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## Game of two halves: preparing young elite rugby players for a future beyond the game

Nathan Price  
*University of Wollongong*

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Nathan Price

*University of Wollongong*

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**GAME OF TWO HALVES: PREPARING YOUNG ELITE RUGBY  
PLAYERS FOR A FUTURE BEYOND THE GAME**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

from

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

By

**Nathan Price**

(Bachelor of Business Studies, Post-Graduate Diploma in Business Studies)

The Faculty of Education

2007

## CERTIFICATION

I, Nathan Price declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signed

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Nathan Price

Date:

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has taken a long time, but without the support and assistance from a number of people I'm not sure if it would have come this far. I was always told that the PhD was a journey, but now I realise how it can shape your life over those years. The learning curve at times has been steep, not just in research but also in terms of life experiences.

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## ABSTRACT

The rise to professionalisation in 1995, and the increasing globalisation of rugby has changed the way the sport is viewed and engaged in by talented young athletes. The shift to a more professional work environment, high salaries, and the increased opportunity for young men who, once they leave school, and sometimes before, to seek employment in this workforce, has altered the way young players look, think and behave. With the shift to professionalism, the situation for young elite rugby players has become critical. Many view rugby as a career option, sacrificing education and training in pursuit of lucrative contracts, unaware of the realities of the occupation in which a relatively high number of players 'don't make it'. Those young players who are unsuccessful in their pursuit of a rugby career are often left directionless with no education or training in an alternative occupation or profession. In elite sport, retirement can be extremely difficult to cope with if athletes are not adequately prepared, or have not planned for such an event. This lack of preparation can leave athletes vulnerable to the challenges of retirement. The need for knowledge in this study relates to how young elite rugby players make sense of rugby as work, how they understand themselves as athletes, and how they make sense of their opportunities for a life outside rugby. The opportunities, barriers and needs for career development, planning and education to prepare young athletes for a life outside elite rugby and the ways these young men negotiate their lives and their alternatives are largely unknown.

This thesis examines the experiences of young men who are part of the first generation of players who will only experience rugby in its professional format, and provides them with a voice as they pursue work as professional rugby players. More specifically, this study explores issues such as rugby as an occupational choice for young men, how players perceive, and are subsequently prepared for, a life outside rugby, their identification with the sport, and their needs and concerns as elite young rugby players. To gain a further understanding of the resources and opportunities available to assist in the development of these young men and their preparation for a life outside rugby, the study also explores coaches' and managements' perspectives and the ways in which they approach these relatively new issues facing young athletes. Investigation in this area of young athletes' experience has been limited, with the majority of research

focusing on recently retired athletes, or those more established in their professional sport career, as opposed to those beginning to embark on, or pursuing a career in professional sport. There has been little research into the career experiences of elite young rugby players as a basis of understanding how best to prepare them for their future experiences both during, and post-elite athletic performance.

The study employed a largely qualitative methodology, interviewing twenty-five young elite rugby players (18-22 years of age) in New Zealand and New South Wales, and eight coaching and management staff from rugby union and the wider sports industry. The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews enabled a rich understanding of the experiences of elite young rugby players from the perspectives of the players, coaches and management. A mixed mode approach was used to a limited extent, where additional quantitative data was collected through the use of a questionnaires provided to one group of participants.

The main themes that emerged from this inquiry formed key considerations for the preparation of elite young rugby players in their future beyond rugby. These considerations highlighted the career development needs, barriers, opportunities and experiences of elite young rugby players as they pursued a career in professional rugby. Among others, the analysis of interviews identified an identity heavily invested in rugby, unrealistic predictions of their future rugby life cycle, the structure of the work, and support from their clubs and academies as key inhibitors to players career development and post-rugby planning. The study revealed that the involvement in elite rugby largely does not facilitate the accomplishment of developmental tasks that athletes require later in life. In many cases these young men are sacrificing the potential breadth of their future selves in the pursuit of a rugby career. Thus, the study points to the need for a greater focus in the support, assistance and resources for young elite rugby players in their career development and planning for their post-rugby future. These young men are in many cases at risk of having no tangible entry into an occupation or career should they not succeed in professional rugby.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter introduces the study, noting the significance of sport in New Zealand society, and the particular dominance of rugby. Briefly discussed are some issues relating to professional rugby that informed this study, including the special need for the career development and post-sport planning of its elite participants. This chapter then outlines the context for the study, followed by the research problem and the rationale for the research.

### 1.1 Background to the Research

Since its introduction, rugby has formed an important part of sport, culture and national identity in New Zealand. New Zealand's prowess on the rugby field has given the country an influence in the game out of all proportion to its population. However, it is rugby's shift from amateurism to professionalism in 1995 and its rise as a career option for talented young athletes that has largely created the need for the current study. The inception of this new workforce has created a new range of issues surrounding work as a rugby player that are yet to be fully explored and understood.

Professional careers in sports such as rugby have characteristics unlike other vocations. For this study it is important to note what typifies work in professional rugby, what are its unique characteristics and its similarities and differences to other vocations. This will assist in locating the study within a context in which issues associated with young elite rugby players' experiences can be further discussed. In general, players are scouted and offered academy contracts as soon as they leave school and sometimes before. If they are successful and make representative teams such as their provincial team, they will start to gain public recognition and begin to be reasonably well remunerated. The higher the level they achieve, the more fame and celebrity status they

are given and their salaries increase substantially. In addition, they will travel frequently and enjoy other fringe benefits such as sponsorship and commercial opportunities. However, during their career their bodies suffer high impact consequences, with the threat of severe injury always a possibility. Employment in professional rugby is often a short-term tenure with high levels of risk and occupational uncertainty, with other facets of life often sacrificed in pursuit of athletic success. Due to its physical nature and competition for the limited number of places on a team, most professional rugby careers end with the players in their early thirties. Even that scenario would be considered a fairly long career. The concerns and issues associated with work as a professional rugby player go beyond the dangers of injury and a limited tenure. These extend to the issues of identity, labour conditions, career development and career termination, all of which will be discussed in this thesis.

During the course of their involvement in sport, elite athletes will inevitably be faced with the termination and transition process from a high-performance career to an alternative occupation. Upon termination many elite athletes must cope with the uncertainty of moving out of an area in which they are very accomplished into an arena which may be unknown, or for which they may be unprepared and are yet to prove themselves (Orlick, 1986). Whilst the majority of their non-sporting peers have already established themselves in careers, retired athletes may find themselves beginners in the occupational world, with no tangible means of entry into an alternative occupation or profession. The growing research illustrating the difficulties faced by retiring athletes provided the catalyst for the current study (Fortunato, 1996; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998; Sparkes, 2000). To understand how these post-sport difficulties may be manifested there is a need for greater understanding of the lives and experiences of athletic workers during their time as high-performance competitors.

This study will investigate the perceptions and experiences of elite young rugby union players in New Zealand and Australia (ages 18-22 years), in particular, experiences that may act to prepare them for, or influence, their post-sport lives, whilst they are in their high-performance phase. The thesis title 'Game of Two Halves', a rugby cliché, was used deliberately to illustrate two stages of an elite player's life cycle. One half, or stage, is the competitive or high-performance phase, and the second half or stage, is life after competitive rugby or post-high performance stage. It is the experiences and

opportunities of players in this first stage and the influences in the way they make sense of their place in the sport and their future beyond the sport that will be examined in order to ascertain the players' preparation and readiness for the second stage. This is encapsulated by the major research question: *How might young elite rugby players be better prepared for their future beyond rugby?*

More specifically, this study examines how young elite rugby players prepare for, and are educated or trained during their elite playing days for a life after their active participation in elite sport and the ways in which this is facilitated or inhibited. Player perceptions of, and perspectives on, career development, post-rugby planning, and education are explored as well as the views of relevant coaches, managers and administrators. Due to the relatively recent rise of rugby to professional sport and the lack of research into this area of young players' lives, an opportunity has been taken to open new issues for discussion in this area of professional sport, and gain some insight into the unique environment in which elite young rugby players operate.

Recognition of the dominance of New Zealand sport by rugby, the impact of termination and transition on an elite athlete, and the relative lack of field research on the post-sport preparation of elite athletes initiated the researcher's orientation towards the present study. Any new knowledge to be generated was seen as providing sport professionals with an in-depth understanding of young players' lives, views and concerns regarding their employment in this labour force and how they may be better prepared for a career or life beyond rugby. This study is seen then as having relevance for other elite team sports, beyond rugby union.

### *1.1.1 Theoretical Resources and Context for Study*

The conceptual map in Figure 1.1 illustrates the theoretical framework this study employed to guide the research. This framework assists in illustrating some of the special conditions in which rugby professionals operate and the interaction of the major themes that inform the study. It is within this context that the various perspectives to be analysed and evaluated in this study, will be developed. Therefore, this framework



provides a lens through which to examine the career experiences of elite young rugby players in New Zealand and Australia.

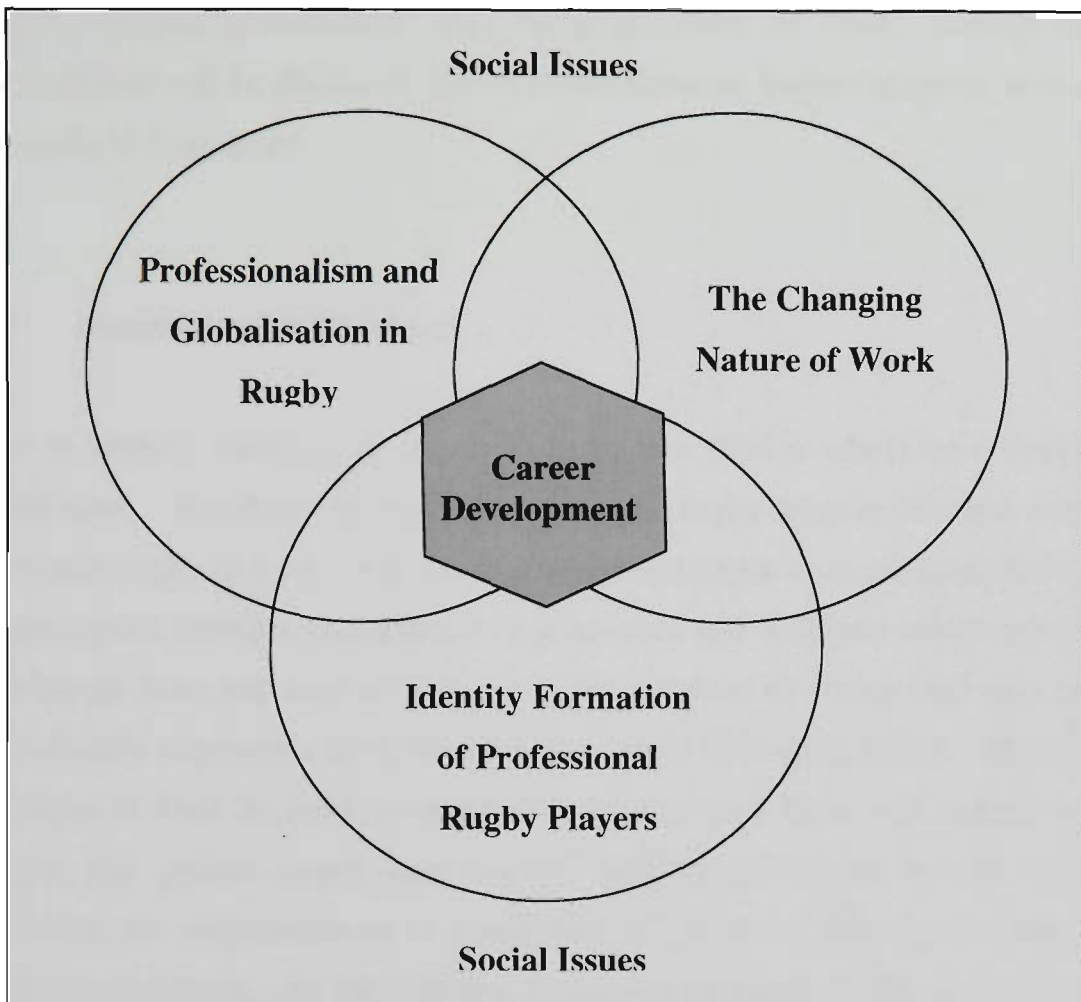


Figure 1.1: Theoretical resources and context for study

To further expand on this framework, the professionalisation of rugby was one of the catalysts in the development of the study, as will be discussed further in Chapter Two. When rugby became professional in 1995, the game changed dramatically, especially in terms of the career experiences and labour of the athletes involved, thereby orchestrating a change in their social, cultural and working conditions. With the rise of professionalism, the globalisation of the game further increased, creating working opportunities for the talented rugby player to apply his trade and be well remunerated in many countries around the world (Chiba, Ebihara & Morino, 2001). This altering and expansion of the game has had dramatic impacts on the labour, career experiences, and professional development of the athletes involved. Furthermore, due to both the professionalisation and globalisation of rugby, there has been a shift in the identity of its elite competitors. There are now higher expectations placed on the athlete, often

requiring a '100 percent commitment', culminating in the emergence of a strong athletic identity. This shift in identity has implications for the labour and post-rugby planning and development of the athletes involved. The themes and theories behind professionalism, globalisation, the changing nature of work, identity and career development will be discussed further in the literature review chapters, thus informing the study in more detail.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Due to rugby's move to professionalism in late 1995 a whole new workforce was established. Hundreds of previously amateur rugby players became employed to undertake rugby as work. The rise of professional rugby as an occupational option, and its perception amongst young men as a glamorous and well-paid career path, has meant this labour force has seen an increase in the numbers of young men who are leaving school early to pursue a professional rugby career (Tuitupou, 1997). The significance of rugby in New Zealand, coupled with its perceived fame and fortune as a career choice, has guided young men towards seeking paid work in this labour force. However, the overproduction of young men in pursuit of this work results in a high turnover of athletes. As McGillivray, Fearn and McIntosh (2005) suggest, players are being discarded devoid of the development of necessary transferable skills required for their entry to alternative employment: "Overreliant upon a constantly depreciating bank of physical capital, these players face precarious futures once this asset reaches exhaustion and their working bodies are deemed surplus to requirements" (p.102). Although some young men will have a successful rugby career, the nature of the work in this role means that a career in rugby is invariably short-lived.

Research on athletes in AFL (Fortunato, 1996), basketball (Adler and Adler, 1994) and soccer (McGillivray, Fearn & McIntosh, 2005) indicates that many athletes leave elite sport without education, training, or life-skills that may assist them in an occupation or profession outside sport. Furthermore, it seems the involvement in elite sport does not facilitate the accomplishment of developmental tasks that athletes require later in life. Anecdotal evidence points to the fact that this is also likely to be the case in rugby; for example former All Black coach John Hart said "it's not so bad when they play but

what about afterwards? What skills have they developed? (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.96). However, there is currently little empirical evidence to confirm this statement. Compounding this issue is that, like sports such as AFL, the talent identification process in rugby means that some athletes leave school before completing their education to pursue a rugby career. This group of athletes will have a significantly more difficult time accessing, and are more likely to be marginalized in, the workforce due to their low levels of education at the basic school level (Curtain 2001, 2002, 2003, Kirby 2000, Marks & McMillan 2001).

Issues associated with transitioning from professional sport into an alternative working environment are strongly linked to the extent to which the athlete has been prepared for this shift (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998; Lavalley & Anderson, 2000). Modern sport is littered with examples of athletes who have struggled with the end of their athletic careers. Soccer greats Diego Maradona and George Best are such examples, as is former AFL star Gary Ablett. These athletes faced difficulties making the transition back to 'normal life'. With little direction post-sport, they attempted to replicate the highs – or forget about the lows – through alcohol, drugs and women. Maradona and Best have come close to killing themselves through their addiction (Best has since passed away), while Ablett was associated with the drug-induced death of a young female fan. Such examples are a reminder to elite athletes and sporting bodies about the importance in preparing for alternative careers and a life after sport (Connolly, 2005).

Retirement has been traditionally associated with the end of a long working career, has involved lifestyle and financial planning, and the anticipation and understanding of expected demands and challenges. In sport, the retirement of an elite athlete can be extremely difficult to cope with if they are not adequately prepared or have not planned for such an event. This retirement experience can make the athlete vulnerable. Such vulnerability stems from the fact that many young athletes are generally unprepared for the challenge of retirement and its consequences (Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1986). According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) the degree and quality of adaptation to career termination and transition may depend on developmental experiences that occurred since the inception of their athletic careers. At this point in time there is little in the research literature that might either motivate or provide guidance for rugby clubs or similar organisations in addressing these issues. The main purpose of this thesis is to

contribute to this knowledge. Therefore, this study aims to understand the experiences of elite young rugby union players, with a special focus on their preparation for a life beyond rugby.

### **1.3 Rationale of the Research**

The field of career development and post-sport planning is an area that has only recently begun to gather momentum as a significant avenue for academic research (see for example; Martens & Lee, 1998 or Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Moreover, the investigation in this area of young elite athletes has been limited, with the majority of research focusing on recently retired athletes, or those more established in their professional sport career (see for example; Fortunato, 1996; or Lavalley & Anderson, 2000), as opposed to those beginning to embark, or pursuing a career in professional sport. As a result, it is the experiences of young elite athletes (18-22 years old) that will form the focus of this study. Furthermore, much of the research in this area is situated in a North American context, where the environment of the young elite athlete is vastly different than their New Zealand and Australian counterparts (see for example Martens & Lee, 1998 or Martens & Cox, 2000).

New Zealand is a country relatively inexperienced in the professional sports industry. It is not surprising then that there has been little research which might inform organisations and/or individual athletes in planning for careers outside or beyond rugby. Understandably, preparing young rugby players for a future beyond the sport is a relatively new avenue of research due to the recent rise of rugby to professionalism, and the evolution of rugby playing as a viable career option. Therefore, increasing attention and scrutiny needs to be paid to the issues surrounding elite young rugby players, their lives and the challenges which this new age of professionalism brings to both the players and their respective governing bodies.

One of the significant areas in this professional environment, as well as being one of the least discussed in academic research, is that of the career dynamics and impacts of professional rugby which, in a wider sense, goes beyond the discussion of a player's athletic career; for example, the impact of professional rugby on the acquisition of life-

skills, educational attainment or sacrifice, alternative career development and planning, as well as other concerns associated with, and derived from, playing elite level rugby. There has been little research into the career experiences of elite young rugby players as a basis for understanding how best to prepare them for their future experiences both during, and after, elite athletic performance. Furthermore, part of the rationale of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the working environment of elite rugby for young men and the issues and experiences of athletes who are part of a disposable workforce with limited job security, where workers who are no longer required are simply discarded.

Given the prominence of elite rugby in New Zealand and Australia, the significance to the young athlete of obtaining a professional contract, and the relatively high number of young players that 'don't make it', research into the experiences of these young players and their preparedness for post-athletic lives is urgently needed. In the context of rugby in New Zealand and Australia it is unknown how young athletes are prepared for the realities of professional sport and what infrastructure is in place to assist them. Furthermore, a voice needs to be given to players, coaches and administration staff to understand their perceptions of and perspectives on preparing young rugby players for a life beyond rugby.

To answer such questions the researcher employed qualitative research coupled with a quantitative questionnaire to help explore, understand and subsequently inform the preparation of young elite rugby players for their life beyond rugby. This thesis provides an in-depth examination of the issues and considerations associated with this area and concludes with practical recommendations on how clubs, provincial teams and nations might respond to the changing nature of professional rugby.

The 2003 World Champion Under 21 New Zealand Rugby Team and the 2003 New South Wales (NSW) Academy Team were the major sources of participants in this study. For the New Zealand players, by representing their country at the highest junior level (New Zealand Colts) these young men are at the peak of their junior careers. For many of these players and for NSW Academy players, the next logical step is to represent their state or region at the Super 14 level. Many of these young men are at the transition stage between semi-professional and professional rugby. Unfortunately, for

some, this may be as far as they go in their ‘career’ as an elite rugby union player. It is therefore important to understand how young rugby players make sense of themselves as elite athletes and their future options and opportunities given the unpredictable nature of a professional rugby career.

Initially this study only intended to focus on New Zealand players, coaches and management. However an opportunity arose to include NSW players and management as participants in the study. Including participants from NSW enabled a wider understanding of young players’ experiences, needs, and concerns. The context of rugby in NSW for young elite players is slightly different from that of New Zealand, in part because of the amount of time they are required to commit to training and due to their access to career development resources and opportunities. Furthermore including these participants enabled a better understanding of the situation for young rugby players in New Zealand.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

The structure of this thesis follows a predominantly traditional format. Chapters Two through Six examine the literature that underpinned the research and present a number of key theoretical concepts that provide a lens through which to examine the career experiences of elite young rugby players. Chapter Two explores globalisation and professionalism and discusses its relationship with rugby. This chapter also provides a case study of New Zealand rugby and its transformation from amateurism to the modern professional game. Chapter Three describes the changing nature of work and draws parallels between elite sport and paid employment. Chapter Four examines post-sport development and planning, and the implications of such in an athletic context. Chapter Five discusses how identity is formed in the athletic role and its implications for elite athletes. Chapter Six discusses the notion of athletic career termination and transition and its impact on elite athletes. Chapter Seven is a method chapter which describes the steps for the collection and analysis of the data.

Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten present the results of the study. Chapter Eight provides the perspectives of the players alone and describes how they make meaning of their

lives as elite young rugby players and the associated issues and insecurities. Chapter Nine follows many of the same themes as the previous chapter, but does so from only the perspective of coaches and management in rugby and the wider sports industry in regards to how they perceive young elite rugby players. Chapter Ten brings together responses from players, coaches and management in rugby, and coaches and management from the wider sports industry to examine the opportunities and assistance players are provided with to enable them to explore and engage with career development and post-rugby planning. In Chapter Eleven the major themes are drawn together to present a grounded theory on the preparation of young elite rugby players for a life beyond rugby. This chapter examines the major considerations against a backdrop of relevant literature and looks forward by proposing implications for professional athletes, governing bodies of rugby and the wider sports industry. Chapter Twelve provides concluding arguments and recommendations arising from the study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GLOBALISATION AND PROFESSIONALISATION

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The forces of globalisation and professionalisation have vastly altered the dynamics and environment of competitive sport. This chapter introduces the notion of globalisation and then discusses its relationship with elite sport. It then highlights some of the impacts of globalisation such as migration of athletic labour and their impact on national and local allegiances. This discussion becomes more specific through a case study of New Zealand rugby where the shift from amateurism to professionalism is discussed as well as the impact of globalisation on the game in New Zealand.

#### 2.1 Globalisation

The concept of globalisation must be described before it is explored in the context of sport. Drawing on the work of Rowe, Lawrence, Miller and McKay (1994), Silk and Jackson (2000) suggest that we should see globalisation as “a multidirectional flow of traffic in people, goods and services which will allow us to capture the diverse and changeable ways in which social groupings are connected within and across regions, nation states, localities and cities” (p.102).

Furthermore, according to Maguire:

Globalisation processes are viewed here as being long-term processes that have occurred unevenly across all areas of the planet. These processes – involving and increasing intensification of global interconnectedness – appear to be gathering momentum and despite their unevenness, it is more difficult to understand local or national experiences without reference to these global flows. Every aspect of social reality – people’s living conditions, beliefs, knowledge and actions – is intertwined with unfolding



globalisation processes. These processes include the emergence of a global economy, a transnational cosmopolitan culture and a range of international social movements (1999, p.3).

One of the key elements of globalisation theory is the diminishing importance of the nation state (Featherstone, 1990; Morley & Robins, 1995). It is suggested that the importance of geographical borders is weakening as transnational corporations, as opposed to governments, begin to control the flow of capital, images, technology, people, services and products. Until recently, the cultural imperialist view has been a popular way to explain these global flows from one society to another. The significant element in the cultural imperialism perspective is that a local culture is invaded by a foreign one and this causes a homogenising trend and the creation of a global culture (Tomlinson, 1991; Maguire, 1993). The cultural imperialist argument is often equated with Americanisation, however, scholars recently have tended to see this approach as over-simplistic and have pointed out that Americanisation is only one of a number of global processes, including, for example, Japanisation and Europeanisation. Further, it is not sufficient to see these processes as going unchallenged in local cultures (Donnelly, 1996). Globalisation, therefore, is considered to be a multidirectional flow and not the domination of one country.

Drawing upon these definitions, this chapter seeks to highlight the relevance and significance of this concept to the current study. Terms such as ‘multidirectional flow of traffic in people’, ‘uneven processes’ and ‘people’s beliefs, knowledge and actions intertwining with the globalisation process’ will assist in illustrating the significant relationship between globalisation and rugby, and in particular how rugby has been influenced by global forces.

## **2.2 The Relationship Between Sport and Globalisation**

Over the past 100 years sport has become increasingly commercialised, codified and globalised. Goldlust (1987) notes that modern sport originated in the mid-nineteenth century in Great Britain amongst fear of declining physical prowess and fighting ‘spirit’ of the British male, and the breakdown of authority in public schools. Sports such as

cricket, football, athletics and rowing grew in prominence and, according to Goldlust, “Britain rapidly established itself as the basic model for the universal organisation of modern competitive sports” (p.22). In the late-nineteenth century sport in Britain moved from a local context to national settings, with the emergence of standardised rules and the development of national and international links and organisations (Coakley, 1998). Leading up to the turn of the twentieth century the Olympic games were revived to promote national prowess, but also acted to guard the amateur ideal in sport. Growing interest in the Olympic games was enhanced by the development of international competition, furthered by advances in transport, communications and the news and entertainment media (Goldlust, 1987; Wright, 1999). During the 1920s and 1930s a number of amateur sports developed large spectator followings for competitions, and profits from gate-takings began to increase. According to Goldlust (1987) it was common knowledge at this time that ‘under the table’ payments were made to top-level competitors. Post-World War II, the United States assumed global hegemony, which resulted in the extension of American sports such as baseball and basketball. Television and corporate sponsors progressively influenced professional and collegiate sports in the 1960s and the marketing potential of sport grew (Wright, 1999).

During the past two or three decades, there has been a significant change in how the sports industry has operated and the increasing removal of sport from its amateur foundations. This is illustrated by the emergence of owners and managers of sport with globalised strategies designed to generate vast profits (Wright, 1999). Maguire (1999) argues that “modern sport is structured by a political economy in which multinationals play a decisive part” (p.35). Therefore, the globalising changes occurring in sport indicate multiple and overlapping progressions that are situated at the national, regional and global levels. Wright (1999) lists examples of these progressions which include:

- Increased involvement by global media organisations, such as News Corp., Disney and Time Warner. These organisations control the scheduling and production of sporting competitions, use sport as a marketing tool, and own numerous sport franchises. For example, Disney owns the following sports related subsidiaries: “ABC Sports, ABC Sports International, ABC Sports Video, ESPN, Eurosport (along with TF 1 and Canal+), the Anaheim Angels (Major League Baseball), and the Mighty Ducks (National Hockey League)”

(p.18). In addition, in 1998, News Corp. put forth a bid to purchase Manchester United for AUD\$1.4 billion, having already bought the Los Angeles Dodgers earlier in the year for \$370 million, News Corp is also part owner of the National Rugby League in Australia;

- Exploitation of third world 'sweat shops' to produce sports equipment, sports and leisure related clothing and footwear, for example Nike;
- Sports organisations and federations generating enormous revenues by trading television rights and sponsorship to transnational corporations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) and the South African, New Zealand and Australian Rugby Board (SANZAR);
- Promoting national and local teams, such as the Chicago Bulls, Manchester United, the Brazilian national football team, and the All Blacks in markets overseas as a method to endorse leagues and sell team-related merchandise;
- International sports management firms, such as International Management Group (IMG), control athletes, manage and market global events and produce the televising of sporting competitions;
- The increase and inclusion of 'foreign' athletes on professional club teams; for example, English Premier League soccer clubs are often made up of a high percentage of players born outside of England;
- The professionalisation of former amateur sports, such as athletics and rugby union.

The progressions noted above (and many more) illustrate the close relationship between sport, globalisation and transnational corporations that is occurring in the world economy. Maguire (1999) argues that an emerging generation of agents, entrepreneurs and organisations, such as the late Mark McCormack and IMG, Rupert Murdoch and News International, and media-sport production executives in general, have aided in creating a global system of sport competitions by directly employing or facilitating the employment of elite sports 'migrants' to perform in commercial Super Leagues, World Series and exhibition tournaments. Silk and Jackson (2000) go further to suggest that the importance of geographical borders is diminishing as these transnational

corporations start to control the flow of athletic talent, their services and the images we see of them.

The increased professionalism in rugby has been accompanied by, and is arguably a result of, global commercial forces. Jonah Lomu, who in the past was referred to as New Zealand's answer to Michael Jordan, is perhaps a prime example of global forces operating on New Zealand rugby. Lomu's endorsements of Reebok and McDonalds highlight the complex relationship between local culture and transnational corporations (Silk & Jackson, 2000). Furthermore, Maguire (1999) argues that increasingly, the link between corporate raiders and sports migrants is very obvious; for example, the World Series Cricket organised by Kerry Packer and the Rugby Super League developed by Murdoch; in both instances player contracts were purchased to ensure that a product would be displayed by the media outlet broadcasting these sports.

Maguire (1999) argues that in sport, elements of an Americanisation process are evident within broader processes of globalisation. Moreover:

the pervasiveness of what is in the main a distinctively American style of business practice in a range of exported sports such as American football, basketball and baseball has forced people in other more indigenous sports such as soccer, rugby and European ice hockey to align themselves to this model. Failure to do so would jeopardise their place within the hierarchy of the global media-sport market place (p.103).

Rugby union internationally responded to this and since the mid-1990s has operated in a more global, mediated and professional environment.

Sport as a commodity is therefore increasingly integrated with entertainment, media organisations and transnational corporations, where it has become part of internationally traded goods and services. Subsequently, athletic career trajectories are more complex and often see players forego or shorten elite and international competition for other more lucrative opportunities, which emerge in the context of globalised and professionalised sport. It also sees substantial international sports migration and the development of multiple careers as some sports identities conduct tandem careers as media personalities, journalists, business entrepreneurs, and some as celebrities. These tandem careers have importance in the new clustered media and entertainment

industries, which integrate with sport. In many respects it is hard to distinguish and separate these activities and define them as separate careers undergoing transition and so these phases might represent a situation where jobs are re-prioritised (Kell, 2002).

Cameron Stewart's (2001) investigation into sports agents suggests that many sports agents view their athletes as celebrities and see no difference between athletes such as Susie O'Neill and movie stars such as Nicole Kidman. Sports agents are introducing entertainment management philosophies into the way they manage sports people. This includes investigating how someone, such as former Australian cricket captain Steve Waugh, can have a career well beyond his shelf life as a cricketer. Player agent Robert Joske notes that: "If we do our job correctly, Steve Waugh's movement from cricketer to the business world (doing media work, speeches, product representation etc), should be a smooth transition and not result in a change of lifestyle for himself and his family" (cited in Stewart, 2001, p.R5). In the process of globalisation, professionalism and the changing nature of sport, monosyllabic rugby players, cricketers and Olympic medallists are being transformed into media personalities and entertainers, blurring the boundaries between sport and celebrity. The size of potential television audiences, and therefore the television rights fees paid by media companies, have substantially increased the potential incomes of athletes and turned some athletes into national and international celebrities who can then use their celebrity status to make money endorsing products sold around the world; for example, Tiger Woods for Nike and Jonah Lomu for Reebok.

### **2.3 Professional Rugby as a Globalised Career: Migration of Labour**

The globalisation and professionalisation of rugby has many implications for the experiences of players and introduces new patterns of work, which are characterised by greater intensity, complexity, mobility and very different connections with notions of club, community and nation (Kell, 2002). This is illustrated by players moving to different clubs, cities and even countries to fulfil their desire for success, fame, money and extension of their time as a tradable commodity. Arguably, loyalty is no longer a notion that is associated with professional rugby, where mobility is generated by getting better contracts.

Therefore, with the increasing globalisation process of rugby union, there is also an increase in the numbers of rugby migrants. Appaduria (1990) notes that the migration of sports talent, viewed as athletic labour, is a significant feature of the new global cultural economy. Furthermore, Maguire (1999) states that “sports labour migration occurs at three levels: within nations, between nations located within the same continent and between nations located in different continents and hemispheres” (p.98). This is especially evident in New Zealand and Australian rugby. Players are able to travel the country and the globe, moving between international corporate-funded franchises to pursue or further their careers as elite rugby players.

The athletic flow between countries is one such example of the relationship between globalisation and professional rugby. The global expansion of rugby and the unrestricted recruitment of labour by overseas clubs ensure that top New Zealand and Australian rugby players will continue to offer their services overseas. Equally, the overproduction of young men who dream of playing rugby for a living, or of older veterans who seek to extend their playing career and earning potential also results in them following the overseas path. The US Worldpaper noted that to stay on top of rugby union, the All Blacks must play their toughest opponent to date, global capitalism, because the newly professionalised sport saw leading players and coaches leave New Zealand for more lucrative locations (Gray, 1998). Thus, “linking sport to globalization leads to an analysis of sport as part of an emergent global culture, as contributing to the definition of new identities, and to the development of a world economy” (Harvey & Houle, 1994, p.346). What needs further investigation and exploration are the local responses to these global processes.

The global forces that operate on rugby are also having an effect on teams and clubs affiliated on the basis of locality and province. Rowe, Lawrence, Miller and McKay (1994) suggest that the multi-directional flow of goods, services and traffic erodes such affiliations as teams emerge who represent corporate interests rather than local or historical ones. This is illustrated in the Super 14 competition where there has been a transformation from provincial Super 14 rugby teams in South Africa to ‘placeless’ clubs in communities imagined by media tycoons (Sharks, Golden Cats). This may well set the scene for rugby in New Zealand and Australia. It is evident that with these

global forces operating there becomes a certain loss of local identity (Silk & Jackson, 2000). To further illustrate this point, in 1992 Silvio Berlusconi, owner of the AC Milan football club and later the Italian Prime Minister, announced that “the concept of the national team will, gradually, become less important. It is the clubs with which the fans associate” (Maguire, 1994, p.460). His prediction may be considered conservative given that Nike ‘owns’ the Brazilian, Italian and Nigerian national football sides – the nation became a club (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001). It is through the same lens that the All Blacks can be viewed, in light of their 90 million dollar relationship with global brand Adidas.

Globalisation is perceived by some as a threat to contemporary national identities, whereas others see the increasing encounters with global products, services and people as an opportunity for a country such as New Zealand to reach new markets and redefine or recreate national identities. Speaking in rugby terms, Silk and Jackson (2000) argue that teams may be at risk of losing their regional and then their national identities. In this context, representing one’s country, traditionally seen as the pinnacle of a sporting career, may no longer hold the value that it once did. For example, in a soccer context, Australian professional players Harry Kewell and Mark Viduka both England-based professionals, have at various stages in their careers been either unable to secure release from their clubs or unwilling to put their national team duties ahead of professional overseas priorities. National allegiances from such examples are not eradicated but become more subject to negotiation within the context of a globalised and professional sporting culture (Kell, 2000). “Contractual and career obligations create uncertainty about player loyalties, as professional athletes jockey for career advancement, taxation advantages and contractual stability in the short period they have in the limelight” (Kell, 2000, p.160).

## **2.4 The Rise of Rugby: A New Zealand Case Study**

The actions of elite rugby players in New Zealand can only be adequately understood through reference to a sociological model of rugby in New Zealand society and through knowledge of the development of the social position of the athletes within this structure. This section provides the ‘local’ context for the study through a description of the

development of rugby and its transformation into the modern professional game as we now know it. The origins of the game are briefly explored, its expansion to New Zealand's national game, followed by rugby's rise to professionalism. This case study also provides the reader with an appreciation of the influence and contribution that rugby has on New Zealand's national identity. This includes not only the national and local supporters of the game but the players who have the job of representing, entertaining and being role-models for so many New Zealanders. With the relatively recent rise of professionalism this task has become all the more serious, with exaggerated rewards, sacrifices and consequences.

#### *2.4.1 Development of Rugby in New Zealand*

Rugby was first introduced and demonstrated in New Zealand in 1870. Charles Munro, son of Sir David Munro, a speaker of the New Zealand House of Parliament returned to New Zealand from his public school education in London with a knowledge and some experience in the game. Munro's introduction of rugby led to a historic match on May 14, 1870 between Munro's former school, Nelson College, and the Town in Nelson. The victory for Town (2 goals to nil) was not as significant as the occasion itself, which is now widely acknowledged as the first organised game of rugby in New Zealand in its modern form (Palenski, 1992). In the following decade many regions in New Zealand adopted the game, and a relatively standardised version of rugby spread quickly. Rugby historians such as McLean (1991) and Palenski (1992) have suggested that the appeal of the sport lay in its limited need for equipment, relatively unprepared grounds, clear objectives, limited rules and sense of physical contestation. The rapid development of a comprehensive railway network and a reduction in work hours, allowing more leisure time, aided the development and spread of the game throughout the country (Palenski, 1992).

Local histories and newspaper accounts over the years have outlined the impact of rugby upon virtually all New Zealand districts, usually taking up themes of community and national pride. In 1874, 3,000 people out of a Dunedin population of 18,000 were spectators at an Otago versus Auckland rugby game (Crawford, 1985). By the early 1890s, European settlers and the indigenous Maori were engaged in playing rugby in



many regions of the country. There were less rigid class distinctions in New Zealand at this time compared to England and this was reflected in rugby's popularity (Phillips, 1996). The colonial rugby field, was seeded with a relatively egalitarian tradition. Rugby players came from all walks of life: they were bankers, miners, clerical workers, farmers; Pakeha (Maori word to describe non-indigenous New Zealanders) and Maori. Players could not be defined by one profile. However, in terms of the administration of the game, rugby's control was predominantly operated by middle class white men (MacDonald, 1996). In this context, pioneering rugby in New Zealand helped create a sense of community and identification (Crawford, 1985). Booth (2000) suggests that the male-dominated pioneer culture was prey to the appeals of a visibly aggressive sport and its related male socialising. Phillips (1996) describes rugby as "the glue of masculine culture in New Zealand" (p.86), enabling men to display their physical prowess, courage and total commitment to the team. As such, masculine values dominated the game of rugby in New Zealand at that time.

In 1879, rugby union clubs were formed in Canterbury and Wellington, indicating that the game was becoming more formally organised. Other clubs soon followed but it was not until 1892 that the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) was formed to administer the game at a national level (Chester & McMillan, 1981). The first major international tour by a New Zealand formed team was in 1888-89 when a 'Natives' team, dominated by players of Maori descent, toured Britain, winning two-thirds of their tour games. The importance of this tour went beyond the team's playing record. Historians such as Phillips (1996) have come to see its sporting exchanges as a starting point in the young colony's self image. The search for a New Zealand identity was given momentum through the opportunities to compete against Australia and British touring teams. According to Crawford (1985) other cultural forms of expression had failed to produce a figure that would assist in the development of a national feeling of identity. According to Fougere (1989) "the New Zealand rugby nation predated, and in part facilitated, the emergence of the New Zealand nation itself" (p.113). On August 15, 1903, New Zealand met Australia in a rugby test for the first time. It was the beginning of New Zealand's greatest sporting tradition, test rugby (Palenski, 1992). In over 100 years of competition, the All Blacks have earned themselves a 74 per cent winning record, winning 312 out of the 421 games played, far better than any other

national rugby team and a winning ratio barely matched in any other sport at the highest level (NZRU, 2007).

#### 2.4.2 *New Zealand's National Game*

In the twentieth century, rugby enhanced its prominence as New Zealand's national sport. A 1905 tour of the British Isles entered national folklore; the team played 35 games and only lost one. According to Phillips (1996) "it led New Zealanders to view rugby success as the very essence of New Zealand identity" (p.85). Phillips (1996) also argues that the tour reinforced the perceived classlessness of New Zealand society. British commentators attribute the success of the team to the absence of class divisions. The team returned to a heroes' welcome and were subsequently named 'The Originals' (Keith, 2003). In the course of the 1905-6 tour the team were also dubbed the 'All Blacks', a name which has been indelibly connected with the national rugby team of New Zealand ever since. The exact origin of the term however is still debated. Originals and All Black Billy Wallace suggested that reference to the team by the name "All Blacks" first appeared during the Originals tour when a London newspaper reported that the New Zealanders played as if they were "all backs". Wallace claimed that due to a typographical error, subsequent references were to 'All Blacks' (Palenski, 2003). However, newspapers in Devon, reporting after the Originals match there, referred to the 'All Blacks' due to their standard uniform of a black jersey and black socks.

There was growing disagreement over compensation for players as the competitors had to sacrifice earnings for a game that spectators paid to watch (MacDonald, 1996). As a result, in 1907 the professional rugby league code was formed, splitting from the amateur code. The team was labelled the 'All Golds' in reference to the players' financial motives and included some 1905 All Blacks. The tour of Australia and England as professionals threatened the moral base of amateurism, as playing the game for its own sake and not for financial reward remained of utmost importance. In response, the NZRFU worked to expel those players who accepted payment for playing (Phillips, 1996).

In wartime, rugby occupied a special place in the recreational escapism and comradeship of servicemen (Chester & MacMillan, 1981). Many able-bodied New Zealand men enlisted for army service, and no matter which part of the world they found themselves in, they would still play the game they loved during breaks in the fighting. Thirteen All Blacks were among the 16,697 New Zealanders who died in the First World War (Chester & MacMillan, 1981). By the mid-twentieth century the All Blacks had become the most feared opponent in rugby and the national game dominated the New Zealand sports scene during this time. Rugby writer J.B.G Thomas (cited in McConnell, 1996) noted that New Zealanders were crazy about the rugby union game and rugby to a normal New Zealander was a way of life and far more than a mere sport. Political scientist Cleveland (1966) argued at the time that to become an All Black “represents a peak of social status which transcends all other considerations of class, prestige, rank and privilege” (p.23). The following quote from former All Black great Colin Meads, says much about how he regarded the privilege of being an All Black:

You have to protect the silver fern, the All Black jersey. I would never train in it. You would swap it with a Welshman, after a test, and train in their national jersey the next day...You can never trade the mana [Maori word meaning prestige and honour], the history, the honour of being an All Black. The pride is not in the money you make, it is in being selected to be an All Black (cited in McConnell, 1996, p.274).

Throughout history, the black jersey has been a source of pride and passion for New Zealand rugby players and the opportunity to wear it has traditionally been seen as the ultimate accolade in New Zealand rugby. Traditions and the symbolism of the black jersey are strong in New Zealand rugby and are used for motivation and cohesion. McConnell and Edwards (2000) note that along with the black jersey, “the silver fern, the iconic name ‘All Blacks’ and the haka have consequently provided specific symbols of New Zealand identity and a rallying point for young and old New Zealanders overseas at the time of international sports events” (p.120).

In the post-war years New Zealand’s greatest rugby rival was South Africa. In 1965 the South African Prime Minister reiterated that Maori players would not be welcome as touring All Blacks, however this contrasted with the contribution that Maori had made

to rugby. During this time there was a growing number of New Zealanders taking the stance of 'No Maoris, No Tour', and this led to debates on the relationship of sport and politics. The 1976 All Black tour to South Africa was met with riots and police shootings in the republic and rugby was publicly condemned in New Zealand because the NZRFU was perceived to be providing tacit support to South Africa's racist regime. The actions of the New Zealand Government and the NZRFU led to African athletes and others boycotting the 1976 Montreal Olympics due to New Zealand's presence (Sinclair, 1988).

The debate over rugby contact with South Africa came to a peak in the 1981 tour of New Zealand. Growing numbers of New Zealanders believed the proposed tour should not proceed. Grounds were circled with barbed wire and patrolled by police to deter protesters. Two tour matches were cancelled on police advice, and in the third test against the All Blacks in Auckland a light plane circled the playing field dropping flour bombs. The 1981 South Africa tour damaged the sport of rugby in New Zealand and according to McConnell:

New patterns were emerging in the social patterns of New Zealand, which were seen as being at odds with the traditional and entrenched culture associated with rugby. These new social patterns had the effect of marginalising the game... In the more diverse, multicultural, urban and sophisticated New Zealand society of the 1980s, rugby no longer served as a certainty of New Zealand society. Rugby may have remained the 'national game' but no longer reflected the fullness of New Zealand society (1996, p.84-85).

Over the next four years rugby made progress in its re-building phase with the New Zealand public, yet controversy was reignited over an impending tour to South Africa and after a legal battle the tour was called off (Palenski, 1992). However, a private tour of South Africa was arranged and organised by many of the then current All Blacks, who became known as the Cavaliers. The team returned to New Zealand amidst significant controversy due to the size of the team fund and the payment to individuals, which led to suggestions that the tour was the first step in professional rugby. Those All

Blacks who participated were stood down for two matches upon their return (Verdon, 2002).

### *2.4.3 The Rise of Professionalism in New Zealand Rugby*

Into the late 1980s and early 1990s rugby strengthened and continued its dominance as New Zealand's national game. New Zealand was co-host with Australia for the inaugural World Cup in 1987, in which New Zealand completed the tournament unbeaten. The World Cup gained worldwide exposure, with 100 million television viewers worldwide. The continued strength of the game at a local level saw gate revenues increase and rugby become an attractive medium for the promotion of corporate companies. However, the slow adoption of commercial practices reinforced the notion that the game should continue to be played on an amateur basis (Martin, 2005).

Throughout most of its history in New Zealand, rugby had been played at the amateur level, meaning players were not paid for their participation in the sport. According to Howitt (1979) the NZRFU only allowed a modest daily expense allowance for All Blacks in order to maintain the amateur ethos. Players had to rely on the goodwill of employers to allow them time to travel with the team. However, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s rugby in New Zealand operated in an environment commonly labelled as 'shamateurism'. Shamateurism referred to the 'under the table' payments and rewards provided to players for their participation in rugby. Although effectively illegal, it was a common practice amongst many provincial clubs to 'reward' their players for their loyalty and participation. It seemed clear well before 1995 that rugby would eventually make the transition into a professional game. The international growth of rugby continued through globalised television coverage, with a growing audience. This reflected the emergence of global media and the growing interest in sport from broadcasters (Palenski, 2002). With the success of the inaugural World Cup in 1987, the change to a professional approach was inevitable. According to Romanos (2002) if rugby did not start paying their players, then many of them would make the switch to a code that did, in this case rugby league. The major threat came from a Rupert Murdoch-led Super League competition that was starting to gain momentum.

To add to the competition for players' services, an international business group attempted to take control of rugby union financially by floating a competition to rival the International Rugby Board (IRB) called the World Rugby Corporation (WRC). Top players were recruited for the equivalent of the World Series commercial cricket competition where cricketers were contracted by a broadcaster. In response to this, the full NZRFU council unanimously accepted a recommendation from its amateurism sub-committee to urge the IRB to immediately repeal the game's amateur regulations. The IRB moved quickly to accept professionalism, as the viability of its role was under threat. The need for changes to amateur regulations was widely acknowledged by senior administrators. NZRFU deputy chairman Rob Fisher, referring to the level of shamateurism, stated "it's fairly obvious there are significant breaches of the regulations all over the place. The regulations have to be changed. It's a bad law when nobody follows it. You can't lock everyone up, so you have to change the law" (cited in Gifford, 1994, p.64). As a result the chairman of the NZFRU stated that New Zealand was seeking full professionalism in the game, and added, "we are the only major sport that is still amateur and that is not feasible these days" (cited in Krishnamurthi, 1995, p.52).

On the 27th August 1995 the IRB agreed to repeal its amateur regulations, meaning players could now be paid for playing rugby union. However, professionalism was a foreign concept to rugby and vastly different to the current shamateurism. At the time it was noted that "the next few years will be a learning curve as the sport embraces professionalism" (Sanders, 1995, B.8). The expectations of professionalism came very quickly to unions around the world primarily run by volunteers and multitudes of committees and sub-committees and there was an immediate impact on the financial side of the game. According to Romanos (2002) The New Zealand Rugby Union's healthy reserves of about NZ\$10 million shrank by NZ\$9 million in one year as a result of the cost of making the transition to professional rugby. With the advent of professionalism New Zealand Rugby was confronted with a number of issues such as transfer fees, player contracts, referees and coaches, organisational leadership, tax issues and post-rugby programmes for its players. These were all new areas and largely uncharted territory for the once amateur organisation (Romanos, 2002).

The move to professional rugby immediately changed the dynamics of the domestic game in New Zealand at the elite level. *New Zealand Rugby Almanack* editors Akers and Miller commented on the state of New Zealand's club and domestic rugby competitions:

Sadly New Zealand domestic rugby is at the mercy of the SANZAR (South Africa, New Zealand, Australian Rugby) partners and the IRB (International Rugby Board), who are looking at developing a global rugby season. The game is now top-heavy with administrators searching for the ideal global game, and the New Zealand Rugby Football Union will have less control over the old-fashioned, but hugely successful chain of club competition, NPC and national teams (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.163).

At present New Zealand rugby is structured in a way that accommodates amateur, semi-professional and professional levels in club, provincial, and regional competitions. At the amateur level there is local club rugby; the next level up from that is the National Provincial Championship (NPC) which has 26 provinces over two divisions, the premier division is the highest division and is comprised of 14 teams, and the modified division has 12 teams. The NPC is considered a semi-professional competition where players have contracts and receive some payment for playing; full professional players also participate in this competition. Excluding international representation, the highest level of rugby in New Zealand is Super 14. This competition incorporates five teams from the largest regions of New Zealand, four from Australia and five from South Africa. This is considered a professional competition, where players receive financial reward. Up until 2006 this competition was called the Super 12 as it was comprised of 12 teams not 14. After a number of successful years in which the popularity and marketability of the competition grew, two new teams joined the competition in 2006, one from Australia and one from South Africa. Due to the change in format whilst this study was underway, at different times depending on context it is referred as both the Super 12 and Super 14.

The Super 14 and the five New Zealand teams are now established 'brands' with the Super 14 competition having consistent at-ground and television audience growth as well as on-field success. The majority of Super 14 franchises have developed successful

commercial models with the emphasis being on the franchise rather than the province. As a result the geographical names have been dropped and team names are largely used, for example, Waikato is known and referred to as the 'Chiefs', Otago as the 'Highlanders', and NSW as the 'Waratahs' (Romanos, 2002).

One of the major changes in this new environment was the money being offered for playing services. Being a successful rugby player in the professional era can be a lucrative occupational choice. The New Zealand Rugby Players' Association (NZRPA) provide details of the collective agreements between players and the NZRU and detail the earnings for elite rugby players at different levels in New Zealand. In 2007, players at the Super 14 level (all of whom hold contracts with the NZRU) were paid a retainer of NZ\$65,000, which is in addition to any provincial union payments. Furthermore, any contracted player is eligible to receive 'assembly fees' which can be up to \$7500 a week for national selection. In 2007, those players who had a contract with a provincial rugby union were provided with a retainer of \$15,000 (NZRPA, 2007). Established players in both the Super 14 and provincial unions usually earn far in advance of the retainer level. It is difficult to accurately calculate the earnings of those players who represent the All Blacks, however these figures and anecdotal reports suggest the current All Black test team are all on salaries of at least \$200,000 depending on their status and experience. At such a young age (some players secure these contracts at 19 and 20 years old) this is a considerable amount of money to manage. High-profile and established All Blacks may earn more than \$300,000 a year, however, this does not include commercial deals and earnings such as personal sponsorship and appearance fees. Similar figures are provided for Australian rugby players and according to Dabscheck (2003) the average income of professional Australian rugby players has risen from AUD\$86,775 in 1996 to \$163,680 in 2004.

As illustrated by these figures, a career as a professional rugby player looks very appealing to the young gifted athlete, who may still be in his teenage years. With the money and celebrity lifestyle associated with this profession, it is not surprising that young elite players will pursue this well paid and well recognised occupation. However, there is an unseen exploitative element in professional sport, of which athletes are often not aware, where young men, especially on the fringe of professional selection, are asked to train and work long hours with little financial reward or job



security. It is this contemporary professional rugby environment, that was analysed as part of this study.

The cultural dimension of rugby in New Zealand at all levels has changed over the last two decades, and more noticeably since the game became professional in 1995. Representative teams in New Zealand's most populous regions are comprised increasingly of Polynesian players. Up until the 1980s, rugby in New Zealand was generally, but not exclusively, played by white men; the opposite is now true. There has been a marked exodus of Pakeha's away from the game and a large rise in the number of Maori and even more-so of Polynesian players. According to Romanos (2002), this is due to Pakeha boys and their parents being intimidated by the size of the Maori and Polynesian boys of the same age who are noticeably bigger. He argues it is becoming physically dangerous for smaller Pakeha players due to the weight disparity.

The increase in Maori and Polynesian players is also evident at major high schools. For example, The Wellington College First XV in 1970 contained no Maori or Polynesians. In 2002 from a squad of 23, twelve were Pakeha and eleven were Maori or Polynesians. In the Auckland representative team in 1970, 47 players were used of whom 39 were Pakeha, five Maori and two Polynesian. In 2001 the figures were vastly different: Auckland used 36 players, of whom ten were Pakeha, 19 Polynesian, six Maori and one French. In 2002, Maori and Polynesian players made up 60 percent of all contracted Super 14 and NPC players in New Zealand (Romanos, 2002). However, in comparison to their over-representation as players, there are very few coaches and administrators from Polynesian background. Furthermore, McConnell (1996) argues that coaches are rarely provided with training in the understanding of the background and social milieu of their Polynesian players despite the more effective communication, relationships and understandings that can result.

Romanos (2002) argues that for rugby in New Zealand, the attraction of financial rewards and increased job opportunities explains the increase in playing numbers of Maori and Polynesians. In New Zealand, young Maori and Polynesians are disproportionately over-represented in youth unemployment (New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2007). As rugby has professionalised it has presented as an attractive source of employment for young Maori and Polynesian men.

Romanos (2002) further suggests that rugby is akin to the lure of professional sports like boxing and basketball in America:

Black boys growing up in the poorer areas of some of America's major cities face a terribly difficult task gaining an education and acquiring the academic qualifications to land themselves high paying jobs through their adult lives. It's not impossible, but for a variety of reasons – family circumstances, poverty, peer pressure – the odds are stacked against them. Boxing and basketball, where black boys can use their physical skills, offer the most appealing way of earning big money (p.180).

Ex-All Black coach John Hart adds, “some families would say that professional rugby is the best chance their boys have to make money” (cited in Romanos, p.180).

Former All Black Norm Hewitt expands on this point, noting that this is a recurring theme in the dozens of schools he has visited. “I talk to these [Maori and Polynesian] boys and their attitude is always the same. They expect to be able to leave school and basically go straight into professional rugby, where they know they can earn very big money” (Romanos, 2002, p.182). It is possible that New Zealand rugby has contributed to this way of thinking to some degree. High schools in New Zealand, such as Scots College in Wellington, recruit and buy talent from the Pacific Islands. In 2001 the Otago Rugby Union signed up almost the entire Wesley College First XV Team, made up almost completely of Maori and Polynesians. This becomes a snowballing process, whereby other Maori and Polynesian boys see this example and are encouraged into believing there must be opportunities for them as well (Romanos, 2002).

This is further illustrated through Tuitupou's (1997) study on the career dynamics of professional rugby in New Zealand, which revealed a high number of school boys who confidently suggest that they can make rugby their career. This study revealed that almost 40 percent of researched Auckland school boy First XV players expected to be contracted to play rugby in the next three years. This number increases to just under 50 percent for a seven-year time-frame, indicating that in seven years almost 50 percent of surveyed high school rugby players expected to be contracted to play elite rugby. Such figures illustrate how the professionalisation of rugby in New Zealand has contributed to the rise of young players viewing professional rugby as a viable career option. The

reality, however, is that less than one percent of these rugby players will be able to secure a professional rugby career. Furthermore, Tuitupou (1997) argues that many aspiring to be rugby professionals pursue this at the expense of their schooling. It seems that the popularity attached to being a professional rugby player is leading young men to pursue sporting greatness over and above less attractive and more probable career pursuits.

#### *2.4.4 Exodus of the Elite: The Migration of Labour and its Impact on Local and National Allegiance and Identity*

Rugby has progressed from amateurism to professionalism and can now be described as a global game, with the last World Cup in Australia available for viewing in 200 countries with a potential of over three billion viewers (ausport, 2004). The globalisation and professionalisation of rugby has resulted in changes in New Zealand rugby which challenge the traditional role it has played in New Zealand society. Silk and Jackson argue that “the transformation of rugby union perhaps best exemplifies the shifting terrain of sporting culture in a more deregulated, privatised, consumerist and globally interdependent New Zealand” (2000, p.106). The global pressures on the NZRU governing body have created a change in the way in which the game is played in New Zealand. As a result the NZRU experienced a unique struggle located within a global economy, where the fight for players and the sale of television rights was unprecedented in their history (Silk and Jackson, 2000).

New Zealand rugby acts as a feeder system (for players and coaches) for many competitions around the world, from Japan to France, Italy and Scotland. For example, in 2002, 650 New Zealanders were registered with the NZRU as playing rugby overseas, and 23 different countries played host to some of New Zealand’s top rugby talent (Wallace, 2002). The introduction of professional rugby coupled with the strong record of New Zealand as a rugby playing nation has created a significant demand for New Zealand players overseas, and in many ways turns New Zealand into a rugby factory, where talented players are produced and dispersed throughout the world.

One of the issues associated with the migration of rugby labour in New Zealand is the way those players, who have been deselected from the All Blacks, often use the fact that they are still competing at Super 14 level to negotiate lucrative financial contracts in other countries and subsequently are lost to New Zealand rugby. It could be argued that these deselected players are less inclined to stay in New Zealand and compete for their place in the national side. Professionalisation has made rugby an occupation for these athletes and to continue to earn good money they need to exploit the globalisation of the game to extend their employment as a paid rugby player. Maguire (1999) speculates that the main motivation of those rugby players who migrate may either be a desire to relocate and settle in another country, or more likely, to earn as much money as possible in a short period of time and then return home. However, sports migrants in general have to supply their athletic labour in various locations and therefore as a group may experience varying degrees of exploitation, dislocation and cultural adjustment (Maguire, 1999). One recent example of the influence of money in the migration of labour is illustrated through former Auckland Blues Super 12 player Rupeni Caucaunibuca who was paid a salary of approximately NZ\$100,000 in his Super 12 and NPC contract. This compares to an estimated NZ\$600,000 paid by French club Agen, which also faced competition from clubs in England and Japan offering similar amounts.

Pre-professionalisation and globalisation this migration would not have occurred to the same extent. There are now many examples of players who have played a small number of tests for the All Blacks, have been deselected and have then accepted contracts overseas. Other top non-All Black players with good Super 14 records also make the move overseas, whilst they can still demand high-paying contracts. With rugby now a global professional sport, players can sell their services to the team that will pay the most (Romanos, 2002).

Maguire (1999) argues that this migration of athletic talent, in many instances, results in the deskilling of donor countries such as New Zealand. In basic terms New Zealand invests in the production of rugby talent and once this talent reaches maturity, more economically developed leagues such as those in the UK, Europe and Japan lure the best players with greater financial rewards. Addressing the exodus of good players leaving New Zealand for overseas contracts is arguably an area in which the New

Zealand Union has been ineffective. New Zealand and Australia are not only losing their established players to overseas, but the young elite players are also considering their options. Their absence damages the standards of club rugby, reducing New Zealand's player depth and draining the country of potential coaches, referees and administrators (Romanos, 2002).

The loss of young elite players through the migration of rugby labour is a significant issue for New Zealand rugby. In an increasingly competitive global environment in which choice is paramount, rugby management in New Zealand is under increasing pressure to retain its players. For example, after two years playing Super 12 rugby in New Zealand, Craig Newby found himself on the growing list of the Super 12 scrap heap when his name was omitted from all five squads. "I learnt that rugby in New Zealand can be a fickle thing. It made me realise that there's not much loyalty and job security in rugby anymore. I learnt to look out for myself" (Campbell, 2004, p.29). Subsequently Newby left New Zealand to play rugby in England. There are many recent examples of professional rugby players both younger and more senior who have left New Zealand to pursue a rugby career overseas. Ex-All Blacks Carlos Spencer and Andrew Merhtens, and more recently current All Blacks Anton Oliver and Bryon Kelleher are such examples. The current research sought to understand how young elite rugby players might position themselves in the current professional and global environment and in what ways the globalisation of rugby has, or will, impact on their decision as they prepare to embark on a professional rugby career. This led the research to consider methods and infrastructure that may act to retain young elite players in New Zealand and Australia.

The migration of rugby labour raises issues concerning national allegiance. In New Zealand, once a player fulfils an overseas contract he will not be considered for selection in the national All Black team. Therefore, the player must choose between playing for his country, and accepting a more financially rewarding contract. Such a tension reproduces the notion of the diminishing importance of the nation state as we witness the growing migration of rugby talent overseas. This study explores the tension between the increasing forces of globalisation and the traditional notion of representing one's country as the highest honour. Silk and Jackson (1994) argue that "sporting cultures are undergoing a myriad of changes in light of the globalisation that affects

New Zealand. Today it is counterproductive to consider sport and culture in New Zealand as operating within national boundaries” (p.101). For example, the Super 14, arguably rugby union’s premier competition, is not played between nations but by local teams from New Zealand, South Africa and Australia; e.g. Blues, Brumbies, Sharks.

A concern that has been raised many times since rugby moved to professionalism is that rugby in New Zealand may lose touch with its grassroots, and that there will be a decline in the importance of club rugby. Before professionalisation and indeed globalisation, club rugby was the prime focus of rugby in New Zealand, and a very important part of the social fabric of the community and country. However, the notion of the club and that of club competitions are becoming increasingly insignificant, as more and more clubs can no longer support themselves (Romanos, 2002). This is evident in New Zealand through numerous mergers of local club rugby teams.

Silk and Jackson have constructed an argument, for and against, that in the context of global flows and processes, rugby will be eroded as New Zealand’s national sport.

#### FOR

- New Zealand’s culture is currently positioning itself within a postcolonial context, locating itself within the Asia-Pacific region, resulting in a move away from real and imagined colonial ties.
- Young New Zealanders find themselves within a global generation of choice, with rugby no longer being a central part of a child’s upbringing.

#### AGAINST

- New Zealand rugby is inextricably tied to the formation and maintenance of the current social organization of New Zealand.
- The NZRU currently holds a strong hegemonic position over the organisation of rugby, the provinces and the players it has under contract.
- Through lucrative deals with Rupert Murdoch, the NZRU has ensured the delivery of unique New Zealand culture in the form of the All Blacks to the rest of the world (Silk & Jackson, 2000, p.107).

This chapter illustrates the way rugby has become a major consideration in the social, economic and cultural life of New Zealand, highlighting the interface of sport and society in this country. Whether examined through the constructs of media, commercialisation, amateur-professional debate, international competition, politics, funding, national prestige, symbolism, or with critical consideration of the beliefs and values sustaining a sport, rugby is dominant in New Zealand society. Played throughout the country, the national game is seen by a number of commentators as having had a significant impact on the formation of New Zealand's local and national identity (Palenski, 1992; Collins, 1994; Macdonald, 1996; Thomson, 1996). However, the nature of rugby in New Zealand has changed. This includes the way it is identified with by New Zealand society, the structure and rules of the game and the marketing and branding of a product. Much of this can be attributed to the shifts from an amateur and nationalistic structure to a more professional and global structure.

In summary, New Zealand is operating in a new global climate that will have a significant effect on both sporting and national cultures. It is no longer applicable to consider rugby in New Zealand as operating within nation state boundaries; rather it must be conceptualised as existing within a mediated space in which local control has been, and continues to be, relinquished to global interests. Rugby, for example, is increasingly under the control of those outside of local jurisdictions. Rugby players have arguably become hired labourers whose local and national roots are becoming less important and more blurred as their performances as athletes and commercial endorsers become increasingly valued. Today's young athletes do not necessarily view their identities and futures as bound up within the nation state (Andrews, Carrington, Mazur & Jackson, 1996). Furthermore, it can be suggested that the All Blacks have blurred the line between a sports team and a commodity, where they are now marketed as a global brand. It has been argued in this chapter that discussions of modern rugby should be framed with reference to professional and global trends, tendencies and structures. These progressions in rugby have created questions as to the ongoing influence of globalisation and professionalisation in rugby. As the participants in the current study are part of the first generation of players who will only experience rugby in its professional format, it is of particular interest to understand how professionalism and the increasing forces of globalisation in rugby have impacted on, and influenced, these young men as they pursue a career in professional rugby. New perspectives are

required on this phenomenon of rugby as work in the global and professional era. It is hoped this study goes some way to providing these.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the past two decades the nature of work has changed and there has been a shift away from the traditional notion of the career to reflect a workforce that is more casualised, flexible and mobile. This chapter describes these changes and highlights the impact on youth employment as a relevant issue in this thesis. Parallels between elite sport and paid employment are then explored outlining rugby's shift from an amateur pastime to now reflect many of the characteristics of modern global capitalism. Finally, the labour process of elite sport and the work of the athlete are discussed, again drawing comparisons between the manual worker and the sports worker and highlighting the characteristics of work in professional rugby.

#### 3.1 The Changing Nature of the Workforce

Over the past two decades, increasing globalisation and technological advances have resulted in vast changes to the workforce, in particular the shift away from the notion of the traditional career. For example, Mallon (1999) notes that “the demise of the traditional career is widely heralded (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Handy, 1994; Bridges, 1995) as is its replacement by more fluid and individual career choices” (p.358). Fluid and individual career choices refer to the casualised and flexible workforce; those in this workforce are often referred to as contingent workers, flexible workers or assignment workers. Some labour economists, by contrast, refer to them as disposable and throwaway workers (Freedman, 1993). In essence, the notion of career has shifted from a long-term secure activity to a much more dynamic, insecure and mobile pursuit. The insecurity of the contemporary workforce is highlighted by Cawsey (1995) who argues that “stable, long-term career security is becoming a thing of the past, requiring new ways of thinking about, and framing relationships among, work, organizations, payment, and value for effort” (p.41). It is argued that secure, full-time jobs that last

until the statutory retirement age are decreasing, and according to Freedman (1993), the contemporary labour market provides almost no long-term secure jobs. In accordance with this, Kell (1996) states that there is a:

growing army of casualised and part time workers with low pay rates and insecure tenure...As full time jobs have been increasingly eliminated, through a combination of technological change, corporate restructuring and exposure to foreign competition, there has been a growth in 'servile' occupations. Most of these jobs have few career pathways, while some are often unsafe and exploit workers who are unprotected by withering industrial award systems (p.6).

Kell's claims of a casualised and part-time workforce are supported by Rapoport (1994, cited in Kerka, 1997) who suggests that the numbers of part-time, contingent, and contract workers have increased to more than 35 percent of the U.S labour force and nearly 50 percent in Europe. Charles Handy (1989) would suggest these types of figures are due to the emergence of the 'portfolio worker' and the 'portfolio career'. In his view "individuals will maintain portfolios of their skills, abilities and achievements with which they obtain temporary assignments in a variety of organisations, rather than securing permanent jobs" (cited in Kerka, 1997, p.1). According to Mallon (1999) "portfolio work is understood as packages of work arrangements for the plying and selling of an individual's skills in a variety of contexts" (p.358); for example, a worker who holds multiple jobs or contracts in multiple fields with multiple companies. For portfolio workers, money comes in bursts from different sources, such as part-time work, consulting fees or items to sell. Portfolio workers lead cash-flow lives, not salary lives, where the result is a less secure but more fulfilling career (Handy, 1989). As work becomes more centred around the portfolio worker, it is also becoming increasingly globalised, with more notions of flexible specialisation. This is translated to a more casualised workforce and the growing movement transnationally of people to take up professional and unskilled occupations. There now exists a highly mobile workforce in which career trajectories are much more tangential (Kell, 2007).

The boundaryless career theory (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) assists in explaining these shifts in the notion of career. Boundaryless career theory is based on the notion that in

recent times society has progressed from a structural 'industrial state' (Galbraith, 1971, cited in Thomas, Lazarova & Inkson, 2005) to a relatively flexible 'new economy' (Beck, 1995, cited in Thomas et al 2005) in which boundaries have become more permeable. Within Arthur's theoretical construction, the boundaryless career contends that the traditional career no longer exists due to the organisation as an institutional structure, upon which much of the career literature is based, having significantly changed. Boundaryless careers have been defined as "sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings" (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994, p.307). Thomas et al (2005) argue that the individual with a boundaryless career is highly skilled and most importantly a mobile professional who builds his or her career competencies and labour market value through transfer across boundaries. One of the consequences of this change to the boundaryless career is that the organisation becomes less responsible for the individual's career development.

At its simplest, boundaryless career theory contends that careers are no longer constrained by organisational boundaries. People are increasingly mobile and move freely between employers, relying on competencies which are transferable. For example, competencies may be technical skills and expertise that enable an electronics engineer to move between computer companies, or those of the professional rugby player who can transfer his athletic skills between various teams, or even across sporting codes, such as to rugby league (Gunz, Evans & Jalland, 2000).

When discussing the nature of the workforce, the issue of youth employment is particularly significant for the current study as many of the young men in this study will still be under 25 when their rugby 'career' is finished. It is important to explore the various issues associated with youth (16-25) employment in order to understand the nature of the workforce for these young men. Some of the issues for youth in the workforce are highlighted by Kirby (2000) who states:

Young people face difficulties in gaining access to employment. The stresses and strains are all too evident in the statistics. At the extreme, they are reflected in the suicides and attempted suicides. At a more every-day level, young people experience more mental anguish and affective disorders than any other group in the population (p.47).

In addition to the difficulties described by Kirby, Australian youth, or those aged under 25, experience an unemployment level almost three times higher than those aged 25-54 (Curtain, 2003). In New Zealand, the youth unemployment rate is over two times higher than that of the general population (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). The harsh realities of youth accessibility to the workforce are criticised by Kirby in his ministerial review of education in Victoria stating that “it is an indictment on our society that over two decades we have grown to accept as normal that a large percentage of our young people will be excluded from employment and a livelihood” (2000, p.11).

Curtain (2003) and others argue that young people, particularly those who do not complete year 12 or an equivalent level, experience demeaning marginalisation in the labour market (Curtain 2001, 2002, 2003; Kirby 2000; Marks & McMillan 2001). Such marginalisation is characterised by a move into the labour market with extended periods of unemployment, underemployment, numerous short bursts of temporary work in lower-skilled, part-time and or casual positions (Marks et al, 2001). Furthermore, Sweet (1998) argues that young people face a difficult time not only finding employment but also escaping from the cycle of temporary, part-time and casual work. Sweet (1998) suggests that the result is that many young people completely drop out of both education and the labour market.

Put simply, low education levels for youth result in increased likelihood of exclusion from the labour market. Involvement in education, employment and training reduces the prospect of youth being marginalised and remaining fringe participants of the labour market for longer periods. In the current study, high levels of youth unemployment in relation to low levels of education is a concern due to the increasing numbers of young men who are leaving school early to pursue a professional rugby career (Tuitupou, 1997). For the many young men who will not ‘make it’ as an elite rugby player, the literature suggests they will have a significantly more difficult time accessing, and are more likely to be marginalized in, the workforce due to their low levels of education at the basic school level. In many cases these low levels of education place these young men ‘at risk’. This is a term that is widely used and broadly signifies concern about young people’s future and the difficulty locating ongoing and rewarding employment, training or education.

In summary, various global, economic and social changes have combined to effect a shift in both the reality and perceptions of career structures, which has resulted in the diminishing of stable and long-term employment. Increasingly, the workplace is characterised by increased uncertainty, short-term work and greater emphasis on performance. According to contemporary theory, a career can no longer be envisioned as an upward progression through an organisational or occupational hierarchy. Rather it must be viewed as boundaryless, variable, and portfolio-orientated (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996). As part of this shift, young people have become increasingly marginalised in the labour market and experience extended periods of unemployment, casual and part-time work.

### **3.2 Sport as Work**

As described in Chapter Two, sport has progressed from a once amateur recreational pastime, where money was considered a destabiliser to the very core values of sport, to a more professional work-like environment where sport and its elite participants are driven by profits and production. Owing to the vast changes in modern sport, professional sport can now be analysed using similar approaches to those used to examine other forms of work in a capitalist society. Key writers in this field such as Brohm (1978) and Rigauer (1981) put forward critiques of sport that reflect the parallels between modern elite level sport and work. Rigauer (1981) argues that sport originally served as a counter-agent to work in a capitalist society, however, in the course of the last century sport has increasingly taken on more of the characteristics of paid employment. In the following passage Brohm (1978) suggests that sport as work is a reflection of industrial capitalist society:

Sport, as an activity characteristic of bourgeois industrial society, is an exact reflection of capitalist categories. And as Marx explained, economic categories reflect the structures and principles of organization of the capitalist mode of production. The vertical, hierarchical structure of sport models the social structure of bureaucratic capitalism, with its system of competitive selection, promotion, hierarchy, and social advancement. The driving forces

in sport – performance, competitiveness, records – are directly carried over from the driving forces of capitalism: productivity, the search for profit, rivalry and competitiveness (pp.49-50).

Brohm's (1978) contention that modern sport, driven by its measurable outcomes and search for profit, and reflecting similar characteristics to paid employment is supported by Rigauer (1981) who suggests that sport is no longer a playful alternative to the world of work but rather its mirror image. This is subsequently reflected by Brohm (1989) who argues that "we are witnessing a process whereby playfulness and joy, contact with air and water, improvisation and spontaneity, are disappearing: all these things are abandoned in favour of obedience to strict rules, efficiency and record times" (p.41). In accordance with this, and using football as an example of the ways in which sport reflects the world of work, Hunt argues:

Professional football has most of the characteristics of a vast capitalistic industry. It is on the lines of big business that the clubs are organised, with their boards of directors, their managers, their shareholders, and their employees. The monopoly of the means of satisfying the demands of the consumers (the spectators) is for the most part concentrated in the hands of comparatively small groups of industrialists and financiers...The driving force, the overriding motive, of professional football clubs is not the satisfaction of public demand, but the acquisition of profits (Hunt, 1981, cited in Horne, Tomlinson & Whannel, 1999, p.235).

Whilst Hunt is referring to football in Britain, a similar argument can be made for rugby in New Zealand and Australia. For example, the Super 14 competition is made up of franchised clubs, each with a chief executive officer, managers, administrators, and players as the employees. It is apparent that the corporate structure of rugby exhibits much of the structure of new organisations of modern global capitalism. These franchises, through value-exchange relationships, produce and sell rugby to the entertainment market for profit, which vastly contradicts the amateur-based culture of the game.

Rigauer (1981) suggests that modern sport has been shaped by its purposeful, rational, work-like behaviour patterns, which are reflected in its organisational structure through the characteristics of division of labour, mechanisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation which are also evident in modern work. Summarising the work of Rigauer (1981), Horne et al (1999) present six ways that modern sport and paid employment complement each other:

1. The repetitive, intensive and demanding training techniques, necessary for achievement in elite sport, reflect the alienating and dehumanising nature of the factory floor assembly line.
2. The athlete, and in particular, the elite sports team has a host of experts and 'support personnel' allocated to them. These 'experts' are responsible for developing strategies and tactics. The athletes are then expected to comply with a prescribed tactical plan and fit into a fixed division of labour that the individual or team has played no part in developing.
3. As in paid work, the athlete has limited ownership of the product where they may be able to exercise initiative (the rugby player or basketball player performing set plays called by the coach is an example). Rigauer notes that room for exercising initiative is greater in sports than in most forms of work, but argues that the gap is constantly narrowing.
4. The nature of the bureaucratic administration of sport means that management and officials, not athletes themselves, decide on sport-related policies.
5. The effect of these changes in modern sport is that a once amateur pastime has developed into a demanding, achievement-orientated and alienating area of human activity. Consequently sport loses its potential to be used as an escape from the pressures of work.
6. The idea that sport can fulfil this function of escapism is a 'masking ideology', where the real functions of sport in modern society are hidden from participants; for example, through the pretence of leisure, reinforcing an ethic of hard work, achievement and group loyalty, all of which are necessary for the operation of an advanced industrial capitalist society.

The nature of modern professional sport as a work-like environment for participants means that there is a focus on performance, production and profit. To achieve these

outcomes athletes must operate effectively and efficiently to maximise performance. Brohm (1989) talks of “the total, not to say totalitarian mobilisation of the athletes to produce maximum performance” (p.18), arguing that modern sport engages in a manipulation of human robots through the use of doctors, psychologists, bio-chemists and trainers. Brohm (1989) goes on to suggest that an industry has been built around the ‘manufacturing of champions’ where specialised laboratories, research and athletic institutes, and training camps are employed in pursuit of this outcome. Brohm (1978) argues that “training turns men and children into efficient machines who know no other joy other than the grim satisfaction of mastering and exploiting their own bodies” (p.41). The manufacturing of champions is evident in many elite-level sports and in rugby this is illustrated through the production of young men who are trained to play at high levels. In New Zealand young school leavers are placed in an academy where they are trained in the skills of rugby. They have access to coaches, fitness trainers, doctors, physiotherapists, physiologists and psychologists, all with the aim of manufacturing elite rugby players.

Modern sport has become increasingly bureaucratic, drawing it closer to the characteristics evident in paid work. The roots of modern thinking on bureaucracy lie in the work of sociologist Max Weber. His ideas on bureaucracy are embedded in his broader theory of the rationalization process. When discussing the rationalization process, Weber described how the modern Western world became increasingly rational; that is, dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and non-human technologies that control people (Ritzer, 2000). According to Weber “rationality means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures” (cited in Ritzer, 2000, p.23). Individuals are not left to their own devices in searching for the best means of obtaining a given objective, rather, institutionalised rules decide, and in some cases dictate to individuals what to do (Ritzer, 2000). Rigauer (1981) argues that these principles of rationalization help to explain the sociological relationship between elite sport and work through their utilisation in:

analytical training methods, in repetitive athletic activity, in temporal and spatial planning, in bureaucratic measures, in social roles, in specific forms of



social cooperation, of technical-rational conceptualisation and structuring, and in the attempt to make the rules for athletic behaviour scientific (p.77).

The bureaucratisation of elite sports, as argued by Rigauer (1981) implies a system of social roles similar to that which exists in the world of work. Drawing on the work of Guttmann (1978), Horne et al (1999) note that “the central importance of rules in governing behaviour and the priority of contractual relations over personal relations, are key features of bureaucratic organisations” (p.239). The connection here with modern sport is clear, as sports are controlled through governing bodies, associations and unions who apply specific conditions of employment for athletes, implement and enforce rule changes, organise events and competitions, and certify records (Horne, et al, 1999). Horne et al (1999) argue that in many ways Guttmann’s ideas of rationality and bureaucracy in modern sport have been relabelled as ‘McDonaldization’. Ritzer (2000) suggests that ‘McDonaldization’ is “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world” (p.1). The five underlying components of McDonaldization according to Ritzer – efficiency, quantifiability and calculability, predictability, control and technology are highly applicable to modern sport. One such example is that the work of the athlete can be monitored and quantified to calculate the level of efficiency and effectiveness through the use of technology. The technology available allows for the ‘tracking’ of players in sports such as rugby league to illustrate the level of work a particular player has or has not been involved in. Such technology means that players can be monitored during the game then have their work reviewed by coaches, managers and the public to evaluate the type and amount of work the player has been involved in. Such a measure attempts to quantify and control the player’s work and increases their accountability, as is evident in labour productivity.

The concept of ‘role specialisation’, which is similar to the notion of ‘division of labour’, also assists in explaining the increasing alignment of modern sport to the world of work. Role specialisation is a distinctive feature of modern sport, as historically sports were unspecialised and undifferentiated. However, modern sports are increasingly dominated by players in specialist positions (Horne et al, 1999). For example, Rigauer (1981) argues that “every description of the position contains a catalogue of characteristics which imply a prescribed pattern of behaviour for the

individual player” (p.51), and that the very conception of a team situates players into a set place with specialised and specifically prescribed tasks. Therefore, top-level sports by their very nature exhibit the characteristics of division of labour. For example, in rugby, positions have clearly defined roles, distinguished from each other in terms of skills and responsibilities. The hooker is responsible for throwing the ball into the lineout, the eight forwards are responsible for the scrummaging and the first five eighth is often required to do a high percentage of kicking. Whilst role exchange is possible, and some degree of independence exists for the individual athlete (in contrast to the worker), players are expected to carry out the duties of their position (Rigauer, 1981).

In summary, it is argued that from its once amateur recreational origins elite sport now reflects purposeful, rational, work-like behaviour patterns illustrating a sociological connection between elite sports and work (Rigauer, 1981). From this perspective, sport has gradually acquired most of the features of industrial factory production. For example, bureaucratic organisations, division of labour, role specialisation, the enactment of efficient, repetitive, standardised tasks, achievement-orientated goals and an obsession with making profits by owners and players are now all central to elite level sports (McKay, 1991). The underlying factor in the shift in the working environment in rugby was the move to professionalism. The professionalisation of rugby changed the game forever, from a traditional amateur pastime to a work-like environment where an ever greater amount of significance has been placed on effective production and measurable outcome-orientated goals. The payment of players for their services increased the requirement of this new labour force to be accountable to their team owner, coaches and management. Training levels increased, as did time commitments and other related commitments such as sponsor and community commitments. As part of their work, the off-field behaviour of players was also monitored and in many cases player curfews applied. The required commitment of players to the team and their employers meant that new rules and regulations were placed upon players in which heavy fines and disciplinary measures applied to those who strayed.

### 3.3 The Labour Process and Professional Sport

Labour markets in elite sport differ from other labour markets in the rules and regulations that govern the sale of labour power. There are also specific regulations that apply to the mobility of labour and the ability for sports workers to choose their employers (Hargreaves, 1986). For example, in the Super 14 rugby competition, players who are not wanted, or not required, by their 'home' franchise in New Zealand, are placed into a draft system where any of the five New Zealand franchised teams can hire them, and the player is then required to compete for that team. Such restriction on the freedom of players disrupts their job security and forces the worker to relocate if they want to maintain their job, limiting the control the worker has in their occupation. A further restriction on labour mobility is evident when the sports worker enters into a legally binding contract which effectively locks them in to a particular employer for a stated period of time on a stated salary; players are generally unable to seek out other employers during this time.

As discussed in Chapter Two, up until 1995 rugby union has traditionally been an amateur sport. In the time leading up to this point, and in particular throughout the Super League war, rugby union was involved in a contest for players. Competition for these athletes strengthened the bargaining position of players who acted collectively to determine which of the rivals they would join. This decision set the foundations for the way in which rugby's industrial relations would be conducted in the professional era (Dabscheck, 2003). These industrial relations for rugby in New Zealand and Australia are conducted through a players' association, which is an independent body that collectively represents players in areas such as payment, welfare and professional development. It is through this association that players can obtain an improvement in their working conditions and salaries, through a collective bargaining agreement.

With regard to rugby in New Zealand, Obel (2001, cited in Owen & Weatherston, 2002) argues that it is the emphasis on All Black success that has led to the uniqueness of the player labour market. The labour market for professional rugby players in New Zealand is controlled by the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) who implement payment structures, as well as regulations on mobility and eligibility. With the inception of the Super 12 competition in 1996, 150 players and five coaches were initially contracted by

the NZRU to the five regionally based New Zealand franchises. However, due to the ongoing threat of overseas competition, the NZRU expanded its contract base to include younger players such as the national under 21 'Colts', and other emerging players (Obel, 2001, cited in Owen & Weatherston, 2002). A unique feature of the labour market in New Zealand rugby is the centralised contracting system in which Super 14 players are contracted to the NZRU, not their franchise or provincial union. Such a contract requires a player to play, if selected, for up to five different teams, including provincial teams, Super 14 teams, the All Blacks and other representative teams (Obel, 2001, cited in Owen & Weatherston, 2002). Tiered collective contracts currently cover the country's top 220 players and specify general terms, conditions and levels of payment, which may be dependent on participation in various teams and competitions (Owen & Weatherston, 2002). Contracted players at all levels are provided with a retainer, and national players are involved in a revenue sharing arrangement with the NZRU (NZRPA, 2007).

As the commercialisation of sport has increased, so too have the number of disputes and industrial action. There have been a number of player strikes in sports such as soccer, basketball and ice hockey. In the 1998-99 season of the NBA in America the player strike lasted for 191 days; in the National Hockey League a player strike in 1994 lasted 103 days; and soccer players in Norway took strike action due to a dispute over players' contracts and occupational injury insurance. In many other sports strike action has been threatened; for example, in rugby league in Australia strike action was called for over salary cap payments. The growth of player associations and player unions has given players a collective strength with which they are able to negotiate their employment conditions. As sport generates increased revenues through television rights, players are increasingly aware of their ability to dispute their working conditions and payments.

Beamish (1993) suggests however, that, despite athletes' collective strength, future prospects for improved remuneration, working conditions, and control over the work process are minimal. Beamish (1988) further argues that "in the case of professional sport, despite increased use of legal action and the development of players' unions, the professional athlete remains relatively powerless in relation to the owners" (p. 155). For example, managers and owners in professional sports still hold significant power which allows them to hire and fire in ways that would not be acceptable in other working

environments. Beamish (1993) goes on to note that there are a number of powerful forces behind the status quo. For example, the dominant hegemonic forces that make up the current high-performance sport system remain intact, and the “ideological dominance of bureaucratic and instrumental rationality have not been challenged” (p.204). Writing in 1993, Beamish goes on to suggest that the working conditions for athletes in the future will become even more controlled and supervised. It may be argued that his predictions have been borne out in elite sport.

### **3.4 Sports Workers: The Athletic Career**

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the wage/labour relationship, little attention has been paid to the work of professional athletes (Beamish, 1988). A large amount of trivial knowledge regarding elite athletes is provided through the mass media and the numerous sports biographies and autobiographies. However, much less is known about elite athletes as ‘sports workers’ or ‘athletic labour’ (Horne et al, 1999). Hargreaves (1986) notes that sports workers are a small occupational group, predominantly comprised of men, as opportunities for women in professional sports are limited. It may be argued that the opportunities for anyone to undertake work as a professional athlete are highly limited. For example, Coakley (1994) suggests the chances of a high school or college athlete in the United States becoming a professional athlete in the three major sports of football, basketball and baseball is less than one percent. If the athlete is able to ‘break into’ the professional sport, it is likely that their career will extend over a fairly short timeframe. For example, in American football, basketball and baseball, Coakley (1994) notes that the average professional career ranges from four to seven years in length. However, he argues that “this average is deceiving because it obscures the fact that the number of people who play for only one or two years is far greater than those who play for more than five to seven years” (p.284). Highlighting the short-term nature of professional football in Britain, Roderick (2006) argues that the professional football industry has always been typified by a competitive labour market, limited-tenure contracts, surplus of labour, and vulnerability to injury and aging. Given the high impact of the sport, competition for places, and effects of aging, similar arguments may be applied to professional rugby. When considering the work of elite athletes, Coakley (1994) suggests it is important to remember that:

- The number of career opportunities for athletes is highly limited.
- Career opportunities for athletes are short-term.
- Most career opportunities in high-level sport do not result in fame and fortune.
- Opportunities for women, ethnic minorities, the elderly and disabled are extremely limited.

As the specific tasks, earnings, working conditions and statuses of different players vary greatly between and within sports, it is difficult to conceptualise sports workers as a homogeneous group. However, some generalisations are possible, and Hargreaves (1986) provides a set of arguments regarding the social position of sports workers:

1. Like manual work, sports work involves physical labour and in the case of high impact sports such as rugby, rugby league and AFL, the physicality of the labour is highly intense. The high demands on physical fitness, ability and impact means that sports careers are generally considerably shorter than those of industrial workers.
2. The performance and efficiency of the sports worker is analysed and further enhanced with the aid of time and motion techniques in the pursuit of increased productivity.
3. Like manual workers, sports workers, especially those in high impact sports, are exposed to health and safety hazards as part of the job. Injuries to sports workers is a common aspect of their work, where specific injuries such as neck, shoulder, back and knee can result in the end of a sports worker's career, and even permanent physical damage. Furthermore, dangerous work conditions can be found in sport such as the lack of adequate medical safeguards and the frequent use of drugs to mask pain that enable the competitor to continue their involvement.

Drawing on the Marxist conception of labour as a commodity it may be argued that athletic skills can be objectified into exchange commodities (Rigauer, 1981). In the work of professional athletes, athletic labour becomes a commodity like all other commodities, where players are objects of measured worth. Erikson (1986) argues that an athlete's experience, ability and their very self, are sold at market prices to entrepreneurs who have invested capital in sport. In a capitalist economy the

commodities produced by athletes as workers are primarily for the entertainment market.

In spite of the numerous parallels between the manual worker and sport worker, there are important contrasts that must be noted. For example, Hargreaves (1986) argues that the physical health of sport workers is likely to be better than industrial workers due to the specific attention it is given throughout the sports career. However, in some cases this may be misleading when referring to high impact sports such as rugby, where not only are the injury rates high, but there are numerous instances of players playing on through pain and even concussion. The immediate goal of winning often outweighs the impact on medium-term health. Hargreaves (1986) goes on to note that those involved in sports work have an overall higher satisfaction with their job than those involved in manual work, and view their work as having prestige and status, a trait not commonly seen amongst industrial workers. Furthermore, the satisfaction and perceived prestige may go some way to explaining the lack of adverse reaction to the tight control exerted over the labour process. For example, sports workers seem to be one of the few categories of workers who are publicly reprimanded for rule infringements and their punishment is publicly debated. Punishment for rule infringements often results in workers being suspended from undertaking their work, and the subsequent suspension and associated fines often result in a loss of earnings. Furthermore, the external control over sport workers lives extends to their out of work time, where they can be punished for poor conduct outside the work context (Hargreaves, 1986).

Athletes embarking on work as professionals can serve a fairly long apprenticeship as they work their way through the 'feeder' system. In the New Zealand rugby academy system for example, young elite players are recruited to a provincial academy straight from school, and sometimes before. They are 'locked in' to a contract which in most cases is for three years. During this time they are trained hard, for fairly little remuneration. Vincent Hanna, a journalist for the Guardian in England comments on the recruitment and engagement of young elite soccer players in Europe. A similar idea can be applied to professional rugby in New Zealand and Australia:

Suppose someone told you there was a regime in Europe where agents scour the country looking for talented young boys, who are taken from their homes

and brought to camps to do menial jobs and train consistently – for whom, because of the intense competition for places, education is cursory. The lucky ones are kept on, bound under a contract system where they can be bought and sold by employers. The successful and the bright do very well. But many of the second-raters will find themselves, in their 30s, on the scrap heap and uneducated. Thus does Britain produce the greatest football league in the world (Hanna, 1996, cited in Horne et al, 1999, p.223).

One of the misconceptions regarding the work of a professional athlete is the level of associated financial rewards. Findings from Tuitupou's (1997) study indicate that the young men interviewed perceived a strong relationship between professional rugby and the financial benefits, seemingly unaware of the variations in wages between the top level and the semi-professional player. Gurney (1997, cited in Horne et al, 1999) analysed players' average weekly wage over the four divisions of the English Football League to highlight the disparity of salaries in the 1990s. Gurney's findings suggest that the majority of the 3800 professional footballers in England and Wales only earned marginally higher than the average national professional wage. There was a marked difference between the payment of highly elite or 'marque' players in the premier league and those competing at the lower end of the professional scale. In most professional sports this pattern is similar, with the minority at the top level securing vast amounts of money and others earning a much smaller wage. As Hargreaves (1986) argues:

Differences in income, security, length of career and future prospects produce substantial economic inequalities between sports workers, at least as great as those generated outside sport across the occupational structure. Some are at the level of semi-skilled workers, others command the equivalent of better-paid skilled workers, professional people, managers and small businessman, and the earning of the superstar-elite vie with those of top company executives and employers (p.126).

The high earnings of sport workers, and in this case professional rugby players, need to be understood in relation to their career pattern. For example, injury or loss of form may drastically reduce earnings, or end the career of the player prematurely



(Hargreaves, 1986; Roderick, 2006). Full-time rugby careers are relatively short, illustrated by the low numbers of players competing at a professional level at the age of 34 or over. For example in the 2006 Auckland Blues squad, the average age was 26 and the oldest player was 33. According to former All Black coach John Mitchell, with talent being identified earlier and the nature of the elite game requiring athleticism, power and strength, international rugby careers will start earlier and finish earlier, beginning at 19 or 20 and finishing at 26 or 27 (Thomas, 2003). One of the key distinguishing features between the work of a professional athlete and other types of work is that age often determines career length.

Such characteristics of injury and aging can contribute to heightened feelings of uncertainty amongst athletic workers. For example, according to Roderick's (2006) study of professional footballers in Britain, the characteristics of professional football means that athletes' work is highly contingent, lacks long-term security, and breeds a pervading sense of insecurity. Furthermore, Roderick (2006) argues that "uncertainty is central to the lived experiences of players, for whom career advancement and attainment are never secure" (p.245). In rugby, the worker has a relatively short productive work life, and is prone to serious injury (Garraway, Lee, Hutton, Russell & Macleod, 2000). Furthermore the chance of maintaining or improving the level of income after retirement from sports is unlikely for many (Horne et al, 1999). Discussing this in the context of professional football in Britain, Parker (2000) argues that the implication of this is that along with:

notions of fame, fortune and stardom, football's young hopefuls must seriously consider the wider occupational options open to them, preparing not only for the possibility of rejection and failure, but for the ultimate conditions and consequences of life outside their chosen profession (p.62).

Through an examination of the economic, rational, bureaucratic and other aspects of work, this chapter has illustrated the close relationship existing between professional sport work and other forms of work in a capitalist society. It is evident that sports workers, or in the case of this study, rugby players, are employees selling their labour to the entertainment market. These young men are recruited at a young age to serve their apprenticeship as rugby players with no guarantee of securing work within this

occupation. These workers have limited job security due to variables such as injury and selection and are subject to the authority of employers and officials. Furthermore, many may face difficulty accessing the workforce and marginalisation in the labour market upon leaving the sport. This will be further exaggerated for those who have not been able to further their education or undertake any alternative forms of training or work experience. For the current study, researching those individuals who are engaged in, or pursuing work as, a rugby player will extend the knowledge about what it means to be involved in this relatively new labour market of professional rugby and the associated experiences of this occupational choice.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The career development, planning and education of elite athletes whilst in their high-performance phase is evolving as a more significant component of sport research. Only recently has the notion of career development and planning become a considered aspect of the life of an elite athlete and recognised as beneficial to the athlete whilst in their high-performance phase. This chapter reviews related literature and perspectives on career development and planning. The life career development perspective is introduced and implications drawn for the athletic context. This chapter explores views on the importance of career development and planning for elite athletes and the influence on areas such as career awareness and life-skills of the athlete. The chapter also briefly draws upon the providers of career development and education and examines examples of programs and initiatives offered to athletes.

#### 4.1 Career Development and Planning: Theories and Perspectives

Vocational guidance, the precursor to career development counselling, began in the early 1900s, with Frank Parsons (1909) being credited as its founder. The early work of Parsons, based on a matching between a knowledge of self and a knowledge of aspects of the world of work, remained the primary focus of theory and practice until the 1950s. Modern theories of career development emerged in the literature during the 1950s. During that time the 'occupational choice' focus of the first 40 years of career development diminished as a broader, more comprehensive view of individuals and their occupational development over the life span began to emerge. In the 1960s, knowledge regarding occupational choice as a developmental process increased dramatically. With the work of Ginzberg and his colleagues (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad & Herma, 1951), as well as that of Super (1953, 1957), the emphasis moved from trait and factor approaches, with their focus on the content of career choice, to

developmental approaches, which placed an important focus on the process of career development and decision making (Zunker, 1994).

Ettinger (1996) suggests there are two types of career development theories: Structural Theories, which focus on individual characteristics and occupational tasks, and Developmental Theories, which focus on human development across their life span.

*Structural Theories:* Often referred to as trait and factor approach, this group of theories began with Parsons, who proposed that a choice of vocation depended upon an accurate knowledge of yourself, thorough knowledge of job specifications, and the ability to make a proper match between the two. Parsons wrote:

In the wise choice of vocation there are three broad factors: (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitation; (2) a thorough knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; and (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of acts (Parsons, 1909, cited in Ettinger, 1996, p.5)

In light of the structural theories, John Holland (1985) offers this simple formula for successful career planning:

*Know self + world of work + review of alternatives + career decision = career planning.*

*Know self* = information about yourself such as performance abilities, interests and occupational choices.

*World of work* = information such as occupational profiles, job descriptions and traits that exists within occupational roles.

*Review of alternatives* = matching personal information with an occupation.

*Career decision* = making a decision e.g., Do I like what I see?

*Career planning* = pursue the occupational goal; e.g., Job search activities.

*Developmental Theories:* Donald Super (1957) and other theorists of career development recognise the changes that people go through as they mature. They argue

that career patterns are determined by socio-economic factors, mental and physical abilities, personal characteristics and the opportunities to which persons are exposed. People seek career satisfaction through work roles in which they can express themselves and implement and develop their self concepts. Career maturity, a main concept in Super's theory, is manifested in the successful accomplishment of age and stage development tasks across the life span (Ettinger, 1996).

Socio-economic theory is an extension of development theory in which sociologists and economists describe how one's culture, family background, social and economic conditions and other factors outside an individual's control strongly influence one's identity, values, and overall human and career development. Socioeconomic theory is also known as the "chance" or "accident" theory. This approach to understanding career development suggests that many people follow the path of least resistance in their career development by simply falling into whatever work opportunities happen to come their way (Ettinger, 1996).

Zunker (1981) argues that career development consists of two areas: the first is concerned with conducting self-exploration, career exploration and learning the skills to find the right career; the second involves planning for future changes or transitions at the end of a chosen career. Zunker (1981) defines *career development* as:

A lifelong process of developing beliefs and values, skills and aptitudes, interests, personality characteristics and knowledge of the world of work...the terms reflect individually developed needs and goals associated with stages of life and tasks that affect career choices and subsequent fulfilment of purpose (p.2).

Furthermore, Zunker (1981) defines *career education* as a "relationship between traditional education programs and the world of work" and suggests that its major purpose is "to prepare each individual for living and working in our society" (p.32). Under the umbrella heading of career development, there are other associated terms such as career planning, career awareness and career education, which are discussed in this chapter in relation to professional sport. For the purpose of this study, career development may include a variety of activities, including but not limited to, continuing

education, career training, developing job-relevant skills, advice or experience, investment endeavours, identifying personal career needs and social networking.

#### 4.1.1 *Life Career Development Perspective*

In 1975 Gysbers and Moore proposed the concept of *life career development* with a view to expanding career development from an existing occupation perspective to a life perspective, in which occupation has place and meaning. They defined life career development as “self-development over the life span through the integration of the roles, settings, and events of a person’s life” (Gysbers & Moore 1975, p.648). From this perspective, career development is viewed as a holistic process that involves all aspects of a person’s identity and life circumstances. Demographic variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, race and religion are important in shaping human behaviour and therefore are considered highly relevant to an individual’s vocational choices. Career and personal concerns, rather than being dichotomized, are viewed as intertwined and interactive at all levels of an individual’s outlook. Furthermore, all elements of an individual’s reality are expected to interact and develop over their lifetime, or life career (Martens & Lee, 1998).

The word ‘life’ in life career development indicates that the focus is on the total person. The word ‘career’ identifies and relates the roles in which individuals are involved and defines much of a person’s experiences (worker, student, family, community member), the setting where individuals find themselves that shape their priorities, define their needs and place demands on their time (home, school, community, workplace), and the events that occur over their lifetimes (first job, marriage, divorce, retirement). The word ‘development’ indicates that individuals are constantly in the process of becoming. Life career development describes unique people with their own lifestyles (Gysbers, Heppner & Johnston, 2003). The life career development perspective responded to Hall’s (1996) call for a more holistic view of individuals: “What is needed in career theory and practice is a more holistic view of the individual, one that encompasses all spheres of activity and all corresponding facets of personal identity” (p.7).

Life career development was developed to assist career counsellors better understand their clients. Its view of human development and behaviour provides ways to analyse and understand clients' development and behaviour in career terms, to expand their vision of career from a work only focus to a broader view involving life roles, settings and events all interacting over the life span. This approach allows people to focus on a specific life role, while at the same time linking that life role to other life roles, to appreciate the influence various life settings may have on life roles, and to anticipate the possible impact that planned and unplanned events or non-events may have on career planning and decision-making (Gysbers et al, 2003).

### *Implications for the Athletic Context*

The life career development perspective has numerous implications when applied to an athletic context and has previously been utilised by Martens and Lee (1998) in their work on the career development of college athletes in America. According to Martens and Lee, applying the initial work in this area (Gysbers & Moore, 1975; McDaniels & Gysbers, 1992; Gysbers et al, 2003) to an athletic context provides a way of understanding the complexity of the conditions and issues athletes are facing in the professional and global era. First, it highlights the importance of considering athletes as individuals with complex lives. Not only are these individuals athletes, they often have varying backgrounds, some are students and some have part-time work and many have the same developmental concerns as the wider population. Second, it points to the importance of understanding the settings that shape their priorities, define their needs and place demands on their time. For many athletes this is the athletic arena, which in many cases provides barriers to the developmental experiences of the athlete. Third, it highlights the need for processes which facilitate the preparation of athletes for life events. This may be gaining a professional contract, enrolling in university or retirement from elite sport. This also includes guiding athletes to think more broadly about themselves and their future. Finally, it recognises the positive behaviours and skills that may be transferred to other settings.

For many athletes it is difficult to consider their future selves, as often the lens being used to view the future is too small and narrow to capture the full scope (Gysbers et al, 2003). Life career development can serve as a 'wide angled lens' that can elucidate athletes' problems, concerns and issues. It can also provide athletes with an insight into

major life possibilities for their future selves. Moreover, the life career development perspective allows the intertwining of athletes' major focus of work, as a professional athlete, with their other life roles.

## **4.2 Implications of Career Development and Planning for Elite Athletes**

Historically, the opportunity to study and address the career development and planning needs of elite athletes has proven to be difficult for a variety of reasons. Typically, trained professionals such as sport psychologists and career counsellors have had limited contact with athletes during their competitive careers, and even less after they leave their sport. Until recently sport administrators had little concern for athletes after they retire and sport psychologists rarely had the opportunities to evaluate the need for such services to elite athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Divergent perspectives held by administrators and coaches with respect to career development may also have hindered further exploration of this area. According to Sinclair and Orlick (1993), sports organisations often did not want sport psychologists or other professionals to address career development and education or life after sport, for fear of distracting the athletes from their competitive focus. However, it seems this view is shifting, and some sports governing bodies now realise that providing education and vocational counselling to their athletes is an integral part of the athletes' developmental process and contributes to the ultimate success of the athletic program (see Parker, 2000; McGillivray, 2006). This study explores whether this position relates to the recently professional sport of rugby and what value coaches and administrators place on the career development of their young athletes.

The growing body of research on career development and planning for elite athletes is largely in agreement on the various benefits it provides athletes whilst in their high-performance phase (see Martens & Lee, 1998; North & Lavalley, 2004; McGillivray, 2006). It is argued that career development has the ability to broaden an athlete's self-identity, enhance perceptions of control, and develop life-skills. It is also argued that socio-economic status, financial dependency on the sport, perceived performance, balance of life and post-athletic occupational potential would all be positively influenced (see Murphy, 1995; Martens & Lee, 1998; Anderson, 1999, Hickey & Kelly,



2005). Other studies have found that career development and planning that assists athletes to develop work and social skills enables them to deal more effectively with the pressures of being elite athletes, and suffer less anxiety about being a late starter in a career outside sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder 1993; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Murphy, 1995).

Anderson's (1999) study of elite Australian athletes examined the impact of career development and education on the perceived performance, mood, self-concept, and the well being of athletes. The study involved elite athletes participating in the ACE (Athlete Career and Education) program, which provides career and education services to elite Australian athletes. Those athletes involved in the ACE program "had a higher perception of their performance both in training and competition, maintained constantly lower levels of anger, confusion and tension, and consistently higher levels of vigour" (p.ii) than those who did not complete the ACE program. This research would suggest that those athletes who undertake some form of career development and planning receive benefits that extend beyond preparation for life after sport, and have implications for their involvement and performance during their high-performance phase: Athletes who participated in the ACE program demonstrated more successful competition results in the 12-month period, thus providing benefits to the club or team in which they represented. However, despite the benefits, and the fact that some athletes have career programs available to them, it is often unknown to what extent athletes utilise these and become actively involved in them. Sinclair & Orlick's (1993) research suggests that it is only a small proportion of athletes (27 percent) that take advantage of these services.

#### *4.2.1 Career Awareness (Understanding the Career Process)*

Understanding the career process has been identified as an important component of career development and has specific implications for athletes in terms of enhancing their awareness of alternative careers beyond sport (Hawkins & Blann, 1996; Martens & Lee, 1998). Hawkins and Blann (1996) define career awareness as "the understanding of the career planning process and procedures and resources that can be used in developing and pursuing parallel and post-sport career life goals" (p.v). Career development

theorists Super and Thompson (1979, cited in Zunker, 1994) use the term *vocational maturity* to describe the understanding of the career process and identified six key factors of this: (1) “awareness of the need to plan ahead; (2) decision –making skills; (3) knowledge and use of information resources; (4) general career information; (5) general world of work information; and (6) detailed information about occupations of preference” (p.30). A number of studies conclude however, that young elite athletes are less likely to engage in career development and planning activities than non-athletes, resulting in lower levels of career awareness and a poorer understanding of the career process (Blann & Zaichowsky, 1986; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996).

Part of developing career awareness is understanding and planning for post-sport careers. Blann and Zaichowsky (1988, cited in Hawkins & Blann, 1996) conducted a study on athlete career awareness surveying 214 professional athletes from American and National League Baseball Associations to establish what career plans, if any, had been formulated. The study concluded that overall career awareness was poor, with seventy percent of the participants stating that they had delayed planning for post-sport careers, whereas eighty-four percent had not planned financially for retirement. In contrast to Blann and Zaichowsky’s study, Hawkins and Blann’s (1996) study of athlete career development in the Australian and Victorian Institute of Sport reported that athletes generally exhibited high levels of career awareness. Nearly all the athletes in this study agreed to “knowing their personal strengths, weaknesses, interests and skills” (p.37) and eighty-seven percent agreed that “they could relate these qualities to careers best suited to them” (p.37). Ninety-two percent of the athletes reported that they believed they had “acquired skills in sport that could be used in a variety of other careers” (p.37). Eighty-two percent of the athletes reported that they would “be confident and effective in an employment interview situation” (p.38). Finally, eighty-seven percent of the athletes responded that they believed it was “important to plan for a new career for when their sport career ends” (p.38).

The difference between the two studies can be largely explained by the different opportunities afforded to the athletes in terms of resources and support in their career development and planning. For example, The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) provide career development and education

programs for their athletes. It is likely that the athletes' high levels of awareness had developed through participation in these programs. In the context of rugby, especially in New Zealand, there are currently few opportunities for young elite athletes to develop career awareness. Many young men embark on a professional rugby career straight from leaving high school. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Ten, this impacts on young rugby players' vocational goals outside of rugby and how they select or pursue an alternative career.

#### 4.2.2 *Development of Life-skills*

One of the claims made by career theorists is that career development and planning will influence the development of life-skills (Zunker, 1994). Danish (1993) defines life-skills as those skills that enable us to master the tasks necessary to succeed in our social environment; for example, learning to transfer skills from one domain of life to another, in particular those skills learned in sport that can be applicable at home, at school, or in the workplace. The development of life-skills is particularly important for athletes in elite sports such as rugby due to the short-term nature of the occupation. Furthermore, due to the commitment required, involvement in the sport does not necessarily assist in the development of skills in other areas (Horne et al, 1999; McGillivray et al, 2005). Danish, Petitpas and Hale (1993) suggest that athletes need to be aware of the skills and qualities they possess that are of value in other settings, long before they need to be utilised. Furthermore, these authors argue that when athletes recognise that they possess skills that are applicable to outside settings their athletic performance will improve.

Engagement in career development and planning provides athletes with a context in which they are able to develop a range of life-skills that can be applied in a setting outside professional sport. For example, Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, and Murphy (1997) argue that there are different factors as to why one athlete thrives in life after sport, while another struggles, however, one factor appears to be critical. The athlete who possesses effective life-skills will be better able to cope with the challenges of a career outside of sport than the athlete who lacks those skills. Petitpas, et al (1997) further argue that athletes who are very successful not only at playing their sport but

also in learning important life-skills from their participation view themselves not just as talented athletes but also as talented people; they have transposed their sport success into life success.

Anderson (1999) suggests that the limited success of some career development programs in America was partly due to the reluctance of administrators and coaches to understand, or fully appreciate, the need to assist athletes with life-skills programs. Moreover, she argues that this problem would remain as long as administrators and coaches perceived life-skill programs to be peripheral to developing athletic performance. In her study on life-skill intervention, Anderson (1999) spoke with numerous American-based researchers in this area, concluding that “with less than one percent of college athletes making professional sports teams, life-skills programs were urgently needed at the college level” (p.49). There is little doubt that as New Zealand and Australia continue to produce young talented athletes striving for a career in rugby there will need to be an integrated life-skills program as part of any career development and planning initiative.

### **4.3 Barriers to Engagement in Career Development and Planning**

Research in America indicates that varsity college athletes experience lower levels of career development than their non-athletic peers. Kennedy and Dimick (1987) found that college basketball and football players were less inclined to engage in career development activities compared to non-athletes. Furthermore, Martens and Cox (2000) found that college athletes were also less likely to engage in career and educational planning than non-athletes. In Australia, Hickey and Kelly’s (2005) study of AFL players also concluded that career development pursuits were a low priority for young players. A number of explanations have been provided to explain athletes’ low levels of engagement in career development, many pointing to the barriers they face as high-performance competitors.

Different priorities and intense commitment to sport mean athletes differ from most of their peers in that their career development and planning must involve sports participation as their primary focus, whereas their non-athletic counterparts are focused

primarily on education or work. Vitale argues that “professional athletes today have been hampered in planning for their future careers by the intense demands of training, travel, performance and the ever-present prospect of physical injury” (2002, p.1). As a result, Petitpas and Champagne (1998) have hypothesised that lack of time impacts on athletes’ career development. Education and work-related decisions are often put on hold until the sporting ‘career’ is finished. This can lead to athletes feeling that they have fallen behind in terms of career development, as they are often making education and work decisions later than their peers (Murphy, 1995). For example, former AFL player Brendan Gale said in an interview on the ABC Sports Factor:

Because football is so consuming...you do make a lot of sacrifices. So when you do leave the game, you’re often well behind the guy who’s probably had 8 years, 9 years work experience in the ordinary work force so to speak, and he [the athlete] has to go and re-skill, re-train, and often he’s way behind the eight ball (Radio National, Sports Factor, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2005).

The structure of elite sport also provides a barrier to career development and planning, and may inhibit athletes’ ability to engage in career development pursuits. McGillivray et al (2005) suggest that young elite athletes are subjected to an environment that discourages engagement in career development pursuits such as the continuation of formal learning. In addition, researchers argue that the degree of structure inherent in the athletic system promotes conformity and dependence and discourages exploratory behaviour in athletes (Russell, 1993; Petitpas & Champagne, 1998; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). According to Martens and Lee (1998) the continual assistance provided to elite athletes with regard to basic life tasks can result in the athlete feeling unprepared to make decisions or explore options independently. Moreover, Hill and Lowe (1974) argue that with ever increasing salaries for elite sporting professionals, many may experience a false sense of security that makes career development and planning a low priority for them. North and Lavalley (2004) go further to argue that it is young athletes and those who perceive they have significant time left in their sport who fail to develop plans for the future. Romanos (2002) provides the following example of how many young rugby players are unaware of the importance and implications of engaging in career development and planning:

I know of one group of youngsters who attended one of the provincial rugby academies. They were supposed to attend the local polytechnic, but most hardly ever bothered to turn up for their courses. At the end of the year, the academy supervisor asked the tutor if he would give the young players a dispensation and pass them anyhow, and was quite miffed when the tutor would not. In this instance both the young players and their supervisor were short-sighted. Both could not see further than rugby (p.103).

The type and status of the sport also provides a barrier to career development and planning. For example, sports that are professional and where the participants are well remunerated can also act as a barrier to career development and planning. Evidence from previous studies suggests that athletes who participate in a sport where a professional career may be a long-term goal are at greater risk of discontinuing their academic studies in order to concentrate on pursuit of a sport career (Donnelly, 1993). This was evident in Parker's (2000) study of professional football youth trainees in Britain where the vast majority of the trainees "viewed full-time professional player status as an occupational inevitability and because of this many simply dismissed the whole notion of 'further' educational pursuit or post-career vocational training" (p.62). Perceptions of career development and planning may therefore be shaped by the status of the sport within which they are situated. In the context of this study, where rugby was a long-term goal for many of the participants, there are important implications here.

The extent of an individual's investment of identity as an athlete has been found to have a significant relationship with the level of engagement in career development (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997). Brewer, Van Raalte and Linder (1993) found for example, in their study of college athletes, that those with a higher level of identity investment in their sport were less likely to engage in career development and more likely to experience anxiety regarding career exploration. Furthermore, some authors have suggested that a strong commitment to sport may be detrimental to athletes' career development and planning, and as a result athletes' develop a perception of restricted alternatives (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

In their study of young elite AFL players, Hickey and Kelly (2005) found that young footballers faced a range of barriers to engaging in career development and planning.

While they found that lack of time and access were significant barriers, they suggest that one of the biggest obstacles to these young men engaging in career development was themselves. They argue that the athletes' lack of focus on, and commitment to, career development pursuits, and their intense narrow focus on football provided the greatest barriers in this area. There are many similarities between the experiences and perceptions of the young AFL players in Hickey and Kelly's study, and the rugby players who participated in this study. This study explores the perceived barriers to young elite rugby players engaging in career development pursuits.

#### **4.4 Career Development and Planning Programs and Interventions: Whose Responsibility?**

Much of the literature points to the role of governing bodies or sports organisations in providing career development and planning programs to athletes. For example, Monsanson (1992) argues that elite athletes are located within a complete "Ecosystem" including their coach, management, and governing bodies and further proposes that these people must be involved in the athletes' career development and planning. Findings from Anderson's study (1999) suggest that, given the intensive commitment to sport, innovative and flexible programs are necessary to ensure that athletes have appropriate opportunities to develop their skills outside sport, while they are still training and competing. Furthermore, Sadlier (1999) notes that national sport organisations have a responsibility for preparing athletes for their future beyond sport, which implies assisting with career development and life-skills.

Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) argue that elite sport is now entering an era where it will be increasingly challenged to take a more socially responsible attitude towards athletes. High rates of occupational 'drop-out' have resulted in professional football in Britain being criticised for its failure to meet the educational and vocational needs of young players and neglecting issues of alternative career training (Parker, 2000). Furthermore, McGillivray et al's (2005) study into professional football in Scotland noted an absence of career advice and support from clubs and an unwillingness to invest in the intellectual capital of their workforce. In New Zealand and Australia pressure is increasingly coming from wider society and specifically the media where sporting

organisations are challenged to “do the right thing” by facilitating an environment where a holistic approach to development of athletes is achieved. This is no more evident than in the recent occurrences involving players from the NRL in Australia, where they have received widespread media attention for accusations relating to sexual assault, alcohol abuse, problem gambling and socially unacceptable behaviour. These events prompted calls for programs to be implemented that educate the athletes for a life outside sport and life-skills including appropriate behaviour towards women.

Petitpas et al, (1997) suggest that through a planning process, athletes can maintain high levels of sporting performance, but not forego vital personal and career development opportunities. They argue that programs can provide valuable assistance in the following areas:

- Development of a career plan: Incorporating sporting commitments, education pathways and vocational choices.
- Personal development training courses: Promoting skill development in areas of relevance to elite athletes.
- Educational guidance: Information and advice on matters relating to school and further education.
- Work related issues: Information and advice on incorporating work and sport.

#### *4.4.1 Existing Programs in Australia and New Zealand*

In Australia and New Zealand, some professional sport organisations appear to be responding to the concern of career development and life-skills amongst elite athletes. There are a number of career development, planning and education programs and initiatives that exist in elite sport aimed at providing the athlete with a range of skills that may be utilised both during and after their athletic tenure. To further understand the level of support some organisations provide their athletes, a selection of initiatives and programs will be reviewed

The major program offered to Australian athletes is the Australian National Athlete Career and Education Program. Conducted in conjunction with the Australian Institute



of Sport, the Athlete Career and Education program, otherwise known as ACE, focuses on helping athletes reach their educational, vocational and personal goals. The mission statement of the ACE program is to “enhance the personal development and performance of Australia’s elite athletes through the provision of nationally consistent career and education services” (Australian Institute of Sport, 2002, p.2). The program provides all eligible elite athletes with career, educational, and professional development services. Eligible athletes are those who are scholarship holders from an Australian Institute of Sport, and as a result, the program is not available to all athletes. The ACE advisor's role is to assist athletes to more effectively combine sporting and vocational aspirations without compromising their sporting objectives, and to assist athletes to develop a career plan which incorporates all aspects of their life.

The ACE program runs a number of seminars, courses and training evenings throughout the year on a range of topics to assist athletes in achieving their highest potential, in and out of the sporting arena. Additional assistance is provided in the areas of career counselling, educational guidance, résumé development, employment networks, access to scholarships for professional skill development, access to personal development courses and assistance with achieving a balance between sport and career development. The program has gained significant international recognition and is licensed to the United Kingdom’s Sports Institute and the New Zealand Academy of Sport. It also has strong links with life-skill development programs being offered in the United States, Europe, South Africa and Asia (Australian Institute of Sport, 2002).

Another example is the Australian Olympic Team, which has access to a relatively new initiative called Aspire – Career Assistance for Athletes. Originally called Olympic Jobs Opportunity Program, (OJOP) Aspire is a national program of the Australian Olympic Committee. Established in 1992 as OJOP, Aspire’s aim is to help Olympic calibre athletes develop and secure career path employment that allows them to both train for the Olympics and prepare for their professional lives beyond sport. As at January 2000, 294 athletes have been placed in career path employment through OJOP with the support of more than 140 employer organisations (Australian Olympic Committee, 2006).

The Australian Rugby Union also has career development and planning programs in place for its players. Such programs were in part motivated by the transformation of the game to professionalism and the resulting recruitment of younger players who may not have previously been involved in a career or education. For example, when discussing the need for such assistance, former Australian Rugby Coach Rod Macqueen (1997) stated:

Some real problems have arisen in rugby that will have to be addressed, problems that go to the very nature of the game and what it means. When I look at our team, we are very fortunate that we've got intelligent players here, players who have gone to university, who have careers outside football. We have to be very careful not to lose this. We are now entering an era of full time rugby players and that's a concern. We need to address, urgently, how to keep the education and careers of players going. We have to take a step back and look at how we can keep those values alive (p.5).

In response to the changing profile of rugby players, Australian Rugby and the Rugby Union Players' Association offer their players a Career Training Scheme which:

Aims to capitalise on the culture of Australian Rugby to ensure that all players can fully exploit the career and education opportunities available to them throughout the length of their rugby careers. The Career Training Scheme is a proactive, player focussed program structured to self empower players to maximise their potential on and off the field (Rugby Union Players' Association and Australian Rugby, 2002, p.2).

The Career Training Scheme committee has implemented six key strategies to ensure that all State Union and Academy players are provided with comprehensive support networks throughout their careers. The six strategies and their respective objectives are as follows:

Strategy 1: *Career and Education Planning*. To enhance a player's sporting performance and personal development through the provision of an individualised career and education program throughout their career.

Strategy 2: *Personal and Professional Development Training Courses*. To provide players with a nationally tiered and accredited competency based personal and professional development program.

Strategy 3: *Career Placement Program*. To foster flexible career networks for players.

Strategy 4: *Player Welfare and Counselling*. To provide specialist advice and support to players and partners in all welfare, counselling and life management areas.

Strategy 5: *Financial Planning and Management*. To develop and implement an education program to enable players to understand their own financial goals and to assist them to develop a personal financial management strategy.

Strategy 6: *Training and Education Fund*. To provide players and retiring players with financial assistance for approved educational, vocational or employment pursuits (Rugby Union Players' Association and Australian Rugby, 2002, p.4-7).

It must be noted however, that this program is not available to all elite Australian rugby players. For example, at the time of writing, the NSW Waratahs Super 14 Academy team (comprised largely of young elite players, aged 17-22) did not have access to many of these programs offered to the more high-level players. However, due to the changing nature of professional rugby and the recruitment of younger players straight from school it could be argued that these players need access to these sorts of programs as much as, or more than, the senior players.

A number of Australian State rugby teams have implemented their own programs and initiatives. For example, The Queensland Reds Rugby College, (a development squad that acts as a feeder to the senior Queensland Reds Super 14 Rugby team) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) work together to assist rugby scholarships holders in their vocational development with flexible entry, study and employment alternatives. The Reds Rugby College has also been able to find employment for scholarship holders with employers from within the rugby community. This creates an opportunity for the scholarship holder to gain career experience in a supportive environment.

In New Zealand, The New Zealand Rugby Players Association (NZRPA) offers a Professional Development Program to its Super 14 players. In an article in the players' journal, Rob Nichol, the executive manager of the NZRPA, describes the aim of the program as being to "assist, guide, and facilitate opportunities for professional players and team management in a number of key focus areas including career and career planning, education/study, work and work experience, personal planning, professional environment and health and risk management" (Nichol, 2002, p.40). The program is focussed on the individual player and their off-field personal and professional development, requirements and objectives. Each Super 14 team in New Zealand is assigned a Professional Development Manager who works closely with the athletes to provide guidance and support in their career development and planning. Like the Australian program, the academy players and players competing just below the Super 14 level do not have access to these programs and resources.

In 1997 the New Zealand Sports Foundation (NZSF) put in place a series of athlete support programs which are still in operation today. Elite athletes who receive personal grants from the Foundation are able to access independent career management advice through an independent consultant on contract to the Foundation. A sponsorship arrangement between a corporate body and the Foundation provides elite athletes with the opportunities to undertake intensive skills analysis to assist them with employment and training decisions. The Foundation also launched a career development program with New Zealand Post to provide career and employment opportunities for elite athletes. Speaking at the launch of the program, New Zealand Sports Foundation CEO Mr. Ineson stated:

The development of a career package for New Zealand's athletes is an integral part of the holistic approach the Sports Foundation is taking to high performance sport. Members of the Foundation consider the responsibility of the organisation is more than one of just providing funds. This is part of a process of providing athletes with security. The vast majority of athletes funded by the Sports Foundation will not make a living from their sport and it is important that they are prepared for life after sport (cited in Hughes, 1997).

Given the above initiatives, it would seem sports' governing bodies are beginning to recognise the need for a holistic approach to the development and support of elite athletes. Despite the development of programs in New Zealand, Australia and overseas aimed at assisting elite athletes in their career development and planning, the perspectives of young elite athletes with regard to these have largely not been heard. Furthermore, few of these programs have targeted young athletes. This study suggests that there is an urgent need for programs specifically aimed at young athletes embarking on an elite sports career.

In summary, the need for, and benefits of, career development and planning for athletes are wide ranging. Research in this area suggests the implications for the athlete include improved performance, mood state, life-skills and development of career awareness. The evidence suggests that career development and planning can stabilise athletes in the present, as well as prepare them for the future. Other key implications of career development and planning relate to the identity of athletes and also their preparation for athletic termination and transition. However, due to the extent of these implications and the significance of these topics to the thesis, these are addressed in Chapters Five and Six. While there is growing literature on the associated implications of career development and planning, it is evident that significant barriers exist to the engagement of athletes in these. Furthermore, much remains unknown from the athlete's perspective on their perceptions of, experiences in, opportunities and needs for, and barriers to, engaging in alternative career development and planning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IDENTITY

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

For many elite athletes, their self-identity is largely developed and confirmed through their participation in sport. They are often so immersed in their competitive lives that there is little opportunity for the formation of other career or educational identities. This chapter opens by defining athletic identity, its application to an athletic context, and examines the identity formation and role identification of athletes. Following this, the strong identifications athletes make with sport are discussed and the possible consequences of having a limited self-identity when not only making transitions into other careers and social settings but also in achieving a balance of life whilst engaged in their high-performance careers. This chapter draws upon both sociological and psychological perspectives to explore how identity is formed in an athletic role and how it may impact on the career development and subsequent termination of an athletic career.

#### 5.1 Defining Identity

“Rugby is not just a sport... it’s so much more than that. It’s really a lifestyle, it’s a fraternity. It’s a culture, it’s a family in its own sense” (Eales, 2001, p.1). This quote from one of Australia’s most successful rugby captains illustrates the all-encompassing environment that elite rugby players operate in. When sport is likened to something as significant as family, when it becomes a participant’s lifestyle, and operates as its own culture, then it arguably becomes a core part of the participant’s identity.

McConnell and Edwards (2000) define identity as “the perception of self, shaped by social and ideological values and practices” (p.116). In addition, the processes by which individuals construct their identity influence perceptions and continuing involvement of the social world of which they are part. Furthermore, Coakley (1998)

suggests that identity is the basis for self-direction and self-control in one's life. Self-identity in the sports domain can be defined as the degree to which the individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). From this perspective, athletic identity is conceptualised as comprising the athletic portion of a multi-dimensional self-concept.

MacClancy (1996) states that sports are “vehicles of identity, providing people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others” (p.2). MacClancy also notes that “sport may not be just a marker for one's already established social identity but a means by which to create a new social identity as well” (p.3). In terms of rugby, Roche (2000) suggests it is an important form of popular culture, which has great significance for the collective and personal identity formation of the players, arguing rugby can play a formative, rather than simply an expressive role, in relation to human identity at the personal and collective levels. This is certainly true of New Zealand rugby, as indicated in Chapter Two.

## **5.2 Identity Shifts and the Athlete**

According to interactionist theorists, individuals are active participants in the construction of self, others and society. With regard to the construction of self, Donnelly and Young (2001) suggest any new role that an individual takes on involves changes to their identity, how they think of themselves and who they are. Sociologists describe this process as *identity formation*. When applied to an athletic context, Coakley (1998) argues that as athletes behave and see the impact of their behaviour on themselves and others, they develop a sense of who they are and how they are connected to the rest of the social world. The interactionist approach also emphasises the central concern of identity where individuals are seen as being actively involved in the process of identity formation and supporting their role identities (Stevenson, 2001). From this perspective, individuals choose to try and develop, or continue to maintain, particular role identities, for example as a gymnast or rugby player (Stevenson, 2001).

Through their interaction with self, others and society, individuals choose to develop particular role identities. Snyder (1985) defines role identity as “one's imaginative view

of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant of that position” (p.212). Further to this Markus and Nurius (1986) use the term *possible selves* to represent individual’s ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming. Possible selves relate to the individual’s current view of the self, and how they think about their potential and their future. Markus and Nurius (1986) note that possible selves are significant as they function as incentives for future behaviour through the images of selves to be approached or avoided. Possible selves are both individualised and distinctly social, and are the direct result of previous social comparisons. Here, the individual’s “own thoughts, feelings, characteristics and behaviours have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become” (p.954).

The roles of individuals can also be considered from the perspective of the identity theory. According to Weiss (2001) the identity theory is “built on the assumptions, definitions and propositions of symbolic interactionism and emphasises the relationships between self, society (social structure) and role performance” (p.396). Furthermore, Weiss notes that this theory “seeks to understand the reasons why people select a particular role performance, given the variety of available and reasonable possible alternative choices” (p.396), which is of particular interest to the current study.

Applying the concept of identity formation in an athletic context Webb, Nasco, Riley and Headrick (1998) suggest that athletic talent is often recognised before the athlete reaches high school and, for many children, developing that talent becomes a central preoccupation for both the child and the significant adults in his or her life. Webb et al (1998) further contend that for those children, the time, energy and “psychological commitment to the role of athlete is such that by the time they reach high school, highly successful athletes have internalized the athletic identity, frequently at the expense of other possible social roles” (p.340). As an athlete moves through high school and further develops their talent in their particular sport it becomes more likely that they will define themselves around that sport and play the role of the athlete. Petitpas et al (1997) refer to this process as *athletic identity development*, that is, the way in which the athlete defines him or herself to others.



As the athletic identity becomes more internalized this role is likely to dominate the individual's overall self-concept (Coakley, 1998). Furthermore, others may also define the athlete around the sport in which they excel. Therefore, the athlete's self-identity becomes socially and externally reinforced by family, friends, and the community. As rugby in New Zealand is a highly publicised and popular sport, Weiss (2001) would argue that the identities of these athletes are more likely to be reinforced due to the awareness and value society has of the sport.

According to Coakley and Donnelly (2001) the athlete's sense of self is partly grounded in their role as an athlete, yet the extent to which this role becomes a basis for the identities of individuals depends on things such as their talent, how their social relationships affirm their athletic identities, and the stage in their athletic careers. However, other roles such as son, daughter, brother, student or employee also contribute to the basis for identities for those who play sports. Therefore, the identities of individuals are comprised of a mixture of identities of varying degrees of importance and prominence. Furthermore, according to Weiss (2001) these identities from multiple spheres may complement or conflict with each other. Part of the aim of the current study was to further understand the complementing or conflicting identities when explored in relation to areas such as career development, post-rugby planning and education.

As an athlete's sense of self becomes further reinforced by a growing adulation and social and public recognition, they may develop an identity termed the '*glorified self*'. This term was developed by Adler and Adler (1989) in their study of the changes in the selves of North American, elite college basketball players as they embarked into a world of celebrity and fame. They remark that experiencing glory was exciting for the athletes involved and created or expanded various aspects of their sense of self. They point out that characteristically, the glorified self is a greedy, intoxicating and riveting self, that seeks to rise in importance and to cast aside other self-dimensions as it develops. As both Adler and Adler (1989) and Brock and Kleiber (1994) point out, athletes can sacrifice both the multidimensionality of their present selves and the potential extent of their future selves as various dimensions of their identities are either diminished, detached or somehow altered as a result of their increased investment in the glorified self. According to Stevenson (2001) the more rewards and recognition athletes receive

from their athletic role identities, for example, star rugby player, the greater the cost of not fulfilling that role identity and the greater the incentive to continue to maintain it. In addition, Adler and Adler (1989) note that one of the first consequences of the rise of the glorified self was the loss of a future orientation and long-term planning for the athletes as the future became defined as a direct continuation of the present. In the context of young players this is of particular concern as it creates a way of thinking that closes off the need to think and plan for a non-sport career.

According to Stevenson (2001) having chosen their sporting involvements, the commitment, reputation and identity related to this acts to “draw the athlete deeper and deeper into a commitment to that athletic role identity and career” (p.94). Similar to this, Marcia (1966) uses the term ‘*identity foreclosure*’. This is a term used to describe the closing off of alternative career identities due to an early commitment to one specific career identity without sufficient exploration. In a sporting context, athletes rewarded for their athletic endeavours may choose not to seek success in academic pursuits or other career opportunities (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993). According to Danish et al (1993), foreclosure may be brought on by the demands and expectations of the environment or may be a result of individual choices. The notion of identity foreclosure is particularly important for the current study as rugby is a professional sport which in many cases recruits young men straight from school and requires a large commitment of time, energy and self.

For many athletes, identity foreclosure is common due to the almost sacrificial devotion to their sport. For aspirants of international level sports competition, such as the participants in the current study, the incidences of suffering this myopic perception of themselves increases due to the higher expectations of professional sport and the perceived critical necessity to make sport their exclusive focus of attention (Broom, 1981). This may be further exacerbated due to the perceived notion that their athletic career may extend further into the future than is often realistic. Danish et al (1993) note that identity foreclosure in itself is not harmful and only becomes problematic when exploration is impeded. Petitpas (1978) further suggests that without such exploration, an athlete’s self-esteem can be too narrowly defined and subject to severe threat in the face of possible loss. Moreover, findings from Murphy, Petitpas and Brewer (1996) suggest that the young athletes in their study who did not engage in exploratory

behaviour and identified strongly with the athletic role, had delayed career development and impaired career decision-making skills.

Prior to 1995 and the advent of professional rugby, it may be argued that identity foreclosure in New Zealand and Australian rugby was not very evident. This was due to the amateur status of rugby, meaning most players had to be associated with other careers to meet their financial needs. However, with the current generation of professional players not having played elite rugby in its amateur form, the notion of identity foreclosure is more likely.

### **5.3 Impact of Identity on Athletic Retirement and Career Transition**

According to Drahota and Eitzen (1998) the role transition of athletes to a new career has presented a challenge to sport sociologists due to athletes' loss of the primary source of their identities. Elite sport provides many forms of reinforcement, such as financial rewards, hero status amongst fans, media attention, social status and other extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, many of which are removed upon retirement (Crook & Robertson, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Self-identity is a factor that has consistently been deemed relevant to the sport career transition process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Gordon, 1995; Webb et al, 1998; Sparkes, 2000). Lavalley, Grove, Gordon and Ford (1998) report that athletic identity played a significant part in the experience of symbolic loss in elite sport. Furthermore, according to Brewer, Van Raalte and Petitpas (2000) self-identity may not only influence adjustment to sport career transitions, but may also be influenced by the transitions themselves as athletes restructure their identities around activities unrelated to sports participation.

It is evident that some athletes have problems when they retire from sports. Coakley (1998) notes that to understand those problems information is required about how sports fit into their lives and whether playing sports limits or expands their experiences, relationships, and resources. If it limits them, problems are more likely, if it expands them, the transition is often smoother. Coakley (1998) goes on to argue that "problems may occur for those who end long careers in sports, especially those who have no identities apart from sports or who lack the social and material resources they need to

make transitions into other careers and social settings" (p.94). The current study explores how rugby fits into the lives of young men and draws on Coakley's work to describe the possible implication of this for their future retirement. This may assist to alleviate future problems associated with athletes with a narrow identity and enable provision of assistance for the athlete.

Research suggests that without the input from their sport, retired athletes have little to support their sense of self-worth (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sparkes, 2000). Much of this self-worth has been gained through public adulation for their sporting performances. Performing one's role as an athlete carries a public visibility and evaluation unlike most other roles and the athlete's public reputation becomes part of that athlete's overall identity. Retirement results in the loss of that collective approbation, a loss which many athletes feel is unlikely to be replicated in other roles (Gorbett, 1985). In the biography of former All Black Fergie McCormick, Versey (1976) provides a summation of the metathesis of the aging rugby player having difficulty 'letting go'. This statement highlights the importance of rugby as a means of creating a viable social identity for the elite athlete:

He was a hero yesterday, to whom rugby was more than a game. It had been a life-raft at a time when he may have sunk and drowned. It had been the vehicle for his expressions of pride. It had carried him to corners of the world that would otherwise have been unreachable moon-places. It had given him status in the eyes of the sort of people he admired most. And now the cycle had turned. He clung to rugby as if it was still his life-raft, as if it were still the one dais upon which he could stand and be acclaimed. It was an indication that after all the achievements, after all the adulation, after all the comradeship – even though these things were now a part of him never to be erased - he was still uncertain of his station...So he clung with a desperation no one really understood, least of all himself (p.168-9).

Athletes whose socialisation process, that is the process by which people become familiar with and adapt themselves to the interpersonal relationships of their social world, has occurred primarily in the sports environment may be characterised as role restricted (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986). That is, these athletes have only learned to assume

certain social roles specific to the athletic setting and are only able to interact with others in the narrow context of sports. As a result, their ability to assume other roles following retirement may be severely inhibited (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Sparkes, 2000). Studies by Gorbett (1985), Werthner and Orlick (1986), and Fortunato (1996) all indicate that athletes with a broad-based social identity including family, friends, educational and occupational components demonstrated better adaptation following sports career termination.

The argument that sport retirements are somehow different from other career retirements rests, in part, on the contention that athletic identity holds a unique status among other situated identities (Webb et al, 1998). One of the major aspects athletes struggle with is forming a new identity once they are no longer an elite sports person. Messner's research (1992) led him to suggest that athletes leaving the elite competitive sports environment face two major challenges:

1. Reconstructing their identities in terms of activities, abilities, and relationships unrelated to sports participation.
2. Renegotiating relationships with family members and close friends so they receive feedback and support for identities having little or nothing to do with playing sports.

The level of identity invested in elite sport can mean that upon retirement athletes are faced with an identity crisis. Grove, Lavalley and Gordon (1997) in their study of athletic retirement found a positive correlation between athletic identity and the degree of emotional and social adjustment required for the transition out of elite sport. When ex-athletes attempt to adjust to the new world into which they now must assimilate, they are likely to experience a feeling of social and cultural limbo and no clear personal identity (Sparkes 2000; Dacyshyn, 2001). According to Petitpas et al (1997) many elite athletes struggle to come up with the answer to the question: 'Who am I if I can't compete?' For most of their competing lives they have thought of themselves as 'Mark the basketballer' or 'Lisa the swimmer'; now they must progress on to a new career and a new identity, or risk forever being stuck in the role of 'Mark the ex-basketballer'. Athletes in Fortunato's (1996) study described experiencing feelings of loss and hopelessness upon retirement. In one case a retired AFL player stated "everyone knew that I was a footballer, and everyone related to me as a footballer. Football was the

most important part of my life, and now I no longer have that in my life, and I feel sort of lost” (p.103). This is further illustrated in a quote from a participant in Sparkes’ (2000) study, whose career had recently been terminated:

I feel like I have lost my identity. I was a horse rider through and through, and I felt so at home when I was competing...I do wish that I could feel grateful for my lot, but I don’t. It’s no use pretending that life goes on, and there is more to life than horses, because in my opinion there isn’t (p.16).

Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents in Webb et al’s (1998) sample (46.2 percent) of ninety one athletes reported that they experienced a difficult retirement and that their athletic identity was strongly related to that experience. Among this group of retirees, athletic identity was also strongly related to a sense of vagueness about the future. In addition, Sparkes’ (2000) study on career termination illustrated how a strong athletic identity can act as an ‘Achilles heel’ for the athlete undergoing the transition out of sport. According to Ogilvie and Howe (1986) the emotional and psychological responses to this career crisis are nearly universal, and they are much like those experienced with any major loss. Furthermore, as retirement often denies opportunities to foster and maintain the athletic identity, Webb et al (1998) suggest that the individual with a strong, centralised athletic identity will lack the flexibility necessary for redefining their self-concept. This was illustrated in Sparkes’ (2000) study where the participant stated: “I feel that I have put all my eggs in one basket and someone has come along and smashed them all” (p.25). Such a statement also reinforces the dangers of identity foreclosure.

The focused attention needed for high-level performances can discourage athletes from giving consideration to matters of life after sport and even to other aspects of career and personal development (Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). These claims are supported by McGillivary and McIntosh’s study (2006) into professional footballers in Scotland where athletes’ perspective of who they were was inseparable from their status as professional footballers, even to the extent that they were often unwilling to accept or look past the possible end of their playing days. A number of empirical studies suggest that a strong athletic identity acts as a barrier to athletes undertaking career development and planning measures that may assist them in

their retirement planning (Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Martens & Cox, 2000; Hickey & Kelly, 2005). Furthermore, the study by Grove et al (1997) found that those athletes who possessed a stronger athletic identity also experienced more anxiety regarding career development, planning and decision-making. For those athletes who have maintained a sense of balance and developed life-skills that can be used in a non-sport domain, alternative role identities should be more easily established, that in turn would assist in achieving a successful integration into adult society (Petitpas, Brewer & Van Raalte, 1996).

#### **5.4 Developing Other Identities Through a Balance of Life**

The literature paints a clear picture of the consequences for athletes whose identities have been formed almost exclusively around their involvement in sport. Furthermore, Petitpas et al (1996 & 1997) suggest that those athletes who have a balance in their life will be provided with a greater sense of direction when they retire from sport. Therefore, balance of life serves as an important area when discussing the identity development and expansion of professional athletes. Simply defined, balance of life is when the athlete has a broad-based social identity, one that is not solely formed and reinforced by their sport. This section will examine the notion of athletes developing and expanding other identities and the associated benefits from the perspectives of the athletes, management and coaching staff. Anecdotal reports from athletes suggest that having a balance of life and enabling other identities to further develop will assist in negating some of the characteristics of the earlier discussed identity foreclosure and glorified self in which other identities of athletes can be diminished or detached (Romanos, 2002). Having a balance of life may provide the athlete with other identities, whether they be in education, part-time work or community volunteer work. This may also act to increase the athletes' engagement in career development and planning for a life after sport. Furthermore, it is argued that players' performance and motivation will increase through such engagement (McCarroll & Hodge, 2001, cited in McKenzie, Hodge & Carnachan, 2003).

According to McKenzie et al (2003) having interests outside of rugby enhances on-field performance and is crucial for life after sport. Such a view is also supported by many

players. For example, in an interview with Travis Hall, ex-Australian rugby player Jason Little comments on trying to combine work with football:

I think that's probably the most important thing now being professional. I think personally I've played my best football when I actually had something outside of rugby. When I was playing solely professionally I got a bit stale...and also now finishing you don't realise how important post career development is. It's a tough transition no matter how much you prepare for it but it also helps your performance and gives you something else to focus on (2002, p.10).

The enhancement of playing performance is supported by McCarroll and Hodge's (2001) research, which investigated the training motivation of professional rugby players. The results indicated that: "Those players who had other commitments and interests in their lives (e.g. work, university or polytechnic study) were more committed to their training programmes. Players who had no commitments other than their rugby training and playing were 'poor' trainers in comparison to those that had other commitments" (2001, cited in McKenzie et al, p.1). Furthermore, former All Black coach Wayne Smith stated "from a selfish point of view they perform better if they've got a balance, have outside interests, and some sense of direction after rugby" (cited in McKenzie et al 2003, p.1). This was confirmed by findings from Anderson's (1999) study where coaches perceived athlete's involvement in outside pursuits enhanced their training and competition performance.

It may be argued that in the amateur era; more as a matter of necessity, players were more self-sufficient than today's players, as they combined work and their rugby lives. In the 1980s and early 1990s All Blacks were policemen, farmers, bankers, accountants and businessmen. Former All Black prop John Drake warned that professional rugby was producing too many players who were "brain dead", suggesting they were not using their minds enough. "They're spending too much time sitting on their bums all day. When I was playing most of us would go to training to refresh ourselves after working. Now these guys need to go to work to refresh themselves from rugby. People need to go to work otherwise they go stale" (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.100). Former All Black



coach John Hart also feels rugby has lost something through so many top players not having jobs outside rugby:

It's a lifestyle balance," says Hart. "Some players have lost that balance. It's not so bad when they play but what about afterwards? What skills have they developed? Even when they are in the middle of their careers, they are often bored. Decision-making is an important part of life and the fewer decisions you make, the less your brain is working. That's an issue with top players today (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.96).

Some current professional rugby players have pursued, or are currently pursuing, academic careers and have emerged with university degrees and double degrees; for example All Black Anton Oliver. However, others have not sought to extend themselves or further their career options or education. An example of this is recounted from an official of a first division NPC team towards the end of the 2001 season:

We were in Auckland ready for a Saturday evening match. On the Saturday morning we [the team management] had to decide how to fill in the day. A group of us went to Mission Bay and stopped for an hour or so at a Café. It was pathetic. Some of the players wanted to be dropped off at a video arcade and a couple who came with us spent much of their time playing with some building blocks in the corner (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.95).

It seems that these players are not expanding their experiences. They have the income that enables them to indulge themselves, but that does not necessarily provide them with life-skills, a balance in their life or prepare them for life after rugby. Former All Black Bryan Williams does not believe the problem is as bad as it once was and that it is now being overcome:

In New Zealand rugby we are trying to get all players to pay attention to the educational side of things. We had a lost generation when the game went pro. The new breed of players is much more mindful of the importance of education. I've noticed that over the past 5 years. The attitude of players in the early years of professional rugby seemed to be, 'Good, I don't have to

work anymore.’ They seemed to play golf and sleep. Now there’s more awareness of the need for a balanced life (cited in Romanos, 2002, p.101).

The current study examined the extent to which this statement applied to young elite rugby players in New Zealand and Australia.

In summary, as an athlete becomes more involved in a particular sport they begin to define themselves by that sport and assume the dominant role of athlete. This athletic identity development frequently occurs at the expense of other social roles (Webb et al, 1998), and dominates the individual’s overall self-concept (Coakley, 1998). However, athletes who are disproportionately involved in their sports participation may be characterised as one-dimensional people, meaning that their self-identity does not extend far beyond the limits of their sport (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Coakley, 1983). These athletes often have few options for gaining meaning and fulfilment from activities outside their sport (Sparkes, 2000; Cresswell and Eklund, 2006), are less prepared for post-sport careers (Baillie & Danish, 1992), have restricted career and educational plans (Grove et al, 1997; Martens & Cox, 2000), and typically experience retirement from sport as a loss that can never be recovered (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Therefore, athletic identity becomes an important component in explaining the preparation for, and subsequent retirement of athletes. Understanding and addressing identity issues at the entry point to a rugby career may assist in the pre-retirement planning for players.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ATHLETIC TERMINATION AND TRANSITION

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the previous chapter, the termination and transition of an athletic career was looked at from the perspective of the influence of identity. This chapter provides a broader perspective on athletic termination and transition and begins by describing the concept through historical perspectives in which an outline of early research in the field of inquiry is given. Following this, the chapter outlines the causes of sport career termination and introduces research that emphasises perceptions of pre- and post-transition. A discussion then follows on the influence of career development and planning on the termination and transition process, which develops into the research of athletes' career transition needs and predominantly focuses on helping athletes achieve a smooth transition.

#### 6.1 Historical Perspectives

Athletic termination and transition as a field of inquiry has only recently gained the attention of sport researchers. It was only two or three decades ago that this sporting construct began to be academically researched and evaluated. This may have been due, in large part, to the increasing globalisation and professionalisation of sports and the fact that elite athletes were more fully integrated into the basic fabric of society than they are now. According to Chartlend and Lent (1987) elite amateur athletes were typically either students or held full-time jobs away from their sports involvement. As a consequence, their transition to life as an 'average' citizen was not as dramatic due to the fact that sport at this stage was not a career, but merely an activity of high interest. As sport has developed into a high-paying professional career, the notion of athletic retirement and the subsequent transition away from a professional sporting life has become more noticeable as a critical life event. An American pioneer in the field of transition, Bridges (1980), makes a distinction between the concepts of 'change' and

'transition'. He defines 'change' as an external event and 'transition' as the internal psychological processing of that event.

Since athletic termination and transition began to be interpreted as an area of relevant significance to the sports scientific community, attempts have been made to conceptualise the process that athletes go through as their competitive careers come to an end. The earliest view of athletic retirement as transition was outlined by Hill and Lowe (1974). These researchers drew on Sussman's (1971) analytical model of the sociological study of retirement. Sussman's multidimensional conceptualisation suggests that perceptions about retirement will be influenced by several factors: (1) individual (e.g., motives, values, goals, problem solving skills); (2) situational (e.g., circumstances of retirement, pre-retirement planning, retirement income); (3) structural (e.g., social class, marital status, availability of social systems); (4) social (e.g., family, friends, extended social support); and (5) boundary constraints (e.g., societal definitions, economic cycles, employer attitudes).

The process of athletic termination and transition may also be conceptualised within the framework of Kubler-Ross's (1969) human grieving model. Five stages in the grieving process have been defined and include: denial against the initial trauma; anger about the perceived injustice and lack of control; bargaining to delay the inevitable; depression over loss; and acceptance and reorientation towards the future. This grieving model has proved useful in understanding the experiences of athletic termination and transition (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Wolff & Lester, 1989).

## **6.2 Underlying Factors of Athletic Termination**

Although the cause of termination of an athletic career can occur for a variety of reasons it usually relates to one of four major factors: the selection process; ageing; injury; and voluntary retirement. The last of these appears to produce the most positive response to the process (Fortunato, 1996).

### *Selection Process*

The process of selection, which occurs at every elite level, accounts for a large attrition of athletes. In every elite sport, a rigid selection criterion is imposed upon athletes, and those who are successful in surviving the cut will continue to be subject to the process in their competitive career. Ogilvie and Howe (1986) state that "each and every athlete must be prepared for the consequences of functioning in a Darwinian sports world" (p. 366), which in professional sport means not only losing status but also losing income.

When an athletic career is terminated through selection it is probable that the greatest problems arise when the high expectations of athletic success clash with the realities of not making the step up to the next level of participation (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). For example, Tuitupou (1997) found that 23 percent of high school rugby players in New Zealand expected to be playing professional rugby within three years when the reality is that less than one percent will do so. If athletes are unprepared for the selection process and if alternative plans are not made for the development of a career in an area other than sport, transition problems are likely to occur.

Athletes who have been unexpectedly deselected and whose performance goals were never met in the sport are most likely to face a difficult transition process and possibly develop bitterness or frustration towards the sporting group with which they were involved. In Fortunato's (1996) study of retirement in AFL players it was found that "footballers who retired due to deselection discussed their transition from a point of view that reflected their distress. Players felt bitter towards their club, coaches, administrators, and the league in general" (p.119). Players also reported that they had not been prepared for deselection.

### *Age*

The inevitability of the aging process can be fatal to the athletic career. As physiological changes occur, many athletes battle to prolong their competitive career. The injection of younger, fitter, faster and stronger athletes significantly increases the pressures on the aging competitor. The effect of age on the athlete will differ amongst sports; for example, a golfer may still be able to make the cut at age 55, whereas a gymnast may be considered too old at 22. In terms of the professional rugby player, his

body may not be able to sustain the high impact nature of the sport beyond late twenties or early thirties.

The reaction of fans, team-mates, media and management towards aging athletes can impact on their ability to successfully negotiate a transition away from competitive sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). For example, those athletes for whom ageing has corresponded with a decline in competitive performance may be prone to suffer difficulties with their adjustment to sport termination due to issues of loss of status and self-confidence (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998).

### *Injury*

Athletic injury can cause a severe termination crisis, meaning that the transition process to life after sport is not smooth. This is often due to the athlete being totally unprepared for the termination. For example, Ogilvie and Howe (1986) use the case of Bernie Parent, all-star goaltender for the NHL Philadelphia Flyers, who suffered a severe eye injury that abruptly and unexpectedly ended his athletic career. Parent suffered severe depression and alcoholism following this sudden termination from professional hockey. In his study of injury and identity Sparkes (2000) discusses the case of an elite equestrian competitor who upon forced retirement through injury discussed feelings of loss of control over her life, destiny and emotions. These cases are only some of many examples of how injury can not only end an athletic career but also severely hamper an athlete's transition and adaptation to life after sport. Permanent damage to bones, ligaments, cartilage, nerves and sometimes brain damage may also significantly inhibit the athlete's ability to lead a productive and fulfilling life (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986). In rugby, there are numerous cases of elite players retiring due to injury. Australian hooker Brendan Cannon and Auckland Blues player Derren Witcombe are two such examples in 2007.

Webb et al's (1998) study into athletic retirement found that athletes who had left sport as a result of an injury had significantly lower rating of current life satisfaction than other athletes. Furthermore, Fortunato (1996) discusses how footballers who retired due to injury were unprepared for the termination of their athletic careers. Their lives had centred around being elite footballers; now that was no longer who they were, their future seemed uncertain and these athletes often expressed regrets about not being able

to fulfil their sporting aspirations. Consequently, their transition process was not as smooth as that of footballers who retired voluntarily.

### *Voluntary Retirement*

Unlike the three causes of retirement discussed previously, voluntary retirement from sport is a process over which the athlete has some control. The extent of control that athletes believe they have in the termination of their sport career is significant and thought to directly impact upon the way in which they respond and adjust to the career transition (Webb et al, 1998). In some cases the decision to retire is delayed as long as possible and may be influenced by the level of educational attainment, the present and future financial position, the awareness and acceptance of declining athletic skills, the perceived career opportunities post-athletic life, and the amount of anticipatory socialisation for the post-playing stage of the life cycle (McPherson, 1980). Sport careers may be terminated voluntarily for a variety of personal, social and sporting reasons. For example, a change in values and motivation, a desire to pursue new goals and interests, to spend time with family and friends or because sport is no longer intrinsically rewarding (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). In Fortunato's (1996) study, footballers who retired voluntarily experienced a smoother transition than those who retired involuntarily and discussed feelings of satisfaction with the decision to retire.

## **6.3 The Career Termination and Transition Process**

Whatever the cause of termination, each athlete faces a period of adjustment or adaptation during the transition from athlete to ex-athlete. For some, this transition is handled well and their life is not too disrupted, but for many this is a period of difficulties, dilemmas and identity crises. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) state that:

Athletic participation is characterised by magnificent highs and debilitating valleys. Furthermore, the range of events and emotions that are experienced through athletic involvement seem to be both numerous and extreme compared to the normal population. Yet of all the powerful experiences encountered by athletes perhaps the most significant and potentially traumatic is that of career termination. Moreover termination from sport

involves a variety of unique experiences that sets it apart from typical retirement concerns (p.761).

Two extremes of the reaction to sport career termination are illustrated in a study by Baillie (1992), who surveyed 260 elite and professional athletes concerning their experiences in leaving sport. The responses of two United States Olympians in the study clearly demonstrate the wide range of possible responses to leaving high level competition:

...you assume that once the athlete has retired from *their* sport they have retired from *all* sport. I haven't touched an oar since retirement, but I do a zillion other sports, some competitively, and I work on a program that takes athletes overseas to coach in black townships in South Africa. I doubt any athlete ever retires from sport, just from *their* sport (Baillie, 1992, p.157).

Retirement from competition was... frustrating because 1988 was to be my best year, but illness prevented that (and an injury)... The only thing I truly regret is that I did not jump off the building in Seoul as I had contemplated every night. All I had to do was slide six inches further forward, but I didn't (Baillie, 1992, p.157).

On one hand, termination of an athletic career and the following transition process can be an experience that opens up many avenues for athletes, allowing them to try new career paths and explore new opportunities. As the first athlete points out above, sport can still play an important role in the athlete's life even when elite competition has ended. On the other hand, leaving elite competition can be a confusing and depressing experience, especially when the career is terminated when the athlete still has unfinished business in sport, or when the future is filled with doubt and uncertainty. In this instance the transition process is made very difficult.

Many studies (Baillie, 1992; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Fortunato, 1996; & Sparkes, 2000) have examined athletes' retirement/career transitions and have found them to be stressful. According to Ogilvie and Taylor (1993), whether the stressors are financial, social, physiological or physical, their effects may produce some form of trauma.



Werther and Orlick (1986) report that elite former Olympians experienced trauma, lack of self-control, lack of preparation for life after sport, and loss of recognition and admiration. Wylleman, Deknop, Menkehorst, Theeboom and Annerel (1993) reveal mild to severe trauma in 44 percent of their sample of female and male former athletes. Not only did the athletes suffer during their career transitions, but as Kane (1991, cited in Hawkins & Blann, 1996) reports, coaches, spouses and significant others also suffered.

Coakley (1983) however, challenges the assumption that retirement from sport is an inevitable source of stress, identity crisis, and adjustment problems. He suggests that the problem is not retirement as such, but the personal and social characteristics of the individual that affect the ability to adjust to changed circumstances. Coakley refers to retirement as “re-birth” and argues that future studies should give more consideration to the positive aspects of retirement from sport, that retirement from elite sport should be viewed as an opportunity for engagement not disengagement.

Coakley’s (1983) view is partially supported by Fortunato’s (1996) study into voluntary and involuntary retirement in elite Australian footballers. In this study, athletes who retired voluntarily reflected on their careers in a positive way, and most of their thoughts were focussed on engaging in exciting new challenges. Many retired or terminated their own careers to devote more time and energy to a range of new areas requiring different levels of engagement. However, those whose careers were involuntarily terminated, either through injury or deselection seemed hardly able to contemplate the future, instead expressing regrets about their lost football careers. The voluntary retirees mirrored Coakley’s rebirth and opportunity for new engagement concept, whereas those who retired involuntarily largely did not. In most cases, Coakley’s notion of retirement as re-birth does not reflect the empirical findings of many researchers that suggest retirement from elite sport is a difficult and sometimes a traumatic experience. However, Coakley’s view that retirement should be viewed as an opportunity for engagement not disengagement provides a perspective for the type of program that may provide preparation for the retirement process.

As the termination and transition process gathers growing attention, researchers have identified factors that negatively influence athletes' post-sport career transitions. These factors include:

1. Failure to develop alternative career plans or undertake pre-retirement planning (Fortunato, 1996; Coakley, 1998; Howe, Musselman & Planella, 2000).
2. Identity strongly and exclusively based on athletic performance (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Coakley, 1998).
3. Coaches' negative attitudes toward athletes who consider alternative careers during their playing careers (Crook & Robertson, 1991).
4. Unexpected and involuntary departure from sports due to age, non-selection or injury (Fortunato, 1996; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998; Howe, Musselman & Planella, 2000).
5. A significant gap between level of aspiration and level of ability affecting accomplishment of goals (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Baillie, 1992).
6. The need to deal with the transition in a context that lacks the emotional and material resources that could be helpful (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).
7. Uncompleted college undergraduate programs (Baillie, 1992).

These factors suggest that certain variables in the time before the transition, for example, whilst the athlete is still in his/her high-performance phase, have a large impact on the adjustment of the athlete. This raises questions about what variables are evident during the high-performance phase of young elite rugby players that may influence the ensuing termination and transition process.

Writers who have tried to predict the natural course of the termination and transition experience from elite sport have had difficulty because the experience is unlike other experiences to which it has commonly been compared, such as the retirement from work or the experience of loss from a death (Rosenberg, 1981). Two theories of retirement that have been applied to sport are the social gerontology perspective and the thanatology perspective. The social gerontology perspective has been applied to explain retirement in aging and older athletes and considers life satisfaction as being dependent on characteristics of the sports experience (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). The thanatology perspective is related to the field of study which examines death, dying and

grief. When applied in a sport perspective, Rosenberg (1982) suggests that retirement from a sport career is akin to social death. However, some theorists criticise attempts to use social gerontological or thanatological theories to describe the sport transition process. For example, Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) argue that such theories are too limiting and that attempts to explain the sport transition process must be developmentally based, focusing on the socialisation experience of the athlete, the nature of the transition, the reaction of others, the development of coping resources to handle the transition, and the development of new individual roles.

In order to continue the evolutionary process in the understanding of career transition among elite athletes, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) developed a conceptual model that attempts to integrate the theoretical and empirical investigations to date. They incorporate aspects of prior theorising, taking into account the findings of empirical research, and their own applied work with athletes in career transition. What emerges is a model that addresses relevant concerns from the initiation of career transition to its ultimate consequences (see Figure 6.1). The factors relating to adaptation and the available resources for adaptation to career transition are those of particular interest in the current study due to their impact on the post-sport transition for athletes.

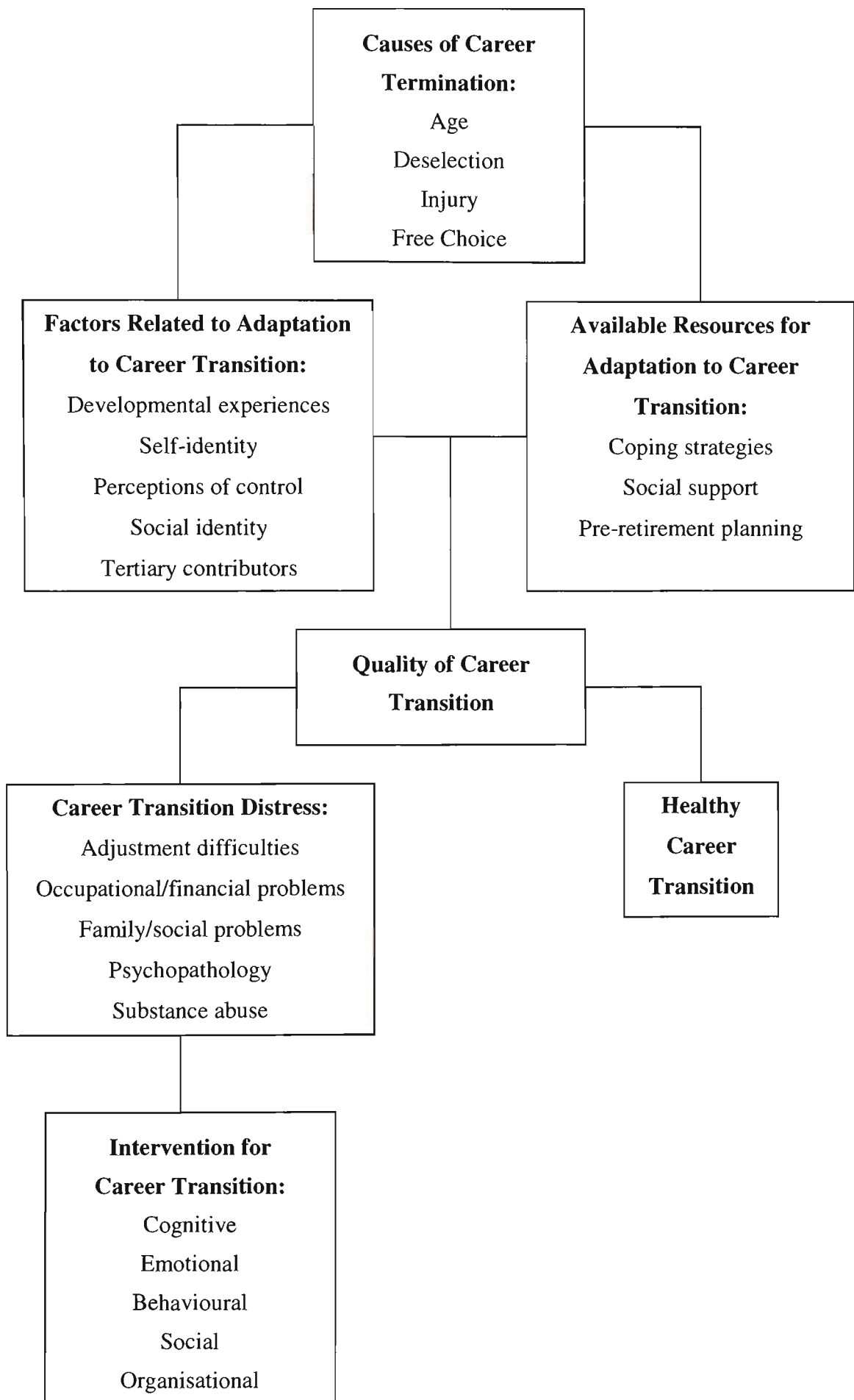


Figure 6.1: Conceptual model of adaptation to career transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, p.5).

The termination of an athletic career can create a major life crisis for which the athlete is often not prepared. An extensive review of related literature indicates that the social, psychological and financial problems associated with termination are receiving growing attention. In light of the potentially traumatic effects of termination, it is important that this reality, which occurs in the life of every elite athlete, is addressed in depth and methods to alleviate such problems are further explored.

#### **6.4 The Role of Career Development and Planning in Athletic Termination and Transition**

Athletes' adaptation to career transition depends largely on the resources that they have available to overcome any difficulties that arise. Research indicates that valuable resources such as career development and pre-retirement planning have the broadest influence on the quality of the career transition process (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Fortunato, 1996). Taylor and Ogilvie, (1998) argue that the presence or absence of contributing variables such as career development or planning in the early stages of an athlete's high-performance phase may dictate whether athletes undergo a healthy transition into their post-athletic careers or experience distress in response to the end of their competitive careers. It seems that the trauma associated with the transition from sport can often be traced back to inadequate preparation for life after sport (Fortunato, 1996).

Despite the many benefits, and the fragile athletic labour market conditions, a common theme that emerges from the literature on retirement outside of sports is the resistance on the part of individuals to plan for their lives in preparation for the end of their high performance phase (Hawkins & Blann, 1996; McGillivray, Fearn & McIntosh, 2005). A concern has often been expressed that planning for a life after sport will somehow distract the athlete from a focus on high-level achievement. Contrary to this, many researched athletes have identified that planning for a post-sport career lessens their anxiety about the transition process and allows for a better focus on their high performance goals (Petitpas et al, 1997). McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) argue that in the short-term it is understandable that athletic pursuits take precedence over post-

sport planning, however, in the long-term this is unsustainable as a large number of athletes face redundancy at the end of each season. It is likely that this denial of the inevitable will have serious, potentially negative and long-term implications for the athletes. This type of denial may be even more threatening for elite athletes as the immediate rewards are so attractive and the discrepancy between their current lifestyles and that which might occur upon career termination is significant. As a consequence, any acknowledgement or consideration that their athletic careers might end can be a source of significant anxiety, thus warranting avoidance of the issue altogether. However, McGillivray et al (2005) argue that unless football players make investments of cultural, social or economic capital whilst they are playing their retirement will be difficult, as their training in professional football has resulted in them possessing few transferable employment skills.

The resistance of athletes to planning for their future lives is further evidenced in Hawkins and Blann's (1996) study where "although the athletes, in general, showed moderately high levels of career planning and involvement, there were areas where athletes' levels of career planning and involvement were not as high as desirable" (p.50). Only thirty-one percent of athletes "strongly or mostly agreed they had set career goals that were specific and stated positively" (p.50). Thirty-six percent of athletes "strongly or mostly agreed they had set career goals to help them gain employment" (p.50) and less than half the athletes "strongly or mostly agreed that they had identified a group of personal contacts who could assist them in their career search" (p.50).

Research on elite Australian footballers (Fortunato, 1996) found that neither athletes who retired voluntarily nor those who retired involuntarily had carried out long-term planning for retirement. Involuntary retirees were often forced to retire in early-or mid-career (in athletic terms of a typical football career) when they had no expectation or plans to terminate their elite athletic involvement. Voluntary retirees generally admitted that they had done little planning prior to making the decision to retire, but once that decision was made, they had the opportunity to spend up to several months planning before they officially retired. Monsanson (1992) states that "often athletes adopt a waiting strategy, that is, worry about it when the time comes" (p.75). By then, Monsanson suggests, it would be too late. Monsanson (1992) further notes that "it is

sometimes especially hard for athletes to develop a career plan and to find out what they'd like, because they already know what they want to do, and they do it...they are high performance competitors!" (p.73). Elite athletes are often criticised for their shortsightedness when considering their future lives, however Mosanson (1992) argues that athletes must be introduced to a 'planning culture', whereby they are encouraged to make plans for their future lives external of sport. It is suggested then that the integration of career development and planning whilst competing is a challenge which must be faced by athletes and their representative bodies in the early stages of the athletic career to ensure athletes have the best preparation and opportunities post-sport.

Danish, Petitpas and Hale (1990) suggest that if young athletes, through appropriate education, can be socialised to perceive the value of retirement planning through such measures as career development and planning during their sporting careers, they might avoid the trauma that is currently widely experienced by retiring athletes. If early intervention is implemented, where the breadth of the athletes' life-skills, job-relevant skills, identity and knowledge of an alternative career are expanded, they may face a less stressful time both emotionally and financially when their high-performance phase ends.

Hawkins, Blann and Zaichkowsky (1993) surveyed Australian elite and professional athletes on their career development experiences and needs for their impending athletic termination and transition. Their findings show that athletes at the Australian Institute of Sports (AIS) and the Victorian Institute of Sports (VIS) believed that training for sports should be balanced with education and work to ensure a proper balance in their long-term development. In general, the Australian athletes who participated in this study had:

1. A high awareness of the need for career development, although there were gender differences in this awareness.
2. Male athletes generally expected a prolonged athletic career, which was often unrealistically long for the majority of athletes, but they also had more specific career goals than did the female athletes studied.
3. Male athletes were more interested in internship programs and specific job experiences than the female athletes.

4. Female athletes were more interested in assistance in identifying their personal qualities, and the career that best matched those qualities compared to males.
5. Both males and females agreed that programs using individual counselling or small group counselling would be most effective and that such programs would be most helpful if delivered both during and after their sports careers.

Hoskin, Hawkins and Kilty (1992, cited in Hawkins & Blann, 1996) conducted a pilot research study of Australian athletes' career transitions as part of a larger study funded by the Australian Sports Commission. Results from the "Australian Athletes Career Transition Inventory" (AACTI) show that athletes believed:

1. They possessed the necessary skills for making successful career transitions but their skills may need to be improved.
2. That career transition programs should be provided during their high-performance phase.
3. The career transition program should be personalised in nature.

The reviewed literature focuses much attention on the transition to life after sport and provides various strategies for athletes. However, reference to the experiences of elite young athletes that contribute to the career development, post-sport planning, and education that prepares them for such a transition is scarce. This raises the question as to how young rugby players think about, and are prepared for, the end of their elite playing days, and the ways in which such awareness and preparation is facilitated or inhibited by coaches, management and the governing bodies of the sport. Furthermore, at present there is little research and understanding of the needs of elite young rugby players in relation to their alternative career development and planning, despite its importance for the sport and post-sport lives and experiences of these athletes.

In summary, the termination of an athletic career may come unexpectedly through factors such as injury or deselection. However, the exclusive commitment often required by their sport can dominate the life of the athlete so much that they will not be prepared for any other activity. The presence and quality of adaptation to career transition and termination may depend on developmental experiences that have occurred since the inception of the athlete's high-performance phase. The nature of these



experiences will affect the emergence of self-perceptions and interpersonal skills that will influence how athletes adapt to retirement and a life outside elite sport. The often single-minded pursuit of excellence that accompanies elite sports participation has potential psychological and social dangers. The personal investment and commitment to the pursuit of elite athletic success, though a worthy goal, may lead to a restricted development that may significantly impact on the athlete's post-sport life (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). In order to alleviate these difficulties at their origin, the implementation of a more holistic approach to sports development can be beneficial early in the life of the athlete (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). It is for this reason that the researcher here has investigated young elite athletes who are at the beginning of their professional life cycle.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter begins by situating the method in the context of the research topic followed by framing the research questions arising from the review of the related literature. Implications of these questions are examined for the selection of a largely qualitative methodology informed by a grounded theory approach. An analysis of the essential features of qualitative research methodology is followed by an outline of the research procedures used in the present study: interviews and questionnaires. Descriptions of participants, data collection and data analysis are discussed followed by research validation, triangulation and ethical considerations.

As argued in Chapter Four, elite athletes have restricted opportunities to expand themselves outside of the sporting environment. This leaves athletes vulnerable to post-sport difficulties and a future defined only by the sport in which they participate. Research suggests one of the methods to alleviate such difficulties is through career development and planning. Most of the research conducted in this area has been with retired athletes, or senior athletes, who are in the middle or at the end of their sporting careers. With the exception of McGillivray and McIntosh's (2006) work on young Scottish footballers and Hickey and Kelly's (2005) research into young AFL players, research that has been conducted on young athletes is largely from a North American context where the structure of elite sport is embedded in a College or High-school environment. Little empirical research has been conducted in the context of young elite athletes embarking on a rugby career in New Zealand and Australia, and the voices of the rugby players themselves have largely been absent. The need for knowledge in this study relates to how young elite rugby players understand themselves as athletes and how they imagine their futures and make sense of their opportunities for a life outside rugby. The purpose of this research is to provide information that will contribute to a more general understanding of players' needs, identity, futures and to inform policy and planning of rugby organisations to enhance performance and increase player retention,

satisfaction and welfare. To achieve this, a largely qualitative approach was employed to collect data from young elite rugby union players, coaches and management in rugby, and coaches and management from the wider sports industry. Part of the information may be viewed as idiographic, in that it describes the unique situation and traits of young elite rugby players who participated in the current study, where the strength lies in a greater understanding of the situation. Part of the information will have other contextual features relevant to other elite athletes and sporting contexts.

## 7.1 Research Questions

The research question that guides this study is: “*How might young elite rugby players be better prepared for their future beyond rugby?*” Subsidiary questions that will assist in identifying specific components of the main research question are the following:

1. *How do young men make sense of, and give meaning to their lives as elite rugby players?*
2. *What is the social and cultural environment that structures young players’ perceptions of their careers?*
3. *What are young players’ perceptions of career development and planning?*
4. *What are players’, coaches’ and managements’ perceptions of current career development and planning programs?*
5. *What are the similarities and differences between the players’ perceptions of their careers and career development and planning, and those of coaches and management?*
6. *What are young players’ perceptions of their preparedness for life after playing elite rugby?*

### 7.1.1 Research Design Map

A summary of the methodological approach taken for this inquiry is outlined in Figure 7.1. The diagram illustrates the participant groups and the project design, utilising

largely a qualitative methodology informed by grounded theory approach. The research design will be elaborated throughout this chapter.

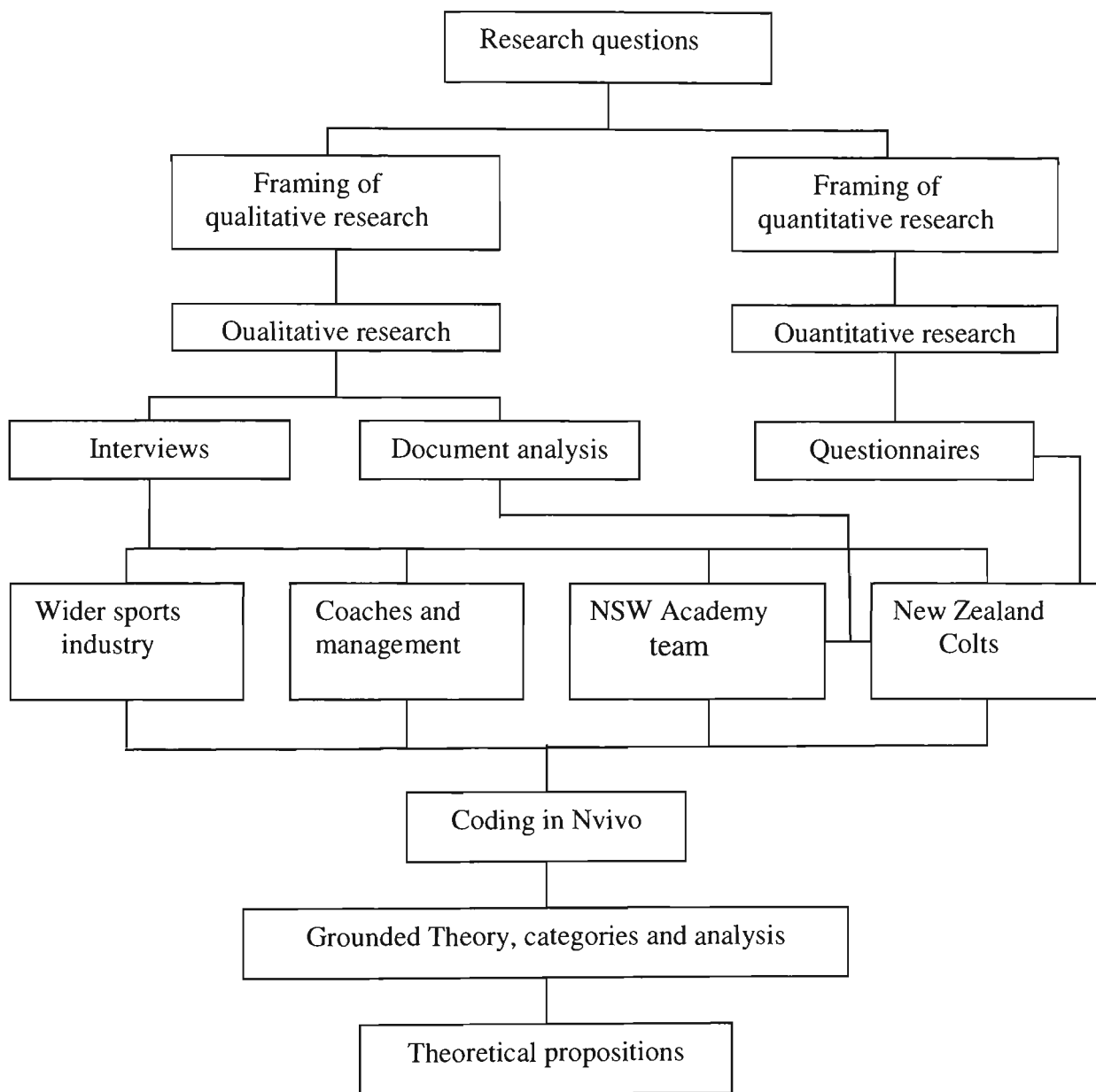


Figure 7.1: Research Design Map

## 7.2 The Nature of Qualitative Research

This research utilised primarily a qualitative methodology, however, a mixed mode approach was used to a limited extent, in that quantitative data was collected through the use of a questionnaires, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Creswell (1994) defines qualitative research as an “inquiry process of understanding a social or human

problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p.2). The decision to select a qualitative approach stems not only from its suitability to the research question but also the nature of the research problem. In the current study, the desire of the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of young rugby players’ lives and the unique social context in which they operate lends itself to a qualitative methodology. This study is interested in the way young men make sense of, and give meaning to their lives as elite rugby players. It was intended that a qualitative approach through the use of semi-structured interviews would allow for a complex picture of young players’ experiences and their interpretation of these as they engage in the relatively new career of professional rugby. The study required a methodology that would enable the researcher to be flexible in the questions asked of the participants and the ability for the participants to expand on their experiences until an in-depth understanding had been gained. It was perceived that a largely quantitative approach would not be as suitable to extract such rich data and the level of understanding sought in this study.

Qualitative researchers regard their research task as “coming to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glense and Peshkin, 1992, p.6). In the present study, exploring the experiences of young elite rugby players in a global and professional environment, or as Glense and Peshkin (1992) state, how athletes ‘construct the world around them’, is at the heart of the purpose. Qualitative methodology was seen as an appropriate way to allow the researcher an opportunity to explore and uncover perceptions and issues involved in the experiences, identity and pre-retirement planning of elite young rugby players and associated views of coaching and management staff.

Quantitative research was drawn upon to a lesser degree. Questionnaires were provided to only the New Zealand players due to access time limitations and were drawn upon to add to, and confirm, the open-ended qualitative data gathered. Collecting quantitative data allowed information to be recorded quickly and efficiently, for example through the use of likert scales, and also enabled demographic information to be collected in a written format as opposed to using the limited interview time. Punch (1998) suggests that quantitative research is particularly efficient at getting to the structural features of

social life, while qualitative studies are often stronger in terms of developmental aspects. It was therefore beneficial in the current study to be able to bring these two strengths together.

### **7.3 Selection of Participants**

As New Zealand's national game and premier professional sport, rugby attracts much attention. Athletes are highly paid and are often seen as hero figures, which in turn influences public and player perceptions. Therefore, to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and issues for young elite rugby players, participants were chosen from the next generation of likely All Blacks, specifically the 2003 World Cup Winning New Zealand Colts. The New Zealand Colts are the national under 21 (years) rugby team made up of players from around the country that gather once a year to play in the under 21 World Cup. Outside of this national team the players play for their province or Super 14 franchise team.

The New Zealand Colts form the major focus of this study, however, members of the 2003 New South Wales (NSW) Super 14 Academy team were also employed. Initially NSW was seen as a pilot study to formulate and refine questions for the larger study, however, the data that emerged from the pilot study highlighted that pre-retirement planning of young elite rugby players was not an issue confined to New Zealand. It became evident that the needs, concerns and experiences of NSW young rugby players were highly relevant to the current study and would assist in addressing the research questions. Although the young men in Australia competed under a slightly different structure to their New Zealand counterparts, it was similar enough to allow the two to be combined in this study. The reason for widening the study to include NSW was not to provide a comparison study of the two countries, but rather to gain a wider understanding of perspectives. The context of rugby in NSW for young elite players is different from that of New Zealand, among other things including their required time commitments to rugby and their access to career development resources and opportunities. It was therefore useful to consider how this context has impacted on young players' experiences in elite rugby. The NSW Academy team is largely comprised of young (under 22 years of age) athletes playing at the semi-professional

level. The team often acts as a talent pool, where players' next step up is to the Super 14 level. As the major focus of this study is on *young* elite rugby players, only rugby players who were under 22 years of age and had represented either their country or state in the last year were included. Furthermore, as only male rugby is fully professionalised, elite female players have not been included.

Focussing solely on the young athletes would not provide a complete picture of the experiences, issues and in particular the provisions available for them as they embark on a professional rugby career. Including coaching and management staff from both New Zealand and Australia provided a broader understanding of, and different perspectives on, the issues and experiences of elite young rugby players. Coaches and management, through their close work and interaction with the players, brought a unique perspective to the study as they were able to provide a broad picture of way the young men think, behave and act in their lives and experiences as elite rugby players.

To acquire further understanding of the professional sports environment and the work of an elite young athlete, a small sample of coaches and management staff were selected from AFL and rugby league to participate in this study. These participants from the wider sports industry were interviewed to extend the information and perspectives on issues such as professionalism, career development and post-sport planning, identity, and programs to assist the athlete's preparation for a life after sport. Through including participants in sports with more experience of professionalism, it was possible to extend knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding young athletes that were important to the current study. These participants were again selected from Australia and New Zealand. Following is a list of the participants in the current study.

- 17 New Zealand Colt players
- 8 NSW Waratahs Academy players
- 1 Senior coach of one of the researched teams
- 1 Management member of New Zealand Rugby Players Association
- 1 Management member of Australian Rugby Union Players Association
- 2 Professional Development Managers (NZ based)
- 1 Athlete career counsellor (Australian based)
- 1 Former premiership winning Australian Rules Football coach

- 1 Retired National Rugby League Team coach, and player welfare officer (Australian based)

#### **7.4 Recruitment and Data Gathering Procedures**

To obtain access to participants the researcher wrote letters to senior management staff at the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) and NSW Rugby Union outlining a brief proposal and request for player participation. These letters detailed the proposed research, requirements of participants and some sample questions that might be asked during the research. One of the most difficult aspects of the data gathering process was gaining access to the young rugby players in New Zealand. As participants were national representatives and contracted to the NZRU, permission to access these players had to be given by executives of the NZRU. As athletes could not be contacted outside these channels, it gave the Union power to either support or reject the application for entry into the research setting. Due to the profile of the intended participants, athlete time constraints and ethical considerations, it was nine months before the initial request for access and actual permission to conduct the study was received. This proved a difficult time for the researcher and the study, as there was considerable doubt that the study would proceed in this particular setting. Gaining access to the NSW academy team was much more trouble free, only requiring a letter and a follow-up phone call. The researcher flew to Sydney within two weeks and was welcomed and provided with an office at the training ground in which to conduct the interviews.

Once access had been granted to the Under 21 New Zealand Rugby Team, each player received a letter introducing the researcher, the research, and a request for their involvement in the study. The letter was followed up one week later with a phone call to each player to discuss their interest in participating. If the player agreed they were given more detail about the research and a date, time and place were set for the interview. Interview dates were organised geographically in an attempt to reduce travel time. Once all interview dates had been confirmed the researcher travelled by car to each participant's home-town, beginning the journey of data collection from the top of the North Island and ending at the bottom of the South Island of New Zealand. Using this form of data collection presented some problems, as it was very time-consuming.



The journey took almost four weeks and over 4000 kilometres were travelled in this time. This was seen as the only way the researcher could conduct face-to-face interviews with the players who resided in different parts of New Zealand. Including participants from different regions of the country was considered important in order to gauge any possible variations in their experiences, structure of their career or resources that were available to them. Interviewing had to be flexible because a small number of players had forgotten or wanted to reschedule interview times, which meant the researcher had to change travel plans to get to other participants in different parts of the country, or spend extra time in various locations.

The New Zealand rugby-playing participants were given the choice of where they would like the interview conducted. The majority of players asked for the interview to be conducted in their own home, some of the players chose a local café, and one player opted for the hotel lobby where his team was staying that night before their weekend game. Before each interview the interviewer would try to show respect, for example by asking if shoes should be removed upon entering a house, and gratitude, for example by offering to purchase a drink or something to eat for the participant if the interview was in a café or hotel. All participants were asked if they agreed to the interview being tape-recorded and were further reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time. Once the consent form had been signed the interview commenced.

New South Wales player interviews were all conducted at their training ground, whilst training was underway. The researcher was provided with a small office and when one player had finished the interview he would collect the next player. Many players expressed relief at being interviewed that particular day as they were training in 32 degree heat. New Zealand and Australian administrative, management and coaching staff from both rugby and the wider sports industry were all interviewed at their place of work.

#### *7.4.1 Interviews*

Interviews were utilised in all sectors of the present study as the primary method of collecting data. An interview schedule containing open-ended questions was devised.

These were intended as focus questions that facilitated discussion around the issues at hand. Interviewing seems to be the most natural way of communicating with other people. “An interview is an exchange” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p.342), a conversation between two (or more) people. Yet there is much more to interviewing than a simple conversation. Interviews “demand... different emphases in the social interaction that takes place from those in ordinary conversation” (Robson, 2002, p.273). This was particularly evident in this study due to the cultural diversity of participants. In this study, interviews were designed and carried out using a semi-structured technique. Semi-structured interviews have a specific number of questions but provide opportunities for the interviewer to probe interviewee perceptions beyond immediate answers. This was particularly important and relevant in the current study as many of the participants, especially those from a Polynesian background, were very shy and often would only expand on their responses when the researcher asked a stringer question such as “in what ways” or “could you expand on that.” These more open interviews had the researcher seeking a structure through exploring specific aspects of the topic area, “a mixture of conversation and embedded questions” (Fetterman, 1989, p.49). The interview process allowed each participant to explain his social world, how it was constructed and perceived, and subsequently allowed for exploration of the informant’s experiences (Fetterman, 1989).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 current New Zealand Under 21 players (see Appendix 1). Each interview lasted for between 45 minutes and one hour. A similar structure was used to obtain data from eight NSW Academy team members, although in a shorter time frame of 30 minutes due to access limitations. In the first part of the interview, players were asked about their history as a rugby player, the place of rugby in their lives, other interests and aspirations and their experiences thus far as elite young rugby players. The second half of the interview focussed more on their planning for the future in terms of career development, career awareness, and education. This involved discussing athletes’ needs in this area, the role of clubs and unions in providing assistance, and the extent of athlete engagement in career development, post-rugby planning and education or training.

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 minutes and one and a half hours were conducted with rugby coaching and management staff from New Zealand and Australia

(see Appendix 2). These interviews focussed primarily on the career development and planning programs implemented by the clubs and unions and the perceived importance of preparing athletes for life after sport. Also discussed was their role and interaction with athletes and their perspectives on athlete identity. Semi-structured interviews were also held with coaches and management in AFL and rugby league. These interviews included core questions also asked of rugby management and coaches. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Field notes of the interview were also written up after each interview.

The only major issue that arose throughout the interview process with athletes was the different interview skills required to effectively engage in a discussion or interview with athletes from a Polynesian background. The researcher found it challenging to elicit a free-flowing conversation with these participants. In some cases answers received were only one or two words, and initial attempts to expand were unsuccessful. The researcher sought advice from academic staff who had previously undertaken interview research with Indigenous and Polynesian participants. They suggested that it was important to first gain a rapport and to talk about general subject matter first, such as family and their background. When applied, this technique worked, as it seemed to relax the participants and engage them in conversation. Throughout the interview it also helped to use a mixture of conversation and embedded questions as described above (Fetterman, 1989).

#### 7.4.2 *Questionnaires*

A questionnaire was administered to New Zealand Under 21 players to add to, and confirm, the open-ended qualitative data gathered (see Appendix 3). The questionnaire was not provided to NSW players due to access time limitations. The questionnaire construction was a very demanding task for the researcher with numerous drafts produced whilst endeavouring to produce a clear, concise, unambiguous and presentable questionnaire that would suit the participants and achieve its purpose. Question-designers tend to speak of the need for simplicity, intelligibility, and clarity (Converse & Presser, 1991). A recurring problem is that often questionnaires are difficult to understand and to answer. As Sheatsley (1983) observes:

Because questionnaires are usually written by educated persons who have a special interest in and understanding of the topic of their inquiry, and because these people usually consult with other educated and concerned persons, it is much more common for questionnaires to be overwritten, overcomplicated, and too demanding of the respondent than they are to be simpleminded, superficial, and not demanding enough (p.200).

It is thus a challenge to construct questions that are clear and straightforward in four important respects: simple language, common concepts, manageable tasks, and widespread information (Converse & Presser, 1991). Draft questions were presented to experienced colleagues and supervisors before implementation to ensure suitability and relevance. They were also trialled on friends from a rugby-playing background to ensure the target participants would understand the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were administered directly at the conclusion of the interview, taking approximately 15 minutes for the player to complete. This ensured a 100 percent return rate. Participants were not required to complete the questionnaire if they did not desire, however all agreed to do so. The questionnaire was designed to elicit perceptions and perspectives of participants that may not have been covered in the interview context. It also allowed more time in the interview to utilise open-ended questions that required more free responses, while the questionnaire was able to collect closed responses. The questionnaire also aided in validating the data collected in the interviews, where comparisons and cross checks could be made to ensure the consistency of information and responses. The questionnaire sought information on such areas as demographics and background, knowledge and behavioural information, and also included likert scales to provide a measure of players' attitudes, values and opinions (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). A number of the likert-scale questions and career development program options were based on Hawkins and Blann's (1996) questionnaire that was provided to elite athletes at the Australian and Victorian Institutes of Sport. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about the players':

1. Career awareness (their understanding of career planning and the need to recognise resources that can be used in developing and implementing parallel and post-sport career goals);
2. Parallel and post-sport career planning involvement;
3. Career transition needs (types of programmes/activities/services which would be most useful in meeting their post sport transition needs);
4. Life structure (how athletes view and structure their life, in terms of rugby, education, employment and achieving a balance of life).

### 7.4.3 Documents

Documents analysed were current professional development programs from the New Zealand Rugby Union and the Australian Rugby Union. These documents included descriptions of the mission statements, the structure of programs, the purpose of programs, and the content provided to players. Documents collected were largely internal documents provided to players and clubs. The collected documents contributed to this study as they provided a detailed account of the policy, structure and content of various programs available to athletes and enabled triangulation with other collected data. Documents played a minor role due to the small number of policy documents available on athlete welfare and career development programs. Figure 7.2 illustrates data collection and participant sources.

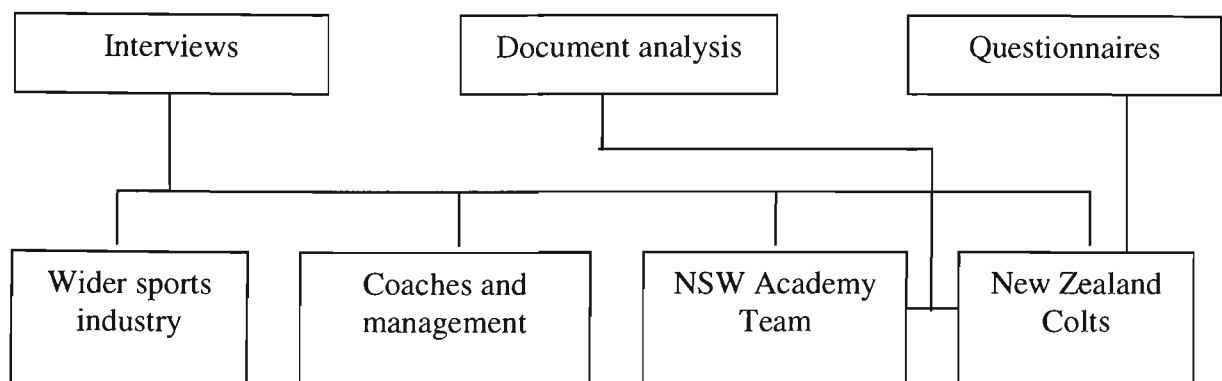


Figure 7.2: Data collection and participant sources

As Figure 7.2 shows, interviews were conducted with rugby players, management, coaches and members of the wider sports industry (coaches and management).

Questionnaires on the other hand were only conducted with New Zealand players as these participants formed the major focus of the research.

## **7.5 Data Analysis**

“Analysis involves working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (Bogden and Biklin, 1992, p.145). This passage is consistent with the way qualitative analysis of data was approached in this study. Data analysis was the beginning of the process of making meaning from the data and developing the findings of this research (Creswell, 2005). A good qualitative research design produces rich data, which needs to be complemented with an appropriate way of analysing it. As for most qualitative researchers, the task was to come “to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glense and Peshkin, 1992, p.6). To assist in this process and to help manage the large amount of data collected, QSR NVivo (version 2) software package was used to organise, code and generally help make sense of the data.

The rise of computer-aided qualitative analysis software is fairly recent in comparison to its quantitative counterpart. It is only in the last decade that researchers have been provided with this option to assist them in their qualitative analysis. With this new generation of qualitative software it is possible to manage, access and analyse qualitative data and to keep a perspective on all data, without losing richness or the closeness to the data that is so critical for qualitative research (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). Through the use of NVivo, interview transcripts were able to be broken down into categories and properties and resynthesised to begin to produce a picture and a theory. NVivo enabled this researcher to organise themes, explore and analyse them, to show relationships between data.

### 7.5.1 *Grounded Theory*

Methods of analysis here were informed by grounded theory approach. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), grounded theory is a “general (research) methodology, a way of thinking about and conceptualising data” (p.275). Grounded theory evolved from the work of two sociologists, Glaser & Strauss (1967), who sought to “close the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research” (p.vii). Grounded theory is embedded within the interpretivist paradigm, hence the researcher is “interested in the subjective meaning, namely the way people make sense of their world, and in which they assign meaning to it” (Sarantakos, 2005, p.40). This is particularly relevant to the current study as the young rugby players are part of the first generation of rugby players who will only ever experience rugby in its professional format. Understanding how these young men make sense of this and the meanings they attach to this form part of the purpose of this study. “A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through a systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23).

In this study, grounded theory methods were used as a set of analytical guidelines to enable the building of theory (Charmaz, 2005). Grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content (Patton, 2002). Therefore, “one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (de Vaus, 2001, p.23). Furthermore, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state: “you are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know...you are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (p.32). In the present study the starting point was the lack of knowledge of the experiences of elite young rugby players.

Grounded theorists begin with general or capacious research questions that enable freedom and flexibility to investigate a phenomenon in-depth. In grounded theory studies, the researcher “attempts to derive a theory by using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationships of categories of information” (Creswell, 1994, p.12). In the present study the multiple stages of data collection included in-depth interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Grounded theory,

due to its generality, can be applied to in-depth studies of diverse phenomena. It forms the basis of theory generation for the qualitative analysis in this present study.

An important assumption underlying this approach is that “all of the concepts pertaining to a given phenomenon have not yet been identified, at least not in this population or place; or if so, then the relationship between the concepts are poorly understood or conceptually underdeveloped” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.37). Hence, grounded theorists, like all researchers, try to find answers to questions that are important but not yet completely answered. This is especially relevant to the current study due to the relatively new phenomenon of young men pursuing a career in professional rugby.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest a four-step process in grounded theory analysis.

#### 1. Comparing Incidents Applicable to Each Category

The researcher begins by coding each occurrence in the data into as many categories of analysis as possible; as categories arise or as data emerge that fit an existing category, they are grouped due to their perceived commonality. Constant comparison of occurrences soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category. Here, for example, categories associated with career development, post-rugby planning, education, identity and life after rugby began to emerge. As indicated above, the coding of the data began when all of the interviews had been completed. As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, coding qualitative data is a subjective process and one that grows from the data. It involves assigning meaning to portions of interview text collected during the study. Such subjective coding is consistent with the notion that qualitative data analysis is an interpretative task, where interpretations are not found, rather they are made (Ezzy, 2002). Strauss’s (1987) system of open coding was first applied to the raw interview data, where each interview was scrutinized line by line with the aim to produce concepts that fitted the data. Here similar concepts were grouped together to form categories, relating to particular phenomena from the data. Each category was given a name that represented the data. Examples of these categories into which text was coded are: ‘alternative career planning’; ‘identity’; ‘life after sport’; and ‘rugby as a career’.



Through the open coding process new categories constantly emerged as new ideas and topics evolved through the interviews. At the end of this process every sentence was allocated to a category or a sub-category, which could then be explored, organised or changed. Therefore, patterns, themes and categories started to emerge from the data as they were coded. This allowed the researcher to start asking questions such as what is actually happening in the data? What is the basic problem(s) faced by the participants, and what accounts for those problems? (Strauss, 1987). Such coding also assisted in linking the data to an emergent theory.

The coding process was frequently interrupted to allow the researcher to write a theoretical memo. Writing memos is particularly central to grounded theory as it underpins the emergent coding scheme. Strauss (1987) defines a theoretical memo as “writing in which the researcher puts down theoretical questions, hypothesis, summary of codes...a method of keeping track of coding results and stimulating further coding, and also a major means of integrating the theory” (p.22). NVivo has a function enabling the researcher to write memos whilst coding, which is a necessary part of analysing any qualitative data. Keeping memos in the program helped to record emerging ideas, reflect on areas that needed further exploration, and assisted in more analytical thinking.

## 2. Integrating Categories and Their Properties

Axial coding was the next step in the coding process. The aim of axial coding is to integrate codes around the axes of central categories. “While open coding ‘opens’ data to theoretical possibilities, axial coding ‘puts together’ concepts and interrelates them to reach a higher level of abstraction” (Sarantakos, 2005, p.60). Axial coding resulted in identification of other codes associated with central themes and enabled the researcher to relate categories to their sub-categories. As the researcher continues to record incidents they are coded and compared with each other. “Constant comparison causes the accumulated knowledge pertaining to a property of the category to readily start to become integrated; that is related in many different ways, resulting in unified whole” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.109).

### 3. Delimiting the Theory

Delimiting occurs at two levels: the theory and the categories. Firstly, the theory becomes stronger as fewer major modifications are made as the researcher compares the next incidents of a category to its properties. Later modifications occur mainly on the order of clarifying the logic, and removing non-relevant properties and according to Glaser and Strauss, “most important – reduction” (1967, p.110). Reduction is implemented so the analyst can discover prevailing regularities between categories to “formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.110). Emerging theories are subject to ongoing inquisition, which anchors the qualitative process in its own characteristic research rigor. Modifications to evolving theory occur as saturation of categories develops. Theoretical saturation occurs when no additional data or attendant categories and properties are being generated. As suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as the researcher sees similar instances over and over again, they become empirically confident that a category is saturated.

### 4. Writing the Theory

In this final stage of qualitative analysis, the analyst has acquired a depth of coded data, a series of memos, and a theory. This information is used to form a “systematic substantive theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.113). This gives an accurate account of matters studied, and is relayed in such a form that the reader could enter the same field and follow the writer’s path, thus allowing the researcher’s publication of the results with confidence. The analyst can refer back to the coded data if necessary to validate a suggested point, highlight data or gaps in the theory, and provide examples. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) define theory as “an explanation of the commonalities and the relationships among observed phenomena in terms of the causal structures and processes that are presumed to underlie them” (p.773). This definition of theory holds true regardless of the method by which the theory is derived (e.g., deductively or inductively). Grounded theorists, like other theorists, identify and describe these conceivable relationships among concepts and sets of concepts (Ertmer, 1997).

Strauss and Corbin (1996) suggest that “theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that are systematically inter-related through statements of relationships to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon” (p.21). A theory has

a further role than solely providing an understanding, or illustrating a set of findings. It facilitates users in explaining and predicting events, thereby providing guides to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Therefore, the goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is relevant for those involved. In this study through the process of coding and the emergence of concepts, memo writing and journal entries, a theory was developed to explain the relationship between rugby as work, player identity and preparing young elite rugby players for a life beyond rugby. The theory in this study is one that is intended to guide policy and implementation of planning in relation to preparing young elite rugby players for a life beyond rugby.

Generally, the researcher followed the grounded theory rules as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1968). However, there were a couple of points where this deviated in the current research that need to be noted. One of the strategies of grounded theory includes simultaneous collection and analysis of data. In this case the bulk of the analysis, coding and defining of categories was completed after the researcher had left the field. As data collection involved four weeks of travelling around New Zealand by car, it was deemed too difficult to carry out a robust system of simultaneous analysing and coding. The researcher did however, both mentally and through the use of a researcher journal, start to tentatively create codes and write memos. This emerging analysis assisted in explaining the data as they were collected and more significantly further directed data gathering especially for the inclusion of coaches and management staff in of the study. A more rigorous and robust analysis was carried out post-data collection to allow further categories to develop, and coding to begin, using the computer software QSR NVivo (version 2).

## **7.6 Validity and Reliability**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and Janesick (1994) highlight credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability as key criteria for assessing the validity of a qualitative study. Credibility or internal validity seeks honest, meaningful, credible and empirically supported findings. With regard to assessing grounded theory studies, Charmaz (2005) argues that the theory must fit the empirical world it analyses, provide a workable understanding and explanation of this

world, and address problems and processes in it. Furthermore, Charmaz (2005) suggests that the research is credible if the data is sufficient to meet the researcher's claims, there are strong logical links between the data and the researcher's argument, enough evidence is provided to allow the reader to inform an independent assessment, and it provides originality in the sense that the work challenges, extends or refines current ideas, concepts and practices. It is argued that through the depth of data and the processes of analysis employed this study meets the above criteria of credible qualitative research.

Transferability or external validity addresses the extent to which representations may be compared from the present study's subject groups to others. This study is seen as providing adequately detailed description of the research relevance, setting and process to enable the transferability of findings and external validity to other elite athletes and sport organisations. This study adheres to the guidelines of dependability or reliability through a sufficiently detailed description of the research process being available to independent researchers to provide them with the opportunity to audit the present researcher's decision-making path. Confirmability is sought in presenting the study's findings in adequate clarity such that their derivation can be traced to original data with acceptable interpretations and patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To assist in the trustworthiness of the data, all transcribed interviews were posted back to the participants enabling them to add, delete or make changes to their part of the interview. Participants were invited to return any changes to the researcher, and if no changes were received it was assumed that the participant was satisfied with the interview content and consented to parts being used in the final thesis. This process was critical in validating the data by ensuring that information obtained from players had been transcribed accurately.

### *7.6.1 Triangulation*

Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals (e.g., players and coaches), or methods of data collection (e.g., interviews and questionnaires) (Creswell, 2005). Sarantakos (2005) suggests that triangulation "allows the researcher

to view a particular point in research from more than one perspective, and hence to enrich knowledge and/or test validity” (p.145). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that triangulation assists in securing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. In the present study two methods of triangulation were used; method triangulation and data triangulation. In terms of data collection, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis provided method triangulation. Qualitative data collection in the form of an interview was conducted initially to gauge feelings, perspectives, perceptions and attitudes. The addition of questionnaires provided the researcher with both qualitative and quantitative data that could be checked against each other and then against the data gained from document analysis to ensure research validity. According to Patton (2002) “because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of data collection and analysis provide more grist for the research mill” (p.557).

The second method of triangulation was that of data sources. Data were collected from players, coaches and management in rugby and coaches and management from the wider sports industry. According to Creswell (2005), this assists in enhancing the accuracy of a study. This was specifically used in the current study to verify data. For example, when players would describe the sort of assistance or advice they may or may not be receiving from their rugby clubs, the best way to validate this information was to talk to the management and administration staff from those clubs about what advice or assistance they provide to players. The reason for checking for inconsistencies is that interview data should not be treated as accurate or distorted versions of reality. Silverman (1985) argues that, “interview data display cultural realities which are neither biased nor accurate but real” (p.176). Some of the collected data here did not rely on triangulation as they were personal accounts of the player’s experiences and the meaning they attach to them. Figure 7.3 illustrates the triangulation of data sources.

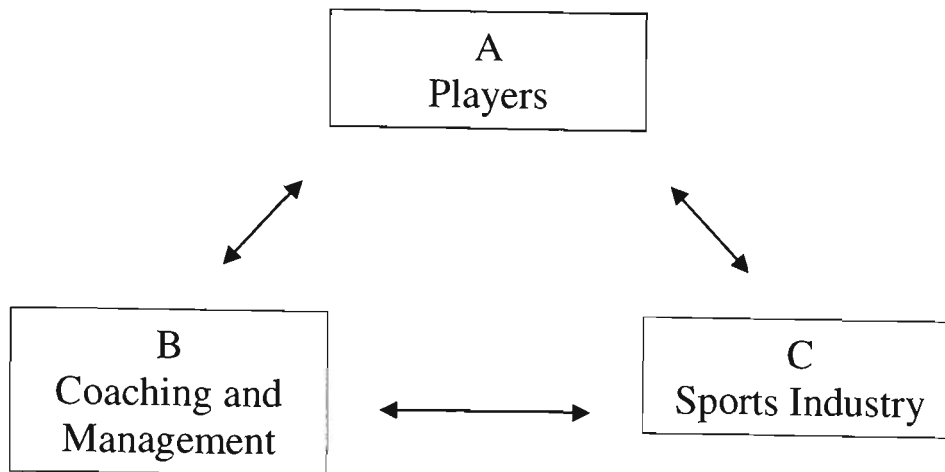


Figure 7.3: Data sources triangulation

## 7.7 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical issue that needed to be considered was that of confidentiality. Some of the athletes were very much in the public eye, and maintaining the confidentiality of their data was of high importance. It was agreed that the researcher could refer to the team studied as the New Zealand Under 21 Rugby Team or NSW Academy Team, however, extreme care had to be taken not to reveal the identity of any individual players. In response to this, field notes, analytical logs, transcripts and any other identifying information were only used by the researcher to make sense of the data, and pseudonyms were used in the thesis. Participants were only identified in accordance with their current situation. For example, New Zealand Under 21 player ‘Shane’ or ex-AFL premiership coach ‘Ken’. The protection of identity was enhanced due to the high turnover of players, and the distance between the collection of the data and the writing up. Data and discussion will continue to be kept anonymous and confidential. In addition, following the observations of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991) the researcher had, and continues to have, control and ownership of data and will continue to exercise due ethical responsibility by not publicising or circulating any information that is likely to harm the interests of participants. The full consent of interview participants was ensured following the researcher fully informing them of the nature of the research. All subjects had the right to accept or reject the researcher’s presence or questions and were able to terminate the interview at any time without consequence.

In summary, this chapter has reviewed the methods and design of the research and the techniques that have underpinned the gathering and analysis of data. It has highlighted the appropriateness of a largely qualitative study informed by a grounded theory approach. Using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods within the setting of rugby union and the wider sports industry the researcher was able to gather a rich supply of data pertaining to the unique viewpoints of the participants being studied. The chapter identified challenging issues relating to data collection and ethics, and how these were approached and overcome. The following chapter explores the perspectives of young elite rugby players, in relation to the analysed themes of life and work of young elite rugby players, athletic identity, and future athletic termination and transition.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PROFESSIONAL RUGBY: PLAYER PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY, ISSUES AND INSECURITIES

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter explores three major themes that emerged from the analysis of interview and questionnaire data: i) The life and work of young elite rugby players; ii) Athletic identity and investment in rugby; iii) Future athletic termination and transition. More specifically, this chapter focuses on how young men make sense of their life and work as elite young rugby players in the professional era, including recruitment, contracts, commitment to the sport, their understanding of a rugby career and concerns associated with engaging in work as a professional rugby player. Following this, the notion of athletic identity and investment in rugby is discussed where issues such as alternative identities and balance of life are explored. The chapter concludes by discussing players' perceptions on the future athletic termination and transition process. Data from New Zealand and Australian players have been combined and are used together throughout this chapter. As indicated in Chapter Seven, the questionnaire was only administered to New Zealand players in this study. Therefore, whilst the questionnaire provides significant findings that may support or contradict interview data it is important to remember it only represents the perspectives of the New Zealand athletes.

#### 8.1 The Life and Work of Young Elite Rugby Players

The changing nature of rugby over the past 10 years and the shift to a professional context has had various impacts and influences on young players coming into the game. The cohort of players in this study are from the first generation of players who will experience elite rugby only in its professional format, as opposed to many current senior players who also competed when the game was in its amateur form. In their interviews these young men provided accounts of what it is like to be an elite young rugby player,



they talked about perceptions of rugby as their future career and their understanding of what a career in rugby might entail. Players also discussed their concerns as they prepared to embark on a career as a professional rugby player. The demographics and background information of players provide a context for understanding the characteristics of the players as a population. They provide information such as players' ages, education, rugby playing years and ethnic identification.

### 8.1.1 General Demographics

Demographic information was collected quantitatively from New Zealand participants through the use of a questionnaire, whereas demographic information from NSW participants was collected through interviews. The ages of the players from both New Zealand and Australia ranged from 19 to 22, with the highest percentage of players being 20 years of age, as shown in table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Age of participants

Age	%	No's
19	8	2
20	48	12
21	36	9
22	8	2

In terms of education, two-thirds of the players' highest qualification was gained in high school, with one-third of players obtaining a Polytechnic/TAFE or University Diploma or Certificate.

Table 8.2 Participant qualifications

Highest qualification	%	No's
5 <sup>th</sup> Form/Yr 10	4	1
6 <sup>th</sup> Form/Yr 11	24	6
7 <sup>th</sup> Form/Yr 12	40	10
Polytechnic or University Diploma or Certificate	28	7
Bachelors Degree	4	1

For players' involvement in education at the time of the study, 40% were studying for a tertiary qualification, 8% were undertaking a Rugby Development course offered by their individual rugby union, and 48% of athletes were not undertaking further education. Of those athletes who were not studying, 42% already had a Polytechnic or TAFE qualification and 50% did not have a qualification higher than a school level.

Table 8.3 Current education

Current education	%	No's
Tertiary qualification	40	10
Not studying	48	12
Rugby Development Officer training	8	2
Apprenticeship	4	1

To ascertain how these players structured their life and how they supported themselves financially, a question was asked to determine the extent of their financial reliance on playing rugby. As illustrated in table 8.4 the majority of the players relied solely on playing rugby for their income.

Table 8.4 Sources of income

Income Sources	%	No's
Total from rugby	76	19
Some rugby/some work	24	6
All work	0	0

To further understand the structure of players' lives and their level of involvement in playing and training for rugby, players were asked to indicate their time commitments to the sport. As the New Zealand players were on different training schedules depending on their province, they committed varying times to rugby. As highlighted in table 8.5, a large majority of the players reported committing less than 21 hours a week to rugby. This compares to NSW players who at the time of the interview (pre-season training) were involved in rugby five days a week from approximately 9am until 4pm. For those New Zealand players who committed more time to rugby, it did not appear to be correlated with playing at a higher level, e.g. Super 12.

Table 8.5 Participation hours in rugby (New Zealand)

Participation hours per week in rugby	%	No's
10-15	35	6
16-21	47	8
22-27	6	1
28-33	12	2

The following three questions were only asked in the questionnaire and were not addressed in NSW interviews. In regards to ethnicity, the majority of New Zealand players identified with European ethnicity. The remaining players identified themselves as Polynesian.

Table 8.6 Ethnicity of participants (New Zealand)

Ethnicity	%	No's
European	65	11
Pacific Island	35	6

The largest proportion of New Zealand players had played rugby for over 15 years as highlighted in table 8.7

Table 8.7 Length of rugby participation (New Zealand)

Years of Participation	%	No's
3-6	6	1
7-10	29	5
11-14	24	4
15+	41	7

At the time of the questionnaire all New Zealand players had played international rugby in their age group (under 21), and the majority had played provincial rugby. Only three players had played Super 12 rugby. There is an overlap in regards to the level of rugby played.

Table 8.8 Level of rugby played (New Zealand)

Level of Rugby	%	No's
U21 International	100	17
Provincial	88	14
Super 12	18	3

The demographics provide some background information for the elite young rugby players in this study. As a group, they largely relied on playing rugby for their income. Just over a third of these young men held a tertiary qualification, whilst 28% were currently studying for a tertiary qualification. Their time commitment to the sport varied from 10 hours per week to five days per week from 9am until 4pm. One of the key differences between the New Zealand participants and NSW participants is that whilst both groups of players were competing at the semi-professional level, NSW players were required at training or competition full-time, five days a week from 9am until 4pm, which severely impacted on their ability to engage in pursuits outside rugby.

### 8.1.2 *Becoming a Young Elite Rugby Player*

This section is an analysis of the interviews with the young rugby players to construct an idea of what it is like to be an elite rugby player in today's elite rugby environment. It begins with a description of the way the young players were recruited and contracted, discusses the impact this has had on their life in terms of their required commitment to the sport, and concludes with players' aspirations and desire to succeed in rugby. Typically, young elite rugby players from New Zealand and NSW were recruited and immediately contracted after leaving school, and for some whilst still at school. From the age of 17 or 18 many young elite players were contracted to a provincial academy for three years if in New Zealand, or one to two years in a State Academy if in Australia, where they undergo intense rugby development. For example, 20 year old Paul described his experience of being recruited straight from school into a New Zealand provincial academy:

They [provincial rugby club] have got an Academy going on, like as soon as you leave school. They offer players from school contracts for three years

to stay in Auckland. They bring you up through development teams and pay for your schooling.

The academy system is designed to contract players and 'keep them in the system' so they are unable to play for other states or provinces. From an early age these young men are locked into a contract for up to three years where their rugby talent can be developed and applied for one particular club. As Dave, a 21 year old player from New Zealand stated:

They put you in the Academy so you are pretty much locked away and no one can grab you. Then they just look after you with training and age group levels.

In NSW, a similar academy system is in place. In most cases, players are contracted either straight from school, or for some, whilst still at school. Players can also be recruited and contracted to an academy through the club rugby system, which may happen as late as 21 years of age. Although players are locked into a contract with an academy, the reward outside of rugby skill development and the opportunity to secure a better contract is fairly small. Players are paid small wages as part of their contractual agreement with an academy. Discussing this, Brett stated:

You get a small amount of support financially, very minimal, but it's looked upon as a stepping stone for guys that they think have got potential to go on. There are a lot of guys that are straight out of school and into that, and a few guys were still doing there HSC.

Once these young men were contracted to their respective academies the time commitment that was required to rugby greatly increased. Many spoke of having to give up certain aspects of their life, or reduce activity in certain areas not associated with rugby. In some cases this meant players foregoing pursuits such as education and part-time work. For example, Justin described how he had to withdraw from university once he obtained a contract with NSW:

I was studying Exercise Sports Science at uni. Finished school in 2000, finished my HSC. Did the first year out and last year then got signed to the Waratahs Academy and was doing uni part-time and then started on a full time contract now so I've stopped uni; you couldn't defer the course that I was doing so it's a pain.

Once contracted to a rugby team the players felt they had to sacrifice other pursuits in their life in order to succeed in rugby. Training and playing got in the way of the pursuits these young men were involved in before they signed their rugby contract. For example, New Zealand player Hamish, had to put a hold on his building career to be able to compete for selection:

One thing I realised is players who are up and coming, especially the young fellas, get chucked into an environment like semi-professional and the coaches put a lot of pressure on them, especially the unions. With me I wanted to do my building when I finished school, but I was pressured a lot into training and getting into the top team, and I put a hold on my building career.

Hamish went on to discuss how being a professional rugby player has also meant spending time away from family.

You tend to spend a lot of time away from family and especially partners. When special occasions come up your commitments with rugby take over family stuff. That is a big thing I find hard because I was brought up in a big family.

Having to postpone so much at a young age was something that the players discussed in a negative sense and it seemed that they felt they were deferring part of their life with no guarantee of achieving their goal in rugby. For example, New Zealand player Richard stated: "I just find that you have to give up so much at such a young age."

Part of being a talented young elite rugby player was the aspiration to achieve higher honours in the sport. In the short term, players wanted to make the Super 12

competition if they had not done so already, and in many cases the long-term goal was national representation. Shane summed up the goals of many New Zealand players interviewed by stating that his: “Ultimate goal is to wear the black jersey”, that is to represent New Zealand. The questionnaire also asked New Zealand players about their rugby aspirations, surprisingly; only 58 percent indicated that playing for the All Blacks was their major goal in rugby. Other aspirations were to gain a Super 12 contract, win championships, or switch to Rugby League and compete in the National Rugby League competition (NRL). This suggests that playing for one’s country is not as important as being able to earn money from playing rugby.

What seemed to matter most for these young rugby players was to secure a professional contract. For example, New Zealand player Paul stated: “I’m hoping to score a contract by the end of the year.”

The aspiration of securing a professional contract brought with it the pressure to perform, as these athletes strived to attract the attention of selectors. For example, New Zealand player Tevita stated:

Overcoming my injury at the moment, my first game back is on Saturday, so hopefully I’ll perform well in that and get back into the A’s. Hopefully get a Super 12 contract by next year.

The constant pressure to perform on the field to ‘justify their selection’ and not ‘let the team down’, was sometimes a burden felt by these young men. Feeling the need to constantly prove themselves brought extra pressure to build and maintain a reputation. For example, New Zealand player Conrad discussed this aspect of being an elite young rugby player:

I think there’s a lot more pressure on the young guys. Just for the fact that there’s so much pressure on you to perform, like especially if you’ve made the NZ colts, you’ve got such a reputation to live up to, that the older guys might not even worry about cause they’re going through the end of their career. Us young guys, we’re just starting up and because of the

professionalism era, franchises want their money's worth, so there's a heck of a lot of pressure on us young guys to perform on the field.

Becoming an elite young rugby player meant being recruited at an early, often straight out of school and drafted into academies and 'locked in' for up to three years on a fairly small contractual wage. Players' trained hard and committed a lot of time to rugby, often sacrificing education and other aspects of their life in order to commit to the game and build a reputation. The aspirations of these young men centred around securing a professional playing contract, although this did not necessarily mean representing their country.

### *8.1.3 Rugby is my Career: Constructed Realities*

Every player in this study either talked about rugby as their current career, or expected to have rugby as their career in the near future. Players did not suggest that rugby was a job or a short-term occupation but viewed playing professional rugby as a viable career option. This was supported by questionnaire results where 100 percent of players indicated that 'they view rugby as a career'. Players spoke of rugby as a career they were interested in and were good at. For example, NSW player Brett stated: "Obviously, I've always had aspirations to go into this career path and I felt I've had the ability." Many players suggested that this was the only 'career' they had been involved with and for some their only career option at present. New Zealand player Chris highlighted the attitudes of many of the players by stating:

Yes, this is my career because I wasn't the best at school. So I see this as a career that suits me.

When asked about what career he might be doing in ten years Chris went on to say:

"Yes, pretty confident, rugby would be my main focus."

However, the majority of these players (22 out of 25) were only competing at the semi-professional level, they had not secured long-term or lucrative contracts and in terms of the New Zealand players, were only committing an average of 20 hours per week to



rugby, suggesting that from an outsider's perspective, rugby was more like part-time work than a career. However, this was not how it was viewed by these young men. For example, when asked about whether rugby was a job or career, NSW player Carl, and New Zealand players Phil and Tevita, who were all playing rugby at a semi-professional level responded: "Nope, this is my career, yep"; "Yeah, definitely career path at the moment"; "Yeah I'm trying to make it a career at the moment."

It may be suggested that it is somewhat ambitious for these players to be referring to rugby as their career, as a career generally refers to a long-term job or occupation, or progress in a profession (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). These players at this stage of their competitive rugby lives were all under the age of 22 and not yet established as professional rugby players. Furthermore, they operate in a sport or occupation that is characterised by its short-term and insecure nature.

While all players' perceived rugby as a viable career option, many had unrealistic or over-optimistic ideas about the actual realities of the length of a professional rugby career. Rob echoed the general feeling of many of these young players by describing his rugby career in the following way. He saw himself playing until: "Maybe late twenties in New Zealand then maybe a couple of cheeky years overseas." New Zealand players Tevita and Conrad also had fairly optimistic views on the length of their rugby career: "Till about 32"; "At least till my mid 30s."

To gauge players' understanding of a professional rugby career, the questionnaire asked how long they perceived they would be able to play rugby at the elite level. The majority, (53%) suggested they could play elite rugby for the next seven to ten years (table 8.10). Statements from management and coaches suggest that in fact the majority of players will play professional rugby for only four seasons or less, a figure in stark contrast to the 71% of players who indicated they would play elite rugby for between seven and fifteen years.

Table 8.10 Expected future professional rugby playing years (New Zealand)

Future rugby playing years	%	No's
Less than 3 years	0	0
3-6 years	24	4
7-10 years	53	9
11-14 years	18	3
15+ years	6	1

It seems players had an idealised view of how long they would play professional rugby, with the majority of players suggesting an age where very few players are still competing professionally. Even Neil, who currently has a stress fracture in his back and a constant hamstring problem, still suggested he would be playing professional rugby for another 10 years: “Probably with my body and everything that is wrong with it, about [until I am] 30.”

As well as suggesting that their playing days would last into their 30s, some players also suggested that the high remuneration they associated with the professional game would mean they did not need an alternative occupation or career plan post-rugby. For example NSW players, Carl and Andrew stated:

Nathan: “Do you ever think about your rugby career ending, do you think can I do this forever, can I do this for 10 years”?

Carl: “Yeah.”

Nathan: “Does it make you think, I better plan for something else?”

Carl: “Nah, not really, it makes me think shit I better do this better, I better work harder.”

Well depends, you’re at a stage now where football has turned professional, so like it could be, everyone says what have you got after football? But the way that it’s going, if you’re a successful footballer, well you could be set up for life (Andrew, NSW).

This comment was in response to a question to Andrew regarding the place of education in his life. His response suggests that if he succeeded in professional rugby he would

not need an education. Such expectations, which are generally unrealistic, mean that players like Andrew do not see the need to make alternative plans for future careers, or financial support, other than that which they expect from rugby. However, evidence from recently retired professional rugby players and literature on athletic retirement (Petitpas et al, 1997) suggest that even if players do achieve highly in rugby it is unlikely that they will not have to engage in a post-sport career.

The questionnaire also asked players about the possibility of rugby providing them with commercial opportunities. It is important to note that it is generally only the very top professional players in rugby that secure commercial endorsements. Only three of the players who completed the questionnaire had even made it to Super 12 level, however, 77% of players agreed with a statement suggesting that they would secure commercial endorsements from rugby (table 8.11). This reinforces the argument that the players had little understanding of the realities of professional rugby, and had overly optimistic expectations of their future.

Table 8.11 Player's responses to rugby offering them commercial opportunities e.g. endorsing a product

Response Category	%	No's
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	6	1
Don't know	18	3
Agree	59	10
Strongly agree	18	3

Contrary to the unrealistic perceptions of the majority of players, a small number of players displayed a more realistic view of a rugby career. Justin, a NSW player, began by describing his experience as being like many other young elite rugby players his age but went on to say that he has doubts about the certainty of a rugby future, which makes him think about life outside of sport:

...Especially at our young age, at the age of 20, you think the world's at your feet and your career is going to go for the next 10 years, you don't think about the young people coming through, or the chance that you could

get an injury or anything else. I wouldn't say that I have put a lot of thought into it, but over the last few months and having to give up uni I've kind of thought well what if? If things go wrong what am I going to do?

A small number of players also indicated that they understood that professional rugby is a short-term insecure job, often determined by injury and selection issues. NSW player Luke's quote is typical of the perspectives of this minority of players:

It all depends on how things go, at the moment it could go either way. I would love to play until you get to an age and it's not viable but obviously there are other variables. Obviously if you don't make the teams or injuries and stuff, so I'd love to play for however long.

The young players in this study seemed to have optimistic and unrealistic ideas regarding the future length of their elite rugby career. Players spoke confidently about playing professional rugby into their mid 30s. In some cases players were so confident about their future in the sport that they spoke of the possibility of being 'set for life' and not having to give thought to alternative options. Only a small number of players acknowledged that rugby may not be their long-term career. Perhaps the certainty displayed by players could be due to the increasing options to play professional rugby in New Zealand, Australia and worldwide.

The idea that career options in rugby extended beyond New Zealand and Australia was recognised by these young players. Many talked about how, if they could not make professional rugby their career in their home country, they would move overseas to further pursue it. Some described how they could migrate while still young to earn more money, or extend their rugby life by relocating overseas when nearing the end of their playing potential in their country of origin. Players also pointed out that they saw their representative level rugby as adding to their value. For example, New Zealand player Conrad spoke about how he might structure his global rugby career:

I want to go overseas sometime to play, but probably near the end of my career, or maybe even in the next couple of years to get some experience

and then come back. I was going to go this year, but I made the Colts team that's just opened up so many doors for me. I'm more valuable now.

Many players had already identified the best time for their move overseas, stating that the higher level they reached in their own country the higher their market value in securing a contract overseas. This suggests that players saw themselves as 'market-savvy' and as having value as a commodity. This was confirmed by Paul:

I think every player wants to test themselves before going overseas, see how far they can get in New Zealand. I think the higher you go here the more money you can get overseas. It gets pumped up a few 'k' [1,000].

The players also suggested that they would relocate to play overseas if they did not 'make it', or could not secure a playing career in their country of origin. In this way, the option of playing overseas was spoken of both in terms of career longevity and in the sense that it offered broader labour market opportunities and high salaries. In times where these young men are thinking of rugby as a profession, what counts is being paid and securing a career. It is not surprising then that many of the players spoke of the option of migrating overseas to work as a rugby player. If the young rugby players in this study are representative of the perspectives of young New Zealand and Australian players then there may be serious consequences for the governing bodies of New Zealand and Australian Rugby. With such player migration they will continually struggle to retain their young elite players and risk losing talented athletes.

This way of thinking by these young athletes also challenges traditionally held perceptions that the aspiration of playing for their country is enough to keep young rugby players in New Zealand and Australia. Players comments suggest that national loyalty and the aspiration to represent their country is weighed up against the possibility of securing longer and more lucrative contracts overseas. Rugby players who are competing overseas are generally not considered for national representation. Therefore, players must decide whether to stay in New Zealand or Australia to achieve what has traditionally been seen as the 'highest honour', or move overseas to financially make the most of their time as a tradable commodity. The following statements exemplify the intentions of the players in planning different options:

I could go offshore, 'cause unless they can guarantee you, there's no point sticking around (Andrew, NSW).

Personally if I miss out on Super 12 I'll probably do a stint overseas for 6 months and play NPC next year (Dave, N.Z).

When Dave was asked about a possible location, he replied "France at the moment"

If by the time I am 23 or 24 it is not happening, I will look overseas (Neil, N.Z).

The nature of professional and global rugby as a career with high financial reward has changed the way players view the notion of club, community and nation. The traditional notion of loyalty to a club has diminished as players seek the most lucrative contracts. This brings players into conflict with those in the rugby union who still hold a traditional ideology of loyalty to the club. For example, as a coach, Barry expressed his concern at what he sees as the diminishing loyalty in the professional era:

I've seen a selfishness come into it and loyalty gone out of it. Loyalty is a small part of it now. I think that's also a generation thing as much as a rugby thing... Nowadays they just walk in and say give me more money and if you don't I'm off. I think that's happened with a lot of the players... As I say loyalty, you look at Justin Marshall he's been with the All Blacks but he's only there because he wants to be there, it's not a loyalty thing. If money was more important than living in NZ and playing for the All Blacks then he'd be off. It's not loyalty that's keeping him because they don't have that same sense of loyalty now. It's personal preference. The loyalty is the people like bloody Glen Taylor who didn't make the All Blacks and could have earned a lot more money all over the place doing things, he chose to stay in Northland. Once again that was a bit of loyalty to Northland and a preferential in terms of a lifestyle.

A relatively new issue that has arisen as a result of the progression of professional rugby as a viable career option is the recruitment of young athletes targeted by club talent scouts whilst they are still at school. A number of the researched athletes noted that because rugby is now seen as a career option, younger talented players, generally at school level, are now starting to identify with a future as a rugby player and are focusing their energies, even before leaving school, on making rugby their career. The players interviewed for this study suggested it was a risk for school-aged rugby players to have such a mind-set, as it compromised their final years of school. This phenomenon seemed to be more prevalent in the experiences of the NSW players who had seen it happen to school-aged boys from private schools. For example, in the following quotes NSW player Brett described the mind set involved:

It's the middle of July and they're looking to get contracts organised for next year, and they've still got 6 months where they have to do HSC, but they've got their mind set of 'oh I've got to try to get this deal with the Waratahs or the Broncos'... A lot of the top level GPS players at school have all got player managers... You come out of school and a lot of kids think if they've been good at school, they were like rock stars at school, and that's what they want to do...

...There are a lot of guys that are straight out of school and into that, and a few guys were still doing their HSC. I think it's really tough for those guys to keep focussed on finishing school and all that sort of stuff. I think a lot of them have the mind set of while they were in school and straight out of school that I'm going to be a professional footballer, and they hadn't given one iota of thought to anything else.

These statements have important implications for this study as it highlights the impact that professional rugby is having on young athletes who now view professional rugby as a viable career option. It seems this pattern of young elite athletes considering rugby as a career is set fairly early, to the point where it disrupts their schooling. It also has implications for further research in the area of school-aged athletes and their professional sport aspirations.

#### 8.1.4 *Uncertainty, Insecurity, Intensity and Injury: Players' Concerns of Working in Rugby*

In contrast to their apparent confidence in rugby as a career, these young players displayed considerable anxiety and concern regarding the nature of the work in rugby. These concerns are important when understanding the life and experiences of young elite rugby players and often sets rugby apart from other occupations. Players' concerns focussed around three key areas, which may be encapsulated as the insecure, intense, and uncertain nature of the work. Due to issues such as deselection, injuries and contracts, these young men had limited security in their work, and had a perceived lack of control towards their future lives. For example, NSW player Luke discussed his uncertainty in pursuing a rugby career:

When you go to work you control your own destiny, but with rugby you can't control your own destiny. I think it's more of an understanding. They can say we're going to give you what we can, but it's up to you at the end of the day. There's also the variable that the coach might like you or might not. Whereas when you're working you control your own destiny to a certain extent, whereas here there's so many variables. If you get an injury or the coach doesn't like you but you are a good player. I think that's the only downside to having rugby as a career, you can't really control your own destiny.

Craig summed up his feelings on the subject in only a few words, in which he highlighted the nature of professional rugby for a young elite player: "Just a lot of uncertainty."

One of the concerns for some players was that their contracts are not confirmed for the following season until the end of the current season, leaving them uncertain about their futures. Players were frustrated that they were not able to find out sooner if they will still have a job in rugby for the next few years. New Zealand player Chris described the impact of the uncertainty over contractual arrangements:



If they could work out a better structure for the Super 12, you don't know if you've made a Super 12 team till weeks after the NPC [National Provincial Championships], so you don't know where you stand. If you do get a contract then you know you can make that your career for the next five to six years. So you become more certain in your career. And if you do make it, you can work stuff out to do like correspondence work.

In the above quote Chris stated that if he gets a contract then rugby will be his career for the next five to six years, however, it is very rare that a contract of that length is signed. As in any professional team sport there is a high degree of competition for places on the team. For some, this competition for places provides added uncertainty and insecurity to their careers as rugby players. Recently there has been an increase in rugby league players switching codes to rugby union. This trend reverses developments in the early 1990s where many rugby union players switched codes to play rugby league. Some of the young men in the current study were particularly concerned at the number of rugby league recruits now moving to rugby union and how this could threaten opportunities for them as professional rugby players. NSW player Andrew exemplified this position:

League players, one big thing that's going on now is they're converting the league players, what's that saying to the young players coming through. I got signed for the position of fullback and wing, but they've just signed three league'ies.

An issue for the players was the intensity of the work at the elite level and the level of commitment required to such a physical contact sport. Players were concerned that they had little time or energy for other pursuits, were at risk of burnout, and more prone to injuries. As Dave said: "...I think burnout, I am absolutely stuffed by the time NPC comes around, my body has had it."

Due to the slightly different structure of the teams in New Zealand and NSW, the players were required to commit different amounts of time to rugby. At the time of the study the NSW Academy team players were required at the training facility four days a week from approximately 9am until 4pm. In New Zealand, training or playing commitments varied from three days to six days a week for approximately four to six

hours during these days. The intensity and rigor of this training routine was something that players negatively linked with both playing performance and career longevity. For example Hamish, who played at the Super 12 level in New Zealand suggested:

I think the young guys play a lot of rugby. I think they train them too much. They get tired and wasted by the time they get to the top, they are sort of really knackered then they can't play rugby. That's how I felt.

The intense playing and training schedule also meant players did not get much time away from rugby and were restricted in exploring alternative pursuits. For example, in the following quote, Joe spoke about how the structure and commitment to rugby in New Zealand meant that he could not engage in part-time work:

I've probably played every week since January. I have been training, non-stop since last December. We get November off, but we still do some training. So I've got no time to work. With NPC and Super 12, and the week after Super 12 I had to go away for six weeks with the Colts.

One of the main consequences of the intense nature of the game (not having enough rest or time away from the game) was injuries. Injuries were a major concern for these players and added to their uncertainty and perceived lack of control over their rugby future. New Zealand player Conrad described the impact of a long season of rugby on his body:

...Training for 10 months week in week out, your body needs rest, as much rest as possible. When you're getting hammered every Tuesday and Thursday and then Saturday, you don't get that much time to recover. That's where the injuries come in. I've had a few problems with injuries this year because of lack of rest.

Sustaining an injury was a major concern as it could possibly mean an end to their elite playing days. Injury made the future more uncertain and insecure and sparked some players to contemplate what that might mean for their future. For example, in the

following quote, New Zealand player Dave described how injury is a constant preoccupation because of how it may impact on his playing career:

Injuries is a major concern, it is always in the back of my mind. If I get injured what am I going to do? Going back to that question about the young fellas ... you have to reiterate to them that injuries is a big concern. A lot of them don't think that, two years ago I didn't think about it but you see a lot of young fellas getting injured now... Yeah I've only just woken up to it this year because of the intensity. It is so easy to get injured. You might be able to come back but you might not be the same, someone may have taken your place.

Players who had sustained an injury often spoke of how it had prompted them to think of their future, the uncertainties of professional rugby, and reminded them that their time in the sport was provisional. In the following quote Tevita described how worried he became when told how serious his injury was and how this made him contemplate, for the first time, an alternative career:

When I first did it I was worried, I was scared of what the coaches were going to think when I told them. The first thing I asked the doctor when I did it was how long would I be out for, and how would it affect me? He actually said I wasn't going to make it back for the NPC...I was shattered, I felt like it was the end of the world. This year especially, it was the most important year. It's my last year contracted to [leading NPC Team]. So to get them to give me a contract for the next few years I needed to perform this year.

When Tevita was asked about what was going through his mind at the time of injury he replied:

I just started thinking of what I had behind me and what else I could do other than rugby, if I wasn't to play rugby again.

According to Charmaz (2003, cited in Roderick, 2006), Tevita's initial devastation at his injury is because an athlete's sense of self is invested in their physical body. A bad injury, such as that suffered by Tevita, is a disruption to the self that is equivalent to the trauma of a chronic illness. For the large majority of these athletes, injury was described as a major concern facing their rugby career. This is not surprising given that many of the players did not have any other career options to turn to. For example, Conrad spoke of injury concerns and the impact on his earning capability. "Injury would be top of the list... money in terms of being able to sustain a living."

Compounding the concern of injury, was the fact that the majority of players in this study, competing just below the Super 12 level, did not have any income protection should they get injured. If these young men sustained an injury they would no longer have secure income, or compensation for lost income, leaving them very uncertain about their future. For example, for Chris, his major concern in relation to his career as an elite rugby player was: "Probably just injuries, cause I don't have income protection at the moment."

Due to this lack of income protection some players had decided to play through their injuries, as having time away from the game meant no income and the risk of someone taking their place. However, continuing to play with injuries was a risk in itself to the long-term physical well-being of the player. New Zealand player Neil is one player who decided to play through the injuries and who had: "...a stress fracture in my back and I have always got a hamstring problem."

One of the concerns described by these players was how the intense nature of the game impacted on their motivation towards playing. Players' described how rugby became all-encompassing of their life and the lack of alternatives contributed to feelings of staleness and boredom. For example New Zealand player Rob stated:

You could get pretty stale being a professional rugby player, and all you do is train all day. You don't have any job or anything like that. You could get pretty sick of it, and it is a long season.

For Andrew, a NSW player, the intensity of the time and level of commitment was also having an effect on his enjoyment and 'freshness' for the game:

When you do this it's just like, every morning you drive here and you know exactly where the potholes are in the road.

Various other concerns were raised by players and one of these was that the level of time commitment to rugby may negatively impact on their future careers. This was exemplified by Justin who described his concern of being a 'late career starter':

It can be cut short, you don't know when it's going to finish, and the fact that if it's cut short, unless you really get stuck into your studies or you have something behind you, then you're already starting out there in the career behind the '8' ball. There are blokes my age who have already finished their degree and been working their way up through the real life of business and whatever else up towards the top of business. Say by the time they're 30 they could be up there somewhere and I could just be coming out of a football career and having to start either studying again to get the courses that you need or having to start right at the bottom. So it's a bit of a worry that one.

Justin's awareness and concern of being a late career starter may have been heightened by the fact that he had recently withdrawn from university as he perceived he could not combine education with playing elite rugby. The insecure, intense and uncertain nature of work in professional rugby means rugby players operate in an environment where they are plagued by a perceived lack of control and are subsequently unsure whether they will still have a job after the next game. This section has developed a contradiction in terms of players' responses to their occupation as a rugby player. Players spoke of how work as a professional rugby player was insecure, intense and uncertain, and that they had a perceived lack of control over their future as rugby players and future employment due to factors such as injury and deselection. However, earlier in discussion, many players also spoke confidently about their elite playing life cycle continuing until their mid-thirties, seemingly forgetting about the intense, insecure and uncertain career they later described. It seems some players employed the mentality of

'it won't happen to me' as they provided somewhat contradictory reports of their expectations in the sport.

## **8.2 Athletic Identity and Investment in Rugby**

As much of this chapter has documented, players in this study strongly identified themselves as rugby players, and for all the players, rugby was an important source of identity. Many of the issues associated with the career experiences of the young athletes in this study were linked to the players' identity as rugby players. For example, the players' identities were closely linked to the changing expectations and opportunities that the professionalism and globalisation of rugby presents to players. Players' strong identification with the athletic role also has a relationship with areas such as life after sport, career development and planning, networks and relationships, balance of life and even on-field performance. Therefore, it was important to understand more specifically how these athletes had started to develop their identities around rugby and to what extent these young players had invested their identities in achieving highly in sport.

A large majority of the young men had a strong athletic identity and were heavily invested in their image of themselves as rugby players, often to the exclusion of other ways of thinking or valuing themselves. Players often referred to rugby as their 'life', 'full-time career', and 'number one priority'. The following player statements illustrate the importance that rugby plays in the lives of these young elite athletes and highlights the level of their identity development, that is, the way in which the athlete defines himself to others. Even at this young age, many of the players viewed rugby as their complete life. For example, New Zealand players Richard, Dave and Phil stated: "At the moment rugby is life and everything is based around it." "Yeah first priority, everything in my life revolves around rugby now." "I see myself as a rugby player, but I haven't looked too far ahead."

Players' views of themselves as rugby players were so important that if they were not able to continue playing then this would invoke feelings of despair and loss. For example, in discussing the possible termination of Dave's elite playing days a very

strong indication of the importance of rugby in his life and the extent of his identity investment is evident:

I don't know how I would cope. If it happened next year I would be depressed, because a rugby player is what I wanted to be. It would be like losing a family member, it's been with me so long.

The importance of rugby in identities was also evident in the responses to the questionnaire when players were asked to rank the top three priorities in their life at present. For over half of the players, rugby had the highest ranking, followed by family and education (table 8.12).

Table 8.12 Life priorities (New Zealand)

Priorities in life	1 <sup>st</sup> Priority		2 <sup>nd</sup> Priority		3 <sup>rd</sup> Priority	
	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's
Rugby	59	10	18	3	24	4
Family	24	4	35	6	12	2
Education	6	1	35	6	18	3
Religion	12	2	0	0	6	1
Social life	0	0	6	1	29	5
Friends/Girlfriend	0	0	12	2	0	0
Career	0	0	0	0	6	1

### 8.2.1 *Development of Other Identities, Outside Interests and Balance of Life*

The interview responses indicated that many of the players had few interests outside of rugby that might act to expand their identity or further develop identities other than those constructed around rugby. When the athletes did have spare time, approximately half used it to engage in higher education. Other players utilised their spare time by socialising with friends, relaxing, spending time with their girlfriend and sleeping. The following statements are typical examples of responses to the question of player interests away from rugby and the ways in which these young men utilised their spare time:

Hanging out with friends or going to the movies. Spend time with my girlfriend (Chris, N.Z).

Not much, relax, I don't know. I've got a girlfriend, so that takes up a bit of time. Trying to help out round the house, hang out with mates (Andrew, NSW).

Not much this year (Joe, N.Z).

I usually play golf, I'm pretty keen on golf. Relaxing probably the main thing, playing golf or hanging with your mates (Luke, NSW).

Furthermore, when Dave was asked about what interests he had outside rugby he replied: "Not a lot really."

Dave is the player quoted earlier in this section who said that he would be depressed if he was unable to play rugby again and that it would be like losing a family member. The data suggests that players' identities do not extend far beyond the realms of their participation in elite sport. The issue here is not that Dave or other players are not involved in a large range of activities outside rugby but rather how rugby has become so much part of who they are that when rugby is not available, players are likely to have little else to fall back on. Furthermore, Webb et al, (1998), and Coakley, (1998) argue that the danger of such strong and exclusive identification with the athlete role is that it may result in identity crises and emotional disturbances following termination of athletic participation.

For some players, rugby did not consume their whole life. Over half of the players were undertaking some form of education, and identified themselves as both a rugby player and a student. There was little difference in the proportions of New Zealand and Australian players with regard to those who were undertaking further education. For some players like Richard and Shane, further education was also part of a plan for their life post-rugby:



I'm training to be a Rugby Development Officer with [leading NPC rugby team]. I did a certificate in sports coaching last year (Richard, N.Z).

I study over in [provincial tertiary provider]. I study sports fitness. Doing two papers this semester (Shane, N.Z).

When discussing with players issues associated with life outside of rugby, the notion of balance of life was often referred to. Those players who were engaged in pursuits and interests outside of rugby spoke of the importance and benefits of having a balance in their lives. This was particularly evident with those players that were currently involved in either education or work, who valued having an 'outlet' from rugby. These athletes spoke of the benefits associated with engaging in an activity that extended them beyond just playing elite rugby and helped enhance enjoyment and relieve the monotony that was earlier referred to as a concern by some players. For example, New Zealand player Conrad, who was one of only three players engaged in part-time work, stated:

Oh definitely, you need some kind of break of some sort. At the end you get a bit sick of training, sick of playing.

This was confirmed by, Neil, Tevita and Justin who at the time of the study were all either engaged in education or part-time work:

Else the rugby could get too much for you. If you are thinking about it 24/7 by the time the game comes you're a zombie (Neil, N.Z).

You can't just be of one mind and narrow, where everything is rugby, because for me I'd probably get sick and tired of rugby and get bored. Whereas if you've got something outside of rugby, then you actually look forward to playing rugby and you enjoy it more (Tevita, N.Z)

Yeah, I think whether it be studying or work it's really important to have something else, cause if it was just rugby full-time I think you'd get over that pretty quickly as well (Justin, NSW).

In the following quote New Zealand player Shane suggested that a balance of life even assists with his on-field performance:

It's important, it helps you out with rugby, keeps you open-minded. Balance of life helps me in my rugby by keeping a healthy mind, and having a healthy mind I feel I can think quicker on the field.

Despite the acknowledged benefits, many players found it difficult to achieve a balance of life, perceiving their investment in rugby as all-encompassing of their life and identity, leaving little time to explore other pursuits such as education or work. However, this is somewhat contradicted by the questionnaire results which showed that the majority of New Zealand players committed 21 or fewer hours per week to rugby, arguably leaving them enough time to study part-time or engage in part-time work. In spite of this, many stated they would not be able to combine education or work with rugby. The following quotes from New Zealand players Joe, Shane and Craig are typical examples of responses, noting the perceived difficulty many players had in achieving a balanced life:

I try to have a bit of a balance, because I'm still young, I haven't been a professional for that long, I'm still trying to get that balance and am still working at what that balance will be (Joe).

It's pretty hard out 'cause of NPC as well, don't really get much time to go to lectures (Shane).

I think rugby takes up too much time (Craig).

Other players spoke of how a balance can be achieved if they are prepared to work hard. For example New Zealand player Neil stated:

I would like more of a balance but I guess I could get that if I was prepared to work harder with my University work.

To further understand the importance these players placed on a balance of life and a life outside of rugby, they were provided with a hypothetical scenario. The scenario was similar to a position they may have been in themselves as they neared the end of high school. Players were asked how they perceived talented young rugby players, such as school leavers, should structure their up-and-coming rugby life cycle if they made it to the elite level. Contrary to the way they organised their own lives, most players suggested that the theoretical young athlete should do his best to obtain a balance of life and an identity that is not exclusively defined by rugby. Players may have stressed this point because they acknowledge its importance but found it difficult to undertake and attain for themselves. For example, the following quotes are typical of the kind of advice suggested about the importance of having a life outside rugby. However, two of the following three players were not currently engaged in any education, work or any external pursuit:

...When you're a young fella you're always keen to play rugby, then you probably get to 20 and you've had enough or you at least want a break. You definitely need a balanced lifestyle that is what I would recommend to a young fella (Dave, N.Z).

It's a really good career if you're heading down that way, but make sure you've got something outside of rugby (Chris, N.Z).

I would tell them that they need to get a balance and if they can develop other skills (Peter, N.Z).

In summary, the young players in this study were heavily invested in the image of themselves as rugby players, often to the exclusion of other ways of thinking or valuing themselves. Many players did not extend themselves in pursuits outside of rugby that might prepare them for a life post-rugby. In many cases players filled their spare time by playing golf, spending time with friends/girlfriends and relaxing. Players who were engaged in education or part-time work outside rugby spoke of the benefits of this, citing the positive impact on their on-field performance and their increased motivation to compete. The notion of having a balanced lifestyle, where outside pursuits could co-exist alongside elite rugby, was acknowledged as very important but difficult to obtain

due to the perceived time and energy commitment to rugby. Some players' views here were contradicted by those of their team-mates, who through what seemed to be effective time-management and maturity, were able to organise their lives to balance education or work and rugby.

### **8.3 Game Over: Future Athletic Termination and Transition**

One of the major issues and indeed realities of participation in professional rugby is the inevitability that the athlete's career will be terminated at some stage, usually earlier rather than later. When the issue of athletic termination was raised with the players, it appeared to be a 'taboo' subject, one that they often appeared uncomfortable discussing. When players were asked about their possible future outside rugby, the majority of players suggested that they were under-prepared for the termination of their elite playing days and were unsure how they would cope during the transition process. Players described identity issues, finding an alternative career and coming to terms with the fact that they will not play elite rugby again as the major difficulties they would face upon athletic termination. For example, Peter, Conrad and Luke highlighted these perceived difficulties.

...I would also probably be a bit lost; rugby has always been there, it's always been a big commitment I've had (Peter, N.Z).

I don't have much of an education unfortunately so that's going to be a problem. Possibly even getting a decent job to be honest with you. I've got this job at the moment, but say if I left to focus on my rugby, then next thing I blow my knee out and they don't want me anymore, then what do I do? (Conrad, N.Z).

I think it would be disappointing, if it's one of those injuries that stops you from playing rugby and pretty much ends your career, I think it would be disappointing not able to realise that at the end of the day I've done everything possible and you're satisfied... With an injury you might not realise your true ability. It would be disappointing (Luke, NSW).

Other researched players had simply not thought of the possibility of their elite rugby days ending, and as a result were not prepared for such an event despite its inevitability. For example, when New Zealand players Troy and Chris were asked about their preparation for the possibility that their rugby playing days might be terminated they replied: “Not too prepared, it would hit me unexpected, ‘cause I'm not thinking about it” and “Well under-prepared.” In the following quote, Neil showed a degree of uncertainty but also a carefree attitude when asked what he might do should his elite playing days suddenly end.

I don't know really, I would have to hit my studies hard I guess. Probably just fish and drink beer is probably about me.

Furthermore, when NSW player Manu was asked about his future plans should his playing days be terminated he stated: “Well I wouldn’t have any back-up at all.” When asked if that concerns him he replied: “It does a little bit, yeah.”

Player responses in this area are further supported from the questionnaire results where only 41% of athletes indicated that they would be prepared for the termination of their athletic career (table 8.13).

Table 8.13 Player’s responses to their adequate preparation for athletic termination (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No's
Strongly disagree	18	3
Disagree	12	2
Don't know	29	5
Agree	35	6
Strongly agree	6	1

Players displayed a certain degree of uncertainty when discussing the termination of their elite playing days, indicating that many had not given much thought to this area. This is further illustrated by the results of the questionnaire where over half of players indicated that they have not thought about their rugby career ending (table 8.14).

Table 8.14 Player’s responses to thinking about the end of their rugby career (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No’s
Strongly disagree	47	8
Disagree	6	1
Don’t know	6	1
Agree	35	6
Strongly agree	6	1

Only three players stated that they would be prepared for such an event and could return to non-playing roles with little difficulty. Perhaps not surprisingly, these players were the only ones engaged, or recently engaged in part-time work in an industry they saw as a career option, therefore providing them with something to ‘fall back on’ should their rugby career be terminated. This suggests that those athletes with alternative career options may feel more prepared to deal with the termination and transition out of their athletic career. For example Conrad stated:

I think I’m quite prepared. It’s just the reality. Pretty much every rugby player should think of these things, cause you don’t know what’s going to happen next game. Last week a guy fractured his spleen, quickly gone in one tackle. I think we need to stop using our age as an excuse, we’ve got to think pretty quickly.

NSW player Brett, who was established in a professional work career but recently left to focus on rugby, is still actively involved in his former workplace and illustrated his confidence in adapting to the suddenness of career termination due to his alternative career option: “100 percent I’d get my job back next week.”

New Zealand player Hamish, who also works part-time as a builder said that he would be happy making the transition from rugby as: “For me I have always wanted to be like a normal person and work the long hours.”

The data suggest that the majority of these young men had not given thought to the possibility of their elite playing days ending, and as a result were unprepared for the inevitable termination and transition process. Players found this a problematic subject to discuss, as they perceived it would be a difficult time in their lives. It might be assumed that the previous talk of the uncertain and insecure nature of the occupation would prompt athletes to give thought to, and prepare for, the possibility that they might not be playing professional rugby next week, month or year. However, responses from both the interview and questionnaire suggest that this is not the case, many players suggesting they 'have no back-up' should they be unable to play rugby. There were only a few players in this cohort who appear well-placed to make the transition out of elite rugby. Only those players who were engaged in part-time work which they viewed as a career option, indicated that they felt prepared should their elite playing days be terminated.

#### **8.4 Conclusion**

This chapter began by introducing player perspectives on what it is like to be a young elite rugby player in New Zealand and NSW. Players spoke of how they were recruited and the type of contract they were offered to be part of an academy team. Players also spoke of the perceived need to forego other pursuits such as education or work to commit to rugby. Many athletes described how they deferred or dropped out of university to pursue their aspiration of gaining a more lucrative contract with a Super 12 rugby team. It became evident through the data that these young men now considered rugby as their career; for the majority it was their first and only career or career option, one in which they would relocate and pursue overseas if they could not 'make it' in their home country. Increasingly, recruitment is extending to talented young men still in school who then focus their energies on achieving rugby contracts often to the detriment of their final years of secondary schooling.

Following this, players spoke of the insecure, intense and uncertain nature of professional rugby, reinforcing the frailties of this career choice which is often plagued by injury and deselection. However, the realities of a rugby career seemed to escape many players as the majority gave unrealistic predictions of their future career length in

rugby, many suggesting they would play professional rugby into their mid-thirties. This lack of awareness raised issues that were explored when discussing the possible sudden termination and transition of their elite playing days. Players spoke of their general lack of preparation for the end of their playing days and for many it was evident that they had not given any thought to this inevitable stage of their playing career.

Despite acknowledging the uncertainties and insecurities of rugby the majority of players spoke of rugby as their career, their life and their number one priority. It became evident that many players were heavily invested in the image of themselves as rugby players, often to the exclusion of other ways of thinking of, or valuing themselves. It seems that some players did little to extend their identity outside of rugby as they spent spare time socialising, relaxing and spending time with girlfriends. Others, however, were enrolled in education or undertaking some employment or work experience. Many athletes spoke of the importance of 'having something outside of rugby' and a balance of life, discussing the numerous benefits involved. However, at the same time players discussed the difficulty in obtaining such a balance. The following chapter explores similar themes as those covered in this section but does so from the perspective of coaches and management staff in rugby and in the wider sports industry. In many cases coaches and management challenged players' optimistic views of a life in rugby, yet agree with players' perspectives that they are generally unprepared for anything else.



## CHAPTER NINE

### TALKING TO COACHES AND MANAGEMENT FROM RUGBY AND THE WIDER SPORTS INDUSTRY: PERSPECTIVES ON PROFESSIONAL RUGBY.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the perceptions of coaching and management staff on professional rugby and its young elite competitors. Coaching and management staff provided a broader understanding of, and different perspectives on, the issues and experiences discussed by young players in the previous chapter. Perspectives were gathered through interviews with coaching and management staff from rugby and the wider sports industry. This chapter follows a similar thematic structure as the previous chapter and engages in areas such as issues and consequences associated with the nature of work in professional sport, where coaches and management challenge young elite rugby players' views and the realities of a career in professional rugby. Coaches and management discuss the growing issue of school leavers pursuing rugby as a career option and the ensuing consequences. Following this, the aspect of diminishing life-skills of players is explored along with the identity formation and investment of athletes in rugby. This chapter concludes with coaches' and managements' perspectives on athletes' future termination and transition.

#### 9.1 Introduction to Participants

This group of participants included those people who worked most closely with the athletes both within rugby and in the wider sports industry. These individuals also played a large role in the facilitation and development of various career development and planning programs that were available to the athletes. These participants (table 9.1) included a coach from one of the two participating teams, three Professional Development Managers or Career Counsellors from both New Zealand and NSW,

including one who is a retired professional rugby player, two high ranking members of management from both the New Zealand and Australian Rugby Union Players' Association, and one high-ranking member of management from the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU). The researcher also had the opportunity to interview two former elite coaches from the wider sports industry. They were an ex-premiership winning coach from the Australian Football League (AFL), and an ex-assistant coach and welfare manager of a National Rugby League (NRL) Team. This provided perspectives from those sports with a longer involvement in professionalism, who have already experienced many of the issues facing the recently professional sport of rugby.

Table 9.1 Coaching and Management Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Occupation	Job Description
Margaret	Career Counsellor	Provide career and education services to players, assist with personal planning and balance of life
Greg	Professional Development Manager	Provide career and education services to players, assist with personal planning and balance of life
Jeff	Ex-Assistant Coach and Welfare Manager of a Rugby League team (NRL)	Assistant Coach and assist athletes with their life off the field
Brendan	Professional Development Manager and retired professional rugby player	Provide career and education services to players, assist with personal planning and balance of life
Barry	Coach of one of two researched teams	Senior Coach of Rugby Team
Murray	Rugby Union Players Association	Collective bargaining. Oversees program implementation for athletes
Don	Rugby Union Players Association	Collective bargaining. Oversees program implementation for athletes
Ken	Ex-AFL Premiership winning coach	Senior coach of AFL team

## 9.2 Issues and Consequences Associated with a Career in Professional Rugby

The coaches and management interviewed for this study spoke of a number of issues relating to young men engaging in the work of professional rugby. One of the major issues they identified was the fact that young men are often recruited straight out of

school, or for some, whilst still at school. As a result, they perceived this was having a negative effect on the education of these young men who in some cases had sacrificed basic education to pursue a rugby career. Coaches and management spoke of the issue of professional rugby being a short-term insecure occupation where few players actually 'make it' and regard this as an area that is not often understood by the young elite players. They challenged players' perceptions of a career in rugby and suggested that young players are attracted by the high salaries and associated fame, but show a lack of awareness and have optimistic predictions of a future in rugby. A further issue raised by coaches and management was that elite rugby operates in a protective and insular environment, where many basic tasks are being done for players. It was suggested that such an environment was detrimental to the development of life-skills of young rugby players. Many of the issues described by coaches and management in rugby were confirmed by those participants from AFL and rugby league suggesting that rugby is dealing with many of the issues that other professional sports have also encountered. This presents rugby with an opportunity to learn from those sports that have been professional for longer in regards to managing such issues.

### *9.2.1 From School Uniform to Rugby Stripes*

Many of the rugby coaches and management interviewed in this study were particularly concerned with the trend of young men, who whilst still at school, were pursuing a professional rugby career. From the perspective of coaches and management, the targeting of school-aged athletes became a problem. As Don, a management member of the Rugby Union Players' Association, explained, this means that students commit much of their time and energies to achieving a rugby contract and as a result their school grades suffer:

A lot of things are changing. Our Queensland adviser is already identifying that the younger players coming out of private schools who have got rugby as a focus is that their marks are dropping off. The parents are sending them to a private school so that they get a really good education and they play rugby as well. So if we want our kids to have a chance in rugby we'll send them there. But what's happening is these kids are really focusing on rugby

because it's a really good private school program and their marks are dropping.

Some coaches and management suggested that young men are attracted to rugby as a career option due to the financial rewards associated with it. For example Brendan, a Professional Development Manager, described his experiences with young players:

...players in sixth and seventh form [aged 16-18 years] or the people that were talented in school could actually genuinely see rugby as a career option and automatically associated with that, is that rugby is reasonably well remunerated for what you do.

Brendan went on to state:

It is like getting a carrot waved in front of you; because of the academy structure it's starting to target players at a younger and younger age to channel them towards rugby. For the younger players, it's a real opportunity for them and they chase it, which is fair enough, which is what you want, you want the best to be chasing it. But I'm not sure if whether other things may fall by the wayside in that respect.

For some management staff, it was the fact that players had entered rugby straight from school and had known little else that contributed to their concern. They showed particular concern for the athlete who leaves school and for whom their first and only career is professional rugby. For example, Don described how the structure of players' lives has changed in the years following professionalism:

Most of our senior players, the Gregans, Roffs, Mathew Burke. There's quite a lot of players, like those players, who were playing before '96 as well. They were doing something else. Most of our Wallabies have either completed studies or are well on the way to completing their studies. The real danger now is that younger players leaving school their first and only career is as a professional athlete. That's where the difference is.

A further concern regarding school-aged youth pursuing professional rugby was that physically their bodies are often not ready for the associated demands. In addition, some of the coaches and management suggested that these young athletes use performance-enhancing drugs to 'build themselves up' to be more physically competitive. For example Don claimed that:

There is a very high incidence of the use of creatine phosphate in young kids in high school. Where their bodies are growing disproportionately in areas where they get on the creatine and they're pumping weights so they can be on the front row and their bodies aren't ready for it. There is probably a higher level of incidence in some having illegal drugs too. Steroids in younger players in private schools 'cause they want to be a professional rugby player.

The wider sports industry faced similar issues as rugby regarding school-aged athletes, with cases of young elite AFL footballers foregoing their school-work to play professional football. It seems that some clubs are more concerned with performance and results, with little regard for the athletes' education or welfare. As a former premiership winning AFL coach, Ken was critical of a structure that places performance ahead of high-school education:

Coming back to [a leading AFL club] last year as a football director, they allowed a young bloke the number one draft choice in the country half-way through his VCE when he gets drafted at 17s. This is a disaster our system, the way it works. I have never let a single player not complete their VCE. [Leading AFL player] is now playing great footy at the Carlton Football Club. I said '[leading AFL player] I'm not going to play ya son. I am absolutely obligated to get you to pass your VCE. You're going back to school and will play a few games along the way. If you go back to school, I'll consider you. If you're good enough you'll get a game. If you don't go back to school, I'm not going to play you until next year.' He had to have it one way or the other. He went back against everybody's wishes and actually passed his VCE. I'm very proud of him. I'm more proud of him

than the fact that he kicked six or seven goals in the weekend. He actually went back when he didn't want to.

In contrast, Ken described the consequences for a player when a club, faced with a similar issue of a player leaving school to play professional football, took the opposite approach:

I mean [AFL player] comes number one draft at 17, and this club, when he said 'I don't want to go to school anymore', this club said 'oh, it's okay just play footy.' The kid is still struggling now to make the grade. He just busted his thumb in the weekend so that's going to put him back again. He's been injured since he came here, he's an 18 year old going on 19. He's hardly played three games in a row. He's the very person that needs to get his head into something else.

Like rugby and AFL, rugby league also has talented young athletes foregoing their school-work to focus on achieving in sport. In the following quote, Jeff discussed how his club deals with this matter, while he viewed it as an issue that needs particular attention:

We actually, and my role as coaching development manager, I ask for school reports on a regular basis. I feel very, very strongly about that. We do our best to make sure that school doesn't get pushed into second place by these boys.

Management and coaches acknowledged that the increase in young men leaving school in pursuit of a career in professional football is a 'real danger' and cited a reduction in school grades and an increase in the use of performance enhancing drugs as consequences of this. Some clubs in AFL and rugby league have implemented measures to address this issue, including monitoring of school grades and refusing to play players who have not passed their VCE. Interviews with coaches and management in New Zealand and NSW suggest that there were no such measures to address the issue of young men leaving school to pursue a career in rugby.

### 9.2.2 *A Career in Professional Rugby: Players' Realities Challenged*

Associated with concern over the recruiting of school age or school leavers to rugby, the coaches and management were concerned that many young athletes did not have a good understanding or awareness of the hard realities of professional rugby. Unlike the players in Chapter Eight, their estimations of the length of rugby-playing careers were considerably shorter. Coaches and management recognised that players often hold unrealistic predictions of the future length of their professional rugby careers. For example, Professional Development Manager Greg stated:

A lot of the times we met with these guys first up, especially when they were first or second year in there; you say to them how long do you think you want to play professional rugby for? They say 10 years. The reality is for most of them it's three seasons or less. We've got some figures from the NZRU if you look at all people who have ever played Super 12, that includes from 1996 all the way up till now. If you take out the guys who played in the last Super 12, 72 percent of all players who were involved in the Super 12 played for three seasons or less.

A number of the management staff suggested that this optimistic view was more evident in the younger players than the older players. The younger players had only ever experienced rugby in its professional format, whereas the older players had a career before professional rugby, and as a result they had different expectations of rugby as a long-term career. For example, Brendan described his perception of the difference between younger and older elite players:

I think particularly at the moment, it [rugby] is still in that transition phase where there is still a number of players involved in professional rugby that were amateur before and I think they are a different kettle of fish, generally speaking, than what the current younger players who have only ever known professional rugby. I think there is one quote somewhere about Christian Cullen [an elite rugby player] saying 'yeah, yeah I've had a job before, I used to do a paper round', whereas there is still a degree of players that have

worked prior to being professional and know what it takes to survive. There is still some of those and I think their attitude and outlook on it is different, that they know that they have had a fantastic opportunity and predominantly the majority of them are trying to maximise that opportunity presented to them. Whereas probably the players that are coming through, the school leavers of three or four years ago have seen that there is an opportunity for a genuine career option in professional sport. And they're the ones that are saying 'yeah a life in rugby, no problem at all'. At 24 or 25 there is some other guy knocking on the door and his form is not as good, and coaches change and that sort of stuff and the opportunity starts to go.

Although acknowledging that much of the difference between the older and younger players lies with the evolution from amateurism to professionalism, Brendan also seemed to blame the young players, suggesting their attitude towards rugby was part of the reason they held optimistic hopes of a life in elite rugby:

They [older players] understand and accept as well that being a professional sports person has provided them with that unique opportunity and it's not theirs as of right. A lot of the younger players might be more of the attitude that, that is theirs as of right and I'm being paid to do what I do, it's mine as of right. I think it's a change of thought processes and that leads them to taking it for granted, becoming apathetical, then after three years their career just goes downhill. Their first year of fantastic football, second year of losing, third year which is good but they don't progress or move on. As I say it's the whole mind set that they just don't develop at a younger age now, having seen professional sport and professional rugby and the opportunities provided.

Brendan went on to suggest that this unrealistic attitude demonstrated by players also extended to those players who relocated their career overseas:

I was talking to a guy who works with an Italian team. They've got quite a high number of New Zealanders that come over to the team through various connections. He always says, whenever you talk to a New Zealander the



first thing about being professional is oh my god I'm rich, I'm never going to have to work again.

Some of the management staff that worked most closely with the players in a development role talked about how players did not understand the 'cut throat business' of rugby where players can lose their livelihood in the space of a day. They described the players as demonstrating naivety when they suggest they may be 'set for life' by playing professional rugby. In contrast to the optimism of players in Chapter Eight describing their future career, Brendan described his perception of rugby as a career:

In regards to professional sport it's quite a cut throat business, where your contract is often only year to year because remuneration is based on selection, so if you're not in a Super 12 side, you're not necessarily getting paid...That's the thing, part of it is providing a little bit of a reality check, like geez you've done well and you're going to get paid this but did you know that next year that you could possibly not be paid that or nothing or in four years time it will be gone and all you'll have left is what you've done in those four years previous. It takes a lot of discipline, organisation, determination and management to be professional for a period of time.

Murray, a senior member of management in the Rugby Union Players Association, confirmed this:

Selection is pretty cut throat in New Zealand, it relates back to the contract thing, you get paid for when you are selected. A lot of New Zealanders don't recognise that. A player might be told you're on a four year contract, it's irrelevant if you don't get selected in Super 12, you can actually earn zilch. So you can go from a reasonable income one day, you're not selected in Super 12 when they name the team in November, you can be on zero the next. If you think of having two or three kids at home and a mortgage on your house, very anxious and stressful times.

The short-term, insecure nature of professional sport is also reflected in the wider sports industry. Similar statistics to those provided by Greg earlier, regarding the length of a

rugby career, were also provided by former AFL Premiership winning coach Ken, in terms of the reality of a young elite player achieving a career as an AFL player:

In this country, season before last season, 1,721 kids around Australia registered for the National draft. That's a lot of kids. When the draft came, 74 were picked. There are a few smashed dreams for a start. 74 out of 1,700 [4%] and if the average continues less than 20 (19.8) will have a 50+ game career. That's how tough it is.

Coaches' and managements' observations of the young men in the clubs and organisations confirmed the findings reported in the previous chapter, that these young men were heavily invested in the image of themselves as rugby players, with a long and lucrative career ahead of them. The remuneration and satisfaction of being engaged in elite rugby meant that it was often difficult for management and coaches to convince players that this may not be a long-term status and to think beyond their potential rugby career. For example, as a senior member of the Rugby Union Players' Association, Don provided his perception of young players, which confirms the comments received from players:

We see young athletes as they think they're bullet proof. A lot of young players are like 'I don't need this [career development and educational pursuits] because I've got a 10 year career and so much money in the bank'

Don went on to describe the young men who forego career development and post-rugby planning and focus all their energies on achieving in rugby as 'casualties':

The real battle for us, these programs are more important for the young under 21 player who spends the best career development years of his life pursuing a rugby career. There would be a lot of 23 year olds out there who would have spent the last six years (17-23) trying to be a professional rugby player and that's it. Those players are the real casualties in professional sport no matter what the sport is.

Brendan confirmed Don's statements, and from a New Zealand perspective described the difficulty of getting young players to think beyond their perception of rugby as a long-term career:

Trying to get players to think five or six years down the track is quite difficult, because if I sat with a professional player and said if you do this course this many hours a week for the next six years of your life, you'll get a degree. It's like nah! It's a hard enough concept for most people to get over. Quite often with a professional player you're being well remunerated, it's a difficult hurdle to get over.

Coaches and management confirmed the conclusions arrived at in the previous chapter regarding the uncertainty of rugby as a career and players' investment of themselves as rugby players. Coaches and management were critical of the way the young players viewed their potential career in rugby, and at times blamed these young men for having optimistic views of their rugby playing future. The perception held by coaches and management was that players were unrealistic in their career predictions and had little awareness of the actual realities of a professional rugby career. Coaches and management provided realities of their own on the length of a playing career, which challenged those proposed by players. The differing views of rugby as a career between the older, more senior players, was also discussed as an issue that has arisen due to the relatively recent rise of rugby to professionalism, suggesting that it is difficult to convince these young men to think beyond a career in rugby.

### *9.2.3 Protecting the Young: The Issue of Diminishing Life-skills*

The move of rugby from amateur to professional status has shifted the setting in which athletes train and compete from a self-sufficient environment to a more protective and paternalistic environment where many fundamental life tasks are being done for the players. From the point of view of Margaret, a career counsellor, this protective environment inhibits the athletes' capacity for self-sufficiency and basic life-skills:

I think what is more the issue is that this [professional rugby] can be a very protective environment, and I don't specifically mean [Super 14 Team] I mean rugby in general and any professional sport can be a very protective environment.

Later in the interview Margaret went on to state:

What I mean is life-skills, some of the players' life-skills are really lacking, how to pay bills, even how to mail things, how to submit forms, how to enquire about things over the telephone, because they're used to having it all done for them. So sometimes the system of professional sport can be to their detriment, in terms of not getting them to be self-sufficient enough. Because when they go on tour it's all there, not even when they go on tour, it's all laid out. Self-sufficiency is something that really needs to be encouraged... I really do believe that the life-skills area is a big one and once again coming back to the protection, because they're so protected here.

Failure to develop these basic life-skills whilst playing elite rugby can have significant consequences for the end of the players' competitive career in rugby. For example, in the following quote, Greg, a Professional Development Manager points out that without necessary life-skills players will 'fall by the wayside':

At the end of the day, if they get injured, or they lose their form they get dropped and they've lost their contract, and they've got no skills because everything has been done for them. They just fall by the wayside some of them, some of them won't; if they've got no skills it's a struggle.

Due to many basic tasks being done for the players, some coaches and managers pointed to the risk that players may develop a sense of entitlement, where they come to expect certain preferential treatment and have high expectations of what they should be entitled to as elite rugby players. For example, Barry recounted a personal experience as a coach, of this attitude amongst players:

We do team trips; the first year we went up North, the second year we went out West to [New Zealand town]. We stayed in the old hotel above the pub in town, and they were in shared rooms and some of the rooms didn't have T.V. I remember one of the boys coming up saying 'we've been ripped off, there's no T.V in the room' we just started laughing, cause the expectation was free gear, free accommodation, T.V in every room, the whole nine yards. We had to explain that's not what it's all about.

From the point of view of Professional Development manager Greg, it seems that this protective environment has been created by some management and coaching staff who have the closest contact with players:

So the idea is to empower them to take some sense of self-responsibility for their actions outside of rugby. Sometimes I think that there are people involved in the rugby system, franchises and in teams that will do too much for the players. Nurse them a bit too much.

Some coaches and management interviewed for the study suggested that one way to get players to become more self-sufficient and take responsibility for themselves and their actions is to remove the protective environment that has been developed by those who work within rugby. For example, Barry stated:

To me, I'm almost bordering on we don't want to 'mollycoddle' them too much. They've got to stand on their own two feet at some stage in their life. Sooner or later they've got to stand up and fight for themselves. Very few of the players do that.

As rugby has moved into the professional era there has been a shift to a more protective environment where many fundamental tasks are being done for, rather than by, the young elite players. Such an environment, which has largely been constructed by many of the coaches and management who work most closely with the players, has hindered the development of basic life-skills. Without basic life-skills, coaches and management identified that players would not become self-sufficient and will also face difficulty upon retirement from rugby.

### **9.3 Identity Formation and Investment in Rugby: Extending Athletes' Identity Through a Balance of Life**

This section focuses on coaches' and managements' perceptions of players' identities, more specifically the notion of players having a balance of life and an identity that extends beyond their athletic identity. The results from players suggest that these young men had a strong athletic identity and alternative pursuits were often compromised while they focused solely on achieving in rugby. Coaches and managers interviewed for this study had also observed this in their interactions with players. For example, when asked if players had an identity outside of rugby Brendan replied: "Predominantly no, I would say no to the large majority."

Coaches and management overwhelmingly supported the idea that athletes should have a 'balance of life' and an identity external to that constructed by sport. They spoke of the benefits associated with this, such as improved athletic performance and increased options for a life after sport. Furthermore, possible consequences were highlighted should this not be achieved such as boredom, lack of life-skills and restricted development outside of rugby. Coaches and management in the wider sports industry also described some of the programs they offered to assist in identity extension and balance of life.

The issue of a narrow identity was seen as particularly pertinent for the current cohort of elite young rugby players who had not yet achieved a Super 12 contract. Coaches and management confirmed that many of these young men focus all their energies on achieving in rugby possibly to the detriment of other pursuits. For example, Brendan suggested:

Some of them do [focus all energies on rugby] definitely, I find that's definitely true for some of the guys who are on the fringes... NPC players who haven't made the Super 12. I know a number who are virtually hanging out to get a Super 12 contract and they simply train and do nothing else, focusing all their energies on rugby.

Coaches and management suggested that one of the reasons some players come to have an identity defined primarily by rugby is that they have 'known nothing else'. For example, Career Counsellor Margaret linked this to their recruitment from school:

We've got players in the squad who know nothing else. They've come straight from school into rugby league and then straight from league into here. For them it's their life, it's their career life, 'this is my job', and they make very good money doing it.

Similar to the studies that found that those athletes who have an identity external to sport are less likely to experience an identity crisis when they retire (Webb et al, 1998; Coakley, 1998), coaches and management here also perceived that players who had something meaningful in their life outside sport would have better preparation for life after sport. Coaches and management also alluded to the consequences of athletes not managing this part of their life. They gave examples of wider post-sport problems, such as gambling and 'womanising', that may be a result of athletes not having something else to focus their energies into after leaving professional sport. In this case, former AFL coach Ken argued for work placement or involvement in community programs to address the issue:

You need players to study or have a work placement or work in one of the many terrific community programs now being offered which assist disadvantaged or disabled people. Players can do a terrific job in that. There is no doubt that if they do work in those areas that they'll have far better preparation for life after sport... I think the important thing in life after footy is not so much that you're remunerated well but you've got something constructive and satisfying to do in your life, if you're smart as a footballer. These young blokes don't think about it, it all comes to an end and they haven't thought about it. They've got a few bucks in the bank 'but what am I going to do?' They become the blokes that are hanging around the pubs and chasing the women and gambling all their worldly life away.

Drawing on player interviews and questionnaires in Chapter Eight, it was also evident that the majority of the young men did not have a balance of life and their identity did not extend much beyond the realm of rugby. Coaches and management spoke of the dangers of athletes having a narrow identity and suggested that players who continue like this are 'at risk', leaving themselves with little options for the future and prone to burnout. All of the participants in this aspect of the study spoke of the importance of a balance of life for elite young athletes. For example, Professional Development Manager Greg suggested:

I don't think their main focus has to be rugby, there are no guarantees that they're going to make it. Sure they've got to put a certain amount of time aside to focus on their rugby and do the things that are going to get them to where they want to be, but if they forego everything else and just focus on rugby they're at risk I believe. Because if they don't make it they've got nothing else. So I think it's very very important for those guys to continue with their education or continue with their work whatever that happens to be, then do whatever's required. The last thing you want them to be is burnt out before they make it. It's very very important I believe for them to maintain their relationships, their jobs, their career paths or their education, it's crucial... Keep your options open. Continue with your education. Continue with work if you've got a job or a career. Continue with those things. Make sure that you develop an identity outside of rugby. That's going to help you be a better player. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

Although Greg suggested that players need to continue with their jobs and education, results from players reported in the previous chapter suggest that this was not necessarily possible. For example, NSW players were required to commit to rugby five days a week from 9am through to 4pm and spoke of having to withdraw from university to participate in elite rugby.

As previously discussed, professional rugby is a short-term insecure occupation, however, many players in the current study did not illustrate an understanding of this and had unrealistic predictions of their future involvement at an elite level. Coaches



and management perceived that this attitude increases the importance for players to have a balance of life and outside interests away from rugby. For example Greg suggested:

In terms of when you're young and bullet proof, well they think they're bullet proof, they think this is going to last for 10 years. But for most of them it's not. When you say that to somebody it's like 'ok, for most it's not, but that's not going to happen to me.' That's why it's doubly important for them to have outside interests. So if it doesn't happen for you what are you going to do? The ironic thing about that is that if they have got outside interests as an insurance policy and if they've got a balance they're probably going to be better performing which will increase the likelihood that they are able to stay in the system for a lot longer.

In addition to the perceived importance of an expanded identity and balance of life for areas such as life after sport and increased holistic and personal development, there was unanimous agreement that athletes perform better when they have alternative pursuits that they are constructively committing their time to outside of rugby. There may be a number of reasons for this increase in performance, one may be because it keeps athletes 'fresh', as some players spoke of how only participating in rugby may make them bored with, and stale of rugby. From a rugby league point of view, Jeff explained the improved performance in the following way:

I think in answer to the playing performance just for the fact that they're not totally bored with themselves and so forth and more active and they have an activity and a worthwhile activity away from the game of rugby league... I think the increased self-esteem is very, very important for these young guys... I think their form was being affected to a greater degree too. I think an active mind is very, very important for them you know.

From a rugby point of view, Greg, Margaret and Brendan spoke of how a balance of life is linked to playing performance:

They think that because these guys are getting paid full-time, some people think that they should be engaged in rugby full-time in terms of nine to five. The next generation is starting to realise that you need to give these guys time off. You need to give them a life outside of rugby because the philosophy then is that if they have a balance in their life and they've got their life outside of rugby sorted, then when they come to training, to games, they can focus more fully on playing and it actually makes them a better performer (Greg, Professional Development Manager).

It's really hard to measure in the intangibles like whether having a balance outside of rugby enhances on-field performance, but undoubtedly it does. There is that rare entity of a player who doesn't do anything else outside rugby and pours everything into their playing career and makes it. There's that rare entity but it is rare (Margaret, Career Counsellor).

There is a general consensus that if players are organised and well balanced off the field then it's going to have a direct influence on their consistent performance on the field.... Top coaches accept that players well organised and balanced and doing things outside of rugby are going to be consistently better performing on the field (Brendan, Professional Development Manager).

There was uniformity amongst the responses of coaches and management on the benefits of players having a balance of life, yet there was little provided as to why this concept was not part of the structure of elite rugby.

There was a concern from some coaches and management that players were not using their time constructively to engage in other experiences outside sport that may assist them in a balance of life. From earlier results, which suggested that the majority of New Zealand's young elite rugby players committed less than 21 hours to the sport per week, it may be argued that players had some time to engage in activities that would expand their identity and provide the benefits as discussed by coaches and management. Therefore, some coaching and management staff suggested that the onus is on the

players to be more proactive in engaging in activities outside of rugby to ensure they develop the necessary skills for a life outside rugby. For example, Barry suggested:

Sometimes you've got to make the bed you lie in rather than sit around and sleep and watch videos all day. Then all of a sudden you don't have a professional rugby career cause you've got a career-ending injury, whose fault is that?

Barry implies that it is the players who need to take responsibility for their time outside of rugby and if they do not then they will have to face the consequences. His comment suggests that the governing bodies do not carry the responsibility to ensure these players are engaging in alternative meaningful activities. However, this seems unrealistic as in many cases these young men have come straight from school into rugby and some coaches and management have already reported that these young players operate in a very protective environment which does not encourage exploratory behaviour. From a rugby league perspective, Jeff described the way spare time is utilised by young elite athletes:

What we were finding was that the players just had too much time on their hands. A lot of them were just not preparing and not getting any life experiences other than rugby league... They'd go to the movies and play bloody playstation. It was just a void. Play golf, their handicaps were pretty good.

Former AFL coach Ken suggested that it may be the celebrity status, fame and fortune associated with professional sport that inhibit some athletes in developing an identity outside of sport. It was argued that this status, coupled with a lack of alternative interests and pursuits, results in players engaging in anti-social behaviour during their time as an elite athlete:

Because they are rock star status they get ahead of themselves. They get unbalanced and that is the tragedy in this community. 'Why would I have to work, why would I have to do anything else?' These guys are getting 300 or 400 thousand at 22 or 23 years old...The players that caused me all my

havoc when I was coaching were players that had nothing else in their life other than footy. One after the other they wouldn't go and do some study, wouldn't hold a job. They are the blokes who end up in trouble with the women and the gambling and the grog and all those things.

Ken's recount of his personal experience with athletes is consistent with Adler and Adler's notion of the *Glorified Self* (1989). Characteristically, the glorified self is a greedy, intoxicating and riveting self, that seeks to rise in importance and to cast aside other self-dimensions as it develops. Furthermore, athletes can sacrifice both the multidimensionality of their current selves and the potential extent of their future selves as various dimensions of their identities are either diminished, detached or somehow altered as a result of their increased investment in the Glorified Self.

Coaches and management perceived players to have an identity that was primarily formed through their involvement in sport, confirming data gathered from players. It was suggested that these players had some time available to be involved in meaningful pursuits outside sport but may need more assistance in utilising this. Coaches and management spoke of the consequences of these young men not having an external identity or a balance of life, and identified these as major contributors to increased difficulty upon retirement, restricted development of life-skills, burnout and lack of personal and vocational development. Other implications discussed were the anti-social behaviour of athletes who had nothing in their life except football, citing examples of womanising, gambling and heavy drinking. Coaches and management also had a collective voice when stating that athletes who have an external identity and a balance of life will perform better in their athletic role. This raises the question: Is this aspect of professional rugby encouraged?

### *9.3.1 Assisting the Athletes in the Pursuit of Balance: Processes and Solutions*

Many young elite players in this study seemed to struggle to find a balance between playing elite rugby and engaging in outside pursuits such as education. Some players who were competing just below the Super 12 level had withdrawn from or deferred university, as they perceived they could not combine education with elite sport. On the

other hand, coaches and management placed a great deal of importance on athletes having a balance of life and an external identity and spoke about the various benefits of athletes obtaining these. However, in many cases it appeared that this has not progressed to an actual policy or procedure of the rugby unions in New Zealand and Australia. There are no definite structures in place to support players in this pursuit, yet it seems that it is the young men such as those in the current study who may need the most support in this area. The perceived athletic benefits alone associated with balance of life suggest that if there were such a structure where players could engage in outside pursuits, then rugby in New Zealand and Australia would certainly benefit. For example, the following comment from Barry, a senior coach, exemplifies this:

I believe it is one of the keys to possibly New Zealand having success in the future is finding a balance between professional rugby and professional development outside of rugby. Too many kids are not doing that and need help and New Zealand rugby union is doing a bloody good job at Super 12 level but I believe that needs to extend down.

However, it seems that at present the discussion remains at the level where coaches and management agree on the worthiness of the idea, but without any specific guidelines to implement it. For example, Brendan spoke of the importance of providing assistance to the players but did not indicate how this might be achieved:

I reckon there is a lot of merit in being able to provide the players the opportunity to strip away their rugby guard if you like and do something for themselves as who they are not as what they are. Not what they are as a [leading NPC team] rugby representative but who they are as Joe Bloggs part way through a degree or with an interest in looking after sick people or an interest in painting or something like that, house renovations, something like that.

One of the challenges professional rugby administrators are faced with is encouraging and enabling young players to have a balance of life and an identity that extends beyond their athletic identity. One solution may involve removing part of the protective environment in which these young men operate and enabling them to engage in pursuits

away from rugby. For example, Margaret described the challenge for rugby organisations:

I think the players need more exposure to normal life outside of rugby; even in the educational sense it's hard, cause a lot of them study by distance, they're not exposed to the classroom situation, so once again it's a protected environment. But the challenge for rugby as all of the professional sports, is the administration has to look where they can get the best balance in terms of allowing the player to be exposed to normal scenarios and normal life things but also be able to train.

From discussion with the rugby coaches and management in this study, it seems there is a level of uncertainty on how best to encourage or assist players to obtain a balance of life and expanded identity. Some sports in Australia with a longer history of professionalism could provide a framework for rugby to follow. Various professional sports clubs in Australia have processes in place that are designed to assist athletes in having an expanded identity and balance of life, whether it be through assisting athletes to find part-time work, or providing them with opportunities to combine sport with education. It is apparent however, that young elite rugby players in New Zealand and Australia have been somewhat overlooked in this area, despite the fact that if responses in this study are typical, this age group and level of players require much assistance. One such possibility is making it compulsory for players to be involved in either education, work or work experience whilst playing elite rugby as is the case in some rugby league and AFL clubs. Rugby Professional Development Manager Greg was asked about this possibility:

Wayne Bennett does that with the Broncos. Ultimately I think that's what we'd like but I think rugby in New Zealand is still struggling with professionalism, in terms of getting used to what it means and how it should manifest itself.

If New Zealand is still coming to terms with professionalism as Greg suggests above, then it would seem vital that New Zealand rugby learn from other sports that have more experience with professionalism. This may ensure that this area, considered so

fundamental to the performance of their players, is effectively addressed. Greg goes on to describe how New Zealand rugby is learning from sports that have more experience in the professional era to assist in providing solutions to the narrow identities of many rugby players:

It was interesting that when we were there [Australia] last December and July of this year, two of the clubs that were held up as examples of the new-age type AFL clubs, who were adopting a different strategy and recognising the need for a life outside of rugby were giving their players one and a half and sometimes two days off a week and requiring the players either to be in study, work or if they're not in either of those to be involved in the community. The two examples that were specifically given were... Brisbane and Collingwood. Ironically those were the two that just competed in the grand final.

From a rugby league perspective, Jeff described the processes that are in place to assist and encourage his players to have a balance of life.

What we've done at [a leading NRL Club] is we've encouraged players to go back to part-time work, full-time players to part-time work. [Leading NRL player] for example, one of our State of Origin players is working for Telstra Countrywide. He's done training and sales and is out now as a sales rep. We've crossed one of our youngsters who is also doing that. So we encourage players as much as possible to work. We actively will find work for them if we necessarily have to but we do encourage that.

Some coaches and management suggested that much of the solution to assisting players with a balance of life lies with the coaches. Moreover, if coaches 'buy in' to the concept then this will go a long way to ensure athletes get the time and resources necessary to obtain a balanced life, which will in turn benefit their performance. For example, from an AFL perspective, former coach Ken, outlined the important role of coaches:

We've got to encourage the coaches to not only agree with the balance but to actually facilitate it. You've got to somehow convince them (and I think that anecdotal evidence is very strong but we've got to go on to some empirical research), that if an athlete gets their head... into a sincere commitment into something other than sport, then I'm absolutely convinced they have less dips and troughs in their performance, I don't say they will play any better, but they'll play more consistently. What they're showing also is that they'll stay longer. So if you're a smart coach and that's fact, then you'll be encouraging your players to do it, 'cause you'll actually get better players for it... If all the coaches in the competition say 'yeah, we believe in a balanced lifestyle'. One of the coaches down the road here, he would argue (and he's a teacher by background and a very well balanced person) that case strongly. And yet he would set up a program there that would prevent the athletes from doing it. Whereas Mick Malthouse, in Collingwood, gives them Monday, Wednesday and Friday for training, Tuesdays and Thursdays off... He has worked out that his athletes will be better as footballers for this.

Although all the coaches and management from rugby in this study spoke of the benefits of athletes having an identity external to rugby, and a balance of life, it seems that some clubs were restricting their players' ability to achieve this by requiring them to be at training five days a week, without suitable time to explore and engage in alternative pursuits. For example, this was confirmed by career counsellor Margaret:

It's virtually impossible at this time of the year, pre-season. This is a full-time job.

It seems in some cases the structure of rugby makes it difficult for young elite rugby players to organise time to be involved in pursuits outside rugby, which suggests they may need assistance in this area. For example, Brendan stated:

The time that players have available to do anything outside of rugby is probably less, it requires a lot more planning and organisation and self-



motivation to actually actively be involved in something else outside of rugby.

The issue of identity and balance of life and their facilitation by professional sports teams may be an area that needs further empirical research in order to convince sports organisations to implement programs or assistance in this area. For example, Ken suggested:

We need to come up with research that says that actually you're going to be a better footballer while you play, you actually are going to have a longer career, all things being equal, and you're actually going to make the transition into life after footy better. Even dumb footballers can work that out...Until we can actually prove that there is a strong link between consistent, effective performance and balance in your life the rhetoric will continue.

In summary, coaches and management placed a great deal of importance on players having a balance of life and an expanded identity, stating various benefits of these. However, the contradiction is that there were no real structures, policies or procedures in place to support the young men at this level. A further contradiction is that although coaches and management from rugby spoke of the importance of assisting players obtain a balance of life it is apparent in many cases that they may be contributing to the closing off of alternative pursuits. This is evident through the structures that were in place that meant players had to be at training five days a week, restricting their involvement in outside pursuits. This was especially so in NSW where players had little time available to them outside their commitment to rugby. Coaches and management gave their perspectives on how the young players might be assisted in this area and in a number of cases turned to models or initiatives employed in sports that have had a longer experience with professionalism such as rugby league and AFL. Data from these sports indicate that it is possible for successful professional sports teams to have such initiatives in place for their athletes. These sports of similar intensity have managed to provide their athletes with suitable time and opportunities to explore alternative pursuits. It was also suggested that more empirical research is needed in this area to

illustrate to coaches and management the benefits of a balance of life and expanded identity.

#### **9.4 Game Over: Future Athletic Termination and Transition**

Although all interviewed players stated that rugby was their career, by their own admission, players had not thought about, or prepared for, what might happen should their career be terminated. Coaching and management staff identified many issues for young players in relation to the termination and subsequent transition process of their athletic lives. Player responses were largely confirmed by coaches and management who suggested that athletes did not often plan ahead for the end of their rugby playing careers. Coaches and management also seemed to hold players responsible for the fact they had not thought ahead to the end of their 'career'. For example, talking from a personal experience as a career counsellor, Margaret suggested:

Some have very starry eyes and don't want to think about life after football. Some I think are scared to think about it, and I've had someone say that to me, so therefore they don't do anything about it.

As suggested earlier by Margaret, many young rugby players move into elite rugby straight from school and have known nothing else. It seems that this limited experience in a life outside rugby may impact on player's lives post-sport. For example, Murray, a senior member of the Rugby Union Players' Association suggested that many players would have little career direction should their playing days be terminated:

Some of them come straight out of school and play professional rugby for seven years. Frankly if they weren't playing professional rugby tomorrow they wouldn't have a career to go to.

There were a number of common themes on the termination of athletic careers that were evident throughout both rugby and the wider sports industry. Coaches and management across the range of sports studied identified this area as one requiring specific attention due to players' hesitation to plan for the termination and transition process. For

example, Jeff, a NRL rugby league welfare officer, described how they were attempting to encourage athletes to give more thought to their retirement:

What we were finding, what I was finding was there was a lot of players that would just play football until the last game of the season when their careers finished and all of a sudden they're not. And we wanted to have them starting to think a season or two out from their final year.

In this case, the pre-retirement planning process may not be starting early enough, as the athletes Jeff referred to are only encouraged to prepare 'a season or two' before retirement. However, as illustrated, the uncertain nature of rugby, and in this case rugby league means that it is very difficult to predict when 'a season or two' before retirement is, as injury and deselection are unpredictable variables that are part of the nature of professional sport.

The literature suggests that athletes often encounter difficulty with the termination process (Fortunato, 1996; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998; Sparkes, 2000), and the coaches and management in this study suggested the experience of their athletes is no different where many do not cope emotionally in what is a difficult process to manage. This is exemplified by former AFL coach Ken, who described the devastating consequences of not preparing players for their athletic termination and post-sport careers:

The number of players I've had to go and visit in the Northern Clinic down here who have ended up with severe depression is unbelievable. Because, and I've failed them too, we haven't been able to convince them during their careers that they need to prepare for life after sport.

Throughout this, and the previous chapter, coaches, management, and players by their own admission, described a situation where players have little understanding, or are not willing to acknowledge the realities of professional rugby, have a lack of basic life-skills, and little preparation for a life after sport. However, as described in Chapter Eight, there are some players who do have an awareness of the nature of professional sport and have developed alternative plans, life-skills, sought career advice and continued other work. In the present study, it was those players contracted to a Super

12 team who were most likely to demonstrate this enhanced awareness. While not everyone with a Super 12 contract may possess this level of awareness, it is evident that increased access to resources and personnel, such as access to a full-time Professional Development Manager, resulted in the increased opportunity for players to develop this understanding. In the following, Greg spoke of a small number of players in his particular Super 12 franchise that have a strong career awareness and have planned for the future due to their understanding that rugby is an uncertain career path by nature:

The true professionals, the ones that I'd say are the leading professionals, are superb. They've got a plan for what they want to do after rugby, and it's not just in their head, they've actually done something about it. They've put plans and processes in place, they've started to put investments and money aside, they've protected their assets, they've invested wisely, they've sought good advice, they're insured, they've got a career plan, they've got an education. All those things, they've got a number of life-skills. I could probably name two or three guys in our franchise that I would say are good examples of those guys that have really got it sorted.

However, whilst two or three players illustrate this understanding, in most Super 12 franchises there are at least 25 players, arguably leaving many players who may not have this type of structure in place. In this section, coaches and management confirmed players' statements and suggested that young elite players were largely not prepared for the inevitable termination of their elite playing days. In some cases it was perceived that this was due to athletes' 'starry eyes' or the fact that players had been recruited straight from school and have not known anything else. In many cases it appeared that coaches and management perceived that players were responsible for their own preparation for the future termination and transition process. Coaches and management were unanimous in their agreement that players needed plans, processes and alternative pursuits in their lives that may act to prepare them for their post-sport life. However, it seems in the current professional rugby environment this is a rarity.

## 9.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed findings from coaches and management from rugby and the wider sports industry. The most significant issues and consequences associated with athletic participation, or a career in professional rugby, were explored from the perspective of these participants. One of the most significant issues raised by coaches and management was the recruitment of young athletes, in many cases those straight out of school, and for some, whilst still at school. This was cited as a ‘real danger’ as young men were foregoing the most basic of education to pursue a career in which they had little understanding of the realities. The consequence of such recruitment practices meant players were focussing much of their time and energy on achieving a professional rugby contract, which was observed as having a negative effect on their school grades. Furthermore, one participant even cited an increase in the use of performance-enhancing drugs amongst this group of players. Young players such as those in the current study who went straight from school into professional rugby were considered ‘at risk’ by coaches and management.

Coaches and management challenged players’ perceptions of a ‘career’ in professional rugby, in particular their over-optimistic expectations of the length of a professional playing career. Coaches and management perceived young players as viewing themselves as ‘bullet proof’ and suggested that they generally lacked awareness of the realities of the short-term, insecure nature of professional rugby. The consequences of players’ optimistic views were discussed in terms of their perceived lack of need for alternative career options due to their perceived future length of their career and their lack of preparedness for a post-sport career. However, this lack of preparedness for a life outside rugby was exaggerated by the protective nature of the professional rugby environment, where coaches and management suggested players were often sheltered from the ‘real world’ and many basic life-skill tasks were done for them. Consequences of this were identified as an inability for players to engage in exploratory behaviour and restricted development of a range of life-skills.

It was suggested by coaches and management that young rugby players generally did not have an identity that stretched beyond the realm of professional rugby, yet stressed the importance and expressed their overwhelming support for the development of a

balance of life and identities which extended beyond rugby. Reasons for expanding athletes' identities and balance of life were seen to be players having increased personal development, higher self-esteem, enhanced athletic performance and better preparation for a life after sport. However, at the same time it was acknowledged that the structure of rugby is not always conducive to players engaging in pursuits outside the sport.

The following chapter explores the opportunities that were available to these young elite rugby players to develop alternative career plans for a life outside of sport, players needs in this area, and the support available to meet these needs. In many cases players discussed how the opportunities available to them at this level did not match their development needs despite the fact they required the most support. The chapter combines findings from players, coaches and management in rugby and coaches and management from the wider sports industry.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CAREER DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING, AWARENESS AND EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALTERNATIVES

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The previous chapters highlighted the perspectives of players, coaches and management on the nature of the work of an elite young rugby player, the issues and consequences of such work, the restricted identity, balance of life and life-skills of elite young rugby players and their inadequate preparation for a life after sport. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the perspectives of players, coaches and management, in rugby and the wider sports industry, in regard to the opportunities and assistance athletes are provided with to enable them to explore and engage in career development, education, or post-sport planning. More specifically, this chapter explores the perceived needs of young elite players in their preparation for a life after sport, and the resources available to them. Also discussed are the programs that are offered to both the NSW and New Zealand athletes in this area and to what extent players, coaches and management deem them to be effective. Finally, the role of education in these young players' lives and the perceived tension in combining it with participation in elite rugby is examined.

#### 10.1 Rugby's Response: Athlete Career Development and Planning Programs

Australia and New Zealand rugby offer varying career development and planning programs to their players. These have been developed, in part, in response to the development of labour relations, in terms of player associations, and the perceived duty of care from rugby organisations (Rugby Union Players' Association & Australian Rugby, 2002). This section explores the opportunities available to young elite rugby players to develop their life-skills, alternative career options and education, to what degree they were available and utilised, and their perceived usefulness for players.

### *10.1.1 NSW Programs*

On 16 August 1995 the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), New South Wales Rugby Union (NSWRU), Queensland Rugby Union (QRU) and the ACT Rugby Union (ACTRU) agreed to support the concept of the establishment of a Rugby Union Players' Association (RUPA) in order "to collectively develop and promote the best possible employment conditions for its members" (RUPA, 2007). As an industrial relations movement it was established to promote and safeguard the interests of its members, namely the professional rugby players of Australia (RUPA, 2007). This was a swift response to the changing context of rugby, coinciding with rugby's shift from amateurism to professionalism. It is possible that the response was swift due to Australia having other professional sports such as AFL and rugby league, which could be used as benchmarks to apply a similar structure.

In 1997 RUPA and the ARU developed the 'Career Training Scheme' to be offered to all state unions, with the purpose of "promoting the development of the full-time professional rugby players' post-rugby careers" (Rugby Union Players Association & Australian Rugby, 2001, p.3). There were six main streams offered: career and education planning; personal and professional development; career placement program; player welfare and counselling; financial planning; and a training and education fund. However, the training and education fund was only available to those players who were playing Super 12 rugby, not to the academy players who participated in this study.

The purpose of the programs offered by NSW is to provide the athlete with opportunities to develop and plan for an alternative career. With the exception of the education and training fund, the programs and resources were available to NSW academy players should they want to access them. The players also had constant access to a career counsellor, who was on-site at their training ground. It was compulsory for the young players to meet with the career counsellor at least once. As a member of RUPA management, Don spoke of the resources and assistance that was available to the NSW Academy team:



Last year we [RUPA] were servicing both the Academy squad and the professional squad. They get access to all our services exactly the same except the Academy squad can't get access to what we call our training and education fund where we give them tax free money for their professional development otherwise they have access to all our services... Our aim is to make them as well rounded as to what the current ones are. If it wasn't for programs like this they wouldn't be anywhere nearly as well rounded. Where we educate the players, is when a young player is entering the rugby academy and enters the professional sports arena. Our aim is that if you want to be a professional rugby player, the career training scheme is going to play a very important role in your rugby career as well as you playing rugby. When the player becomes a professional rugby player he goes and meets the footy manager, he meets the coach, he signs his contract. His next appointment is with our career adviser... The career adviser finds out what he is doing at the moment and sets up his career plan.

Under the umbrella term of 'the career training scheme', NSW implements a module called 'personal and professional development'. This particular module provides a wide range of life-skills, career planning and education programs that allows the young elite athlete to develop skills off the rugby field. For example, Don described how they were assisting the development of their players:

...A lot of the players don't like studying by distance education cause study is very hard to do part-time. So what we do is we run user-friendly courses for them which gets them into the technique, gets them into something they enjoy doing. At the Waratahs this year and at the Brumbies we're just about to start six investment workshops. The players go and learn how to invest their money in the share market, property, negatively gear, tie it in through taxation. Once they start attending...courses might spring up from that. We've just done a complete computer audit of all our players to see what their computer skills are. So every player now we know exactly, can they do Word, Power Point, Excel. So we know where they are all at. So we can go to a player and say 'ok, we're running this workshop in two months time, you don't know how to do Power Point but you want to be a presenter we

reckon you should do that'. We're just trying to build up all our knowledge of our players.

In earlier chapters it was suggested that the protective environment of professional rugby was restricting players' life-skill development. Through the personal and professional development stream, NSW have implemented a program that will aid in increasing players' life-skills in the areas of nutrition, finance and public speaking. For example, Margaret describes this program and the feedback received from players:

This year we ran a really good program; we ran three streams and were able to give really good elective choices to the guys, so we ran a public speaking/presentation stream. We only had seven players in that; they were seven of the higher profile guys. We had cooking/nutrition and an investors' stream, and feedback across the board was really positive about all three streams and the players seemed to enjoy having one topic that they could do three lectures in rather than doing a mass of different lectures they had to go to.

The personal and professional development module of the career training scheme was also perceived to offer a partial solution to the protective environment of rugby. This module implements a networking program that exposes athletes to the 'outside world' and also provides them with opportunities to develop career networks to assist them in their life outside rugby. For example, in the following quote, Margaret outlines the perceived benefits of getting players to engage in the networking program:

The idea behind that networking day we had was to get them exposed to the outside world, hey there are people who go to work everyday in the city and work 12-14 hour days, there's a whole different world out there to what it is here. I think the players need more of that, they need more exposure to normal life outside of rugby.

For those athletes that want to continue with their education, the career and education planning stream of the career training scheme was seen to provide such opportunity.

For example, Don explained how Australian State sides have provided their athletes with opportunities to further their education:

We've formed links with the Australian Graduate School of Management for post-grad studies. So that's for players who want to further their studies. We're just about to sign the lines with the TAFEs to assist brokering all their TAFE course for the players at that level.

Although such an initiative was available, NSW previously discussed how they had to defer or withdraw from education due to the time demands of rugby, meaning they had restricted opportunity to engage in such an initiative. Placing athletes in an industry that they are interested in was another initiative made available to NSW athletes. Don talks about the career placement program that is in place for Australian state and academy players:

Then for the career placements we had last year once again 30 players that were pursuing/had career placements. So they were pursuing flexible employment whilst they were playing. Some of them as well as studying, others 'cause they'd finished studying and they were looking for other things. That would be our main aim over the next few years, 30 over the three states.

Although such an initiative is offered, none of the NSW players in this study were involved in the career placement program Don refers to. It is not known if this is because such a program is more suited to the full professional players or if the current cohort perceived they did not have the time to engage in such placements.

The programs implemented by Australian and NSW rugby were generally aimed at both the professional player, i.e. Super 12 athletes, and the academy players who have not yet obtained a Super 12 contract. The Australian Rugby Union Players' Association seemed particularly aware that it is often the young athlete competing just below the Super 12 level that may need the most support in preparing options for a life outside rugby. For example, this was an area that Don was particularly passionate about.

Now we've got to educate our players that there is a life after rugby as well... There is a fantastic life out there for you even if you don't make it. If you don't become a great rugby player hopefully you get the benefit of this program in assisting you with your chosen career. That's what we get a buzz out of, not by helping George Gregan but by helping Paul Demean get a job. By helping Matt Dowling with his resume so he gets a job with a company over in Hong Kong. They're the things that we get a buzz out of.... Our program has got to be aimed at Paul Demean? Who the fuck's Paul Demean? That's what our program's got to be very good for 'cause who the fuck is he. If we're not assisting those players well we're failing as a program.

Given the comprehensive nature of career development and planning programs available at NSW, career counsellor Margaret suggests that players who are introduced to this culture early may have less difficulty in the termination and transition process:

Transition-wise, what we are trying to do through the whole education of having them start out in the system at the beginning of their ten years and progress through, is so that their transition will be much smoother. So these younger guys if they do stay in the system for that length of time then they should be ok. But it's the players that exit earlier because of injury or deselection they're the ones that are in bigger strife.

Rugby has changed significantly since the inception of professionalism and so has the type of player that participates at the elite level. Rugby in Australia is shifting from a sport largely dominated by middle and upper class participants to one that attracts participants from a cross section of society. For the management of Australian rugby, this raises new challenges in the provision of career development programs and support. For example, Don stated:

The danger of rugby is that the culture has changed dramatically. It's not a private school, white-collar sport any more. That's fine, we've got no problems with that, but that means that's the greatest challenge to rugby.

We are now having to look at vaster network for the players to support them.

Don goes on to state:

The other greatest challenge is obviously the diversity of players now playing rugby...we've got obviously 30 percent Pacific Islanders and we've got a number of rugby league players. Already we've noticed that rugby league players don't grab the opportunities in the same way as the union players. It's something that's not stressed in league. We're having problems with the league players who are crossing over.

The challenges for us are:

- a) the players going full time into a professional career straight up out of school;
- b) the Pacific Islanders;
- c) the League players.

The discussion with coaches and management suggests that NSW is committed to assisting their young players in a life outside of rugby and there are a variety of programs available that assist young elite rugby players by providing opportunities for career development, planning and transition management. The data suggest that NSW rugby is taking a pro-active role in assisting the athlete in their holistic development through union run programs.

#### *10.1.2 New Zealand Programs*

New Zealand was slower in responding to the changing context of rugby, forming their Players' Association in late 1999. It is possible that the response was fairly slow as rugby was the first professional sport in New Zealand and the concept and characteristics of professionalism were not widely understood. As was the case in Australia, the New Zealand Players' Association was developed to protect players now competing and working in the professional environment. For example Murray, a senior manager at the Rugby Union Players' Association stated:

There you're looking at the employment environment. In the past it was a question of are they employees, are they contractors. Now we are saying they are definitely employees and now we're looking to represent them as a unified and organised body and making sure that the employment environment is managed appropriately from the players' perspective.

In late 2001 a professional development program was implemented by the Players' Association and NZRU to assist Super 12 players in their career development and post-rugby planning. Such a program was not available to the players who were competing just below the Super 12 level such as those in the current study. In the following quote Murray describes the purpose, design and content of this program:

We are involved in an initiative with New Zealand rugby and I say New Zealand rugby because it is the NZRU right through and ourselves which are driving what's called a professional development program. And a professional development program is a program that is designed to facilitate opportunities or help the personal and professional development of players off-field. So the focus areas are career planning, work and work experience, personal planning. That includes financial things like that. Transition management such as transition into the professional game and if you miss selection or whatever transition.

Player welfare programs in New Zealand differed slightly to those offered in Australia with a less structured approach and one that was not uniform throughout the country. From 2001, each first division NPC club in New Zealand began to form an academy in which young potentially elite rugby players could be contracted to for up to three years, generally from the time they leave school. While the major focus of the academies has been to further develop player's rugby skills, they also provide some options for career development, planning and life-skills. One initiative of the program, made available through various rugby unions and academies, was the opportunity for players to study free of charge at selected universities or polytechnics through a scholarship scheme that the union had set up with a local provider. For example, Professional Development Manager Brendan stated:

...we've got an academy manager here, but basically they have an induction where the guys recruited to the academy are exposed to physical development and development as rugby players. Also a number of them are offered scholarships or encouraged to seek a career outside or develop their career whilst in the academy. They are offered support to help them do that.

The New Zealand coaches and management seemed to have an idealistic view on the structure and implementation of the academies and their programs. For example, some coaches and management spoke of the potential of the academy system in New Zealand and the opportunities it could provide players to gain alternative qualifications or work experience. For example, Brendan provides this perception of the academy system in New Zealand:

I think at this stage the academy structure is going to play a really important part in that, in my brief dealings in my position so far I think it already has, particularly in [leading NPC Team]. But nationally I think it's got a big part that basically you are identified as a talent at a such or such an age and because of that you have the ability to access through the academy a trade or a course or a qualification and you work hard at that and during that time you also develop your rugby skills and at the end of three or four years you are either a plumber, a builder or you have a commerce degree. You have the tools to go further in education on your own bat, go and find a job or have the skills and the qualifications behind you to present yourself as a prospective employee, or at the average age of 21 or 22 is when your professional career is going to kick in. It's a bit of a generalisation but if that was the model, the structuring then that's going to have an important part in equipping players with the qualifications that they require post-rugby life... So they reach 21 or 22 where their professional rugby career is really going to start taking off and that is time enough to get some sort of qualification, trade or something behind them which they can use if they don't make it to professional.

As a coach, Barry confirmed Brendan's ideal scenario of the academy system in New Zealand:

If you find some kid and he's no academic but all of a sudden he's tied into a trade that he's going to get some skills in that could help him in his life; he's saying 'well, shit I'm not going to go to France and earn relatively peanuts, because those lower-end guys don't get huge money over there, when I could do this and that could really help me. And if after four or five years I'm fully qualified and I'm not a professional rugby player well I could go away and do an OE [overseas experience] and enjoy myself and I've got something to come back to'. In the meantime they've hooked him into a New Zealand system for four or five years and really giving him some benefits.

It seems that New Zealand does not offer its young elite players the same level of career development, planning and life-skill programs and support that NSW has in place for their players, especially for the researched players competing just below the Super 12 level. The provision of programs in New Zealand were discussed by coaches and management in an idealistic way around the notion of how they could work and the benefits they might provide, as opposed to discussing what specific initiatives were available for the young players to access. In both New Zealand and NSW, it is evident that higher levels of resources and support were available to players who had obtained a Super 12 contract than those who were competing just below that level, such as the players in this study.

## **10.2 Is This Support Adequate: What are the Player's Needs?**

The researched cohort of players were a unique group as the large majority were not considered professional, yet they were investing much of their time, energy and identity in pursuit of a rugby contract. Players from New Zealand, and to a lesser extent NSW, were at times critical of the support they received from their clubs with regard to their career development, post-sport planning and education, where they perceived the



available programs provided them with little benefit for a life outside rugby. Coaches and management also suggested that it is this group of young men who require the most support, assistance and resources in areas outside of rugby, as a large percentage of these players will not go on to make a career from playing rugby. Although NSW athletes seemed to be receiving a fairly high level of assistance they made a number of suggestions regarding the content and the delivery of their programs to further assist players in their career development and post-rugby planning. One suggestion from the NSW athletes was that the programs and support could be more individualised, player-specific and targeted to their needs and interests, instead of a generic program. For example, Andrew echoed the general sentiment of NSW players:

They could just do it better, listen, maybe do a survey. I think they're doing it from what they think is right, instead they could ask people to write it down, and that means they're doing what people are interested in, and what they want to do, 'cause half the time we get to these things and everyone is like, snore. The last thing you want to do after training is two or three hours on a Thursday night, you've got to drive the city or somewhere, and you're just going, ohhh.

The content of programs may be an area where management find it hard to please all players. It appeared that a balance between life-skills and training for alternative career options was the most valued form of support. Some players argued that the content of the programs should be more focussed on the preparation for an alternative career or options post-rugby. For example, Brett stated:

I mean the nutrition option is not benefiting you when you've finished. That was one of the options out of three, and it's great that a lot of people wanted to do it and it's good that it teaches you how to shop, but that's not going to do anything for you when you've finished. The investing one was good, but it wasn't informing us, all it was set out to do, was with our savings looking at investment options, that's not really a career path either, it was advice. The public speaking ones, a lot of the high profile guys did it for media. So I guess the three options there were, they weren't focussed on what people wanted to be doing.

With prompting, Brett went on to suggest that a work experience option would be more beneficial for players in developing interests and skills in an alternative career:

I don't know, maybe they look into an option of making guys do a certain amount of hours work experience. At least, it might be a bit of a drag, but at the end of the day, it might teach them whether they like that or not. Like if someone wants to go into financial advising, if they go and have to do a week every six months, or something like that, or one day a week for five weeks.

Other NSW athletes expressed satisfaction with the programs and felt their needs were largely being met. Some players felt that the support provided went beyond the basic responsibility of the club to assist players in a life outside rugby. For example, Luke describes the support as he saw it:

Yeah we got RUPA, we always talk to the people and they help us get pointed in the right direction, we've done careers days, lectures and stuff where we can get information of what we might like to do in the future. We do a lot of networking things where they can try you and see how you go, see how you like it...I think they're doing more than they can anyway. There's not a lot more in my experience so far that I can see that they can do...I don't know how far they can go really, because as much as it comes down to it, we're paid to play rugby. We need something so we can start progressing like everyone else is, but when it comes down to it, it's pretty much a job. I think they're doing a lot more than people expected. I think they're doing more than most organisations. Compare it to league, I think union are way ahead, but obviously you can always improve on things. At the moment I don't think anything arises.

Justin confirmed Luke's comments and described the programs available:

They've got that career placements program where they have investors, public speaking, stuff like that. You do like a five week course, in an area

that you're interested in, hopefully if you get something out of that, you can push along. We have networking days, where you meet up with all sponsors and businesses and stuff, there might be some area there that you want to work in, and someone can help you out.

The NSW players were generally fairly satisfied with their access to support and assistance for career development and planning. However, this was not reflected in the comments of New Zealand athletes. In New Zealand the large majority of researched players could only access career development and planning assistance through their provincial academies. For some players this was satisfactory, but for others it was inadequate. In New Zealand the perceived usefulness of, and satisfaction with, these programs varied from very poor to fairly satisfied. It is important to stress that those players who were playing Super 12 rugby had access to other programs provided by the Super 12 franchises, that were not accessible to academy level athletes, including access to a Professional Development Manager (PDM). In the current study only three athletes of the researched cohort had played Super 12 and therefore had access to such resources. Those players involved in Super 12 were generally satisfied with the programs provided. However, if players had not yet reached the Super 12 level there was no structured career development or planning program that players could engage in beyond the academy level. There was a mixed reaction from players to the academy program(s) in terms of the delivery, content and support.

In some New Zealand rugby unions/clubs the nation's potential All Blacks had guidance on careers, education, financial investment, life-skills and life as a professional rugby player. In others, it seems these issues were brushed over and given little consideration. The majority of players indicated that the provincial academy which they were contracted to provided little assistance in their career development and post-rugby planning, although the reported levels of assistance and support varied between different unions or clubs. Provincial academies in New Zealand seemed fragmented and were not delivering a national program, therefore players were not receiving the same level of assistance and support across the country. This is in contrast to those athletes in the Super 12 format who have access to a more structured national program facilitated by the PDMs. In many cases the academy did not provide these young men with what they perceived they required at this stage of their lives and rugby life cycle.

For example, when Brad and Rob were asked their thoughts on the academy in which they were involved they replied: “It was pretty shit for what I needed”, and

I was in it for two years. It was pretty crap actually, the [leading NPC Team] Academy....here they just give you a bit of paper and say see you in six months.

The results from the players suggested that the academies were not structured or operated in the manner envisioned by coaches and managers like Brendan or Barry. Moreover, many players were fairly critical of the academy system in some New Zealand unions. The curriculum content for career development and planning through the academies was often not what the players felt they needed or would particularly benefit from. For example, Phil had a mixed response to the content of the academy program:

Some of the stuff is quite good, but sometimes they can't fill it so they just put in crap, which makes it pretty boring. Some of it is useful for sure, but other parts are crap.

When asked to describe how the academies could assist with career development, planning and education, many players suggested they would like access to more personnel such as the Professional Development Managers that are available to Super 12 players. Players also suggested they would like more assistance from the academies in education, career advice and life-skills. For example, Shane, Conrad and Peter suggested:

Just programs to help with the education side, and some advice as well (Shane).

I think it would be good to have a few more things around... and get more life-skills (Conrad).

Maybe some more career development advice... Career wise I'm not sure what there is but I'm sure that they're there (Peter).

All athletes agreed or strongly agreed that it is important that they undertake some career planning such as up-skilling or training for a career after rugby and as such their resulting career opportunities after retiring will be enhanced (table 10.1 & 10.2).

Table 10.1 Player’s responses to the importance of career planning (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No’s
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Don’t know	0	0
Agree	47	8
Strongly agree	53	9

Table 10.2 Player’s responses to career opportunities being enhanced if planned for whilst playing (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No’s
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Don’t know	0	0
Agree	59	10
Strongly agree	41	7

Despite the value placed on career development and planning, New Zealand players were generally dissatisfied with their access to support and assistance in this area. For example, when Neil was asked; “Does anyone give you advice on careers?” He replied: “Not really to be honest.” When asked if this was an area that he would like more support in he replied: “Yeah, because you have got some time.”

While some coaches and management seemed to have an idealistic notion of the academy system in New Zealand, players did not share this perspective. For example, only 41% of New Zealand athletes indicated they had received any advice on alternative employment or training that may assist them in a job or a trade, as shown in table 10.3.

Table 10.3 Employment advice or training (New Zealand)

Received employment advice/training	%	No's
Yes	41	7
No	59	10

However, increased advice on alternative careers or occupations was an area where these young men felt they needed more assistance and support. For example, results from the questionnaire indicated that players perceived career advice as an important component for their life post-rugby. In the questionnaire, 76% of players indicated that it was either important or very important that they receive some advice or training for alternative employment, (table 10.4) indicating that there is still a challenge for the New Zealand academy system in terms of providing such assistance to its athletes.

Table 10.4 Importance of employment advice or training (New Zealand)

Importance of advice/training for employment	%	No's
Very unimportant	18	3
Unimportant	6	1
Don't know	0	0
Important	47	8
Very important	29	5

Some players felt that they required more assistance or motivation from their clubs or unions to undertake part-time study, suggesting that by having available and structured time for study and more guidance, they may be more likely to engage in it. For example, Dave and Neil suggested:

Maybe set up some class time. So you do your training and then have a class from 11 till 1. So you can do your study and have someone look after you... so then you know you have to go. When you study by yourself it's a lot harder but if there is somebody there you might go (Dave, N.Z).

I don't know, probably a bit more guidance on it. You are left to your own devices a lot. But that is probably more fault of my union than anyone (Neil, N.Z).

Dave spoke of the need to 'have someone look after you', and Neil expressed the need for education guidance and suggested he is not comfortable being left to his 'own devices'. Whilst Dave and Neil perceived these needs to be fairly significant, it could be argued that this is an example of players expecting tasks to be done for them and requiring assistance in basic life-skill tasks, which may reinforce the protective environment as previously discussed by coaches and management.

A small number of players from one or two provinces suggested their academy experience was of some benefit and praised the program. One academy in particular received significant praise and appreciation. It seemed this academy was successful as they provided athletes with support in terms of their career and life-skill development. For example Peter stated:

The academy is pretty good, a lot of life-skills and some rugby stuff. You've got to make a commitment to be there every week.

When Peter was asked about what sort of life-skill activities are covered:

Budgeting and cooking, goals for life...the academy has been really good.

Another benefit described by players was the ability to study free of charge, through a partnership brokered between some clubs and various tertiary providers. For those players who did want to study whilst playing rugby this scheme seemed to be of benefit. For example, Dave suggested:

They work pretty well with that zero fees scheme down here... The polytech down here is all free. So it is quite easy to do papers if you want.

All three players who were contracted to a Super 12 team expressed satisfaction at their level of assistance. This is not of great surprise due to their increased access to

resources and personnel over those at the semi-professional level. For example Joe stated:

They've got pretty much everything. They have got guys who will give you advice in most areas. If I needed some advice I could just ring someone up.

As one of the three players who had access to a Professional Development Manager (PDM), Rob confirmed Joe's statement and spoke of his interaction with a PDM, where he was able to discuss some of the salient issues that young elite rugby players face today:

When I was getting into rugby and contracts started coming, just to sort out getting a good balance between social life and rugby and education, and just trying to plan for what's going to happen throughout my career and what could happen if it stops.

However, those New Zealand players who did not have a Super 12 contract and therefore no access to a PDM, felt that they would greatly benefit if they were able to utilise such a resource. For example, Neil described how he might benefit if such access was provided:

I bumped into a few of the personal development officers. I was talking to the Otago one and he was saying that it's his line of work. Like if guys want to get their HC license [truck] he can do things like that and he sounds pretty pro-active with the University. When I was talking to that guy down in Otago he gave me a piece of paper with what his role was and it all looked fairly professional. It looks like you wouldn't have a worry in the world. Even if we could ring up the guy in Hamilton [PDM] to talk to that would be good.

Dave confirmed this:

I know that some of the Super 12 boys go to see Alex McKenzie, the professional development manager; he sounds ideal.



To help gain a better understanding of these young players' needs, and in particular post-sport or parallel sport career interests, the question was asked in the survey as to what areas they might like assistance or information that could assist them in their alternative career planning. Understanding property purchasing and selling was the most requested area of information and advice, with 71% of players showing an interest (see Figure 10.1). Understanding more about finances was also considered an important area (59%), and small business operation was the third most requested (53%) area for advice or information in career planning.

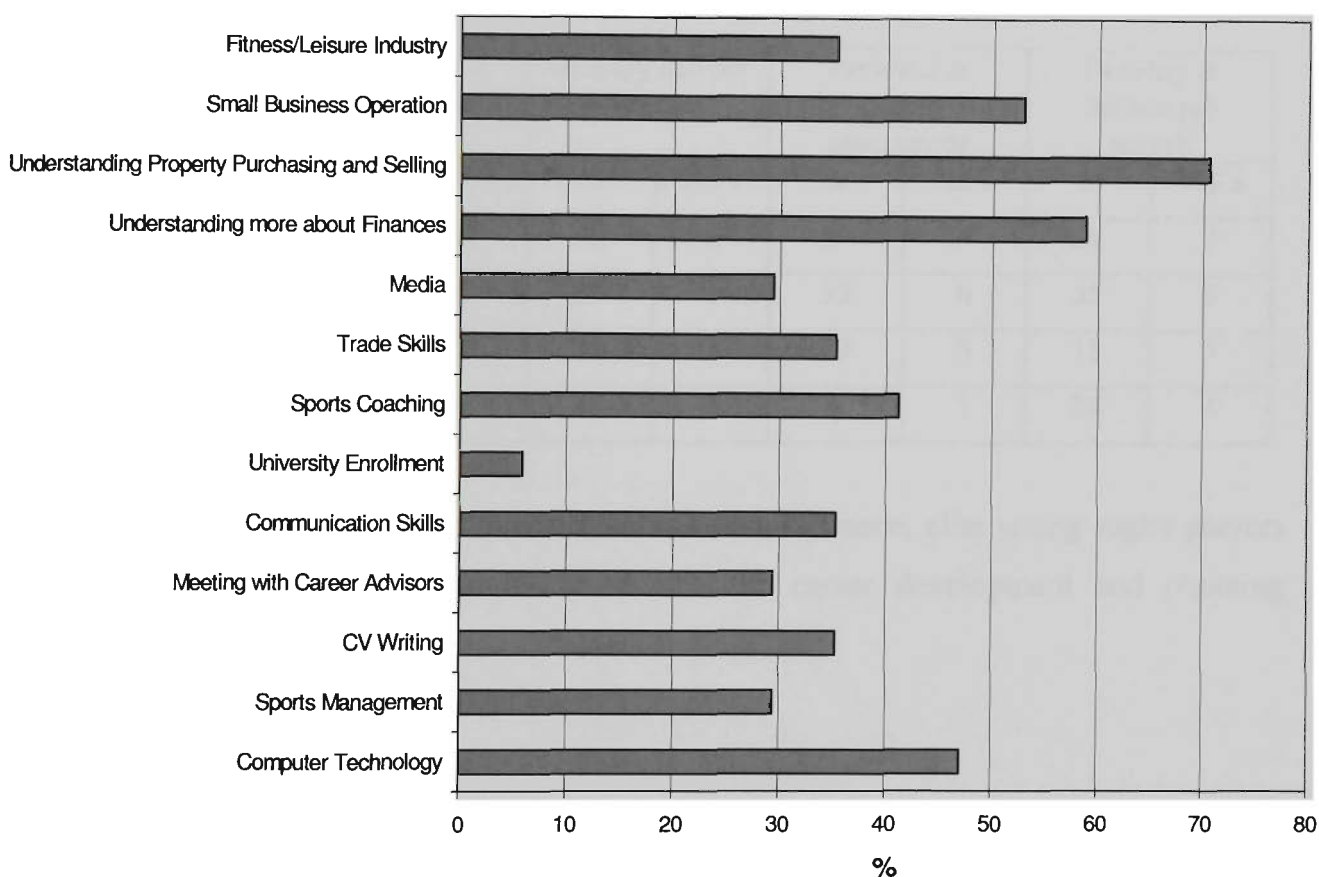


Figure 10.1: Required areas of assistance or information (New Zealand)

Players were also asked what method of career development and planning would be of most assistance, through questions such as: ‘What type of program would best suit your needs?’ ‘When would be the best time to offer such a program?’, and ‘What method of delivery is most preferred?’ The players ranked the following initiatives in terms of their perceived helpfulness (see table 10.5) in their career development and planning (in order of priority):

1. Obtain actual work experience related to their career choice or in a career that best suited them.
2. Identify and initiate further education or training needed to obtain their career goals (e.g. education and career counselling).
3. Identify their personal qualities and match them to careers that best suited them (e.g. personal and career assessment).
4. Develop and initiate a job search (e.g. preparing a résumé/curriculum vitae, identifying and applying to prospective employers).

(Categories adopted from Hawkins and Blann, 1996, p.55).

Table 10.5 Preferred program type (New Zealand)

Level of helpfulness	Obtain work experience		Identify further education		Personal & career assessment		Develop & initiate job search	
	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's
Most helpful	65	11	35	6	29	5	24	4
2 <sup>nd</sup> most helpful	24	4	35	6	35	6	35	6
3 <sup>rd</sup> most helpful	12	2	12	2	29	5	18	3
Least helpful	0	0	18	3	6	1	24	4

In terms of when they would like to receive such assistance, elite young rugby players indicated that they would prefer to receive the career development and planning programs (in order of priority):

1. Both during and after their rugby career.
2. During their rugby career.
3. After their rugby career.

(Categories adopted from Hawkins and Blann, 1996, p.58).

Table 10.6 Preferred period for program delivery (New Zealand)

Preference level	During and after playing		During playing		After playing	
	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's
Most preferred	65	11	47	8	24	4
2 <sup>nd</sup> most preferred	35	6	47	8	6	1
Least preferred	0	0	6	1	71	12

Finally, the preferred methods of program delivery for these athletes were (in order of priority):

1. Individual counselling.
2. Small group counselling.
3. Seminars.
4. Reading material.
5. Conferences.

(Categories adopted from Hawkins and Blann, 1996, p.56).

Table 10.7 Preferred method of program delivery (New Zealand)

Preference level	Individual counselling		Small group counselling		Seminars		Reading material		Conferences	
	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's
Most preferred	71	12	41	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> most preferred	18	3	47	8	18	3	12	2	6	1
3 <sup>rd</sup> most preferred	12	2	12	2	41	7	41	7	12	2
4 <sup>th</sup> most preferred	0	0	0	0	29	5	12	2	53	9
Least preferred	0	0	0	0	12	2	35	6	29	5

From both the questionnaire and interview results of the young elite players in New Zealand, it was apparent that many felt they needed more assistance, support and resources to aid them in their life outside rugby. The New Zealand coaches and management suggested that young players such as those in this study need to be given more attention in this area as they are at risk of focusing all their time, energy and identity on rugby often to the detriment of other pursuits in their life such as education and alternative career planning. Coaches and management concur that there is often not the support and resources available for this researched group of players who fall just below the Super 12 level. For example, as a coach, Barry described the importance of providing support and assistance to young elite players:

...it's all very well giving the support to the professional athletes but it's just as important and in fact more important from a franchise point of view that you give the support to the guys just below that. The young players like [young elite rugby player] who hadn't made Super 12 at that time, he had his life pretty sorted anyway, but if he hadn't he obviously had the talent to

be a professional rugby player. He was the sort of guy that really needs that sort of career development stuff. But before he becomes a professional rugby player he is actually working towards something so that if something happens and he doesn't make it his life is going to carry on.

Barry went further to confirm players' claims that access to a PDM would provide excellent assistance to young elite academy players in their off-field lives and that this was a gap in the services provided:

I personally believe that the career guy [PDM] that works with the Blues [a Super 12 Franchise in NZ], it can't be a full-time job working with 30 players if for half the year they're not selected. So what happens with the other half of the year? For my mind they should be targeting the younger players that are coming up through the U19s and U21s and spending some time with them to see if there are ways that they could help them in support of the academies that have been set up.

Coaches and management identified that the young elite players such as those in this study required more assistance than they were receiving. It seems paradoxical that the players who required the most support and assistance were receiving it the least. Arguably the players most at risk are those who have spent three years in a rugby academy, have not secured a professional contract but have also not progressed in their education or career development. As a Professional Development Manager, Greg was asked if he thought the level of support for the young elite athletes was adequate:

No I don't think that's adequate, I think there could be more done... Ultimately what we would want, I would think, is the focus to be on those guys. So by the time they get into the Super 12 and NPC, you don't have to spend much time with them, they're up, they have developed the skills required to become a professional. They're aware and understand the requirements of being a professional player. Trained in some of the skills that they need. So I think we need a little bit more focus on the academy level athletes...So the guys who are in the academy system do need some help like we help them, they've got an academy manager who keeps an eye

on them and does some of that pastoral care as well, we just add value if we can. The ones that are most at risk I believe are the ones that go through the academy system, by the time they graduate out of the academy system they still haven't quite made it, they're fringe players as well still. But they've got no support structures in place, so they're the ones I believe are probably the most at risk.

When asked how this might be improved, he suggested:

We can extend the program to pick those guys up if we can, I think there's got to be something that can be done. As I said before if we identified them at the regional level as potential elite players then maybe if we've got a relationship with the academy of sport we might be able to pick them up through the ACE [Athlete Career and Education] program.

Data from players, coaches and management suggest that there is a deficiency in the level of support offered to young elite rugby players who are 'at risk' of not achieving a professional rugby contract, having no education, and no career or occupational options.

### *10.2.1 Mentors*

The researcher raised the concept of players having a mentor to assist them in their life outside rugby. Players suggested it would be of value to have a mentor in their lives, however, they also emphasised the importance of a mentor being the right kind of person and someone with whom they could connect. Players suggested that a mentor would be valuable to assist them with their on-and off-field performance and development. It is the off-field benefits that a mentor might provide that are of interest to this study. In the following, Dave described the value of a mentor in his off-field life:

You also need someone to guide you. You can easily go out drinking when you are talented rugby player. I have got a lot of mates who could be where I am but I was lucky to get dragged away from it, so I am very fortunate.

For some of the players, a mentor would be able to provide guidance, or act as a role model for off-field behaviour, and may assist in avoiding such problems heavily documented in the media regarding anti-social behaviour of professional footballers. For example, when Timana was asked about the role of a mentor he replied:

Yeah, before Michael I thought I was the man, just walking around thinking I was God's gift and that. My rugby started going down a bit. Having a mentor just helps you keep your feet on the ground.

It was also suggested that a mentor could provide the players with someone independent who they can confide in should they want to discuss certain issues with someone outside of the union. For example, Conrad stated:

Definitely, that would be great, 'cause quite a few players are scared of going to the unions, 'cause if they go to the unions it's going to fly around the office.

Coaching and management staff also endorsed the notion of mentors to assist players in their career development and life outside rugby. They viewed mentors as playing a vital role in supporting the athlete in his off-field life. For example, Don, a management member of the Rugby Union Players' Association spoke of his goal of having a mentor for every player:

Our next target is, ok now that you understand it and you're starting to do it lets work to getting 100 percent career mentors... Our aim over the next couple of years is for all players to have a career mentor, no matter what industry they're in. We think that's achievable. That mentor might be just providing the player advice regarding their current studies, someone who's in the industry the player wants to be in. We're setting up a number of those relationships who assist the player during their career to get some work experience, might be paid work, it might be full time/part time work during the club rugby season.

As a coach Barry also supported the idea of a mentor to assist with financial and other guidance:

I would really applaud that [mentors for players]. I think that could be an extension of what the guys are doing at the Super 12 level. You know what it's like when you buy your first house, all of a sudden you need a solicitor for the first time in your life and if your parents aren't in business or doing things regularly or you're in a town where they're not there all of a sudden you need someone to guide you... I know that, [a young elite rugby player] for example, has gotten huge benefits out of having someone as a bit of a financial and life mentor who is not his father. I think that is a good idea. The problem is finding the right people to do it, who have got the time.

In both New Zealand and NSW the number of elite young Polynesian rugby players is increasing, and in one Super 12 team in New Zealand, management has recognised this and assigned a Samoan mentor to assist the Polynesian players. This initiative is described by Greg:

What I've tried to do in that area is to get a mentor from the community. Get one of the guys, for the Samoan guys, a local Samoan. A guy that I knew and was well respected in rugby circles and got him to keep an eye on some of the guys. I filter messages through to him and say can you make sure these guys are doing something in this area. Rather than me approaching them directly I do it through him.

Although the notion of mentors was well received by the coaches and management interviewed for this study, it was evidently not an initiative that had been widely implemented, with no clear responsibility on either the clubs or the players themselves to effect such an idea. For example, Ken spoke of the rarity of mentors in AFL, but does suggest that young athletes should be pro-active in this area:

It's just so rare. It just doesn't happen. Full stop. It happens in business, you get an older partner in a business where it's an accountancy practice. A young bloke comes in and he sees him as what he might have been like at

the same age so he takes a real care and interest in that person. It's lovely when that happens. But if you're a young person and you're smart you'd be actually seeking it.

The data in this section has suggested that NSW young rugby players are largely satisfied with career development and planning programs offered, although they had some suggestions regarding components of the content and delivery of programs. In New Zealand the young players seemed largely unsatisfied with, and at times highly critical of, the level of support they were receiving in their career development, planning and education. These young men voiced their needs, in particular suggesting more access to resources and personnel. Coaches and management supported New Zealand players' sentiments agreeing that the level of support was inadequate and there was a gap in their services in this area, that was leaving these young men 'at risk'. The contradiction here is that it is these young players who require the most support from governing bodies in terms of their career development and post-sport planning. There was general support for the idea of a mentor for players to assist in their off-field development and provide independent support and guidance.

### **10.3 Alternative Options: Planning for the Future**

This section explores the types, and extent, of career development and post-rugby planning that the young men in this study were involved in that might provide them with alternative occupational or career options. Approximately half of the players had started to plan for their future careers or occupations through involvement in some kind of tertiary education. Not including education, the majority of players had not been, or were not at the time of the study, involved in any aspects of career development or post-rugby planning. Some players mentioned they would like to, or had plans to, talk to someone about their future career options, however, players were generally not involved in any type of work experience, career goal-setting or the process of identifying alternative career options. The general lack of post-rugby planning was illustrated by New Zealand player Chris, when asked: "Is there any ways at all you've planned for a career outside of rugby, have you set any goals for a career, do you do any networking, or do you have a C.V?" He replied: "No, haven't got any of that stuff yet.



This was further confirmed by NSW player Carl who, when asked about his planning for a future occupation or career, replied: “I’ve got to do a lot more planning, I haven’t planned too much.”

Results from the questionnaire (table 10.8) support the interview data, indicating that only 24 percent of New Zealand based players had developed a career plan, despite every player previously indicating that planning for an alternative career would enhance their post-rugby career opportunities. The reasons for this discrepancy may require further research, although it is possible that the players may not have been provided with suitable resources, are not pro-active in seeking opportunities, perceive they do not have enough time or energy to engage in career development or planning, require more assistance from rugby management, or are simply delaying this due to their perceived amount of time left in the sport.

Table 10.8 Player’s responses to the development of a career plan (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No’s
Strongly disagree	18	3
Disagree	29	5
Don’t know	29	5
Agree	24	4
Strongly agree	0	0

It seemed those players who were already involved in part-time work or were competing at the Super 12 level had a higher awareness of the importance of planning for the future and showed concern at the lack of planning on behalf of their team members. Some of these players provided perceptions of how other young elite rugby players were approaching their career development and planning. For example, Conrad, who was working part-time in a job he viewed as a career option, was concerned at the number of players who had not planned for the end of their elite playing days:

A lot of players are too busy thinking about the game, not what happens afterwards, that’s just my personal view, ‘cause everyone else is like ‘I want

to make money playing rugby', but not realising what happens if you blow your back out next week. Then what are you going to do?

This was confirmed by Super 12 player Joe:

Some guys haven't done much planning, I'm quite lucky I know I've got to have some things planned and I have to get out and do it.

For those players who had given thought to a future occupation or career, furthering their education was the most common way of doing this. These players generally viewed education as a necessary tool to gain qualifications for future careers. New Zealand players Timana, Neil and Craig described their engagement in education:

I'm studying at [leading rugby club] doing a coaching course, training to be a rugby development officer (Timana).

I started doing my BCom at [local] University (Neil).

Sports science at Polytech (Craig)

Players were asked if they had given any thought to career options they may like to be engaged in post-rugby. Many of the players were unable to describe an alternative career option. It was apparent that some players had given this little thought and there was a sense of vagueness surrounding their responses to the question of alternative career options. It seemed some players felt they had ample time to think about their future options and it was not an issue that required their immediate attention. The impression was gained that they would defer decisions until the end, or close to the end, of their playing career. For example, Dave, who was not involved in any education or part-time work, spoke in a relaxed manner about his future career planning:

No. I haven't sat down and thought about it. Just buy a business or a property down here or around the country.

This was similar to Carl, who when asked if he could describe an alternative career, replied: “Not at the moment, not really.”

The uncertainty regarding an alternative career that was evident from the interview results was confirmed by the questionnaire, where only 35 percent of players indicated they knew what they might do for income should their rugby playing days end (table 10.9). Such results suggest that players had not given a lot of thought to the end of their elite playing days or what they might do for income should they not ‘make it’ in rugby.

Table 10.9 Player’s responses to knowing what they will do for an income post-sport (New Zealand)

Response Category	%	No’s
Strongly disagree	18	3
Disagree	12	2
Don’t know	35	6
Agree	29	5
Strongly agree	6	1

In some cases players had only given thought to a future occupation or career after experiencing a career-threatening injury. Such an event highlighted to these players that professional rugby was an uncertain occupation and one which, if unsuccessful, would leave them with no immediate career options. Many players did not see themselves getting injured and therefore perceived little need for alternative career planning at this point. However, some players discussed why career planning had become more important for them after suffering a career-threatening injury and as a result have engaged in post-rugby planning. For example, Tevita stated:

Yeah, ‘cause this is the first major injury I’ve had, so I’ve never really looked at what I wanted to do if I had an injury, ‘cause I’ve looked at myself as never getting injured. Now that I’ve experienced it, it’s good to have something to fall back on.

When asked if he perceived that many players think the same way as he once did he replied: “Yeah, but once they’ve experienced an injury they’ll realise.”

A small number of players provided detailed descriptions of a career they might like to pursue if they were unable to secure a career as a rugby player, illustrating that they had given some thought to their future lives. For example, NSW player Sean has a clear alternative career option and goal and could describe what was required for him to achieve that:

I'd like to do a teaching course, I want to be a liaison officer for Aboriginal kids, obviously I'm Aboriginal. I just want to help the young kids and give them opportunities that I didn't have, also the opportunities that I did have. Probably also do primary teaching and then move onto high school. Start off with the primary school and just normal things, even dental and eye sight, just making sure they're looked after, and teaching the parents and other people about it. I know they're lacking in that area, I'm a people person, and I think that job would be suitable for me.

Other players also described an occupational or career option based on their interests away from rugby. For example, as a player not involved in education, work or work experience, Troy was asked if he might like a part-time job whilst playing rugby he replied:

I wouldn't mind working in a video store, that would be pretty cool aye, they would probably let you watch the videos.

When asked what about if rugby did not work out for him, what would he like to do? He replied:

Maybe own a video store aye, cause then I'd be able to watch all the videos.

Despite previously acknowledging the benefits, many players were not involved in any form of alternative career development or planning. Some players perceived their peers were too involved in the game to think beyond it and others suggested that this would not change until they suffer a career-threatening injury. For those who had given thought to their future employment, education was the most popular method of

preparing for this. Many players exhibited a sense of uncertainty and vagueness towards any future careers or occupational alternatives, often unable to provide an alternative occupation they would like to be involved in. Many players had given little thought to their future, suggesting that these young men generally had low levels of career awareness.

**10.4 The Importance of Education and Training, But is There Time?**

There was a great deal of tension surrounding education in the lives of these young elite rugby players. They acknowledged the importance of education but in many cases found it difficult to negotiate a way of incorporating it into their life. Approximately half of all players interviewed had previously, or were currently, undertaking some form of tertiary education, as shown in table 10.10. The most popular courses being undertaken were Exercise Science, Physical Education, Rugby Development Officer Training and Bachelor of Commerce. Table 10.10 represents players from both New Zealand and NSW.

Table 10.10 Education status (New Zealand and NSW)

Currently Studying/Studied	%	No's
Yes	56	14
No	44	11

The vast majority of interviewed players held the view that education was an important part of life. Players largely viewed education as important for their post-playing life to provide them with something to 'fall back on'. For example Neil, Sean and Rob stated:

I definitely want to have it, like when I have finished playing footy I want to have it (Neil, N.Z).

Yeah definitely, that's why I really want to get something for after football. That's why I want to go to uni and have something, even if it takes three or four years to do that, as long as I have it there (Sean, NSW).

That's why I'm doing a degree as well really, gives something to fall back on, rather than just being 100 percent a professional athlete and not having any education (Rob, N.Z).

Some players suggested that education will be something they will look into once they have finished playing rugby, while others did not see themselves undertaking further education but still could see the important role it might play. For example, when Tevita was asked about whether he might need further education he replied:

I think I do, but I don't see myself down that road... but I reckon you do need it though.

The role and importance of education in these young men's lives is significant. In the questionnaire every New Zealand player indicated it was either important or very important that they further their education whilst playing elite rugby, as illustrated in table 10.11. Of the reasons why they felt it was so important to get an education, 59% indicated it was so they had something to fall back on, 29% indicated it was due to the risk of injury, 24% had other reasons such as 'good to have other interests', (table 10.12). (Note: some players expressed more than one reason why they would like to engage in education).

Table 10.11 Importance of furthering education (New Zealand)

Importance of furthering education whilst playing	%	No's
Very unimportant	0	0
Unimportant	0	0
Don't know	0	0
Important	53	9
Very important	47	8

Table 10.12 Reason to gain education (New Zealand)

Reason to gain education	%	No's
Something to fall back on	59	10
Injury	29	5
Transition help	6	1
Good for other interests	6	1
Other	12	2

Whilst many of these young men valued education, some felt that playing elite rugby was a short window of opportunity they had been provided with and engaging in other pursuits such as education would only act as a distraction. As a consequence rugby was given priority status, often to the detriment of education. For example, New Zealand player Richard saw no room for education at this stage of his life due to the importance of rugby:

It is going to get bigger when I am older, it is a huge part of life. But if I don't give rugby a good crack now it will be too late.

However, as previously discussed by coaching and management staff in Chapter Nine, players would have a higher chance of succeeding in rugby if they were undertaking some education due to its contribution to a balance of life.

#### *10.4.1 Combining Education and Elite Sport*

Although players recognised the importance of education there was a tension between this and elite rugby participation. Many were having difficulty combining this part of their life with playing elite rugby. For some it was about being physically exhausted, for others the structure of professional rugby did not allow them to adapt to different timetables. Of those players who were currently undertaking education at the time of the interview, many spoke of the difficulty combining education and elite rugby, and as a consequence some players stated that they had to defer their university studies or withdraw completely. This has numerous implications for athletes' career development and post-rugby planning, their identity, balance of life, transition into a post-playing

career and, according to coaches and management, their playing performance. The NSW players had more difficulty combining education and elite rugby as at the time of the study they were committed to rugby five days and up to 30 hours per week. New Zealand players had a little more spare time and therefore were more able to combine education and elite sport, however they still encountered numerous difficulties. The structure of rugby was perceived as the major source of difficulties for players as they suggested they were often too physically tired to study, and/or not able to find the time. The issue of lack of time is contradicted through questionnaire results where over 80 percent of New Zealand players indicated they committed less than 21 hours per week to rugby, arguably leaving them time to study part-time. The fact that over half of the New Zealand athletes were already undertaking education further illustrates that it was possible, although still considered difficult.

The perceived difficulty of combining education and elite rugby is illustrated in table 10.13, where 41% of New Zealand athletes indicated they felt they were not effectively combining their sport and education/career goals.

Table 10.13 Combining education and sport (New Zealand)

Effectively combining sport and education/career goals	%	No's
Yes	59	10
No	41	7

In New Zealand, many of the provincial unions had a partnership with a university or polytechnic, allowing players the opportunity to gain a scholarship and study free of charge. Although this was appreciated by the players, it did not ease the difficulty of combining rugby and education. Players in both New Zealand and NSW often suggested that if education and training providers could be more flexible to meet their needs then they may be more likely to undertake part-time study. Many felt that a stronger partnership with a university needed to be established which in turn would benefit both the players and the university. Suggestions involved universities offering more courses through distance or extramural programs and the clubs providing players with the time to engage in these. NSW player Justin provided suggestions on how to get players to engage in education:



I think the players just need to get the degrees and everything behind them, but I think with it [rugby] being professional and your full time job it's really hard. Whether they can try to somehow structure it that the courses for uni can be done... that maybe in NSW rugby they can set up with a university that the boys can do the courses they want by correspondence or they can have two afternoons off a week to do the study that they need to pass the course... The universities can use us as much as we can use them, for whatever they want to use it for. Something like that would make you feel a lot safer, at least you've got the degree or what-ever else behind you when you finish rugby.

Justin was one player who, due to rugby commitments and the inflexibility of university courses, had to withdraw from his tertiary studies. Like other players in the same situation Justin expressed disappointment at having to forego his education:

Yeah I would've liked to at least finish the course, or do it by correspondence, but unfortunately the course I was doing wasn't available.

It seemed that despite the rhetoric, governing rugby bodies and universities are presently unable to provide a structure that enables elite rugby players to compete in their sport and undertake part-time study. For example, Joe spoke of his personal experience trying to combine playing and studying:

Originally, I went to university but the demands of rugby and going away for six weeks, that is not viable. I went to the University of Wellington, then went away for six weeks to France for a World Cup under 19's, they pretty much said there is no way I can pass my uni... One of the main things is university, they need to be a bit more lenient with rugby players. I had one university lady say to me when I was 17 just getting ready to go to France for six weeks on tour "there is no point going to uni, why do you bother". I was pretty gutted.

Due to the current structure employed by both rugby unions and universities, players suggested that they are effectively being denied the opportunity to engage in education, further their career options, and develop life-skills. Some players even had to sit university exams while on tour with a rugby team, providing a less than ideal setting. For example, Neil stated:

Yeah one time we came straight out after the winning game and went into the manager's room to sit an exam. So we were not in the best state of mind. You think they [university] could have arranged something for us. It was almost as if they didn't believe us [that we would be on tour].

Due to this tension, players perceived that they had to choose between rugby and education due to the difficulty of combining the two. Not surprisingly rugby was the first choice. For example, NSW player Andrew stated:

I decided to do this [rugby] full time... I don't think I'd be able to do both, I mean you get home from this and the last thing you want to do is study.

Brad confirmed this and looked like becoming another young player foregoing education to play elite rugby.

It's pretty hard because in the NPC team it's pretty full on. But I only did a couple of weeks in it full on. But the weeks I was in it, it was pretty hard, so if I am in that position next year I would flag classes altogether.

As education was considered important for many of these players, they often expressed frustration at not being able to combine it with playing rugby. The structure of rugby and the commitment required was considered one of the major barriers to athletes engaging in education. This again raises the issue of coaches and management endorsing education but possibly not realistically providing the opportunities and time for players to engage in it, as was discussed in Chapter Nine. Frustration at this structure of elite rugby and the way it is impacting on himself and other young rugby players was expressed by New Zealand players Hamish:

... I spent a whole year training and I didn't even get to play a game for the top team. I could of had that year off and done my studies. So I believe the young guys are not getting a fair chance to do their studies.

However, while many players reported difficulty combining education and elite rugby some suggested it can still be done. For example Rob stated:

I just put a bit more emphasis on it. I just told myself I was either going to do it or not going to do it, no point pissing around with it. It was something I wanted to get, a degree.

As reported in the previous chapter, coaches and management stated that they would encourage players to have something outside of rugby such as education or work due to the positive impacts on identity, balance of life, life-skills and preparation for life after sport. However, many also noted that it was difficult to combine professional rugby and education due to the timetable clash of both activities, although some argued that it was still possible and provided examples of such. Like players, coaches and management also raised the issue that a more flexible university timetable and delivery might result in more players undertaking education or training. It could be suggested from these results that there need to be allowances from both the rugby industry and universities to enable players to undertake education and participate in elite sport. Despite their previous talk of the associated benefits, coaching and management staff from rugby did not mention the possibility of providing athletes with set days to dedicate to education or training, yet they spoke of how the structure of rugby inhibited such engagement for these young men. For example, Professional Development Manager, Greg stated:

They're able to, but it's a struggle. One of the biggest problems with that is that the schedule changes too much, the weekly schedule, and they can't plan their life around with lectures and stuff like that. So what I find is that if they make the Super 12 or NPC team a lot of them will either withdraw from a number of courses, maybe stay with one or two so that they can actually physically fit it in. Otherwise they're just going to miss too much,

especially if you're doing a course that's got labs, like the sciences. It's not so bad with the art subjects or commerce subjects.

Brendan confirmed Greg's comment but placed more blame on the structure of university courses as opposed to the structure of rugby:

It is encouraged, again it's one of the complexities of the position and being a professional player, it is very difficult to find courses that are lenient. Quite often they will start but through commitments and so forth and then miss something and they'll get behind, and it will get too much, and quite often they'll withdraw from it.

It does seem that some action is being taken to attempt to address this issue, with rugby management in New Zealand discussing the possibility of setting up a partnership with tertiary institutions to deliver flexible courses. This was an idea discussed by players, coaches and management and was seen as one possible solution. For example, in the following quote Greg described the possibility of such a partnership:

Well, at the moment we are currently investigating as a result of going over to Melbourne, setting up a memorandum of understanding or trying to get something up and running with the university and tertiary institutions around the district. Hopefully we might be able to roll that out nationally to get some sort of arrangement that there can be provisions made for students who are in the position, not just professional rugby players, but people in the performing arts like musicians and dancers and stuff like that, who are doing tertiary study but have to perform and be away from the university for a time. That's not up and running but it's something that we are investigating and trying to build.

Combining education with elite sport participation was not only an issue faced by rugby; the participants in this study from AFL and rugby league also described the tensions this can produce. These sports also struggled to provide the players with enough time to engage in education despite acknowledging all the associated benefits. For example, former AFL coach Ken, in an earlier quote, noted that athletes needed to

be given time so they can undertake these types of pursuits for their benefit both on and off the field, however in the following quote he also acknowledged the contradiction:

We claim it all, the university, they market it all over their newsletters, telling the world that they're students at [local university] and making it almost impossible to remain so. It's like saying, yes I believe in this and then saying that we're going to be here from nine til five everyday and you can't do anything else in your life.

While acknowledging the difficulties involved, Ken went on to describe how his club dealt with this issue, providing examples and offering possible solutions, and describing how elite AFL players have completed demanding degrees whilst competing at the highest level, through club support, assistance and flexibility:

One of our best players, it's a really interesting story, he came off a large farm in Western Victoria. He qualified after he left School as a wool classer, a qualification to help on the farm... He came over here, still working as a wool classer, well it just about killed him. Travelling all over Victoria, physically throwing the wool all over the joint and he's coming in absolutely buggered. He said, 'I know you want me to work but I can't do this anymore, it's killing me'. I said, 'well what do you want to do with your life?' He said, 'I'll go back when I've finished, just go back on the farm, work the old man's farm'. I said, 'isn't there anything else that you would really like to do. What's your dream?' He said, 'yeah, I wouldn't mind being a vet'. And I said, 'well shit, you've gotta be pretty smart'. And he said, 'I was pretty smart at school'. So we went to the university and checked it out. He had to do a year science first and if you're good enough you can get into vet science. So he did a year science and got a good mark to get into vet science. He went up to Queensland, so we virtually didn't have him for a year. Did a brilliant course in Queensland and got back and enrolled in university the next year. He is still playing and is a qualified vet. Still playing elite football and is doing very well... At the same time, Michael Sexton became a chiropractor a six year chiropractor

course. Another bloke did a commerce degree. It is feasible and there is a bit of heartache along the way to bring it about.

The data show that the majority of elite young rugby players in the current study regarded education and training as an important component of their life. These young men spoke of the avenues, security and options it provided them for a life after sport and opportunities for alternatives other than rugby. However, tensions arose as they attempted to combine elite competitive sport and education. Players perceived that in many cases they were required to make decisions based on priority and in most cases this resulted in the foregoing of education or training. This tension became a source of frustration for these young men. Players cited the changing week-to-week structure of elite rugby and the inflexible nature of university programs as specific barriers to their engagement in education and training. NSW athletes were particularly affected as they committed up to 30 hours per week playing or training for rugby, whereas the majority of New Zealand athletes committed less than 21 hours per week. Coaches and management also endorsed education for its capacity to expand the athlete's identity, increase life-skills, enhance performances and assist them in their post-sport planning. However, coaches and management confirmed players' experiences of trying to combine career development and rugby by suggesting that the structure of elite rugby coupled with inflexible university courses were inhibiting players' education and training. Players, coaches and management suggested that a partnership with education and training providers might act to ease the difficulty of this issue.

### **10.5 Career Development and Planning: Whose Responsibility?**

To gain a deeper understanding of the provision of resources, coaches, management and players were asked whose responsibility it was to provide these young men with guidance, support and programs and to ensure that players are actually undertaking or engaging in some career development or post-sport planning. The data has shown what is offered in the way of assistance and programs, however the literature suggests that even if programs are offered, they are not always taken up by the players (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). There were varying perspectives from players, some suggesting that such programs are the responsibility of the governing body, e.g. NZRU or ARU, whilst

others nominated the various Super 12 franchises, provincial unions and themselves as individuals as responsible for career development and planning.

From the survey results, players perceived their provincial rugby club as having the most important role in providing career development and planning assistance (table 10.14). Players were asked to rank the importance of the role of their province, their franchise (if they belonged to one) and the NZRU.

Table 10.14 Role of organisation (New Zealand)

Response Category	Provincial role		Franchise/Super 12 role		NZRU role	
	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's
Very unimportant	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unimportant	0	0	0	0	18	3
Don't know	12	2	35	6	24	6
Important	41	7	47	8	47	8
Very important	47	8	18	3	12	2

Although players indicated that the provinces held much of the responsibility in providing any support, they also noted that Super 12 franchises and the NZRU also have an important role. It may be suggested then that a collaborative approach between all these organisations may be the most effective. From a NSW management point of view, a collaborative approach was also suggested, where the responsibility can be shared amongst all governing bodies, who as employers of this workforce have a responsibility for the welfare of their contracted players. For example, Margaret stated:

I think that that the whole three [Australian Rugby Union, NSW Waratahs and Rugby Union Players' Association] have ownership in it, and that they're recognised in preparing the players for their life after sport. Just like any employer in the corporate world would in terms of having employment assistance program. This is an EAP, an employment assistance program, and it's looking after the welfare of your players. So I think the responsibility lies, yes legally in terms of looking after the welfare of the players, it lies with those three parties.

Although players favoured a certain amount of input from their unions and governing bodies, many showed an awareness of the role they as individuals play in this process, noting their responsibility in their own career development and planning. Some players suggested that they needed to take some responsibility for this in order to enhance their own self-sufficiency, a point that was made by many of the coaching and management staff as indicated in Chapter Nine. For example, NSW players Brett and Justin, note that once the resources are in place, they have the responsibility to utilise them:

All they can do is supply the funds to give you the service and then once the service is provided to the player at the end of the day it's up to them. I mean spoon feeding is all good and well, but... it's like anything, you've got to be able to do it yourself (Brett).

I think you can't expect them to do everything for you, I think that could be a little bit of a problem, expecting to be spoon fed and pushing all our problems on to somebody else which I think isn't really a good thing. I think they have to have a lot of the programs in place for us. I think they should be placing a lot more pressure on us to be making a career choice. I think that should start to happen now, which hasn't happened I think in the first few years of professional football... is that it's starting to happen that players are having to study, or they're making them have jobs while they're playing so there's something else to fall back on. I think it's a bit of both it's probably their responsibility to have the work there and the careers there to be pushing us along, but it's also the player's responsibility to realise that football is not going to last forever and you've got to think about life after it (Justin).

It is interesting to note that Justin slightly contradicts himself as he argues that players need to be pro-active, yet he requests more pressure on him from the union to motivate him to make alternative career choices. A joint responsibility, one where the union has programs in place, and the players are pro-active in utilising these programs was seen as the best option. For example, in the following quotes, New Zealand players Conrad and



Timana state that much of the responsibility for taking up career development and planning provisions lies with them:

I think there's a bit of responsibility from the union, I think there's a fair bit of responsibility, but in the end the onus is on yourself, to be honest (Conrad).

Pretty much myself actually, maybe the guys that are looking after the players, sort of the players' association making sure the players are playing rugby and being looked after off the field too (Timana).

Similar responses were received from the management staff who stated for the most part that the responsibility remained with the organisations to provide the support and for the players to take it up. For example Professional Development Manager Brendan stated:

At the end of the day it's totally the players choice. How much they use it, up to them, all you can do is offer it to them.

As a coach, Barry again places emphasis on the notion of individual responsibility, and illustrates his advocacy for players to be pro-active, suggesting that if players are not successful in professional rugby, it was their responsibility to have prepared themselves for alternatives. This is largely contrary to the views of other coaches and managers in this study:

I'm one of these people who believe you make your bed you lie in. I personally believe the player should get off his own arse and do it themselves and if they're needing help then sing out for it, go to the manager and say 'hey, I think I need some help in this area'...Whose responsibility? Well I believe it should be the players but at the end of the day the rugby union has taken it on board and I believe are doing a very good job... I think players have got to be encouraged to get out there and do things and I think the career development officers in the franchise is great, 'cause they're working with them and showing them the way and then it's up to them to go and start study or do chipping or labouring when they can

or do whatever, and that's great, 'cause they've actually physically got to get out and do something, rather than be handed something... So if they end up missing out on being a professional, well they should be looking after their life anyway.

Perspectives from the rugby industry were largely mirrored by the wider sports industry in regards to this aspect of player welfare. It was generally identified that professional sport teams need to recognise that they have a duty of care to their athletes, however the onus to employ the resources offered remains with the players. For example, from a rugby league perspective, Jeff suggested:

I think there is a duty of care that clubs have to, really should have over their employees. I believe that in any organisation that advancement is not just a specific job it's a holistic approach that we take. I believe that it is an advantage that we have adopted a holistic approach for the development of these players and you just don't see them as a commodity.

Speaking from an AFL perspective, Ken confirmed Jeff's comments:

I reckon we've got an absolute obligation to encourage these people in other than their athlete's voice...there's a lot that needs to be supported in a different direction.

Like their rugby counterparts, coaches and management in the wider sports industry also felt it was beneficial for athletes to take some responsibility in their own career development and planning. For example, Jeff discussed the role of the athlete in the undertaking of a TAFE course:

What I found is this...if we paid for it completely there was no compunction on the player to finish the course. But what we decided to do was to make them pay for it. We charge them to do the courses. And what I found then was that became an extrinsic motivator if you like. It was intrinsic and extrinsic because their pocket was hit and was the fact that they then wanted to, they were motivated within themselves.

There was general consensus from players, coaches and management that if the programs and resources are made available by the clubs then it is the responsibility of the players to utilise them. However, a question that arises from this is how do rugby organisations get players to take it up, when it was earlier demonstrated that some players perceived they did not need it?

## **10.6 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the opportunities young elite rugby players had to undertake career development and planning for a life outside of rugby, the way these opportunities were delivered and the extent to which players engaged in them. It was evident that there were a wide range of resources, programs and personnel available to assist those players who played at the Super 12 level in New Zealand, or for the NSW academy or Super 12 team. The NSW academy players had more support and resources available to them to undertake their career development and planning compared to their New Zealand counterparts, however, they had less time available to utilise them. Players, coaches and management in New Zealand spoke of the inadequate level of support for those New Zealand players who fell just below the line of full professionalism. In the current study that included over 80 percent of young elite New Zealand rugby players. The data indicated that it was these young men who required the most assistance and support due to the unique position in which they were situated. All coaching and management staff spoke of the importance of young players planning for an alternative career and a life after rugby, specifically referring to the short-term, insecure nature of the sport and the need to have something meaningful in their lives to 'fall back on'. Despite this belief, such planning has not been widely integrated into the structure of professional rugby. Players emphasised their needs in this area and ways they may be further assisted by the governing bodies of rugby.

Players, coaches and management spoke of the difficulty players had in combining elite rugby with education or training due to the structure of both education and rugby. It was suggested that there needs to be some flexibility from both the sports clubs and education providers to enable young elite rugby players to combine these pursuits and

prevent them feeling pressured to choose rugby over education. The following discussion chapter further explores these themes and those discussed in the previous data chapter and propose implications for the elite athlete and governing bodies of rugby.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PREPARATION OF YOUNG ELITE RUGBY PLAYERS FOR A FUTURE BEYOND RUGBY: A GROUNDED THEORY

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The previous three data chapters provided multiple perspectives on the experiences of elite young rugby players. These chapters primarily drew upon the voices of young elite rugby players in New Zealand and Australia, coaches and management in rugby, and coaches and management in AFL and rugby league. This chapter outlines a theory that proposes a set of key considerations for the preparation of young elite rugby players for a future beyond rugby. This theory is comprised of three main themes: rugby as work; athletic identity; and opportunities for alternatives. The chapter examines each of these themes against a backdrop of relevant literature and looks forward by proposing implications for professional athletes, governing bodies of rugby and the wider sports industry. This chapter also addresses the research question and sub-questions.

This inquiry began with the intention of exploring the opportunities for, and nature of, career development and post-rugby planning for young elite rugby players. However, what became evident is that these aspects of a player's rugby experience do not operate in a vacuum. As the lives of these young men were further explored it became clear that there were strong relationships between players' preparation for life outside rugby and areas such as their identities and the professionalisation and globalisation of rugby. Thus, exploring these critical interacting components and their relationships became the major focus of the inquiry. What emerged was a theory that manifested in the form of considerations to be taken into account when speaking of, and discussing notions of preparing young elite rugby players for a future beyond rugby. Because this theory has been formed through the analysis of the data, it is considered a form of grounded theory, and can be seen to directly inform future practice.

Before outlining the grounded theory that emerged from this inquiry, it is necessary to briefly revisit some of the key points of a grounded theory methodology. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest grounded theory is the interconnection of many disparate pieces of collected evidence. Charmaz (2000) suggests that this interconnection of evidence “tells a story of people, social processes and situations” (p.522). The aim of grounded theory as Strauss and Corbin (1996) suggest, is more than just providing understanding, it facilitates users in explaining and predicting events, thereby providing guides to action. Glaser (1992) suggests two main criteria for judging the adequacy of the emerging theory: that it fits the situation, and that it works. In other words, it helps the people in the situation to make sense of their experience and to manage their situation better. It is argued that the developed theory here complies with Glaser’s (1992) criteria and helps the people in the situation make sense of their experience and manage their situation better.

In this research, the theory that has emerged is comprised of eight areas, which can be grouped into three major themes: rugby as work; athletic identity and balance of life; and opportunities for alternatives. Each area of consideration will be discussed in relation to the literature and theory, highlighting any contradictions, paradoxes or dilemmas. All eight areas hold importance for players, coaches and management in rugby in the designing of an effective program and assisting young elite players in their preparation for a life beyond rugby. The considerations that form this theory and address the research questions are:

#### Rugby as Work

- The social and cultural environment of elite rugby
- What it is like to be an elite young rugby player
- Players preparation for termination and transition

#### Athletic Identity and Balance of Life

- Development of other identities, outside interests and balance of life

#### Opportunities for Alternatives (Career Development and Planning)

- The importance of education and training, but is there time?
- Preventing life-skill development through a protective environment
- Player needs
- Initiation of a program and the role of the union in providing it

## **11.1 Rugby as Work**

### *11.1.1 The Social and Cultural Environment of Elite Rugby*

The rise of professionalism in rugby and the creation of a new labour force in late 1995 has largely triggered the need for this study, and has emerged as an important consideration in the lives of elite young rugby players that impacts on their career development, planning, and preparation for a life after rugby. Furthermore, all the considerations that will be discussed in this chapter have been strongly influenced, and in some cases are specifically owing to, the rise of rugby to a professional and global sport. This shift to a more commodified and globalised environment has changed what it means to be a ‘player’ of rugby and shifted it from a recreation to an occupation.

Many of the findings in this study are consistent with a broad view of work in contemporary society. As Mallon (1999) and others suggest, there has been a shift away from the notion of the traditional career, which has been replaced by more casualised and flexible employment (Kell, 1996). Cawsey (1995) argues that “stable, long-term career security is becoming a thing of the past, requiring new ways of thinking about, and framing relationships among, work, organizations, payment, and value for effort” (p.41). In theoretical terms, the nature of the contemporary workforce is particularly useful in this context as, unlike the traditional view of career, it recognises that the rugby player’s work is temporary and insecure. In some cases this new workforce has been termed as disposable and throwaway workers (Freedman, 1993). These terms are applicable to the work of rugby given the often short-term, provisional and contingent nature of the work of modern players.

The move to professionalism has shifted rugby from an amateur pastime to a work-like environment where the sport and its elite participants are motivated by profits, production and measurable outcome orientated goals. This is confirmed by Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel (1999) who argue that workers in competitive sport, more generally, experience conditions and exhibit characteristics similar to other workers in a capitalist labour market. In the current context, the globalisation and professionalisation of rugby has introduced new patterns of work for the athlete, which are characterised by greater intensity, complexity, mobility and very different connections with notions of club, community and nation (Kell, 2002). With the shift in the social and cultural environment of elite rugby its young players must now be considered mobile workers engaged in a short-term occupation in which they are seeking to gain as much financial benefit in a short period of time. Drawing on the Marxist conception of labour as a commodity, these young men are hired labourers whose local and national roots are becoming less important and more blurred as their performances as commercial endorsers become increasingly valued. This working environment of professional rugby has resulted in far-reaching social, economic, demographic and technological changes that has ultimately transformed the way young elite rugby players look, think and behave (Thomas, 2003).

Analysis from this study suggests that New Zealand rugby, in particular, is still yet to fully come to terms with professionalism and the associated cultural changes. This is supported by NZRU chairman Jock Hobbs who noted that “inevitably there will be those who find it very difficult to understand that the changes have been primarily brought about by social and economic forces in the world we live in and will always hanker for the past” (cited in Thomas, 2003, p.43). This study has produced examples of such thinking, where some of the management and coaching staff displayed idealised notions of rugby in its traditional amateur format, unwelcoming of the characteristics that accompanied the new work of rugby. For example, some more idealised and traditional members of the coaching and management staff, such as Barry, spoke negatively of the professional and global environment and retained an expectation that young players will respect traditional aspects of rugby in New Zealand, such as club and national loyalty. It seems that to a certain extent New Zealand is still operating at a point of tension between an idealised notion of rugby, where athletes should play for the love of the game and for community and nation, and the professional and global



working environment it now operates in. This ambivalence may assist in explaining the lack of action on behalf of rugby organisations with regard to their responsibility towards the development and education of players.

Owing to the professionalisation and globalisation of rugby, opportunities have been created for talented young athletes to seek work as professional rugby players. This study points to the fact that the globalisation and professionalisation of rugby has contributed to an 'overproduction' of young men who constituted their identities in relation to playing rugby for a living. These young men are required to invest, and have invested, large amounts of time and energy to rugby and in the process forego alternative pursuits. This phenomenon is becoming an increasing concern to coaches and management and points to the need for alternative career development and planning and greater employer responsibility to initiate such programs. These issues were not as prevalent when the game was played in its amateur form prior to 1995.

One of the key concerns in this study is that the rise of rugby to a professional and global game is culminating in young men becoming professionals straight out of high school with unrealistic aspirations of 'making it' in professional rugby but with little appreciation and awareness of the risks and uncertainty involved. For example, NSW player Brett stated that: "I think a lot of them have the mind set of while they were in school and straight out of school, that I'm going to be a professional footballer". This confirms findings from Tuitupou's (1997) study of the vocational attitudes of school-boy rugby players which suggested that such players perceived a strong association between professional rugby and the positives or material benefits to be gained from professional sport at a very early age. The issue here is that evidence from the current study suggests that in many cases the school grades of these young men were adversely affected, or entirely sacrificed, as a result of their desire to pursue a rugby contract.

Players in this study thought of rugby as something they would do for a period of their lives as a source of income. To achieve this, these young men were having to make decisions in areas that few young men of their age are likely to have to make; for example, negotiating contracts, income protection, and moving overseas to make the most of a short-term opportunity. Evidence of this changing socio-cultural environment and the mobility provided through the professionalisation and globalisation of rugby is

highlighted by the number of young elite rugby players leaving New Zealand and Australia to pursue work as professional rugby players in countries such as Japan, England and Italy (Verdon, 2002). This mobile and flexible player may be referred to as a 'portfolio worker' (Handy, 1989), who undertakes playing contracts in a number of rugby clubs around the world, selling his skills in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, drawing on Thomas, Lazarova and Inkson's (2005) work on the boundaryless career theory, it may be argued that these rugby players, through their ability to transfer their labour across boundaries, are part of an emerging labour force with a boundaryless career. The emergence of the portfolio rugby worker and the subsequent migration of rugby labour is 'speeding up' as New Zealand and Australia struggle to match the financial remuneration offered by many European and Japanese clubs.

This increasing global exodus of young men pursuing work as a rugby player has significant implications for New Zealand and Australian rugby. From this study it is evident that New Zealand and Australia are not only losing their established players to overseas clubs, but if the young elite players in this study are typical, then many young players are also considering their options. Maguire (1999) suggests that the main motivation of those rugby players who migrate may either be a desire to relocate and settle in another country or, more likely, to earn as much money as possible in a short period of time and then return home. In the case of the players in this study the main motivators appeared to be economic factors and the continuation of pursuing their goal of making a career from playing rugby. These young men were aware of the opportunities overseas for elite rugby players and this enabled them to think of rugby as a career beyond New Zealand and Australia, one that provides them with options if they are not selected in their home country. Such an exodus, however, results in the depletion of the depth of elite players available to New Zealand and Australia; an issue that must certainly be of concern to coaches and management.

The aspiration and apparent scheduling of migration into these young rugby players' 'career plan' also challenges the importance of national representation. The diminished importance of national representation to players is supported by this study, where only 58 percent of these young players who had recently represented New Zealand at the Under 21 World Cup had the major goal of representing New Zealand at the All Black level. Although there are no results from a similar question ten or fifteen years ago, the

researcher would argue that pre-professionalism and globalisation, more than 58 percent of players in a similar situation would have aspired to make the All Blacks. It becomes increasingly evident that players viewed rugby as they would any other job: first and foremost it is their work and their source of income and they must make decisions based on their welfare and the economic implications. For players in this study, national pride, loyalty and the aspiration to represent their country are weighed up against the possibility of securing more lucrative contracts overseas. Consistent with Maguire's (1999) work, players in this study did not seem to have a strong attachment to local place or space, rather they were interested in securing playing contracts.

It seems New Zealand can no longer rely on national pride or the lure of the 'black jersey' to retain its young elite players, as the importance of securing rugby work becomes a greater priority. New Zealand and Australia are unlikely to be able to compete against the global capitalism that sees European and Asian clubs offering rugby players extensive amounts of money. However, if New Zealand and Australia do not want to continue to lose their players to overseas clubs then an initiative is needed to assist in retaining players in their home country. An effective career development program where athletes can progress in education and training as well as their rugby career may be a possible solution.

The place of rugby in Australian, and more so New Zealand culture, and the significant amount of money linked to the performance of the national and Super 14 teams means the response to the exodus of players needs to be swift. In simple terms, New Zealand and Australian rugby need to recognise where their future players 'are at' and how they are influenced by the professional and global state of rugby. What seems clear is that the nature of rugby as work for young men in the age of globalisation and professionalisation requires new perspectives on this phenomenon. The analysis of the data and the emerging grounded theory in this study allow for some further exploration of these issues, however more research is required on the influence of professionalisation and globalisation of rugby on the migration of players and the resulting impact on the state of rugby in New Zealand and Australia.

### *11.1.2 What it is Like to be an Elite Young Rugby Player*

This thesis shows that the life of a young elite rugby player in New Zealand and Australia is one where players are recruited at a young age and contracted to an academy where they train hard but are fairly poorly remunerated. Due to the nature of the occupation, players perceived that they had to sacrifice other pursuits in order to commit to, and improve on, their role as a rugby player. Furthermore, embarking on work as a rugby player meant that they would be a late career starter, well behind that of their peers in other occupations. These young players had optimistic predictions of their future in rugby, yet at the same time, because of the importance of rugby in their lives, and their limited alternatives, lived with a fear of injury and deselection.

Vincent Hanna, a journalist for the Guardian in England describes the recruitment and work of young elite soccer players in Europe. A similar description can be applied to professional rugby in New Zealand and Australia:

Suppose someone told you there was a regime in Europe where agents scour the country looking for talented young boys, who are taken from their homes and brought to camps to do menial jobs and train consistently – for whom, because of the intense competition for places education is cursory. The lucky ones are kept on, bound under a contract system where they can be bought and sold by employers. The successful and the bright do very well. But many of the second-raters will find themselves, in their 30s, on the scrap heap and uneducated. Thus does Britain produce the greatest football league in the world (9 May 1996, cited in Horne et al, 1999, p.223).

Although somewhat sensationalised and commenting on the recruitment and work of soccer players, the notion of player recruitment and engagement in work can be applied to a rugby setting. In essence, this is how young men in this study described what it is like as an elite young rugby player. They are recruited and contracted to an academy, in some cases away from their home town, restrictions are placed on their mobility as their contracts do not allow them to seek out other rugby employment during this time. They have to train intensely and some felt that they had to sacrifice education, training or work to succeed in rugby, leaving them with little to turn to should they become

unwanted. In many ways, the elite young players in this study resembled young men undertaking an apprenticeship. These players are rugby apprentices straight out of school and into the job and training of a rugby tradesman. These young men initially attract a lower wage and are open to exploitation but are being trained so that they may have the opportunity to become a fully qualified professional rugby player. The academy system may be viewed as their three years of training, however the issue arises for many of these apprentices that after these three years, they may not necessarily be selected as professional rugby players and unlike apprentices in the traditional form, in the meantime these players have gained few skills that they can apply to alternative career options. In addition, many of these young workers are not protected by labour relation laws or long-term contracts and may be without a job with very little warning. In many cases, these young men may be seen as 'football fodder', where they are regarded as the necessary but expendable ingredient that makes the rugby system work.

For many participants, being an elite young rugby player meant sacrificing other pursuits and interests in order to focus on their goal as a professional rugby player. Of particular note was the number of players in this study who had deferred or withdrawn from education or training, because they were unable to combine it with their rugby commitments. Although coaches and managers unanimously spoke of the importance and benefits of players remaining in education and training, it seems rugby is operating in a structure where some of the same coaches and management are enforcing training schedules that makes it very difficult for these young men to attend classes or engage in alternative work. The intensive nature of rugby and the level of commitment to such a physically intense sport meant players often felt too tired to study or undertake alternative part-time work as their bodies struggled to hold up to the amount of training and playing required. Although for most of the New Zealand based players rugby training often only occupied three or four hours a day, it was the fact that it was five to six days a week that many felt made them more physically exhausted. NSW academy players seemed to have more cause for complaint often committing up to 30 hours per week to rugby. Through the structure of rugby, clubs invariably urged these young players to prioritise rugby over investment in their post-football life. This is not to say that players cannot combine education and rugby, as we have seen examples of some who were doing so. However, it is the players who are not able to combine both who

might be considered most at risk of leaving elite rugby with few recognised resources and credentials for alternative occupations and careers.

For many players, the perceived necessity to forego other pursuits in order to focus on rugby meant that they became bored with and stale of rugby as they did little else but train and play. Rigauer (1981) suggests that the shift from amateurism to a work-like environment has meant that sport has developed into a demanding, achievement-orientated and alienating pursuit and has subsequently lost its potential to be used as an escape from the pressures of work. Furthermore, Tuitupou (1997) notes, players begin to lose motivation for the game once it shifts from a pastime to a job. Further adding to their boredom and staleness, the structure of rugby often restricted players' ability to have any external stimuli to keep them motivated and 'fresh' away from the game, which negatively affects their playing performance and motivation (McCarroll & Hodge, 2001, cited in McKenzie et al, 2003).

When considering the work of elite athletes, Coakley (1998) suggests it is important to remember that the number of career opportunities are highly limited and short-term. Using soccer in Britain as an example, McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) argue that "there exists an apparent paradox between the continuing significance and growing glamorization of the professional game on a global scale and the increasingly unstable labour market conditions affecting professional football players" (p.371). This same paradox can be applied to rugby in New Zealand and Australia where there is an overproduction of young men pursuing a professional rugby career that is typified by its short-term nature. This is reflected in the current study where management staff noted that the average Super 12 'career' in New Zealand was three years or less. However, players demonstrated only limited understanding and awareness of this statistic and confidently spoke of how they still intend to be playing professional rugby in ten and sometimes up to fifteen years in the future. Such optimistic predictions were also found in North and Lavalley's (2004) study, where professional rugby players suggested they would retire at an average age of 37. Although some players in the current study had an awareness of the short-term nature associated with this occupation, players in general had optimistic hopes of a long career in professional rugby. According to McGillivray et al (2005) sporting organisations contribute to this illusion by suggesting that with the necessary discipline, sacrifice and dedication players will succeed in the sport. In many

cases rugby clubs are operating on a promise and these young players are deceived with optimism.

What really mattered to these young men was that they obtained a playing contract, and many of the actions they took were to help them to achieve that goal. The fear of not 'making it' was great, as evident by some players taking performance-enhancing drugs. These are the types of players that the academies need to support. The researcher would argue that the globalisation and professionalisation of rugby and the allure of fame and fortune has bred a generation of young athletes drawn in by the perceived opportunities of a career in rugby, and who in pursuit of this goal will forego education and even take performance-enhancing drugs to get there. Tuitupou (1997) suggests that there is a danger that the allure of the positives of rugby becomes an influential factor in the decision to pursue a rugby career without full knowledge of the occupational realities. While young athletes being deceived with optimism is not new in the context of professional sport, (see McGillivray et al, 2005) rugby organisations have a responsibility to provide their players with an awareness of the realities of a rugby career. If this does not happen, these young men will be at risk of not achieving their desired rugby contract and ending up on the scrap heap of unwanted players with little or no education or training.

Coaches and management confirmed that players' were uninformed of the realities of a professional rugby career and suggested that players considered themselves as 'bullet proof' and having 'starry eyes'. However, the researcher would argue that building this awareness and educating players in the realities of professional rugby is the role of clubs and organisations. Without such awareness young players will continue to have unrealistic career expectations, caught up in a romanticised notion of a career as a rugby player without an understanding of the instability of this labour market. This study highlights the importance and relevance of educating players about a career in rugby and preparing them for a career and life outside rugby as the reality is only a very small percentage of this cohort of players will play professional rugby past their mid-twenties.

One of the consequences of these young men considering rugby their future career at such a young age and at the beginning of their elite performance phase was the apparent loss of future orientation. For example, many players could not identify an alternative

occupation that they may like to pursue. The majority of players described their futures in the context of themselves as professional rugby players. These response may have been caused, in part, by the perception that their possible rugby careers were more immediately compelling. With rugby now establishing itself as a professional and global sport with ever-increasing salaries, many of these players demonstrated a false sense of security that made career development and post-rugby planning a low priority for them. Coupled with the specific demands and pressures of rugby it was easy for players to relegate their future to a distant priority (Hickey & Kelly, 2005; McGillivray et al, 2005). For example, in the current study, Andrew suggested that with the financial benefit professional rugby provides he may not need anything planned for post-rugby. It must also be noted that there is no real incentive at this stage for young elite players, such as those in this study, to contemplate or start developing future careers, as many seem content that they will be professional rugby players for some time into the future. The governing bodies of rugby need to understand how these factors might prevent players taking up opportunities and how this might be addressed.

Due to intense competition for places, increased injury rates and an over-supply of athletic labour, the rugby workplace is increasingly characterised by growing uncertainty, short-term work and greater emphasis on performance. Players described being an elite young player as intense, insecure and uncertain due to issues such as deselection, injury, the high level of physical commitment required and fear of not securing a playing contract. For the young players in this study, these characteristics created a perceived of lack of control and feelings of vulnerability. Consistent with the professional soccer players in Roderick's (2006) study, feelings of uncertainty was a perpetual dimension of their working lives. Part of this uncertainty stemmed from the constant fear of injuries, which players related to the intense nature of the game. These young men rated injuries as their biggest concern in their work as a rugby player. Some players even spoke of how they were currently playing with injuries, due to the fact that they do not get enough rest to fully recover. One of the major causes for concern regarding injuries is that the high majority of elite players relied on rugby for their total income. If players sustained an injury the majority did not have any income protection, therefore their livelihood depended on them continuing to play rugby, ultimately putting themselves at risk of further damage. Furthermore, there was a perceived threat of another player taking their place whilst they were out injured and as a result not getting



another chance to succeed in rugby. Players' concerns are understandable when the injury figures are viewed. The number of injuries have more than doubled since rugby went professional in late 1995. Prior to 1995, players were injured every 3.1 matches; it is now every 59 minutes of play (Garraway et al, 2000). This fear of injury and their limited alternatives meant players were constantly anxious about their future. There is a contradiction here as, on one hand, players spoke about rugby as a long-term career and acted as if this was inevitable, yet on the other hand described a continual concern about injury and deselection.

One of the consequences of players' intense focus on rugby training and performance is that many of them felt that they would be late starters in other careers with little or no education. Murphy (1995) suggests that involvement in elite sports, where education and work decisions are often put on hold, can lead athletes to feel as though they have fallen behind in terms of career development, as they are often making education and work decisions later than their peers. The players' anxiety at being a late career starter should be of concern to the respective rugby unions as research suggests athletes who plan for a post-sport career suffer less anxiety and have a better focus on their high performance goals (Murphy, 1995). This issue needs to be taken into account when speaking of, or developing programs to prepare young elite rugby players for a future beyond rugby.

The analysis in this study suggests the nature of work as a rugby player does not provide the participant with a great deal of security or control in their lives. Despite their best efforts, factors outside their control may determine their success as a rugby player. Although in many cases it is difficult to prevent injury in a high-impact sport, or reduce the competition for places in a team, it is possible for rugby clubs and organisations to provide these players with a higher perceived control over their future lives. For example, Sinclair and Orlick's (1993) research involving both elite amateur and elite professional athletes found that career development enhanced athletes' perceptions of control and reduced financial dependency on the sport. In addition, respondents in Petitpas et al's (1997) study discussed how, through career development and planning, they had gained more confidence and more perceived control of their future and this in turn had impacted positively on their performance in the sport. Players in the current study who were engaged in education or work were also more

confident in their future direction and were more able to describe an alternative career they may like to pursue. The study suggests that by taking this fact into consideration when assisting athletes in their post-rugby planning, players' anxiety levels maybe reduced and they may gain some sense of control and security over their future.

In answering the sub-question regarding how elite young rugby players view rugby as an occupation and their levels of understanding of this, it has become clear that these players considered rugby, even at the semi-professional level, as their future career and perceived it would continue to be so for a number of years into the future. To consider rugby their career at this point in time is fine in itself if the player shows awareness and understanding that rugby is a short-term, insecure career with few safety nets, and therefore are prepared for alternatives. However, this was largely not the case, with the majority of players not displaying such an awareness. Instead some have foregone basic education to pursue a rugby playing career, often misguided or uninformed of the actual realities of a professional rugby 'career' path. The implication of this is that players were delaying any post-sport career development or planning due to their perceived future career length in the sport. The delay of such planning can have serious negative effects on the post-sport life of players, especially in terms of the transition away from sport. The data analysis here has revealed that there is a need to counsel athletes on, and address the implications associated with, unrealistic expectations and misleading perceptions of a 'career' in rugby. With no guarantee that they will make a career out of rugby it is vital that players are also engaged in alternative pursuits that will provide them with current and future options and alternatives in their life.

### *11.1.3 Players' Preparation for Termination and Transition*

Future athletic termination and transition emerged as an important theme in this research, as it highlighted their lack of preparedness for a life after rugby, and the subsequent need for these young men to be engaged in some career development and planning that may prepare them for a life post-rugby. By their own admission, many players had not given thought to, or were not in any way prepared for, the possible termination and transition of their elite playing days. In some cases, players illustrated a limited capacity and desire to think beyond rugby using phrases such as "well under

prepared”, “I wouldn’t have any back up at all” and “probably just fish and drink beer”. Findings from the current study support those of Hawkins and Blann’s (1996) study where elite athletes were well under-prepared for termination and transition and had undertaken little planning for an alternative career. Furthermore, elite athletes in Cresswell and Eklund’s (2006) study were not confident that they were sufficiently prepared for a career outside rugby, if their playing days were terminated. Given the growing literature in this area and the fragile labour market conditions in elite sport, it is of some concern that the issue of elite athletes being unprepared for the end of their athletic tenure has not been adequately addressed. What exaggerates this problem is the situation that awaits these young men upon re-entry to the workforce. In Australia, those aged under 25 experience an unemployment rate almost three times higher than those aged 25-54 (Curtain, 2003), and in New Zealand those under 25 experience unemployment over two times higher than the general population (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). The situation is far worse for those who have not furthered their education, where they face increasing likelihood of marginalisation and exclusion from the labour market.

This study argues that the perception of a long future in rugby contributes to the limited thought given to preparation for a life post-sport by the young players in this study. For many of these young men, aspirations of a long-term rugby career outweighed issues of post-sport planning. Such a finding supports previous research (Fortunato, 1996; Hawkins & Blann, 1996; North and Lavalley, 2004) which indicates an unwillingness among younger athletes, and those who perceive themselves as having a significant amount of time before they retire, to develop future plans. Monsanson (1992) notes, “it is sometimes especially hard for athletes to develop a career plan and to find out what they’d like to do, because they already know what they want to do, and they do it...they are high performance competitors!” (p.73). She stated that athletes often adopt a “waiting” strategy, that is, worry about it “when the time comes” (p.75). In the current study some players exhibited an attitude of ‘I will cross that bridge when I come to it’, however, by then, it is too late (Monsanson, 1992). It is those players that exit earlier than they expected, due to injury or deselection, that will face the most difficulties. For example, findings from Fortunato’s (1996) study demonstrated how those athletes whose athletic career was terminated involuntary or unexpectedly faced a more difficult transition. In the current study it is likely that the majority of players’ elite competitive

days will end earlier than they first expect due to the gap between their optimistic perceived length of their playing career and the short-term nature of work in rugby.

Although a small number of coaches and management seemed content to hold the players responsible for this lack of preparedness, this study argues that this is more a reflection of the absence of resources, support and an effective career development and planning program for these young players. The lack of advice and support from the New Zealand academies in particular demonstrated a general unwillingness of the clubs to invest in the educational and occupational professional development of their workforce (McGillivray et al, 2005). These young players were not educated in terms of the realities and frailties of the sport and have been provided with limited opportunities to explore or engage in alternative career interests that may act to prepare them for a life after sport.

The literature provides a guide to the factors that if not countered, will result in a more difficult termination and transition for athletes when leaving elite sport. Pearson and Petitpas's (1990) study examined the transition process and defined some of these factors:

- Identity strongly and exclusively based on athletic performance.
- A large gap between level of aspiration and level of ability.
- Dealing with the transition in a context that lacks the emotional and material resources that could be helpful.

Of concern is the finding that these factors were exhibited by players in this study. For example, data in the current study indicated that many players had a strong athletic identity that was primarily constructed through rugby. Secondly, every player in this study had aspirations to achieve higher in his rugby career, and many suggested they would be disappointed if that goal was not achieved. For example, one of this study's participants, Luke, mentioned how not fulfilling his rugby aspirations would be one of the most difficult things to come to terms with. Here, the high expectations of athletic success might clash with the realities of not making the step up to the next level of participation due to the gap between aspiration and ability. In relation to the final factor of Pearson and Petitpas's (1990) study, for players at this age and position in their elite

rugby life, the unions, especially in New Zealand, did not provide the emotional and material resources that could be helpful for players exiting elite rugby. Using these points as a guide, this study argues that if these young players are typical, then many players in New Zealand and NSW will face difficulties when they undertake the termination and transition process, highlighting the significance of this consideration for the post-rugby preparation of these elite young rugby players.

Previous research also notes that the athlete who is able to set effective goals, develop a career plan, and consider a variety of options is more likely to develop a successful career in a new setting (Petitpas et al, 1997). However, many of the researched players have not yet set effective goals, developed a career plan or considered a variety of options, as they struggled to inform the researcher of alternative careers they might like to pursue. There were only three players who were confident of their coping ability in the termination and transition process and adjusting to a career outside rugby if their playing days ended. Consistent with past research (Petitpas et al, 1997) these players were engaged in part-time employment that they considered a viable career option should rugby not work out for them. The message to rugby in New Zealand and Australia must be that urgent attention and action is needed on behalf of rugby organisations to ensure that players have the opportunities and ability to plan for a life after sport. If they can provide their young players with an environment where support and resources can assist them in identifying career options, setting goals for a future career and undertaking some career development and planning, their players will face less difficulty in their adaptation to a life and career outside rugby.

The short-term nature of elite rugby, coupled with players' lack of preparation, results in a real danger of these young men leaving the sport vulnerable, unqualified and disorientated. Former AFL coach Ken provided an example of what these young rugby players may face upon termination, describing a situation where a number of former players had been admitted to a clinic for depression because they were not prepared for the end of their athletic career. Some players in the current study provided insight into possible difficulties they may face, noting that if they had to leave elite rugby they would be 'lost' and not 'know what to do'. Furthermore, one interviewed player stated that if his career was to end it would be "like losing a family member". Rugby

organisations need to respond to this issue and act to ensure these young rugby players do not suffer the same difficulties as athletes in other professional sports such as AFL.

The coaches and management in this study suggested that one of the biggest termination difficulties players may face is not having anything to 'fall back on' career-wise. Danish, Petitpas and Hale (1990), and Monsanson (1992) argue that to avoid this, athletes must be introduced to a "planning culture", whereby they are encouraged and socialised to make plans and prepare for their future in order to avoid the trauma that is currently widely experienced by retiring athletes. It seemed a planning culture for most of these young men was scarce, and the majority of players were not encouraged or assisted in future planning. Monsanson (1992) argues that elite athletes are located within a complete ecosystem including their coach, peers, and administrators, therefore these people must be involved in any proposed career plans involving their athletes.

The analysed data provide an answer to a research sub-question, whereby generally these young players are not prepared for a life after rugby. If these players were to have their elite playing days terminated now or in the next few years, as some of them will, then they will face some difficulty in adjusting to a life without elite rugby. It is the unfortunate reality that some of these young men will leave professional rugby with no alternative vocational goals, training or education, and uncertain how to even begin selecting or pursuing an alternative career. As a relatively new professional sport, rugby has an opportunity to avoid, or reduce, significant termination difficulties and adequately prepare their players for this part of their athletic lives. This process needs to start at the inception of the high-performance phase.

## **11.2 Athletic Identity and Balance of Life**

In this study, rugby formed the central focus of every young player's life, and anything else seemed to come a distant second. In line with the interactionist approach these young men were actively involved in the process of identity formation and supporting their role identities as rugby players (Stevenson, 2001). Being a rugby player was not just something they did, it was something they were (Roderick, 2006). The data in this study suggest that the rugby identity dominated players' self-concept, and the self-

identity of these young men had been formed, consolidated and reinforced through their participation in elite rugby. Each player's imaginative view of himself was as a rugby player. Markus and Nurius (1986) use the term *possible selves* to explain the individual's ideas of what they might become. For these young men their possible selves related to their current and future view of themselves as rugby players.

Athletic identity forms an important part of this research due to its wider links with other significant areas in the study. For example, players' strong commitment to the athletic role is closely linked to the professionalisation and globalisation of the sport, where players are now required to invest more time and energy into rugby. Players' level of identity investment also has a relationship with areas such as athletic termination and transition into life after sport, where identity crises are well documented (Fortunato, 1996; Petitpas, et al, 1997; Coakley, 1998). Furthermore, the strong athletic identity of players has implications for the career development and post-rugby planning of players and even has links to on-field performance. It is for these reasons that the athletic identity of these young men has emerged as an important factor in the preparation of young elite rugby players for a life after rugby.

### *11.2.1 Development of Other Identities, Outside Interests and Balance of Life*

As athletes develop talent in their particular sport it is more likely that they will define themselves around that sport, a process referred to as *athletic identity development* (Petitpas et al, 1997). This is the way in which the athlete defines him or herself to others. Furthermore, Webb et al (1998) suggest that successful young athletes internalise the athletic identity, frequently at the expense of other possible social roles. This was illustrated in the current study when both players and coaches spoke of high school rugby players foregoing their schoolwork to focus on achieving a professional rugby contract. This supports Tuitupou's (1997) study which identified that many young men aspiring to be professional rugby players pursue it at the expense of their schooling. Findings from the current study are further reinforced through Hickey and Kelly's (2005) study which concluded that young elite AFL players at high school were placing football ahead of their education, thus compromising their final years of schooling and starting to form an identity solely around sport.

Whilst the identities of young men in this study were being reinforced in the athletic role it seemed other facets of their identities were being diminished, detached or altered as a result of their increased investment in rugby. As suggested by Adler and Adler (2001) these young men “sacrificed the multi-dimensionality of their present selves and the potential breadth of their future selves” (p.167). These young men defined themselves as rugby players, often to the exclusion of other ways of describing or valuing themselves. These findings mirror McGillivray and McIntosh’s study (2006) of professional footballers in Scotland where athletes’ perspective of who they were was inseparable from their status as professional footballers, even to the extent that they were often unwilling to accept or look past the possible end of their playing days.

Having an identity formed and reinforced almost exclusively in rugby meant that often these young men had not engaged in exploratory behaviour and in some cases had closed off alternative career options. Such thinking is termed *identity foreclosure* (Marcia, 1966). This concept describes the closing off of alternative career identities due to an early commitment to one specific career identity, a trait that was clearly seen in the current study. It may be argued that for many of these rugby players, identity foreclosure was common due to the almost sacrificial devotion required by the sport, and the perceived necessity to make rugby their exclusive focus of attention. The identity foreclosure witnessed here may be further exacerbated due to players’ perception that their elite rugby playing days may extend further into the future than is often realistic, thus reducing the perceived need for exploratory behaviour.

Identity foreclosure at this age (18-22) has some dangerous implications for the young men in this study. For example, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) argue that “individuals who strongly commit themselves to the athlete’s role may be less likely to explore other career, education and lifestyle options due to their intensive involvement in sport” (p.241). A number of empirical studies further suggest that a strong athletic identity acts as a barrier for athletes to undertake career development and planning measures that may assist them in their retirement planning (Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Martens & Cox, 2000; Hickey & Kelly, 2005). Such research resonates with the findings of the current study, where those participants who exhibited an identity formed almost exclusively around sport demonstrated restricted career and educational plans



and were often unable to suggest an alternative career they might be interested in. Without sufficient exploration of other roles or careers these players are vulnerable to post-sport difficulties where they will have little to fall back on when their rugby career is terminated. In this case these young men may be largely unemployable and vulnerable to a possible identity crisis post-sport. Moreover, those who have foreclosed their identity are more likely to exhibit deficient life-skills due to their almost exclusive involvement in rugby.

The narrow identity exhibited by these young men has further implications that must be examined in light of the literature in this area. One of the implications is noted when the athlete retires or leaves the high-performance phase (Fortunato, 1996; Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). Athletes with overly-developed athletic identities are less prepared for post-sport careers (Baillie & Danish, 1992), and according to Werthner and Orlick (1986) typically experience retirement from sport as a loss that can never be recovered. Players in the current study provided insight into the loss they might feel; for example Dave, who was not involved in alternative pursuits outside of rugby, stated that he would be “depressed” if he could no longer play rugby, and Tevita stated he “felt like it was the end of the world” when he thought he might have to retire. However, others such as Brett, who worked part-time in a job he viewed as a possible alternative career, suggested he would be disappointed if he could no longer play rugby but had alternative interests that he could focus on. This highlights the impact an expanded identity may have on the retirement experiences and emotional health of elite rugby players. In Dacyshyn’s (2001) study of the retirement of elite gymnasts she states that “a common theme that emerged from the interviews was sport is life and life is sport” (p.221). Dacyshyn concluded by stating “consequently, retirement evoked feelings of disorientation, loss of identity, and the feeling of being in nowhere land” (p.221). Juxtaposing the current study with Dacyshyn’s (2001) study, it may be argued these young rugby players, whose life was rugby, lacked alternative roles, activities and interests, and consequently may face numerous difficulties when their elite playing days are terminated.

To understand retirement problems, Coakley (1998) suggests that information is required on how sports fit into athletes’ lives and whether playing sports limited or expanded their experiences, relationships, and resources. If it limited them, problems

are more likely; if it expanded them, they experience less difficulty. The analysis of the data here suggests that playing elite rugby has largely limited the experiences and restricted the development of many of these young men by reducing possible involvement in education, training or work, therefore suggesting problems may be evident upon retirement for this cohort of players. Assisting players' engagement in meaningful outside pursuits therefore becomes more pertinent in light of these results and other research in this area.

The coaches and management in this study extensively discussed the benefits of an expanded identity. However, in some cases it seemed that they contradicted themselves, as they became the very people who were creating an environment that contributed to the narrowing and foreclosing of players' identity. Several authors have suggested that the physical and psychological demands of elite sport may isolate athletes from mainstream education, restrict their opportunities for exploratory behaviour and promote identity foreclosure (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; McGillivray et al, 2005). In the current study it was not only the physical and psychological demands that restricted exploratory behaviour, it was also the structure of rugby. As a result of how their labour is structured, these young men accrue only a limited set of life experiences and form an identity primarily restricted to their athletic role (McGillivray et al, 2005).

A tension witnessed in this study was that although players understood the wisdom behind expanding other identities and having a balance in their life, some were reluctant to give too much of themselves to outside pursuits as they felt they needed to make the most of the opportunity to be a professional rugby player. Such tension was also uncovered in Hickey and Kelly's (2005) study of young elite AFL players, where early career players spoke of the need to give football everything they had, not welcoming activities that took their attention away from football. Yet one of the key attractions of a balance of life from the perspective of coaches and management in this study was the positive impact it had on athletic performance. One coach went as far as to say that players having a balance of life "is one of the keys to New Zealand having success in the future." In this study, those players who had outside interests such as education or part-time work acknowledged the positive impact it had on their athletic performance, suggesting that as a result they could think quicker on the field and did not get as bored

with rugby. Such findings are consistent with Anderson's (1999) study where coaches perceived athletes' involvement in outside pursuits, especially career development and planning, enhanced training and competition performance.

This study provides strong evidence from players, coaches and management to support the notion that these young men will be better rugby players if they are actively engaged in pursuits outside of rugby. However, the structure of rugby in New Zealand and Australia is restricting players' engagement in outside pursuits. For example, the methodology of recruiting young men straight from school and 'locking' them into rugby academies has been criticised by All Blacks assistant coach Wayne Smith. He suggests that he, and other top coaches, are in danger of inheriting a group of players with no outside interests, life-skills and as a result restricted ability to adapt or change tactics on the field:

It's sad the way we target schoolkids and that they go straight into academies, in doing so we run the risk of developing a generation of players who have no outside interests, no career and who can't solve their own problems and we didn't want that to happen...I'd like to see a movement away from players being full-time academy and full-time rugby players...the strict adherence to completing a pre-planned sequence of phases produced players who could not think for themselves (n/a, New Zealand Herald. 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2005).

Although the structure of the rugby academies may enhance some technical skills of the players, it is detrimental to their life-skills, balance of life and ability to think for themselves and make decisions both on and off the field. For example, speaking to the Guardian newspaper, All Black manager Darren Shand stated:

We just felt, when we looked back at the 2003 and 1999 World Cups, that there was an inability on the field to make the correct decisions at the correct times. We realised, with the development of professional rugby, that the type of player we were getting had changed. They were coming straight from an academy or school environment with no other life, whereas the Sean Fitzpatricks and Zinzan Brookes of this world had more balanced

lifestyles. It became clear that we were over-coaching the players and needed to empower them to the point where they ran the game rather than us (Kitson, 2005).

Data from players in this study confirm Shand's comments; for example Shane stated: "Balance of life helps me in my rugby by keeping a healthy mind and having a healthy mind I feel I can think quicker on the field." While the data from the current research and the above comments from the All Blacks assistant coach and manager point to the benefits, the industrial labour type structure that is producing these players continues. Given the benefits for players both in their professional development and athletic performance the question becomes why more is not being done to ensure young elite rugby players have a balance of life, and why this is not more built in to the fabric of being a professional rugby player? Such an initiative would reduce the risk of elite coaches inheriting players from a highly protective and structured environment who cannot think for themselves. It is evident that a change is necessary at the academy level at which the participants in this study were involved.

In recent time athletes have been highly represented in media coverage regarding numerous instances of personal and societal problems, especially in rugby league and AFL, where players have been accused of anti-social behaviour, binge drinking, inappropriate behaviour towards women and many instances of problem gambling. This study revealed that if players did not have an expanded identity or balance of life they may be more prone to engagement in such behaviour. For example, former AFL premiership winning coach Ken, stated that:

The players that caused me all my havoc when I was coaching, were players that had nothing else in their life other than footy. One after the other they wouldn't go and do some study, wouldn't hold a job. They are the blokes who end up in trouble with the women and the gambling and the grog and all those things.

Although it is difficult to conclude that this behaviour was solely the result of players having 'nothing else in their life other than footy', it may be argued that such instances would be reduced if players did have expanded identities and a balance of life.

It has become apparent that the personal investment and commitment of identity, coupled with the pursuit of elite rugby success, though a worthy goal, may lead to the restricted development of the athlete (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Not engaging in part-time work or education narrows the focus of players' lives and diminishes their options for the future. Cresswell and Eklund (2006) suggest that such issues go beyond career development and planning and players who are unable to be engaged in something meaningful outside rugby such as education, training, or part-time work, are less likely to experience instances of positive accomplishment and self-esteem from sources other than rugby which as a result can contribute to player burnout. If rugby does not want its players to suffer identity crises at the end of their athletic tenure, be prone to mental illnesses such as depression, feel as if sport is a loss that can never be recovered, and wants to ensure its players have minimal problems with drinking, gambling and relating to women in a positive way, then it is vital that rugby organisations assist in the management and development of players' identities and balance of life.

### **11.3 Opportunities for Alternatives (Career Development and Planning)**

#### *11.3.1 The Importance of Education and Training, But is There Time?*

In the current study, almost every player indicated that it was important that they further their education whilst playing elite rugby. However, at the same time players noted that the structure of elite rugby restricted them from engaging in education or training. As mentioned, NSW players in particular had significant difficulty combining education and rugby. However, Don, speaking from an Australian rugby management perspective, described those players who spend the best career development years of their life exclusively pursuing a rugby career as 'casualties'. The contradiction here is that NSW coaches and management spoke of the importance of players continuing with their education, yet required them to work in an environment where this is largely unattainable, thus restricting these players' career development and contributing to the growing rate of 'casualties' that Don speaks of. Due to the training structure, New Zealand players had a little less difficulty combining education and playing, with half of the players engaging in some form of education or training. However, these players still spoke of the complexity of combining education and playing. This study has illustrated

that the players, coaches and management value education, yet cannot facilitate its attainment, as some players felt immobilised by feeling that they can only do rugby. This now becomes an important consideration when planning the education of elite young rugby players.

One of the greatest concerns in terms of the education of these young men were those players who had left school early to pursue a professional rugby career, and were thereby foregoing education in pursuit of achieving that goal. Such a concern is evident in Tuitupou's (1997) study, which reports that players were pursuing a career in professional rugby at the expense of their schooling. Romanos (2002) concurs and states that "teenage boys with athletic talent are now shunning academic careers in the hope that they'll make a success of rugby and win Super 12 and All Black contracts" (p.74). Before they have completed high school, these young men are invited to give up their schooling for the optimistic opportunity of 'making it' as a professional rugby player (McGillivray et al, 2005). Coaching and management staff and even some fellow players showed concern for the young men who come early from school and into professional rugby. As a senior member of the Players' Association, Don stated, "this is where the danger lies." Despite this concern, young men are willing to pursue this career path without achieving the most basic of education and there is little indication that the governing bodies of rugby are acting to rectify this.

Evidence from previous studies suggests that athletes who participate in a sport where a professional career may be a long-term goal are at greater risk of discontinuing their academic studies in order to concentrate on pursuit of a sport career. For example, in Parker's (2000) study of professional football youth trainees in Britain the vast majority of the trainees "viewed full-time professional player status as an occupational inevitability and because of this many simply dismissed the whole notion of 'further' educational pursuit or post-career vocational training" (p.62). Consistent with Parker's (2000) study, becoming a professional rugby player had long since represented an idealised working goal for these young men and had subsequently occupied a position of key occupational importance within their lives, often to the detriment of educational achievements. Like the young men in the McGillivray et al (2005) study, the picture here is not one of a group of young rugby players without academic potential. Rather, it seems that educational attainment is put aside in favour of pursuit of the rugby dream.

Education plays a multi-faceted role in the lives of elite young rugby players and has an importance for these young men as they look to embark on a period of their lives as professional rugby players. However, participation in elite rugby and the inflexible nature of university courses has meant that these young men have had to make choices regarding the amount of time dedicated to educational pursuits, often relinquishing educational plans. Similar findings were reported in Hickey and Kelly's (2005) study where clashes between sport and educational institutions limited young AFL players' capacity to engage in education or training. Former All Black manager John Graham notes that regrettably there is no place in professional rugby for the academically-minded young men wishing to pursue their studies, and suggests that the game is poorer for it. However, as is documented in the current study, Graham notes that the university system is not accommodating for all-rounders (Thomas, 2003). Players, coaches and management all noted that education providers were not flexible to the needs of these young men, which suggests that post-compulsory education may be contributing to their inability to prepare for an adult vocational life. This is an issue for elite athletes, clubs and organisations, and requires creative ways to assist players to undertake education whilst competing in high-level sport. For example, a partnership with universities where flexible study is available would go some way to facilitating and enabling this, and should be seen as a priority for rugby administrators.

Perhaps just as troubling were the small number of players in this study who, through indifference to, or ignorance of, the vulnerability of their occupation, suggested that they have ample time left in the sport to think about education and training. McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) argue that in the short-term it is understandable that athletic pursuits take precedence over educational or training pursuits, however in the long-term this is unsustainable as a high number of young men face redundancy at the end of each season. Furthermore, in alternative employment fields their athletic labour is often of little value. Whether through personal choice or perceived requirement, these young men are sacrificing the potential breadth of their future by narrowing their range of options to only include the pursuit of rugby success.

If these current and future young rugby players are not involved in some form of education or training they are likely to leave the sport with little future direction or

career path and face difficulty accessing the workforce. This risks drawing parallels with those athletes in Adler and Adler's (1994) study where U.S college basketball players reported that their best days were behind them. "Everything they had put into basketball had evaporated into a mist of memories, leaving them with no tangible entry into an occupation or profession" (p.169). A key difference between the current study and studies undertaken on career development of young elite athletes in the U.S (Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996; Martens & Lee, 1998; Martens & Cox, 2000) is that U.S athletes are required to undertake some form of degree or diploma during college years if they are to continue playing on the team. Arguably this provides them with some basic tertiary educational exposure. The lack of career development for athletes is exacerbated in countries such as New Zealand and Australia where these young men are competing in elite sport with no requirements to be involved in education or training, leaving many with no education here except for their high-school qualifications. The facilitation of education and training would provide these young men with a tangible entry into an occupation or profession and a base from which they can plan for their lives post-sport.

Education in this case does not necessarily have to refer only to formal education such as university or TAFE. Young elite players could benefit from informal education delivered by trained personnel in the academy or rugby system. Such informal education may focus on areas such as the realities of professional rugby and developing an awareness of the need to plan post-sport. These are areas that the data suggest players may need special assistance with. Assisting players in their vocational maturity may also be one way of educating these young men. At any point in their rugby lives, players can benefit from an understanding of the career process and the necessary steps involved in making well-informed career decisions. Vocational maturity is one aspect of career awareness explored by career development theorists Super and Thompson (1979) who identify six factors in vocational maturity: "(1) awareness of the need to plan ahead, (2) decision-making skills, (3) knowledge and use of information resources, (4) general career information, (5) general world of work information, and (6) detailed information about occupations of preference" (cited in Zunker, 1994, p.30). For professional rugby players, whose occupation is typified by its short-term nature, this framework for vocational maturity is an important guide for educating players, during and after their elite playing days.



The findings of this study suggest the major focus of preparing young elite rugby players for a future beyond rugby needs to be education and training. Education and training, both accredited and non-accredited, play a significant role in career development and post-rugby planning due to their wide range of implications for the experiences of young athletes, both during and after their high-performance phase. The researcher would suggest that education and training provides part of the solution to many of the issues and considerations that have been raised in this thesis. Through effective education and training these young men may not feel as though they are late career starters and may not resent the sacrificial nature of professional rugby as previously discussed. Players may not get stale and bored with the game, may be less likely to suffer from burnout and have a self-esteem that is not solely reliant on their playing performance. There may be fewer instances of career foreclosure as players will develop job-relevant skills or a possible future career option. These young men will have insurance against the intense, insecure and uncertain nature of rugby, will be provided with 'something to fall back on', and as a result will cope better with the transition process should their work in rugby be terminated. Education and training will expand players' identity and balance of life, which will in turn enhance their athletic performance. Ideally, players will develop their life-skills and decision-making skills and become more self-sufficient. Furthermore, if implemented by the governing bodies players may feel more supported by their union and, through the implementation of a broader career package, including education and training, there may be an increase in player retention.

### *11.3.2 Preventing Life-skill Development Through a Protective Environment*

This study found a group of young elite rugby players who are part of a paternalistic culture where they are highly dependent on the rugby system in directing their lives. Many basic tasks are carried out, and decisions made for the players which has led coaches and management to express concern that professional rugby is producing players with little or no life-skills, stating that these young men are being 'nursed' and 'mollycoddled' in a protective environment. Such an environment is also evident in other professional sports; for example, Gearing (1999) suggests that a protective

environment is one of the principal cultural and occupational features of a professional footballer's world. Furthermore, All Black assistant coach Steve Hanson stated that "professional sports people, not just rugby players, are normally pretty reliant on people doing everything for them. That's not real life, is it?" (Kitson, 2005). Perhaps of more concern is the fact that findings in the current study support previous research regarding the protective structure of sport where it is argued the degree of structure inherent in the athletic system promotes conformity and dependence and discourages exploratory behaviours (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988).

This study indicates that the system, structure and culture of professional rugby are detrimental to the development of a self-sufficient athlete. The protective and insular environment of professional rugby that was widely reported by coaching and management staff in the current study provides an insight as to one possible reason why elite young rugby players had limited basic life-skills. According to Martens and Lee (1998), after such continual assistance players may feel unprepared to make their own decisions or explore options independently. These players may also lose confidence in making these types of lifestyle and career decisions, resulting in significant implications for their post-playing life. For example, Petitpas et al (1997) note the importance of life-skills for athletes when they suggest the athlete who possesses effective life-skills will be better able to cope with the challenges of a career outside of sport than the athlete who lacks those skills. The current study confirms this; for example, Greg stated that those players who do not have sufficient life-skills will "fall by the wayside" when their competitive phase is over. It will not be until the protective environment surrounding professional rugby players is replaced with a sense of autonomy that they will develop life-skills that are considered necessary in society.

Sports that have been professionalised for longer than rugby provide examples of players who leave the sport with restricted life-skills. For example, Craig Kelly, a former AFL player in an interview with Australian television program 60 Minutes stated, "I know players who come out of football at the ripe old age of 30 and still don't know how to write a cheque or pay the bills or do the things they should know how to do as grown men" (Channel Nine, 2004). This view from a past player is mirrored by data in the current study where career counsellor Margaret stated that:

Some of the players' life-skills are really lacking, how to pay bills, even how to mail things, how to submit forms, how to enquire about things over the telephone, because they're used to having it all done for them. So sometimes the system of professional sport can be to their detriment, in terms of not getting them to be self-sufficient enough.

For governing bodies of rugby there is a risk that current practice will produce a high number of ex-rugby players with limited autonomy and life-skills and who will be facing difficulties in becoming self-sufficient.

Anderson (1999) suggests that the limited success of some career development programs in America was partly due to the reluctance of administrators and coaches to understand, or fully appreciate, the need to assist athletes with life-skills programs. Moreover, she argues that this problem would remain as long as administrators and coaches perceived life-skill programs to be a peripheral need in developing athletic performance. In the current study rugby coaches and management acknowledged the value of such programs, however, this is not to say that it was common practice. At the time of the study, NSW was providing life-skills as part of their career training scheme, but in New Zealand this was largely not the case.

### *11.3.3 Player Needs*

A pertinent consideration when assisting players in their pre-retirement planning is to have an understanding of their needs. Implementing career development or planning programs without prior knowledge of player needs may discourage players from engaging in the programs and will almost certainly blunt the effectiveness and purpose of such an initiative. Acknowledging young players' needs in this area will also ensure they have 'buy in' to the program. This study has been able to highlight a range of player needs in regards to their career development, planning, awareness and education and provides a picture of the type, content and delivery method that players perceive would be most effective in assisting them in this area.

Player needs varied between New Zealand and NSW athletes. New Zealand players were seeking more support and resources, whereas NSW players were seeking a change in content and delivery method of current programs. Some of the combined key needs of players from both teams identified that:

1. Programs need to be less generic, more individualised and player specific.
2. More opportunities were needed to develop job-relevant skills, possibly through work experience.
3. More opportunities and time was needed to engage in education.
4. More access to support personnel would be beneficial.
5. Assistance needs to be received both during and after the player's rugby tenure.
6. Individual counselling would be the most effective method of delivery.

There is little empirical research regarding the career development and planning needs of elite young athletes. The majority of research in this area focuses on the needs of retiring athletes in the termination and transition phase, however one of the core arguments of this thesis is that by then it is too late. More information is required on the needs of young athletes as they embark on a professional sports career so that they may be adequately prepared when the time comes to retire. One study on the career development and transition of elite athletes (Hawkins & Blann, 1996) showed that:

1. Athletes felt that post-sport career planning was best delivered both during and after their high-performance phase.
2. Individual counselling was considered the most effective delivery method.
3. A program where athletes may obtain actual work experience related to their career choice would assist them the most.

The current study provided similar results on athletes needs, supporting all the points outlined above by Hawkins and Blann (1996). However, the current study also brought to light a number of new issues that do not appear to have been previously identified. This is largely due to the unique setting of the current study, in terms of the specificity of participants, e.g. young elite male rugby players in New Zealand and NSW, and the qualitative nature of the study, which allowed for expanded responses relating to their direct needs. Furthermore, some of the needs of these players were specific to their sport, age and position within their rugby life cycle. The need for broader opportunities to engage in education emerged strongly from the analysis. Players also noted that they

needed a time allowance to engage in education or training, and a partnership with education and training providers to further facilitate this was needed.

A significant need for the New Zealand players was the opportunity to access a Professional Development Manager (PDM). Players contracted to a Super 12 franchise in New Zealand had access to a PDM but they were not available to those competing just below this level, the majority of the players in this research. This study argues that these young men would benefit greatly from increased access to the guidance, support and resources that a PDM is able to provide. In NSW, the players in the academy team had access to a career counsellor which they valued immensely. They also had access to various programs such as the career-training scheme. For these players, their needs were mostly focussed on the content of programs already being delivered and in some cases the delivery method. Arguably these areas are easier to address, given that the infrastructure and framework is already in place.

Understanding players' views and needs in the area of career development and post-rugby planning is one aspect, but ensuring they are being met is another. This study has documented a range of needs expressed by young elite rugby players, however, it will be of no value providing this information if it is not applied in the setting. As mentioned, a paradox in the current study is that the young elite players who required the most assistance and support at this stage of their rugby life cycle, in terms of career development and planning, received the least. The coaches and management by their own admission recognised this gap but did not provide, or suggest, a clear initiative to change it. The young players most at risk here are those who have finished their time at their provincial academy, are on the verge, but have not yet received, a professional contract and are investing so much of their time, energy and identity in achieving that contract. The data indicate that there is an urgent need to engage them in career development and planning programs when they are young professionals and ensure they have the best possible support.

It was evident that some players had not had any introduction to, or discussion surrounding pre-retirement planning. At the end of one interview, a player asked for the researcher's contact details to gain more information on career planning methods. The player seemed anxious that he was unable to answer some of the questions raised

regarding alternative career plans. While there was no right or wrong answer in this study, this player felt he needed more information on career development and planning, illustrating how this issue was not being adequately addressed for many young elite players.

#### *11.3.4 Initiation of a Program and the Role of the Union in Providing it*

The provision and implementation of programs for these young rugby players has become a significant consideration in preparing them for a life after rugby, as it is through this medium that players are most likely to be able to prepare for careers or occupations other than elite rugby, expand their identities and life-skills, and explore educational and vocational avenues. The type, content and delivery of career development and planning programs has an influence on every consideration that has been discussed in this chapter. Literature on career development programs for athletes suggests that initiatives aimed at assisting athletes to develop work and social skills are most effective as they enable many to deal more effectively with the pressures of being an elite athlete and assist in avoiding the trauma that is currently widely experienced by retiring athletes (Brewer et al. 1993; Danish et al, 1993; Hawkins & Blann, 1996).

Although the purpose of this section is not to provide an evaluation of current programs it is difficult not to offer some critique, as it is important that these issues are discussed more broadly. With the development of industrial relations in professional rugby and the emergence of player associations, New Zealand and Australian rugby unions provide their young elite players with varying career development and planning programs. As noted in Chapter Ten there was a difference between NSW and New Zealand in the types of programs offered and their perceived usefulness by players, coaches and management. As a result, the sub-research question regarding the extent to which current career development and planning programs are deemed effective by players, coaches and management can be answered and addressed.

With regard to the New Zealand provincial academy programs, Professional Development Manager Greg suggested that there was inadequate infrastructure and resources in place to support the players who compete just below the Super 12 level in

New Zealand. Arguably, it is much more effective, as Greg suggests, to assist players early in their elite playing days, so that, if their desired rugby career does not eventuate they at least have something to fall back on. This was confirmed by senior coach Barry, who stated that “they should be targeting the younger players through the under 19s and 21s”. Thus, career development programs need to be implemented as young men enter the occupation of elite rugby. In New Zealand, the provincial academies provide the best avenue and environment to offer career development assistance and support to the players, however it seems they are not being employed to their full potential. Some players strongly criticised the current program, describing it as “crap”, and others said “down here they just give you a piece of paper and say see you in six months”. Judged by players, coaches and management, current programs in New Zealand aimed at these young men are largely inadequate, yet it was unanimously recognised that it was these players who required the most comprehensive program with the highest level of support and assistance.

On the other hand, NSW offered a program that was consistent across Australia and provided academy players with a range of networking, education, work placement and counselling initiatives that for the most part were deemed effective by players, coaches and management, with the exception of some criticisms of delivery and content. It is possible that the NSW program was more advanced and comprehensive due to Australia’s longer experience with elite professional sport. The fact that rugby league and AFL were already professional meant that rugby union may have been aware of issues regarding the welfare of their players and the importance of an effective career development and planning program. In NSW, one of the key initiatives is that the majority of resources and services were also available to academy players not just Super 12 players, which was not the case in New Zealand. However, whilst NSW had a fairly comprehensive program they provided little time for players to engage in alternative pursuits.

A common theme amongst responses of coaches and management was that players should be utilising the period of time between age 18 and 21 to undertake some education or occupational training. Many players do not have an education, training or even life-skills to assist them in a life outside of rugby, and it is these players that Professional Development Manager Greg labelled as “at risk”. Yet it is evident these

young men need more access to resources to effectively achieve this. There is a great opportunity for the academy program in New Zealand to be a leader in the professional development of elite young rugby players by facilitating their education and training, work or work experience, life-skills and balance of life.

Drawing on the life career development perspective may assist in addressing some of the unique issues faced by young rugby players and be used as a way to understand the development concerns and needs of these young men. The life career development perspective provides a way of understanding the complexity of the conditions and issues athletes are facing in the professional and global era. First, it highlights the importance of considering athletes as individuals with complex lives. Not only are these young men athletes, they have varying backgrounds, some are students and some have part-time work and many have the same developmental concerns as the wider population. Second, it points to the importance of understanding the settings that shape their priorities, defines their needs and places demands on their time (Martens & Lee, 1998). The life career development approach would allow the players to focus on a specific role, in this case playing elite rugby, while at the same time linking that role to other life roles. This would act to expand players' vision of their future career from a rugby only focus, to a broader view involving life roles, settings and events.

As a professional sport, the challenge remains with rugby to take a more socially responsible attitude toward its young elite players. As mentioned, this is no more evident than in the recent occurrences involving players from the NRL and AFL in Australia, where they have been accused of sexual and physical assault, alcohol abuse, problem gambling and socially unacceptable behaviour. The researcher would suggest that a strong career development and planning program in rugby, implemented at the early stages of elite players' careers may go some way to protect against this type of behaviour. Other professional sports have recognised that assisting their young elite players in career development is of significant importance. Drawing on Britain's football league for example, the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) has ensured that post-career educational/vocational preparation has become a compulsory part of a football trainee's life. These football trainees are of similar age to the rugby players in the current study. The PFA has increased the opportunities available to players for alternative occupational and career development and planning. Parker



(2000) notes that no longer “are those leaving the game necessarily condemned to the stereotypical expectancies of side-street newsagent or pub landlord” (p.63).

Support in meeting the needs of the player must be central to any strategic approach to managing elite rugby. To be internationally competitive, there are now increasing pressures for players to dedicate themselves to full-time training. The increased commitment required to compete internationally and the life-skills and career development costs associated with this are significant. Professional rugby organisations have a responsibility for preparing players for their future beyond sport, which implies assisting and implementing an effective career development and planning program (Sadlier, 1999). A gap exists in both Australian rugby and, in particular, New Zealand rugby in the provision of opportunities to young elite players that would enhance their educational and vocational opportunities. The role of the rugby organisations in the provision of career development programs is an increasingly important consideration when preparing young elite players for a life outside rugby.

The delivery of such a program needs to be provided as a package, tailor-made for young elite rugby players embarking on a professional career. Such a package also needs to be situated around players’ needs as identified in the previous section. However, players also need to realise why they need such a program, as there is little point making programs available if players do not think they need to utilise them. Thus, as demonstrated in the results, the responsibility lies with the players to take advantage of provided resources and support. Research suggests that many athletes do not utilise career development programs (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), therefore someone needs to work with these young men, such as a Professional Development Manager, mentor, or ex-player to assist them to develop an awareness of the need for such programs, and how they might be best utilised.

#### **11.4 Conclusion**

This inquiry began with the primary intention of exploring the career development and planning of young elite rugby players, however, what became evident was that there were other social and economic forces at play that needed to be considered. As the

young men spoke about their lives it became clear that there were strong relationships between their preparation for life after rugby and areas such as their identity, the professionalisation and globalisation of rugby and their perceptions of rugby as work. Through exploring these critical, interacting components, the study has addressed its major research question, which has culminated in three major considerations for the preparation of young elite rugby players for a life after rugby. These considerations may be used as a framework of understanding or intent, for any discussion or implementation of career development and planning programs for elite rugby teams, or other professional sports organisations such as rugby league and AFL. The nature of the industry of modern rugby means that players are committed to rugby at the exclusion of other interests and opportunities for education and training. These conditions mean that players may be increasingly unemployable, one-dimensional with limited life-skills, unformed of the realities of professional rugby and subsequently unprepared for the career termination and transition process. The final chapter provides concluding remarks and proposes recommendations that may assist and support young elite rugby players.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

The previous chapter discussed the key considerations in the form of a grounded theory for preparing young elite rugby players for a life after rugby. Through the analysis of the collected data an in-depth picture emerged of the experiences of elite young rugby players in the professional era, including their concerns, needs and the pertinent issues regarding their welfare and opportunities for alternatives. This chapter provides concluding arguments for this thesis and puts forward recommendations that may assist and support young elite rugby players both in their work as a rugby player and their life post-rugby.

The main task in this thesis has been to understand the experiences of elite young rugby union players, with a special focus on their career development, planning, education, and their perception and preparedness for a life after sport. This has involved not only exploring the ways in which young men engage with work as a rugby player, but also examining the resources and opportunities for alternatives available to them. To achieve this, the study gave a voice to the young men involved in this labour force as well as the coaches and management who work most closely with them. This study utilised the theoretical contexts of globalisation and identity and the principles of the changing nature of work and career development to construct a complex picture of young rugby players' experiences and their interpretation of them as they engage in the relatively new work of professional rugby.

This study provides new ways of understanding and new knowledge regarding the experiences of young men pursuing employment as elite rugby players and the nature of work as a rugby player. The study contributes a deeper level of understanding to the ways young men perceive their future in this occupation and in many ways, coupled with the current literature, provides an insight into the experiences they may face upon

exiting employment in this industry. From a practical point of view such knowledge may be used as a warning to current rugby management, coaches and administration as to where their players are heading and may be utilised to develop a program that assists in athlete career development. From a theoretical point of view this study provides new ways of theorising on rugby and a grounded theory that will assist users in explaining and predicting events, and provides guides to action for the preparation of young elite rugby players for a life beyond rugby.

The changing social and cultural environment of elite rugby in New Zealand and Australia has changed the game at almost every level, on and off the field. The players in this study are part of the first generation of athletes who will only play rugby in its professional format. However, as professionalism has evolved and progressed in New Zealand and Australian rugby, so too has the number of accompanying issues that have previously been unexamined. Rugby has always been a short-term and insecure pursuit at the representative level due to its inherent characteristics of injury and deselection. However, it is only since the advent of professionalism, where players have become well remunerated and have started to identify with rugby as a career, that the wider implications for the player are being recognised. This study has argued that accompanying rugby's shift to a working environment is a number of linking characteristics and issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the experience of the player involved is one that not only enhances their playing ability but also addresses their education, identity, life-skills, post-sport opportunities and general welfare.

In thinking about the post-rugby preparation of elite young rugby players three main themes emerged: the notion of rugby as work; athletic identity and balance of life; and opportunities for alternatives. Firstly, with respect to the notion of rugby as work, the social and cultural conditions of rugby have changed significantly in the past decade and has shifted rugby to a professional, work-like environment where options for work as a rugby player have emerged. This thesis has highlighted the importance of moving away from viewing rugby in its traditional form as an amateur pastime to understanding rugby as part of modern global capitalism driven by profits and production. However, a tension between the amateur environment and the professional environment was identified. Some coaches and management had not yet come to terms with the cultural

change and still view rugby in its idealised past, and in some cases expect players to continue to respect the traditional values of amateurism.

Drawing on the nature of work as an analysis tool has provided this study with a lens through which to view the operations of the rugby industry, players' engagement in rugby, and their perceptions of their future. The data in this study point to rugby as a working environment reflecting many of the characteristics of an industry in global capitalism. The workers in this scheme must be viewed as manual labourers and objects of measured worth who are selling their athletic skills to the entertainment market. The impact of this shift from amateurism to the current working environment is significant when discussing the career development of these players and their life outside rugby. The recruitment practices of clubs that sign up young men straight from school and place them in an academy where they are to serve their rugby apprenticeship retards their ability to engage in educational and alternative development pursuits. Furthermore, the perceived fame and fortune associated with a rugby career, and players' unrealistic understanding of their future time working as a rugby player, lowers their perception of the importance of preparing for alternatives. Players here illustrated an unrealistic understanding of employment in rugby, in many cases unaware that they were disposable and contingent workers working in a casualised, insecure workforce.

This study has revealed some characteristics of work in elite rugby that are often unseen and argues that to a large extent the players themselves have a superficial and narrow understanding of the work of elite rugby players. Many of these young men were not aware that they were football fodder, where they were regarded as the necessary but expendable ingredient that makes the rugby system work. These young men reveal a level of naivety and ignorance and are largely uninformed of the realities of a professional rugby career. Some players presented an air of invincibility when they discussed their future in rugby and showed little in the way of preparation for the possibility of athletic termination and transition. The reality remains that professional rugby is a short-term occupation where the majority of these players, if lucky enough to secure a contract, are likely to only be involved in this work for an average of three years.

The second theme that emerged in this study was that of the athletic identity and balance of life of athletes. It was revealed that players' identities were formed primarily around their involvement in rugby and largely excluded other ways of seeing or valuing themselves. Their view that 'rugby is life' contributed to the identity foreclosure that was evident in some players, where they had appeared to have closed off alternative career identities due to an early commitment to their career identity in rugby. The relationship here with career development and planning is that "individuals who strongly commit themselves to the athletic role may be less likely to explore other career, education and lifestyle options due to their intensive involvement in sport" (Brewer et al, 1993, p.241). This study argues that whether through personal choice or perceived requirement, young elite rugby players are sacrificing the potential breadth of their future selves by narrowing their range of vision and options to only include the pursuit of rugby success. In the current study, education, training and career development activities were further down the list of players' priorities.

The literature notes that athletes with a narrow identity formed almost exclusively around sport may face an identity crisis upon their exit from elite sport (Petitpas et al, 1997; Dacyshyn, 2001). Many of the young players in this study provided insight into the perceived crisis they will face if they do not make a 'career' from rugby or if it is cut short unexpectedly. Many of these young men were devoid of realistic alternatives and suggested they would be "lost", as they have no alternative job prospects or life-skills available to them if they cannot play professional rugby, one player even stating it would be like "losing a family member". The high level of identity investment evident in these players is an indicator of future problems come retirement. Undertaking career development and planning during the high-performance phase has been identified as a way of alleviating identity crises following the end of an athletic career (Petitpas et al, 1997). Furthermore, the coaches and management in this study suggested that an expanded identity and balance of life could have positive impacts on players on-field performance as it combats the experiences of boredom and staleness that players referred to in this study. This study argues that steps need to be taken to re-formulate players' identities away from a reliance on their athletic skills and towards providing these young men with ways of seeing themselves and their lives differently. However, at present their resources for doing this are limited.

This leads on to the third theme that emerged throughout this study; the opportunities for alternatives available to these young men. Players, coaches and management all spoke of how players' opportunities for life post-sport would be enhanced if they could plan for it during their time in elite rugby. The contradiction identified through this research is that coaches and management widely endorsed players engaging in education or training and undertaking some work or work experience, yet through the structure of rugby they provided an environment which heavily restricted players' involvement in pursuits outside rugby. Education was highly valued by these young men, yet this study identified numerous examples of players who could not combine education with elite rugby and were deferring, or in many cases withdrawing from, educational pursuits. Further to this, coaches and management strongly identified this current cohort of players (those in rugby academies) as the players most in need of career development resources and support, yet by their own admission stated that these are the players who are receiving the least amount of resources and support and that this was a clear gap in their services. Even through this acknowledgement there seemed little in the way of clear initiatives that might look to rectify this issue. The researcher would argue that we are going to continue to see young men enter the rugby workforce straight from school and then leave three or four years later devoid of any life-skills, education, training, direction and with no tangible entry into a career or occupation. Intervention at the organised level is urgently required to facilitate the career development and progression of these young men.

Players, coaches and management all noted that the current programs available to these young men were ineffective in offering opportunities for alternatives and according to Professional Development Manager Greg, many of these young men will "fall by the wayside" when their competitive phase is over. This study argues that the system, structure and culture of professional rugby is detrimental to the development of young men and their opportunities for alternatives post-sport. Providing a voice to these young players enabled the study to identify a range of needs relating to their career development and planning. Rugby management and administration needs to take note of players' requirements in this area, which centre around more time to engage in career development and planning and increased access to resources. Without acknowledging or understanding the needs of these young men, the rugby industry will continue to lose

its players overseas and will continue to produce one-dimensional young men, with limited life-skills, who are not self-sufficient, who are becoming bored with and stale of rugby and as a result, according to the assistant All Blacks coach, lose their ability to make decisions on the rugby field. The question arises: Is the evidence produced in this study enough to effect a change in the structure and culture of elite rugby?

The central focus of this thesis is about understanding the experiences of elite young rugby players but also what will change the players in a structural sense, in terms of what will provide them with more opportunities. Many of the recommendations relating to this have been embedded throughout the thesis. The most pertinent of these recommendations is the provision of an effective career development and planning program that addresses the considerations for preparing players for a life beyond rugby as revealed in the data. It is vital that any suggested programs are designed with the discussed considerations and identified experiences, perceptions, and needs of elite young rugby players in mind. For example, among other things, programs must be designed with an understanding that a balance of life and an expanded identity make the player a better performer on the field and assists in their transition to a life after sport. It must be designed knowing that young elite players perceive that they are 'bullet proof', that they are uninformed of the realities and length of work in professional rugby, that they are not prepared for the possible end of their elite playing days, and be designed knowing that they value education but are frustrated at not being able to undertake that concurrently with rugby. Furthermore, it is important that there is an understanding that professionalisation and globalisation has changed the nature of rugby in New Zealand and Australia and, as a result, the experiences, needs and perceptions of young elite rugby players in these countries has shifted markedly.

It is vital, for the sake of these young men who may be considered 'at risk', and for rugby in New Zealand and Australia, that the considerations discussed in this thesis are used to inform coaches, management and administration of the experiences, understandings and needs of these young rugby players who are the greatest asset to the future of rugby in these countries. This study has argued that education, training, work or work experience would greatly address and assist many of the considerations and issues raised. If this is undertaken in conjunction with an effective career development and planning program that is supported by unions, coaches and management then New



Zealand and Australian rugby, and their participants, will be better for it. This situation specifically needs to be addressed at the level that this study has researched, that is, young elite players embarking on professional rugby with optimistic hopes and dreams but a lack of understanding of professional rugby and its characteristics. An expanding portfolio of educational and training opportunities is required for these young men at the recruitment stage, and needs to be centred around lifelong learning and employability.

It is important that rugby does not develop a professional sport system that emphasizes performance at the expense of the development and welfare of young men. The onus is now on rugby to learn from those sports that have more experience in professionalism, and from current research in the area, to ensure that they take responsible measures to develop and prepare their players for a possible career in rugby and just as importantly a career and life outside of rugby. Problematic issues with elite athletes have been well documented in the media, ranging from sexual assault, binge drinking, gambling problems, physical assault and numerous instances of public nuisance. These shifts in rugby have meant that the problem goes beyond the lack of career development and planning resources and opportunities available to young players; it extends to the fact that rugby has shifted to a scheme that recruits young men from school, and sometimes before, instilling visions of success and wealth while at the same time retarding their education, life-skills and alternative development. If players continue to be recruited straight from school and are not provided with developmental opportunities then we are likely to see retired rugby stars directionless and with little to show except a few years at the top. Furthermore, these players are likely to face marginalisation upon return to the workforce, where those under 25 years of age face levels of unemployment over twice the average in both New Zealand and Australia. Rugby needs to respond to such issues and raise their standards with a systematic approach to player career development.

There are several other specific recommendations that could be made to address issues raised by this study. The first of these is the need for an orientation package for young elite players and their families as they move into professional rugby to provide an insight into the professional rugby environment. This would allow the player to be introduced and educated to the union's culture of career development and planning and be informed of what is provided and required in this area. Secondly, the introduction of

Professional Development Managers for academy players would provide a significant increase in resources, support and guidance for young athletes. Modelled on their work with Super 14 players, Professional Development Managers are in the best position to assist in players' career development, planning and education needs. Such support and resources were identified as an area that was deficient in the lives of young elite rugby players and one of the more significant needs of these young men. Thirdly, any program provided to young rugby players needs to have the characteristics that promote independence, goal setting, initiative and decision-making in the athletes, in order to prevent reproducing the current protective environment of rugby and ensure that players take joint ownership for this part of their lives.

Lastly, the researcher would argue that while players are contracted to an academy they should be provided with one or two days per week where they are required to engage in education, training, work or work experience. This may be in the form of players undertaking university, polytechnic or TAFE education, learning a trade or undertaking an apprenticeship. Athletes could be involved in education in a part-time capacity either on campus or through distance education. A partnership may be brokered between the regional rugby unions and education and training organisations to deliver the courses (see for example Price, 2007). Alternatively, some rugby unions may develop their own training organisations. Compulsory work or work experience may be an option for those players who are not interested in continuing, or have already completed tertiary education and are looking for some practical experience in their industry or trade of choice. The researcher would suggest that the clubs strictly set days aside for this, as the data clearly indicate that these young men are having difficulty combining playing elite rugby with any career development pursuits such as education and training. Providing time to engage in career development will reinforce the message of support from governing bodies and alleviate the difficulty of combining sport and alternative professional development. It is important that any new learning strategies and career development opportunities are included more explicitly in players' contracts.

Furthermore, an increasing number of elite New Zealand and Australian rugby players are migrating overseas in pursuit of more lucrative contracts. This study suggests that the lure of the 'black jersey' or 'Wallabies jumper' is no longer enough to keep players

in their country of origin. New Zealand and Australia cannot compete financially with the clubs in Europe, Britain and Japan so there is a need to find an alternative way to retain their players. One option is providing players with a 'total package' that offers them future opportunities both during and post-rugby. This would also assist in a culture change amongst this labour force.

It needs to be clearly understood that rugby, as well as its players, have progressed and evolved. If New Zealand and Australia do not pay attention to the new environment, their responsibilities as employers, and the perspectives and positions of its young elite players, there may be disturbing consequences. This study has identified that young elite players have an identity formed almost exclusively around sport, largely did not have a balance of life, had low levels of career awareness, lacked life-skills and had generally not prepared for the termination of their elite rugby phase. The literature notes that athletes with a one-dimensional identity, low levels of career awareness, lack of life-skills and little or no preparation for the termination of their athletic career will have a difficult transition to life after sport (Fortunato, 1996; Webb et al, 1998; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). In light of these findings and the related literature, the study concludes that these players are at risk. In simple terms, New Zealand and Australian rugby need to recognise where their future players 'are at' and what they are thinking. It is hoped that this study goes some way to providing this.

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# APPENDICIES

## Appendix 1

### Interview Schedule (semi structured): Young Elite Players

The aim of this interview is to allow informants to freely discuss their experiences in elite rugby as well as issues on preparation for a life after rugby including, career development, planning and education.

1. General demographic:
2. Rugby demographic: Playing years to date and future, rugby aspirations, role of rugby in your life/identification with rugby, hours of participation, manager, other interests/activities?
3. Education: Current study or programs involved in, role of now/future, issues around combining education and rugby?
4. Employment: Career option, satisfaction, hours per week, assistance, issues around combining employment and rugby?
5. Career awareness: Perception of a career in rugby, thoughts about rugby career ending, skills gained from rugby, particular career aspirations and options, difficulties faced if rugby career ended, importance of player assoc and PDM's, rugby as part of a life plan or temporary dislocation of it?
6. Career planning: Ways you have planned for alternative career/occupation, advice/training, importance of preparation?
7. Career development: Resources available, participation in programs and perception of significance, networking, specific programs or resources of most assistance, which method of delivery, whose role to provide this, how prepared are you, any changes to programs or needs/issues, mentors?
8. Concerns: What are some of the things that concern you in your career as a young elite rugby player?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me or discuss on the topic of career development and planning for young elite rugby players?

## Appendix 2

### Interview Schedule (semi-structured): Managers/Coaches/Administrators

1. Yourself and your role?
2. Importance of pre-retirement planning, career development, parallel employment?
3. Programs in place to assist young players, its facilitation, participation rates, feedback, responsibility of union, mentoring, superannuation plan?
4. Your perception of how players view their careers, player's level of career awareness, attitude toward career development and planning, career track?
5. Identities, balance of life, athletic role?
6. Education rates, how feasible to combine with elite rugby?
7. Issues young players may face: What are the major concerns raised by the players, in terms of their careers/education/development outside rugby?
8. Termination – coping and preparation?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me or discuss on the topic of preparing young rugby players for a life/future after rugby?

## Appendix 3

### A Survey of Elite Rugby Players' Careers

Thank you for answering the enclosed questionnaire, I appreciate the time it will take. The responses will provide valuable information to assist the research project, which aims to contribute to the support and development of young elite rugby players. This survey is confidential and your name will not be used.

Please tick the boxes to indicate your response.

#### Part A: Player Background

1. What is your age? 17yrs and under  18yrs  19yrs   
20yrs  21yrs  22yrs
2. What is your marital status? Single  Married  Separated  Divorced
3. What ethnic group do you most closely identify with?  
European  Maori  Samoan  Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. How many years, in total, have you been playing rugby?  
Less than 3yrs  3-6yrs  7-10yrs  11-14yrs  15yrs+
- 5a. What is the highest academic qualification you have?  
High School: 5th form  6th form  7th form   
University Diploma or Certificate   
Bachelors Degree  Postgraduate Degree   
Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 5b. Are you currently studying for a qualification? Yes  No   
If Yes, please state. \_\_\_\_\_
6. What level of rugby you have played?  
Provincial  Super 12  International

7. How many hours per week do you participate in rugby?

- Less than 9 hours     10-15 hours     16-21 hours     22-27 hours   
28-33 hours     34-39 hours     40+ hours

### Part B: Elite Rugby Playing Career

1. Do you presently receive

- a.  Your total income from playing rugby?  
b.  Part of your total income from playing rugby, and part from other work?  
c.  All of your total income from work outside playing rugby?

2. If you answered 1b or 1c, what other work do you do? Please state.

---

3. Of your total income, approximately what percentage is earned from playing rugby?

- 0-20%     21-40%     41-60%     61-80%     81-100%

4. Have you developed your own career plan to help you achieve your employment goals, other than rugby, while you are playing elite rugby?                      Yes                       No

5a. Have you received any advice or training for a job that you can be employed in while you are still playing rugby?                      Yes                       No

5b. If you answered Yes in question 5a, who did you receive this advice from?

---

6. How important is it that you have some employment advice or training for a job while you are still playing elite rugby?

- Very unimportant                       Unimportant                       Don't know   
Important                       Very important

7a. How important is it for you to further your education, whilst playing elite rugby?

- Very unimportant                       Unimportant                       Don't know   
Important                       Very important

7b. Please explain why. \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you believe you are effectively combining your sport and education/career goals?  
Yes  No

9. Do you know what resources are available to you to help you in your career development? Yes  No

10. Why are you playing elite rugby? Please rate by numbers in priority order, 1 being the most important reason, and 6 the least important.

- Money  Social  Enjoyment  
 Fame and prestige  Challenge of playing at the highest level  
 Other. Please state \_\_\_\_\_

11. Please write your major goals as an elite rugby player?

---

12. How many more years do you believe you will play rugby at an elite level?

less than 3yrs  3-6 yrs  7-10yrs  11-14yrs  15yrs+

13. Do you view rugby as a career for you? Yes  No

14. Please rank the top three priorities in your life at present

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
2 \_\_\_\_\_  
3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Part C: Career Awareness and Retirement From Your Elite Rugby Career**

Below is a list of statements that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement by circling the number that best matches your answer. You may also be asked to expand on some answers.

- Strongly disagree     1     opposite to my views
- Disagree                 2     generally opposite to my views
- Don't know             3     unsure
- Agree                     4     generally like my views
- Strongly agree         5     like my views

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree
1. In 5 years time do you know what will be your primary source of income?	1	2	3	4	5
2. In 10 years time do you know what will be your primary source of income?	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think about my rugby career ending.	1	2	3	4	5
4. If I get injured, lose interest or stop playing I have a particular career in mind that I would like to take up. If so please state: _____	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have developed a career plan to assist me for when I retire from playing elite rugby. If so please describe in what ways you have done this. _____ _____	1	2	3	4	5



	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
6. I have received career planning assistance or advice in preparation for retirement from elite rugby.	1	2	3	4	5
7. It is important that I do some preparation or training, while I am still playing elite rugby, for a career or job after retirement from rugby.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I believe that my career opportunities after I have retired from elite rugby would be enhanced if I could plan for them while playing elite rugby.	1	2	3	4	5
9. It is important for me to further my education after I retire from playing elite rugby.	1	2	3	4	5
10. If my elite playing career is ended unexpectedly (e.g. through an injury, loss of form or involuntary retirement), I feel my career planning has adequately prepared me for this.	1	2	3	4	5
11. If my elite rugby career was ended, I know what I would do for income.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree
12. I know who to ask for employment, education and career advice.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I can identify skills I have gained from rugby that I think will assist me in my career after retirement. Please state. _____  _____	1	2	3	4	5
14. I see rugby as offering commercial opportunities for me E.g. endorsing a product, media etc.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I know the value of networking.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I understand the value of a current resume/curriculum vitae.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I would be confident and effective in an employment interview situation.	1	2	3	4	5
18. What are likely to be the most important factors influencing any decision you make to end your elite rugby-playing career? Please explain. _____  _____					

19. How important do you see the following organisations' roles in assisting you to plan, during your playing career for employment or a career for when you finish playing elite rugby?

a. NZRFU role

Very unimportant  Unimportant  Don't know  Important  Very important

b. Franchise role

Very unimportant  Unimportant  Don't know  Important  Very important

c. Provincial Union role

Very unimportant  Unimportant  Don't know  Important  Very important

20. Are there any aspects of your career, other than playing rugby, that you would like assistance or information on? Such as:

- |                                                       |                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Computer technology          | <input type="checkbox"/> Trade skills                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sports management            | <input type="checkbox"/> Media                                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C.V writing                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding more about finances             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting with career advisors | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding property purchasing and selling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communication skills         | <input type="checkbox"/> Small business operation                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> University enrolment         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sports coaching              |                                                                        |

21. Which of the following career programs would help you most? (Please rank in order 1 – 4. 1 = most helpful, 4 = least helpful).

a) Helping you identify your personal qualities and match them to careers best suited to you (e.g. personal and career assessment). ( )

b) Helping you obtain actual work experience related to your career choice or to a career best suited to you. ( )

c) Helping you develop and initiate a job search (e.g. preparing a resume/curriculum vitae, identifying and applying to prospective employers). ( )

d) Helping you identify and initiate further education or training needed to attain your career goals (e.g. education and career counselling). ( )

22. When would you prefer that career planning programs and services be provided? Please rank in order 1 - 3. 1 = most preferred, 3 = least preferred.

- a) During my rugby career ( )
- b) After my rugby career ( )
- c) Both during and after my rugby career ( )

23. What method of program delivery would you prefer? Please rank in order **1 - 5**.  
**1** = most preferred, **5** = least preferred.

- a) Conferences ( )
- b) Seminars ( )
- c) Individual counselling ( )
- d) Small group counselling ( )
- e) Reading material ( )

Thank you for your assistance in completing this survey; For further information contact:  
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Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT  
Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V,  
Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.