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Preparing to not be a footballer: higher education and professional sport

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In the commercialised and professionalised world of elite sport, issues associated with career pathways and post sporting career options have a particular resonance. In various football codes, an unexpected knock, twist, bend or break can profoundly impact a player’s career. In this high risk and high consequence environment, a number of sports entertainment industries have instituted player development and education programmes to educate and prepare elite level performers for life after football. Drawing on Foucault’s later work on governmentality and the care of the self, this paper will discuss findings from a research project funded by the Australian Football League (AFL). The paper presents data that suggests that, elite performers are so focused on establishing and prolonging a career as an elite performer, that other aspects of identity are seen as something to be complied with as a consequence of industry expectations. An industry emphasis on higher education raises issues for the sports industries that promote player enrolment in higher education and for the higher education institutions that must manage this lack of engagement.

Introduction

Research conducted in Australia and the USA has proven that achieving career and education goals while still competing as an elite athlete actually enhances sporting performance. (Australian Sports Commission, 2003)

All of our research shows that players with college degrees tend to make more money during their careers, play longer and make better decisions. (Vice President Mike Haynes, National Football League (NFL, 2006)

In the mass mediated, commercialised and professionalised world of elite level football, issues associated with career pathways, post sporting career options, and player development and welfare practices directed at enhancing elite performance and preparing players for a life after sport, have a particular resonance. Within the volatile world of high profile male contact sports, such as rugby codes, American football, Australian Rules football and soccer, careers can sit, literally, on knife-edge. An unexpected knock, twist, bend or break can profoundly impact a player’s career. In this high risk and high consequence environment, a number of sports entertainment industries have instituted player development and education programmes to skill, educate and prepare elite level performers for life after football. In the NFL player development programmes have been in place since the 1990s. The NFL’s

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mission statement for this initiative outlines a goal to: ‘...challenge National Football League players to be lifelong learners while pursuing continuous improvement in family relations, social interactions, personal growth and career development during and beyond their careers as NFL players’ (NFL, 2006).

The opening quotes to this paper gives some indication of the direction that our discussion will take. In a number of football based sports, entertainment industries, individuals and organisations responsible for the management and regulation of the industry promote the idea that, elite performers should participate in higher education, at the same time as these players build a playing career at the elite level. However, players and those who structure coaching, strength and conditioning, recovery and performance regimes prioritise on field activities (core business) over off-field endeavours (Hickey & Kelly, 2006). As a consequence, elite performers are compelled to negotiate and accommodate a diverse, often competing array of expectations related to dynamic ideas about what it means to be a professional footballer, and the forms of work necessary to develop and maintain this identity.

Drawing on Foucault’s later work on governmentality and the care of the self, we will 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 play-stations in the life of AFL footballers. The research, conducted during 2004, explored two core issues. First, 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. Second, the idea that this ‘professional identity’ is not natural, and must be developed through a range of ‘professional development’ activities (a common link to all other ‘professions’).

The involvement of elite performers in some form of higher education and training is seen by many sports entertainment industries as a means to manage a variety of risks associated with performing at elite levels. However, we will argue that, many elite performers are so focused on establishing and prolonging a career as an elite performer, that other aspects of identity are seen to be not as important, or as something to be complied with as a consequence of industry expectations. This emphasis on higher education raises issues for the sports industries that promote player enrolment in higher education, and for the higher education institutions that must manage this lack of engagement. Recognising the increasing industry, demand on elite performers to enact their professionalism beyond the playing fields, our analysis is shaped by concerns to develop different aspects of the Body, Mind and Soul of 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.

In addition, the tensions that emerge from our analysis of the AFL raise more general questions about the nature of a professional identity at the elite level of globalised sports entertainment industries; and the forms of regulation, knowledges of the self and negotiations that circulate around processes of professionalisation.
Our particular focus in this paper is on the ways that players, at different stages of their careers, negotiate the expectations that they should see themselves and know themselves as professional footballers of the twenty-first century. Of interest in the construction of a contemporary football identity are the ways in which the industry generates a series of expectations about appropriate behaviours and dispositions that serve to identify a player as professional. Prominent in this paper, are the ways that players negotiate their identity alongside the controls or regulations that the AFL, clubs and sponsors/partners seek to exercise over their body, mind and soul.

The AFL and the global sports entertainment industry

At the start of the twenty-first century elite level, competitive, physical contact, male team sports, particularly the variety of football codes, assume a high profile presence in the commodified spaces of a globalised hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1992, 1993; Giulianotti, 2004). The various football codes (such as American Football (NFL), soccer, the Rugby codes and Australian Rules Football (AFL)) have long ceased to be mere games, and have developed into sports entertainment businesses with varying profiles in global and regional media markets (Hess & Stewart, 1998). In these media markets, the performers who compete and dream of competing at the elite level of these sports are more than mere football players. Indeed, many of the elite performers in different industries have evolved into celebrities: they exist as images, icons and brands whose every thought, action, change of style or partner is commodified and consumed (Miller, 2001; Cashmore, 2004; Smart, 2005). These processes of commodification are driven by media organisation’s intent on generating content that will drive sales, increase audience numbers, or lift circulation—and by organisations keen to establish or enhance profile, shift product, be identifiable as a particular sort of brand (Goldman & Papson, 1998). This commodification of the sports star as image or icon also has substantial pay-offs for elite performers in terms of sponsorship and/or endorsement agreements with local, regional and global brands. In many sports entertainment industries, this level of media and brand activity with the financial rewards that accompany certain levels of brand recognition, make the idea and the practice of elite level performers undertaking further, higher education intensely problematic. In this sense, demands for professional elite level performers to adopt a prudent, risk aware orientation to life after football need to be situated in some form of industry/organisational analysis.

The AFL is a significant sports entertainment industry in Australia. The 16 team national competition has a short recent history. Australian Rules football has, however, a much longer history based on 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 marketability of a game not readily understood by the uninitiated. The AFL industry generates annual revenues in excess of $A640 million dollars. Corporate partnerships (with companies such as Toyota, Carlton United Breweries, National Australia Bank,
Telstra), broadcast and Internet rights, merchandising, membership and gate receipts make significant contributions to the AFL itself generating revenues of $A205 million in 2005 (AFL, 2006; Mann, 2006). Individual clubs have turnovers that range from $A20 to $A40 million—there exists a wealth divide between clubs that emerges from a complex relation between location, history, social class and increasingly, market share (Buckley, 2002; Grant, 2004; McGuire, 2004; Mann, 2006). As a consequence of this media and brand profile, AFL players are well paid by Australian wage and salary earner standards. However, their incomes from playing contracts and what the AFL calls Additional Services Agreements (ASAs) place them in the minor leagues of global earning and celebrity stakes. In 2005, of the 547 AFL players who played at least one game, three earned more than $A800k; eight earned between $A600k and 800k; 18 earned between $A500k and 600k; 21 earned between $A400k and 500k; 331 earned between $A100k and 400k; and 166 earned less than $A100k per annum (AFL, 2006). These club-based payments (excluding any individual sponsorships) are a long way behind the salaries of marquee players in the American NFL who are reported to earn in excess of $A15 million a year. Even these are overshadowed by National Basketball Association (NBA) stars who are reported to earn $A29 million per year (Hawthorne, 2005a).

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 2006, for example, most clubs will have a total player payment ceiling of $A6.47 million—with some variations due to regulatory requirements (AFL, 2006). Under this equalisation policy, clubs are also limited in the number of players (44) that they can have on their lists. Furthermore, all clubs are required to make a minimum of four changes to their playing lists each year. This can be dealt with through natural attrition and/or the delisting of players, for a wide range of reasons including age, form and market value. 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.

However, the most significant element of a player’s capacity to make a substantial living out of AFL football is associated with the durability of their body. Put simply, playing AFL football is a health hazard. In this way, it is both like and unlike other football codes. It is like rugby in that it is a full contact sport where the players wear no protective gear. It is like soccer in that, midfielders can expect to run in excess of 20 kilometres in a game and in bursts of anaerobic and aerobic effort. It is like American football—in that players can expect bone-crunching contact to come from any direction. The sum of all this is that, AFL football is one of the most physically demanding codes of football that is played anywhere in the world. While sports scientific knowledge in relation to preparing, protecting and rehabilitating players has
played an increasing role in the AFL over the past two decades, player career spans are shortening and not lengthening. Such are the playing and regulatory demands of the game that the average AFL playing career is now only 2.9 years or 34 games—less than 5% of players extend their career to 10-plus years and 200 games or more (Hawthorne, 2005b). In the world of AFL football, retirement is rarely at the discretion of the player.

This reality shapes the life/career span of the elite AFL footballer, and generates powerful imperatives to think about a career beyond football. In this environment the AFL and the AFL-Players’ Association (AFL-PA), as the organisation (union) that represents player interests, have a recent history of collective bargaining that has produced a number of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) since 1993 (AFL, 2004b). These CBAs have delivered a range of outcomes including an annual contribution of $1.5 million by the AFL to the AFL-PA for various education and training activities and grants to support player development and welfare. The AFL-PA, with the financial and regulatory support of the AFL, actively encourages elite level, professional footballers to undertake education and training in preparation to not be footballers. The Association claims that in 2005, a staggering 80% of all players were undertaking full or part time studies via university or institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Moreover, since the programmes were introduced in 2000, over 1000 AFL players have received funding via an Education and Training Grants scheme that is designed to; ‘support players in their education, training and welfare. Players can apply to receive financial support to assist their studies for Short Courses, Year 12, TAFE and Private courses, undergraduate degrees, Graduate Certificates and Diplomas, PhDs and other professional qualifications such as a Pilots licence amongst others’ (Murnane, 2005, 2006). In short, the industry creates a significant expectation, that part of what constitutes a professional identity as an AFL footballer is a prudent, risk aware disposition to the future. Players are expected to develop and exhibit an orientation to not being a footballer at the same time as they set to develop and maintain an identity as a footballer. Our research suggests that this is a tension not easily managed by many players.

Professionalisation and the care of the body, mind and soul for AFL footballers

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.
In the research we undertook during 2004, data gathering was designed to incorporate the perspectives of AFL participants across three different levels of the industry. The first layer comprised representatives from those involved in the management and regulation of the industry (eight officials from the AFL and AFL-PA Executives were interviewed); the second layer explored the perspectives of club level coaching and football department staff, while the third layer involved the players themselves. Within these levels, we explored understandings of what it means to be a professional AFL player and how this identity is best developed and managed. One to one interviews were conducted with General Managers of Football Departments, Recruiting Managers and Player Development Managers (PDMs) while group and individual interviews were conducted with Coaching Staff, and player leadership groups. In total, 21 officials from three clubs were interviewed about talent identification processes and practices, influences on player performance, player management issues and the various roles of professional footballers in the contemporary sports entertainment environment. One on one interviews were conducted with 11 Early Career players, 13 Mid Career players, and 12 Late Career players from across the three clubs. 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 first pre-season after drafting).
- Mid Career players—four to eight years as an AFL player.
- Late Career players—eight plus years as an AFL player.

Players at clubs involved in the research were sampled by these categories. These phases 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. These interviews focussed on players’ desires, needs, expectations, experience and understandings of what it means to be a professional player, and their understandings or experience of the ways in which their professional identity is developed—or hindered.

The analysis of the research data was informed by the 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 who is a professional AFL footballer. This desire to find a means to talk about the different elements of the person reflects the ways participants in the research talked about different attributes or characteristics of players—their bodies, abilities, smarts, brains, coachability, character, values, ethics, courage. In this research, the Body of the AFL footballer 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 and understood by the individual and by
others whose job it is to get it out on the field each week. The Mind of the player 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. Finally, the Soul of the professional footballer, 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 judgements indicate what we are describing here. The Soul is an intangible concept that presents great problems for measurement and definition (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001).

In this sense, we can argue that a professional identity for elite performers in the AFL can be identified and analysed as a complex, contested, fluid process in which different phases in a career intersect, and overlap, with diverse elements of the Body, Mind and Soul—to produce an array of ideas, demands, expectations, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions that mark the elite performer as professional, or not. We understand these processes of professionalisation in terms of Foucault’s discussions 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 (Foucault, 1978, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1991). In his later work, Foucault’s concern was to situate the ‘imperative to “know oneself”—which to us appears so characteristic of our civilisation—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, 2000a, p. 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, it 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 (2000b), p. 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, therefore, 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,b).

In the form of analysis that draws on Foucault’s work on the care of the self and governmentality, (see, for example, Rose, 1990, Burchell et al., 1991; Barry et al., 1996; Dean & Hindess, 1998; Rose, 1999; Cole et al., 2004) there is an interest in identifying and analysing ‘governmental—ethical practices’. This concept directs attention to the ways in which government practices rely on, operate through, and
establish and maintain relationships to so-called ‘practices of the self’ (Dean, 1995, p. 562). For Dean (1995) these governmental—ethical practices are ‘hybrid ones in that it is often not clear where the locus or agency for the direction of conduct lies, and indeed which suggest rather elastic boundaries in processes of self formation’ (p. 562). In an attempt to account for the hybridity of processes of self-formation, Dean (1995) introduces a distinction between ‘practices of governmental self-formation and practices of ethical self-formation’ (p. 563, see also Kelly & Colquhoun, 2003, 2005). An analysis of the practices of governmental self-formation in relation to the development of a professional identity for AFL footballers would focus attention on the ways in which industry authorities and regulations, club and team structures and codes of conduct, coaching and development officials and corporate partners/sponsors attempt to regulate the behaviours and dispositions, the attitudes and aptitudes of players to encourage players to be more professional, and to enable players to identify practices, behaviours and attitudes that would place professionalism and performance at risk. A concern with practices of ethical self-formation suggests, on the other hand, a means for analysing the practices, techniques and rationalities by which players come to know themselves in terms of what it means to be professional; and the means by which players are encouraged to know, examine and act on themselves in relation to their ability to be professional, to understand and know themselves in a professional way so that their team and club can be successful on and off the field.

The development of a professional identity for AFL footballers is analysable, then, in terms of the relationships between the regulatory processes of the AFL, of clubs, club officials, coaches, and processes of self-understanding and self-formation in which players negotiate the range of expectations about what it means to be professional.

**Career phases and higher education outcomes for AFL footballers**

In '99 I did a trainee course at (name of place) golf course. I didn’t do anything in 2000. I was just concentrating on trying to get into the side. Then I think I did some work at a nursery in 2001. That sort of led into a natural resource management course. But I dropped it last year. I was only doing one unit a semester. It was going take forever to do it. Seven years or something. I just thought bugger it! I was going to do some work at a company, but it went bust. I’m just floating at the moment. (Mid Career player)

A report for the Australian Sport Commission on the influences shaping the experience of university-based higher education by elite athletes who are compelled to juggle preparation, recovery and competition with work and study foregrounds a number of issues important for this discussion (Jobling & Boag, 2003). Jobling and Boag (2003) argue that, their research revealed a range of practices and processes at universities, and in the various sports industries they sampled, that worked to hinder athlete engagement in the Australian Institute of Sports’ Athlete Career Education (ACE) programme. These included timetable/exam scheduling, training, recovery
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and competition schedules, and financial pressures for athletes participating in sports that do not have a substantial financial reward structure. At another level, Jobling and Boag (2003) suggest that while ‘athletes may be motivated, organised and skilled as far as their sport is concerned, this may not carry over to academic pursuits’. Furthermore, more than half of the athletes interviewed/surveyed in their research, ‘have had to withdraw from courses/subjects due to a range of circumstances, including lack of forward planning’. In addition, many ‘athletes felt they did not need or require counselling from ACE or university personnel until they were experiencing difficulties’ (p. 2).

Our research indicates that, although the boundaries of Early, Mid and Late Career are fuzzy, they provide a useful framework for thinking about the stages of a player’s development, and the ways in which the Body, Mind and Soul are thought about, developed and managed in different ways across the career conceptualised in this manner. While there are a number of issues and themes that are peculiar to each of these phases, there are some issues that transcend them all. Prominent here is the emphasis all players attach to putting football first. Whether it is while they train to get themselves ready for AFL football, after they have established their credentials as AFL footballers, or as they contemplate life after AFL football, almost all the players we spoke to were prepared to subordinate all other activities to the needs and demands of participation at the elite level of this sports entertainment industry. Though their rationalisations for doing this appeared to change across time, their desire to identify as a professional AFL footballer was powerful and enduring.

Early Career players

For many of these 17–21 year old Early Career players 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 (Hickey & Kelly, 2005).

Many of the Early Career players we spoke to, recognised that their commitment to football had implications for their capacity to pursue other activities, such as education long before they were drafted. The talent identification processes and elite level pathways provide ample opportunities for talented young players to imagine a life as a professional footballer. 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 underage level. While their under-achievement 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: 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).

Early Career players generally understood their lack of readiness for AFL football in relation to the limitations of their body, not their mind. Their physical immaturity in terms of body strength, endurance 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 energy to other pursuits, such as education and training. 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 spoke of their inability to meet the institutional commitments associated with formal education and training programmes. At the forefront of this was their inability to meet the demands of classes and assessment schedules. Although 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 different schedules. While the players generally reported that their lecturers/tutors were understanding of their obligations 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: 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).

Mid Career players

Most players that get to the Mid Career phase have, to greater or lesser extents, made it. Having been on an AFL list for up to eight years, all of these players had achieved their childhood ambition to play AFL football: It’s a different feeling when you become part of the team and you stop having to worry about whether you will get a game, or even
stay at the club, any more. I don’t know when it happened but all of a sudden I knew I could compete at the top level and wasn’t worried about that anymore. I guess that’s when I started to think about other things, things outside of footy (Mid Career player).

As a group, however, they were far from content with this sense of achievement—the nature of the industry is such that any level of achievement is, fundamentally, provisional, and liable to be short term, or interrupted, even ended, by processes and decisions beyond a player’s control: It came as a bit of a shock when I was told I would be traded. My immediate thoughts were bitter and angry, then I guess there was lots of self doubt, like, ‘who’s going to want me’? When you first start you have lots of dreams but your expectations aren’t that high. I remember just hoping I could play one game. But having been around a while and tasted it, I think it’s harder to deal with when it doesn’t work out (Mid Career player).

Regardless of whether they had, or were poised to achieve substantial contractual commitments from their club, Mid Career players were as determined as ever to consolidate their identity as AFL footballers. When the club said, ‘jump’, they said, ‘how high’. For many Mid Career players, the biggest distraction from football involved how they used their money. While new investments and financial opportunities pervaded their consciousness, they were acutely aware of how quickly these could dry up if they did not continue to perform as footballers: I think what we’re seeing a lot of now is those top end players in the middle of their careers who are getting in excess of $250,000 getting into property, restaurants and the likes. But the reality is that for all but a tiny minority this sort of income can often last just 2 or 3 years. I mean if the average person is now living to 80 then these guys have another 50 years to live. But it’s hard to get them to see that (Executive Official, AFL-PA).

Presented with an opportunity to set themselves up for life, many Mid Career players spoke of an unwillingness to get involved in activities that could distract them from their football. Their ability to sustain, even improve, their status as regular AFL footballers would undoubtedly further their social and financial capital. The motivation to consolidate their status as established AFL footballers was as powerful as ever: For the first few years I didn’t do anything except try and improve my football. I did a couple of courses but I didn’t really achieve much. Not sure I even finished some of them. But in the last few years I’ve been busy building up some investments and trying to get myself set up. I own my own house and have a couple of units and stuff. When I’m away from footy now I like spending time in my garden and with my kid (Mid Career player).

Late Career players

Players that had been on AFL lists for eight years or more were generally well established and respected. They shared a general feeling of privilege and good fortune at having established a long career as AFL footballers. During their years of involvement, they had seen many players come and go. Knowing that they too could have fallen foul of injury, form or opportunity, their identities as (Late Career) AFL footballers made them household names in the media markets where AFL has a high
I’ve always played like it could be my last game, or year. Being a Late Career player doesn’t change that. I could’ve done a knee or something years ago and just disappeared out of the game. I’ve seen a ... lot of that over the years. There’s a fair bit of luck involved in playing football for a long time (Late Career player).

Although, this group collectively acknowledged that their playing days were limited, they were unanimous in expressing their desire to keep playing as long as they could. The body was in sharp focus among players in this group. The rigours of a long football career were generally felt in their bodies. The same wear and tear was not identifiable in their Mind or Soul. Their commitment to football was as strong as it ever had been: I haven’t seriously thought about retiring yet. I’ve heard others talk about it but I haven’t actually said anything about it yet. I’d like to think that I’ve still got a year or two left. I guess I’ll sit down with the Club at the end of the year and talk about where I’m up to. ... my contract is up at the end of this year so no doubt it’ll get raised (Late Career player).

It’s (retirement) become more difficult now days. I mean they’re getting pretty big money so it’s harder to step away from. In the old days a bloke who was getting on a bit and felt like he was struggling ... would talk to the coach and maybe head out and play in the bush for a few years. But nowadays they want to hang in there as long as they can. You talk to a bloke about what he’s thinking about when footy’s over and the first thing he’ll tell you is that he’s still got a couple of years of playing in him yet. (Member of Football Department, AFL Club)

The spectre of retirement was, for many Late Career players, powerful motivation to work thoughtfully towards increased longevity. Their knowledge of the game was an advantage in careful and considered conditioning of their aging bodies. Life after football was something to be worked through, but for now, their emphasis was on maintaining their football careers for as long as they could. They generally felt that they would know when their time was up and they would move on. When it happened, there would be plenty of time to think about what they wanted to do next.

The pressure to conform to industry expectations about preparing for life after football, and for developing and maintaining some balance between football and other activities means that, some AFL players—particularly Mid Career and Late Career players—can develop what some club level PDMs and AFL-PA officials called a portfolio of short courses. This portfolio consists of a series of Certificate I, II or III TAFE qualifications or attempts at gaining qualifications. This sort of portfolio is developed through a variety of ways and means, but often has the following characteristics:

- Initial discussions and encouragement for a player to think about doing some sort of education or training.
- If a player is not certain of interests, or possible future career aspirations they can be encouraged to consider picking from a range of TAFE options that might suit, or which are relatively easy to fit around training and recovery sessions. TAFE courses are often competency based and modular—allowing some degree of flexibility.
TAFE is often considered as an education and training option for non-academic individuals. Certificate courses are of shorter duration and can be seen as self-contained or stand-alone. There is a relatively short time frame in accreditation terms. This means players can get a ‘return on their investment’ without a long-term commitment to something they might not want to pursue further.

By Mid or Late Career, some players have a well-developed portfolio of short courses that do not constitute a coherent theme or direction in education or career terms. They have a training history but may not be further advanced in terms of future career/training options.

By this stage, some players are accessing professional career guidance and counselling provided by firms contracted by the AFL-PA. This counselling often involves extensive and lengthy psychological-based profiling designed to identify the occupations, careers or training that players are most suited to. A Mid Career player we interviewed described how his experience of developing a portfolio of short courses, and subsequent career counselling had some unintended and potentially dangerous consequences. His history of education and training had many of the characteristics described above. At a career counselling session, an interest in horses was identified out of the testing process. This interest in horses translated into the player enrolling in a Certificate II in Horse Handling at a local TAFE college. As part of this training, he was assigned work placement at a stable of a well-known racehorse trainer. On his first day of placement, a stable employee handed him two very large and expensive racehorses and told him to swim them in the stable pool. The player said that, he was ‘shitting’ himself as he headed to the pool between two large, dangerous animals. So much so that, when he got to the pool he nearly drowned one of the horses—or so he thought. He didn’t go back, either to the stable or the TAFE.

It can be argued that, it wasn’t the counselling process that was at fault here. Rather, the series of actions which followed the counselling were not appropriate or were not adequately supervised. There is some merit to this claim. This suggests that, the processes that identify interests and aptitudes need to be more closely linked to the actions that follow—including training and/or work placements. There are, however, a number of more important issues that we want to highlight:

- The player said that his interest in horses had more to do with betting on them than handling them.
- This interest though, is identified in a process that has education and careers futures as its purpose. In this environment, there are pressures to pursue the training and career possibilities, pressures that are not necessarily coercive or overt, but which are nevertheless persuasive given the push in the industry for players to be pursuing these possibilities as part of their professional development.
- Some players respond to this persuasion or pressure by signing up to education and training that they have very little commitment to. They tend then to comply or even withdraw from these activities rather than engage with them.
We also gathered interview data, from players, PDMs and the AFL-PA, which suggests that these issues of compliance and/or engagement are evident in the context of players’ education in university degree programmes. Many players successfully engage with and complete a university degree programme. In many respects, these successes mirror the ways in which non-AFL university students can combine work and study successfully. This success can be beneficial in terms of on-field performance. For example, one Mid Career player we interviewed claimed that, he ‘struggled’ early in his playing career to ‘figure out footy and Uni’. His football development was difficult as he struggled to figure out what was expected of him and how he could deliver on these expectations. The same applied to his study at university. Yet, after a couple of years of development football began to make sense in terms of work, preparation and performance—the same with university study. He claimed that, this development meant that he became consistently successful in both areas. His performance on and off the field was enhanced by this successful balancing of different parts of his life. His claim was borne out, at least in football terms, by his consistent on-field success in the past five seasons.

This example reflects, arguably, many similar experiences of AFL footballers successfully completing university study. However, the explosion in AFL players enrolled in university study has another face. It is a face that in some respects reflects the way in which many non-AFL university students engage with university study. They enrol, but they don’t often turn up to classes, or they fail or perform poorly in terms of grades. Research for the Australian Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, for example, reports an apparent gulf between the interests, motivations and expectations of first year undergraduates, and the academics who teach them—many of whom think students lack purpose, application and ability. In this study just 50% of students found their subjects interesting; approximately, 50% thought academics were ‘enthusiastic’ teachers, or good at explaining things; 40% thought their fellow students were ‘positive’ about learning; and more than 25% worked in ‘isolation’ from their fellow students (McInnes et al., 2000). In another study of 1563 full-time undergraduates who work; 40% agreed that work ‘gets in the way’ of study; 34% said worries about money made it ‘difficult to concentrate’ on study; and 63% agreed that they are ‘often overwhelmed by all they have to do’ (p. 11). This survey found that, in this context many students ‘concentrate on assessment tasks rather than wide reading’; ‘opt to merely pass’; ‘miss lectures’; ‘work on only some of the subjects they are enrolled in’, or change their enrolment status to part-time (McInnes & Hartley, 2002).

The issue of financial concerns does not necessarily apply to AFL footballers—although it can be an issue for other elite athletes who are not as well paid (Jobling & Boag, 2003). However, in our research, evidence from PDM’s and the AFL-PA about a number of the other issues raised by these and other studies, was reinforced by the discussions we had with some players. These players discussed how they had enrolled in a degree—often on the encouragement of family, or of officials at their club, or AFL-PA representatives—but found it easy to find reasons not to
attend classes, do preparation or complete assignments. Indeed, many players find it easy to withdraw or simply drop out.

Conclusion

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, AFL Club)

AFL footballers face a range of tensions in trying to respond to the pressures and practices associated with undertaking education and training programmes 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. Although many players genuinely attempt to engage in education and training practices, whenever these programmes clash with football, football is given priority. Underpinning this, is both their personal desire to establish themselves as AFL players and their commitment to the primary goal of the Football Department—to win games of football. While there was clear evidence that clubs recognised the value of their players being involved in education and training opportunities outside of football, the level of priority given to such activities varied a great deal. In several clubs, there was clear evidence that players saw this push as having little more than rhetorical commitment. At a practical level, our data exposed an array of tensions around the industry expectations that footballers take active steps to prepare for life after football. These, as a matter of course, present new challenges to players and clubs, as well as their chosen education and training providers.

The argument that we have sketched here is that, the variety of professional development activities that have as their aim the development of a professional identity as an elite athlete in a high profile sports entertainment industry can be situated in, and/or mapped onto, the Early/Mid/Later Career—Body/Mind/Soul matrix we have discussed. This mapping process is grounded in the proposition that twenty-first century sports entertainment industries require new ways of thinking about professional identities, and the activities, practices and processes that can be deployed in the development of these identities. The sort of analysis we have developed would not be prescriptive about what these professional development activities would look like. Rather, our suggestion is that, understanding the contested nature of a professional identity in these contexts might lead to more sophisticated thinking about how athletes might better prepare to not be athletes. Our description of different phases in a professional AFL career, suggests the need to think about how professional development activities, and education and training can be configured in a number of ways as players establish (Early), maintain (Mid),
and prolong (Late) a career as a footballer. In this sense, a claim that 80% of players are undertaking some form of higher education might be qualified by trying to understand how many are actually turning up, passing, completing, and whereon preparing for life after football. While there is clear evidence that, players acknowledge the merit of engaging in education and training during their professional sporting careers their participation often mimics compliance more than engagement.

While this research is rooted in the unique world of AFL, the findings clearly have implications beyond this context. Drawing on Foucault’s theorising about ‘caring for the self,’ our analyses can be extended to other settings where individuals might be encouraged to restrain their passions and instincts to establish a balanced and prudent identity. Be it AFL, NBA, NFL, Premier League and beyond, the contemporary sports entertainment industry has generated new expectations about the behaviours and activities that serve to identify a person/player as professional (Giulianotti, 2004). The increasing demand for elite athletes to enact a prudent orientation towards their career evokes a number of challenges. Increasing interest in what professional athletes are up to off the field is interconnected in a complex web of expectations, perceptions and actions where ideals and practices often exist in tension. Better understanding of this is pivotal to developing practices that can produce better outcomes for the industry, the players, and the institutions that currently manage player involvement in higher education and training programmes.

References


