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The AFL is a high profile sports entertainment industry (Westerbeek & Smith 2003). AFL footballers are highly visible, heavily scrutinised athletes who are constantly encouraged to be professional in their approach to preparation, playing, recovery, and their behaviour on and off the field. Fans, the media, sponsors, the industry and their employers demand it of them. They are, rightly or wrongly, considered to be role models because of their status in the industry (Hess & Stewart 1998).

Over the past decade or so Clubs, the AFL-PA, the AFL Executive and the Commission have supported the development of this idea of a professional identity for contemporary footballers. The research we report on here suggests that the dominant approach to professional development has largely followed a risk management model underpinned by a player welfare logic. There is a tendency in this model to try to minimise risk or damage associated with less than professional behaviour hopefully before, but often after, the event. And to counsel, even punish, players in the hope that players will be more professional in the future (Foucault 2000).

This paper examines these issues via the presentation of results from research conducted in 2004 and a model that was developed out of that research. We are interested in the identification, analysis and development of practices and activities that are appropriate for the development of a professional identity for players in this industry (Dent & Whitehead 2002). Our research indicated that tensions exist between, and within, different levels of the AFL sports entertainment industry about what it means to be a professional footballer at the start of the 21st century. These tensions can best be understood in the following ways:

From the time that a young man sets out to develop an identity as a professional footballer he is encouraged to plan, to think, and to take steps to NOT be a footballer:

The position description of a professional footballer increasingly extends beyond an ability to run, jump, and kick into various off-field responsibilities and duties shaped by the sports entertainment environment.

The paper also presents a model for understanding issues related to the professional identity, professional development and performance management of elite athletes in this business. The model integrates understandings of the professional footballer as a person whose Body, Mind and Soul requires different forms of development and management through a career that can be characterised in terms of different phases — Early, Mid and Late. Understanding the professional footballer in this way directs attention to how these different elements can be managed, developed and coached in the pursuit of elite performance (Kelly & Hickey 2005).