

## *Pasifika Diaspora and the Changing Face of Australian Rugby League*

*David Lakisa, Daryl Adair,  
and Tracy Taylor*

The Pasifika diaspora in Australia is making an indelible imprint on the sport of rugby league.<sup>1</sup> In part, this stems from the growing number of players of Polynesian (including Māori) and Melanesian heritage who now take part in the National Rugby League (NRL). The heightened involvement of players of Pasifika origin has created many opportunities but has also presented challenges. This multifaceted, ethno-culturally diverse group of footballers of Pasifika heritage face a range of complex issues that marks them as distinctive in Australian sport. Indeed, researchers can glean much about the diverse and complex Pasifika diaspora in Australia by exploring their involvement in the rugby league. As this article shows, NRL players of Pasifika heritage typically experience complex patterns of migration and geographic mobility as well as profound cultural pressures and stereotyping (both within and outside their communities). Pasifika migrants additionally face problems associated with eligibility for international teams and the underlying politics of allegiance to a country beyond their birthplace.

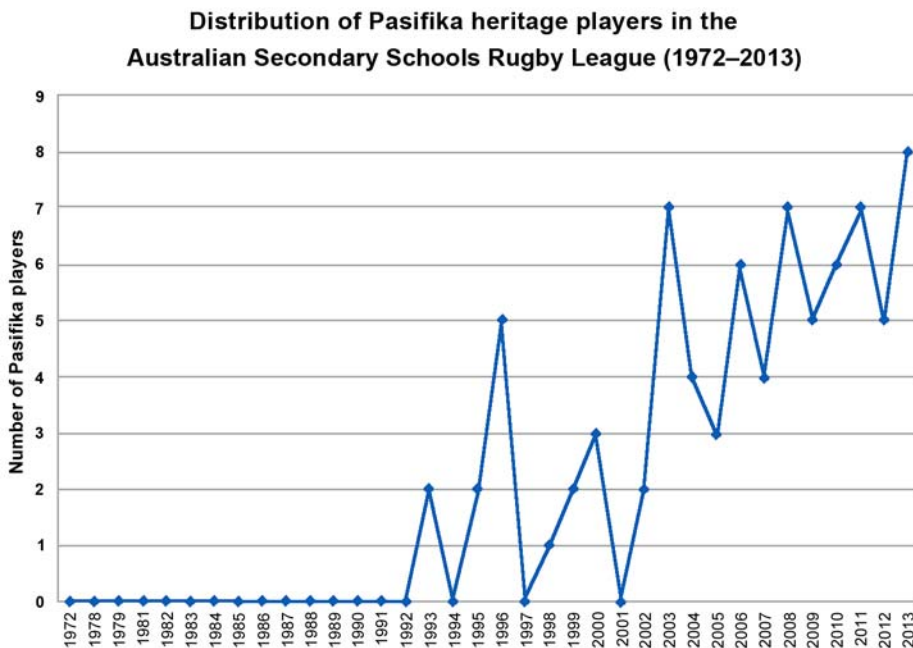
This article contributes to the limited literature on Pasifika people in an Australian sporting context by drawing on primary research on Australian rugby league and the experience therein of athletes of Pasifika descent (predominantly Samoan, Māori, and Tongan). It argues that intrinsic motivation factors relating to family, faith, and culture are key drivers that typically combine to guide the aspirations of Pasifika rugby league players in Australia. Though most of the Pacific scholarship drawn on here is from Samoan and Tongan scholars and deals with Samoan and Tongan contexts, the interrelated factors underscore the shifting nature of Australian Pasifika communities. Importantly, they are hardly homogenous;

rather they feature fundamental differences among cultures, languages, and customs (McFall-McCaffery 2010). There are also pressing issues for all Pasifika footballers, such as welfare and education needs, code hopping (moving between different football codes), the weight-for-age debate in junior competition, and remittances abroad, which, although a cultural obligation, can leave athletes feeling conflicted as either valued or devalued commodities.<sup>2</sup>

### THE STATE OF THE GAME

Rugby league is one of four major competing football codes in Australia (the others being rugby union, Australian Rules football, and soccer). It is the third most attended spectator sport in the country, behind Australian Rules football and horse racing (ABS 2010). The National Rugby League is the premier competition, with 16 professional Australasian clubs based in New South Wales (10 teams), Queensland (3 teams), Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, and New Zealand. The game's roots stem from the great split from rugby union in northern England on 29 August 1895, which was driven by problems that working-class players had with the amateur code; in essence, laborers wanted to be financially compensated for time away from work if they were injured while playing rugby, something the London-based Rugby Football Union refused to sanction (Collins 1998, 2006). The game continued to evolve as a separate code in England; by 1907, it was taken up in Australia, with players demanding financial allowances for participation (Collis and Whiticker 2008).

The thirteen-a-side code of rugby league has gone through numerous sociocultural, demographic, rule, governance, and structural changes over the years. A salient recent trend, especially over the past decade, has been the dramatic rise in participation of Pasifika players. In 2011, 36 percent of NRL playing contracts were signed by players of Pasifika descent (Heptonstall 2011). This sea change in terms of Pasifika participation in football has also been apparent in junior rugby league and is reflected in a rising proportion of selections for elite teams. For example, the records of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) junior representative competitions (under 16 and under 18), which established a heritage database from 2003, indicate that an average of 28 percent of the total number of players selected between 2007 and 2010 were of Pasifika descent. Moreover, since 2000, 25 percent of players selected for the prestigious Australian Schoolboys side have been of Pasifika descent—a stark contrast to the 4



percent over the previous thirteen-year period (1987–1999) (Lakisa 2011; see figure 1).<sup>3</sup> These data suggest that Pasifika players, and by extension Pasifika communities, have emerged as a particularly substantial cohort within Australian rugby league.

When Australia’s population figures are taken into account, the above-mentioned statistics are even more striking. Australia has been reshaped over many years by immigration, with 26 percent of the current estimated resident population of 22 million people born overseas (ABS 2011b). Our interest is with those who self-identified in the 2006 census as Pacific Islander or Māori; the combined total for these two groupings stood at 210,600, making up just 1.04 percent of Australia’s total population (ABS 2006). What is immediately evident, therefore, is that there is a significant statistical overrepresentation of Pasifika participants in rugby league.

## PASIFIKA SPORTING PROWESS

Whether in Australia, New Zealand, or the Pacific Islands, the two rugby codes—league and union—have been bastions of masculinity. For those of Pasifika identity, these collision sports have had particular salience; customary notions of manliness among males have prized the physical aggres-

sion that league and union expect. The games might have been developed in Victorian England, but as forms of social practice they were ideally adapted to the aspirations and attributes of Pasifika males from many cultural backgrounds (Hokowhitu 2004; Grainger 2008). Over time, rugby league and union not only accommodated Pasifika players but also enabled them to showcase their power and skill. This has brought significant benefits but also limitations and constraints.

As also discussed by a number of other contributors to this special issue, Pasifika rugby players (whether league or union) are now globally recognized as “exquisite” athlete products, professional performers, and prime commodities for transfer or purchase (Besnier 2012; Horton 2012). Although this suggests that they are highly valued, Pasifika athletes may also be subject to exploitation and stereotyping, both within and beyond sport (Hokowhitu 2004; Zakus and Horton 2009). For example, as both Chris Valiotis (2008) and Domenica Gisella Calabrò (this issue) have argued, popular media almost exclusively focus on the overt physical attributes of Pasifika players as opposed to their intellectual attributes, which are often difficult to identify or demonstrate in a sport setting in which physical literacy is dramatized. The physical prowess of Pasifika athletes might be considered a blessing, but assumptions that they are “born” to play rugby or are “natural” rugby players have a twofold impact: first, they devalue the tremendous work ethic and preparation of Pasifika athletes; second, they send a message to young Pasifika males that acumen in collision sports ought to be prized above other cultural alternatives. This is not dissimilar to the African-American “hoop dreams” phenomenon, in which young males put all their energy in shooting baskets and aspiring to an elusive college scholarship and a professional basketball career (Hoberman 1997).

Intriguingly, there has been a reaction in Australia against the physical size and prowess of Pasifika youth in the rugby codes. One response has been the introduction of “weight-for-age” competitions in response to concerns raised by non-Pasifika parents for the safety of their smaller-sized children when playing against their Pasifika counterparts (Lane 2006; Williams 2008). This is a complex issue: on the one hand, non-Pasifika parents might be criticized for overreacting to the athleticism of Pasifika youth who are the same age as their children; on the other hand, researchers have argued that Pasifika adolescents typically have larger physiques and hold vastly different attitudes and ideals toward body image than their Caucasian counterparts (McCabe and others 2011), in part because

of different dietary customs but also owing to genetic predispositions to a mesomorphic somatotype (Brewis and others 1998; Swinburn and others 1999; Craig and others 2001). So even in the early stages of development, Pasifika youth are thought to be “different” and, paradoxically, are both celebrated and derided as exemplars of optimum physical development in rugby league.

### PASIFIKA SPORTING MOBILITY

The “brawn drain” (Bale 1991), otherwise known as outward labor migration of athletic talent, has been explored from a number of perspectives in the context of the Pacific Islands. The Tongan state, for example, views rugby migration as a positive exchange, partly due to the economic benefit accrued by the emigration of sporting talent: value is added to the local economy through professional players providing significant remittances to family back home (Besnier 2012). For athletes, though, the search for greener pastures as well as aspirations for producing collective benefit in line with kinship responsibilities fuel “a politics of hope that rubs shoulders with the reality of disappointment and exploitation” (Besnier 2012, 502).

Intersections of geopolitical processes do not function in a linear way; the encroachment of foreign people, values, and cultural products in new settings results in the negotiation of new and ever-changing boundaries (Maguire and Falcoux 2011; Hallinan and Jackson 2008). Recent research by Yoko Kanemasu and Gyoza Molnar into the complex interplay between rugby migration and the (re)making of identity for Fijian rugby players has brought to light two key themes in terms of the mobility of Pasifika athletes:

First, far from being powerless and passive victims, these athletes actively negotiate and seek to exert control over migration processes by cultivating and mobilising an effective migratory network. . . . Second, and more importantly, rugby as a symbolic marker of collective identity provides emigrant players with a vehicle for cultivating a sense of collective belonging and pride in their island home. (2013, 731)

The active negotiation of Pasifika identities (first or second generation), the sense of collective belonging, and the involvement of Pasifika in sporting organizations are areas sparsely researched in Australian sport. Though much has been done from a New Zealand (Grainger 2008; Mila-

Schaaf 2010; Holland 2012) or Pacific Islands perspective (Uperesa 2010; Kanemasu and Molnar 2012; Besnier 2012), there is plenty of potential in exploring these underlying complexities within an Australian sporting context.

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the Australian public has taken considerable interest in Pasifika athletes who have tried to maximize their income on the field. The cases of two prominent Pasifika athletes, Israel Folau and Sonny Bill Williams, illustrate this point. Folau, an Australian-born Tongan, is the first Australian athlete to play three professional football codes (rugby league, Australian Rules football, and rugby union). He is a dual international for two of those codes and was the youngest player (eighteen years and 184 days) in rugby league history to be selected for the Australian Kangaroos (rugby league national team). In a recent episode of the television documentary *Pacific Sport 360*, which showcases Pacific Islander sporting identities in Australasia, Folau revealed he switched rugby codes for financial and family reasons (Cox 2013). Williams, New Zealand-born of Samoan ancestry, left rugby league under controversial circumstances to pursue what became a decorated career in rugby union. He was a member of the 2011 Rugby Union World Cup winning side, the New Zealand All Blacks, and in 2012 he won a Super 15 Rugby championship (the largest professional rugby competition in the southern hemisphere) with the Waikato Chiefs. He even commenced a professional boxing career before returning to rugby league in early 2013 to help the Sydney Roosters win the NRL championship. Both Folau and Williams have been highly sought after and marketable Pasifika athletes whose prowess is being traded across the “sporting ebay” (Jackson 2012)—which has led to their being variously viewed as money hungry or disloyal to their respective clubs or employers (Robinson 2013). Code hopping presents enormous financial windfall opportunities for players to take up off-season stints in the lucrative Japanese and European rugby union, as rugby league salaries hardly compare with those of North American or European professional football codes such as the National Football League (NFL) and the English Premier League (EPL) (Kent 2012). However, the cultural and familial motivations of their strategies to maximize income from sport may be misinterpreted by those who do not understand the importance of family, faith, and culture for Pasifika athletes (Schaaf 2006; Lakisa 2011). In fact, eight of the past twelve players who have defected across to rival football codes have been of Pasifika heritage. Additionally, since 2003, the only three players to become dual-code rugby internationals have been of

Pasifika descent: Timana Tāhu (Māori), Lote Tuqiri (Fijian), and Israel Folau (Tongan). This process, and the need for it, is often misunderstood in Australia. Hence there is a need for cross-cultural awareness about the complexities of Pasifika involvement in Australian rugby league, which necessitates an appreciation of life beyond the playing field.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA

In his role with the NSWRL Academy, the principal author of this article conducted a mixed method study between April–July 2008 and August 2010 on Pasifika-related issues. It was designed to capture participation motivations and associated sociocultural factors during the rugby league journey of self-identified Pasifika players in the National Rugby League. The study involved a convenience sample survey of forty-seven players of Pasifika descent who were contracted to five Australian-based NRL clubs; they participated via a combination of semi-structured interviews and a self-administered survey comprising thirty-six questions covering five interrelated topics: family, religion, sociocultural values, education, and coaching and development. The questionnaire was developed by Matthew Rua and the principal author of this article, who at that time were employed respectively as the Victorian Rugby League multicultural development officer and the NSWRL Pacific Islander coaching and development officer. That working relationship allowed for a 100 percent response rate as the club management of all five teams ensured participation of contacted athletes of Pasifika descent, each of whom made himself available for this foundational study.

This article is particularly relevant in the Polynesian context, as 43 participants identified as Samoan, Māori, Tongan, Niuean, or Cook Islander. The remaining 4 participants identified as being of Melanesian descent (Fijian and Solomon Islander; see table 1). In terms of birthplace, 28 participants were born in New Zealand, 15 in Australia, and 4 in the Pacific Islands. Two convenience sample groups were used: those with first-grade NRL experience (31) and those playing in the Under 20s National Youth Competition (16). The average age of the combined sample groups was twenty-one and a half years old, while the age distribution ranged between eighteen and thirty-two years old. All data from the quantitative survey questions were entered directly into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to feature tabling and charting of information. The data were analyzed using percentages for items and mean scores for illustrating results from ques-

Table 1. Cultural Identification of Survey Participants

	Number
Samoan	20
Māori	11
Tongan	9
Fijian	3
Niuean	2
Cook Islander	1
Solomon Islander	1
Total	47

tions requiring ranked responses. Several questions in the survey provided an opportunity for participants to add their own opinions and comments; this provided valuable qualitative data to supplement the quantitative survey responses.

## FINDINGS

The survey results highlight three influential key pillars for Pasifika rugby league in Australia: family, faith, and culture.

### *Family*

The results show that a collectivistic view was shared by all forty-seven participants, each of whom attributed his success as a professional athlete to the support of his family and the wider kinship networks that constituted that collective. Participants voiced poignant comments such as “Family first” and “It’s all about the whanau [family].” These responses are consistent with Pasifika perspectives, which consider family to be the fundamental social unit and highlight the importance of collectivism, which values the needs, wishes, and desires of groups over those of individuals (Va‘a 2001; Thaman 2008; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009). Kinship obligation and reciprocal giving and receiving are the cultural and economic foundation of Pasifika social systems and communities (Francis 1995; Uperesa 2010), representing an extensive network of relationships binding many people into a communal network of sociospatial ties (Ka‘ili 2005).



The complexities of reciprocity have been highlighted in the shifting attitudes toward remittances sent by members of the Pasifika diaspora in Australia (Lee and Francis 2009). In the survey conducted with the NRL players, participants were asked to respond to a scenario in which their Australian-based parents asked for A\$5,000 for an extended family member's church overseas; 16 of the surveyed athletes indicated that they would remit finances without question; 13 responded that they would not; 10 stated that they would seriously consider it, based on the strength of their relationship with that particular member of their extended family; while the remaining 8 stated that they would partially remit. These findings are similar to those arising from Helen Lee's research on transnational ties in which 151 second-generation Tongans in various locations across Australia showed a wide range of attitudes and practices regarding remittances,<sup>4</sup> providing evidence that many second-generation Tongans in Australia are unlikely to remit at high levels, if at all, even if they maintain other forms of transnational ties (Lee 2007).

Large families have long been the backbone of Pasifika involvement in rugby league (Coffey and Wood 2008). The findings of the present study concur with this, as 77 percent of participants grew up in families with four or more children. This is a stark contrast with the latest census in Australia, which indicates that just 5 percent of families have four or more children; moreover, 38 percent of families in Australia are couples with no children (ABS 2011a). In the present study, the survey pinpointed family ties as an important factor in player involvement; siblings and cousins of current contracted players were being scouted and recruited at the junior representative level (under sixteen to twenty years). This chain participation of players with relatively large families illuminates the desires and expectations of Pasifika athletes to advance themselves and kinship networks in socioeconomic pathways (Schaaf 2006; Lakisa 2011). As with chain migration from Pacific Island nations to Australia, these opportunities are presumed to provide better economic prospects for the next generation, with expectations that they will be more successful than their elders but will also provide for them financially (Janzen 2013).

The culture of remittances offers benefits to an extended family but obviously compromises the economic position of a single provider. The expectation for Pasifika professional rugby league players to provide for their immediate family is important, given the fact that many Pasifika communities in Australia reside in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage (ABS 2006). The intergenerational transmission of privilege (or disadvan-

tage) underpins the deepening desire of reciprocity toward kin and the significant sacrifices endured in search for greener pastures (Schaaf 2006). This deeply felt sentiment was shared by most participants and voiced clearly by one who stated: “The least I could do was buy mum and dad a house. They’ve sacrificed heaps to bring us to Oz [Australia].”

The survey also found that 55 percent of the NRL sample group were experiencing pressure to become the financial breadwinners for their kinship collectives. The weight of financial expectations placed on Pasifika athletes is no simple matter, particularly when contracts are up for renewal or when players are cut from teams. The wider ramifications of salary and longevity for Pasifika players have only recently been talked about within rugby league circles. Such cultural and situational complexities need to be much better understood across the rugby league administration, particularly by coaching staff and the media. As highlighted by Julien Clément and Christina Ting Kwauk in this issue, whether a person’s identity is shaped and heavily influenced by the *anga fakatonga* (the Tongan way) or the *fa’asāmoa* (the Samoan way), a deeper understanding of a player’s immediate and extended family situation may lead to a stronger relationship of trust and value both on and off the field. Understanding athletes’ belief systems and upbringings is therefore of paramount importance.

### *Faith*

Religion (particularly Christianity) plays a central role in the lives of many Pasifika families in Australia (NSWDOCS 2006). Since Christian missionaries first arrived in the Pacific region in the 1800s, Christianity has taken a stronghold on the Pasifika population (Ravuvu 2002). These religious beliefs have now translated onto the football arena in the form of religious practices that can be readily observed at rugby league matches, such as prayer circles (pre- or post-game); ritualized hand motions or gestures (the sign of the cross and religious acknowledgments); visible tattoos of religious images and scriptural quotes; and references to a higher being during media interviews. The present study revealed that 86 percent of respondents used prayer as part of their pre-game ritual, while 68 percent attributed part or all of their success in sport to their religious beliefs.

Religious practices such as prayer can help athletes cope with uncertainty and give meaning to their activities and put them in wider perspective (Coakley and others 2009). The question of whether sport and religion are compatible for athletes in Australian rugby league is pertinent: in the present study, 64 percent of survey participants explained that nonreli-

gious coaches and executive staff could learn to be more understanding of how religion is a major part of life for people of Pasifika heritage, on and off the field. Of the percentage who felt comfortable with the coaching staff's understanding of their religious backgrounds, participants shared: "He (the coach) took time out to talk to me about my beliefs and how it differs from other faiths. It showed he actually cared and was genuine in his approach," and, "Coach isn't religious but he let us attend church during away games. He even let the whole team attend a service for a team bonding sesh [session] once. That was sweet." Such supportive, inclusive practices were reaffirmed recently by Craig Bellamy, current head coach of the highly successful NRL team Melbourne Storm, who stated, "In our game there's a huge Polynesian influence and a lot of them are very religious. As a game we've got to learn more about the Polynesian culture and the way they're brought up, what they believe in and what they value. It's a learning curve our game has to go through. The pressures in the NRL can weigh down anybody. And they say it sometimes just takes a five-minute chat to help those troubled by the strain" (2013, 39).

Furthermore, in the last decade, Pasifika players such as Talilagi Setu, Jordan Rapana, Fraser Anderson, and William Hopoate have left rugby league for a time to engage in full-time missionary service for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church. Hopoate, the second-youngest player to represent New South Wales in the annual State of Origin series and premiership-winning player in 2011 for the Manly Warringah Sea Eagles, put "faith ahead of fame" (Lane 2012a) when at the age of nineteen he put a lucrative contract on hold to complete the two-year lay ministry service. His much-anticipated return to the sport prominently signaled to rugby league stakeholders and the sporting public the significant value of religious beliefs to some Pasifika players. Hopoate shared how his volunteer service has shaped his playing future: "I definitely feel a lot more self-reliant. Tools that I've been blessed to come to know I feel will help me in the long run. . . . I feel mentally stronger. But in saying that, there's still a lot of things that I need to learn" (Barton 2013)

The increasing crossovers among Pasifika diaspora, religion, and Australian rugby league have also created future dilemmas for up-and-coming players from the Mormon faith who may want to pursue a pathway similar to Hopoate's. This difficult decision was noted by eighteen-year-old Māori-Tongan "whiz kid" Dallin Watene-Zelezniak of the Penrith Panthers NRL squad, who stated: "It's such a big decision because I always wanted to serve my mission. Two years is a long time away from family

and I'm playing football to support them. It will be difficult when the time comes" (Massoud 2013).

The survey findings reveal a notable gap existing between the attitudes of club management and the increased awareness and social acceptance of religious practices in rugby league. Pasifika rugby league players, with their distinctive yet diverse cultural values and strong religious beliefs, are ultimately in a position to determine the breadth and depth of religious practices acceptable in their professional sporting trade. The survey results suggest that within appropriate cultural settings, the social institutions of religion and sport can coexist to create a working fusion in a Pasifika and Australian sporting context.

### *Culture*

It is clear from this study that Pasifika rugby league players strongly value their distinctive cultural upbringings. Pasifika customs and traditions are commonly practiced within kinship relationships, such as eating traditional food; speaking the native tongue (either fluently or in part); strictly adhering to parental directives; and respecting traditional ways of celebrating birthdays, weddings, funerals, worship services, and family prayer. Additionally, in the Australian context, a common element in Māori, Pasifika, and Aboriginal cultures is the central role of music, art, and dance in reflecting traditional spiritual beliefs and the importance of the people's relationship to the surrounding environment (Ford 1995). These ethno-cultural beliefs and practices were apparent in the survey responses; for instance, 68 percent said they spoke a language other than English at home during childhood and adolescence; 90 percent participated in traditional styles of cooking using an earth oven (*hangi* or *umu*); while 75 percent participated in traditional cultural performances.

Understandings of key values and principles of the "Pasifika way" (Crocombe 1975; Anae and others 2001) are significant starting points when working with Pasifika diaspora. Too often, however, there is great disparity between principle and practice. The proliferation of Pasifika talent has provided fresh challenges for rugby league. For example, in March and April 2013, the National Rugby League experienced the sudden and tragic deaths of two young Pasifika players through suicide. In response to these tragic losses, and while announcing an increase in funding for player welfare programs and staffing, Paul Heptonstall, the current NRL welfare and education manager, conceded that there are cultural nuances and pressures that are not easy for non-Pasifika sport adminis-

trators and coaches to understand (Badel 2013). The survey findings illuminate this cultural gap. The NRL sample group strongly indicated that besides the physical demands of being an elite sportsman, expectations from family and friends make up the most difficult aspect of being a professional Pasifika footballer. From these deeply unfortunate events one may infer the profound pressure to perform that Pasifika men are under; they also serve as a reminder that the aspirations of young Pasifika players and their families may be starkly different from the ideas and norms of administrators, media, and coaches from a Western perspective. While sport demands Pasifika bodies, and families and kin rely on athletic performance, the players' souls and personal welfare can seem abandoned (Field 2013).

As the inaugural Pacific Islander coaching and development officer for the New South Wales Rugby League, the principal author witnessed firsthand the intricacies of cultural pressures and expectations within rugby league circles. He was quite often the first point of contact for several Pasifika parents, players, coaching staff, and media personnel with selection or recruitment concerns, contract negotiation issues, foreign language translation requirements, naming or pronunciation conventions, Pasifika culture training workshops, conflict resolution disputes caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings, family welfare visits, and mediation for rugby league judicial proceedings. These complex insights were reinforced by the present study; several eighteen- to twenty-year-old players on minimal contracts personally disclosed the enormous pressure they felt to provide financially for their families. For instance, one player confided, "Everyone thinks I'm rich just 'cos they see me on TV, but it's nowhere near like that." Another participant responded, "I don't care if I live on nothing, as long as mum and dad get some money."

Two players even faced physical discipline from their family if they did not perform well during weekly matches. On three occasions, assistance with money transfer facilities was sought by young players who were living away from home. These telling experiences, which were highlighted by the present research, underscore the importance of cultural nuances and associated pressures experienced by Pasifika athletes in Australia and, therefore, the need to widen the understanding of these complexities on the part of the management and media stakeholders of rugby league. These varied lived experiences and approaches to sport on the part of diasporic Pasifika players make it apparent that unitary categorizations or generalizations not only tend to be misleading but in a sense deny the

diverse nature of Australian-Pasifika sporting identities and, by extension, their Pasifika representations.

Heritage, birthplace, residency rules, and citizenship statuses are rapidly changing the landscape of international rugby league, with players now pledging and switching allegiance with cultural pride motivations. New Zealand-born representative player James Tamou (Māori heritage) opted to pledge his rugby league allegiance to the New South Wales Blues and Australian Kangaroos teams. This critical choice between his country of birth and his country of residence drew media headlines that read, “He’ll always be a Maori. But New Zealand should have moved faster” (Jackson 2012) and, following an Australian victory against New Zealand, “Aus-sie Jim’ Tamou has last laugh on Kiwis” (Mascord 2012). Tamou avidly defended his motives for his representative decisions: “It wasn’t money. Those match payments, I couldn’t care less. The excitement of playing [State of] Origin is enough for me. The passion and intensity is something else” (Lane 2012b). The reverse is also happening, with international eligibility rules allowing a single change of national allegiance per rugby union World Cup cycle. Roy Asotasi, Jeff Lima, Brent Kite, and Fuifui Moimoi are high-profile Pasifika players who in 2013 switched allegiance to represent Sāmoa and Tonga after playing several Tests with New Zealand and Australia. Junior Sa’u, who switched his allegiance from New Zealand to Sāmoa, shared his deep desire to maintain the link with his matua (parents) and malaga (journey) by stating, “I’m not only doing [it] for myself, I’m doing it for my Mum and Dad. That’s the country they were born and raised in. It’s a privilege and an honour for me to do that for them” (Barclay 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The National Rugby League was once the domain of Australians of European descent, but it is now a cultural hub of Pasifika talent (Badel 2013). The rugby league field is one of many sociocultural sites for the contemporary achievements of Pasifika in Australia—the “efflorescence of things Pacific” (Teaiwa and Mallon 2005, 210)—which is particularly revealed in the Australian sporting landscape. As sport plays a significant role in the history, culture, economy, and politics of Australia (Coakley and others 2009), rugby league stakeholders ought to ensure that Pasifika values of respect, reciprocity, communalism, collective responsibility, gerontocracy, humility, love, service, and spirituality (Anae and others 2001) are

understood within a shifting paradigm of family, faith, and culture (Lakisa 2011).

Kinship bonds and cultural expectations are at the core of motivating factors for Pasifika athletes in Australian rugby league. The findings from this study provide an evolving platform to better understand the cultural nuances and dimensions of Pasifika involvement in rugby league, such as the positioning of player identities and expectations heavily influenced by the *‘āiga* (Samoan for family) and associated expectations for upward mobility for kinship networks.

The Pasifika revolution is moving forward, bringing with it complex issues among heterogeneous Pasifika communities in Australia. This complexity is perhaps not mirrored in official policy, representation, and academic grounding. The contemporary successes of the Pasifika diaspora in the National Rugby League and better understanding of athletes' beliefs systems as coping mechanisms reveal the importance of sporting and religious ties of Pasifika athletes, as well as the centrality of kinship bonds. Community development and welfare programs also need to take a broader approach to considering non-football values and incorporating them into the way that Pasifika players are recruited, managed, and portrayed in the media. The significant underrepresentation of Pasifika staff in the development arena, among policy makers, and in the club management hierarchy are critical areas requiring redress. Post-career employment significantly influences kinship responsibilities, club allegiances, geographic mobility, and labor migration issues. Though rules and governance structures cycle and change in the rugby league world, the underpinning sociocultural motivations of Pasifika athletes are likely to remain consistent for current generations.

## *Notes*

1 There is much debate on appropriate terminology when discussing Pacific people, Tagata Pasifika, Pacifica, and Māori. For the purposes of this study and its Australian context, the generic term “Pasifika” will be used to refer to people of Polynesian (including Māori), Melanesian, and Micronesian heritage (though, to the authors' best knowledge, we are not aware of any currently contracted NRL players of Micronesian heritage).

2 See Lakisa 2011; Besnier 2012; Horton 2012; Kanemasu and Molnar 2012; Uperesa 2010; Schaaf 2006.

3 The Australian Schoolboys rugby league team, which commenced in 1972, is the National Rugby League football team for secondary school male students in Australia. This elite pathway has helped to produce more than fifty senior Australian representatives at test, World Cup, or international levels.

4 The Tongans in Lee's study fell broadly into three groups: those who did not remit at all and have little or no connection with anyone in Tonga (31 percent); those with some connection to Tonga who occasionally made contributions of money or goods (59 percent); and a small group who more actively maintained transnational ties (9 percent).

## References

- ABS, Australian Bureau of Statistics  
 2006 Census of Population and Housing. Canberra: ABS.  
 2010 Spectator Attendance at Sporting Events. Canberra: ABS.  
 2011a Family Characteristics, Australia, 2009–10. Canberra: ABS.  
 2011b Migration Australia 2010–11. Canberra: ABS.
- Anae, Melani, Eve Coxon, Diana Mara, Tanya Wendt-Samu, and Christine Finau  
 2001 *Pasifika Education Research Guidelines: Final Report*. Auckland: Auckland Uniservices Limited, University of Auckland.
- Badel, Peter  
 2013 ARL Commission Expands Player Welfare after Deaths. *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 11 May.
- Bale, John  
 1991 *The Brawn Drain: Foreign Student-Athletes in American Universities*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Barclay, Chris  
 2013 Sa'u Bruised but Eager for More Test Footy. *Fairfax NZ News*, 23 April. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/league/8582762/Sa-u-bruised-but-eager-for-more-test-footy> [accessed 24 April 2013]
- Barton, Joe  
 2013 Hopoate Mentally Stronger after NRL Break. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November.
- Bellamy, Craig  
 2013 A Little Faith the Key to Saving Us from Tragedy. *The Australian*, 11 May.
- Besnier, Niko  
 2012 The Athlete's Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan. *American Anthropologist* 39 (3): 491–510.
- Brewis, Alexandra A, Stephen McGarvey, J Jones, and Boyd Swinburn  
 1998 Perceptions of Body Size in Pacific Islanders. *International Journal of Obesity* 22 (2): 185–189.



- Coakley, Jay, Chris Hallinan, Steve Jackson, and Peter Mewett  
2009 *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies in Australia and New Zealand*. North Ryde: McGraw Hill Australia.
- Coffey, John, and Bernie Wood  
2008 *100 Years: Māori Rugby League 1908–2008*. Wellington: Huia Publishers.
- Collins, Tony  
1998 *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football*. London: Frank Cass.  
2006 *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain: A Social and Cultural History*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Collis, Ian, and Alan J Whiticker  
2007 *100 Years of Australian Rugby League*. Volume 1. Chatswood, NSW: New Holland Publishers.
- Cox, Adam, producer  
2013 *Pacific Sport 360*. Documentary television series, 240 minutes. Episode 6. Produced by Beyond International.
- Craig, P, V Halavatau, E Comino, and I Caterson  
2001 Differences in Body Composition between Tongans and Australians: Time to Rethink the Healthy Weight Ranges? *International Journal of Obesity* 25 (12): 1806–1814.
- Crocombe, Ronald  
1975 *The Pacific Way: An Emerging Identity*. Suva: Lotu Pasifika Productions.
- Field, Michael  
2013 Polynesian Men a Global Sports Commodity. *Sunday Star-Times*, 26 May.
- Francis, Steven  
1995 Pacific Islander Young People: Issues of Juvenile Justice and Cultural Dislocation. In *Ethnic Minority Youth in Australia: Challenges and Myths*, edited by Carmel Guerra and Rob White, 179–192. Hobart: National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
- George, Jim, and Lena Rodriguez  
2009 Hybrid Youth Identity in the Māori/Pacific Island Diaspora in Australia: A Study of Young Urban Polynesian Men in Sydney. *New Zealand Sociology* 24 (1): 3–23.
- Grainger, Andrew  
2008 *The Browning of the All Blacks: Pacific Peoples, Rugby, and the Cultural Politics of Identity in New Zealand*. PhD dissertation, University of Maryland.
- Hallinan, Chris, and Steven Jackson, editors  
2009 *Social and Cultural Diversity in a Sporting World*. London: Emerald.

- Heptonstall, Paul  
2011 *Welfare and Education 2011 Season Review*. Moore Park, NSW: National Rugby League.
- Hoberman, John  
1997 *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hokowhitu, Brendan  
2004 Tackling Māori Masculinity: A Colonial Genealogy of Savagery and Sport. *The Contemporary Pacific* 16:259–284.
- Holland, Ryan  
2012 Governance of New Zealand National Sport Organisations: Pasifika and Māori Voices. PhD dissertation, Department of Management, College of Business, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Horton, Peter  
2012 Pacific Islanders in Global Rugby: The Changing Currents of Sports Migration. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29 (17): 2388–2404.
- Jackson, Glenn  
2012 He'll Always Be a Maori. But New Zealand Should Have Moved Faster. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April.
- Jackson, Steve  
2012 Closing plenary address at the Future of Sport in Small Nations Symposium, 23 November, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Janzen, Nicholas  
2013 Family Ties Galore in Under-20s. NRL.com, 1 April. [http://www.nrl.com/family-ties-galore-in-under-20s/tabid/10874/newsid/71476/default.aspx?pid=nrlhome\\_featured](http://www.nrl.com/family-ties-galore-in-under-20s/tabid/10874/newsid/71476/default.aspx?pid=nrlhome_featured) [accessed 1 April 2013]
- Ka'ili, Tēvita O  
2005 Tauhi vā: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond. *The Contemporary Pacific* 17:83–114.
- Kanemasu, Yoko, and Gyoza Molnar  
2013 Pride of the People: Fijian Rugby Labour Migration and Collective Identity. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48 (6): 720–735.
- Kent, Paul  
2012 Wests Tigers Star Benji Marshall to Push for Stint in Japan. *The Daily Telegraph* (Australia), 15 November.
- Lakisa, David  
2011 The Pacific Revolution: Pasifika and Māori players in Australian Rugby league. MA thesis, International Sports Management, Southern Cross University.

Lane, Daniel

- 2006 Islanders in Junior Leagues: It's a Really Big Issue. *The Sun Herald*, 16 July.
- 2012a Man on a Mission. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April.
- 2012b True Blues: Uate and Tamou Defend Decision to Ditch Homelands. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 June.

Lee, Helen

- 2007 Transforming Transnationalism: Second Generation Tongans Overseas. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 16 (2): 157–178.

Lee, Helen, and Steve Tupai Francis

- 2009 *Migration and Transnationalism*. Canberra: ANU E Press.

Lilomaiaava-Doktor, Sa'iliemanu

- 2009 Beyond Migration: Samoan Population Movement (*Malaga*) and the Geography of Social Space (*Vā*). *The Contemporary Pacific* 21:1–32.

Maguire, Joseph, and Mark Falcous, editors

- 2011 *Sport and Migration: Borders, Boundaries, and Crossings*. Oxon: Routledge.

Mascord, Steve

- 2012 "Aussie Jim" Tamou Has Last Laugh on Kiwis. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October.

Massoud, Josh

- 2013 Penrith Whiz-kid Dallin Watene-Zelezniak on Idol Will Hopoate's Path. *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 November.

McCabe, Marita P, Helen Mavoā, Lina A Ricciardelli, Gade Waqa, Kalesita Fotu, and Ramneek Goundar

- 2011 Sociocultural Influences on Body Image among Adolescent Boys From Fiji, Tonga, and Australia. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 41 (11): 2708–2722.

McFall-McCaffery, Judy

- 2010 Getting Started with Pacific Research: Finding Resources and Information on Pacific Research Models and Methodologies. *MAI Review* 1 (8): 1–5.

Mila-Schaaf, Karlo

- 2010 Polycultural Capital and the Pasifika Second Generation: Negotiating Identities in Diasporic Spaces. PhD dissertation, Sociology, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

NSWDOCS, NSW Department of Community Services

- 2006 *The Pacific Connection: A Profile of Pacific Communities in New South Wales*, edited by NSW Youth Partnership with Pacific Communities. Sydney: NSWDOCS.

Ravuvu, Asesela

- 2002 Security and Confidence as Basic Factors in Pacific Islanders Migra-

- tion. In *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and across the Pacific*, edited by Paul R Spickard, Joanne L Rondilla, and Debbie Hippolite Wright, 87–98. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Robinson, Georgina  
2013 Israel Folly? ARU, Fans Are Right in Questioning Big-Money Investment. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April.
- Schaaf, Matani  
2006 Elite Pacific Male Rugby Players' Perceptions and Experiences of Professional Rugby. *Junctures: The Journal of Thematic Dialogue* 7 (December): 41–54.
- Swinburn, B, S Ley, H Carmichael, and L Plank  
1999 Body Size and Composition in Polynesians. *International Journal of Obesity* 23:1178–1183.
- Teaiwa, Teresia, and Sean Mallon  
2005 Ambivalent Kinships? Pacific People in New Zealand. In *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*, edited by James H Liu, Tim McCreanor, Tracey McIntosh, and Teresia Teaiwa, 207–229. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Uperesa, Fa'anofo Lisaclaire  
2010 Fabled Futures: Development, Gridiron Football, and Transnational Movements in American Samoa. PhD dissertation, Anthropology, Columbia University.
- Va'a, Leulu Felise  
2001 *Saili Matagi: Samoan Migrants in Australia*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific; Apia: National University of Samoa.
- Valiotis, Chris  
2008 Suburban Footballers of Pacific Islander Ancestry: The Changing Face of Rugby League in Greater Western Sydney. *Australian Society for Sports History* 25:141–156.
- Williams, Daniel  
2008 Power Play. *Time Magazine* (World edition), 28 August.
- Zakus, Dwight, and Peter Horton  
2009 Pasifika in Australian Rugby: Emanant Cultural, Social and Economic Issues. *Sporting Traditions* 26 (2): 67–86.

### *Abstract*

This article investigates the sociocultural motivations of the Pasifika diaspora in Australian sport in the context of rugby league football. In 2011, some 36 per-

cent of National Rugby League (NRL) playing contracts were signed by players of Pasifika descent (Heptonstall 2011). There has been an accompanying rise of Pasifika influence in the game: this is apparent on the field with the high profile of star Pasifika players and off the field with the intensification of welfare and education programs intended to accommodate Pasifika athletes in the National Rugby League. The purpose of this article is to critically analyze kinship networks, religious influences, and the sociocultural expectations placed on Pasifika footballers by various stakeholders and to evaluate how these factors either motivate these athletes to play in the National Rugby League or discourage them from doing so. The article explores what these experiences reveal about the nature of Pasifika communities in an Australian context. The material presented draws on the principal author's original research on Australian rugby league and the experience of athletes of Pasifika descent, as well as his direct experience as a former sports education administrator and as the inaugural Pacific Islander coaching and development officer for the New South Wales Rugby League.

**KEYWORDS:** Pasifika, rugby league, Australian sport, sociocultural motivations