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Risk Management, Player Welfare and Privacy: Player Development Managers and Dilemmas for Employee Relations in Australian Football League Clubs

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This paper reports on one aspect of a research project that was funded by the Australian Football League (AFL) to explore the emergence and evolution of a ‘professional identity’ for AFL footballers. The research was informed by Foucault's later work on the care of the Self to focus on the ways in which player identities are governed by coaches, club officials, and the AFL Commission/Executive; and the manner in which players conduct themselves in ways that can be characterised as professional - or not. The paper explores the roles of Player Development Managers (PDMs) in emerging processes of risk and player management. These roles increasingly involve PDMs in risk management practices and processes that can be seen as intrusive in players’ lives. These risk management processes raise a number of concerns about player privacy and the rights of Clubs to know what their employees are up to away from the workplace.

Introduction
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 research was conducted during 2004. The research explored the following issues: the emergence and evolution of a ‘professional identity’ for AFL footballers – an identity that has many facets including the emerging ideas that a professional leads a balanced life, and has a prudent orientation to the future, to life after football: the idea that this ‘professional identity’ isn’t natural, and must be developed through a range of ‘professional development’ activities (a common link to all other ‘professions’).

In this presentation we discuss the roles of club Player Development Managers (PDMs) in the forms of risk management that clubs recognise as being important in the processes of list and player management that they engage in as a consequence of current AFL regulations. The research 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. 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.

In turn, these capacities, or the character traits that indicate the potential to develop these capacities via a variety of professional development (PD) activities, become important elements of risk management discussions in recruitment and development processes in clubs. Development of a professional identity, of a capacity to adopt a prudent disposition to life after football, and of a capacity to achieve balance between different aspects of your life,
proceeds through a career that has its origins in these discussions and processes. The paper explores the roles of Player Development Managers (PDMs) in emerging processes of risk and player management. These roles increasingly involve PDMs in risk management practices and processes that can be seen as intrusive in players’ lives. These risk management processes raise a number of concerns about player (employee) privacy and the rights of Clubs (employers) to know what their employees are up to away from the workplace.

The AFL Sports Entertainment Industry

In an increasingly globalised media-sport-marketing nexus Sports are much more than a game (Hess and Stewart 1997). Highly profitable TV, WWW and print based media corporations seek to establish relationships with elite sports competitions to provide content – content that is attractive to various demographics and which can establish and maintain financially lucrative marketing and sponsorship associations with various products. These relationships have, over the past 30 years, dramatically increased elite player incomes from playing contracts and sponsorships. These mass mediated associations between individuals and teams, and highly visible products and brands create a range of rewards and responsibilities. These brand management issues rest largely on public perceptions of individual and team behaviours (Goldman & Papson 1998; Westerbeek & Smith 2003).

At the start of the 21st century the AFL is a significant sports entertainment industry in Australia. The sixteen team national competition has a short recent history. Australian Rules football has, however, a much longer history as a series of State based competitions. The AFL, while successful in managing the business of sport (Buckley 2002), is very much a regional brand in this globalised marketplace of brand associations - limited by the attractiveness of an indigenous game not readily understood by outsiders. The AFL industry has an annual turnover in excess of $400 million dollars. Corporate partnerships (with companies such as Toyota, CUB, NAB, Telstra), broadcast and Internet rights, merchandising, membership and gate receipts make significant contributions to this turnover. Individual clubs have turnovers that range from $12 to $30 million (Buckley 2002; Grant 2004; McGuire 2004).

AFL players, while being well paid by wage and salary earner standards, are in the minor leagues of global earning and celebrity stakes – although celebrity status in regional markets does create a range of issues for the development of a professional identity (Voss 2004). A major influence on the level of player payments is the cap on total player payments (salary cap) that the AFL enforces as part of its; 'commitment to a policy of equalization that promotes an even and exciting competition' (AFL 2004a). In 2004, for example, most clubs have 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 addition 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. These CBAs have produced a number of outcomes including:
a series of minimum pay scales within the overall salary cap that specify minimum annual salaries dependent on experience, and a scale of minimum match payments;

designated periods of annual leave in the off season, and a mandated one day off a week during pre-season and the season proper;

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;

a condition that all AFL clubs must have on their Football Department staff a designated Player Development Manager (PDM).

This last outcome is a condition of the latest CBA finalised between the AFL and the AFL-PA:

Condition 24.7: The AFL Clubs shall advise their Players and the AFLPA of the name of the person within the AFL Club who shall be responsible for Player development.

The PDM is meant to provide a position in the Club with direct responsibility for meeting the diverse development and welfare needs of players. Later sections of this paper will discuss this position and some of the tensions associated with the activities of the PDM in managing risks and players in this sports entertainment industry.

**Professionalisation and the Care of the Self**

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.

The research and methodology were framed by a reading of Michel 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). Foucault’s later genealogies of the Self, and the literature that is indebted to these genealogies, can provide a powerful analytical and methodological approach in a number of fields allied to the sociology of work (for example, organisation and critical management studies). Particularly in terms of understanding the ways in which employees are encouraged to recognise themselves, their interests, and their aspirations in a variety of workplace practices and programs. Programs that promise to produce in employees a desire to practise their freedom in ways that will make their organisations more productive, efficient and competitive.

From this perspective the formation of a professional identity can be understood as the development of a specific relationship to oneself and others. To be a professional is to be a
person who must do certain, quite specific work on oneself so that one can be considered to be professional. To be professional as a police officer, or teacher, for example, means different things, requires a different relationship to oneself and others, requires the individual to do different work on the self, than to be professional as an AFL footballer.

To be a professional invokes, also, a sense of asceticism, a certain disciplining of the Self so that one might be, or become, more professional. This is a key element in considering the sorts of ‘sacrifices’ individuals are prepared to make to become ‘professional’. Foucault (2000a: 282), in a discussion of the ways in which people make choices about the sorts of person they wish to become, suggests that processes of self formation can be understood as ascetic processes – ‘not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being’.

What it means to be a ‘professional footballer’ is a product of the negotiations between different individuals and groups about why players should adopt this identity, and the forms of work necessary to produce this identity (Foucault 2000a; Foucault 2000b). Identity is also many faceted and produces different outcomes, rights and responsibilities at different times and settings. In this research two, closely related, aspects of a professional identity are important.

**Being professional: Preparing for life after football**

Contemporary ideas about PD for AFL footballers include an encouragement to develop a prudent orientation or disposition to the future - in an occupation that can 'cut you off at the knees' (or the groin, or ankle, back…) at any time without warning. An ability to adopt a prudent, risk aware relationship to present and future circumstances is a particular issue for AFL footballers who - at an age when other young professionals might imagine a career that stretches 40 years into the future - have to develop a future oriented disposition to a career that might span 10 years. In this context the AFL and AFL-Players Association invest over $1.5 million p.a. in various education and training activities undertaken by players (AFL-PA 2004; Burgan 2002; Brereton 2003).

**Being professional: Doing something to fill your day**

AFL footballers are increasingly encouraged to develop balance in their life – a balance that would enhance their effectiveness and performance, and thus contribute to their club/team performance. Footballers are being encouraged to develop an orientation to themselves, and their team/club, that requires them to undertake some form of training or education, get a job, do community based activities - almost anything to counter the ‘Playstation Syndrome’ that witnesses players struggling to fill their days with activities other than training and video games (Oakes 2003). It is claimed that developing this ‘duty of care’, as an aspect of what it means to be a professional footballer, would then contribute to improvements in individual, team and club performance.

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. At the heart of the qualitative methodology is an invitation to understand the lived experiences of others through their own perspectives. 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. We conducted a series of 60 to 90 minute interviews with 36 players, 24 staff (coaches, PDMs, etc) of the Football Departments of 3 Clubs, and 8 officials of the AFL and AFL-PA Executives, in which we sampled a cross section of perspectives and opinions about what it means to be a professional AFL player and how this identity is best managed.

### Player Development Managers and Player Profiles: PDM expertise and issues of privacy and responsibility

An area of significant change in the AFL in the last 10-15 years is related to the provision of pastoral care at the Club level. Up until relatively recently coaching and support staff were almost exclusively dedicated to maximizing the on field performances of players. However, the fact that all clubs, under the new CBA, are required to identify an official who is responsible for player development is evidence of an industry shift.

The research indicated that there are differences in the roles of PDMs at different Clubs. Some PDMs, for example, also act as forward scouts or perform various other functions on match days. Media commentary on relative inequalities among AFL Clubs also indicates that some wealthier Clubs are able to afford to employ multiple support staff to assist player development, welfare and performance improvements. While more personnel does not automatically translate into better outcomes it does heighten the chances of delivering enhanced player development services.

In a competitive environment this additional expenditure has the aim of delivering increased performance and competitive advantage. This is an explicit acknowledgement that these Clubs believe player professional development along lines that encompass non football related matters is important, and that a commitment to support this development has a range of performance related benefits.

While there is a great deal of diversity in the way clubs use their PDMs, our research reveals that some clubs hold the role of the PDM in very high regard.

> I think it’s the second most important job at the club, behind the coach. He has to be a counsellor. He has to look after the transition of players into and out of the football club. He is the person that looks after all of them. Not just the new kids, but the older players as well, will use him as a sounding board to know how they’re going. He has to be someone they trust and can actually relate to as a friend. It’s a huge job and takes up a huge amount of time.

*Senior coach*

The role of a PDM is a diverse and complex one. At the same time the research indicates that it is an increasingly important role at club level for a number of reasons:

- Facilitating professional development for players – often as a defacto careers and education counselor
Kelly and Hickey

- Developing and implementing induction programs for new players to a Club – often including making arrangements for players’ families

- Working with Late Career players as they prepare to finish their careers – although some Club officials suggest that exit programs were often not as sophisticated as many induction programs

- Welfare and pastoral care activities – many of which remain largely invisible to others in a Club unless and until they are reported on and circulated within the Club

Our research indicates the significant influence that the Senior coach, and his assistants, have on shaping attitudes to player professional development needs – especially at the Club level. However, the role of the PDM, in many respects, is emerging as the first, and possibly most important, point of contact for the ongoing management and professional development of AFL footballers.

Many of the Football Department people we interviewed at the 3 Clubs discussed the ways in which they kept track of the variety of off-field behaviours, activities and issues of the players they were responsible for. In this part of the paper we will outline how the interest in what players are doing off the field produce certain practices; practices that are justified in terms of identifying and managing risks – to the player, and for the Club. Importantly they are also justified in terms of a concern with player welfare. It is argued that these practices have the players' best interests at heart.

One form these practices take is a formal, periodic written assessment or profile for each player. These profiles, in the situations we witnessed them, are prepared by some PDMs and are circulated among key members of the Football Department – often initially to the General Manager Football Operations (GMFO) who might then pass it on to others. These periodic written reports often formalise other, more informal, conversations that have taken place in the context of day to day meetings and discussions about players and what is going on in their lives.

At one Club we visited the PDM gave us a copy of the last report he had collated and passed onto the GMFO. We had discussed this sort of profiling with him, and indicated that we were interested in the formal details of this sort of profiling – but we were not interested in the personal particulars of individual players. The copy of the report he passed to us had player's names and identifying characteristics deleted. Given the Club context though it was possible to identify some of the individuals from the information contained in the profile. In the excerpts from this profile that are reproduced below we have endeavoured to remove any of these details, and we also will not name the Club or the PDM involved.

What is of interest here are the sorts of personal information and detail that is gathered on an individual employee of an organisation, by a development or welfare official of that organisation, and which is then circulated – with names attached – within other contexts in the organisation. Examples here include:

'...[name] has never had a job that has any sort of responsibility. He has been a [suburb] lad from Under 10s and I don't think a career outside of sport was ever contemplated. That said his work ethic has been noted and commented by the senior players of the team...'
'…Daily contact with him during the break – always the same problem, do I have any money left, always the same answer; I haven't got any to give you… Still a burden on [name] and [name] when his cash is low – [name] for meals, [name] for money…'

'… had an enormous weekend with [name] prior to Xmas. Wanted to return home with only three training sessions left. Crying, homesick and real down, he wanted me to take him to [name] house… Spent all day of a Sunday with him, all Sunday night (he stayed at my house) and had to drag him out of bed on the Monday to get to training – and he still didn't want to go!…'

'… Has moved out of the family home and into a house with his young girlfriend. They are both the kings of discount living and only eat at two for one restaurants, or any place that accepts discount vouchers, entertainment cards etc… It is quite odd in this Club where most of the lads are free spending so he does cop a bit from the other boys – I however back him up and am supportive of him and his way of thinking!…'

'…Returned from the 2003 end of season break in a real dilemma – no money because of severe gambling problem ($20,000 down after 2 years) a child on the way (with [name], the mother, residing in [State]) and suffering severe homesickness…Did arrange for part time work in a shoe repairers in the city. An interview is pending however I feel the child will be more than plenty for him to cope with. I feel he lacks maturity and considering he is in his third year at the Club can't see this changing any time soon…'

'…Once again a little lost with what we are to do with him. Still living at home with a father that has no idea what's going on in life so there's not much direction he can receive from him…'

'…was awoken early one morning by [name]'s Mum in tears about a problem – [name] partner of three years had decided she no longer wanted to be with him! (to be honest I thought she was going to tell me he lost a leg. She was in such a state). It was a pretty unsettling time and whilst his outward mood was his usual quiet self he was quite hurt…'

It is evident from these entries that many of these individual profiles contain information of a highly personal nature which in many other work organisations would not have been readily available to employers. Such information may also have been seen as constituting an invasion of privacy. These profiles constitute forms of workplace surveillance that were justified by concerns that had the players' interests at heart. At the same time they circulated in administrative contexts that had the Club's interests at heart.
This information, about off-field behaviours and attitudes, was considered important for a number of reasons: It was argued that such information could help explain or shed light on on-field playing performance: Clubs needed to be aware of what was happening in players' off-field lives so that they could identify and manage any risks these off-field activities might pose to the individual player or club.

PDMs were aware of some of the concerns and possible consequences that might emerge from this sort of personal profiling. They were also aware of issues of trust for their ongoing relationship with players. Some spoke of their self-censorship in compiling and circulating these profiles. They made judgements about what to pass on to other officials in the Football Department, or commit to paper in a way that formalises conversations or meetings they have had with players. But they also argued for the usefulness and benefits, as they saw them, of these profiles. It would not be too difficult to imagine a litigious scenario related to the collation, circulation and storage of this type of information. Particularly if it could be argued that this sort of information played some part in trading, drafting or contract processes that had an adverse affect on a player's career.

What is of interest in these processes, in the particular cultural, regulatory and sports entertainment context of the AFL, are the ways in which a sports entertainment business generates a series of expectations about appropriate behaviours and dispositions that serve to identify a person/player as professional. A related interest is with the forms of control or regulation that the AFL, Clubs and sponsors/partners seek to exercise over players once they recruit them. Foucault’s work, and the social scientific work that has drawn on it, enables us to identify and analyse how relations of power, forms of regulation and arts of governing a competition, a Club, a team, an individual, yourself, intersect and interact in ongoing attempts to make up (Rose & Miller 1992) the professional footballer.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper indicates that 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 emergence of PDMs in Clubs is clearly part of a wider set of industry changes and adaptation that have evolved with the development of the AFL as a fully professional sports entertainment industry.

However the industry, and key organisations within it, need to consider the ways in which personal, and private information related to AFL players is gathered and recorded in a formal or semi-formal manner, and circulated within a Club environment. Importantly, how is this data stored or kept secure to protect the privacy of individual players? What protocols should be developed to regulate these processes? What rights and responsibilities attach to players, PDMs and other officials in these processes? Should players have the right to know what information related to them is recorded and circulated under the banner of concerns with player welfare? Clearly tensions exist between the paternalistic and surveillance practices that emerge from the involvement of PDMs in risk management and player management. These tensions raise questions about the ways in which power relations in these contexts shape understandings of professionalism; of a prudent, risk aware disposition as a professional; and the surveillance practices Clubs establish to monitor and develop these characteristics in their
employees. These tensions are worthy of further research and analysis as this sports entertainment industry develops.

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