draftee. However, investigations by the club indicated concerns about his character. These concerns were not, however, mirrored in the psychological tests successfully completed by the player. Football Department officials were still wary of these character problems but were prepared to take the risk.
cause of this player's football skills – they argued they could manage it

After he was recruited, the player committed a number of 'unforgivable' transgressions in the context of team-based contact sport, and his team-mates refused to associate with him. He was traded at the first opportunity to another club they believed it was better able to manage him.

Conclusion

Our research is producing evidence of tensions between the paternalistic, profiling and reporting elements of various risk management practices – in an environment where what it means to be a professional footballer is taking on new forms. The AFL sports entertainment business is more than a game, and the key participants in this business are more than athletes. They are professionals whose contemporary job descriptions have widened beyond the physical and character attributes necessary to the tasks of running, jumping, tackling and kicking. Character traits indicating capacities to handle celebrity, wealth, free time, demands from sponsors, clubs and the industry, assume more prominence in deciding who to recruit and who to keep on the list. Players are required to know themselves and to act in ways that can account for these aspects of what it means to be a professional footballer.

In turn, these capacities, or the character traits that indicate the potential to develop these capacities via a variety of PD activities, become important elements of risk management discussions in recruitment and development processes in clubs. Development of a professional identity, of a capacity to adopt a prudent disposition to life after football, and of a capacity to achieve balance between different aspects of their life, proceeds through a career that has its origins in these discussions and
A final, metaphorical, point suggests that these developments are taking certain flavour. Future analysis will explore what this flavour might mean for the relationships between surveillance, government and identity in the AFL: 'The things are going we'll only recruit public school boys in the future' (late 90s) commenting on developments in character assessment in the AFL.

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