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Talent Identification and Risk Management at AFL Clubs: 'We’ll Only Recruit Public School Boys in the Future'

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Abstract

This paper will report on a research project funded by the Australian Football League (AFL). The research mobilises Foucault's later work on the care of the Self to focus on the ways in which player identities are regulated; and the manner in which players conduct themselves in ways that can be characterised as professional - or not.

The paper explores the forms of risk management that Clubs use in the processes of talent identification that they engage in as a consequence of AFL rules. The paper discusses how psychological profiling is used to identify character traits prior to initial recruitment in the draft or trading processes – and reports on suggestions that risk management in this increasingly commercialised context may lead to recruitment practices that exclude certain types of persons, from certain types of backgrounds.

Keywords

Australian Football League, Professionalisation, Foucault, Care of the Self, Talent Identification, Risk Management
Introduction

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'). The research is informed by Foucault's later work on the care of the Self. The focus in this analysis on the ways in which player identities are governed by coaches, club officials, and the AFL Commission/Executive; and the manner in which players conduct themselves in ways that can be characterised as professional - or not.

From this larger project this paper analyses 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 reports on suggestions that risk management in this increasingly commercialised context may lead to recruitment practices that exclude certain types of persons, from certain types of backgrounds.

**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

In this context 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.

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. 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. Our interest in identifying and analysing the ways in which
perceptions of risk entered into talent identification, and player professional development processes
came from these interviews.

**Talent Identification: An Inexact Science**

A series of media articles during 2004 argued that Football Departments, Coaches and Recruiting
Managers at AFL Clubs would be held accountable for the success or otherwise of their drafting and
trading decisions – even though the journalists who wrote the articles emphasised that the recruiting process was a pretty inexact science: 'If AFL recruiting is a science, it is at best pretty inexact. And you only have to glance at the catalogue of misses among the biggest hits out of all the drafting and trading over the years to realise just how inexact' (Connolly 2004:2, Conan 2004)

This section of the paper is not a study of recruitment practices, and the success or otherwise of the people responsible for developing them. Our concern in this area is with exploring how current industry structures and regulations impact on the identification of talent, the recruitment of talent, and, ultimately, the development of talent. This concern directed our research to consider how in the pursuit of club/team performance, and competitive advantage in a competition shaped by a philosophy of equalisation, more and more focus is being directed to the mind and soul (character), as well as the body of individuals with the potential to become modern day professional footballers.

The identification of talent, in a football sense, is a more exact science than the identification of character. It’s a more exact science in the sense that potential recruits can be identified via the AFL’s talent identification processes. In these processes talent related statistics such as height, weight, reach, leap, speed, and skill related statistics concerned with possessions, disposals and tackles etc, can be collected over time and comparisons made between individuals. This scientific, objective element of talent identification reaches its peak in the environment of the annual draft camp and its barrage of testing and counting.

Alongside this amassing of data and video records and their storage, transfer and analysis within league and club managed channels, there are a variety of efforts to find out about, and make judgements about, the character of potential recruits. Interviews are conducted with possible recruits themselves, with their families, with their teachers and Principals, with people they may have worked for, with their current and previous coaches. By the time a potential recruit has made it to the draft camp, this process resembles a series of job related interviews with up to 16 potential employers that might have been going on for 2 or 3 years.
Not only is the recruiting process an extensive and prolonged one but it is an intrusive process as well. One coach we interviewed said that he got a really good sense of a player's character when he visited his family and got to have a look at the player's bedroom: [The Recruiting Manager] would talk to their coaches personally, go to their teachers...we'd go and talk to all the families...[The Recruiting Manager] and I would probably go into about 20 homes every year. Go and have a look at their Mother and Father, and whether they've got a clean room, whether they pull their weight around the house, whether they've got part time jobs... (Senior AFL Coach)

Whether we take this comment literally, or whether we examine it as metaphor for the lengths that people will go to in order to identify character, we can highlight a number of points that are worthy of further research and analysis. First, this concern with the character of players leads Club officials to use methods that are intrusive into the lives of potential employees. This sort of intrusive investigation of individuals and family background would be considered very problematic in most other employment contexts – but is considered appropriate in the AFL because of the nature of the Industry.

The second issue relates to the often unscientific, subjective nature of these explorations of character. Much of the discussion early in the research - with Coaches, Player Development Managers and Football Department Managers - was framed by a series of questions that were designed to guide discussion about the ways in which Club Officials ranked different influences on performance, in understanding the players they managed or coached. This discussion led onto another exercise where we asked coaches and officials to identify five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for individual and team performance on the field. The responses to this activity 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 50 metres, etc. The list of responses relied heavily on these sorts of objective, quasi-scientific, measurable KPIs.
We 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 focussed 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 community clubs, and promotional activities for sponsors or the league.

It was in these interviews and discussions that a deep concern with the character or soul of the AFL footballer emerged. In interviews with these individuals and groups any discussion about the factors that influenced weekly performance, or the possibility of a player turning a 30 game career into a 10 year career quickly shifted from a focus on an ability to jump, run, kick, tackle, mark, to a focus on character. The word character came easily to mind for many we spoke to. However, defining, or describing, or measuring the traits that are indicative of character was a much more difficult task.

As a result of the mass mediated, brand driven, celebrity elements of the AFL risks associated with recruitment 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 is a very important influence on player performance and development – on and off the field.

Character has always been seen as vital to elite level performance. However, the attributes of character considered to be important may have changed. Evidence suggests that a *good attitude to hard work, perseverance, courage, commitment to a 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 transformed into things to be measured by a variety of psychologically based tests, or psychologically informed interviews. A significant issue to emerge from discussions about identifying, recruiting and managing players was the increasing emphasis on psychological testing and profiling of players.

These discussions in the early phases of the research directed us to the important work of Recruiting Managers in talent identification, and the central and important role of character in these processes of talent identification. In this context all Recruiting Managers we interviewed said that increasing numbers of potential recruits are very well versed in the recruitment process. Not only have they been well coached in terms of their body (skills, strength, recovery, and conditioning) but they are increasingly well coached in how to handle an interview, and how to handle the elements of the interview, and the psychological testing, that try to identify character traits and attributes. In many instances they become highly skilled in doing the tests: *Most states train them up before they go to the draft camp now. They have meetings at the end of the year and that sort of stuff... they have been taken through a series of questions or interview situations before they get there. That's the way they see it in AFL footy as a career* (Recruiting Manager AFL Club)

This Recruiting Manager, and the others we interviewed, saw these developments as good for the development of the young men involved – even if they did not make it to the elite level. However this preparation for interviews and psychological testing made it more difficult to accurately assess the raw material that Clubs were working with. This is a common concern in recruiting processes in other work situations. Preparation for testing means that people get very good at doing tests but this does not necessarily result in an accurate picture of character for recruiting personnel. These psychological tools are not risk proof. Indeed, psychological testing as a recruitment and management tool has a chequered history in many employment contexts (Wilson 2004, Lawson 2000, Leggatt 2000).

The pursuit of competitive advantage drives the development of tools and techniques to assist Clubs in the recruitment process, and to lessen the risks associated with list and player management. It is in
these processes that Clubs most explicitly focus on the relationships between the body, mind and soul (character) of the young men who might become AFL footballers. This inexact science, this art of discovering and recruiting talent, then has a profound impact on the player management and professional development issues that Clubs confront during the careers that emerge out of this process.

Risk Management: 'We'll only recruit public schoolboys in the future'

In talent identification and recruiting processes Clubs and their officials are interested in much more than football ability. When they try to identify, measure and quantify the intangible elements of character many sometimes resort to stereotypes, or generalisations to identify the risks associated with recruiting a particular individual: Some clubs make very harsh judgements on indigenous kids. Others are more prepared to give them a crack if they’ve got ability and they interview well and yeah I think its sort of whatever club you go to you’d probably get a different answer (Recruiting Manager, AFL Club).

The use of these sorts of generalisations is not restricted to Indigenous players. Some Recruiting Managers, Football Department Managers and Player Development Manager’s also made reference to socio-economic background when discussing risk factors in identifying character. These references tended to be to suburbs/areas that families came from, schools that potential draftees attended and/or family status (good, bad, broken, close). The combination of many of these situations or contexts was seen to indicate relative risks associated with recruiting a player – good, close knit family, good school and a good suburb vs broken family, absent dad, poor area and an average school: Look I’ll be interested to see how one young kid goes this year. Everyone knows he can play football but to be honest once you’ve met the old man you just don’t want to go there. It’s a shame, but the reality is that you don’t want to bring people in that have the potential to stuff up your club. The kid’s got some issues himself and they’re not helped at all by his old man. If there are two kids similar you’re usually going to pick the one who is likely to fit in better and is going to do the right thing by the club (Member of Football Department)
The way things are going we'll only recruit public school boys in the future (Late Career player commenting on developments in character assessment in the AFL). In interviews subsequent to our interview with this Late Career player we used the above comment to ask club officials to comment on some of the ways that they thought about potential recruits, and the risks that may have been associated with their background: *We want people who just aren't going to get into trouble. That respect authority. That will fit into the team environment. And have got a great work ethic. They're the things that we want. And I don't think that sort of means they have to go and visit hospitals all the time... You want them to understand they are going to be under scrutiny off the field and they should try and have a nice balance in their lives, play their footy, and if they can help themselves set themselves up for something after footy without getting into any trouble well that's acceptable for us.*

(Recruiting Manager, AFL Club)

It would be unfair, even dangerous, to take some, or all, of these generalisations too literally, or at face value. In many of these interview contexts club officials were trying to articulate, or give voice to, many of the 'gut', 'subjective', 'inexact' elements of the art of talent identification and recruitment. When the objective and the scientific limits of talent identification are reached – when the statistics, measurements, tables, videos and formulas can't provide answers – then competitive advantage rests in being able to *read* situations, backgrounds, families and individuals.

Even if we do not take these concerns too literally they do raise a number of questions that are worthy of further research:

- Will the AFL, as an elite competition with less than 700 players registered at any one time, become elite in a more general socio-economic sense?
- Will the trend towards psychological profiling, and character assessment and judgement as a major element of talent identification and the management of risks associated with these processes, work against the participation of certain disadvantaged groups?
Will the commercial operations and relationships (brand associations) that provide the financial base for a secure and profitable elite sports entertainment industry give added impetus to the direction of these trends/tendencies?

If these trends do, indeed, exist, what affects will they have on participation and support for AFL at various levels?

Conclusion

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, relative wealth, free time, demands from sponsors, clubs and the industry, assume more prominence in deciding who to recruit, who to keep on the list, who to spend time, energy and resources on developing. This research has produced evidence of tensions between the paternalistic, profiling and reporting elements of various risk management practices at the Club level— in an environment where what it means to be a professional footballer is taking on new forms.

Our research has shown that AFL 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, how do you identify and manage the risks associated with recruiting and retaining individual players? The issue we address here, and one which requires further consideration, is that these processes may produce trends that limit the chances of certain types of person, and certain groups and classes of person, from participating at the elite level in this sports entertainment business.
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