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The Body, Mind and Soul of AFL Footballers: Tales of Identity from the Global Sports Entertainment Industry

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Abstract  
The paper discusses 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 emergence and evolution of a professional identity for AFL footballers – an identity that has many facets including the ideas that a professional leads a balanced life, and has a prudent orientation to the future, to life after football.

The AFL is a high profile, sports entertainment business in which brand relationships between the industry and its sponsors generate substantial income for the League, for Clubs, and for Coaches and players. In addition the AFL’s equalisation policies tightly regulate the ways in which Clubs can recruit, maintain and develop playing lists. In this context various tools of analysis are used to identify and characterise the particular Body, Mind and Soul elements of the young men who might be recruited to a Club; who might have significant time, money and effort invested in their development (as players, as persons); who might develop an identity as an AFL footballer. Drawing on Foucault’s work on the care of the self we argue that in this situation, narratives of identity necessarily involve a struggle for the Body, Mind and Soul of these young men.

Introduction

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power...on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen,
children at home and school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives (Foucault 1977: 29).

In this paper 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 qualitative, interviewed based research with Industry officials, Club officials, and players, was conducted during 2004. Thirty six players, 21 Club based coaches and administrators, and eight officers of the AFL Executive and AFL Players’ Association were interviewed in semi structured, one-to-one and focus group interviews. The research explored 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.

We discuss the ways in which this professional identity – in a physical, high body contact sport – is shaped by concerns to develop different aspects of the Body, Mind and Soul of the young men who want to become AFL footballers. These concerns with the complete person are driven by the management of risks in the global sports entertainment industry. These risks are not just football related – they include the management of brand associations that accompany the commodification of sport on a global scale. And, as the quote from Foucault would suggest, these concerns about the matter that constitutes the Body, Mind and Soul of the professional footballer, and how this matter should be identified, developed and managed, constitutes a struggle for identity that unfolds in a contested space of competing interests.

The AFL as a Sports Entertainment Business

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 and Papson 1998; Westerbeek and Smith 2003).

At the start of the 21st century the AFL is a significant sports entertainment business 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 a 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; McGuirc 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.
In this environment the research identified an increasing concern with the Soul, as well as the Body and the Mind of the young men with ambitions to become professional footballers in this sports entertainment business.

**Professionalisation, the Care of the Self, and the Body, Mind and Soul of the AFL Footballer**

The emergence of the idea of the ‘professional AFL footballer’ – as a relatively recent phenomenon – is not without its tensions. These tensions are apparent between and within the different levels of the industry. 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.

Our understanding of these processes of professionalisation is informed by 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 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'.

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

The research informed a view that to develop an identity as an AFL footballer means bringing together, or developing different elements of the person. The concept of Body, Mind and Soul attempts to name the separate, but intimately connected elements that constitute the person that is a professional AFL footballer. This concept reflects the ways participants in the research talked about different attributes or characteristics of players - their bodies, their abilities, their smarts, their brains, their coachability, their character, their values, their ethics, their courage:

The **Body** presents itself, and what it can do, as something that can be objectively and scientifically defined, described and developed. It can be made stronger, repaired, trained, cared for, understood by the individual and by others whose job it is to get it out on the field each week.

The **Mind** also presents itself as something that may be described, measured and understood in these sorts of scientific frameworks. It presents itself, or is described in terms such as 'coach-ability' or 'teach-ability', or 'football brain'. It can be developed and moulded by concerns for decision making, accountability and discipline – both on and off the field.

The **Soul**, in the way we are talking about it, should not just be thought of in 'spiritual terms'. It presents itself as something that is obvious, but hard to describe. Words such as character, attitude, work ethic, courage, and moral judgement indicate
what we are describing here. The Soul is an intangible concept that presents great problems for scientific measurement and definition.

Of these concepts the industry, in general, is comfortable with its understanding of the Body and the Mind. Even if the identification, measurement, management and development of the Body and Mind is the subject of continual debate and increasing rationalisation within Clubs and the industry via the expertise of sports science and psychology. An increasing emphasis on character creates a need for understanding the Soul dimensions of a professional identity – a need that is driven by regulations, performance demands and brand management. As the following sections indicate the intangible Soul creates problems for identification and management. Here, psychological profiling, extensive interviews and gut feeling come together in often vague, subjective ways in processes of talent identification and performance management.

Early Career Players: Tracing the Emergence of an Identity as an AFL Footballer

These tales of identity emerge strongly at the start of an AFL footballer’s career - what we called the Early Career phase (zero to four years as an AFL player). The Early Career players we interviewed 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 most viewed it as a sacrifice that they were prepared to make.

*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
While preparing for the AFL draft worked against many young players performing well in other developmental spheres, notably schooling, there was evidence of an increasing awareness of the value of a broader base of achievement. These players spoke of the need to demonstrate their readiness to become AFL footballers beyond just their physical skills and aptitudes; they spoke of the benefit of being able to demonstrate their capacity to learn, focus and commit.

You know they’re (AFL clubs) looking at more than just whether you can play footy. It’s about what sort of person you are and whether you’re reliable, handle pressure well and all that. I came here already expecting to start my degree straight away, so I guess that’s what I’ve done. It’ll probably take me 10 years to finish it but it takes my mind off footy.

Early Career player

Almost all of the coaching staff we spoke to identified Early Career player readiness in terms of the Body, Mind and Soul. The bodily aspect was generally considered the easiest to measure and determine. While very few recruits were seen to possess the physical attributes necessary to immediately participate at the top level this was an aspect of player development processes that coaches felt quite at ease with. A far greater degree of uncertainty existed around the readiness of the Mind and Soul.

Once you get past the very top group, you’re dealing with kids that can all play footy. You need kids that can adapt to the game plan. I mean we’re going to teach them how to play footy so that’s the least important part. What you want is a kid that can learn. I call it ‘learnability’. We can teach them if they’re able to learn... It’s something that is really hard to judge or measure. We talk to them, meet their families and friends, talk to their coaches and teachers. You get a feel for it I suppose.

Member of Coaching Staff

By the time a potential recruit has made it to the draft camp, the recruiting 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 Coach

Some Recruiting Managers, Football Department Managers and PDM'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.

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 just don't want them to get into trouble, that's all.

Recruiting Manager, AFL Club

Engineering the Body, Mind and Soul of AFL Footballers

There are a range of ideas from various fields that we can draw on to expand or explain our interest in this concept of the Body, Mind and Soul. In many
organisations, including AFL clubs, we can witness various experts claiming some authority to classify, to measure, to diagnose and to predict in relation to these dimensions of the person. This need to diagnose and predict is increasingly linked to concerns to maximise the performance of individuals so that the performance of organisations is maximised (see for example, Lochr and Schwartz 2001).

Expertise and authority in this context rests on the capacity to identify particular elements in the puzzle of performance management and development. It is possible to see this tendency to specialism in performance management and development in AFL Clubs. Most obviously these experts include medical staff, strength and conditioning staff, and staff responsible for managing diet, recovery, etc. The Body is the focus here. Football skills, and the Mind of players, are largely the province of the coaching group, who are concerned with the coachability, or teachability of players.

In the quest for increased performance behaviours, values and emotions have become objects to be examined and analysed to understand motivations, satisfaction and performance. In this view the management or coaching of these aspects of the person becomes a central task for many organisations intent on improving performance. An additional area of interest from this point of view is related to the types of knowledge that are used to understand the inner life of individuals. We can identify this broad body of knowledge as an expertise of the soul. What Nikolas Rose (1990) has called engineers of the soul — psychologists, consultants, counsellors - are increasingly influential in many organisations, including AFL clubs.

This way of thinking about the package that is the professional AFL footballer also enables us to connect to ideas that education, training, management and coaching — as pursuits and processes that have much in common — all involve a struggle for the soul (Popkewitz 1998). These processes involve an ongoing struggle to know the person being coached, or trained, or managed, or educated, and to use this knowledge to better develop this person. In the context of an elite, competitive, physical, work environment such as the AFL, this struggle is also one for the Body and the Mind. In addition it is a struggle for identity that involves a series of associations, and negotiations, between individuals, teams, Clubs, Industry groups and their executives, sponsors and fans.
These tales of professional identity also suggested novel understandings of what it means to be professional: understandings in which ideas of professional autonomy, expertise and decision making are problematised for these young men by a team ethic, a scientisation of the Body, Mind and Soul in the pursuit of performance, and the commercialisation of the global sports entertainment business.

Conclusion

The AFL is a high profile, sports entertainment business. In this highly competitive, intense, heavily scrutinised and very public environment, brand relationships between the industry and its sponsors generate substantial income for the League, for Clubs, and for Coaches and players. In addition the AFL’s equalisation policies tightly regulate the ways in which Clubs can recruit, maintain and develop playing lists. These list management concerns generate ongoing discussions and analysis of the type of player that Clubs are looking for. It is in these discussions that various tools of analysis are used to identify and characterise the particular Body, Mind and Soul elements of the young men who might be recruited to a Club; who might have significant time, money and effort invested in their development (as players, as persons); who might develop an identity as an AFL footballer. In this situation, narratives of identity necessarily involve a struggle for the Body, Mind and Soul of these young men. The tensions we have sketched in this process suggest this struggle unfolds in a contested space of competing interests. The contested, competitive and commercialised character of this space suggests that these tales of identity are worthy of further research and analysis.
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