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Chapter 13

Introduction

The emergence of the identity of a professional AFL footballer is a relatively recent phenomenon, and 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. The contemporary job description has 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.

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. This paper reports the forms of risk management that clubs use in the processes of compiling and managing their playing lists. Psychological testing and profiling of players is becoming more important in identifying, recruiting and managing players. A range of other practices exist around trying to interpret the manner in which players conduct themselves and whether or not, they articulate with the character attributes of a professional football identity. This chapter discusses how shifting industry expectations around particular character or personality traits become a source of tension around 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.

**A Provincial Brand in the Global Sports Industry**

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, 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). 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).

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 complemented 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.

**Data Collection**

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 (see Table One). It is from these interviews that our interest in identifying and analysing the ways in which perceptions of risk entered into talent identification, and player professional development processes.

**Table 1**: Total number of participants interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry Level</th>
<th>Sample Description</th>
<th>Total Interviews</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management and Regulation</td>
<td>AFL Executive</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AFL-PA Executive, Education and Welfare</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football and Coaching Departments (at three clubs)</td>
<td>Coaches</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Football Department Managers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Player Development Managers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Recruiting Managers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Players (at three clubs)</td>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid career</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Late career</td>
<td>12</td>
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**Talent Identification: An Inexact Science**

The identification of football talent 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 Coach

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, how to handle the elements of the interview, and the psychological testing that tries 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 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.

_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

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 managers 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 versus 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

Conclusions

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 reveals 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 raise 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. The following quote reveals how one late career player laments how the increasing emphasis being placed on protecting sponsorships and brands works against young players who have “flair and individuality”.

*The way things are going we'll only recruit public school boys in the future.*

Late Career player
References


Buckley, B. (2002) 'Managing the AFL: The Business of Sport', Australian Chief Executive, October, 30-31


People, participation and performance: Physical education and sports coaching

John Saunders, Christopher Hickey and Wayne Maschette

Melbourne: Artillery Press
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| Chapter Eleven: Building community partnerships to enhance participation in sport and physical activity: coach education in tertiary institutions. | Paul Webb, Phil Pearson and Kim McKeen |

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Chapter Fifteen: Coping with transformations from elite player to professional coach: the case of rugby league in England.

Christopher Sellars

Chapter Sixteen: Performance enhancement for paralympic athletes.

Brendan Burkett and Rebecca Mellifont
This publication has its origins in the peer reviewed papers from among the over fifty presentations that were given in the physical education and sports coaching stream of the 13th Commonwealth and International Sports Conference (CISC). This quadrennial meeting was held from 9-12th March immediately prior to the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games. It is axiomatic that it presented an important forum for academics and professionals in the areas of physical education and sport to meet and share their latest findings, thoughts and practice in their field. Indeed the history of the event provides the interested observer with a microcosm of the world of professional physical education and sport and the way in which it has developed over the last half century. As part of the development, the focus of the event has moved from a purely Commonwealth perspective and a limited physical education perspective, to its current formulation as a major international event with a goal to cater for all major dimensions of the scientific social and cultural concerns of sport and physical activity. It now involves members of the academic community and professional organisations representing a variety of disciplines in the sport and recreation industry. Such disciplines include physical education, sports science, sport coaching, sport management, sport studies, leadership in sport, sports medicine and other allied health professionals.

The papers represented here provide just a sample of the range of issues that were addressed during the four days of the CISC. They have all been submitted to a blind review process and the editors are grateful to the panel of distinguished reviewers who gave of their time so willingly. Between them they represent some of the latest exploration and application of knowledge and practice in the broad fields of physical education and sports coaching and we commend them to you.

John Saunders
Christopher Hickey
Wayne Maschette
Melbourne 2008

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Professor Herbert Haag, University of Kiel, Germany
Professor Peter Hastie, Auburn University, USA
Dr Keith Lyons, Australian Institute of Sport
Associate Professor Michael McNeill, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Dr John Sproule, University of Edinburgh, U.K.


With an already expanding pool of research into the provision of sport and physical education, the Commonwealth Games represent an important and timely conference for anyone interested in this field. The papers presented here provide examples of the wide range of issues that were addressed during the conference.

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