Professional Education and Training for Early Career Players in the Australian Football League: Footy First, Second and Third

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Abstract

In this presentation we discuss some of the findings of 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. The research explored 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 to the future, to life after football. This ‘professional identity’ isn’t natural, and must be developed through a range of ‘professional development’ activities (a common link to all other ‘professions’). In the AFL at this time professional development has a focus on engaging players in a variety of education and training activities – TAFE & University courses, and workshops and seminars that the industry has put in place to educate players about issues that the industry sees as important.

The presentation will focus on our research with players we classified as Early Career players. For many of these 17 to 21 year old young men the later years of secondary schooling were compromised in their pursuit of an AFL career, and their subsequent drafting is followed by intense efforts to physically prepare them for football. In this context our research indicates that many Early Career players put football first, second and third – education and training, and industry expectations that they participate in this sort of professional development come further down their list of priorities.
Introduction

Year 12. No I didn’t try. Only thing I was thinking about was footy that year. It didn’t worry me how I went. Mum and Dad didn’t hassle me, they knew all I wanted was to be an AFL footballer. They’d given up on trying to get me into study. They were at me a bit, but they knew that I had it in my heart to be a footballer.

Early Career player

In this presentation we discuss some of the findings of 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. The research was conducted during 2004. The research explored 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 to the future, to life after football: the idea that this ‘professional identity’ isn’t natural, and must be developed through a range of ‘professional development’ activities (a common link to all other ‘professions’). 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.

In this presentation we will discuss a number of issues to do with the involvement of AFL players in a variety of education and training processes. These processes:

- fall under a number of broad categories of activity;
- have a number of different motivating forces
- have different levels of involvement by different groups of players
- have different types and levels of industry support and involvement, and;
- have different degrees of investment by individuals and groups in the industry connected to perceptions of the relationship of these activities to the core business of football - It's not that important!

Education and Training, in this context, can be related to individual player enrolment in a TAFE short course or Certificate course. An enrolment that is driven by interest in the subject area, or by a sense that current industry expectations of players suggest they should be looking to do something to set themselves up for a life after football, or to give them some balance in their life. This also applies to player enrolment in a University course (degree or diploma) - though this sort of involvement tends to be a longer-term commitment, and be restricted to more academically oriented individuals. Education and Training can also refer to the sorts of workshops and seminars that the industry has put in place to educate players about issues that the industry sees as important.

Our research that suggests it can be useful to talk about different phases in an AFL player's career. Preliminary, pre-research discussions with the AFL-PA were important in developing our categorisations of these career phases. From these discussions we determined that it was appropriate to describe these phases in the following ways:
Early Career players – zero to four years as an AFL player (some players we interviewed were in their 1st pre-season after drafting)

Mid Career players – 4 to 8 years as an AFL player

Late Career players – 8 plus years as an AFL player

These different phases have fuzzy boundaries, and are, in some respects, generalisations. The categories do not rule out that different players don't fit these generalisations. What these phases do is provide a framework for thinking about how one to four year players, for example, may have different ambitions, hopes, needs and motivations, to players who have been AFL footballers for eight or nine years.

The presentation will focus on our research with players we classified as Early Career players. For many of these 17 to 21 year old young men the later years of secondary schooling were compromised in their pursuit of an AFL career, and their subsequent drafting is followed by intense efforts to physically prepare them for football. In this context our research indicates that many Early Career players put football first, second and third – education and training, and industry expectations that they participate in this sort of professional development come further down their list of priorities.

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 – content that is attractive to various demographics and which can establish and maintain financially lucrative marketing and sponsorship associations with various products. These relationships have, over the past 30 years, dramatically increased elite player incomes 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; Westerbeek & 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 (Buckley 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 the 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 on total player payments (salary cap) that the AFL enforces as part of its; ‘commitment to a policy of equalization that promotes an even and exciting competition’ (AFL 2004a). In 2004, for example, most clubs had 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 can 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 a 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 recent phenomenon – is not without its tensions. A professional identity as a footballer does not come naturally. It is something that needs to be developed, and different authorities have different responsibilities for facilitating this development. It is, also, 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 industry.

Professionalisation in this context is understood in terms of Foucault’s ideas about the 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 should exhibit (2000a; 2000b). In his later work Foucault’s concern was to situate the ‘imperative to “know oneself” – which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization – back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one “govern oneself”? (Foucault, 2000b: 87)

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 professional as an AFL footballer.

To be a professional invokes, also, a sense of asceticism, a certain disciplining of the 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 processes of self formation can be understood as ascetic processes – ‘not in the sense of a 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 being’.
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 2000b). 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 other 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 2004; Burgan 2002; Brereton 2003).

**Being professional: Doing something to fill your day**
AFL footballers are increasingly encouraged to develop balance in their life – a 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 a professional footballer, would then contribute to improvements in individual, team and club performance.

The primary means of data collection in this research involved face to face interviews with some of the key stakeholders involved in the development of professional identities for AFL players. At the heart of the qualitative methodology is an invitation to understand the lived experiences of others through their own perspectives. Taking an industry perspective we constructed our investigations to incorporate the perspectives of AFL participants across three different, but interacting, layers of involvement. The first layer comprised representatives from those involved in the management and regulation of the industry, the second layer took in the perspectives of club level coaching and football department staff, while the third layer involved the players themselves. From within these layers, we sought a cross section of perspectives and opinions about what it means to be a professional AFL player and how this identity is best managed.

**Work-life balance and the influence of Education and Training on performance: Core business or a distraction?**
In this section we report on the various ways the off-field needs of AFL players are managed within the industry. Within this context a number of important issues exist around the provision and monitoring of professional development opportunities for footballers. In this sense we understand professional development to refer to activities
undertaken by players that are not specifically related to their on-field activities and performances. While we recognise that there is an increasing interest in the relationship between off-field activities and on-field performance, there continues to be a strong degree of uncertainty about the exact nature of this relationship, and the ways in which the professional development of AFL footballers can be managed to enhance on field and off field performance. To this end, we focus here on how the industry defines and manages the non-football dimensions of a player’s overall development.

The emergence of a concern with player development, education and training off the field is, in many respects, a positive development – but a development that is not without its tensions. In the past decade there has been a marked increase in awareness of the need to provide AFL footballers with the sort of life skills that will help them to be both a footballer, and to not be a footballer. It is this contradiction that is at the heart of many of the tensions that surround a current emphasis on professional development activities for AFL players.

At a number of levels the Industry approves of, and financially supports, the current emphasis on players’ involvement in professional development related education and training activities. A partnership between the AFL and AFL-PA is supported by an annual expenditure of $1.5 million on a variety of seminars and workshops designed to equip players with knowledge about the industry and the risks, expectations and possibilities that currently attach to being an AFL footballer; and on AFL-PA administered Education and Training grants that provide financial support for players involved in approved Education and Training activities.

This support and the activities that flow from it strongly influence the discussions that League and AFL-PA officials, Club officials and coaches, and players have about what needs to be done in relation to providing players with balance in their lives, and the opportunity to develop career options away from football. Our research indicates, however, that these discussions, and the practices that are developed out of these discussions, are the cause of a variety of tensions related to player development.

There are still some coaches and clubs that would like to have their players training 7 hours a day everyday. But management theory now recognises that productivity comes from making sure your staff are motivated and rested, and have time off to have some balance in their lives. Football’s no different.

AFL Executive

The majority of these tensions emerge and get played-out at the Club level. Here, the business of being a successful football Club and team intersects with the push to educate players about the often risky business of AFL football, and to encourage them to develop balance in their life, and an orientation to life after football. The problem in many clubs is that the development of the on-field footballer and the development of the off-field footballer are nurtured and administered independently. Exacerbating the implications of this division is the fact that the coaching department have a significant influence and authority over players. Many of our conversations at the Club level
were steeped in the effects of this hierarchy. It must be said that in most cases there was a willing acquiescence to the existence of this hierarchy on the grounds that in the interest of being a footballer, matters football must necessarily take priority over other things.

At the end of the day the Club is only interested in winning games of football. If your form drops away they’re all over you. You pretty quickly find yourself doing extra training sessions. But if you don’t turn up to Uni or you fail, no one really gives a stuff. If you’re playing good footy you’ll get away with anything!

Late Career player

Most of the coaches we spoke to tended to endorse the need for their players to have interests outside of football as a way of taking their minds off football. Concerned about the intense pressure put on players to train and perform most coaches believed that players needed some time away from football in their weekly schedules. These coaches were not particularly interested in what the player was doing (this was understood to be the role of the Player Development Manager) as long as they were getting some time away from football.

Outside of a general lack of commitment on behalf of the coaching staff, the single biggest obstacle to players engaging in meaningful education and training programs outside of football are their heavy training and club commitments. One of the most pronounced changes to the life of an AFL player has been the intensification of training and other club commitments.

When I started playing AFL I had a full time job and had to knock off work early on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I could train. Now we train in the middle of the day, sometimes two sessions a day, and there’s no time to fit anything else in.... There are so many bloody coaches these days, I suppose they have to justify their existence!

Late Career player

While all coaches (senior and assistants) agreed with the need for their players to have stable and balanced lives they generally questioned the level of emphasis that could, or should, be placed on non-football activities. Underpinning this was their commitment to the core business of the Club. This was, of course, to prepare the team to be successful at the highest level.

At the end of the day, they’re here to play football. If they can do other things, that’s fine, but first and foremost they need to perform as footballers. I mean, they might be doing alright in a business or in a course, but if they aren’t getting a kick they’re going to come under pressure. Like all the (club name) coaching staff, we’re in the business of producing a successful football team and no matter what else we do, it’s
The success of our team that is going to judge us.

Member of Coaching Staff

The tensions that this comment points to - tensions that for many of the players, coaches and Football Department officials we interviewed, exist just below the surface of any discussion about work-life balance for players - suggests that despite the persuasiveness of the work-life balance argument there exists relatively little empirical evidence to support it.

The Education and Training Experiences of Early Career Players

As a key element of the AFL’s equalisation strategies the National Draft system ensures that Clubs have access to the next batch of young talented players on the basis of need rather than on the basis of proximity, wealth or influence. To this end, all young players must submit themselves to the draft process and willingly accept the outcomes of their selection. After all, the alternative is non selection!

There is widespread acceptance amongst young players of the drafting system that renders them relatively powerless in determining where they will begin their AFL career. Even though the draft process meant that many young players were forced to pack up their life and move interstate, there was very little antagonism towards this process. Indeed, most Early Career players that we spoke to were mentally prepared for the prospect of moving interstate. Even very high draft picks, who may have had good reason to feel confident in their selection, were accepting of the possibility/likelihood of relocation. The negatives associated with moving away from the known and familiar were clearly outweighed by securing a place on an AFL playing list.

I was really disappointed with my year 12. I had been going well for a fair bit of the year but with my team being in the finals and draft camp and all that I really let my study drop away. I just bombed-out at the end.

Early Career player

Early Career players generally understood their lack of readiness for AFL football in relation to the limitations of their Body. Their physical immaturity in terms of body strength, endurance, durability and skill were seen as the overwhelming barriers to their participation at the top level. Young players generally understood the first phase of their participation at an AFL club as a time dedicated to developing the physical condition and skill level to perform at the top level. So strong was this emphasis that many found it very difficult to devote reasonable energy to other pursuits, such as study and relationships. For many draftees, keeping up with the intensity and frequency of training sessions was an all-consuming demand.

Nothing can prepare you for the intensity of the training. The first two years I was here I just used to go home and lie on the couch between training sessions. You’re just
bloody exhausted. I started a course doing something, marketing I think, but to be honest I didn’t give a shit about it. I was just flat out keeping up with the training.

Early Career player

A number of Early Career players talked about the dedication that was needed for them to make it onto an AFL list. Competition for draft selection was something that none of them took for granted and many spoke of the difficulty they had in keeping up with schooling while trying to excel at the elite, underage level. While their underachievement at school was viewed with a degree of disappointment among some of the Early Career players, most viewed it as a sacrifice that they were prepared to make. In terms of priorities, getting drafted by an AFL club was at the top of the list.

Compounding their general lack of energy for activities outside of football was the singularity of their focus on football. As aspiring AFL footballers many Early Career players talked about the need to give football everything they had. Within this mindset, activities that took their attention away from football were generally unwelcomed. For many young players this created a tension between the wisdom of having something outside of football and the need to make the most of the opportunity they had to make it as an AFL player. In all of the conversations we had with Early Career players the chance to become an AFL player subordinated all other activities. Even those players who had commenced Degree programs revealed that they would chip away at them as long as it didn’t affect their football. Changes to weekly training schedules, on account of playing timetables and injury programs, were given specific mention as impediments to maintaining regular commitments outside of football.

In my first year here I started doing year 12 again. I was pretty determined to make up for not doing well the year before. But it was really tough. I mean the training schedule was even tougher so I just couldn’t do it. If I’d have kept going with the course I’m sure I wouldn’t have played as many senior games. I don’t know how the other guys do it. They’re amazing.

Early Career player

A number of Early Career players spoke of their inability to meet the institutional commitments associated with formal education and training programs. At the forefront of this was their ability to meet the demands of classes and assessment schedules. Though as a group they were complimentary of the tolerance they were afforded, as elite sportsman, they identified institutional clashes that limited their capacity for sustained compliance, even engagement. Foremost here was the clash between the timetables. While the players generally reported that their lecturers/tutors were understanding of their demands as AFL footballers they also recognised the limits to which they could exploit the tolerance and goodwill of their teachers. Rather than their availability to attend classes being the major problem, it was more about the lack of energy and motivation for study within the demands of playing AFL football. In simple terms there were many weeks where they just didn’t feel like it. Given the
demand to stay up with readings and other assessment exercises between lectures it didn’t take very long before players fell behind in their classes.

(Name of Tertiary Institution) was alright. They understood my situation and were pretty tolerant, but at the end of the day they aren’t going to shift classes to suit me. I just found it difficult to get to lectures and to keep up with the work. We’ve got videos to watch, team meetings, club commitments and... its just hard to have something else saying you need to be here at this time too!

When I realised that the exams were on at the same time as our end of year trip away that was it for me. I suppose I could have gone to them and asked if I could sit the exams at a different time but it wasn’t going to be a good lead up and I probably would have failed them anyway. I just dropped out.

Early Career player

Conclusion

Early Career AFL footballers face a range of tensions in trying to respond to the pressures and practices associated with undertaking education and training programs outside of football. While time and access are recurring issues, by far their greatest obstacle to them achieving success in these arenas is their general lack of focus and commitment. Foremost here is the intensity and singularity of their focus on football. While Early Career players generally recognised the vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with a football identity the chance to make it was a powerful driving force. A great many young players confront the challenge to become an AFL player in a place far away from their home. Though most young players support, even endorse, the draft process the realities of relocation were often very unsettling for them.

Early Career players seemed to attract specific attention in relation to doing something meaningful outside of football. The underpinning belief was that if they could see the value of getting themselves involved in some sort of education and/or training outside of football, early in their career, the better chance they would have of establishing sustainable routines. The prevailing logic for them was that having something outside of football would make them less vulnerable should they not make it as a footballer. Early Career players generally subscribed to this wisdom and were willing to take on formal education and training activities. However, while their minds seemed willing to engage in such activities their bodies and spirit were less available. Exhaustion presented as a recurring factor that seemed to undermine Early Career players’ ability and willingness to commit to education and training activities outside of football.

In light of this research the AFL and AFL-Players Association should consult with players and other ‘like’ industry bodies about the ways to orientate young players into education and training programs that are attuned to their needs and interests. Underpinning this is the need for a deeper understanding of the reasons why so many players drop out of or fail courses. Such insight could provide the catalyst for strategic
interventions that can reduce the incidence of these occurrences, and lead to enhanced professional development experiences for AFL players.
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