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# The transition from schoolboy to elite sportsman: Education and training and early career players in the AFL

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**I**n 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 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. 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 the AFL at this time professional development has a focus on engaging players in a variety of education and training activities - TAFE & University courses, and workshops and seminars that the industry has put in place to educate players about issues that the industry sees as important.

The paper focuses on our research with players we classified as *Early Career*. For many of these 17 to 21 year old young men the later years of secondary schooling were compromised in their pursuit of an AFL career. Their subsequent drafting is followed by intense efforts to physically prepare for football. In this context our research indicates that many Early Career players put football first, second and third. Education and training, and professional development come further down their list of priorities.

## Introduction

*I was really disappointed with my year 12. I had been going well for a fair bit of the year but with my team being in the finals and draft camp and all that I really let my study drop away. I just bombed-out at the end.*

Early Career player

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 to explore 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.

In exploring these, and other issues, we take the view that 'professional identity' isn't *natural*, but is developed through a range of 'professional development' activities (a common link to all other 'professions'). Our analysis of these processes is informed by Foucault's work on the *care of the self* (2000a; 2000b). Foucault's analytical framework allows us to focus on the ways in which professional identity is governed in diverse ways by coaches, club officials, player

agents and the AFL Commission/Executive; and the manner in which players conduct themselves that can be characterised as professional, or not.

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. The emergence of a concern with player development, education and general off-field activities is, in a great many respects, a positive development - but a development that is not without its tensions. In the past decade there has been a marked increase in awareness of the need to provide AFL footballers life skills that will help them to be both a footballer, and to not be a footballer. In a career that can be cut short with the stroke of a pen, the twist of a knee or a loss of form, it is prudent that the AFL encourages players to think about life after football. It is the contradiction between giving your all to be a footballer and preparing not to be one that is at the heart of many of the tensions that surround a current emphasis on professional development activities for AFL players.

At a number of levels the industry leads, and financially supports, the current emphasis on players' involvement in professional development related education and training activities. Foremost here is the partnership between the AFL and AFL-Player's Association (PA), supported by an annual expenditure of \$1.5 million, aimed at nurturing the

professional development of AFL players. To this end, they run a variety of seminars and workshops designed to equip players with knowledge about the industry and the risks, expectations and possibilities that currently attach to being an AFL footballer. Further to this, are AFL-PA administered Education and Training Grants that provide financial support and incentive for players to access and participate in approved Education and Training courses/activities.

This support and the activities that flow from it strongly influence the discussions that League and AFL-PA officials, club officials and coaches, and players have about what needs to be done in relation to providing players with balance in their lives, and the opportunity to develop career options away from football. The research presented in this paper is based on over 70 interviews with various personnel inside and outside of AFL football clubs, including, of course, players. Interviews with coaching and football department staff were undertaken at three clubs (with representation from two states). Here, one to one interviews were conducted with General Managers, Recruiting Officers and Player Development Managers (PDMs) while group interviews were conducted with Coaching Staff. All participants were invited to discuss their perspectives on a range of issues and processes related to the delivery of professional development for AFL players, across the different phases of their careers (Early, Mid and Late).

In this paper we focus on the conversations we had with, and about, players we classified as Early Career. For many of these 17 to 21 year old young men the later years of secondary schooling can be compromised in their pursuit of an AFL career. This sentiment is vividly expressed in the quotation used to open this paper. Subsequent to getting drafted it is commonplace for young players to experience some degree of, often major, relocation from the home to the club environment. This, while coping with the intense effort required to physically prepare for AFL football can make the transition from schoolboy to AFL football a demanding one. Despite the emerging industry expectation that the professional identity of an AFL footballer involves much more than just playing the game, the ways in which young players understand and participate in education and training activities are not without tensions.

## Professional Identity

Professionalisation in this context is understood in terms of Michel Foucault's (1978, 1985, 1986, 1988) 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. In his later work on the ethics of selfhood 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, 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 a professional, a

particular kind of person. 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, say, an AFL footballer.

This idea of the development of a professional identity suggests a process rather than a state. A process that can be analysed, in part, as a series of suggestions, incitements or sanctions that emerge from a range of settings and authorities, and which have as their aim the development of certain behaviours and attitudes that identify the person as professional. The following statement is illustrative of a wider shift that has taken place with regard to the determination of attributes needed to be a professional footballer. While there continues to be considerable emphasis on the physical attributes of players, the body, there is a clear indication of an increasing industry awareness of the non-physical attributes in the interests of 'risk management' (Kelly & Hickey, 2005).

*Once you get past the very top group, you're dealing with kids that can all play footy. You need kids that can adapt to the game plan. I mean we're going to teach them how to play footy so that's the least important part. What you want is a kid that can learn. I call it 'learnability'. We can teach them if they're able to learn. To be honest some kids are a lot better at it than others. You get some kids who are great junior players but they can't adapt to the game plan and just continue to make the same mistakes time and time again. Yeah, we put a lot of emphasis on their 'learnability'. It's something that is really hard to judge or measure. We talk to them, meet their families and friends, talk to their coaches and teachers. You get a feel for it I suppose.*

Member of Coaching Staff

To be a professional invokes, also, a sense of asceticism, within this process of professional development - 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), 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" (p.282).

At one and the same time these ascetic practices are both productive and limiting. They *produce* particular relations to the Self and to others through the work one does on oneself - often on the encouragement, direction or advice of the coach, or the counsellor, or the manager. They are *limiting* because they close off other ways of being, other forms of relationship to the Self and others because such relationships would mark one as 'unprofessional'. As we will show in the following sections, aesthetic practices require AFL players to do certain sorts of work on themselves.

Understanding the processes of professionalisation in this way highlights the tensions that are inherent in these processes. Research into these tensions can provide new knowledge about why some players (clubs, coaches, managers) appear to embrace this professional identity

while others do not. This knowledge can inform and enhance processes of professional development, and contribute to understanding the ways in which professional development in a significant sports entertainment industry might be managed more effectively in the future.

## Industry Tensions

Identity is also many faceted and produces different outcomes, responsibilities, obligations and rights at different times and in different settings. In relation to this particular project two closely related aspects of a professional identity are important.

### 1. Preparing for life after football

Contemporary ideas about 'professional development' for AFL footballers include an encouragement to develop a certain positive orientation or disposition to the future - *What can I do now as a professional footballer to set myself up when the inevitable happens?* Especially in a profession that can cut you off at the knees (or the groin, or ankle, back...) at any time without warning. This is an issue that has attracted federal and state government funding through an Australian Sports Commission managed National Athlete Career and Education program. Together with the Hawthorn Football Club and Victoria University the AFL-PA recently (2003) developed a Striving Towards Elite Performance (STEP) program - with studies in Career Goal Setting, Leadership, Psychology, Media, Public Speaking, Stress Management (and other units) - leading to a Certificate II in Sport, with a pathway to a Diploma of Sport and Recreation.

Underpinning many of the activities that take place in this context of education and training is a strong degree of prudentialism. A prudent, risk aware relationship to present circumstances and how what I do now might impact on what I can do in the future. *I can do a course, or some training ...but why?* This 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 (if their luck, and good management holds). Indeed, the AFL-PA reports that the average AFL player plays 43 games in a career spanning only 4.3 years. The incapacity to imagine a life beyond a sporting career, or to adopt a 'professional', prudent disposition towards this possibility is a feature of the lives of many 'professional' sportspeople in various sports industries. In a landmark study of *The Welfare of Retired Jockeys* Harriet Speed (2001) argues that these professional sportspeople, in general, had no 'retirement plan' in place at the time of their retirement. Moreover, "few current jockeys were taking any action, or intending to take actions, to prepare for their retirement" (pp ii-iv).

### 2. Being Professional: Doing something to fill your day

Like many other professionals AFL footballers are encouraged to develop an identity that would see them striving for balance in their life - a balance that would enhance their effectiveness and performance, and thus contribute to their club/team performance. Teachers, for example, are encouraged to see themselves as professionals

who have a duty of care to manage their health and well-being in ways that would enable them to manage stress effectively. The development of this professional duty of care will, it is claimed, enable their schools to be more effective (Department of Education 1998, Kelly & Colquhoun 2003, Kelly 2002). At the present time in the AFL professional 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 (*The Age* 7/3/03). 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. This is a common theme in many contemporary workplaces and the research literature suggests a complex series of relationships between, 'balance', 'well-being' and 'effectiveness/performance' (eg Lewis 2001).

## Education and Training, and Early Career Players

As a key element of the AFL's equalisation strategies the National Draft system ensures that clubs have access to the next batch of young talented players on the basis of need rather than on the basis of proximity, wealth or influence. To this end, all young players must submit themselves to the draft process and willingly accept the outcomes of their selection. After all, the alternative is non-selection!

Many of the Early Career players we spoke to recognised that their commitment to football had implications on their capacity to pursue other activities, such as education long before they were drafted. The talent identification process starts long before players get drafted and there are ample opportunities for talented young players to contemplate 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 elite, 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

Compounding their general lack of energy for activities outside of football was the singularity of their focus on football. As aspiring AFL footballers many Early Career players talked about the need to give football *everything they had*. Within this mindset, activities that took their attention away from football were generally unwelcomed. For many young players this created a tension between the wisdom of having something outside of football and the need to make the most of the opportunity they had to make it as an AFL player. In all of the conversations we had with Early Career players the chance to become an AFL player subordinated all other activities. Even those players who had commenced Degree programs revealed that they would *chip away at them* as long as it didn't affect their football. Changes to weekly training schedules on account of playing timetables and injury programs, were given specific mention as impediments to maintaining regular commitments outside of football.

*In my first year here I started doing year 12 again. I was pretty determined to make up for not doing well the year before. But it was really tough. I mean the training schedule was even tougher so I just couldn't do it. If I'd have kept going with the course I'm sure I wouldn't have played as many senior games. I don't know how the other guys do it. They're amazing.*

Early Career player

*I came here already expecting to start my degree straight away, so I guess that's what I've done. It'll probably take me 10 years to finish it but it takes my mind off footy.*

Early Career player

A number of Early Career players spoke of their inability to meet the institutional commitments associated with formal education and training programs. At the forefront of this was their inability to meet the demands of classes and assessment schedules. Though 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 the timetables. While the players generally reported that their lecturers/tutors were understanding of their demands 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.

*(Name of Tertiary Institution) was alright. They understood my situation and were pretty tolerant, but at the end of the day they aren't going to shift classes to suit me. I just found it difficult to get to lectures and to keep up with the work. We've got videos to watch, team meetings, club commitments and.... its just hard to have something else saying you need to be here at this time too!*

*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

A number of Early Career players spoke positively about their involvement in *in-house* education and training programs. These ranged from representing their club in a range of football and welfare development activities (notably with schools) to undertaking formal programs such as the STEP Program. Foremost among the virtues of such programs was the fact that they were organised around the player's schedules and were overtly supported by their club, and team mates.

*I really like the fact that I can do it (STEP) here. There's a whole group of us doing it so we can sort of work off each other... Yeh, I reckon it's been good. (Name of PDM) sort of works with us so you've got good support. Its pretty hard to miss sessions!*

Early Career player

## Conclusion

Early Career AFL footballers face a range of tensions in trying to respond to the pressures and practices associated with undertaking education and training programs 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. Foremost here is the intensity and singularity of their focus on football. While Early Career players generally recognised the vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with a football identity the *chance to make it* was a powerful force in channeling their attention to football matters. Compounding this is the realisation that many Early Career players enter professional football with a truncated academic background, as a result of having given priority to football during their later secondary years of schooling.

Early Career players seemed to attract specific attention in relation to doing something meaningful outside of football. The underpinning belief was that if they could see the value of getting themselves involved in some sort of education and/or training outside of football, early in their career, the better chance they would have of establishing sustainable routines. The prevailing logic for them was that having something outside of football would make them less vulnerable should they not make it as a footballer. Early Career players generally subscribed to this wisdom and were willing to take on formal education and training activities.

However, while their minds seemed willing to engage in such activities their bodies and spirit were less available. Exhaustion presented as a recurring factor that seemed to undermine Early Career players' ability and willingness to commit to education and training activities outside of football.

In light of this research the AFL and AFL-PA should consult with players and other 'like' industry bodies about the ways to orientate young players into education and training programs that are attuned to their needs and interests. Underpinning this is the need for a deeper understanding of the reasons why so many young athletes drop out of or fail higher education courses (Jobling & Boag, 2003). Such insight could provide the catalyst for strategic interventions that can reduce the incidence of these occurrences, and lead to enhanced professional development experiences for young athletes, particularly AFL players, in the Early phases of their careers. In-house education and training programs, such as STEP, do not have a long history so judgements about their impact are necessarily limited - particularly as there has been little or no external evaluation of these programs.

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## Author Notes

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